

The Love You Take

by Subversa

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

Chapter 1: The Predicament

Chapter 1 of 28

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A/N: Thanks and love to DeeMichelle for beta-reading, MagicAlly for Brit-picking, and Sshg316 for alpha-reading and cheerleading.

Chapter 1: The Predicament

Severus Snape, Potions master of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, stood before his headmaster with a look of enraged astonishment on his pale, drawn face. The carriage clock over the mantelpiece showed the time to be near three o'clock in the morning. Thankfully, the fire in the room, hastily augmented upon the arrival of his visitors, dispelled much of the natural cold and gloom of the wee hours of a November night.

The headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, sat in a burgundy leather wingchair placed at a pleasant angle to the fire. Its twin, which Severus usually occupied when the headmaster came to visit, was empty, for the Potions master was towering over the seated, fatigued old man. Dumbledore's robes were both wet and muddy to mid-calf; his silver hair was wildly windblown and untidy; his ancient face was etched with exhaustion both physical and magical. Frankly, he looked like crap, and it unnerved Severus to a profound degree.

The third occupant of the room was not participating in the conversation; in fact, if Severus had not verified for himself that both respiration and heartbeat were present, he would have believed that Dumbledore had arrived at his rooms bearing the dead body of Hermione Granger. Still, the Head Girl lay upon the matching leather sofa in a boneless heap, wan as a ghost, her usually rampant brown hair a drenched and bedraggled mess about her head, her body wrapped as tightly as a swaddled infant in a plaid blanket of crimson and gold.

'Would you mind repeating that, Headmaster?' Severus inquired, his usually smooth voice low and ragged with fury.

Dumbledore sighed and raised his hand to his face, pinching his glasses from his nose so that he might rub tiredly at his weary blue eyes. 'I had a message from Tom a request to meet him at a specific spot along the road leading from Hogsmeade up into the hills. He said he had one of my students whom he wished to return to me and that if I did not come alone, he would be leaving a dead child, rather than an unconscious one, at my feet.'

'Why didn't you tell me?' Severus interrupted roughly.

Dumbledore replaced his half-moon spectacles and gazed at Severus steadily. 'I did not tell you because you would have argued with me about going alone and I was anxious to retrieve my student.'

Severus simply glowered more darkly, so Dumbledore continued his tale.

'When I arrived there, Tom walked right out of the mist with the girl Levitated before him. He was laughing.'

Severus noted the pain in the headmaster's tone, and for a moment, his concern overcame his anger. Wordlessly, he Summoned the decanter from the sideboard and a goblet as well, and poured for his employer three fingers of Firewhisky. Dumbledore gratefully accepted the drink and took a lengthy swig.

'Tom allowed Hermione to collapse on the ground between us, and he told me what he had done that she had been cursed with *Aternus Perturbatio* because, and I quote, "Even an old goat like you, Dumbledore, should have a willing wench in your bed." Dumbledore's mouth twisted in disgust as he repeated the Dark Lord's taunt.

'Why would he do such a thing?' Severus snarled.

'Oh, he was kind enough to share his reasons with me,' Dumbledore said bitterly. 'First of all, Hermione was chosen because of her relationship with Harry.'

'Potter ought *never* to have taken a girlfriend!' Severus said angrily.

Dumbledore shifted in his seat, sitting straighter; the Firewhisky was apparently warming and calming him, for now he spoke with his accustomed even tones. 'Severus, no one who knows them believes that Hermione is Harry's girlfriend she is no more his girlfriend than Ronald Weasley. But she *is* his *best* friend, and she is integral to Harry's past successes and the planning of his future endeavours. To see her in distress would be very distracting and disturbing for Harry. Tom realises this.' Dumbledore rested his elbows on the arms of the chair and steepled his fingers before him. 'The second reason for his actions is that he wishes to humiliate me.'

A mulish look settled upon Severus' face, and he leant against the mantle, his hands shoved into his trousers pockets. He sneered but did not speak.

'Severus, you know my situation,' the old wizard said firmly. 'I cannot be placed in such a position with this child.'

Severus jerked himself from his place against the mantel with barely suppressed violence. 'Then give her to Potter or Weasley!'

Dumbledore's voice became thunderous with disapproval. 'And put this girl at the mercy of a boy too young to know his own mind? Too young to know how to protect her from herself and others? Too young to honour and respect her in spite of her infirmity?' He rose from his seat, seemingly fully recovered from his excursion into the cold Scottish night, and spoke with authority. 'You know you are the only man to whom I can trust her. You will do what must be done, and when the time comes, you will set her free to live out her life as she would have done if *your Master* had never interfered with her!'

Severus flinched at the mention of the Dark Lord in this context, and stood erect upon the hearth, his pale face mottling with mixed shame and suppressed violence. The headmaster, as always, played him like a violin, with the touch of a virtuoso.

'I won't do it!' he shouted, his fists clenched helplessly at his sides. 'You speak of your humiliation of your position what of me! What of *mine*?'

'If she imprints on me, there will be no way to hide it from the staff or the Order and eventually, the Ministry would become involved,' Dumbledore said implacably, as if Severus had not spoken. 'If she imprints on you, no one will notice. You are solitary, and no one comes to visit you in your rooms.'

Severus stared at the sleeping female on his sofa. 'She is just a child,' he whispered.

'She is eighteen well past the age of adulthood,' Dumbledore replied briskly. 'Severus,' he added, and waited for his Potions master to turn to him before he continued to speak. 'If you do not do as I wish, I will be forced to ask Lupin.'

'That *werewolf*!' Severus spat with disgust, tearing his eyes from the Head Girl.

'Yes,' Dumbledore replied inexorably. 'And if Lupin is the one upon whom Hermione imprints, she will be forced to leave school to be near him, for we cannot have him here. Nymphadora will have to be informed of the situation. Hermione's parents will also have to be apprised; they might even insist upon removing her from the wizarding world altogether.'

'Where she cannot be protected at all!' Severus ranted. 'And those Muggles will never understand her behaviour they will likely have her clapped up in some sort of mental institution!' He advanced upon Dumbledore angrily. 'How can you even suggest such a thing?'

Dumbledore stepped forward to meet him. 'Then you will do it?'

Severus felt the searing pain of the bone-crushing clamp as Dumbledore's trap was neatly sprung. He stared at his mentor, his lips moving but no sound issuing from his throat.

'She'll be able to keep on with her schoolwork,' the headmaster said soothingly, his hand reaching to clamp upon Severus' shoulder. 'No one need know if she visits your rooms frequently, for we can connect her Floo to yours. I know you will be discreet, and that you will teach her the necessity of discretion, as well.'

Severus gave a last feeble struggle against the snare in which he was caught. 'She will be horrified,' he whispered brokenly.

Dumbledore grasped his other shoulder and gently shook him. 'She will not be horrified,' he said quietly. 'She will fix upon you, and you will become her touchstone, Severus. She will not know what is happening to her, or why she feels as she does, until you explain it to her. You must find it in your heart to be kind to her emotionally kind in addition to caring for her needs. Keep in mind that it is not her fault she is in this situation and see if you cannot look upon your part in this as another contribution you are making to the war effort.'

Severus jerked away from the headmaster, his eyes blazing. 'Is not my entire life enough of a sacrifice?' he demanded. 'Must you have my soul, as well?'

Dumbledore did not answer, but turned away to the door. 'I will leave you to it, then,' he said.

'Headmaster!' Severus said desperately. 'Wait until she is awake wait until I have spoken to her. Stay, to back up my story.'

Dumbledore simply shook his head, turning to address Severus from the door. 'We cannot risk having another person present when she awakes. She must imprint upon you if we are to keep her safe and out of harm's way.' He opened the door, pausing in the doorway. 'If you find that you need someone to verify your story, please feel free to bring her to see me tomorrow but I feel quite sure that she will be too distressed in her mind to doubt you. She will be very much inclined to believe anything you tell her, providing her needs are met. The first few days will be the worst, you know.'

The door closed behind the departing wizard, and Severus resisted the urge to hurl the decanter of Firewhisky at the door for the mere pleasure of watching it shatter. Instead, he Summoned the straight chair from his desk and sat down beside the girl who lay in an enchanted sleep in his sitting room. In slumber, she looked impossibly young and unspoilt; the mobile mouth, too wide for beauty, was more comely closed than when open for her prattling, in which she seemed to be engaged during every waking moment. The skin of her face was smooth and unblemished, her lashes dark against her cheek. She was not a beauty, but she also was not unattractive.

And in the very near future, she would lose what innocence she retained to her Potions teacher.

And in the end the love you take

Is equal to the love you make.

Eternus Perturbatio is a Latin bastardization of "endless passion."

Chapter 2: The Quagmire

Chapter 2 of 28

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Chapter 2: The Quagmire

Hermione's eyelids fluttered, and she awoke with a small scream, struggling to throw herself upright.

'No! You shan't take me!'

Even as she uttered the words she realised they were not apropos; she was obviously not in immediate peril. She lay upon a leather sofa in a small but warm room, tightly wrapped in a blanket, which accounted for her inability to move her limbs. There was a fire in the hearth, crackling merrily, and the room was lined with bookshelves which were full to bursting with leather-bound volumes of every size and colour.

As she gazed at the books, she became aware of a growing disquiet in her mind. In the seconds since she had awoken, the vague discomfort had increased to the point that she felt the urge to flee but she was confined by the blanket and could not work her arms free.

'You're awake.'

Hermione wrenched her neck around to find the source of the male voice and was perplexed to see her Potions master approaching. He seated himself in a straight chair by her head and studied her critically. Hermione tried to think of a reason why she would be in a room alone with Professor Snape, but the ever-increasing uneasiness in her mind impeded her reasoning ability.

'How do you feel?' Professor Snape asked, his black eyes fixed upon her face.

Hermione felt herself begin to calm somewhat; she had a sudden, unshakeable belief that her professor's presence was her salvation and that nothing bad could happen to her if she was with him.

'I'm all right,' she answered, 'but I really wish I could sit up.'

He continued to study her face, his own devoid of expression, but the voice in which he spoke was kinder than usual. 'Do you remember what happened to you?' he asked.

Hermione thought for a moment. 'I was out in the greenhouses, working on my Herbology project, and when I was finished, I thought I would stroll down to see Hagrid. I didn't get there, though the last thing I remember is walking along the edge of the Forest.'

'Careless,' he said, the line between his brows deepening. 'Why were Potter and Weasley not with you?'

Hermione smiled in spite of the new discomfort she felt, which had migrated, somehow, from her mind to her body. 'It's Friday night, sir,' she said. 'The boys never study or do homework on Friday nights.'

Her Potions master's eyes narrowed. 'You will be more careful from now on, Miss Granger, or you will have *me* to answer to.'

A distant part of Hermione's brain informed her that Professor Snape had no business saying such a thing to her, but the predominant part of her mind wanted him to keep talking. She wanted to move closer to him; in fact, her skin felt hyper-sensitised beneath the slightly rough weave of the blanket. She struggled again to move her arms, but was wrapped up so tightly she could not quite manage it.

'Sir,' she said, 'could you help me sit up? I can't seem to get my arms loose.'

Professor Snape made no move to help her, simply continuing his scrutiny of her face. 'You were taken by the Death Eaters, Miss Granger. The headmaster went to retrieve you from them; it is to him that you owe thanks for your current adornment.' He glanced with scarcely concealed distaste at the Gryffindor-coloured blanket. 'My understanding is that beneath the blanket, you are naked. In my bathroom, I have set out some things for you to wear. May I assist you to reach them?'

Hermione nodded, and Professor Snape stood, bending and scooping her into his arms, blanket and all. The moment he touched her, even though the warm woollen blanket was between his hands and her skin, she was horrified to have to repress a little moan. What in the world was wrong with her? Her nipples were erect, stimulated by the movement of the blanket over her flesh, and her lower abdomen ached as if she had been reading from her stash of erotica or as if she had been pleasuring herself as she sometimes did beneath the sheets of her curtained bed in Gryffindor Tower. She had *never* felt like this in the presence of another person, and even though she knew she ought to feel shame, her only emotion was a thrill of pure desire.

To her relief, Professor Snape seemed ignorant of her physical state. He carried her to the bathroom, which was already illuminated by numerous candles, and set her on her feet upon the marble-tiled floor.

'Please feel free to make use of the facilities in any way you wish,' he said woodenly. 'You may bathe or shower or you may simply don the clothing on the counter before you join me in the sitting room for tea.'

Hermione was quite sure she had not managed to suppress the whimper which escaped her when the professor took his hands from her, but he still did not seem to have noticed. She felt the urge to push the blanket to the floor and to rub her extremely sensitive skin against the lawn of his white shirt and the wool of his black trousers. Her

face flushed crimson at the audacity of her thoughts, but the voice of reason was being swiftly drowned out by the clamouring of her want. Striving to gather her thoughts, she said, 'Was I raped, sir?'

The faintest glimmer of humanity touched the stern black eyes. 'No, Miss Granger.'

'But why am I here instead of my own room?' She tried to ignore the plaintive note in her voice.

'Perhaps you could save your questions until you have dressed and joined me for tea?' He managed to sound both deferential and sardonic at the same time.

Hermione nodded dumbly and watched as the bathroom door closed behind her professor. In her standing position, she was easily able to shrug out of the blanket, and she walked directly into the shower, twisting the taps to turn the spray on full force, hoping to wash away the insane roiling in her blood. All she could think about, with rapidly increasing frequency, was rushing to find Professor Snape and placing his hands upon her body, begging him to touch her.

As she mechanically ran soap over her skin, her hands performing the mindless task of cleansing herself, she was seized with the impulse to assuage the screaming of her nervous system. She abandoned the soap, the fingers of one hand slipping between her thighs, the other hand sliding up her ribcage to pinch her nipples. Within three minutes, she was ready to scream with vexation no efforts of her own could bring her off, yet she had succeeded in pushing herself to the edge, a point beyond which she could not pass.

She leant against the wall of the shower and cried her annoyance into her hands. After a short time, she hiccupped into silence when she heard Professor Snape's voice outside the bathroom door.

'Miss Granger, you will be out in the sitting room in five minutes, or I will be in to fetch you. Is that clear?'

Hermione moaned into her hands dear *God* how she wished he would storm through the door and carry her off and well, do whatever was necessary to make this clamouring stop! Something inside of her said he was her only hope of peace.

Steeling herself as best she could, she called, 'Yes, Professor,' and twisted the taps to the off position. She took up one of the Slytherin-green towels and dried herself, wrapping her hair in a towel of its own. She was pleased to see a brand new toothbrush still in its package, which she broke open and used with the accompanying toothpaste to vigorously clean her teeth. How odd that the professor would be so thoughtful about her oral hygiene when his own teeth were such a fright, and when rumour had it that he never cleaned his hair or his teeth.

She turned from the basin and took up the clothing set out on the counter. She found a soft grey nightshirt with buttons half-way down the front, which she pulled over her head, only to have the hem fall to her ankles. There was also a dressing gown of green satin with silver piping, which she pulled on and belted around her; this garment puddled on the floor about her feet in excess length, but she was able to roll the sleeves up enough to permit her hands to peek out. It was rather luxurious and a strange contrast to the nightshirt. Finally, there was a pair of plain thick grey socks, such as one might wear underneath boots in the cold Scottish climate; Hermione donned them gratefully, and still had one foot in the air when the door to the bathroom thudded open and an exasperated-looking Potions master confronted her from the doorway.

'You're dressed,' he said, sounding and looking momentarily embarrassed. Hermione wondered for a wild moment if he had hoped to find her *undressed*, and her rampant libido flared to life again.

Not trusting herself to speak, she simply nodded. The professor stepped back from the open door, motioning without a word for her to precede him into the sitting room.

A tea service was set out upon a low table before the sofa, and an intriguing-looking book was resting on the corner of the same table. Hermione felt the unease increasing; she was in Professor Snape's presence, and there was nothing sufficiently distracting to take her mind off the provoking ache in her lower abdomen and the tingling of her nerve endings.

Distraught, she turned to face him, the two of them standing between the sofa and the coffee table. 'I don't know what's wrong with me!' she cried, tugging helplessly at the collar of the nightshirt. 'I feel so ...' she trailed off in embarrassment, loath to put her feelings into words.

Professor Snape spoke compellingly. 'I think I may be aware of how you are feeling, Miss Granger will you sit, please? Let me pour you some tea.'

Hermione stood for a moment, irresolute, wringing her hands to keep from reaching out to grasp her professor's shirt. She felt so sure that touching him being touched by him would assuage the feelings inside of her which seemed to grow more intense with every passing moment. It was only his implacable, 'Sit, Miss Granger. *Now*,' which moved her to obey.

Hermione sat on the edge of the sofa with the feeling of wanting to leap from her skin beating against her mind like a fist on a wooden door. 'Please, sir,' she said desperately as Snape seated himself in one of the wing chairs and took up the teapot and a cup, 'I don't think I can ...'

Snape thrust a steaming cup into her hand. 'Drink,' he commanded.

Hermione opened her mouth to object, and the professor barked, 'Now!'

With a moan of sheer irritation, Hermione complied and took a sip. Almost immediately, she felt infinitesimally better. 'What is it?' she whispered, raising huge brown eyes to his face.

'It is an old-fashioned tisane,' he replied, 'blended with the strongest sedative I feel safe giving you.'

Hermione swallowed another mouthful. 'Will it make me sleep?' she asked trustingly.

'No,' he answered shortly and it seemed to Hermione as if there was also a touch of regret in his tone. 'In fact, it will also not sedate you for very long, but I hope it will clear your mind enough for you to hear and understand what I have to say to you.'

Hermione drained the last of the tisane from her cup, feeling the calm of the sedative spreading through her, outwards to her fingers and toes. As the distress subsided, she felt more like herself again and she was fairly certain her professor was offering to *tell* her something. He did not offer to part with information easily she ought to pay particular attention. Leaning forward, she placed the teacup on the table and angled herself slightly to face him. 'I'm ready, sir,' she said.

Professor Snape looked into her eyes for a long moment, then, apparently satisfied with what he had seen, he gave her a curt nod.

'Are you familiar with this book?' he asked, one thin finger tapping on the tome between them.

'May I?' Hermione asked, and the professor nodded again, turning the book so that she could read the gilt of the title upon the aged leather. '*Pravus Veneficus*,' she murmured. She glanced up at the intense black eyes. 'It's a Dark Arts text,' she said. 'You can find a copy in the Restricted Section but only if you know how to remove the cloaking charm.'

Professor Snape regarded her with more interest at this statement than at any other time in the six years she had known him, and Hermione felt a flush of pride.

'And why have you been in the Restricted Section removing protective charms from the forbidden texts?' he inquired acidly, as if to make up for a previous error.

Hermione frowned. 'Because they're books I haven't read,' she said simply.

For a moment, the two sat and looked at one another, as if they will recognise its kind when in unfamiliar territory. In that fleeting instant, Hermione felt a flash of kinship with the Dark wizard across from her.

In the next breath, Professor Snape's thin lips twisted in a smirk. 'Indeed,' he said. A small frown deepened the crease between his eyes. 'And have you read it?'

Hermione shook her head regretfully. 'No, there's still an alarm ward on it which I couldn't remove.' She paused and cast a suspicious look at her abandoned teacup. 'Was there Veritaserum in that drink?'

'There was not,' he said with a show of annoyance.

'Oh,' she said. 'But why am I telling you things that can get me into trouble?' she wondered aloud.

'Because you know I am asking for a good reason,' Snape answered smoothly. 'For now, turn to the page indicated by the bookmark.'

Hermione hesitated. 'Is the ward ...?'

'This is my own copy, and I have made it safe for you to read it,' he replied.

Without another qualm, Hermione took the book into her hands and flipped to the bookmarked page. The chapter contained information on compulsion curses; this bit was dedicated to the *Eternus Perturbatio* curse. Absorbing first the information regarding the theory behind the curse, Hermione then read the behaviours peculiar to the person cursed with this spell. As she read, she felt her face flush with embarrassment; she had been aware that there were spells and curses of a sexual nature, but it was not something that had been covered thus far in her wizarding education and here she was, reading about the first one she had encountered whilst Professor Snape, of all people, watched her. How embarrassing!

But as she continued to read, her embarrassment faded and horror began to dawn. Irrational desire? Complete loss of inhibition? Deteriorating ability to reason or think clearly? Repetitive carnal fantasies focussed on one person? Inability to obtain release by own efforts? All of these things had been raging in her before Professor Snape had given her the sedative.

Dimly, she was aware of her previous discomfort beginning again, a nagging at the back of her mind, disrupting her concentration. Imprinted ... fixated ... irreversible At last, she closed the book and placed it back on the table with trembling hands.

'Who?' she whispered piteously. 'Who did this to me?'

'The Dark Lord,' Snape replied in a tone of voice which suggested such a stupid question scarcely merited a direct answer.

'Why?' She rose from her place on the sofa and began to pace, the sedative calm falling from her with increasing speed; now, the rampaging need swarmed over her with more urgency than ever before.

Professor Snape retained his place in the wing chair, only his eyes moving as he followed her progress.

'To distract Potter from his purpose,' he said, 'and to embarrass Professor Dumbledore.'

'You-Know-Who meant for me to see Professor Dumbledore when I woke!' she said as the need to remove her clothing began to echo in her mind. If she could be rid of the clothes, she would be more comfortable, for her skin was so sensitive now she could not bear the touch of the cloth. She unbelted the dressing gown and shrugged it off without halting her pacing. 'Oh my God, I would have had to have sex with the headmaster!' She turned on Snape now, nearly feral in her torment, her prowling having brought her to his chair. She stood before him in naught but his own pathetic grey nightshirt and with a low sob of anguish she cried, 'Why did he bring me to *you*?'

For the first time since she had woken in her professor's private rooms and this whole nightmare had begun to unfold, Severus Snape's face showed emotion: complete and utter disdain.

'I suppose because it is a headmaster's privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks,' he spat. 'I assure you I did not beg for the job.'

Hermione knew she should be insulted by this proclamation, but the exigency of her condition precluded such mundane considerations. She required relief from the terrible agitation throbbing between her legs, and the ugly, sneering man before her was her only hope of achieving it.

'Will you help me?' she asked, thinking he would surely deny her and wondering if he would be more amenable to killing her, for she would surely go insane if something was not done soon.

'You have only to ask,' he replied steadily, the sneer gone from his face now, replaced by the impassive mask he had worn since she had first seen him tonight.

'Please, help me,' Hermione cried. 'Make it stop!'

She could not have explained the difference, but her Potions master shifted in his seat, so that his posture was open and welcoming. The black hair hung like curtains about his thin, sallow face and the endless black eyes never wavered from her face.

'Come along, then,' he said, and Hermione collapsed into his lap and buried her face in his neck, giving herself into his capable hands.

A/N: Snape's taunt of 'I suppose because it is a headmaster's privilege to delegate less enjoyable tasks,' is a direct quote from the US edition of OoTP. Severus says it when Sirius wants to know why Dumbledore does not teach Harry to do Occlumency.

Beta reading thanks to DeeMichelle and Sshg316, and Brit-picking thanks to MagicAlly.

Chapter 3: The Morass, Part 1

Chapter 3 of 28

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Chapter 3: The Morass, Part 1

Severus received the girl into his lap and his senses were assaulted on many levels at once. She smelt of the standard Hogwarts bath soap, and she was surprisingly light upon his legs. He had a quick impression of hip bone, then soft feminine flesh; next, the child buried her face in his neck with a whimper which fair promised to provide mighty counter-action to the Impotence Potion he had downed. It was not something he kept on hand, so he had been forced to brew it, whilst dashing about preparing for when the child would wake and his *their*, he corrected himself ordeal would begin. He had to find clothing for her to wear for as long as he could manage to keep her dressed, find the appropriate book and remove the jinxes so she could read it, brew the tisane and double-dose it with a sedative draught in short, he had not stopped running since Dumbledore had walked out, leaving him with an eighteen-year-old girl who would, for the foreseeable future, be in a nearly constant state of sexual arousal with Severus as her only focus.

Bugger.

Determinedly, he simply held her cradled in his lap, ignoring the fluttering of his own libido. This was not about him and he was *damned* if he would permit it to *become* about him. From the goodness of his heart, he was performing a duty as a favour to Dumbledore, his general in war. He would do exactly and precisely what needed to be done no more! And he would never do anything but what was requested of him. Yes, it was a fucking shame that he hadn't bothered to go to visit one of his favourite doxies in rather more months than he could recall, but he would take care of *that* at his next opportunity he would *not* permit himself to be swayed by the simple fact that he had not had intercourse with a woman in damn near a year. When one's hand sufficed to the job, why waste the Galleons?

But this fresh armful compared to nothing to *noone* he had ever touched in a sexual way. There had been no romance in his youth, regardless of how he had longed for it, and convenient connexions arranged for him by the Dark Lord in later years never lasted; certainly, none of those women, who were either Death Eaters or who wished to be closely allied to the Death Eaters, had been at all similar to the trusting virginal girl who now trembled in his arms.

Yes, he was certain of her virginity. He had taken the opportunity, whilst she slept, of casting the necessary diagnostic spell to determine that her maidenhead was intact and unbreached. What in the name of Nimüe's garters was the girl saving herself for? *Goddamn* Dumbledore to hell for this he was to be forced not only to consort with a child his *student* but also to relieve her of her chastity?

She clutched at his shirt, fisting the fabric in her hands, and her lips touched his ear. 'Sir please ...'

With a calm which belied the wild thumping of his heart, he replied, 'Put my hands where you want them.'

The girl was too far gone for modesty or embarrassment; she sat forward for a moment and jerked his nightshirt to her waist in one vicious yank. He scarcely had time to register the sight of her bare thighs, coming together at an apex of tight brown curls, before she placed his hand unreservedly upon her mound, damp to the touch and fragrant with her arousal.

'Oh, God please!' At the touch she had instigated herself, she cried out, twisting to press her breasts against his chest and dragging his other hand from its unobjectionable place at her waist to yank it to an undeniably erect nipple. 'Kiss me!' she begged, lifting her tortured face to his, her eyes dilated as if she had partaken of a drug, her lips parted as she panted.

Ignoring the command to kiss her, he captured a hardened nipple through the fabric of the nightshirt and pressed his fingers through the wet hair to her passion-glazed softness, desperately hoping he could remember enough of female anatomy by touch to bring her off without humiliating himself with his ignorance. He knew from his reading of his Dark texts he had many more than the one he had shown to her, and he had chosen the least alarming book to inform her of what was ahead that she would scarcely be fit, when it was over, to grade him upon his performance in servicing her needs.

He commiserated with himself, thinking that he would be undeniably more adept at manually pleasuring a female partner when this charade was done than he could ever hoped to have been, left to his own devices.

Not that he would live to put the experience to practice.

'Oh!' she cried, and his thoughts became inextricably focussed on the sounds issuing from her throat.

She lay against his shoulder, her eyes closed, and he had the leisure to look at her as much as he liked without being concerned about being taken for the fascinated male he was. He encompassed her breast with his entire right hand, gently squeezing at the same time he spread her labia with his left index and ring fingers, offering his long middle finger the opportunity to roll her needy little clit about like a kidney bean in olive oil. He had scarcely touched her when her scream filled his small sitting room with an echo of desire, not quenched, but incited to further need.

Her thighs clamped tight on his hand as she spasmed her orgasm, then she shifted demandingly, her thighs bracketing his legs on the cushion of the wingback chair facing him. 'More!' she cried, rubbing her dripping wet crotch against the rough weave of his wool trousers.

Settling in for the long haul, Severus looked up into the flushed face of the girl straddling him and said, 'Put my hands where you want them.'

She cried out in frustration, but she took both his hands and brought them simultaneously to her squirming centre. Watching her face intently, he used the fingers of his left hand to pluck repeatedly at the hardened nub of her clitoris, and with his right hand he shallowly penetrated her vagina, finding her so slick that he confidently slid a second finger within her as well, plucking with one hand and fucking with the other as she bobbed her arse just over his pelvis, grinding herself against his hand. He had read that manual stimulation for a woman with this curse would take one only so far, but he was determined that it should suffice. He would not risk either of them by actually penetrating her piercing her maidenhead with his prick and fucking her properly. He would never be able to remain objective if he made her his own in that way. Taking a woman's virginity was strong magic, and he wanted no part of such a procedure with this girl his student. No, by Merlin, he would make do with his hands and his mouth, if he must but his cock would remain where it belonged.

Before his amazed eyes, the girl tugged the nightshirt over her head and flung it from herself blindly. She then reached for the lank strands of his hair, and grasping them mercilessly, she pulled his face between her breasts. '*Please*,' she moaned, and he felt his potion-restrained prick twitch in spite of chemical discouragement. Damn and blast!

'Use your hands,' he encouraged her gruffly, taking special care not to make contact with her nipples.

She groaned again, but released his hair and arched her back, bringing her hands up to stimulate her breasts. Gauging her breathing, he slipped a third finger into her body and began to rub her clitoris with a consistent circular motion until she screamed again, becoming utterly rigid above him and remaining in that position for a long moment before crumpling, removing his hands from her vulva by the simple expedient of thrusting her arms between his and flinging them outward, carrying his arms with hers. She sagged against him, tears following swiftly upon the heels of the second orgasm, and he glanced at the coach clock over the fireplace: It had been five minutes from his first intimate touch to the completion of her second climax.

He flexed his fingers as the girl sobbed into his shoulder and thought to himself that it was going to be the longest damn weekend of his life.

Chapter 4: The Morass, Part 2

Chapter 4 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Ladies, I regret to say that this is the end of chapters which are already complete, so the next update may be longer than two days. In addition, I have received my prompt for the SSHG Winter Exchange on Live Journal - but I am committed to completing this story - and have I *ever* left you in the lurch? Exactly!

Please be aware that this chapter might need a mild BDSM warning for a bit of spanking. I had no intention of "going there," but the Muse was insistent. So was Severus, for that matter. Some Bushy-Haired People need to be more considerate and that's all he has to say about *that*.

Love to alpha reader Sshg316, beta reader DeeMichelle, and Brit-picker MagicAlly.

Chapter 4: The Morass, Part 2

Hermione cried into her professor's neck, exhausted and humiliated, with only the lessening of the awful sexual compulsion as a comfort. Professor Snape held her safely in his lap, but he neither petted her, nor murmured reassurances as she cried and she was rather glad. Without a doubt, the uttering of insincere platitudes would have sent her straight up the wall.

Shifting slightly, she looked up into his face; the ugly hooked nose drew the eye away from his extremely fine eyes, black as pitch, with long, curling eyelashes. At the moment, he was glaring at the distance as if it had personally offended him. The stringy hair was baby-fine and attached to an excessively oily scalp; Hermione knew there were girls in her House with similar hair who were forced to shampoo twice a day to combat greasiness. To be fair, she couldn't imagine either Harry or Ron going to such trouble, so it was not surprising that *this* man stalked through his days with exceedingly greasy hair hanging about his face he had no wife to remind him to wash it, did he?

Tentatively, she reached a finger to move a strand of hair back from his face, and she was startled into crying out when her wrist was clamped in a steely grasp.

'What do you think you are doing, Miss Granger?' the silky voice demanded, his glare now fixed on her face.

'I was just ...' she began, but he cut across her.

'Please do me the courtesy of keeping your hands to yourself,' he snapped.

Hermione flushed at the rebuff, and scrambling to her feet, she discovered that she was naked.

'Don't look!' she cried, diving for the dressing gown and crouching, her back to him, as she wrapped its voluminous folds about her.

A derisive sound came from him, but he did not speak; she stood then and turned to face him again. 'I should be getting back to my room, now,' she said, her chin rising.

Professor Snape returned her challenging look blandly. 'Be my guest,' he replied. 'I should perhaps inquire, though, if you actually *read* the text I marked for you.'

Brown eyes flashed. 'I have never failed to complete an assignment you have given me, *Professor*,' she retorted.

One sardonic eyebrow rose at her proclamation. 'Do you recall what information was given regarding the effects of the curse for the first seventy-two hours?' he inquired quietly.

Hermione felt a wave of futility wash over her. 'You could provide me with the sedative,' she began, but once again he interrupted her.

'I would never do so,' he replied firmly. 'The sedative is habit-forming, and it will not truly combat the impulse, Miss Granger it will only dull the effects, and only for a very short period of time.'

Tears started to her eyes again. 'Then what am I going to do?' she cried.

His gaze never wavered from her face, and his manner was unnervingly normal, not at all the unpleasant, sarcastic teacher to whom she had become accustomed. 'If you are interested in my recommendation, I would suggest that you join me for breakfast here, in my sitting room. After you eat, you will undoubtedly need to sleep, as will I, for we have been up all night, Miss Granger.'

Her eyes darted to the clock over his mantelpiece and she saw that it was just past six o'clock.

'The compulsion will come upon you many more times over the next three days,' he continued inexorably, 'and no matter how much both of us wish that was not the case, there is no point in ignoring the inevitable, is there?'

With a defeated sigh, Hermione sagged onto the sofa. 'I *hate* it,' she whispered, and even as she spoke, she felt the first throb of the return of her torment.

Professor Snape was still watching her closely, and he seemed to know exactly what she was feeling as she felt it.

'It has been exactly thirteen minutes, Miss Granger, since your last orgasm,' he informed her as if to convince her further of an argument he had already won.

Hermione blushed scarlet to hear him say it so baldly, but she also felt a feral pulse between her legs as he spoke.

'You are welcome to fight it, if you wish,' he said, 'but I would just as soon deal with it so we can eat our breakfasts.'

Hermione struggled to push the unwelcome desire away, hating Lord Voldemort, Headmaster Dumbledore, and Professor Snape all with equal vehemence in that moment. Trying to concentrate on something else, she stared down at her knees, beginning to mentally catalogue the Twelve Uses of Dragon's Blood, only to be diverted to thoughts of having *his* hand thrusting into her, driving her surely over the edge which now beckoned to her again. She was therefore unable to refrain from grabbing that hand when it appeared before her face, and in so doing, she was immediately cognizant of the fact that his fingers still reeked of her scent.

'Come with me,' he said. 'We will be more comfortable in the bedroom.'

Hermione went with him readily, entering once again the darkened room through which she had passed going to and from the bathroom. He released her hand after they had entered the bedroom, lighting the candles and taking care to close and ward the door against intrusion.

'Why don't you get up on the bed?' he suggested neutrally.

The flaming need licking at her mind and body agreed with this proposal and she complied eagerly, flinging the dressing gown unheeded to the floor and clambering up on the high, old-fashioned four-poster bed. On another occasion she might have been curious to see that her Potions master's bedcovers consisted of a nubby white counterpane over soft, oft-washed white cotton sheets. For now, all she wanted was satiation the sooner, the better.

'Hurry,' she moaned, beyond the ability to feel shame for her wanton behaviour.

Professor Snape approached her, saying, 'Why don't you sit in the middle.'

Hermione felt the thrill again, excitement rising in her. She scrambled to obey him, saying breathlessly, 'Why? Will it feel better?'

She felt the mattress dip as his weight joined hers on the bed and he settled behind her. 'The soft tissues of your genitals are going to take a beating over the next few days,' he explained, his professorial tone detracting somewhat from the erotic possibilities of the topic. 'If it is possible to vary your position, we can hope to minimise that.'

Unbidden, Hermione scooted back until her back was flush against his chest, and she felt her first flash of desire for the body of the man behind her.

'Why don't you undress, too?' she asked.

He did not respond to her question, but rested his hands on his wool-covered thighs, in whose v-shape Hermione was now nestled. 'Put my hands where you want them,' he said.

Hermione felt his breath upon her ear, stirring the hair against her cheek as he spoke, and she felt the stab of wanting again.

'Not just your hands,' she said, attempting to turn to face him. 'All of you'

The implacable hands rose to clamp onto her shoulders, pinning her in place. 'No,' he growled, and a fresh wave of goose bumps broke over her skin at the feral sound.

Without another word, she pulled his hand to her aching vulva. 'Do it,' she pleaded, and she cried out with pleasure when he immediately began to stroke her clitoris. She leant back against him, pulling her knees up and spreading her thighs further apart, giving him more access. 'More,' she begged, and he increased the pressure slightly, causing her to buck against his hand.

Grabbing his other hand, she pulled it to her mouth, unceremoniously plunging his index finger into her warm, greedy mouth, and sucked. Suddenly he jerked his hand from her mouth and removed the other from her clitoris.

'Don't do that!' he thundered at her, his lips right next to her ear.

Moving quickly, Hermione twisted to face him, twining her fingers in his hair and pressing her lips to his with inexpert force.

'Dammit!' he roared, and before Hermione knew what had happened, he had flipped her so that she lay face down across his lap and his hand came down on her bum with a ringing slap.

'Ouch!' she cried, struggling, but he held her in a vise-like grip and delivered another blow, this time to the opposite arse cheek.

'I have very little choice in this,' he said, panting slightly as he rained smacks on alternating sides of her bum, 'but what choice I have, *will* exercise, Miss Granger! Is that clear?'

The only thing that was clear to Hermione was that this ignominious spanking was heightening her arousal. Squirming forward slightly, she parted her thighs further, offering her fanny as well as her bum for spanking.

She could not see, but felt her professor's consternation, for he stopped spanking and remained motionless for what seemed an eternity to the needy naked woman on his bed. At last she spoke. 'I apologise, Professor, but I can't reach your hands to put them where I want them would you please spank me and finger me until I climax?'

There was another eternal moment of silence, but at last he began to spank her again, this time with a touch no less firm, yet with somewhat less force. Now his blows were distributed less on her cheeks and more directly to her fanny, which made a squelching sound with each direct hit, and each impact travelled directly to her clit, a divine form of torture.

After several blows, the same hand cupped her mons, then he slipped his fingers within, curving down and around until his fingertips found her pleasure centre. 'Yes!' Hermione cried, 'yes don't stop!'

True to her instructions, the wicked fingers circled, rubbed, and plucked at her while she bucked wildly, trying to increase the contact, until a shattering climax hit her, seeming to spread from her head to her toes like brushfire. The finger movement stopped then, and he simply cupped her mound as the orgasm raged through her body, seeming to hold her anchored by his grasp on her sex.

When her tremors ceased, he moved her gently from his legs and retrieved the dressing gown from the floor. 'Do you need the lavatory?' he asked, extending the garment to her.

Hermione pulled the fabric over her nudity and shook her head numbly. 'No I only want to sleep.'

It seemed to her then that her professor fled the room into the lavatory, where she was certain she heard him ward the door against sound and entry before all became quiet. She scarcely had time to wonder what sound he wished to conceal before she was sound asleep.

Chapter 5: Complications

Chapter 5 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe.

Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Thanks to my beta reader, DeeMichelle, my Brit-picker, MagicAlly, and my alpha reader, Sshg316. Y'all rock the casbah. Wherever that is.

Chapter 5: Complications

Severus pressed his back against the warded bathroom door and took a deep breath, profoundly shaken. Without further ado, he tore open his fly and with a shudder, took his aching cock into his hand. Impotence potion? He would laugh if he weren't so bloody

Coherent thought ceased as he wrapped the fingers still damp and fragrant from Hermione's essence about his weeping member and stroked once twice thrice before spilling all over his fist, his gasp of relief almost immediately followed by a long string of swear words.

He flung off his clothes and stepped beneath a viciously cold spray to cleanse himself of their mingled scents. Standing within the punishing, icy shower, he admitted to himself that he had seriously misjudged the situation. Damn and blast! He had reckoned without his body's reaction to the girl's the *woman's* need. Her body was perfect in form and lovely in her longing and he was a damned geriatric pervert for thinking so! Miss Granger was his student, who deserved his protection she was a fellow Order member, who deserved his loyalty and she was a witch of uncommon skill and cleverness, who deserved his respect.

Yet here he was, remembering his fingers inside her slick heat and wishing it had been his cock, instead.

Eyeing the bar of soap, still wet from her earlier shower, he imagined her standing where he now stood, passing the soap over her flawlessly smooth skin. He wanted to touch her in all the same ways the soap had done and he was disgusted afresh when his cock twitched at the notion.

With a groan of defeat, he pressed his forehead to the icy marble tile. How could an impotence potion be expected to work when all of that out-of-control passion was directed at *him*? He had been so sure that deeply-seated compassion would prevent his arousal on some level but he had never dreamt that she would behave to him with such particular desire. She has asked him her ugly, old teacher to kiss her wanton lips then *she* had kissed *him* as if she could not help herself. Was he not just a useful pair of hands a convenient mouth for that matter, a handy cock? How could she make it so bloody personal? She had even asked him to undress did she want his naked skin next to her own?

Well, it would bloody well never happen. This was *not* about him if Hagrid had been here when Miss Granger's eyes had opened, she would be asking *him* to undress!

That horrifying mental image enabled him, finally, to take up the soap and wash.

Ron spotted Harry at the top of the marble staircase in the entrance hall and ran up to him two steps at a time.

'She's not in the Great Hall!' he panted, pausing on the top step to catch his breath.

'She's not in her room, either,' Harry answered, his green eyes dark with worry. 'Ginny checked. We've got to tell Dumbledore.'

Ron looked doubtful. 'Shouldn't we tell McGonagall?' he asked. 'After all, she's Hermione's Head of House.'

'Good morning, Mr Weasley,' the headmaster's calming voice said from behind them. 'Good morning, Harry,' he added.

The boys turned to him. 'Good morning, sir,' they responded.

'I believe we have something to discuss. Would you join me in my office for breakfast?'

Once seated in the chairs about the small round table where eggs, toast, and bacon were set out for them, Harry ignored the food, whilst Ron immediately began loading his plate.

'Professor,' Harry said. 'Hermione never came back last night. I'm afraid something has happened to her.'

Dumbledore offered a bowl of scrambled eggs to Harry, then took two slices of toast from the rack and began to spread them with raspberry jam.

'You are quite right, Harry,' the headmaster said, looking up from his toast, his blue eyes keen over the half-moon spectacles. 'Miss Granger was taken last night by Lord Voldemort's Death Eaters.'

In his haste to leap to his feet, Harry knocked the bowl of scrambled eggs flying, providing a marble bust on the nearest bookcase with an odd yellow toupee. Ron's mouth dropped open, displaying for their edification his partially-masticated food.

'She's all right,' Dumbledore said, speaking now with some force. 'I brought her back myself.'

'But where *is* she?' Harry asked urgently, still poised for flight. 'Her bed hasn't been slept in!'

Ron nodded his agreement to this question, swallowing his food with some difficulty.

'Harry,' Professor Dumbledore said, 'please sit down. I will tell you everything you need to know and answer your questions, as well.'

The headmaster waited with perfect patience as Harry righted his seat and sat again, whereupon Professor Dumbledore served his plate with bacon and toast. Nothing was said of the fate of the eggs, which had slid down the face of the bust to puddle in lumps about the marble base.

'Miss Granger has been cursed by Lord Voldemort,' the old wizard said, seeming to choose his words very carefully. Before Harry could begin to question him, he raised a finger and continued, 'She is alive, and she is physically unharmed, but the Dark curse cast upon her is causing her some distress, so I have made arrangements for her to pass the weekend where she can receive the care she needs.'

Ron managed to swallow again before asking, 'What kind of curse, sir? Is it the Imperius, or'

'An excellent question, Mr Weasley,' Dumbledore replied. 'It is not one of the Unforgivable curses, but a Dark one, nonetheless.'

'What has it *done* to her?' Harry whispered, his eyes riveted on the old man's face. 'If she's well, why can't we see her?'

'You cannot see her because she is not in the Hospital wing. I have placed her with a caretaker who specializes in these types of curses but you will undoubtedly see her back in class on Monday.' Dumbledore frowned as he continued, 'As for the effects of the curse, those are rather personal to the individual who has been cursed. Some of the effects may be embarrassing to Miss Granger things she may not wish to discuss with young men, even if you *are* her best friends. I would like to have your word, Harry and yours, Mr Weasley that you will not question her about the specifics.'

After exchanging a speaking look with Ron, Harry said, 'If you think we shouldn't ask her, we won't but please, sir, *why* can't we know more about the type of curse?'

Dumbledore looked rueful. 'I cannot tell you what curse it is, Harry, for we have not determined that, as yet. Professor Snape has the most experience of any of us studying the Dark Arts and associated curses. I assure you that he and I shall work tirelessly with Miss Granger to discover the type of curse and to determine a way to counter its effects.'

'I want to help look for a counter-curse,' Harry said immediately, continuing to ignore the food on his plate. He stared stubbornly, with an air bordering on defiance, at the headmaster. 'Why can't you tell us what's *wrong* with her?'

Professor Dumbledore studied Harry for an unnervingly long time over the rims of his eyeglasses before reaching out and placing a calming hand upon the young man's arm. 'I know what it is to love a friend and to wish to assist them, no matter what,' he said kindly. 'In this case, however, you must consider what Miss Granger's wishes would be. We must be sensitive to *her* feelings in the matter, as well as our own, or we may make her even more uncomfortable for no good reason, Harry.'

With abrupt energy, the headmaster stood. 'I have a meeting which I must attend now, but please feel free to stay and finish eating.' He eyed the defiled marble bust and cleaned the cold eggs from it with a wave of his hand. 'Poor old Paracelsus,' he murmured absently, 'I wonder if he had not always wished to have yellow hair?' Turning suddenly, he strode to the door, saying as he left, 'Trust me once more, boys I pledge to you that Miss Granger shall receive the best care and assistance which Hogwarts can provide.'

The instant the door closed behind Dumbledore, a house-elf Apparated into the room with a fresh bowl of scrambled eggs. 'Eat up, young sirs!' it squeaked cheerfully, spooning eggs onto their plates.

Freshly showered and dressed, Severus stood over the figure sleeping in his bed, dreading the necessity of waking her. He had swallowed another measure of the impotence potion, but he dared not take a third; three doses in twenty-four hours would have him attending to the girl's needs from his sickbed.

'Wake up, Miss Granger,' he said calmly.

Her eyes flew open at the sound of his voice, and the look of warm welcome in her brown gaze rendered him nearly breathless. She smiled and reached her arms to him, as if expecting him to join her in the bed. He was within an instant of doing just that, simply for the pleasure of holding her sleep-warmed body next to his own, when his reason piped up again.

If Hagrid had been here when she opened her eyes, she would be welcoming him into her bed, he reminded himself ruthlessly. There is nothing personal in her pleasure at seeing me.

As he watched her face, her eyes seemed to become unfocussed, and he repressed a sigh. Thank Merlin he had put the food under a warming charm.

Severus savoured his second cup of tea, ostensibly reading the *Daily Prophet*, whilst keeping an eye on his guest. Hermione sat upon the sofa, her feet tucked beneath her in the voluminous folds of the green dressing gown. She had eaten steadily for several minutes when she had been served her first plate of food and was now dawdling over seconds.

'Sir?'

Severus grunted his answer.

'I was wondering if I can go see my friends?'

Lowering the paper, Severus met her anxious gaze. 'Professor Dumbledore has met with Potter and Weasley, Miss Granger.'

The girl flushed to the roots of her hair. 'They ... they *know*?' she whispered, patently mortified.

'They are aware of your abduction; they know you were cursed. They know nothing of the nature of the curse, of its effects on you, or of your present whereabouts.' Her relief was palpable, and he felt a flash of satisfaction for his part in bringing that reprieve.

'I would like to have my schoolbooks,' she said, 'and my own clothes.'

He nodded. 'A house-elf has been deputed to bring those things to this room while you sleep.'

'Why can't I go myself?' she asked crossly. 'In fact, why can't I go to my room?'

'How long do you think you will have before the compulsion comes upon you again?' he inquired softly. 'And if your friends see you in your room, how will you explain the story which the headmaster has so helpfully told on your behalf?'

She turned her face away from him, studying a bookshelf near at hand; she looked very unsure of herself, and he felt the faintest flicker of pity for her situation.

'I hate being such an inconvenience to you,' she informed the bookshelf.

'You may as well accustom yourself, Miss Granger: You will be an inconvenience to me until the Dark Lord falls or until, out of the goodness of his heart, he lifts the curse you bear.' He spoke the last in a tone of such sneering derision that she turned back to face him fiercely.

'It wasn't my idea!' she flashed. 'Do you think I *want* to be like this with you?'

'Rid yourself of the notion that it was *my* wish to have a pathetic schoolgirl foisted onto me for the foreseeable future!' he snarled, stung by her emphasis or so it seemed to him on the word 'you.' 'You are no more appealing to me than I am to you, foolish girl!'

She rose blindly, knocking the china from the table, where it missed the thick area rug and shattered on the unforgiving stone of the dungeon floor. Sublimely unaware, she rushed from his presence, heading for the bathroom, he supposed, and was proven right when the bathroom door slammed with a force which set the tea service on the low table to rattling.

'Bugger,' he swore. Obviously, there would be no peaceful tea-drinking this weekend. He placed his cup back on the tray and stood to inspect the broken cup. As he had suspected, there were traces of blood the blasted girl had cut herself and the drops of blood led, with increasing splatter, all the way to the bathroom door.

He stood outside the bathroom, irresolute, listening to the sobbing emanating from within. He glared at the wood and touched the handle, unsurprised to find she had locked it against him. He strode back into the sitting room to clear away the broken cup and the trail of blood drops; by the time he was before the door again, he could hear the water running.

Good. She could clean up, and she would feel better; he had often observed this phenomenon with the young women of Slytherin House. A good cry, followed by a hot bath, could cure almost any ill. With some optimism, he seated himself in the armchair near the bedroom fire and attempted to read while he waited.

Minutes ticked by slowly, demonstrated by the number of times he consulted the bedside clock, and after twenty minutes, he strode to the door and knocked firmly.

'Miss Granger?'

'G-go away,' she said pitifully.

Disregarding her, he cast a non-verbal unlocking spell and entered the bathroom.

'Get out!' she cried, crossing her goose-pimpled arms over her breasts.

Her left foot was wrapped in a face flannel and elevated on the side of the tub; the cloth was stained red. Whipping his wand from its sheathe with one hand, he lightly removed the flannel with the other.

'Why have you not healed it?' he demanded roughly, the hand on her ankle surprisingly gentle.

'I left my wand in the bedroom,' she said, obviously embarrassed.

'Brilliant,' he snapped. 'Have you removed the glass?'

She shifted, as if to remove her foot from his grasp, but he only tightened his hold. 'I can feel it, but I can't get it out,' she admitted in a small voice.

'I can see you mean to be inconvenient in a plethora of ways,' he remarked sardonically, then he levitated her from the water with a non-verbal flourish of his wand and wafled her into the bedroom and onto the bed, oblivious to her screeching protests.

'I'll I'll bleed on the bedclothes!' she shrieked, attempting to hop onto the floor.

'Give over, girl!' he thundered impatiently, and he was gratified when she desisted in her attempts to stand. Kneeling on the floor with his face very close to her cut and bruised foot, he performed the spell to remove any foreign particles from the wound, then, with great concentration, sang the incantation to heal the cut. When he was satisfied with the results of his labours, he pulled open the drawer of his bedside table and removed a tiny red phial, from which he decanted a small amount of fluid and applied it to the faint scar. 'Essence of dittany,' he murmured, looking up for the first time and addressing the girl.

She sat unclothed upon his bed, her bushy brown hair a tangle upon her shoulders, her eyes fixed upon him with a hunger every bit as naked to him as was her flesh to his eyes. Unable to resist the impulse, he ran his thumb again over the sole of her foot, and she shuddered, her thighs parting, the scent of her need evident to him.

She opened her mouth to speak, but he knew the gist of the words she would utter her desire was clearly written on her face. He looked down at the foot in his hand, so small, compared to his own, and infinitely more delicate, with its daintily arched sole and its taunting, frivolous pink toenails. He saw again the faint mark, now slick with dittany, where he had healed her and a wave of possessiveness as fierce as a dagger thrust pierced his defences.

Mine, he thought hazily, closing long fingers about her ankles and tugging until she sat on the edge of the mattress, her navel on level with his nose.

'Sir, I' she began, but he knew her request before she spoke it.

His hands slid up her calves and ghosted over her knees before coming to rest upon the tops of her legs, his thumbs curved down to touch her inner thighs in a compelling, circular caress. There was no necessity for speech; her need spoke eloquently to his instinctive response, and she lay back with a sigh of acceptance, parting her legs so that her hungry little quim was directly before his eyes. He silently buried his face amongst her fragrant curls, his fingers spreading her labia and his serpentine tongue darting out for his first taste of nectar. She purred like a cat when his lips closed over her nub, and her hands twined in his hair to keep him where she wanted him. It chanced across his mind, when she had ground herself to her third consecutive orgasm by way of his greedy mouth, that he had grossly misjudged his ability to remain unmoved before her unrestrained passion.

Spent, she sprawled untidily across the foot of his bed. Still without a word, he stood and lifted her into his arms, taking down the bedclothes with a non-verbal, wandless spell, and settling her upon a pillow. He stretched out by her side, fully clothed, his aching erection mocking the carefully brewed potion he had ingested to prevent its occurrence. The girl curled up against his side, and they passed into sleep almost simultaneously.

Chapter 6: The Confrontation

Chapter 6 of 28

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The Love You Take

Chapter 6: The Confrontation

Hermione's eyes opened slowly, and she blinked, disoriented. The world had gone a dirty, murky green colour ... and why in the name of Nimüe was she naked?

Struggling to move, she finally recognised where she was: In the underwater city of the Merpeople, beneath the lake. Surely she had done this already? Wildly, her eyes darted from side-to-side; as she grew accustomed to the gloom, she saw that she was surrounded, but not by Merpeople she was ringed by Death Eaters. Beyond the Death Eaters, she could see the vague shapes of Viktor and Harry, swimming back and forth, but not daring to come forward to rescue her.

Again, Hermione tried to move her arms, to move her feet, but she was still immobilised by the enchantment, which had put her to sleep and had enabled her to breathe normally underwater. This had happened when she was fifteen years old, she was sure of it, but Viktor had pulled her out of the water, and she had never woken up until she was back on dry land so why was she awake now?

Glancing down at herself, she flushed with shame: She was completely naked. The nipples of her breasts were crinkled with the cold of the water, and in spite of her discomfort, she felt unbelievably aroused to be in this position. In fact, if she could get her hands free, she wasn't entirely sure that she would not begin to touch herself, in spite of her audience. The building desire was unnerving to her she had to do something to relieve the tension

There was movement on the periphery of her vision, and she looked back again to see the Death Eaters trying to flee but they were far too slow. Arriving like a strong wind, Severus Snape was upon them, and a blast of magic from his wand sent the robed-and-masked villains spinning off in every direction, until Hermione could no longer see them. Then Snape swam up to her, and miraculously, Hermione was able to move again.

She twined herself about his torso as if she were a climbing ivy, and grabbing his empty hand, she pulled it shamelessly between her thighs, plunging his fingers in the warm wetness there. His black eyes watched her expressionlessly, but his fingers seemed to know their business, expertly seeking out and rubbing her clitoris in a steady circular motion. Not satisfied, she put a hand behind his head and urged him down, arching her back to thrust her aching nipples toward his mouth.

For a moment, his touches within her vulva ceased, and Hermione cried out her frustration, wriggling against his hand wildly, never letting up on her insistent urging of his head to her breast. Then thin lips closed satisfactorily around her nipple, and hard suction tugged her entire areole into the warm depths of his mouth, as the fingers slipped inside her channel, the thumb now beginning a lazy circling of her nub.

Hermione's reasoning ability swiftly deserted her as she fell into the languid bliss of the dark head moving back and forth from breast to breast, and clever, knowing fingers teasing her efficiently over the edge into euphoria, obediently continuing the motions until she had peaked yet again. Tangling her hand in his shoulder-length hair, she dragged him up from her breast to her lips and kissed him before drifting again into the murky depths.

Severus followed the impossible wench back into sleep; she had never truly wakened during her assault of his person. Vainly, he tried to empty his mind, but he could not escape the memory of her nipple in his mouth or of her lips, warm upon his own.

Hermione's eyes fluttered open to find her professor's eyes fixed upon her face.

'Hi,' she said, gladness filling her at the sight of him.

'Hello,' he responded, continuing to watch her carefully.

'Have we slept the day away?' she asked, resisting the urge to touch his face with her fingertips.

'Only five hours of it,' he replied.

Hermione smiled. 'Five hours? I went that long without'

He burst her bubble with a quick shake of his head. 'No you woke me once.'

She felt her face flush. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered, feeling like such a huge bother.

'Don't waste your energy on self-recrimination,' he said. 'It will profit you nothing, and I do not require your apologies.'

She felt her eyes fill with tears at this unlooked-for kindness and was moved to take the hand lying upon the counterpane and nurse it to her cheek. 'Thank you,' she whispered.

He neither spoke nor tugged his hand from her grasp but remained perfectly still. Hermione noted the colour of his eyes, so dark the pupil was scarcely differentiated from the iris. There was a faint crease between his eyebrows; otherwise, his face was remarkably unlined, save for the brackets about his mouth. This was not the face of a man who smiled, but of one who scowled; she was moved to smile tenderly at him, turning her face so that his fingers cupped her nose and her lips touched the palm of his hand.

Still he watched her, and she realised she smelled her own scent upon his fingers he smelled of her arousal. The knowledge acted as a catalyst, need falling upon her so suddenly that she was breathless. She shuddered and deliberately kissed the palm of his hand, her tongue tracing down to his wrist.

The hand tremored, then he removed it from her face. 'Tell me,' he said, his voice smooth and sweet to her ears; already, she was beginning to associate those low, intimate tones with mind-numbing pleasure.

'Could you ' she gasped, desperately needy, but loath to say the words. 'Like before?'

He rose above her, his weight supported on one elbow, his lips very close to her ear. 'With my mouth?' he asked, the warmth of his breath, which also smelled of her, stirring the hair at her temple.

'Yes,' she breathed and sighed in expectation as he moved down the bed, insinuating himself between her thighs. She had read of this sort of love-making in her books of erotica, but she had never quite been able to imagine anyone she knew doing such a thing.

When he parted her labia and prodded her clitoris with the tip of his tongue, she made an inarticulate cry and let the bliss flood her being. Oh, it was delicious to have that vicious tongue put to such good use, and he seemed to like it; he certainly made no objection to continuing, even after she came, to bring her off again oh, and again.

Gaining coherence once more, she raised her head to look at him, only to find midnight eyes gleaming at her from the apex of her thighs, the lower portion of his face glistening from her secretions.

'I'll order dinner,' he said.

'I'm starving!' she blurted.

He pushed himself to a sitting position. 'I'm not surprised,' he said dryly. He sat at the end of the bed, his back to her. 'Do you need the lavatory?'

'I can wait,' she said.

He stood and crossed the floor to the bathroom, and Hermione's eyes tracked his progress, noting the breadth of his shoulders, the narrowness of his hips and the tenting of the front of his trousers.

Good Merlin! Did he *desire* her?

He paused in the doorway of the bath, and Hermione darted a glance at his face, only to find him watching her. He had seen her staring at his erection! Flushing guiltily, she looked away, but not before she caught a flash of something in his expression something which very much resembled self-satisfaction.

She required his services again before the house-elf popped into the sitting room with their dinner tray, but it was a relatively quick release, achieved by the use of both his long-fingered hands, reaching from behind her as she leant against his chest, sitting in the vee of his legs upon the bed.

She relished her dinner of roast chicken and potatoes, eating steadily until she scraped the last of her pudding from its dish. Professor Snape, on the other hand, picked at his food, the crease between his eyes deep as he scowled at his sprouts.

'A Sickle for your thoughts,' she murmured, watching him over her after-dinner cup of tea.

'The going rate is a Knut,' he countered.

Hermione sat forward and set her cup on the coffee table. 'May I read everything you have on *Eternus Perturbatio*?' she asked.

He looked up at her, abandoning his apparent attempt to glare his sprouts into non-existence. "You wish to read Dark Arts texts?"

Hermione nodded solemnly. 'Knowledge is power, sir,' she said quietly.

Immediately, he stood from his chair and chose three volumes from his shelves, stacking them on top of the book from which she had read earlier. Each new book, as he removed it from the bookcase, assumed an entirely new appearance as it was touched by its owner; obviously, he carefully warded the more dangerous books in his collection from curious eyes.

The professor seated himself beside Hermione on the sofa, making and holding eye contact with her. 'Let there be no misunderstanding of my terms for this privilege,' he said sternly, and Hermione sat straighter to demonstrate her acknowledgement of his munificence. 'You may read the pertinent sections in each of these books. You may read these pages when I am present in the room with you. You may not read any other sections, nor may you read if I am not present that includes being in the next room, Miss Granger. Do you understand?'

Hermione nodded her agreement.

Holding her gaze for one more moment, during which time Hermione felt strangely close to him, Professor Snape then picked up each of the books in turn, bookmarking the beginning and the ending of the sections pertaining to Hermione's curse. At last, he turned his attention back to her.

'How are you feeling?' he asked, his meaning obvious.

'I'm fine,' she assured him.

'I will sit and mark papers whilst you read.' He nodded to the fine old cherry-wood desk placed perpendicular to the sofa.

'Yes, sir,' Hermione responded, and before her professor's bum had left the cushion, her hand closed about the top text book, and she began to read.

Hermione was a fast reader, a skill which had stood her in good stead for all of her school career. She had even delved into her school bag, brought to the professor's sitting room by a house-elf whilst she slept, and pulled out parchment, quill, and ink for note-taking purposes.

She finished the first book with a faint frown, which steadily deepened as she made her way through the significant pages of each successive text. When she closed the cover of the last one and reached to place it on the coffee table, she found Professor Snape's eyes on her with a certain wariness.

Hermione, her jaw set, stood and crossed the room to him, wadding the parchment as she walked up to stand directly before him. He remained in his chair, unmoving, as she hurled the parchment into his face. 'How *could* you?' she cried.

He made no attempt to dissemble but picked up the parchment from where it had fallen on his desk and smoothed it open, reading her jotted notes, speaking even as he did so. 'I did what I felt was best.'

'Knowing that full intercourse is the only remedy which will bring me relief for any extended length of time, you still refused?' she rasped, barely able to speak in her anger and confusion.

'Yes,' he responded, watching her closely.

Hermione began to pace, all the way to the door that led into the hallway, then back to the desk, the ludicrous green satin dressing gown dragging behind her, giving her the appearance of a little girl dressing in her father's clothes. 'I must be truly repulsive to you,' she threw at him, turning her back on him and pacing back to the door. 'Any other man would have been glad for the opportunity of a bit of a shag, but not you, no!'

His response seemed ripped from him, his tones utterly unlike the silky way he had spoken to her with his hands on her body. 'I am not made of marble!' he bellowed, gaining his feet and walking around the desk to stand in her path. 'I am made of flesh and blood, just like those men who would have been glad for a *bit of a shag!*' He repeated the phrase she had used with such derision that she whirled to face him, scrambling in the capacious pocket of his dressing gown for her vine wood wand.

Pointing it at his face, anguish rising in her like a wave, she said, 'So it's personal to me, then! What were you thinking of? How could the headmaster have given me to you if you can't even bear to do what needs to be done?'

Even through the tears which pooled in her eyes and fell to her cheeks, she could see him standing fearlessly before her drawn wand, his posture relaxed, his hands open at his sides. *My God, but he's magnificent!* she thought, her longing springing into being again like a tickle at the back of her mind.

He watched her, his face impassive, until her tears began to fall. Then, he strode slap up to her, until her wand dug into the centre of his chest. 'Feel free,' he said, taking the wand tip and moving it just to the left of his sternum.

Overcome by his nearness, Hermione let her wand clatter to the floor, her hands rising to cover her face. She could not help wanting him, and he could not bear to want her. What was she going to do?

In the next moment, strong arms enveloped her and pulled her against his hard chest; Hermione immediately wrapped her arms about his waist, allowing the fabric of his shirt to absorb her tears. Then his nose was in her hair, his lips right next to her ear.

'You're not repulsive,' he ground out, as if each word caused him pain. 'Your body is lovely, your manner is enticing, and your passion is bewitching. Only my doubt has held me in check.'

Hermione's response was to raise her face to him; the naked pleading in her expression drew a response from him, for he lowered his lips to hers, initiating a kiss for the first time. His lips were warm and soft upon hers for a moment, then he was looking into her eyes and speaking to her frankly and openly.

'You didn't choose me, but I will no longer deny you if it is your wish,' he said.

'You didn't choose me, either but I don't care,' she responded, raising her hand to trace his jaw line with her fingertips, as she had longed to do before. 'I *need* you, whether you need me or not.'

He startled her when he swept her up into his arms, cradling her against his chest. 'Don't make assumptions about my needs,' he said gruffly, striding into the bedroom and laying her upon the counterpane. He plunged both hands into his trousers pockets, pulling from one a stoppered phial of emerald green potion, and from the other an object which resembled nothing so much as a miniature silver baby's rattle. The rattle he placed on his bedside table, but the potion he handed to her. 'Please swallow that.'

Hermione took the phial and removed the stopper, immediately smelling thistles. 'Contraceptive?' she queried.

He nodded and began to unbutton his plain white lawn shirt. Hermione was completely distracted from the potion as, before her eager eyes, the shirt fell away from his chest. She saw the pectoral muscles sparsely peppered with the black hair which became more pronounced as it travelled down his abdomen, to become a thick line of ebony which disappeared into his trousers.

'Miss Granger I'm up here.'

Hermione jumped guiltily and looked up into his warmly amused eyes; the intimacy of his expression, and the way he deliberately held her eyes as he unfastened his belt,

was dead sexy. She could scarcely breathe.

'The potion will do you no good if you hold it in your hand,' he said. 'If you wish for me to come over there, you must drink it.'

His voice caressed her ears as she longed for his hands to smooth over her skin; she poured the potion down her throat in one go. He approached the bed, his trousers unbuttoned, and held out his hand for the empty phial. She dropped it into his hand, unable to resist the urge to tilt her head and to press her lips to the bare skin of his ribcage, the bones far too evident on his thin frame.

He froze when her lips made contact with his skin, and she was conscious of a shudder running through his body, muscles quivering with sensation. In one swift movement he removed his trousers and pants and stretched out beside her, his flesh pale in the candlelight.

Hermione felt the passion pounding in her with more insistence than ever before, like a pulse beating in her quim, eager for penetration. She shrugged out of the dressing gown and moved against him, feeling his skin upon hers and moaning aloud in anticipation. He rose over her, allowing his eyes to travel down her body, and she could clearly see from his expression that he found her desirable and his jutting erection, purplish against his white skin, bespoke his eagerness, as well.

His face descended and their lips touched, a hot, open-mouthed kiss in which he swiftly expressed his dominance, his tongue invading and claiming. Hermione gasped into his mouth, and he swallowed her breath, his hands now upon her breasts, inflaming her beyond reason. How she had hungered for his touch! He teased her nipples with his fingers, followed by his burning lips, and his hands moved down first to stroke her flank, then gently to squeeze her bum, and finally to touch her at her drenched centre. She bucked against hand, shameless with desire.

When at long last he moved between her legs, she eagerly embraced him with her arms, urging him on. He positioned himself to enter her and watched her face as he pushed into her body; Hermione was conscious of an impression of fullness, far beyond how his fingers had felt, and then the conflagration of her need for him flared and she wrapped her legs about his hips, urging him in further, ever further. A very distant sensation of pain touched her awareness, but it was far overshadowed by the rapture of joining with him and feeling the fire ignite within him as well. He loomed over her, supporting himself on his elbows, his black eyes glittering as he thrust into her body, visibly as transported by their passion as she was.

Her climax, when it came, was of such a violent nature that she saw lights before her eyes as she screamed his name; had she not already been climbing again to a new peak, she might have lost consciousness. As it was, she clung to his striving form, her sensible-length fingernails leaving indentations in his shoulders that would not fade for two full weeks. She could hear his rapid breathing and was aware of every ridge upon his penis as it moved with ever-increasing speed in and out of her body, stroking her clitoris with every pass. Her next orgasm, coming as it did in conjunction with his, did take her outside herself for a time, and she felt as if she was a wisp of cloud, floating softly in the night sky.

Then he moved from her embrace, and her eyes opened; he was kneeling between her legs, and she could feel his fingers, gently probing what was now a very sore part of her body.

'Sleep with me,' she murmured, reaching a hand to him, feeling so exhausted that it was a miracle she could lift her hand.

He moved again, placing an object on his bedside table, and he sat upon the bed, his back to her. 'I can sleep on the sofa in the sitting room,' he said over his shoulder, his former reticence in place once more.

'You bloody well won't,' she said crossly, and with a super-human effort, she struggled into a sitting position, wrapped her arms about his shoulders, and allowed herself to fall backwards to the welcoming bed again.

She heard his chuckle, then was gathered into his arms; sighing as she relaxed into this haven, Hermione drifted toward dreamless sleep, her last conscious moment marked by a quick tightening of his arms about her torso, and the uttering of one word in his silken voice:

'Mine.'

A/N: Beta reading thanks to DeeMichelle and Brit-picking kudos to MagicAlly.

The "goody trail" was added to this chapter for minuet99, who knows why! She demanded that I include the following photograph with this chapter. This is Alan Rickman, circa 1984, when he was thirty-seven, going on thirty-eight - just like Severus is in this story.

smirk



Chapter 7: Acclimatization

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

Chapter 7: Acclimatization

Severus lay in his bed, sated, with an eighteen-year-old curse-induced nymphomaniac in his arms, and felt like a condemned man.

He had been lying to himself, in the beginning. There was a part of him that had been sure he would be able to handle Hermione's needs in an efficient, detached way, somehow managing to balance his dignity against her emotional and physical needs. He was in a position of authority over this girl; it behooved him to keep the unequal nature of their relative positions in the world in mind when dealing with her. An honourable man would see to the woman's needs without allowing himself to become personally involved.

Wouldn't he?

But then he had come face-to-face with the reality of her passion her extremity, all focussed on him and with the failure of his carefully-brewed impotence potion to provide any refuge, he had been burdened with the exact knowledge of how it felt to be fully desired by Hermione Granger.

Still, he had been resolute in his determination to care for the needs of the curse victim without losing himself in the necessary acts or losing himself *in her*.

Her. Hermione Granger: Harry-bleeding-Potter's best friend; student extraordinaire; female, blessed with all the appropriate accoutrements for said sexual designation. Had he ever, in all his time of knowing her, thought of her as a female?

He stared down at the impossible corona of bushy brown hair and considered the question. Her know-it-all behaviour reminded him all too keenly of himself in his early student years at Hogwarts. But her meticulous attention to detail in her written and her practical work was worthy of note; her fierce defence of the defenceless was admirable and her wondrous intellect had always earned a silent nod of approval from him.

Take those qualities and place them inside a female who was lovely in form and stunning in passion, whose sole cynosure was *him*, and you had a formidable recipe for ruin.

Dear Merlin, he was well and truly buggered.

Even so, he had done a good job of holding her at arm's length until she had advanced on him in her righteous fury and demanded to know why he was denying her. He had had no answer to give. He had truly not viewed it before from that perspective from *her* perspective. Perhaps the ultimate objective of this endeavour was *not* to preserve his nobility at all costs, but to, as she had phrased it, do what needed to be done to meet her needs fully and to buy her as much respite as possible from the exigencies of the curse and to hell with the personal consequences for either of them. She certainly had been granted no choice in the matter, and he had, under duress, agreed to provide that surcease for her, knowing full well what it would entail.

Filled with the discomfort of unaccustomed remorse and unwilling to suffer more of the bitter regret he held in place of the only love he had ever felt for another human being, Severus had given himself permission to let down his guard with the girl. The suffering she had endured for the last twenty-four hours was not precisely his fault he had not been the one to curse her, after all but her relief was certainly, and quite literally, in his hands. He had withheld what she needed most in an attempt to shield himself from the things he most feared: emotional entanglement and the loss of dignity not necessarily in that order.

He glanced to his right and spied the old-fashioned Nexus, forged in silver and heavily ornamented, as had been the fashion in the nineteenth century. This one was almost certainly an antique. He had summoned the house-elf and requested the device to be fetched from Prince House. The employment of such gadgets had fallen into disuse after the war with Grindelwald, but Severus had a certain reverence for the Old Ways. This was one gift he could preserve for Hermione, in spite of the sordid way she had lost her virginity.

At last, he felt sleep come to him, and he slipped into slumber by the side of his enticing encumbrance.

Feather-light touches upon his skin brought him to near-consciousness; a hand closed about his shaft, investigative in its approach. Rejecting that nonsensical technique, his hand closed over the smaller one, and he encouraged that hand to stroke him properly. If one were going to bother to give a hand job, it might as well be done correctly. How odd that now, fleeting touches from a slightly damp pair of lips peppered the hand with which he guided his benefactor Sweet Merlin, now the lips were on his *cock*.

His eyes opened, and he saw the girl *nuzzling* his bollocks, her little hand obediently maintaining the pressure and pace his larger hand had set for her on his erection.

'What are you doing?' he croaked, pulling her hand off him.

She answered, and the exhalation which accompanied her words danced over his privates like the promise of a blow-job; his cock jerked as the thought flashed through his mind. What in the name of Nimue did the girl think she was doing? Decent women didn't perform such acts although indecent ones did, if they were suitably paid.

'Stop it,' he commanded, reaching down to drag her up his body.

'I was investigating,' she said, her eyes alight with lust. 'I wanted to wake you nicely, so you would do *that* to me again.'

'I was sleeping,' he pointed out unnecessarily. 'I'm shattered right now but feel free to amuse yourself,' he added, noting with some amusement how she had experimentally straddled him and begun to move her hot wetness over him.

She shocked him when she rose up, lifted his erection, and slid onto it with a shuddering sigh. Before his amazed eyes, Hermione rode him with great enjoyment, finding the pace and the angle which pleased her most. She leant forward, the rigid nipples of her breasts grazing his chest, and caught his lips in a mouth-plundering kiss which ignited his slumbering libido with a suddenness which took him by surprise the girl was *seducing* him.

He tangled his hand in her hair, holding her in the kiss, his tongue dancing into her mouth, exploring; at the same time, he snapped his hips, driving himself deeper into her body. Her gasp of pleasure was answered by his growl; he needed *more*, and he needed it *now*.

Tumbling her unceremoniously onto her back he moved over and into her with a smirk, his hands grasping her arms and sliding them above her head, where he held her wrists and ravished her. He thrust quickly, deeply, and repeatedly, his head thrown back, his eyes closed, his ears only dimly hearing her murmurs of appreciation, which accelerated quickly into cries of completion; his driving need was to bury himself within her tight warmth.

His climax brought from his throat a sound which became a roar; as the jets of hot semen left him, seeking her dark, secret places, he felt as if the world lay conquered at his feet. He remained where he was as his breathing returned to normal, and he realised he had rewarded his partner's generous effort to bring him pleasure with a wild, primitive fuck. Slipping to the side, he smoothed the tangle of hair from her face, only to find her sleeping, a smile of utter hubris upon her lips.

He fell back onto his own pillow again with a chuckle; evidently, that had been Hermione's hope when she began nuzzling his bits. Sleep overtook him as he inventoried in

his mind the ingredients he would need for a potency potion.

The potion base was bubbling in his cauldron, and he was chopping *Liriosma ovata* root when Hermione wandered into his private brewing room the next morning. She was apparently fresh from his bathroom, for her crazy hair was damp, her face was shiny and well-scrubbed, and she smelled faintly of the bar soap from the shower. She wore his rather loosely-belted dressing gown, and her eyes had the strangely unfocussed glaze he had come to associate with the effects of the curse.

'Good morning,' she said, walking up to him, not to peer into the cauldron, as he had expected, but to gaze up at him with a misty smile.

'I sincerely doubt it,' he grumbled, continuing his chopping.

Her smile faltered somewhat, although she reached up, her fingertips skimming his stubble-darkened cheek. 'I missed you,' she said simply.

Clamping down on an epithet, he caught her wrist and placed the hilt of a heavy marble pestle in her hand. 'Pulverize those ginkgo leaves,' he commanded acidly.

Hermione grasped the pestle hilt and automatically reached for the leaves. As he watched her through the curtain of his morning-greasy hair, she bit her lip and gave her head a shake, as if to remove cobwebs. 'I had hoped you'd come back to bed,' she said, beginning to carry out her assigned job as a NEWT-level student would, with the correct angle and pressure on the pestle to grind the ginkgo leaves to powder.

'I know,' he said, his snit mollified by her ready acceptance of his authority. 'However, if you are hoping for my full participation in the day's activities, this potion must be brewed.'

She frowned but kept her eyes on the mortar and pestle. 'Don't you keep it on hand?'

'Don't be impertinent!' he snarled, and she subsided.

Hermione toiled steadily, her work ethic kicking in and focussing her attention on the task at hand. Severus worked with one eye on her, wondering if he could keep her diverted long enough to get the potion to its thickening stage. After half-an-hour, he left her with the glass stirring rod and strict instructions to stir thirty-six times every five minutes, with one anti-clockwise stir added in after every sixth rotation.

He showered, shaved, and put on clean clothes all in fifteen minutes; by the time he was back in the brewing room, Hermione was glaring at the potion, her hands shaking on the stirring rod. She looked up when he entered the room, and her face reflected her relief.

'What colour is the mixture?' he asked in clipped tones, fully in his teaching persona, in spite of his casual dress.

'Canary yellow,' she replied, responding as best she could to the teacher's authority in his bearing. 'Please, sir'

'The potion will sit now for thirty-nine minutes to thicken,' he said repressively. 'Set the timer.'

Obediently, Hermione placed the rod on the surface and set the timer; when she had done so, she looked at him beseechingly. 'I'm sorry; I've put it off as long as I can ...' she whispered.

He stepped up to her, goaded by the desperation of her tone. 'You've done well,' he said quietly. Standing this near to her, he could smell the musky sweet arousal from her slick quim. He was surprised when his cock stirred; in spite of the exertions he had endured in the last several hours, he found he was up to it once again even without the potion. Stilling the urge to push the dressing gown from her shoulders, he let his hands hang at his sides. 'How can I help?'

As if she had heard his earlier thought, she shrugged out of the garment and let it fall to the floor, stepping up and pressing her body to his, her arms slipping around his waist. 'Touch me,' she said, sliding her hands down and deliberately caressing his arse.

Feeling a trace of her insanity touch his mind, he buried one hand in her damp hair and kissed her eager mouth, sliding the other hand from her shoulder to her breast, caressing its incredibly soft underside and passing the ball of his thumb over her furred nipple. She moaned around his tongue and suckled it with such vigour that his passion flared like a flame touched to petrol. Urgently, he stroked down her abdomen to delve into her wetness with two fingers, finding and lightly teasing her clitoris. In her zeal, she bit at his lips, her hot little tongue invading his mouth insistently. With a low rumble deep in his throat, he grasped her buttocks and lifted; she wrapped her legs about his hips. In one smooth movement, he swung her around from the work surface and sat her upon the facing table which he usually used for his reference books.

As soon as her bum touched the table surface, she released his shoulders and her hands went to his fly, her fingers inexpertly seeking to set him free. Batting her hands away, he bent his head to capture a nipple in his mouth and she braced her hands on the table behind her, arching her back to provide him clear access to her breasts.

He suckled first one breast, then the other, his cock growing harder with each pass of his tongue over her achingly crinkled nipples. When she was whimpering from pleasure, he dipped the two fingers still smelling of her back into her quim, stroking her centre. With half-lidded eyes, he watched the naked young woman on his work table; he had never seen a sight more arousing. Her slender neck curved back until her unruly hair touched the table top. Her breasts, like coral-tipped porcelain, sat high on her chest, calling to his hands, to his mouth, for attention. Her hips moved steadily against the pressure of his hand, pleasuring herself. Her legs hung over the table's edge, splayed as widely as she could manage to give him unimpeded access to her sweetness but he well remembered them wrapped about him as he fucked her dear Merlin, did he remember.

Without further ado he unfastened his trousers and freed his erection, replacing the two fingers with his cock, stroking her clitoris with its moisture-weeping, rounded, satin-over-iron-textured head.

'Oh, yes,' she purred, raising her hips until he was positioned at her entrance.

'Yes,' he responded, accepting the invitation and thrusting into her heat.

In a tit-for-tat retaliation for the etching of fingernail shapes on his shoulders, she bore for the next two weeks the clear impression of his fingers upon either side of her waist, just above her hips, where he grasped her as he drove into her body, torn between the way she eagerly received his every stroke over her needy little clit and the way her eyes seemed to drink up the sight of his face as he fucked her.

She climaxed twice in quick succession, and still he moved between her thighs, outside of himself now, almost as if he was watching himself nailing a student in his private lab upon the work surface set at such a perfectly convenient height. When at last he flooded her with his seed and stood over her, panting, she clamped her surprisingly strong legs about his arse, holding him inside of her, and pulled herself up by the front of his shirt to give him a very wet, very thorough kiss.

When at last she released him, and he stepped away from her, she cast a cleansing charm upon him and upon his come-stained trousers before she picked up the dressing gown and sashayed out of his workroom in the all-together, her sassy little arse swaying.

He stared for several seconds at the door which closed behind her, wondering just what sort of monster the Dark Lord had created with his damned lust-compulsion curse.

When he came into the sitting room from his brewing room through the hidden door, he was pleased to find that she had taken it upon herself to order breakfast; she even poured his tea before going back to the arcane Ancient Runes text book she was reading. Three hours passed before he looked up from the journal he was perusing to find her standing before him minus the dressing gown, with a dose of the Potency Potion in her hand.

He took the phial and swallowed the liquid, relieved to find that the flavour was not offensive.

'How long before it's effective?' she asked him, watching his face.

'Within fifteen minutes,' he replied, wondering what she would do next. It seemed incredible to him that his body might respond to her again after so many orgasms in the last twelve hours.

Wordlessly, she straddled him in the wingchair, her knees snug between his hips and the chair arms. He tilted his head back, his face carefully blank, and looked up at her face; she settled her bum on his legs and twined her fingers in his hair, leaning in to give him an open-mouthed kiss. He allowed her to take the lead, feeling a lazy gratification at her efforts to arouse him. Without being bidden, she took his hands from their resting place upon the chair arms and drew them to her breasts, her knees tightening on either side of his hips as she ground herself against him. Idly, he touched her breasts, hefting them in his hands, squeezing gently, and then capturing her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, applying analogous pressure to each, much to her apparent approval, if one were to judge by her soft moan.

The potion kicked in abruptly, tumbling him from interested observer to fully involved participant in a space of seconds. Hermione registered the change in him with a satisfied sibilation. Their hands met at his fly, each fumbling to release him, and she slid onto his unclad erection with a deep sigh. She then proceeded to amaze him, sliding up and down with a competence which belied her inexperience. Driven by her hunger, her efforts caused her first completion to trill through her within seconds. Severus, dumbstruck by the novelty of having sex whilst sitting in his reading chair in his sitting room, was astounded when her continuing exertions brought him to a shuddering climax, an occurrence which pleased the girl so much that she fastened her mouth to his and inhaled his thunderstruck exhalations of pleasure.

When at last she lay sagging upon his chest, panting, he allowed her to remain as she was for too long, for she fell asleep upon him, their mixed secretions mucky-slick between them. Unmindful of the mess, he put a Weightlessness Charm upon her and stood, carrying her into the bedroom and depositing her upon his bed, casting a Cleansing Charm upon her before drawing the counterpane over her body and leaving her to nap in peace.

They spent a surprisingly pleasant Sunday in his quarters, ordering food from the kitchens when they were hungry, and having sex when the compulsion demanded it. The Potency Potion, an ancient recipe Severus had found in a Dark Arts text, was very nearly a miracle drug, and would undoubtedly make his fortune if ever he had the freedom to set up his own Apothecary shop.

In the quiet time between the storms of lust, he caught up on his marking, and she did her homework, her schoolbooks spread out around her as she frowned over her notes. He wondered why she didn't change into her own clothing, but her fairly frequent desire to entwine her naked body about his made that a bit impractical, he supposed.

For the main, she was quiet, rather than chatty, and seemed disinclined to question him ceaselessly, which surprised him.

Was she up to something?

In the early evening, when he lay spooned up behind her on his bed, slowly rocking in and out of her body, the fingers of his right hand rubbing her clitoris in the ceaseless rhythm she favoured, he dimly heard the headmaster's voice issuing from the Floo but the old man could wait. The girl, lost in her bliss, was unaware of the interruption, and Severus, so close once again to emptying his essence within the vessel of her womb, did not care. In less than forty-eight hours, the woman, her needs, her desires, her preferences, the catalogue of her vocal responses to his touches, had become his entire world. He had her undivided attention to himself until morning, and he was damned if anyone would take it from him prematurely.

Mundane reality was coming that which he had sorely mourned less than two days ago had now become his new Boggart. Come sunrise, his own personal Nimue became again his student, and their usual routine would reign. For now, he existed in a satiety-soaked universe permeated with Hermione Granger, and there he would remain until forced to depart.

A/N: Love and thanks to DeeMichelle, who beta reads, MagicAlly, who Brit-picks, and Sshg316, who alpha reads and cheerleads. MUAH!

Chapter 8: Imbroglio

Chapter 8 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: This chapter is over twice as long as the longest one in this story, which is why it has taken me so long to update. There are lemons galore herein, but I hope you can see the exquisite agony as well as the ecstasy. Sshg316, my darling Shug, has informed me that I really need to remove this story from the PWP category, for there is far too much plot. I tell you that as a warning, in case you do not care for too much plot with your lemons.

Extra special love to DeeMichelle, who, in addition to beta-reading this chapter, babied me through the middle bits where I was wibbling and wanting to quit. Love to MagicAlly, who does her damndest to scrub all the Yankisms out of my stories. Mistakes are mine.

Chapter 8: Imbroglio

Hermione was startled when the acid tones woke her from a deep sleep.

'Wake up, Miss Granger!'

Her eyes flew open. She was in Professor Snape's bedroom, in his bed, and she was naked. Every available candle was lit, filling the room with more light than she had seen in these rooms all weekend. Standing at her side, looking down at her with a terrible sneer, was her Potions master. He was fully dressed in his black teaching robes, and he towered over her, remote and cold, like a distant star. Clutching the bedclothes to her neck, she stared up at him questioningly.

'What's happened, sir?'

He removed a gold watch from his pocket and flipped it open, turning the face to her. 'Morning has happened, Miss Granger,' he replied tersely. 'Monday morning, to be

precise. You will return to your so-called normal life today.'

Hermione felt the blow of his disdain as if he had struck her with his fist. Less than two hours ago, *he* had woken *her* and made love to her with such unspoken intensity that she had been utterly transported. *Why* was he behaving this way now?

His lips thinned as he watched her emotions flicker across her face, and when he crossed his arms over his chest, she struggled to school herself. She would not reveal her hurt to him he obviously could not be trusted, and she certainly could not judge his moods. She had been under the impression that they had come to some sort of understanding in the last forty-eight hours, yet he was behaving as if *none* of their interactions had ever occurred!

'It is 5:30,' he snarled. 'You have to return to your room and make your preparations for the day before you join your House for breakfast in the Great Hall. Before *that*, we must discuss how we will proceed. Do you think you can manage to dress yourself and join me in the sitting room?'

Hermione made no effort to answer him, for he had spun on his heel and swept from the room before she could do so. At the foot of the bed, she found the clothes she had worn the night she had been taken by the Death Eaters; obviously, he meant for her to put them on. Defiantly, she stood and pulled on the garish green satin dressing gown, allowing it to trail behind her like a queen's train as she followed him into the sitting room.

He stood before the mantel, his hands clasped behind his back, resembling a great bat. Hermione stopped behind the sofa and stared at him, her chin lifted mutinously. Damned if she would sit down and let him lord it over her.

'Sit!' he barked.

'After you,' she said with exaggerated politeness, adding sarcastically, *sir*.'

It seemed to Hermione and her sweating palms that she and the professor glared at one another for an eternity, but at last he sat in his chair, and she responded by sitting on the sofa, tucking her feet in the folds of the dressing gown.

'The headmaster has provided an explanation for your absence for the weekend,' Professor Snape stated, producing a parchment envelope from his robes. 'Please familiarise yourself with the information therein, Miss Granger pretend it is a textbook, and soon you will be able to regurgitate it word-for-word, upon command.' He smiled nastily as he extended the envelope to her, malice dancing in his glittering black eyes.

Her lips pressed together to prevent her from answering in kind, Hermione took the envelope and stowed it in a pocket. *Why* was he speaking to her this way? He was deliberately saying hurtful things she could almost sense him reaching for the most cutting remark in his arsenal each time he opened his mouth. Why had she never seen this about him before? It was almost transparently obvious.

Next he produced a pair of Galleons, identical to the ones Dumbledore's Army had used, during the reign of Dolores Umbridge, to communicate the meeting times. 'No doubt you recognize these,' he said.

She shrugged indifferently.

'You will carry this token with you at all times, Miss Granger,' he said, clearly irritated by her shrug. 'When you find yourself in discomfort due to curse-related symptoms, you will send me a message, and I will make the necessary arrangements to meet with you. If you do not hear from me to the contrary, you will proceed to my office. Is that clear to you?'

Hermione, who felt the horrific stirring of the need even now, responded by hunching her shoulder at him.

She startled when he slapped the table top, the sound seeming to echo in the small room. 'Answer me, girl!'

Goaded, Hermione rose and flounced out of the room, her dignity somewhat impaired by the over-large dressing gown. All she wanted was the sanctuary of the next room, where she could close the door upon his hateful face and try to work out how she would get through the day *without* coming to him for surcease of the damned compulsion!

Her feelings finding some relief in the satisfying *bang!* of the slamming door, she settled for mere hiccupping sobs as she shrugged out of the professor's dressing gown and reached for her bra. How could he be so physically tender to her one moment and so verbally vicious and petty in the next? He was worse than *any* boy her own age could ever be!

A wave of desire passed over her and she sobbed a little louder in sheer frustration she should be able to overcome these feelings! She was the brightest witch of her age everyone said so! Her intellect should be able to rule the impulses of her body!

With shaking hands, she wrapped the bra around herself backwards and upside down, fumbling ineffectively with the hooks. She would go to her room and wash in her shower and dress in her clothes and go to breakfast with her friends and go to her classes and all would be as it had been before the dark-cloaked, masked figures had stepped out of the shadow of the forest and changed *everything*. It had to be!

The involuntary swelling of her genitals, accompanied by the copious lubrication, made each movement a titillation; she fought to concentrate, struggling to fasten the hooks of her bra, in spite of her shaking hands. No! She would *not* be weak! She would outlast this urgency; if she did not give in, it would pass, and in time, the desire would stop occurring wouldn't it? Surely this was no worse than a Muggle drug addict fighting the jones for a fix she could and *would* go cold turkey on Severus Snape! Oh, dear *Merlin*, she simply could not be subject to his horrible contempt from now until the fall of Voldemort! It was too much!

Really she would rather be dead.

Giving up on the impossible bra hooks, she hurled the offending garment across the room and resorted to pulling on her jumper; if she was careful about how she moved, no one would notice her breasts bouncing. Her breasts ... oh, how they ached; the knit of the jumper rasped over erect nipples, sending jolts straight to her throbbing quim.

She was crying in earnest now, anger, annoyance and acrimony combining with the bloody curse to wrench emotional control from her reason, handing it over to her blazing need.

He was upon her before she knew he was in the room, wrapping his arms around her from behind and lifting her bodily from the floor.

'Put me down!' she screeched. 'I hate you! Let me go!' Kicking and striking out with her fists, she landed a blow to his jaw before he pushed her onto the mattress and restrained her by the simple expedient of using his greater weight to pin her to the bed. 'No! Get away!' she cried.

Ruthlessly, his face pinched with concentration, he grasped her jaw with ungentle fingers on either side of her chin, and he stared unflinchingly into her tear-drenched brown eyes. Exposed, Hermione felt all of her thoughts and emotions spinning through her mind like film from a spool, every pathetic hope for overcoming the *Eternus Perturbatio*, every spiteful thought in response to his cruelty, every encounter they had shared in the last sixty hours, all laid bare for his probing, inquisitive mind.

At length, he released her face, and had she been standing, Hermione would have fallen from the sensation of being pushed from him. As it was, she was flooded upon his liberation of her mind by what felt like a doubled need to *come*.

'I *hate* you!' she repeated before craning her neck to kiss him with such force that their teeth clashed. She tasted blood and did not know if it was his or hers, but she did

not care; she had to have him had to have him *now*.

'Spiteful cat!' he snarled, pulling back from her, a bead of blood upon his broken lower lip. 'Stop or I'll bind your hands!'

The desire pounding in her blood stepped up a notch at this suggestion and she leant forward to lick the drop of blood from his lip. 'Please, sir please bind my hands.'

Swearing, he did as she asked, capturing her wrists and magically securing them over her head it felt as if a soft yet strong cord bound her wrists together and secured them to a stationary object such as the bedstead. The sensation of helplessness added to her excitement as he loomed over her, alien in his teaching robes, but she knew from the set of his mouth that he would do what needed to be done. And oh, sweet Merlin, she needed it badly.

'The potion is ...' she began, her traitorous body writhing beneath him, seeking to make contact in every possible way.

'...unnecessary,' he replied, reaching between them and then repositioning himself, his hardness slipping within her with a sure thrust of his hips.

She wrapped her legs around him, knowing he had reviewed her memories of each time they had done this before, knowing she should be angry with him for the violation, but needing his cock in her quim too badly to be able to act upon her knowledge.

And he seemed to be putting what he had learnt to good account, kissing her deeply, invading her mouth with his tongue and mimicking the movements of their lower bodies in such a way that she felt her orgasm coming at her from a great distance, and she was aware of each connected sensation as the synapses fired in succession. She was pushed to the peak as if propelled from behind by a meteor, then she leapt from summit to summit, maintaining a level of arousal so intense for so long that she continued to shudder with reverberations long after he came with a roar, his head thrown back, the cords of his neck tensed with effort.

He maintained his place, his slackening cock in her body, his weight supported on his arms, as he watched over her and the after-shocks of her orgasms. When at least she ceased to gasp, he released her hands and slipped to the side, pulling her securely into his arms, one long-fingered hand repeatedly smoothing her hair until she also ceased to quiver.

'I hate you,' she said groggily, his robes fisted in her hands, her lips pressed to the pulse beating in his throat.

'It is the only sensible course of action,' he murmured to her, cradling her as he might a blown-glass figurine.

Hermione realised, without knowing why, that it was as close to an apology as she would get.

Standing before the mirror in her own room, dressed in her school robes, she studied herself, looking for some sign of the terrible thing that had happened to her or of the life she had been living for the last few days. In her skirt pocket resided the fake Galleon bearing the Protean Charm; in the zippered bag containing her personal toiletry items was the herbal mixture in which the professor had had her bathe twice a day for the soreness and chafing of her tender places. Hidden deep in her trunk, wrapped in a pair of old socks, was an odd-looking item which Professor Snape had handed her last of all, just before she Flooded from his quarters to hers.

'What is it, sir?' she had asked, her ever-present curiosity overriding the vague unease she had felt about returning to her normal routine.

'Research the Nexus,' he had advised. 'When you have done so, we can discuss it.'

That, however, was for later. Just now, other than her shadowed eyes, she could see no obvious indication of her worst weekend ever. Undressed, the marks of her professor's hands showed at her waist, but fully dressed, there was nothing. The unobservant boys, her best friends, would probably not notice her wan, weary look.

With a final twitch of her robes, Hermione made her way down to the Gryffindor Common Room. As she came to the landing, she saw Harry and Ron sitting on straight chairs which had been moved to face the stairwell. The expressions of joyful relief on their dear faces as they caught sight of her gladdened her heart. She ran down the last few steps and launched herself at them, crying and laughing simultaneously as they engaged in a three-way hug.

'Are you all right?' Harry asked at last, holding her at arm's length, his hands upon her shoulders.

'Yes, I'm fine,' she said.

'What happened?' Ron asked urgently.

'Ron no!' Harry cut across him. 'We promised Dumbledore.'

Hermione gave Harry a grateful smile, then said to Ron, 'I do want to tell you about it but not just now. Let's go down to breakfast.'

The boys agreed, and the three exited the portrait hole and set out along the corridor in silence. Desperate to relieve the tension, Hermione said, 'So, how was team practice on Saturday?'

She was quite gratified when Ron began to eagerly recount his many saves, and she struggled to concentrate on the Quidditch pitch, rather than reflecting upon what she had been doing with her professor on Saturday.

Severus straightened his shoulders, consciously occluded his mind, and strode into the Great Hall through the teachers' entrance, directly onto the raised dais. He passed his colleagues without greeting, and reaching the headmaster, he seated himself on the old man's right.

'Severus?' Dumbledore said hesitantly.

'Headmaster?' he replied irritably, reaching for the nearest coffee pot and filling his cup with the dark roast he favoured.

'Dear boy,' Professor Dumbledore said, 'your lip'

Severus closed his eyes, furious with himself. He had forgotten to heal the split lip the girl had given him and judging by the headmaster's disturbed look, the glancing blow to his face had left him with a shiner, as well. Bugger!

'Did you perhaps engage in fisticuffs on the way to breakfast?' Dumbledore asked, his tone now betraying his amusement.

Severus felt quite sure the old duffer knew precisely how he had sustained his injuries. Damn the wench to hell!

'Oh, dear me, no,' he replied smoothly, aware that all his colleagues within hearing distance were straining to eavesdrop. 'I slipped in the shower this morning, and I thought Poppy could do a better job of healing it than I.' He turned his head suddenly, his scathing glance flitting past Flitwick, Vector, and McGonagall to fall upon the school matron with a challenging stare. 'Isn't that right, Poppy?'

The matron hurried into speech. 'Of course, Severus directly after breakfast! I have some nice, fresh dittany there won't be a scar to be seen!'

Severus nodded to the old hag before chancing a look down at the Gryffindor table. There she was, the author of his embarrassment, chattering with her two dunderheaded acolytes as if she had not spent the last two days fucking her Potions teacher like a brazen harlot. How lovely for her that her so-called life continued on unchanged!

In that moment, she looked up at him, as if she had heard his disrespectful appellation for her. The expression in her eyes, undeniably clear, even from this distance, was

one of ineffable sadness.

He knew, then: She performed for her friends just as he performed for his fellow teachers. Her thoughts, like his, were back in his bedroom, where they had coupled repeatedly. She was not carefree, regardless of appearances.

She was haunted.

Hermione fooled herself for a while, once she was ensconced amongst her friends, that everything was the same that nothing had changed ~~that~~ she had not changed. But then her eyes fell on Ginny, spreading jam on Neville's toast as he sweetened her tea, and on Harry, exchanging a tender smile with Luna Lovegood, who sat at the Ravenclaw table, and she had to face it: Her life was forever changed. She had eagerly if insanely given up her virginity to a man twenty years her senior a man, moreover, who despised her and everyone she loved. She had pursued him, begged him, kissed him, and had his vicious mouth on every intimate place on her body and she would do it again and again and again. No matter how cruelly he spoke to her, no matter how egregiously he violated her privacy (no matter how assiduously he pursued her pleasure no matter how many times he brought her to gibbering, shuddering completion) she would yet beg of him to take her to his bed and fuck her with his cock until she came. She would probably say it just like that, too for had she not this very morning said the word aloud for the first time in her life? Moaned it in his ear, asking for more, harder ...?

She felt, in that instant, that his eyes were upon her, and she turned to face him, a shattered spirit, bereft of every ounce of pride she had ever possessed. Their eyes met, and she knew he felt as much separated from the people and the happenings surrounding him as did she. For the second time since her life had ceased to be her own, they looked into one another's eyes and recognized a kindred soul.

He was not untouched he was haunted by these happenings as surely as she was.

The compulsion did not begin to stir until she was in her second class, and when it did, there were no preliminary twinges: It fell upon her like a wave upon the shore and washed her away as if she had no moorings.

She was desperately glad that there were only fifteen minutes of her Charms class left to endure. The next period was a free one for her. Making an excuse to Harry and Ron, she headed for the library, pulling the coin from her pocket and touching it with her wand as she hurried towards the dungeons, too distraught to think to check and make sure the boys were not following her. All she could focus on was reaching Professor Snape's office. Once she did, she would be all right he would make it stop.

He opened the office door before she could knock, and she practically fell into his arms. With a muttered oath, which sounded like, 'Merlin's Hairy Nuts,' he thrust her behind him and closed the office door, warding against intrusion and adding a Silencing Spell. That done, he turned to her with a scowl.

'Kindly save your raptures until the door is closed behind you,' he snapped. 'Do you want every casual passer-by to see you throwing yourself at me?' He sneered nastily. 'I'm sure *my* credit can withstand the gossip, but I'm not so sure about *yours*.'

Hermione ignored him, frantically unfastening her robes and pushing them off, her breathing ragged with need. Frowning, he stilled her hands. 'How long have you been like this?' he demanded. 'Didn't we discuss *not* letting it progress to this stage?'

'Make it stop!' she screeched, pulling her hands from his. 'No talk!'

A man of action, her professor moved to his chair, tugging her along by the wrist and pulling her onto his lap. Without another word, he fastened his lips to hers, his tongue immediately invading her mouth, one hand buried in her hair, the other skimming purposefully up beneath her skirt. Hermione latched onto his tongue, stroking it with her own whilst she tried clumsily to unbutton his shirt, but she was effectively halted when he magicked her knickers off.

'How did you ...?' she gasped, distracted, but his fingers sought and found her centre, and she moaned loudly, still clawing ineffectually at his shirt front. 'Hurry!'

'Relax,' he murmured, the liquid velvet of his voice caressing her psyche, and at his suggestion, she sagged against him, ceasing her efforts to undress him. 'Good girl,' he crooned, two fingers slipping up her channel as his thumb began to circle inexorably.

She caught the lobe of his ear between her teeth and nipped before trailing kisses down to his throat, her soaking quim moving in rhythm with his fingers. 'Intercourse lasts longer,' she reminded him, gasping as he varied his activity and plucked at her clitoris.

'No time,' he said, sliding his other hand up her side to seek out and find a nipple through her clothing. He mimicked his plucking motion and she nearly arched off his lap as the jolt rushed through her body, an orgasm sending her gasping cries ricocheting about amongst the specimen jars on his shelves. When she had quieted somewhat, he said, 'That should hold you until lunch. I will be in my quarters if you should have need of me.'

Hermione stood, calmer now, and looked around the floor. 'Where are my knickers?'

His face was expressionless, save for the eyebrow which quirked up at her question. 'I Vanished them.'

Hermione turned on him, scowling. 'I'm supposed to go to Arithmancy without underpants?'

His lips thinned. 'I didn't hear you objecting at the time.'

She turned her back on him, huffing, and went to retrieve her robes from the floor. As she fastened them, she closed her eyes, her shoulders sagging. What sort of loathsome person came running down to her teacher for a quick finger-fuck in the middle of the morning? How was she ever going to survive this curse?

Almost as if he was reading her mind, Professor Snape spoke from behind her, his voice devoid of the derogatory maliciousness with which he had greeted her. 'The first seventy-two hours of the curse will be up sometime after midnight, tonight. At that point, according to all the texts we have read, the symptoms will become less frequent.'

Hermione turned to face him, trying to remember that he hated this every bit as much as she did; the curse had hijacked his life as surely as it had done hers. 'Thank you for reminding me,' she said quietly. 'I'll see you at lunch, then.'

He sat in the chair behind his desk in his teaching robes, his greasy black hair and ugly hooked nose marking him surely as her Potions master, but the smear of her lipstick on his cheek and the slick of her secretions on his fingers marked him just as surely as her lover.

Hermione took up her book bag and rushed from his office towards her Arithmancy class, wondering if anything in her life would ever make sense again.

'Hermione, you look all sweaty,' Harry said, concerned. 'Are you feeling sick? We could take you to see Madam Pomfrey.'

Hermione clutched her bag to herself and gave Harry and Ron a grimace. They never used to come and find her after Arithmancy! 'I think I'll just have a bit of a lie-down during lunch,' she lied, the pull of her need making it difficult for her to stand and talk to her friends. 'I'm just tired.'

Ron frowned. 'We'll walk with you,' he said, taking her elbow and gently propelling her in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Hermione balked. 'There's no need, Ron really'

Harry lifted the strap of her book bag onto his shoulder. 'We were worried about you all weekend,' he explained, 'and you're not exactly setting our minds at rest now,

Hermione. We'll walk with you.'

Acquiescing to the inevitable, Hermione led the way to Gryffindor Tower, too agitated for casual conversation. *He* had said if she would come at lunch they could do it properly and maybe *that* would get her through her afternoon classes. Then, she could go back to the professor's quarters and remain there until the seventy-two hour limit was passed

'...Hermione?' Harry asked.

'She's not listening to you, mate,' Ron advised, glancing over at her as they walked. 'She's a million miles away.'

Hermione wrenched her mind from the professor's bed back to her present companions. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm thinking about all the homework we have to do.'

She could tell by the eye-rolling over her head that the boys bought her explanation. It was a lucky thing, because she was swiftly losing her ability to exchange small talk.

'Are you sure you'll be all right?' Harry asked as they paused at the bottom of the staircase to the girls' dormitory.

'I'm sure a nap will set me right,' she said. 'I'll see you in Transfiguration.'

With some reluctance, they allowed her to escape up to her room. Hermione knew she ought to be thankful for such caring friends, but their solicitousness was giving her the urge to scream. Locking her door, she stepped into the Floo and said, 'Professor Severus Snape's quarters.'

She stepped onto the hearth rug and found him in his armchair, reading a periodical. She did not speak to him, or he to her. She dropped her book bag on the hearth and headed for the bedroom, shedding clothing as she went. When she arrived at the bedside, she wore only her skirt, which she stepped out of before climbing up on the mattress.

He was right behind her, leaning negligently in the doorway, his hands reposing in his trousers pockets. 'I see you still haven't found any knickers to wear,' he commented.

'Please don't make me wait,' she grated, glaring at him. 'You said I could come at lunch if I had need of you'

He did not speak again, but began to undress as he approached the bed, taking care to place his clothing neatly upon the bedside chair. Hermione waiting with gritted teeth, sweat glistening upon her face, incipient tremors beginning in her deep muscles. Struggling to keep her voice under control, she said, 'You've forgotten the potion.'

He turned from disposing his black socks in his black boots, saying, 'It is unnecessary,' and Hermione saw this to be true. He came onto the bed and moved over her swiftly, wasting no time on preliminaries. Indeed, foreplay was unnecessary for her; she was in an advanced state of arousal before he touched her.

Nudging her knees apart, he entered her with one swift thrust, and she cried out in relief, her body immediately synching to his rhythm. Upon his face was an expression of intense concentration, but he was not looking at her; he seemed to be looking at the wall behind the bed, his lips moving silently.

Her interest in his extracurricular activities deserted her abruptly as her first climax rippled through her consciousness; she wrapped her legs about his hips, quickening her own movements, driven by a compulsion much stronger than her reason. The next peak glimmered in her mind, behind her closed eyes, and she strove to reach it, seeking relief.

Cresting again with an inarticulate cry, her eyes flew open and she found the professor's gaze fastened upon her face, his eyes glittering behind half-closed lids, his lips still moving. Her direst need assuaged, Hermione watched him as he laboured over her, and she reached her hands to stroke his flanks. When she touched him with her hands, he groaned aloud, saying, 'Ununbium!' before his completion quaked through him, and he promptly slid to her side, his eyes closed, his breath coming in panting gasps.

Hermione rolled on her side to watch him, a frown upon her face. When he seemed to be breathing more easily, she said, 'What did you say, sir?'

His eyes opened to slits and he glared at her. 'Ununtrium,' he snapped.

Hermione's mouth dropped open. 'No you didn't! You said "Ununbium" you were reciting the periodic table!'

The black eyes closed again. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

Hermione could not fathom why a person would recite the periodic table of elements whilst engaging in intercourse, but she could not understand much at all about her professor and his interactions with her. She decided it was not worth her while to question him about it. She was hungry and her lunch period was very nearly over.

She slipped from the bed and bent to retrieve her skirt. 'Thank you, sir,' she said politely.

He lay upon the white counterpane, his forearm thrown over his eyes, unconcerned by his nudity. Without looking at her, he said, 'If you look upon the coffee table in the sitting room, you'll find a tray of sandwiches covered by a tea towel. Eat before you leave.'

'I will,' she said, and her stomach rumbled in agreement. To her surprise, a grin touched his lips, but he still did not look at her. 'Thank you,' she said again, feebly, and retraced her steps back into the sitting room, picking up and donning clothing as she went.

The tray held not only sandwiches, but delicious crunchy pickles and large slabs of cake. Hermione ate some of everything, relishing the food. She heard the shower running in his bathroom, but he did not emerge again before she had to Floo back to her room. Conscientiously covering the food again with the tea towel, she picked up her book bag and departed.

Harry and Ron were waiting for her again in the common room when she ran down the stairs.

'We were going to send Ginny up to look for you,' Ron grumbled.

'Do you feel better?' Harry asked, looking at her closely. 'You still look a bit peaky, to me.'

'I'm a little better,' she said. 'I'll make a really early night of it tonight, and hopefully I'll be fine by tomorrow.'

They headed through the portrait and began the trek to Professor McGonagall's classroom, Ron throwing frequent looks at her from the corner of his eyes. 'The weekend must have been very tiring for you,' he said cautiously.

Hermione tensed, hoping Harry would say something, but he simply waited to see how she would respond.

'Yes, it was tiring,' she agreed. 'The curse is very taxing on my strength.' There. She had mentioned the curse and it was taxing on her strength, in a way.

Ron opened his mouth to ask another question, but Harry frowned him down. 'I'm going to help the headmaster find a counter-curse for you, Hermione,' he said quietly. 'I won't rest until we've found one.'

Oh, for the love of Merlin! Hermione thought. *The very last thing I need is to have Harry hovering over me now.*

Hermione cast her eyes down. 'Thanks, Harry,' she said softly. She would just have to find a way to distract him life was going to be complicated enough until Voldemort died without having to dodge Harry every time she needed to visit the dungeons.

They were half-way through double-Herbology with the other N.E.W.T.-level students when the compulsion came upon her again. Hermione clutched the wooden table at which she was standing with Harry, Ron, and Neville Longbottom, her head down, her eyes closed. Within seconds she could feel a touch of moisture at the top of her thighs.

She had to have it *now*.

'Miss Granger?'

Professor Sprout was at her side, having been motioned over by the boys, who were seriously alarmed by Hermione's state. The kindly older witch bent her face close to Hermione's. 'Is it that time of the month?' she murmured.

Grasping at the proffered straw, Hermione nodded. 'I need to go to my room,' she said.

Rushing up to the castle from the greenhouses, Hermione felt the need upon her like a menacing presence in her mind. She had had no concept of how difficult it would be for her to be constantly overcome with these horrible, inappropriate feelings in the middle of a normal day. What had come to seem normal when she was living in the isolation of her professor's rooms was simply humiliating in the context of her real life. She would almost rather be dead.

She entered the castle and headed straight for the dungeons, her inner guidepost directing her adamantly to the source of her relief. Reaching the corridor to his classroom, she increased her speed to a near run, until she flung open the door and stood, panting, in the doorway.

She could not tell what year was in session, for she did not recognize any of the students, but their robes proclaimed them to be Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs. The students all turned to look at her, curiosity written on their faces, but it was the pinched face of Professor Snape which struck such fear into her heart that, for a moment, the compulsion gave way to a stronger force.

He was seated at his desk, marking papers whilst the students brewed their potions. His eyes blazed at her, and the Galleon in her skirt pocket suddenly weighed very heavily against her thigh she had forgotten all about warning him of her condition and of her approach, had completely failed to follow his instructions to go to his office, not to his classroom and now twenty lower-form students were looking furtively from her to their professor and back, wondering what would happen next.

'You may come in, Miss Granger,' Professor Snape said smoothly, his slightly bored tone masking perfectly the anger she had glimpsed in his eyes.

Hermione closed the door and made her way past the tables and through the billowing steam from the many cauldrons.

'I would advise you all to return to your brewing, if you do not wish to receive zeros for today's lesson,' he added in a deliberately cutting tone.

All of the students turned instantly back to their cauldrons; no one cared to earn a zero for the day. Hermione passed by the first row of desks and stopped before her professor's desk, the sight of him bringing the compulsion back at double the strength. She placed one trembling hand upon his desk top, her eyes beseeching him. She knew he was, again, probing her mind without her permission before he spoke again.

'Very well, Miss Granger; I believe we have that potion in the storeroom, but you will have to search for it.' He stood, nodding tersely towards the door of his private storeroom. 'You will all remain on task in my absence; anyone whose assignment is found to be incomplete at the end of class will lose five House points. Is that clear?'

Hermione reached the door and was relieved to find it unlocked; she heard the students chorusing, 'Yes, Professor Snape,' behind her as she passed into the large cupboard, lined on three walls with shelves that reached to the ceiling.

He passed through the door and closed and locked it behind him, casting a Silencing Spell and a Muffliato Spell as well. Hermione opened her mouth to speak but the words were stilled upon her lips as his hands gripped her waist and lifted her to sit upon a narrow table which had not been there before. Stepping between her legs, he unfastened her cloak and her robes with sure fingers, then patiently unbuttoned her white school blouse. A murmured spell Vanished her bra, and she wondered dimly if she would have any clothes left by the time this curse was lifted.

He fell upon her with a sweeping impact, both of his hands going beneath her skirt, two fingers of one hand slipping into her vagina, two fingers of the other hand beginning with her clitoris, his head descending to suck her nipple into his warm mouth. Hermione gave herself bonelessly into his keeping, biting her lip to keep from moaning her appreciation of his efforts.

He moved his lips from one nipple to the other, his manner urgent, but his movements languid. When the first orgasm radiated from the combined efforts of his hands and his mouth, she wrapped her fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth up to hers, invading it with her tongue, biting at his lips and bucking against his hands, seeking and finding a second release.

To her surprise, rather than stepping away from her, his hands rose to pull her more tightly against him, one at the small of her back, the other at the back of her head, holding her head still as he retaliated, kissing her fiercely, wildly, his erection amazingly hard between them. He ground himself against her and she moaned throatily into his mouth.

'Please,' she gasped when he released her mouth to place burning kisses down her throat.

'Please what?' he taunted, apparently unmindful of the classroom of students on the other side of the door, undoubtedly wondering what could be taking their teacher so long in the storeroom.

Hermione gasped as he hefted her breasts and pressed them together, his long, serpentine tongue darting out to swipe from one turgid nipple to the other and back again. He lifted his face then, his black eyes blazing with intensity as he held her gaze and deliberately took her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, steadily applying equal pressure until her eyes closed and she whimpered with pleasure.

His teeth nipped at a sensitive spot on her throat, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. 'Please *what?*' he demanded again, his lips upon her ear, his tongue now lightly tracing its outer shell.

'*Please fuck me!*' she gasped, quivering in his arms. The compulsion was past, assuaged; she now trembled for him and him alone.

With infinite gentleness, he buttoned her blouse, fastened her robes, and clasped her cloak at her throat. 'No,' he said at last, lifting her from the table and setting her upon her feet. He cast a Cleansing Charm first upon her, then upon himself.

Hermione simply stood and stared at him, feeling weak-kneed and exhausted. Avoiding her eyes, he reached up to a high shelf and brought out a tray of phials, each containing the Potency Potion; he placed this in her hands.

'Bring that with you, tonight,' he said and removed the wards from the door, striding back to his desk.

Hermione followed him out, feeling terribly flushed and dishevelled.

'Tell Professor Flitwick no more than one dose per hour,' he instructed her, a faint trace of amusement lurking in his eyes.

'Yes, sir,' Hermione answered automatically.

He picked up his quill again and began to mark the parchments upon his desk; Hermione weaved her way back through the younger students, glad of the billowing mists to disguise her confusion.

Hermione started when the headmaster materialised behind the boys as they sat at dinner in the Great Hall that night.

'Hello, sir,' she said, causing Harry and Ron to look behind themselves and to greet the old man as well.

'Miss Granger, you will be making an early night of it, tonight?' Professor Dumbledore inquired with courteous concern.

'Yes, Headmaster, I thought I would,' Hermione agreed, feeling a faint flush touch her cheeks.

'Excellent,' the old wizard said. 'Harry, perhaps you and Mr Weasley can make sure no one disturbs her rest?'

After dinner, Hermione sighed with relief as she left the boys in the common room and climbed to her bedroom. For tonight, at least, she was free from the interfering good wishes of her best friends.

It was a fortunate thing for them that the Potency Potion worked as well as it did, for she turned to her teacher for assistance no fewer than five times before midnight. After the fifth time, she retired to his bathroom to soak in the healing herbs which soothed her sore genital tissues; she was horrified when the pressure of the curse came upon her again. Exhausted and discouraged, Hermione gave in to tears. She sat in the warm water of the ancient marble tub in Professor Snape's bathroom, her knees pulled up to her chest, and cried her frustration.

He entered the room so quietly that she was unaware of him until he helped her from the bath and stood her upon the Slytherin green rug, drying her with one of the fluffy bath towels from the shelf. She hated to be so weak, but she wilted against him in her despair, and he willingly supported her. When she was dry, he lifted and carried her to the bed, stretching out beside her, his nearness a comfort to her.

'Are you in need?' he asked her, his brow furrowed.

Hermione nodded, tears tracing down her cheeks. 'I'm sorry,' she said desolately.

He sat up and moved to slip between her thighs, lapping at her quim with the very broadest part of his tongue, as if he were licking icing from a spoon. Instantly, she was focussed on his efforts, no longer mindful of either her weariness or her discouragement. All she knew was his mouth upon her, his lips fastened around her clitoris, sucking it into his mouth and teasing it with his tongue. The orgasms came over her one right behind the other, rattling her with the intensity, after all she had already been through since she had woken up that morning. The professor moved up again to face her, watchful, and for perhaps three minutes, she felt blessed relief. But it did not last; she stared into his face as the compulsion came upon her again.

He did not ask, but moved over her, kissing her mouth with lips still wet from her quim. With a primal sound, she sucked his lower lip into her mouth and began to suckle it greedily, sharing her own taste with him. He growled ferally and lifted one of her legs, driving into her at an angle, watching her face as he fucked her. Hermione moved with him, watching him as well, feeling the new climax building in her like an enormous thunderhead which began on the horizon and grew broader and taller as the storm grew ever closer. Some of her tension communicated itself to him and he quickened his pace; their eyes were locked as surely as were their bodies. Hermione was aware of flashes of light in the periphery of her vision, like lightning heralding the coming of the rain, and then she raked her fingernails down his back as the answering thunder impacted her. Amazingly, he seemed to feel it as well, for they gasped in unison, both refusing to look away, and they watched each other ride out the powerful completion of their combined efforts.

He slid off to lie beside her, but she clung to him, skin to skin, and he did not push her away. The carriage clock over the mantel in the sitting room chimed one A.M., and at that moment, Hermione felt the compulsion loosen its hold on her.

Gasping, she turned her face, seeking his black eyes. 'Did you feel that?' she whispered.

He nodded. 'The seventy-two hour mark has been passed.'

She smiled for the first time in what seemed like days. 'I'll be all right, now?'

'The compulsion will come on you with less frequency,' he replied, 'but you will still feel it more than once per day and you are still imprinted upon me.'

Hermione felt the exhaustion of the day creeping over her, and her eyelids fluttered closed as she moved her cheek upon his chest, making herself more comfortable. 'Do you remember when we were in the storeroom today?' she said.

'Yes,' he replied dryly, causing her to open her eyes and to note his wry expression. 'I am not likely to soon forget today in the storeroom.'

'You know that I ... came ... twice with your fingers in me,' she said, blushing a bit to be speaking such words so frankly to him.

'Yes,' he replied gravely, watching her with calm eyes.

'And then you kissed me after the compulsion had been satisfied and I ... *wanted* you again. Just me, wanting you without the curse.' She yawned, and her eyelids fluttered closed again. 'Isn't that odd?' she murmured, on the precipice of slumber.

'Very odd, indeed,' his voice responded, following her consciousness into sleep.

Chapter 9: Involvement, Part 1

Chapter 9 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Please forgive me for not answering your reviews with any regularity; I apologize. I am trying to finish this story, so I can begin writing my contribution to the Live Journal SSHG Winter Exchange, and I spend what time I have available writing. Please know that I read every single one of your reviews with great eagerness and glee. Thank you for your words of praise and encouragement - for all feedback!

Chapter 9: Involvement, Part 1

Severus Snape stared at the ceiling of his bedroom, the slow, steady breathing of the girl upon his chest a soothing counterpoint to the cacophony of his inner turmoil. Her final words before sleep would not leave him be:

*'And then you kissed me after the compulsion had been satisfied and I ... I **wanted** you again. Just me, wanting you without the curse.... Isn't that odd?'*

So, she thought she had felt desire for him apart from the curse? Why would she say such a thing? Was she trying to ingratiate herself with him? Did she think he *wanted* to hear such a thing?

You bloody well know you do, his traitorous inner voice taunted him. *As if a bright, attractive girl would ever have any use for you have you forgotten about her?*

'Oh, sod off,' he rumbled aloud, and the girl murmured, as if in response to his voice.

Bugger fucking *shite*.

Closing his eyes, he tried to will himself to sleep. Merlin knew he was physically exhausted from meeting the girl's demands as the curse burned through her. He had lost count of the number of times he had made her come and did not *want* to think about what the physical consequences would be for him taking the Potency Potion so many times in one day.

More surprising to him was the number of times he had *not* needed the potion to be physically able to see to her needs.

Perhaps I'm not as old and dried up as I think, he mused as sleep overcame him.

The next days were a learning curve for Severus as he came to know what to expect from the *Eternus Perturbatio* curse. He found early on that if he woke the girl thirty minutes earlier than his usual rising time and took care of her then, she could almost always make it to lunch without having to resort to the use of the fake Galleon to let him know she was in need and on the way to his office. It was also a convenient way to take care of his morning hard-on and ever so much more pleasant than a cold wank in the shower.

She would leave his bed then, her hair a mare's nest from her writhing beneath him, and he would watch her naked arse twitch across his bedroom floor as she headed for the Floo. On the best days, he would not see her again until lunch, although she would often be too distraught to make it to the bedroom, and she would end up pushing him into his armchair and riding him until she came as many times as she could. Her aggression on these occasions dumbfounded him; he had never been aware that *nice* women behaved in such a way. A *paid* woman might be induced to conduct herself that aggressively, but wives and girlfriends certainly never did so did they? She seemed intent, as well, on ensuring pleasure for him in their encounters. He did what he could to discourage her efforts in that area, but when she had seen him so many times at his most vulnerable, it was virtually impossible for him to repel her.

Especially when he had no desire to do so.

When she drove herself hard and achieved from two to four orgasms at lunch, she was often able to leave him in peace until the dinner hour. Evenings would consist of one or two interludes. She often slept overnight in his bed. Dumbledore had arranged for a house-elf to be assigned to their cause; Winky was famous for her loyalty, and when she was assigned to her new job, she gave up Butterbeer on the spot. It was Winky who brought food to his quarters when they were unable to make it to meals in the Great Hall, and it was Winky who answered the door in Hermione's room when the Head Girl was in the dungeons.

Potter and Weasley were more difficult to handle, and Severus left that up to the headmaster. Dumbledore assured Potter that there was no need for him to be distracted from his studies to help with researching a counter-curse for Hermione. The headmaster also begged to borrow Potter's map the one his *sainted* father and the other rule-breaking bastards had created to watch for suspected Dark activity in specific parts of the castle. Potter had gladly contributed his map to Dumbledore's cause. Now the obnoxious brat would not be able to find the dot reading "Severus Snape" superimposed over the dot reading "Hermione Granger" and actually come to the correct conclusion that his best friend was shagging their Potions teacher in the dungeon.

The girl, herself, was able to assist in this, by returning as much as possible to her usual manner with her two cohorts. Over time, she gave them more details of her abduction, although she was unable to tell them anything of what took place after she was taken, for she had no memory of it. She believed that she had been kept unconscious the whole time, and the headmaster was wont to agree with her.

As the days passed into weeks, Potter and Weasley were distracted by the dramas of their own adolescent lives. As long as Hermione *looked* all right and as long as she nagged them and helped them with their homework they were content to leave her well-being in the hands of Professor Dumbledore.

They did commiserate with her over the fact that she spent virtually every lunch period with the surly Potions master, whose expertise in the area of Dark Magic was unchallenged by even the belligerent Potter. It was understood that Snape worked with her to recover any memory she might have of when she had been cursed, as well as teaching her Occlumency to block the Dark Lord from accessing her thoughts, and other defensive spells to help her deal with her curse.

What they really did, of course, was fuck. Although sometimes he would put his mouth on her, breathing the fragrance of her arousal and tasting her sweetness, and other times he would spank her and finger her until she cried out but without a doubt, any knowledge of their true activities together was carefully shielded from her two best friends.

One night in early December, Severus was uneasy, for it was after seven and Hermione had yet to Floo into his rooms, demanding sex. He wondered where she could be but more importantly, he wondered with whom.

Cursing his possessive instinct regarding the girl, he pulled on his teaching robes and his cloak, heading out into the corridors to patrol for wrong-doers. If she came into his quarters and did not find him there, she could very well wait for him, as he had waited for her

Students who were so unlucky as to run afoul of the Potions master in the halls that night lost points for breathing or so it seemed to them. Professor Snape took points for such infractions as 'insolence' for merely looking at him as he passed by and the unfortunates who were found snogging or other related activities won a week's detention with Mr Filch.

He had nearly made it up to the Astronomy Tower, where he fully intended to give miscreants bedpan duty in the hospital wing for the next month, when the fake Galleon in his trousers pocket burned. Snatching it out with an unsteady hand, he frowned over the message there. Why on earth did the girl want to meet him in the Forbidden Forest?

He did not stay to wonder, but moved swiftly through corridors and down staircases, until he strode through the great oaken castle doors into the crisp December night. The sky was blacker than ink, and the stars twinkled like gems in a jeweller's case. Severus noted none of these things, but entered the darkly twisted trees of the primeval forest with the air of man who would brook no trifling; the centaurs and Acromantulas had damn well better leave him alone.

When he found her, he had been walking steadily deeper into the trees for twenty minutes. She greeted him with a weak cry, lying upon the cold, mossy ground near an

ancient tree whose gnarled roots erupted from the ground in a five foot circumference around the enormous trunk.

'Thank God,' she cried, levering herself onto her elbows.

Severus stood over her for a long moment, glaring. She wore her uniform skirt and jumper beneath her cloak, and she was shivering from her long exposure to the icy night air and the unforgiving cold ground. It was clear to him that she had been crying, for her face bore that streaked, pinched look, and even now, her lip trembled as if she was on the verge of shedding yet more tears.

'What do you mean by this?' he demanded angrily. 'Get up from there.'

'Don't be an arse!' she flung at him. 'Do you imagine I would have called for your help if I didn't need it?' She struggled to move to a sitting position but seemed unable to do so because one of her legs would not bear the movement. 'I can't get up. I fell from the tree and I must have knocked myself unconscious for a while. I think I twisted my ankle, but I might have broken it and I'm afraid to try to heal myself.'

'What in the devil are you doing in the Forbidden Forest after dark to begin with?' he demanded, squatting and placing his hands upon her injured leg.

'Ouch!' she cried, but she quieted under his quelling glare. 'Professor Sprout told us there's Enchanted Mistletoe growing in the forest this year. It only blooms once every seven years, you know.'

'Yes,' he snarled nastily. 'I seem to recall having taken an Herbology class once!' His initial fury was calming as he found her more or less unhurt; a sprain, even a broken bone, could be easily mended. He drew his wand and cast some elementary diagnostic spells upon her. 'It's not broken,' he said. 'I will heal the sprain and then you will remain stationary for half-an-hour. I'll be damned if I'm going to carry you back to the castle.'

'I don't want you to!' she snapped, apparently stung by his condemnatory attitude.

'And whilst we wait,' he continued, as if she had not spoken, 'you can explain to me for whom you felt it necessary to venture into the Forbidden Forest to procure Enchanted Mistletoe.'

'Well, I won't!' she said. 'I don't answer to you!'

Severus did not respond to her, for he had pulled her into a sitting position, and he was in the middle of casting the spell to heal her sprain. His anger spiked so violently that he actually saw red as he concentrated to finish the spell. Tightly controlling his temper, he spoke through gritted teeth. 'How does your leg feel now?'

She flexed her ankle. 'It feels better now. Thank you, sir.'

Her suddenly contrite manner did not appease him. He knew very well why she was being conciliatory. He could smell her arousal. Now that the pain of the sprain was repaired, the compulsion, long overdue for propitiation, had reasserted its supremacy over her nervous system.

'I'm sorry I was rude,' she added, darting a glance at him from the corner of her eyes.

Severus stood again, towering over her. 'Answer my question.'

'Sir ... it's so late ... I would have been in your rooms two hours ago if I hadn't fallen from the tree ...'

His temper slipped its leash. 'Answer. The. Question.' He bit out each word at such volume that spittle flew from his lips; he knew he looked and sounded demented, but he did not care.

She looked at him doubtfully, as if she would turn from him, but she could not move if she did not wish to negate the healing spell on her ankle. Haltingly, she began to speak. 'Professor Sprout told us the properties of Enchanted Mistletoe.'

'Yes, spare me the adolescent raptures!' he spat viciously. 'I know all about how couples who kiss beneath Enchanted Mistletoe love one another forever more!' He knelt again, moving into her personal space, putting his disdainful face inches from her own. 'Well, it's a lie! The enchantment is very short-lived, and has been responsible for more than one unplanned pregnancy and a lifetime of regret for the irresponsible idiots who muck about with magic they do not understand for the thrill of it! Have you never wondered why you have never seen Enchanted Mistletoe at Hogwarts? It's because it is *forbidden!*' He took hold of her chin and stared into her eyes. 'Just *which one* of your dunderheaded companions did you wish to trap into thinking they were in love with you?'

The tears which had gathered in her eyes spilled over and ran down her cheeks, splattering and pooling on the fingers holding her face. Her body had begun to tremble from the combination of sexual need and bone-chilling cold. Still, she held his gaze and said quietly, 'She told us, sir, that the only *legitimate* use of Enchanted Mistletoe is as an ingredient in an analgesic for migraine headaches like the ones *you* have.'

His sneer was a truly ugly thing to behold. 'And I am to believe that you were in the forest in the dark climbing trees in your school skirt to fetch Enchanted Mistletoe to make a potion for my headaches?'

The girl lowered her face slightly, digging the tip of her chin into the v-shape made by the hand which held her, her brown eyes never leaving his. 'Go on. Look. You know you're going to, anyway. Do it with my permission, for once.'

He cast the spell by thinking the incantation and was welcomed into her memories. He saw her in Herbology, taking notes as Pomona Sprout prattled about seasonal plants; in the margin of her parchment she had scrawled, *headache cure? Severus? Christmas?*

Angrily he pushed away from that memory, going deeper, feeling her resistance, but ignoring it. He was looking for evidence to support his conclusion, and he would bloody well not stop until he found it.

For several tense minutes he reviewed her memories of Potter, of Weasley, of a French Muggle boy she had met on holiday, of Viktor Krum, and nowhere did he find memories of current romantic plans for any of them. He saw that she had once nursed a liking for Weasley, but that she no longer felt that way. Constantly, he found the memories circling to times she had spent with him, and each time he approached those he pushed them away and changed directions. It was odd that those memories tended to involve the two of them sitting together whilst they read, or talking together whilst they laid in his bed, or chopping ingredients side-by-side in his private brewing room, making more Potency Potion or replenishing her birth control philtre. The memories did not include the many, varied times he had made her come in a screaming frenzy. But never mind; he had no desire to view her feelings for *him*. He had made that mistake once in his life, and he had sworn never to repeat it.

At last, he released her, and although she drew back from him, she did not look away from his eyes. He could not fault the girl for her courage; she did not like it when he shouted or sniped, but she was fundamentally unafraid of him.

'Are you *satisfied?*' she said, her voice throbbing with indignation.

He did not look away from her scornful expression; he could not show that kind of weakness to her, but he did not answer. He did not know what to say.

'Sometimes,' she said, scrubbing at her face with her hands, 'I really *do* hate you.'

Silently, he took his handkerchief from his pocket and gave it to her, moving to sit beside her. She accepted the scrap of linen without comment, simply drying her cheeks and recommencing her shivering.

'Why did you come out here dressed like that?' he demanded. 'It's far too cold for those clothes.'

'I didn't think I'd be out here that long, but there wasn't any of the mistletoe closer to the castle, and then I fell.' She sighed and shivered more violently.

Severus took a fold of her cloak between his fingers. 'This fabric isn't thick enough to keep you warm in April, much less December. This isn't even wool.' He frowned at her. 'You didn't buy this in Diagon Alley.'

'It's a polyester blend,' she said. 'It was less expensive than the cloaks at Madam Malkin's. I bought it in a Muggle shop and used the extra gold to buy my own copy of *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration*.'

Severus rolled his eyes; he might have known the story would involve a book. He moved until his body was pressed against hers; then, he lifted his arm and pulled her against him, covering her with his cloak. As he had suspected, she was driven to clutch at him, twisting her torso to rub one breast against him. The compulsion was long overdue for satisfaction.

'Shh,' he said. 'Don't move the injured leg.'

'Oh, please,' she whispered brokenly.

He unfastened the cloak, securing it about her throat, and moved down to urge her to raise the knee of the undamaged leg. Without speaking, he pressed the leg gently out of his way as far as possible. She sobbed a bit with relief when his probing fingers found her clitoris and began to gently stroke; he reminded her quietly not to move her leg when she seemed in danger of it, but otherwise, he simply stimulated her until she cried out. He removed his handkerchief then from her hand and wiped her eyes for her again.

'It's been thirty minutes,' he said. 'Do you think you can walk?'

She did not answer him, except to wrap her fingers in his hair and tug his head down to kiss him, pulling him on top of her and wrapping both legs about him, her hips moving in a circular motion against his.

'I wanted the mistletoe to make a gift for you,' she said, sucking his tongue into her mouth.

He did not reply, except to hike her skirt to her waist and to Vanish another pair of knickers.

Only the forest creatures saw the humans who coupled and slept beneath the heavy dark cloak until the moon set. They seemed not to feel the cold, unlike most of their kind, and only rose and made the trek out of the forest when the snow began to fall, with bundles of Enchanted Mistletoe dangling from their hands.

A/N: *Theories of Transubstantial Transfiguration* is mentioned in canon.

Chapter 10: Involvement, Part 2

Chapter 10 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: This ten thousand word monster was beta-read by DeeMichelle and Sshg316; MagicAlly Brit-picked. My little PWP has sprung free and grown a plot. Whatcha gonna do?

Chapter 10: Involvement, Part 2

The boys went to the Burrow with Ginny for Christmas. The headmaster had explained to them that Hermione would remain behind, for her own safety. Her parents had accepted her excuse of receiving an invitation to spend the holiday elsewhere, and thus far, she had spent her days revising and reading for pleasure, with obligatory trips to find Professor Snape, as needed.

After lunch on Christmas Eve, Hermione nervously inspected herself in the mirror over the basin in the professor's bathroom. He had an unbreakable engagement to spend the holiday with his family, and she was going with him. She did not want to go, but what choice did she have? She had to be where he was, and he was going away.

'How will you explain me to your family?' she had asked nervously.

'It is not unheard of for a student to spend a holiday with a professor,' he had replied, his manner discouraging her from making further inquiries.

Now she extinguished the candles and walked into the sitting room, where he stood waiting for her, already cloaked and booted, ready to depart.

'Do I look all right?' she asked nervously.

He frowned at her. 'Your appearance is perfectly acceptable,' he replied with a trace of impatience. 'Come, put on your cloak.'

He had the black garment over his arm, and she walked over to take it from him, but he gestured for her to turn, so he could place it about her shoulders.

Hermione reached up to fasten the clasp and her fingers met an unfamiliar golden Gryffon-embossed latch. She turned to Professor Snape, confused. 'This isn't my cloak,' she said, looking down at the elegant garment. It was matte black and light upon her shoulders, yet very warm. The lining, which flashed as she moved, was crimson silk.

'It most certainly *is* your cloak,' he replied, bored. 'Come.'

He strode out into the corridor, pausing to ward his door against intruders, and led the way at a brisk walk.

'But, sir,' Hermione said, hurrying to keep pace with him, 'did *you* buy this for me?'

'Your cloak is worthless,' he said, starting up the first stairway leading to the entrance hall. 'I will not have you catch cold; you would likely transmit it to *me*.'

Hermione smiled to herself, smoothing her hand down the densely woven wool. It was the nicest one she had ever owned, and it was a terribly thoughtful gift. She was glad she had a gift for him, as well.

They moved through the empty entrance hall and into the weak winter sunlight. Each of them carried in their pockets small bags containing the things they were taking with them. Hermione had been fascinated with the small beaded bag Professor Snape had given her that morning, telling her she could probably fit everything she owned in it if she wished although he sincerely hoped she had more sense than to take too much with her for a two-night visit.

When they were clear of the Anti-Apparition wards, he stopped and looked at her sharply. 'Does Side-Along Apparition make you nauseous?' he demanded.

'No,' she answered, amused with his ability to make concern sound like annoyed accusations.

He pulled her securely against him, and she experienced the compression of Apparition; when she sensed the earth firmly beneath her feet once more, she opened her eyes to swirling snow.

'How pretty!' she exclaimed, stepping away from Professor Snape and making a slow circle, looking all around.

The house was large and old, with many enchantments to conceal it from Muggle eyes. They were standing in a big, well-tended garden, which was now covered in snow. Hermione could see no other dwellings in any direction.

'Where are we?' she asked.

'We're in Yorkshire,' he replied, staring at the house. 'This is Prince House; we're in the back garden.'

'Prince?' she asked.

'My mother's maiden name,' he answered absently.

'Your family must be very wealthy,' she said, counting the windows on the first floor. There were nineteen, the central one twice as wide and tall as the others, a stained glass representation of Merlin's betrayal by Nimue.

'No,' he answered, 'but the Princes are an old family, and this house has been theirs since the seventeenth century.'

He started forward, a curiously shuttered expression on his face. 'Come along, Miss Granger,' he said.

Hermione followed him to a side door, which was opened before they could knock by a bowing house-elf.

'Welcome to Prince House, Master Severus and young Miss,' it said in a high-pitched voice.

'Hello, Scampy,' the professor said, entering and turning to make sure Hermione followed him. When she stepped into the rough stone-flagged hallway, he added, 'Where is my grandmother?'

'Mistress is in the parlour,' Scampy replied, closing the door on the snowy afternoon. 'She is very excited to have you, Master Severus.'

The little creature trotted along the narrow, twisting corridor, which navigated through the regions of the kitchen, the scullery, and the wash room, each populated with more house-elves, and Professor Snape and Hermione followed. They came at last to a formal entrance hall at the front of the house, complete with a candle-filled crystal chandelier and a marble staircase sweeping up to the first floor. Upon the landing, Hermione spied the stained glass window, its gemstone colours even lovelier with the scant light of the winter afternoon coming through. Distracted by the depiction of Merlin being shut up in a cave by the witch to whom he had imparted all his magic, Hermione was startled from her reverie only when her professor grasped her wrist and pulled her along.

The room to which Scampy led them was very dark, with darkly panelled walls covered with dark-coloured portraits of black haired wizards and witches. The carpet and upholstery were forest green, as were the moth-eaten velvet draperies, which had been pulled across the windows. A large fire burned on the hearth, and an old woman sat regally in a throne-like armchair, her wrinkled face showing the ravages of a once-great beauty. Her hair was pure silver and worn swept up into an elaborate coiffeur; her eyes were a rather startling blue.

Beside her chair stood another witch who was demonstrably younger. Her black hair was threaded with silver and was wound into an untidy bun at the nape of her neck. She had a heavy brow and a face bracketed by frown lines, but just now she came forward, her arms outstretched, a smile upon her lips.

'Severus!' she said, and he permitted her to embrace him.

'Happy Christmas, Mother,' he said, gently loosening her hold on him and turning to Hermione. 'I would like for you to meet the top student from my school, Miss Hermione Granger.'

Hermione flushed crimson to hear herself described in such terms, and she held out her hand. 'How do you do, Mrs Snape?' she said politely.

Mrs Snape took her hand and murmured words of welcome, but the old witch in the chair spoke so loudly then that Hermione could scarcely hear what was said to her.

'Well, Severus?'

Professor Snape went forward and bent to kiss the wrinkled cheek. 'Hullo, Gran,' he said, his voice full of a tenderness he had not shown his mother. 'You look very well.'

His grandmother pursed her lips at him. 'Don't try your flattery on me, young man,' she said tartly. 'You're not likely to get around me that way.'

Professor Snape's lips quirked up on one side, which was the closest to a smile Hermione had ever seen on his face. He turned and held out an imperious hand to Hermione, who came to stand beside him.

'Grandmother, this is Miss Hermione Granger, our Head Girl and top student. Miss Granger, this is my grandmother, Madam Prince.'

Remembering her lessons in wizarding etiquette, Hermione dropped a tiny curtsy before taking the hand of her hostess. 'Thank you for having me here, Madam Prince,' she said.

Unblinking blue eyes surveyed her for a moment before the old woman said, 'You are welcome.'

Hermione detected no outward sign of dislike, but she had a distinct feeling that Madam Prince did not approve of her.

After tea, Scampy came and showed Hermione to her room, an elaborate guest room with very handsome furnishings in crimson and gold. The four-poster bed was canopied and hung with crimson velvet curtains; the matching draperies at the windows were tied back with tasselled gold cords.

'Young Miss is to have a lie-down,' Scampy informed her. 'At six, Scampy will come to help young Miss dress for dinner.'

Hermione smiled at the house-elf; she had decided that the Christmassy gold tinsel the creature wore in its hair identified it as female. 'Thank you, Scampy, but I can manage that for myself. You don't need to bother.'

Scampy took a step back, as if from a dangerous wild animal. 'Scampy will be back at six!' she cried before bowing low and backing out of the room.

Hermione hung her new cloak in the handsomely carved wardrobe and removed her other clothing from the beaded bag and hung it, as well. She had brought two sets of dress robes, and she only hoped they would be nice enough for her not to feel self-conscious in these rather grand surroundings.

That task complete, she piled pillows at the head of the bed and settled back to read Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. She always read it at Christmas time and had brought it along to help her feel less out of place in this unfamiliar place. She felt a slight twinge of homesickness, followed by a sharp pain of loneliness, but when she asked herself if she would rather be with the boys at the Burrow, the answer was, oddly enough, a resounding *No*.

By some means she could not identify, entirely apart from the fact that she was sexually imprinted upon Severus Snape, she had begun to find that she was not entirely happy if she was separated from him for too long.

True to her word, Scampy came at six and woke Hermione from the sound sleep into which she had fallen whilst reading.

'Professor Snape sends you this potion,' Scampy said, showing Hermione the phial, 'and this note.'

Opening the note, Hermione read her professor's spiky handwriting: *This Calming Draught may be sufficient to delay your symptoms for a few hours; if it is not, tell Scampy that you still feel unwell and need my assistance. She has been told that you are ill.*

Hermione swallowed the potion and felt the wonderful tension relief drift through her body. Scampy very efficiently drew a bath for her, scenting it liberally with sweet-smelling salts. Hermione relaxed in the bath for twenty minutes, feeling utterly decadent, and when she emerged wrapped in her dressing gown, she found that Scampy had set out her black satin robes and the accompanying black under things she had brought to wear with it. Hermione had never failed to feel attractive when she wore pretty lingerie beneath her clothing, but lately she had given up the practice it seemed indecent, somehow, to wear sexy clothing to entice her *teacher* - especially when he was already duty-bound to have sex with her.

Besides, she was far too fond of her matching black knickers, bra, suspenders, and stockings to risk having them Vanished upon the whim of her mercurial professor.

Scampy insisted upon helping her dress, gently persistent until Hermione also permitted the elf to arrange her hair. Rather than smoothing and rolling the bushiness into a chignon, Scampy threaded her long fingers through the brown hair until it was charmed to hang in glossy ringlets. Hermione had never seen her hair look that way.

'What did you do?' she breathed, admiring the spiralling, shiny curls.

'House-elf magic,' Scampy replied, frowning at the serviceable black shoes in the wardrobe. 'Where is Miss keeping her party shoes?'

'I don't go to many parties, Scampy. I'll just wear those.'

Scampy took the shoes from the wardrobe and snapped her fingers, and Hermione's mouth dropped open. Her shoes had been Transfigured into elegant sling-back black satin stilettoes with a very narrow three-inch heel. The severely pointed toe was embellished with a crystal ornament in an elongated "S" design, and the satin lining of the footbed was as red as Father Christmas' bag of toys.

'Those are smashing!' she said reverently, taking the shoes from the elf's hands. 'But I could never walk in these, Scampy I'll fall off and hurt myself.'

Scampy knelt and placed the shoes on her feet. 'Scampy has specially charmed the shoes, Miss you won't fall.'

Hermione took a few steps across the room and found she could easily walk in the high-heeled shoes. As she walked, she was surprised when her robes were Transfigured as well, with a slightly more daring neckline and a greatly more fitted bodice.

Scampy clapped her hands in delight. 'Miss is as pretty as a picture!' she declared. 'Now, come along; the family is gathered for drinks.'

With one last look at her unusually chic appearance, Hermione followed Scampy down the stairs, her feminine confidence at an all-time high.

Scampy delivered her to the doorway of the same room she had been in earlier in the day, then disappeared. Hermione stood uncertainly on the threshold, unnerved by the unexpectedly large number of people standing about, drinking from crystal goblets.

In her absence, the gloomy parlour had been transformed into an inviting, brightly-lit, Christmas-decorated room. An enormous tree filled an entire corner of the room, the star on its top nearly touching the fifteen-foot ceiling. Red velvet bows adorned almost every stationary object in sight. Madam Prince was ensconced in her throne-like chair, but everyone else in the room was standing. Mrs Snape was in conversation with a plump, pretty woman, whose hair was an unnaturally pale blonde. An unfamiliar tall man, with short jet-black hair and a hawk-like nose was watching with amusement on his handsome face as three teenage boys argued and joked before the Christmas tree. And standing in the darkest corner of the room, looking terribly debonair, was her Potions master, his hair tied back from his face, dressed in green robes so dark they were nearly black. Hermione's heart turned over in her chest at the sight of him, so foreign to her with his face uncurtained by stringy black hair. It came to her that he was the most striking man in the room, regardless of the more conventionally attractive group by the tree. Unable to look away from the figure whose very presence spelt security to her, Hermione began to cross the room to his side.

It was only then that she realised he was in conversation with someone with a red-haired witch who placed a manicured hand upon the dark green sleeve as she leant in to speak to him. She was quite tall, her eyes on level with his lips, rather than with his chest, as Hermione's were. As she watched, Professor Snape chuckled and inclined his head, as if in agreement. At that moment he caught sight of Hermione, and he stopped, his eyes widening a bit as if in surprise. Confused, Hermione halted her approach, and she felt her cheeks flush as his eyes raked down her body, then up again, coming to rest upon her face. There was such a warmth in his expression that even the witch in his company turned to see what had caught his attention, and Hermione saw that the red-haired woman was quite beautiful.

'Ah, Miss Granger.'

Startled from her own thoughts, Hermione turned to the voice and found herself addressed by Madam Prince. 'Good evening, ma'am,' she said politely.

'My grandsons will be so pleased to have another young person present tonight,' Madam Prince remarked, her keen scrutiny missing no detail of Hermione's appearance. 'Allow me to introduce you to them.' She raised her voice and spoke to the group by the Christmas tree. 'John!'

The eldest of the boys turned to her.

'Bring your brothers to meet Miss Granger,' the old lady commanded.

The three boys came dutifully to their grandmother, standing in a line beside her chair. They were all dark-haired and dark-eyed, with good-humoured faces.

'These are my grandsons, Miss Granger,' Madam Prince informed her, smiling with great pride, 'my son Tiberius' children. John is the eldest, then Paul and George.'

As she spoke their names, the boys nodded to Hermione and smiled. Hermione murmured greetings to each of them.

The handsome older man who had been with the boys at the tree came forward and offered his hand to Hermione. 'How do you do?' he said smoothly. 'You must be my nephew's pupil. I am Tiberius Prince.' He held out his hand to the plump blonde witch. 'Come say hello to Severus' student, Ava.'

Ava Prince broke off her conversation with Mrs Snape to turn and speak to Hermione with a thick German accent. 'Frohe Weihnachten,' she said. 'You are a student at Hogwarts?'

'Yes,' Hermione replied.

'My boys go to Durmstrang,' Mrs Prince said. 'John left school in the spring, and Paul is in his sixth year. You are in your seventh year, are you not?'

Hermione glanced at the Prince boys and found the two oldest ones grinning at her with nearly identical smirks. 'Yes, I am a seventh-year,' she agreed.

The middle boy stepped toward her, speaking in English only faintly tinged with a German accent. 'But perhaps it takes a sixth-year to appreciate a woman's beauty,' he said, taking Hermione's hand and pressing a kiss to it.

His older brother stepped up and jostled him into releasing Hermione's hand. 'Hermione, don't let this dolt annoy you,' he said with an engaging smile. 'You know how children can be.'

Madam Prince rose from her chair and took her son's arm. 'Let us go in to dinner before you boys quarrel in my drawing room,' she said, her tone indulgent. 'John, please show Hermione to her place.'

The party moved into the dining room, where the long table was laid with two-hundred-year-old china and ancient Goblin-wrought flatware. Hermione took her place between John Prince and his youngest brother, George, who informed he was in his third year at Durmstrang. Paul was seated directly across from her, and he lost no time in catching her eye and giving her a charming smile. George, on the other hand, was much more interested in his dinner than in the girl whose attention his brothers sought.

Silent house-elves served their plates as Madam Prince initiated conversation. 'What is the attitude toward the return of Lord Voldemort at Durmstrang, Tiberius?'

Hermione dropped her salad fork, astonished that the fragile-looking old lady would so casually mention the name of the most feared wizard in existence. John, Paul, and George seemed unfazed, but Hermione's eyes darted nervously down the table to her Potions master, who seemed to have been waiting for her to look at him. He moved his head in a tiny negative motion, and she dropped her eyes again to her plate. She would try to continue eating as if she were accustomed to hearing talk about Voldemort over holiday meals.

'There are those who feel he has the right idea about some things,' Tiberius Prince said, sipping from his wine glass. 'There are also those who feel he takes vulgar vandalism too far.' He replaced his goblet on the table and took up his fork. 'Why do you not ask Severus, Mother? He is, after all, *in the know* about the Dark Lord.'

Professor Snape lifted an eyebrow. 'You give me far too much credit, Uncle,' he said. 'I know nothing of the Durmstrang attitude after all, it is you who teach at Durmstrang, not I.'

The beautiful red-haired witch, who was seated to Professor Snape's right, laughed musically. 'Should we not moderate our conversation?' she said, glancing down the table and finding Hermione looking at her. She stared into Hermione's eyes, her expression anything but friendly; Hermione was chilled by the woman's manner, but fascinated by her green eyes, so like Harry's. 'Is Severus' little student aware of his loyalties? Or will we be having a bit of *Obliviate* for pudding?'

'Morgen!' Ava Prince gasped. 'Stop!'

'Let her talk, Aunt,' Professor Snape said lazily, his half-lidded eyes fixed on the red-haired witch. 'Miss Granger is fully aware of my loyalties. Morgen can stir no controversy there.'

Ava Prince looked down the table to Hermione. 'I must apologise for my sister, my dear. She likes to shock.'

Aware of the scornful green eyes upon her face, Hermione answered calmly, 'There's no need to apologise, ma'am. Professor Snape is correct: I am fully aware of his loyalties.'

Hermione glanced down the table to meet the green eyes with disdain, and she saw amusement touch her professor's face. Was he *enjoying* having two women sparring over him?

'Morgen,' Madam Prince said, 'it is so good of you to join us this Christmas. I am so pleased that Herr Singer could spare you. How are your parents?'

'My parents are well,' Morgen replied, her manner respectful as she spoke to the old woman.

Madam Prince looked pointedly at her eldest grandson. 'Of course, it is wonderful how frequently you find yourself free to join us when it is known that Severus will make one of our party.'

Hermione observed the heightened colour in Morgen Singer's face, which only made her more lovely, damn her green eyes. Morgen lowered her eyes deferentially, but Hermione clearly saw the coquettish look she darted at Professor Snape, whose only answer was a quirked eyebrow.

Unsure of why she was so annoyed, Hermione directed her attention to John, who was only too happy to engage her in quiet discussion of the similarities and differences between their schools during the remainder of the dinner time.

After dinner, they all retreated to the drawing room again. Tiberius Prince and his mother sat with a chessboard between them, involved in a battle of wits. Mrs Snape and her sister-in-law talked together on one settee whilst Morgen pulled Professor Snape down beside her upon the other. The sight of the other woman's blood-red fingernails upon her teacher's arm filled Hermione with a fury she was at a loss to explain. Furthermore, the Calming Draught's beneficial effects had worn off, and she was fully aware of the compulsion's hold upon her again. She needed to relay this information to Professor Snape, but she was loath to approach him when he was engaged so raptly with Morgen.

Hermione stood by the window gazing out at the snow-covered garden, now illuminated by the light of a nearly full moon. It had been a long time since she had permitted the compulsion to reach this state; her routine with the professor had not required it. She was not aware that John Prince had come up behind her until he spoke near her ear.

'Would you like to go for a stroll in the snow?'

Hermione turned to see the admiring eyes of the good-looking young wizard entreating her to agree.

'Miss Granger is scarcely dressed for walking in the snow,' Professor Snape said, rising from the settee and coming stand near them, carefully scrutinising her face.

'She is dressed to attract the attention of a young man,' Morgen said archly, 'just as she ought to be. But she cannot go traipsing about in the snow in those shoes, John.'

John flushed. 'I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking.'

Irritated, Hermione said, 'Don't be sorry. I have boots. It will only take me a moment to change.' She smiled at John and moved to the doorway, struggling to maintain her

composure. What could she do? Her hands were already beginning to tremble but how was she going to manage a shag with her professor with all these people around them?

'Miss Granger!'

She stopped at the sound of her teacher's voice, her quim throbbing painfully, but did not turn to him, fearful of what the others would see in her face.

'You know what Madam Pomfrey said,' Professor Snape said, remaining in his place beside Morgen. 'You're not well enough for late-night strolls in the snow, no matter how romantic it might be. Go up to your room, please. I will have a house-elf bring your potion.'

'Yes, Professor,' she said, nearly weak-kneed with relief. He would come to her on the pretext of going upstairs to fetch her potion. She glanced over her shoulder at John, who looked rather stricken. 'I'm sorry, John, but Professor Snape is right. I promised the school matron I wouldn't over-do during the hols.' Turning more completely, she said to the room at large, 'Good night.'

The others murmured 'good-night' to her, and Madam Prince looked up with her keen blue eyes. 'To bed with you, Miss Granger, and Professor Snape will provide your potion. One must be very careful, even after recovering from the Black Water Flu.'

Hermione inclined her head submissively and fled to the sanctuary of her bedroom, praying that her teacher would come to her quickly.

She was pacing back and forth in her bedroom, her distress increasing with every moment, when a portion of the elaborately panelled wall slid silently aside, and Professor Snape entered.

'Thank God!' Hermione cried, advancing on him precipitously.

He caught her by the shoulders and held her from him, his hands less than gentle.

'Who would have suspected you possessed such finery?' he said mockingly, letting her see his blatant appraisal of her body in her party clothes. 'I am particularly fond of the shoes.'

'Don't!' she cried, twisting away from him. 'Just *do* it!' She reached for the fastening on her robes, but he stilled her hands.

'I *will* do it.'

Hermione shuddered at his words and pressed herself to him, her hands grasping his bum through his robes, pulling him against her. 'Then *do* it!' she cried, 'but don't you dare Vanish anything!'

He cast a Silencing Charm, then he backed her up to the bed, pressing her onto the mattress. Next, he reached up beneath her robes and tugged her now soaked black lace knickers down her legs. Letting them fall onto the floor, he slid two fingers into her wetness and bent his head to put his lips around her clitoris. In less than one minute she cried out, but she did not calm much, her croaked, 'More!' testament to how long she had let the need grow before seeking relief.

He took her hands and pulled her to her feet, his burning black eyes intent upon her face. Now he glanced down at her slightly décolleté neckline, and he placed his hands on her breasts over her clothing, drawing his thumbs surely over her climax-hardened nipples.

'Oh!' she gasped as he lowered his mouth to kiss her, squeezing and massaging her breasts as he plundered her mouth.

'You needed this when we were at dinner, didn't you?' he demanded, his lips now on her throat as he deftly unfastened her robes.

'Yes!' she said, trying to help him, only to have him bat her hands away.

'I wanted to do it then when I saw you in this dress right on my grandmother's table.' He pushed the satin robes from her body and stepped away from her again, letting his eyes roam in a leisurely way over her black lace demi-bra and the lacy suspenders attached to her black stockings; it seemed to her as if his eyes travelled very slowly down her legs to the shoes. She reached behind her back to unclasp the bra, but he said, 'I would like for you to remain as you are.'

Hermione stood upon the carpet in her elf-made sling-back stilettos, knickerless, and watched her professor undress before he took her wrist and led her back to the bed. She ached for him in every cell of her body. 'Please...!' she whispered.

'Lie down,' he answered. 'I should very much like to fuck you, now.'

She bent to slip off her shoes, but he stopped her.

'As I said. I want you to remain as you are.'

Hermione looked at the spiked heels of the shoes. 'I'm afraid I'll hurt you.'

With a strange, blazing expression in his face, he said, 'I'm not.'

She moved onto the bed, lying upon her back, and whimpered with relief when he knelt between her thighs. She was surprised when he lifted her legs to his shoulders, running his palms down the length of the satiny nylons, but once he entered her and began moving in and out of her body, she was too electrified by the different sensation of intercourse from this position to pay attention to anything else. The way he filled her fulfilled her occupied her entire awareness.

After her second climax, her eyes opened and focussed on his face. She was surprised to see his utterly transported expression, framed between the exaggerated pointed toes of her black satin shoes. As she watched, he gasped and gripped her ankles before spilling within her, his movements at the end becoming jerky and uneven. There was something terribly personal about the way he had looked at her tonight, something that seemed entirely divorced from the effects of the curse, as if he would have wanted her wanted to make love to her simply because he found her utterly enchanting in her party clothes.

He lowered her legs to the bed and sat back on his heels for a moment, sweat from his exertions gleaming upon his pale skin, his hair now swinging free from its binding. After a moment, he stood and cast a cleansing charm upon himself.

'Where are you going?' Hermione asked, sated and sleepy.

He began to dress. 'I am expected elsewhere and have delayed too long.'

Hermione yawned, reaching to tug off the shoes. 'Expected where? By whom?'

'Morgen Singer expects me in her room,' he replied, stepping before the glass on her dressing table and binding his hair back again.

Hermione leapt from the bed. '*What?*' she screeched. 'You're going to her *bedroom?*'

He turned from the mirror, his expression thunderous. 'Silence,' he hissed.

'You're going from my bed to hers?' she demanded.

'Go to sleep,' he replied, his manner dampening. 'I have no time for these theatrics.'

'Fine!' she threw at him, turning and beginning to remove her things from the wardrobe, throwing them willy-nilly upon the bed. 'I'm going back to Hogwarts!'

In a rage, Hermione began to grab things from the pile and to shove them into the enchanted beaded bag, unmindful of her state of undress, wanting only to get as far away from him as she could go, as quickly as possible.

Snarling something that sounded distinctly like 'Merlin in a merry-widow,' Professor Snape crossed the room to her and pulled her around roughly by the arm. Hermione retaliated by jerking her arm away and swinging her fist with all her strength, landing a square blow upon his jaw.

He sat down hard upon the floor, a stunned expression upon his face.

Immediately contrite, Hermione fell to her knees beside him. 'I'm sorry! Are you all right?'

He rubbed the spot where her fist had connected with his face and moved his lower jaw experimentally from side to side, watching her with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

'What do you weigh?' he asked conversationally. 'Eight stone?'

Hermione looked outraged. 'None of your business!'

'More?' he asked, surprised.

'Less!' she snapped. 'Shut up about it!'

'Call it eight,' he said. 'I'm about eleven and you knocked me on my arse.' He stood up. 'If you've given me another shiner, I'll take a cane to you.'

'You can't go to her,' she said plaintively, looking up the length of him, feeling rather foolish sitting about in her under things with no knickers on.

He bent and hauled her to her feet. 'You've seen enough to have sussed out the political leanings of my family,' he said. 'This behaviour is expected of me, Hermione deviation from what is expected will be reported to the Dark Lord, and neither of us wants that, I assure you.'

Pressing her lips together to suppress threatening tears, Hermione pulled her hands from his and turned away, taking off her remaining garments and replacing them with a warm flannel nightdress from the pile on the bed. 'I hope you've brought Potency Potion,' she said morosely, slipping beneath the covers, shoving the contents of the wardrobe to the other side of the bed.

'I will come to you in the morning, before breakfast,' he said to her back.

Hermione did not respond, and she managed not to cry until the panel slid shut behind him. Did he have a handy panel into Morgen's room, as well? How long had they been lovers? Why had he never mentioned her before?

And why the bloody hell did she, Hermione, *care*?

The room was still in pitch darkness when he slid into the bed beside her, pressing his naked body against her flannel-clad one. He spoke no incantation, but the nightdress was suddenly gone, and she knew he had Vanished yet another piece of her dwindling wardrobe. Then his lips were on the nape of her neck, and one hand was insinuated between her legs, cupping her mound in his warm palm. Her need for him flamed to life within her, and she turned in his arms, reaching down to take the rock-hard, satiny length of him in her hand, stroking in the way she had learnt would inflame him very quickly. Fleeting, she wondered how many doses of the Potency Potion he had found it necessary to take this night; then, he lifted her leg onto his hip and rubbed the silken head of his cock between the lips of her vulva, stroking her clitoris and driving from her mind all thought, save incoherent desire.

As dawn broke over the Yorkshire countryside, Hermione sat astride her professor, who reclined, propped up on every pillow the bed possessed. Two fingers of his left hand applied perfect pressure to her pleasure centre as her climax built within her, billowing like smoke from a brushfire, up and up and up, until she became one with the inferno, burning as red hot as the rising sun.

Severus moved wearily through the hidden passage, wanting nothing more than a shower and an hour's sleep before breakfast in the dining room but he soon saw that was not to be.

'Good morning, Severus,' his grandmother said, comfortably established in the chair beside his bed. 'How would it be if you explained to me how that child came to be burdened with such a Dark curse and what you mean by bringing her here to carry on as if this were a house of ill-repute?'

Hermione was sitting before the dressing table, applying her make-up, when there was a knock at her door, followed immediately by the appearance of Madam Prince in her bedroom. Nervously, Hermione stood, feeling quite self-conscious in her dressing gown.

'Forgive an old woman her bad manners, won't you, Hermione?' Madam Prince said with an expression far warmer than any Hermione had seen from her before. 'May I speak with you?'

'Of course,' Hermione replied. 'Please, sit down.'

When the old lady was seated in a squishy armchair with Hermione on the matching pouf at her feet, Hermione waited politely to find out why her hostess had come to find her.

'Severus and I have been discussing your *Eternus Perturbatio* curse,' Madam Prince admitted.

Hermione blanched, her stomach twisting in shame.

'You have done nothing wrong, child,' the old witch said, leaning forward to place a hand on Hermione's arm. 'Tom Riddle has been a crass bounder since he joined the wizarding world.'

Hermione could do nothing but wait in silence to see what would next be said.

'Albus Dumbledore is a fool, of course, but I cannot see how he could have contrived better for you, all things considered it would have been a mistake to imprint you upon a wizard of your own age, even had you been involved with one, for young men are notoriously inconsiderate.' Madam Prince cocked her head to one side. 'Severus tells me he gave you his Nexus.'

Hermione blinked at this. '*His* Nexus?' she said, confused.

'Do you have it?' the old woman asked.

'Yes he explained I was to always keep it with me,' Hermione responded.

'May I see it?'

Hermione went to the wardrobe, where she had replaced all of her belongings before she had her morning bath, and extracted the rolled socks from the beaded bag.

'That's an interesting place to hide a Nexus,' Madam Prince said with some amusement.

Hermione sat down again on the pouf and unrolled the socks to reveal the silver Nexus. The old lady reached out and took it into her hands, looking it over carefully, from end to end. 'Did he explain to you what it is? I don't imagine a Muggle-born would be aware of its significance, and it is rather too arcane to be taught at Hogwarts.'

'He told me it is a practice from ancient times,' Hermione replied. 'The silver is dug from enchanted mines and hand-wrought by a Mage. A woman would collect her virgin's blood upon her wedding night and put it in the bottom chamber of the Nexus, then she and her husband would exchange promises, bound by the ancient blood magic. Upon the birth of their first child, the umbilical blood is added to the top chamber, strengthening the bond between the witch and wizard.'

Now it was Madam Prince's turn to blink. 'My word, child do you have perfect recall?'

'Nearly,' Hermione admitted.

'But do you understand what you have so admirably repeated?'

Hermione nodded. 'I have researched the Nexus Professor Snape required me to do so before he would discuss it with me. The Nexus is bound to the witch whose virgin blood baptises the metal. It is the decision of the witch if and when she will exchange promises with a wizard based on the Nexus it does not have to be with the wizard who takes her virginity. And the binding power of the blood magic remains linked to the witch if the wizard with whom she has exchanged promises dies, she can then choose another wizard to whom she may be bound although she is not required to bind herself to any wizard, ever. Upon the death of the witch, the Nexus passes into the keeping of the child whose umbilical blood it contains, and upon the death of that child, the magic passes out of being and the Nexus does, as well.'

Madam Prince reached a finely-wrinkled hand into the neck of her robes and pulled out a dainty silver chain, from which dangled another Nexus. 'This is mine,' she said, her gaze fixed upon it with a certain reverence. 'It was one of the last dozen Nexuses forged in Europe, before the death of the last Mage. It contains the umbilical blood of my daughter, Eileen a disappointment, if ever there was one. I was bound to her father with this Nexus, and upon his death, I chose not to confer that power of magical union upon another wizard.'

Hermione waited, her mind teeming with questions. 'I beg your pardon, ma'am, but how does Professor Snape come to have a Nexus? He isn't a witch and if there were only a dozen left when you were a girl ...'

Madam Prince smiled, apparently pleased by Hermione's curiosity. 'My sister, Elaine, died when we were children. My father had procured one for each of us, and hers passed into my possession upon the death of my parents. It would have become the property of my daughter but she chose to marry a Muggle.' Her lips thinned, and for a period of time, she did not speak.

Hermione tried not to fidget upon her pouf, longing to ask more questions, but perceiving that the old witch was lost in memory.

At last, Madam Prince put the magical item back into Hermione's hands. 'I told Severus when he was just a boy that his mother's Nexus would pass to him when he became an adult, as an invaluable gift for his wife. It remained in my possession until he sent a house-elf to fetch it over a month ago.'

Hermione frowned down at the Nexus. 'But I'm not his wife he doesn't even like me very well.'

Madam Prince nodded. 'So he advised me,' she said, her voice touched with amusement. 'I think, Hermione, that he felt very, very badly about what Albus Dumbledore asked him to do to take your innocence to be responsible for the demands of the curse. It was the most momentous gift he, in his limited male mind, could conceive of, to present to you as recompense for the injury he was forced to do you.'

Hermione sat in silence, holding the Nexus, wondering why Professor Snape had told her so little of its huge magical significance. 'It is an old-fashioned custom,' he had informed her in an off-hand way. 'Someday, when you choose the wizard with whom you wish to join, you will have this token of your commitment with which to present him.'

She was stirred from her thoughts by having a tiny gift-wrapped box placed in her hands.

'Please,' Madam Prince said, 'open it.'

Hermione tore the paper from the box and removed its gold-embossed lid, revealing a gossamer silver chain, almost faerie-like in its delicacy.

'This is the chain which is meant to go with the Nexus, Hermione -*your* Nexus. A witch as powerful as you obviously are should never leave such a potent fragment of her magic unattended. You can Disillusion it, if you wish no one else will be able to see it, then.'

Hermione knew it would be churlish to even consider refusing the chain it was, after all, part of the Nexus, which could never belong to anyone but her, now. She threaded the chain through the tiny eye at the top of the Nexus and turned to allow Madam Prince to fasten it about her throat.

The unfamiliar weight of the silver Nexus as it dangled between her breasts was simultaneously strange and very, very right. Placing her palm over silver pendant, she turned to Severus Snape's grandmother with a rather misty smile.

'Thank you,' she whispered.

'Merry Christmas, my dear,' the old lady replied, standing and shaking out the creases in her forest-green robes. 'Hurry, now Christmas breakfast at Prince House is an experience not to be missed!'

Christmas morning amongst the Prince family was not unpleasant. Hermione received small, generic gifts, the types of things women kept tucked away in case of unexpected guests at Christmas. Madam Prince gave her embossed note cards, Mrs Snape gave her eau de cologne, and Mrs Prince gave her a box of Honeydukes chocolates. John, however, surprised her and seriously annoyed his younger brother by presenting her with an inscribed copy of *Durmstrang, A History*.

To a girl too lovely not to have all her questions answered

Happy Christmas, Hermione

From John Prince.

It was illuminating to watch Professor Snape's mother and grandmother open their gifts from him identical black cloaks, differentiated only by the colour of the lining and the shapes of the clasp on each garment. Mrs Snape's clasp was a badger and the lining of her cloak was Hufflepuff yellow. Madam Prince's clasp was the sinuous serpent and the lining of her cloak was Slytherin green.

He had bought her the same gift he had bought the women of his family. What in the world did it mean? That he thought of her as family? Or that it was convenient to make all his purchases at one shop?

'Good heavens, Severus!' Madam Prince said, stroking the lining with a loving hand. 'Acromantula silk! I don't suppose you've become rich on your teacher's salary?'

Mrs Snape, who had rushed to embrace her son in thanks for her gift, stepped back from him with a worried look. 'Oh, Severus, it's too dear'

'Grandmother, a simple "thank you" will suffice, I assure you,' Professor Snape said, apparently bored.

Hermione grasped her heavy new book and kept her eyes on the text before her. Acromantula silk! No wonder the cloak was so warm, in spite of being so light!

'Severus, open it!'

Hermione looked up to see Morgen Singer on her knees at Professor Snape's feet, smiling up into his unresponsive face.

'Really, Morgen,' he said, not moving to take the proffered box. 'You shouldn't have.'

'Oh, stubborn!' Morgen cried gaily, and then she ripped the silver paper from the box herself. 'It's a warm jumper cashmere! You live in that terrible dank dungeon'

Not that you wouldn't like to live there yourself, you hag! Hermione thought angrily.

The Prince boys were opening and exclaiming over gifts when Hermione saw Professor Snape extract her gift to him from beneath the discarded paper at his elbow. He made eye contact with her, then unwrapped the gift. She watched as he lifted each item from the box before returning it and moving to the next; at last, he opened the enclosed parchment and read what she had written.

A phial of condensed Enchanted Mistletoe Elixir for Migraine Headaches only three drops needed!

He looked up and inclined his head at her in congratulation, and she flushed with pleasure. She had worked hard to find a way to condense the formula he was impressed.

A jar of condensed Enchanted Mistletoe Crème for Migraine Headaches rub a small amount on each temple and at the base of your skull for immediate relief!

He looked up again, and she was gratified to see the crinkles at the corners of his eyes she had found the formula for the crème in one of his old Potions textbooks, and he was obviously pleased to have it. She wanted to wriggle like a tail-wagging puppy, but she kept her seat, content to communicate with him silently across the bedlam of his cousins' gift exchange.

A lump of Lucite with an eternally preserved sprig of Enchanted Mistletoe for one never knows when a paperweight may be needed to preserve one's desk from the cross draught in the dungeons!

This time when he looked up at her, he seemed first curious and then speculative. Didn't he like the paperweight? It was just a whim on her part a joke, really. Perhaps he disliked being reminded of their night in the forest?

She watched as he tapped the box surreptitiously with his wand and slipped the now minuscule container into the pocket of his robes before allowing himself to be drawn into conversation again with Morgen Singer.

They met in her room before Christmas lunch. Neither of them spoke, but he swallowed the Potency Potion and they got down to business. Quite deliberately, Hermione raked her nails down his back whilst they fucked, hoping it would cause him to wish to hide from the Singer woman. Remembering her annoyance about the other witch, she pushed him onto his back and straddled him, planting her palms on his shoulders as if pinning him to the bed as she rode him. It startled her when he grasped the Nexus.

'What the devil is this?'

Hermione stopped. 'You're not supposed to be able to see it.'

'It bloody well hit me in the nose,' he snapped, dumping her onto the mattress and sitting up, his back to her.

'It's the Nexus,' she said.

'I can see that, Miss Granger, thank you.' He stood and began to dress.

'Your grandmother came to visit me this morning she told me more about it and she brought the chain.'

He did not answer her, but checked in the mirror to make sure he was reasonably tidy, then left without saying good-bye.

Scampy came to her again that evening to dress her for dinner. She arranged Hermione's hair as she had done the night before and made alterations to the ruby-red velvet robes until they fell, slim as a pencil, to Hermione's ankles, with long, tight sleeves and a high, snug neck, trimmed with luxuriant white fur.

Hermione admired her reflection, terribly pleased with the little elf's lady's maid skills. 'Scampy, can you make my boots appropriate for wear with these robes, yet also sufficient protection for a walk in the snow?'

Delighted to have been set a difficult assignment, Scampy took Hermione's plain footwear and transformed them to white-fur trimmed red velvet boots with discreet ridges on the soles. 'The boots are waterproof, Miss,' Scampy told her as she helped Hermione put them on.

'Please carry my cloak down to the front hall, Scampy, in case I decide to go for a walk after dinner.'

The seating arrangement at dinner was the same as it had been for every meal; Paul was no longer trying to compete with his brother for Hermione's attention, for she obviously preferred conversation to flirtation.

Morgen Singer was apparently not content with the impact she had made thus far on her prey, Professor Snape, for tonight she wore robes so deeply décolleté that even Madam Prince appeared to be shocked; Ava Prince whispered angrily to her sister before they took their seats, but Morgen was not to be deterred.

Just as he had done since turning from her in the bed at midday, Professor Snape kept his attention resolutely upon his dinner partner, never looking in Hermione's direction. She had no idea how she had offended him, but she had resolved not to fret over it. He knew her needs he had, after all, sent the Calming Draught with Scampy again tonight, to buy her a few extra hours before the compulsion came upon her again and he would do what had to be done.

Had he not always done the necessary?

Hermione enjoyed the extravagant meal, drinking the elf-made wine freely, chatting with John, who was a convivial companion. He was employed with the German Ministry of Magic in the International Cooperation Office, highly prized because of his fluency in English, as well as German.

Before they even reached the drawing room after pudding, John invited her to go for a stroll in the moonlight. Hermione readily agreed, retrieving her cloak from the hallway before they slipped out into the icy December air.

'So, Hermione,' John said when they had walked some distance from the house, 'you have no boyfriend?'

'No,' she said with a smile. 'Do you have a girlfriend?'

'I have been seeing a witch I work with,' he answered carefully. 'But she's not as much fun to talk to as you are.'

'What a nice compliment!' she replied. 'I think you're great to talk to, John perhaps your witch friend is just not comfortable with you yet? My best friends are both boys, so I'm quite accustomed to them.'

John seemed to swallow with some difficulty. 'I see two best friends who are boys?' He gave her a shy smile. 'How did you decide which one ... you know ...?'

Hermione frowned. 'How did I decide which one ... what?' she asked.

'I'm very flattered, Hermione so pleased you came out to walk with me ...'

With a convenient tree at hand, John put his hands on her waist and pushed her gently against the bark, looking down into her confused face with admiration and excitement shining in his eyes. Before she could ask him what he meant by it, he kissed her, taking advantage of her gasp of outrage to thrust his tongue into her mouth, pressing her firmly against the tree, his interest easily discernible through the layers of his robes and cloak.

Hermione was immediately assailed with the details about him which were different from what she was accustomed to. He smelt all wrong, of cologne and chewing gum, instead of Hogwarts bar soap and potions ingredients. He wasn't tall enough, and his hands were too thick and hairy. His tongue was like a very wet, floppy thing, rather than a slick rapier caressing her mouth until she moaned with desire.

She pushed against him, not wishing to hurt his feelings, but repulsed nevertheless. She knew the curse had imprinted her upon her professor, but she hadn't realised it would give her such profound distaste for the touch of another.

It seemed as if her efforts succeeded with surprising speed, but she quickly realised that she did not have the strength to have pushed him from her hard enough to send him flying so far from her, where he landed so hard in the snow. The presence of her very angry Potions master explained it all, as he dragged John up out of the snow bank and pressed his wand to the younger wizard's throat.

'You will never *never!* touch this girl again,' he hissed, his enraged face thrust within inches of his cousin's fearful one. 'You will apologise for your inexcusable lapse of good manners, and you will get out of my sight!'

'I beg your pardon, Hermione,' John gasped, staggering backwards toward the safety of Prince House, even as he spoke. 'I didn't know Severus was your I completely misunderstood!'

He turned tail then and ran, never having drawn his wand.

'Well what a coward!' Hermione exclaimed, pulling a handkerchief from the pocket of her cloak and scrubbing at her lips with it.

For the first time since their midday interlude Professor Snape looked into her face, and she quailed, stepping away from him. His expression held such loathing that she was afraid of him for the first time in a long while. He grabbed her wrists and jerked her against him without speaking, and without warning, they Disapparated.

They arrived in her room, and she staggered, for he released her as if she had burnt him.

'Do you mean to tell me my grandmother gave you the chain for the Nexus without telling you the significance of *youwearing* the thrice-damned thing?' he demanded, his voice low and trembling with wrath.

Hermione put her hands on her hips, a posture which would have alerted Harry and Ron to a coming disturbance in their peaceful existence, but which Professor Snape had not seen before.

'How dare you speak to me like this?' she demanded. 'You know I don't know anything about the lore of the Nexus! I told you *everything* I found on it, and there was *nothing* about the consequences of wearing the bloody thing! In fact, your grandmother told me ten times more this morning than any of my resource materials knew about it! Why is there such a paucity of information?'

His nostrils flared at her tone, which bordered on disrespect, and his eyes narrowed, as if daring her to cross a line with him. 'Because it is considered a Dark Object!' he spat. 'There is nothing harmful about it, but the books at Hogwarts the ones to which you have access, at least tell nothing of the practical use of it.'

Hermione's hands left her hips and her arms crossed over her chest, hands tucked angrily in the crooks of her elbows. 'Then suppose you enlighten me?' she snapped.

'An unmarried woman who wears the Nexus containing her virgin's blood is advertising to the world at large that she is in search of a sexual partner.'

'How could you not tell me that?' Hermione screamed, advancing on him with clenched fists.

'Why do you think I didn't give you the goddamned chain?' he returned, stepping forward as well.

'I'll take it off, then!' Hermione took the chain in her hands, and Professor Snape closed the distance between them, batting the chain from her hands.

'You can't!' he said, and then he bent his head and captured her lips in a hot, bruising kiss.

The conflagration came upon her at the touch of his lips, and in spite of her fury, she was driven to return the kiss, sucking his tongue into her mouth, dragging the riband from his hair and twining her fingers in its inky length.

Her lifted her and carried her to the bed. 'You will never kiss that boy any boy again, do you hear me?' he snarled, one long-fingered hand about her throat.

'I will if you kiss that Singer woman!' she snapped defiantly, and pulling her wand from its sheathe, she Vanished every stitch of clothing he was wearing.

Incensed beyond reason, he dropped her on the bed and grabbed her wand, tossing it onto a chair. 'I thought you didn't know that spell,' he snarled then Vanished her entire ensemble as well.

'I learnt it in self-defence!' she snapped, reaching for him, but he secured her hands above her head as he had done once before.

'But you're not so accomplished yet with wandless magic,' he mocked before joining her on the bed and moving over her and into her, sure of his welcome.

Hermione arched to meet his thrust, insensibly excited by the binding of her hands, her whole upper body flushed with arousal. 'Harder!' she begged, and he complied, driving too hard, too fast, and she screamed as she came, calling his name and speaking every filthy word she had ever heard.

Still he pounded, staring into her face with glittering black eyes. 'Say it,' he panted, 'no more boys!'

Hermione did not answer him, for her body was riding the crest of another orgasm, swept higher and higher; she knew he was aware of her state, for he stopped talking, and synchronised himself to her, seeming to take every breath with her. 'Come with me,' he said, and it sounded like a plea.

'Yes,' she said, and she did, cresting the wave and crashing into the pounding ocean of his climax, pummelled by the incredible force of the wall of passion which drowned them, and ever so happy to feel her hands being released, so she could hold him as he fell beside her, seemingly incapable of speech.

'No ... more ... boys ...' he managed between panting breaths.

'No more Morgen,' she replied, applying her teeth to the pulse beneath his jaw.

He wound his fingers in her hair and gently but inexorably pulled her up to face him. 'I have not touched another woman since this began,' he said.

'But you said Morgen expected you in her room! That you had to go!'

'I made my excuses convincingly,' he said, 'but tonight's happenings will get back to the Dark Lord, I promise you.'

Hermione lifted the Nexus. 'What did John see?' she wondered.

'It's not something *you* would see,' he answered, his tone showing his exhaustion. 'Only someone carefully trained in the Dark Arts would see that your aura has changed colour someone who was looking for such a change.'

Hermione placed her hands on the chain. 'Why can't I take it off,' she said. 'I don't want people looking at me and thinking'

'Once you have donned it, you cannot cease wearing it, Hermione. It is peculiar to this type of blood magic: the Nexus will be with you until the day you die. No one at Hogwarts, however, will be aware of the aura change it is not something for which they would know how to look.'

'But people here your whole family ...'

His eyes drifted closed. 'The entire household knows where we are and what is transpiring,' he said. 'There is no help for it.' He extinguished the candles with a wave of his hand and settled to sleep.

Hermione's face burned in the dark. 'I won't go to breakfast.'

'Suit yourself ...' He punctuated this with a yawn.

'And I'm never coming back here as long as I live.'

'We'll see,' he responded neutrally, before drifting into the deep, regular breathing of sound sleep.

Hermione lay awake for some time, feeling his sticky seed drying upon her thighs and holding tightly clasped in her hand the Nexus he had given her, baptised as it was with her virgin blood which he had spilt.

A/N: Hunnybunch assures me that "Frohe Weihnachten" is the German phrase for "Merry Christmas."

Chapter 11: Escalation

Chapter 11 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Thanks to my beta team for this story, DeeMichelle, Sshg316, and MagicAlly.

Please take note: preliminary readers of this chapter found the scene with Lord Voldemort to touch on the area of "squick". It implies material of a squicky nature, but it is not graphic. You may wish to skip that section if you have any doubts about your tolerance for the subject matter.

Love and chocolates to my reviewers. As always, I have read every word you have written to me, even if I have not responded consistently. Forgive me, I pray, and know that I am spending the time writing the next chapter.

Chapter 11: Escalation

Severus woke the instant the Dark Mark began to burn. His inner clock told him he had been sleeping for three hours; it was, therefore, around 2 A.M. on Boxing Day.

Fucking Morgen. She had wasted no time airing her perceived wrongs before their master.

The girl stirred beside him, turning so that her bare back was pressed against his left side. How could he provide for her needs, now that the Dark Lord was calling for him? Dumbledore had been far too optimistic, which was, indeed, one of his many flaws.

She turned again, so that her breasts were now pressed against the arm which still burned from his lordship's call. She sighed and snuggled her cheek against his upper arm, as if she was a puppy and he was a sure source of affection and protection.

With a muffled oath, he moved to a sitting position, his black eyes flicking over his shoulder to stare at the girl, who murmured but did not wake. Her hair, in the long, glossy ringlets, changed her appearance entirely, and he wasn't sure he liked it. Other men would notice her more if she looked less like a walking bird's nest and more like a pretty young woman.

He moved carefully from the bed, grumbling to himself over the loss of his clothing, and slipped stealthily through the hidden panel and along the passage into his own room. From the wardrobe, he pulled his twin to Hermione's beaded bag - his was black kidskin leather - and removed from it the necessary cloak and mask. He scrambled

into clothing and donned the hooded cloak. Every moment he delayed was a guarantee of discomfort to come, but he could not depart without making provision for the girl.

'Scampy!' he called, and the house-elf popped into the room. 'Please wake my grandmother, with my apologies, and fetch her to me; tell her it is an emergency.'

'Right away, Master Severus,' Scampy said, 'but Mistress is not asleep. She scarcely sleeps any more.'

Scampy disappeared again and Severus involuntarily clasped his left forearm, dreading the interview to come.

The room into which he Apparated harking to the Dark Lord's call was overly warm, lit only by the fire burning in the massive hearth. Illuminated by the flames was a round bed, covered in white satin sheets. Sitting upon the bed, one leg crossed negligently over the other, was the Dark Lord, his freakishly white skin somehow whiter than the shiny satin bed sheets. He wore a green kimono-style dressing gown, and for the first time in many years, Severus saw his master's naked legs, hairless, with a grotesquely scaly texture.

What was far more disturbing was what was on the bed behind the Dark Lord. It was a woman, naked, her wrists bound together and resting behind her head. Black hair fanned out over her pillow, and her hooded eyes were fixed upon her lord. Bellatrix's body was painfully thin, greatly reduced from the succulent beauty she had been before Azkaban, when the Dark Lord had frequently flaunted her physical perfection before his Death Eaters. His lordship had found in young Bellatrix Black the ideal servant, who worshipped him in mind and body. Her family had believed the great man had the right idea about how to right the wrongs in the wizarding world to the benefit of the pure-bloods and at any rate, they were far too nervous of Lord Voldemort's displeasure to deny him their eldest daughter.

When Severus had first been brought to the Dark Lord's attention, Bellatrix Black had been his lordship's constant companion. Soon afterwards, his lordship had commanded that she wed Rodolphus Lestrange, son of one of the Dark Lord's oldest cronies. Rodolphus and his brother, Rabastan, had been classmates of Severus', and it had been common knowledge that Rodolphus was not interested in women but the manoeuvre had obtained for the Lestrange family the fiction that Rodolphus was embarked upon a proper pure-blood marriage, and for the Dark Lord, it had obtained a hefty contribution to his war chest.

Severus came forward and fell to his knees, lifting the hem of the kimono and pressing his lips to the fabric. Consciously, he closed his mind to every emotion and waited for the inevitable.

'Severus,' the Dark Lord said, 'how good of you to find the time to answer your master's call.'

'I live only to serve you, my lord,' Severus said, his eyes firmly averted.

A moan of sexual pleasure issued from the prone figure on the bed, but Severus did not react.

'I understand from Morgen Singer that you have a cursed student given into your charge,' the Dark Lord continued, apparently content to leave Severus upon his knees on the cold floor.

'Yes, my lord,' Severus responded, having learnt many years before not to provide more information until the Dark Lord saw fit to request it.

'Look at me, Severus,' the high cold voice commanded.

Severus raised his face and looked into the eerie red eyes of the greatest Legilimens the world had ever known.

'How is it, Severus, that you come to have in your keeping the Mudblood slag whom I intended for Albus Dumbledore?'

'Dumbledore forced her upon me, my lord,' he answered truthfully.

The Dark Lord stared into Severus eyes for a long time, and Severus saw memories passing before his mind's eye. With all his concentration, he offered up choice scenes sure to please his master and scrupulously hid others, for the sake of his *other* master.

'Ah, you spank her,' the Dark Lord said. 'Sluts enjoy spanking don't you, Bella?'

Severus dared a darted glance from the corner of his eye to Bellatrix, who responded to her master with a moaned, 'Yes, Master, yes please ...'

'Would you like to have Severus spank you, Bella?' the Dark Lord inquired, his gaze fixed again upon Severus' face.

'No, Master, please not Snape please, spank me yourself, Master ...'

His lordships' cruel mouth curved into a smile. 'Would you like to spank her, Severus? Variety is the spice of life for a man Lord Voldemort understands this. Lord Voldemort is generous to those who serve him well.'

Severus responded, 'I shall do so if you wish it, my lord but you know there is no love lost betwixt Bellatrix and me.'

The Dark Lord's smile widened. 'It is amusing, is it not, how dear Bella loathes you?' The smile disappeared as quickly as it had arrived. 'Come, Severus, sit beside me, here on the bed. I want you to see this.'

Obediently, Severus stood, his knees protesting the ill treatment, and he sat gingerly beside the Dark Lord, whose red eyes now rested upon Bellatrix.

'Open your legs, Bella,' his lordship commanded, and his most loyal servant obeyed with a whimper. 'Show Severus how wet you are for me.'

Understanding that he was to watch, Severus turned slightly so that he might do so, not bothering to hide his distaste for the spectacle of his most vituperative enemy in such a lascivious display.

'Abraxas Malfoy invited me to the party where I first saw Bellatrix,' the Dark Lord said conversationally, watching the woman writhe as if in response to his voice. 'She was fourteen, and a riper beauty I have never seen. She was fifteen the first time she turned up on my doorstep, offering herself to me. She was sixteen when I made her mine forever.' He glanced at Severus, as if to make sure Severus was attending to him. 'She wished to become Lady Voldemort, and do you know, there are times when I regret my decision *not* to give her that honour.'

As Severus watched, the Dark Lord stretched out one spider-like hand and placed it upon her belly, eliciting a low moan and increased begging. 'Do you know why Bellatrix lost her mind in Azkaban, Severus?'

Seeing that his master required a response, Severus said, 'The Dementors, my lord, prey upon the human prisoners, sucking all hope and happiness from them.'

'No,' the Dark Lord answered him, removing his hand once more from Bellatrix' flesh, apparently indifferent to the anguish this caused for her. 'It is because she was sexually imprinted upon me by the *Eternus Perturbatio* curse at the age of sixteen, and my absence drove her mad.'

Severus could not prevent the flash of horror which stole through him as incidents of the last twenty years, some witnessed and others only reported, fell into place like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. But what of the persistent rumours amongst his followers that the Dark Lord's new body lacked ... certain functions?

'I'm sure you're aware that my progress along the road to immortality has deprived me of the carnal appetites of mere men,' his lordship said, as if in answer to Severus' fleeting thought. 'I could release her, of course, but she begs me not to do so is that not true, Bella?'

The dark head lifted, and blazing dark eyes stared out of the gaunt, crazed face. 'You mustn't, Master! Please! I'll do anything!'

Voldemort hissed, and although Severus did not understand what he was saying, he recognized that his master was speaking Parseltongue which meant that the loathsome Nagini was close by. There was a rustle, and the massive head of the snake reared up on the far side of the bed, then onto the mattress, and soon the entire length of Nagini was stretched out beside the naked witch. The snake butted her head against the Dark Lord's hand, as if she was a cat wishing to be petted.

'As you know, Severus,' the Dark Lord said, 'the curse victim can only receive surcease of the driving need fostered by the curse from the ministrations of the one upon whom she is imprinted. Nagini, here, is so close to me that she is able to act as my deputy.'

Severus struggled not to show his horror as Voldemort hissed at the snake, which began to slither along Bellatrix's bare leg.

'Of course, Nagini, in the desire to fulfil my orders, sometimes becomes a bit too enthusiastic, allowing the fangs to pierce Bella's skin but I always heal Bella before she become too ill do I not, my dear?'

As if on command, Bellatrix began to scream. Turning his attention back to Severus, the Dark Lord smiled. 'Poor Bella she never knows if she's going to receive the honour of my hand or mouth or the pleasures attendant on my precious Nagini. It brings me great enjoyment to hear her scream her pleasure she may perceive it as pain, but in the end, she always agrees that Lord Voldemort knows best.'

Now the smile disappeared from the Dark Lord's face and he drew his wand, levelling it at Severus. 'I cannot tell you how disappointed I was to find that you had deprived me of the knowledge that my old enemy was sexually bound to a teenage girl, Severus.'

Severus hated himself for being forced to show fear. 'My lord, I agreed only because I thought I could be of service to you. Dumbledore is more sure of me than ever, since I have obeyed him in this against my own very strong reservations in the matter. And I thought I would be able to bring you more information about Harry Potter by being in a position of such power over his best friend!'

Bella's screams were reaching a crescendo, combining sexual release with horror and pain, and in his excitement, the Dark Lord's vertical pupils were contracted to mere black lines in his horrible red eyes. 'That may very well be true, Severus only time will tell but, for now, you have displeased me very much and you know Lord Voldemort only punishes to instruct'

Severus felt himself falling almost before the first searing pain of the Cruciatus Curse began to course through his nerve endings; in the end, what he remembered most clearly was the counterpoint of his own screams to those of Bellatrix as the Dark Lord conducted his perverted symphony of pain and degradation.

Hermione woke slowly, blinking owlishly at the dim light peeking around the drawn drapes. A muttered '*Lumos*' ignited the candles, and she squinted at her wristwatch, wondering why she was having so much difficulty waking up. Four o'clock? It couldn't be four in the morning it would be pitch dark outside! So, it must be four in the afternoon but why in the world was she

A shout from the floor below brought memory flooding back, and she was instantly alert. She had heard her professor's voice, and he was in distress. Throwing the bedclothes from her naked form, she grabbed clothing at random from the wardrobe, pulling on denims and a jumper with no underclothes, pausing only to stuff her feet into her trainers before she bolted down the corridor and raced down to the landing, where she paused before the great stained glass representation of Merlin and Nimûe to survey the scene in the hallway.

Professor Snape lay in a heap upon the marble floor, his Death Eater's cloak still hooding his head, his attenuated face chalky against the black fabric. Mrs Snape knelt at his head, wringing her hands and crying helplessly. Morgen Singer knelt at his side, chafing his hand and begging him to speak to her. Madam Prince stood over him, her lips pressed in a thin line. Standing at his feet, her long-fingered elf-hands clasping his ankles, was Scampy. Gathered in a knot in the drawing room doorway were the Tiberius Prince family, all five of them tense-faced.

'Severus Severus, I'm sorry!' Morgen wailed. 'Please!'

Hermione stormed down the stairs, grabbing the back of Morgen Singer's robes and physically jerking her to her feet. 'Get out of my way!' she cried. That done, Hermione crouched beside Professor Snape, pressing fingertips to his throat. His pulse was thready, but it was there. 'He's alive!' she gasped, tears starting to her eyes.

Eileen Snape stopped crying at this pronouncement, and Madam Prince was galvanized into movement. 'Get up from there, Eileen you're only in the way.' Eileen stood obediently, and Madam Prince took her daughter's place, her old-fashioned buckled shoes glinting oddly in the flickering light from the many-candled chandelier.

Hermione looked down the length of his body to Scampy. 'Can you help me move him to his room?' she asked, ignoring everyone else.

Scampy took the question as a command and immediately levitated the fallen wizard, directing his body up the stairs. Morgen Singer started forward, saying, 'I'll get him settled,' but Hermione was in front of her in a flash, her wand levelled with a steady hand directly at the redhead's chest.

'Take one step and I will hex you,' Hermione snarled. 'This is *your* fault! Don't you dare try to touch him! Are we clear?'

Morgen Singer lifted her chin, a look of unutterable disdain on her beautiful face. 'How dare you speak to me like that, you ridiculous little Mudblood!'

Hermione turned from the older witch in disgust, sheathing her wand as she started up the staircase after Scampy and the unconscious professor. 'Oh, sticks and stones, Morgen,' she said dismissively. She was on the landing when the unmistakable BANG! of a well-executed spell rang out, followed by a feminine cry of outrage. Hermione whirled, drawing again as she did.

'I'm sorry, Aunt Morgen,' John Prince said, advancing into the entryway and retrieving his aunt's wand from the floor. He handed the wand to her and added, 'I couldn't let you cast at your opponent's back that's bad form, even for a Death Eater.'

Hermione bestowed a shining smile on John, who flushed in gratification, then she ran lightly up the rest of the stairs in pursuit of the house-elf and her professor.

Madam Prince had come to her before first light, waking her by sitting on the side of the bed lately vacated by her eldest grandchild.

'*Severus has been summoned by He Who Must Not Be Named,*' she said, *only the crease between her eyes betraying her anxiety. 'The Dark Lord is aware that you are imprinted upon Severus, rather than Albus Dumbledore, and he will not be happy.'*

Hermione tugged the bedclothes up to her chin, sharply aware of her nudity beneath the sheets. 'How could he possibly know?' she asked as she struggled to clear her brain of the cobwebs of sleep.

Madam Prince drilled Hermione with her keen blue eyes. 'Morgen Singer has wanted to marry Severus since she was old enough to put her hair up and let her skirts down. The families have no objection, but Severus is not interested.'

'Good for him,' Hermione muttered grimly.

'Like harks to like, Hermione. It would be a good match,' the old lady said, never looking away from Hermione's face.

'She's not like him!' Hermione cried, incensed and moved to express her opinion. 'She's nothing like him! She's vain and spoilt and petty!'

'You do not know her,' the old woman said dismissively.

Hermione persevered, as if Madam Prince had not spoken. 'He's brave and clever and honourable he would never snitch to Voldemort about her, even if she deserved it!'

Madam Prince quailed a bit at Hermione's blatant utterance of the Dark Lord's name, but she did not speak a word of censure. 'At any rate, Morgen went to the Dark Lord with her ... concerns after the incident between John and Severus last night.'

'And why?' Hermione demanded, changing course, her irritation now directed at the professor's grandmother. 'Why did you give me that chain and tell me to wear the Nexus, knowing what everyone would think of me?'

The old woman stood, glaring down at Hermione uncompromisingly. 'I will thank you to mind your tone with me, Hermione. I am prepared to allow you a certain amount of license because of your natural anxiety, but I will not tolerate your insolence.' She lowered her eyes to her hands, busily readjusting the sash on her dressing gown. 'Suffice it to say that there is little point in you owning the last Nexus in existence only to keep it rolled up in a sock in a cupboard.'

Realising that she was unlikely to receive a direct answer to her question, Hermione's mind skittered again to the fact that her professor had gone willingly into danger. A faint stirring of need touched her, like the first signs of hunger, and she looked up at the older witch in trepidation. 'How long ... what if ...?'

'Yes,' Madam Prince said. 'That is why Severus sent me to you. I am going to put you into an enchanted sleep, Hermione hopefully, it will hold you until he returns and is able to ... see to you, himself.'

Hermione raised a hand. 'No please I don't want to be asleep when he's in danger.' She knew it was a stupid thing to say, but instinct told her to remain alert.

'It is his wish, Hermione,' Madam Prince said sternly. 'Do you really wish to be rebellious? I will be forced to tell him about it, you know.'

Hermione had complied, feeling like a coward who was taking the easy way out, but also realising that she would be doing no one any good if she were awake, simultaneously worried about her professor's well-being and needing to have sex with him.

She entered Professor Snape's bedroom and closed the door behind her, hoping the closed door would discourage Morgen Singer or even the rather ineffectual Eileen Snape from entering to offer assistance. Scampy had laid him out in the middle of his bed and had already managed to undress him down to his shirt and trousers; as Hermione entered, the little house-elf removed his boots. As she did so, his eyes fluttered open.

'Headmaster,' he croaked.

Hermione hurried to his side. 'Sir it's Hermione. We're still at Prince House the headmaster isn't here. Shall I Apparate to Hogwarts and fetch him to you?'

At the sound of her voice, Professor Snape's eyes opened wide, and his burning black gaze fastened upon her face. 'No you will not leave this house,' he rasped. His attention seemed to wander then, and he looked fretfully down at Scampy. 'Water ...'

Scampy was at his other side instantly, levitating herself onto the mattress and lifting his head to allow him to sip from a cup of water. When Scampy gently raised his head, he groaned aloud.

'Oh, sir!' Hermione cried, the words wrenched from her as she gripped her hands together to keep from touching him. How she wanted to help him! 'Please what happened? What did V-' she caught herself. 'What did You Know Who do to you?'

'Cruciatius,' the cracked voice managed before his eyes closed again, and he seemed to lapse into unconsciousness once more.

Hermione stared at the wall over his head, her mind whirling. The Cruciatius curse caused intolerable pain. No one had ever been able to tell her why, precisely, but it made sense to her that it was caused by irritation of the nervous system.

'Scampy,' she said, 'I gave Professor Snape a potion for Christmas it was in a box with an unguent and a paperweight do you know where he put it?'

Scampy nodded, her huge green eyes frightened. 'Yes, young miss, but Master Severus said Scampy is not to touch it he said the box contained something very special'

Hermione leant forward. 'It's okay, Scampy you don't have to touch it. Just show me where it is, all right?'

Three drops of the potion, applied under his tongue, seemed to bring the professor some measure of relief; Hermione breathed more easily when he no longer moaned on every third breath.

'Scampy, I have an ointment I want to rub into his muscles can you help me undress him?'

Working together, the witch and the house-elf attended to the professor's needs. Mindful of his dignity, Hermione kept his private area draped as she worked on him. Scampy helped her roll him onto his side, and with firm, steady strokes, she rubbed the crème made from the Enchanted Mistletoe into the long muscles of his back and legs, reaching beneath the sheet to massage it even into his bum. Concern for his well-being had taken pre-eminence over the symptoms of the curse, but now that she was touching his skin, caressing the sculpted roundness of his bum, she wanted very badly to straddle him. Her erect nipples were abraded by the weave of her jumper, and her quim ached as moisture pooled between her thighs.

Struggling mightily to bring her mind back into order, she settled Professor Snape again on his back and covered him up to his armpits with the duvet, knowing how he preferred to keep his hands free and unencumbered.

'Thank you, Scampy,' she said. 'You can go now. I'll call if I need you again.'

The little creature popped out of the room, and Hermione stretched out beside him, her eyes intent upon his face, and she was on his eye level when his eyes fluttered open.

'What did you do?' he whispered.

'I rubbed your muscles with the migraine relief crème,' she whispered back. 'It seems to help with the spasms.'

The ghost of a smile touched his lips. 'It's a miracle nothing has ever helped like this before.' He moved his shoulders experimentally. 'The headmaster and the matron would always have to put me to sleep and keep me that way until the spasms passed it took up to three days, depending upon the severity.'

Hermione was surprised by his volubility, but it dawned upon her that the narcotic properties of the potion had undoubtedly loosened his tongue.

'Are you hungry?' she asked him, gratitude for his relative well-being flooding her but doing nothing to calm the rising storm of the curse symptoms.

'No,' he answered. He frowned slightly. 'What time is it?'

'Eight at night,' she answered.

'Too long,' he said, shifting fretfully on the sheets. 'You'll have to do all the work I'm too weak.'

Hermione lowered her lips to his ear. 'I can slip on top of you ...'

'No,' he said, 'it won't work. The Dark Lord cursed me an impotence curse. Short acting, but still in effect.' His lips thinned, and Hermione reached a finger to smooth over his lips.

'We'll wait,' she said, wondering if she could.

'I can smell you now,' he informed her baldly. 'Get out of your clothes.'

Double-checking to make sure the door was locked, Hermione warded it as well, adding a Silencing Spell for good measure. She pulled off the jumper and peeled out of the denims, conscious of his eyes upon her.

'So,' he said, 'you've given up wearing knickers just to keep me from Vanishing them?'

'No,' she said, approaching the bed. 'I got dressed in a hurry when you shouted downstairs.'

He looked from her face to her breasts to her mound. 'Hands or mouth?' he inquired.

She studied at him. 'How could you manage mouth?'

His eyes drifted lazily down her nakedness again. 'Kneel over my face, and I'll show you.'

If she had not been so driven for relief, Hermione would most likely never have had the nerve to follow her professor's directions.

'Place your knees on either side of my head ... spread your labia ... lower yourself until you can feel my tongue ...'

It might have been her terrible need, but it seemed as if the climax she reached writhing upon her professor's face was amongst the most intense she had yet experienced with him. It felt as if he had sucked her clitoris into the middle of his mouth and was flicking it with his tongue. By the time she moved off his pillow to lie beside him, she was trembling with reaction and glad to cuddle up to his warmth, pulling the duvet over them both.

'Kiss me,' he rumbled, his baritone like warm honey to her senses. 'Clean yourself from my face.'

Unreasonably aroused, Hermione did as he bade her, sucking his lips into her mouth, licking at his mouth, the very source of the warm honey she craved, delving ever deeper in search of it, clambering atop him and twining her fingers in his lank hair.

'Move down,' he told her at length, and she was amazed to feel, as she slid down, the silk-covered iron of his erection.

'I thought you had an impotence curse,' she said, positioning herself and sliding onto him with a moan of relief.

'It appears that impotence is not my natural state in the face of your shameless provocation,' he replied, and his hands, gaining ever in strength, rose to grasp her hips. 'Shut up and fuck me.'

In the wee hours of the morning, when he slept peacefully, Hermione pulled on her clothes and slipped through the door out into the hall, unsure of how to find and use the secret panel. She was startled to discover John Price sleeping in a straight chair set against the wall opposite the professor's bedroom.

He startled when she came out of the door and sat up, instantly alert, his wand in his hand.

'John!' she whispered. 'What are you doing?'

John lowered his wand and stood, smiling rather sheepishly at his reaction. 'Just making sure no one tries to do any more mischief to my Cousin Severus,' he said.

Hermione felt quite embarrassed, emerging from her professor's room at this hour with her hair in disarray, smelling of sex. She could smell their mingled secretions upon her skin and was terribly afraid that this young man could do so as well.

'Thank you,' she said and stepped to one side to move past him, down the corridor to her room.

'She doesn't mean anything by it,' John blurted.

Hermione stopped. 'Who?' she asked.

'My Aunt Morgen,' he explained. 'She's loved Severus all my life.'

Hermione frowned. 'John, if you loved someone, would you go to the most frightening Dark wizard in the world and tell that Dark wizard something that you knew for a fact would mean punishment for your loved one?'

John sheathed his wand and rubbed his hands over his face. 'No, I wouldn't, but I'm not as high-strung as my Aunt Morgen.' He nodded his head toward his cousin's closed bedroom door. 'If the man you loved scorned you and took up with another witch, would you just walk away?'

Hermione looked at him as if he was daft. 'What are you talking about?' she demanded. 'Professor Snape isn't "the man I love"! There's nothing stopping him from taking up with your aunt, if he chooses to.'

John crossed his arms over his chest. 'Oh, come on, Hermione. You put on the Nexus, he challenged me for you and carried you off to bed and the whole family knows it.'

Hermione felt her face flame. 'That doesn't mean ...'

John threw his hands up, as if he was trying to communicate with someone unable to understand simple concepts. 'You can't push him to that and then spurn him! He made his intentions perfectly clear.'

John Prince turned and stalked away, leaving Hermione standing outside her professor's closed bedroom door, mouth agape.

What intentions?

Chapter 12: Confusion

Chapter 12 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Love and thanks to DeeMichelle and Sshg316, who beta read, and to MagicAlly, who Brit-picked. And to RichardGloucester, who objected to lemon in Severus' tea I took it out just for you, Dickie.

Chapter 12: Confusion

Severus nodded to Madam Pince and reached for the two books from the Founder's Collection that she had found for him over the holiday. He had been back at the school for nearly a week now, but he had found himself reluctant to pick up the threads of his term-time routine. With the girl spending rather more time in his quarters than in her own, he recognised it was far more pleasant to sit with her by the fire, each of them ensconced in one of the wing chairs, and read for pleasure. She had come across Alain Foucault's *Merlin et Nimue* on his bookshelf, and he had given her permission to read the wizarding classic, a somewhat romanticised version of the story of the great wizard and his great downfall. It was a joy to watch her reading his copy of the book, eagerly absorbing all that she read and then looking up at him with a knowing expression which seemed to say she knew he had been watching her. He would glare before lowering his eyes to pretend to read the book lying neglected in his lap.

At other times, when she looked up at him, he knew she was in need. Without a word, she would rise, go into his bedroom, and begin to undress. In equal silence, he would follow her, schooling his face carefully not to show his amazement that this vital creature willingly slipped into his bed and waited in trembling anticipation for him to touch her. He could do with her as he wished, enjoy her body in ways he had never dreamt a witch would permit him to do and she welcomed it all, eager for him at every juncture.

He knew she was driven by the Dark magical compulsion that her eagerness was the result of the Dark Lord's horrible curse but when the girl looked at him with her big brown eyes and grasped his cock her small, knowledgeable hand, and asked him in her passion-ragged voice to fuck her to please, *please* fuck her it felt fatally authentic.

He was moved from his reverie when Potter and Weasley entered the library, their heads close together, whispering. They passed the desk without sparing a glance for it; had he been Lord Voldemort, Potter would have been dead on the floor. Idiot boys! And why in thunder would the Dunderheaded Duo be in the library the night before term began? His eyes narrowed. They were looking for their bushy-haired third. He waited for them to walk down the central aisle and turn left toward the girl's favoured study table, beneath the great oriole stained glass window in the northwest corner of the cavernous room.

Moving stealthily, he tracked them, slipping down to the shelf directly behind them, where he stood like a statue, listening to their interaction.

'Harry! Ron!'

He sneered. Obviously, she was delighted to see her two swains. Impatient to see her face, he Disillusioned himself and levitated half a row of books to the very top of the shelves. Now he could see half of her face, as well as the backs of Weasley's and Potter's heads.

'We need to talk to you now.'

Potter sounded quite tense. Severus' adrenaline flooded his blood stream. Had something happened? Was the Boy Who Shirked about to lead his two faithful followers into a bit of rule-breaking?

'What is it?'

He nodded approvingly. She sounded doubtful they wouldn't easily be able to lead her down some stupid garden path. Now Weasley spoke.

'We did a bit of research over the hols, Hermione on compulsion curses.'

Severus tensed, and he was certain the girl did, as well. Who could have predicted that the two laziest students in their form would bestir themselves to do *research*?

'Well? What do you want to say?'

She sounded appropriately irritated. He smirked.

Potter leant closer to her and spoke so softly that Severus had to cast a silent amplification charm to hear them properly. 'It's a sexual curse, isn't it?'

The girl was unable to mask her reaction; her eyes grew wide and stricken.

'See?' Weasley said, forgetting to speak softly. They would have Madam Pince down on them if he didn't quiet down. 'Look at her! I *told* you it had to be that! She won't even hold my hand any more!'

Severus frowned. He had availed himself of the girl's memories about Weasley once even by her invitation and she had no romantic feelings for the dolt. Had she neglected to inform him of that fact?

Potter silenced Weasley with a glare, then turned back to her. 'Hermione why didn't you come to us? We would have helped you done anything for you.'

Weasley waited a moment for emphasis, then reiterated, *Anything*.'

She sat back in her chair, the sheaf of parchment upon which she had been writing clutched protectively to her chest, as if to ward them off. 'The headmaster explained it to you I was embarrassed and didn't want to speak about it especially not to *you* lot!'

Weasley spoke again, his voice still immoderately loud. 'But Hermione *the headmaster*? It's just *wrong*!'

Her mouth dropped open, and Severus closed his eyes for a moment, readying himself for the end of any peace in his life. Did he really want to hear what she would say to them about him? His craven self wanted to flee, but he stubbornly held his ground.

'Of course not!' she hissed at them. 'That's just *gross*!'

Weasley leapt to his feet, ignoring Potter's white-knuckled attempt to keep him in his seat. 'Who, then? Who are you having sex with every day?'

Severus had to exercise restraint to prevent himself from cursing aloud or hexing the two boys. The girl surprised him when she said to them, 'Go to hell!' and ran from the

room, leaving her things behind.

'Smooth move, Ron,' Potter said angrily, taking the time to gather the girl's books. 'We agreed *not* to get physical with her she's practically a rape victim!'

'She's not *your* girlfriend!' Weasley snapped, his profile now turned to Severus, who was witness to the way the boy's ears reddened when he was angry.

Potter hefted the girl's familiar book bag over his shoulder and turned away. 'She's not your girlfriend either, Ron she never forgave you for Lavender, remember?' He began to walk away, throwing over his shoulder, 'I'm going to find her and talk to her. Don't come unless you're capable of remembering this is about *her* and not about *you*.'

Severus watched as Weasley went impetuously after Potter, and for several minutes after Hogwarts' golden trio had disappeared from his sight, he remained standing with his eyes fixed on the empty chair where the girl had sat.

The clock stuck ten, and Severus replaced the girl's bookmark in Merlin et Nimue before rising from the chair. It had been three hours since she had fled the library with the dunderheads in hot pursuit eight hours since he had held her wrists over her head, inciting her to cling to him with her legs, and whispered filthy words in her ear as he slowly moved in and out of her body, prolonging his pleasure and her torment, bringing her off three times before spending himself deep within her womb.

She was past due for relief, but she wasn't here yet.

What could prevent her from coming? Some unlooked-for Head Girl duty? Tending to the egos of her two so-called 'best friends'?

An ugly sneer settled on his face as he began to pace. His life had been peaceful before the headmaster had dumped this intolerable nuisance on him. Not only did she clutter his living space with her own belongings he aimed a kick at the fluffy pink sock peeking from beneath the coffee table but she absorbed all his free time, made incessant demands upon his physical abilities, and chattered inanely when he was trying to work. It infuriated him that the remainder of his life for surely, he would not outlive his master was to be given to catering to an eighteen-year-old, empty-headed bint!

Restlessly, he glanced again at the clock. Ten-fifteen.

He eyed the box of Floo powder on the mantel, then forced his eyes away. His only obligation was to meet her needs, and she was to seek him out for that purpose. He had never used the Floo connexion between her room and his to go to her. Damned if he would start now.

Ten-twenty.

Perhaps she was ill perhaps she was incapacitated in some way, unable to come to him. As if in answer to his thought, the fake Galleon in his pocket burned. He pulled it out and frowned over it. Obviously, she had activated the charm, but she had included no details of the when and where to meet her.

Something was wrong.

Throwing a handful of Floo powder into the flames, he stepped into the grate and said, 'Hermione Granger's room.'

When the spinning stopped he stepped immediately out of the fireplace, unmindful of the soot on his robes. He took in the tableau before him in an instant. Potter lay upon the floor, rigid, obviously the victim of *Petrificus Totalus*, his wand uselessly tucked away in its sheathe at his belt. Weasley held the girl's fake Galleon in one hand and with the other hand he had a pincer-like grip on her upper arm, keeping her seated on the side of her bed beside him. On Weasley's far side, out of her reach, her vine wood wand lay abandoned on the duvet. She was struggling against him, talking, but Weasley was not listening to her.

'Ron give it to me! He'll come, now. I told you to let me go! You don't understand!'

The moment Hermione perceived Severus' presence in the room, she ceased her struggles against Weasley. Severus could see at a glance that she was in a bad way, her limbs already subject to the involuntary tremor which afflicted her when the desire was upon her for too long before it was assuaged. Her eyes filled with tears and her cheeks flushed in shame; she turned her face from him and stared at the wall.

Blinding rage drove Severus across the room. He jerked Weasley from the bed and whirled, slamming him against the door. The look of anguished shame on her face was too much not embarrassment over her curse-driven need, but humiliation over being physically bested by someone inferior to her in every way. Severus recognised the first ten years of his life playing out in this room, and he wanted to choke the life from the worthless specimen before him.

'All right, Weasley?' he hissed, slamming him once again against the wooden door. 'Do you like pulling the wings off flies, too? Kicking puppies?'

'Gerroff me, you greasy git!' Ron shouted, shoving against his Potions teacher with all the strength and energy of his twenty-years-younger body. 'Get off me and stay away from her you disgusting pervert!'

Severus staggered back from the boy, caught off-balance by the strength of Weasley's push. He reached for his wand, suddenly remembering that he was a wizard and possessed of far better ways to control an adversary than his own physical strength. He saw Weasley reaching for his wand as well and prayed his own would be in his hand first. In the next instant, a jet of light shot past his shoulder and sent Weasley's wand skittering across the floor.

'Stay where you are, Ron, or I'll hex you.'

Severus looked over his shoulder; the girl stood in the proper duelling stance, her wand trained on her best friend. Severus relaxed an iota and stepped back out of her way. 'Are you all right?' he asked, sotto voce.

'I'm *fine*,' she snarled, her gaze fixed on the terrified freckled countenance before her. 'Except for the fact that I needed to be with you two hours ago, and I stayed to talk to my *friends*, to try to help them understand except *forthat*, I'm simply brilliant, Professor thanks for asking!'

He saw the tremble in her hand, and he knew she was coasting on pure nerve. Rather than speaking to her again, he freed Potter, who leapt to his feet, his bespectacled face full of fury.

'Ron, you *prat*!' he shouted. 'How could you do that to her? Take her wand? *Hold her down?* You deserve whatever Snape does to you!'

In a flash, the girl had lowered her wand and stepped past Severus, slapping Weasley's face. 'You think he *raped* me?' she hissed. '*He never did anything* to me I didn't beg him to do and then only after we had tried every other avenue to treat this curse. Professor Dumbledore asked him to take care of me. It's *not his fault* that You-Know-Who cursed me! It was done because I'm Harry's friend and because You-Know-Who is a twisted deviant.' She stepped even closer to Weasley and Severus and Potter each took a step back, as if to give her more elbow room for whatever she planned to do to him. 'If *anyone* did anything to me against my will, Ronald, it was YOU. You who took my wand you who forcibly held me down YOU.' She pulled back from him, a look of contempt on her face. 'I'd spit at your feet if I wouldn't have to clean it up myself.'

'Don't let that deter you, Miss Granger,' Severus drawled, his wand levelled threateningly at Weasley. 'I imagine Potter and I would both be willing to undertake that chore on your behalf for the privilege of seeing you actually do it.'

A loud banging on the door, followed by the stentorian accents of Minerva McGonagall, interrupted them.

'Miss Granger! Miss Granger, open this door immediately, or I will blast it down!'

Undoubtedly, the noise had caused someone to alert the Head of House. Severus stepped forward and pulled an unresisting Weasley away from the door. Looking over his shoulder, he spoke quietly to the girl. 'Go. I will be there as soon as I can.'

He waited only for the green glow of her departure to clear before he opened the door. 'Good evening, Minerva. Pray, come in. Unless you would prefer to, ah, blast the door down?'

McGonagall's lips thinned to a pinched line at the sight of him, but she swept imperiously past him, looking about the room for her nurslings. 'Where is Miss Granger?' she demanded.

'He sent her to *his* rooms,' Weasley blurted, unable to restrain his stupid mouth, even in the face of two wands levelled on him. 'He's molesting her! Every single day! And no one cares!'

'Mr Weasley!'

Severus repressed a shudder that tone from McGonagall still elicited a Pavlovian response from him, as if he were a foot and a half shorter, and she had her beady eyes trained on him.

Weasley shut his mouth and stared at the floor, his arms crossed belligerently over his chest.

McGonagall was fully aware of the circumstances of the girl's misfortune; she could be depended upon to deal with Weasley as was appropriate. With icy authority, McGonagall said, 'You will go directly to the headmaster's study, Weasley you as well, Potter and I will meet you there.'

Weasley cast one last look of sickened disgust at Severus before he left the room; Potter gave him another look one of puzzled inquiry and they were gone.

'Is she all right?' McGonagall asked anxiously.

'She was kept in this room against her will past the time she needed ... assistance,' he replied tersely. 'Do what you have to do to keep them quiet, Minerva don't let them humiliate her further by gossiping about this.'

McGonagall frowned at him. 'I understand your annoyance, Severus, but they are her best friends they have been inseparable since they were first-years they would do nothing to injure her.'

Severus sneered. 'You mean like keeping her from the sure relief of her symptoms, until her hands were trembling with need?' He waited for and saw on McGonagall's face the faint touch of distaste at the notion of how the girl's need was addressed, then he lowered his voice menacingly. 'Please do not try to smooth over this blatant disregard for her best interests and her express wishes I will be making a report to the headmaster, as well and I will not be satisfied with pathetic excuses.'

She was pacing and wringing her hands when he Flooed into his sitting room. She turned to him anxiously as he stepped onto the hearth rug; he cast a silent charm to remove the soot from his robes and schooled his features to impassivity before he looked at her.

'I'm so sorry you had to hear that,' she said tempestuously, grabbing his arms.

'Why are you still dressed?' he asked, looking down into her earnest face. It was surprising to him that even in a state of physical desperation, she could spare a thought for his feelings. Had anyone, since he was sixteen years old, given a damn about his feelings?

'Don't joke!' she cried. 'I should have said more to them told them more about how kind how thoughtful ...'

Wordlessly, he shook her hands from his arms and pulled her against him, as much to silence her as to comfort her. When his body came into contact with hers, she gasped aloud, and reaching for his head, she pulled him down into a fierce kiss. He kissed her back, helping her to move them to the sofa, for they would not make it to the bed this time to assuage her terrible need. As he freed himself from his trousers, and thrust into her slick heat, groaning at *his* need for *her*, he yet felt a small sadness that his touch had led straight to passion bypassing tenderness altogether.

When she screamed beneath him, calling upon him to continue, harder, more, faster, *please* he rotated his hips and knew it had been a random thought what could be better than a woman who asked no more of him than constant mindless rutting?

Term began, and they settled again into their routine. She needed him no less often than she had done before. He noticed that she came to his rooms earlier in the evenings, and that she spent more time with her books and papers spread about her at the coffee table than previously. Obviously, she was spending less time with Potter and Weasley in their common room.

The headmaster had given him a full report of his dealings with the girl's friends the night they had tried to 'reason' with her. Potter had expressed willingness to reserve judgement until he had a chance to discuss it alone with Miss Granger. Weasley had been another kettle of fish altogether; he had raved and argued until Dumbledore very kindly offered to have Arthur and Molly Weasley visit to explain it to him then, he had capitulated completely.

Severus wasn't certain how much interaction took place now between Miss Granger and her two former best friends. He had been tempted to ask her but stopped himself every time the question rose to his lips. Already, far too much intimacy existed between them outside the confines of their sexual relationship. She had, after all, pushed her way through his family to reach his side after the Dark Lord punished him, and she had diligently and successfully nursed him back to full health.

He had been too weak to hold his eyes open, but he had clearly heard what had taken place when he had come back from his summons. She had stood up to even his grandmother, had pre-empted a house-elf, and had run his sickroom with a ruthless efficiency which he had very much admired in complete silence, of course.

If only he could find a witch like that for his own ...

Of course, he already thought of her as his own on loan, as it were. He understood that he would have to give her back, once the Dark Lord fell and he knew very well that he was unlikely to survive once his betrayal of his master became known.

He had noticed a tendency on her part toward possessiveness, as well witness her reaction to Morgen.

The day after Boxing Day, whilst he still recuperated in the bed, Scampy had delivered to him a note from Morgen Singer, which read:

Darling Severus,

If you cannot bear to see me or to speak to me after all we have been to one another I cannot bear to remain here. I will go back to Germany today. Please know that I will always be waiting.

As Ever,

Morgen

With a sardonic snort, he had said, 'Scampy put it on the fire.'

The girl, who had been watching him covertly but not very expertly from the corner of her eye, jumped to her feet and snatched the perfumed sea-green parchment from his fingertips. 'I'll do it!'

He had simply sat back against his pillows and watched as she surreptitiously read the note before putting it to burn with great satisfaction. What she had shown then, and what she showed now, were simply different sides of the same coin: she, like he, did not care to put her mouth where another had been nor any of the other involved body parts. It was a straightforward enough preference.

There was nothing personal about it.

When he walked into the Great Hall on the feast day of Saint Valentine, he was repulsed to see the lurid pink, lavender, and red hearts hanging from the ceiling, with occasional showers of glittering, heart-shaped confetti. Muttering an oath towards Dumbledore, who clearly adored that step from the sublime to the ridiculous, he placed a shield charm about his person, which prevented the damn confetti from falling into his dark roast. After he had consumed a cup of coffee, he felt strong enough to raise his head and to gaze out upon the students, and as always happened now, his eye fell upon the girl, and he could not look away.

They had very nearly missed breakfast. It had been a lazy Saturday morning, and he had found himself unable to stop partaking of the pleasures of her body. Every kiss was returned, every touch brought a sigh, each stroke of his tongue upon her clitoris brought a gasp. He had often wondered how many times he could make her come before she would call a halt to his activities, but they had never possessed the leisure to explore that question. Even now, the scent of her secretions lingered upon his hands and face, and he idly wondered if she would go into Hogsmeade with Potter, or if she would come back to his quarters where he could ...

The owls flew into the Great Hall burdened with the day's mail, and Severus' concentration was broken when he saw a familiar eagle owl coming directly to him. The bird dropped its package into his waiting hands and wheeled in mid-air to fly off again. The perfumed sea-green envelope atop the box gave away the identity of the sender; he grimaced and placed the box in the pocket of his robes.

What he found more disturbing by far was the scene playing out at the Gryffindor table. Potter had entered hand-in-hand with the Lovegood girl, who broke tradition and sat with her boyfriend for breakfast, rather than with her House. Longbottom and the Weasley girl exchanged cards and stolen kisses, and Weasley sat between Lavender Brown and the frightening Romilda Vane like a king at court. In the midst of it all, the girl sat alone. At first glance, it appeared that she was in the thick of the laughing group, but a discerning eye the eye of the person who knew her best saw that although she was among them, she was not one of them. She was without peer in that company did she know it?

She turned her face then and looked directly into his eyes, and he saw the truth she was fully aware of her isolation. It was the wistfulness of her expression which smote him, that of a young woman who recognises the silliness of the situation, yet still longs to participate in that silliness.

'You will be at the ball tonight, Severus?' the headmaster asked cheerfully as he took the seat to Severus' left.

Severus turned the full force of his glare upon his employer. 'Did you not order me to attend?' he asked sourly.

Dumbledore smiled and nodded before turning his attention to his bowl of porridge. 'I did, indeed. Perhaps you will ask Miss Granger to dance.'

Severus did not deign to answer. He poured a second cup of coffee and stalked from the table, his eyes narrowed, brooding over the girl's discontent.

Just before lunch, she Flooed into his rooms, all business.

'Let's get this over with. I want to go to Hogsmeade this afternoon,' she said without looking at him. She headed directly to the bedroom.

Treading cautiously, he followed her, pausing in the doorway and leaning against the jamb, watching as she shed her Muggle jeans, knickers, and jumper. This was an odd mood for her, and although he was damned if he would tolerate disrespect, he was willing to make allowances for the fact that all her friends were spending a sappy, romantic day, and she was not. He had been Head of Slytherin House for long enough to know how adolescent girls felt about such things.

Advancing into the room, he seated himself on her side of the bed near her feet and raised an eyebrow at her. 'How shall we proceed?'

'Just do it,' she replied shortly, avoiding his eyes.

He frowned. 'It's a terrible day, Hermione. You are welcome to hide down here and avoid it all but the headmaster will require both of us to be present at the ball tonight. The Head Girl cannot miss the Valentine's Day Ball.'

She pushed herself into a sitting position, glaring at him. 'It's not a terrible day for *you*,' she said heatedly. '*You* received a Valentine this morning.'

Comprehension dawned on him. 'I received a letter,' he replied neutrally.

'What does dear *Morgen* have to say?' she demanded.

'I don't know,' he answered. 'I forgot I had it.'

She rolled her eyes and turned her face away from him; obviously, she did not believe him. Reaching into his pocket, he removed the box and its attendant perfumed sea-green envelope. 'Since it is a matter of such importance for you,' he said, 'I shall open it.'

The girl turned her face back to him and seemed to wince at the sight of the package. He made quick work of the brown paper, which revealed a slim black leather case, embossed with *Grundell and Ridges, Jewellers to the Discriminating Wizard Since 1217. Diagon Alley, Paris, Moscow, Salem*. He heard her gasp and wondered if it was disgust or amazement, but he did not look at her to find out. Instead, he opened the case and gave it a cursory glance before passing it to Hermione.

'It's a gold pocket watch,' she informed him unnecessarily.

'Hmm,' he said noncommittally, perusing the note which had accompanied the gift.

'It's much nicer than the one you have now,' she continued, poking at the timepiece as if hoping her touch might render it less elegant.

'The one I have now belonged to my grandfather Prince,' he informed her absently. 'My grandmother gave it to me when I came of age. I have no interest in replacing it.'

'It's engraved,' she said, and he looked up. She had the watch in her hand and was holding it to the light. He made an unsuccessful grab for it, but she turned away from him. '24/12/80 what is the significance of that date?'

He stood and removed the watch and its case from her reach. 'Enough,' he replied. He strode to the highboy across the room and shoved the expensive bauble in amongst the other things Morgen had given him over the years. When he turned back, the impertinent girl was reading Morgen's note. Merlin's arse! Was there no line she would not cross?

'Give me that,' he snapped, snatching it from her hands. 'I said *enough!*'

She stared up at him with stricken brown eyes. 'You're *betroted* to her? *Betroted*? You told me you were not involved with anyone!'

He turned from her, his jaw clenched. He had no intention of discussing his convoluted history with Morgen Singer with Hermione Granger.

'I am betrothed to *no one*,' he said, turning to look at her. 'Now, do you want ...?'

She rose on her knees, her mood changing as if upon command. 'Good,' she said, running her hands lightly down her own body in a way she knew he liked. 'It would be really awkward for me to be knocking on your wife's bedroom door asking if I could come ... in ...' her hand reached her mound, and she slipped a finger through the nest of dark curls. Her head fell back as she arched into her own touch, and he felt the sudden rush of passion pounding in his ears, engorging his cock, driving him across the room to fall to his knees and to replace her hand with his mouth.

Her hands came down to twine in his hair, and she held his face to her quim as if he was kissing her mouth, crying aloud her encouragement.

Later, long after her friends had left to go into Hogsmeade, he spooned against her back, slowly rocking, both of them beyond themselves in the transcendent moment of rapture, taking each breath in tandem. When he came the third time in two hours, unaided by the potion there was scarcely any ejaculate. Even in his exhaustion, his first thought was for her, and he turned her onto her back, his fingers seeking and finding her clitoris. 'More?' he whispered to her, and she spread her thighs and moved against his fingers in agreement. When she shuddered against him for the last time, she rolled once more, so that her face rested upon his pillow, her nose lightly rubbing the tip of his much larger one.

'No wonder she cannot bear to let you go,' she said.

'Shut up,' he replied, too tired to put much weight behind it.

They slept.

In the early evening, she availed herself of his bathtub, and he hastened to the sitting room to Floo his grandmother in privacy.

The Great Hall, decorated for the Valentine's Day Ball, was slightly less repulsive than it had been that morning. The staff planning committee had come to the agreement that the headmaster could decorate for the meals, but Filius Flitwick would be in charge of decorations for the dance. Evergreens coated with enchanted snow lined the walls, decorated with living faeries. The strategically placed tables were lit by silver and gold heart-shaped candles, and the decorative cupids suspended in the air were made of ice, which glittered in the faerie lights.

Severus stood sentry near the teachers' table, making the students nervous with his mere presence and watching the door for the girl, curious as to what her demeanour would be.

She entered just behind Potter and Lovegood, standing for an instant in the doorway on her own, her eyes scanning the room. She wore again the black satin robes she had worn at Prince House, the bodice clinging to her breasts, the neckline slightly décolleté. On her feet were the shoes which had nearly driven him mad the last time she had worn them; he flashed upon a vivid memory of the stiletto heels resting upon his shoulders as he fucked her then he brought his gaze to her face and was surprised to find her eyes upon him.

Scampy had obviously been here, just as he had requested of his grandmother the girl had not turned the house-elf away but had permitted Scampy to help her dress for the party. As before, her hair hung in glossy brown ringlets which shone in the candlelight, and amongst the curls tiny clear jewels were scattered, making it appear as if she were crowned with stars.

And tucked in at strategic points were the Black Bacarra roses from his grandmother's greenhouses. The colour of the rose was such a dark red that it appeared quite black at times. The deep burgundy was the perfect foil for the girl's very fair skin. He was quite pleased with the artistry he had wrought from afar, until he saw the number of adolescent male eyes trained upon her.

She was unaware she was the cynosure of so many eyes, for her attention was still riveted upon him. Then Potter looked over his shoulder and spoke to her, and she stepped out of the doorway to follow her friends to their table. When she began to walk, Severus saw with a mixture of justifiable annoyance and a throb of lust that Scampy had altered the girl's robes, allowing for a slit up one side which travelled to mid-thigh, displaying too much smooth alabaster leg with every step the girl took.

It was going to be a long night.

Severus had a plan to which he adhered rigidly, hoping Scampy's improvisations had not rendered the girl so popular that she would have no dances free. It was an inconvenient, unpleasant task, but he had vowed he would do what he could to give the girl a tiny taste of gratification on this thrice-damned 'holiday'.

First, he danced with Minerva, engaging in a pleasant exchange of barbed comments. Next, he danced with Professor Vector, during which they discussed a recently published Arithmancy theory. He took a break to drink some punch and to clear his mind of vaguely understood Arithmantic equations. When the next dance started, he bowed to Pansy Parkinson, neatly cutting out Draco Malfoy, and led the pug-faced, sharp-tongued Slytherin into a dance. As she chattered non-stop, he was only required to occasionally nod and murmur.

With a pattern of behaviour firmly established, he could now safely dance with the girl. He waited until Head Boy Ernie Macmillan delivered her to her table, and he stepped up to her just as Potter bounced out of his chair and took her hand. Inwardly cursing his bad luck, painfully aware of the titters of some fourth-year girls at the table behind him, Severus drew himself to his full height and assumed his most pestilential stare.

But the girl had seen him arrive, and her eyes were fixed on his face. 'Sorry, Harry,' she said, bypassing Potter and walking up to Severus. 'Professor Snape promised this dance to me thank you, sir.'

It was providential that she had finagled a way for them to dance together, for this was the last of the slow songs until the very last dance and he dared not be seen dancing the traditional lover's dance with a student. It would be his part to go into the grounds, then, and to scare the snoggers and gropers out of the shrubbery.

Holding her at an appropriate distance, he could still smell the perfume she wore he had never smelt it on her before.

'It's called "Inamorata,"' she explained with a giggle. 'Parvati put it on me it's wizard-made. Do you like it?'

He struggled with the desire to tell her it made her smell like a common trollop. It wasn't true; it was a lovely scent, and it made him want to bury his nose in her throat. If it sparked that response in him, then it would spark the same response in other men in these callow boys who watched her with hungry eyes and he hated that idea. But the whole point of this evening, the way he had planned it, was to make the girl feel better to make her feel as if she had got to experience some small part of what her friends had experienced that day.

'It is very nice,' he replied stiffly.

She shifted slightly closer to him, her arm further encircling his waist, and she looked up into his face, tilting her head back. 'Thank you for the flowers,' she said.

Ah. He had prepared for this. 'What are you babbling about?'

She smiled. 'These gorgeous roses, Professor thank you. It's almost like a real Valentine's Day when a girl gets flowers.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' he replied with practiced indifference.

The imp actually nipped him with her fingers, bringing his sternest look to her face.

'Deny all you want, sir, but the very exotic nature of the blooms the luscious texture, the extravagant colour I don't know another person, wizard, witch, or child, who would have chosen such a gift for me.'

He did not speak again. He danced with her, pretending it was another time and another place, where he was not a teacher and she was not his student where she had chosen him of her own free will, rather than been imprinted upon him by a Dark curse where he was not a spy, and there was not a war, and the fate of the wizarding world did not rest upon the actions of James Potter's brat.

He was aware of Dumbledore watching them with benign approval, of Weasley watching them with nauseous rage, and of Potter watching them as if a question had been answered.

He returned to his rooms, fresh from roosting Hufflepuffs from their 'hiding places' on the grounds, and found the girl waiting for him, still completely dressed. A fresh tea service resided on the low table before the sofa, and she poured a cup for him, adding a generous dollop of milk she knew to a nicety precisely the way he took his evening tea.

He accepted the cup from her and sagged into the wingchair. 'How are you?' he inquired.

'No desperation,' she replied with a tiny smile. 'Just oh, garden variety desire.'

He allowed one eyebrow to travel up. 'Do you plan to enlighten me?'

She pursed her lips and thought for a moment before saying, 'It's the natural desire a woman feels for the man who provided her finery for the ball, then danced with her and made her feel beautiful. It's the desire a woman feels for the most attractive man in a huge room full of magical men.'

He simply watched her, his face blank, trying to imagine what she was up to.

'I watched you tonight, you know,' she confided, leaning towards him, her brown eyes shining as they rested upon his face. 'You stood guard over us until we were all safely in the Great Hall, then you began to dance for the first time in all the time I have know you. You have the finest body, the most regal bearing, and the keenest mind of any man I have ever met and in a roomful of other wizards, in comparison to them, the power radiates from you like rays from the sun.'

Stunned into silence, his mind tried to go in five different directions at once to weigh her words and determine her motive for uttering them. After a time, she interrupted his preoccupation when she set her teacup down and stood, opening a large rectangular box he had not noticed before.

'It's a music box,' she said, and he saw this was true, for it began to play a vaguely familiar song. 'Please dance with me properly because I want you to hold me as a man holds the woman he desires.'

It was a silly request and a dangerous one but she stood there looking so sexy, and he wanted her so badly, he could only stand and do as she asked. There was very little room for dancing in his sitting room, but she led him into the bedroom and stepped into his arms, her hands running up his back and down his bum in ways entirely unrelated to dancing as he knew it. Soon they were kissing, and he lifted her onto the bed, where she lay fully clothed. The music box continued to play until it wound down, and he would always remember that air with a particular fondness.

He removed every stitch he was wearing and stretched out beside her, caressing her body through her clothing until she was whimpering with need. He lifted the robes to her waist and removed the lacy black knickers with his hands, before insinuating himself between her thighs and thrusting into her.

He fucked her until she cried out and then he fucked her until she cried out again. And when little beads of sweat at her hairline and the smudged quality of her makeup made her lovelier than she had ever been before, he made love to her slowly, undressing her, kissing every inch of skin as it was revealed, striking her to silence with the quality of intense concentration he focussed on her. She was watching him almost fearfully as he pushed himself again into the welcoming warmth of her channel, and he moved over her with exquisite endurance, watching every expression on her face.

'I didn't make you feel beautiful,' he told her as the coming detonation built inexorably to its final climax. 'You *are* beautiful. Has no one ever told you so?'

When he lay upon his back, too spent and sore to budge, she magically moved the bedclothes from beneath him and covered them both. Then she curled against his side and whispered, 'Thank you for the flowers.'

He lifted the hand holding the rosebud he had plucked from her hair with his teeth as he ravaged her and stroked the furred petals down her petal-soft cheek. 'You're welcome, petal,' he replied.

A/N: I must beg your pardon, Faithful Reader. I began this story as a lark - therapy, if you will, to get me past the pain of Deathly Hallows. I didn't expect the Muse to step in, or for the story to develop a plot. I have a commitment to write a story for the Live Journal SSHG Winter Exchange; I thought I could finish this story first, but I am running out of time and no where near finished with telling this story to you. As always, when faced with the choice of finishing it quickly, or finishing it properly, I will choose the latter. For that reason, this story will go on hiatus for a while, until my obligation to the SSHG Exchange is completed. I hope you can forgive me for the delay. Some of you don't know me very well, but those of you who do know me can vouch for me: I have never, ever abandoned a story or left one incomplete. I do not plan to begin now.

You may see the Black Bacarra roses here:



And here:



Chapter 13: Regrouping

Chapter 13 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Happy New Year, my beloved ones. I hope you had lovely Christmases. Here it is, a bit later than I had planned ... chapter-the-next of the PWP which grew a P. It is a short one, with more to follow soon. If you want to recapture our place, you may wish to reread Chapter 12. I hope you enjoy my offering, and I pray 2008 will be a beneficial year for one and all.

As always, beta-reading love goes to DeeMichelle, Brit-picking love to MagicAlly, and alpha-reading/cheerleading love to Shug.

Chapter 13: Regrouping

He lay staring at the ceiling of his bedroom, the tremendous swell of emotion engendered by their coupling finally beginning to dissipate. His superbly sensitive sense of smell identified numerous scents: the Inamorata perfume, the bruised Bacarra rosebuds, and the exquisite blending of their sweat and sexual emissions. The girl was curled up against his side, asleep; he held her clamped possessively to him with his left arm. As he watched the long, smooth ringlets the house-elf had wrought commencing their reversion to the natural, bushy state of her hair, he was moved to revulsion by the contrast of the innocence of her countenance to his infernal Dark Mark, clearly visible against her porcelain skin.

Acutely imprinted on his memory was the expression of adoration on her face as he had said to her, 'I didn't make you beautiful. You *are* beautiful. Has no one ever told you so?' He had followed up that somewhat forgivable lapse for were men not famous for saying anything and everything during the act of sex? by calling her 'petal', like a damned fool.

What the *hell* was wrong with him?

He was indulging himself no! He was indulging *her* with sentimental behaviour, which had gone from unwise to dangerous. This state of affairs had come about because of an inane progression of thought, if one could call it that. In short, he was behaving like a lovesick fuckwit of Brobdingnagian proportions. He had become weak where she was concerned. The day would come when she would be gone from him for he would be dead, or Potter would surely fulfil his only *raison d'être* and defeat the Dark Lord and when that happened, she did not need to be confused by a perceived emotional attachment to *him*.

It was unmistakably his duty to distance himself from her again.

When she woke him just before dawn with greedy hands and lips, Severus disciplined himself to icy aloofness to atone for his lapse. The girl, ever sensitive to his moods, was quick to address the change.

'Sir?' she inquired from the opposite side of the bed.

He did not answer her. These post-coital moments were amongst his most vulnerable, and he was careful to steel himself against the entreaty in her voice.

'Have I done something to offend you?' she whispered into his silence.

'Sleep, Miss Granger,' he said, deliberately rolling away from her and extinguishing the candles.

Staring stonily into the dark, he plainly heard her soft weeping. He knew his emotional withdrawal, on the heels of their soppy but intense interactions after the Valentine's Day Ball, was a tough changeabout to process even he felt the hollowness of his reply. Gritting his teeth, he gripped the bedclothes with his fists and willed himself not to respond. When she slipped away, he did not move or speak, and the green glow of the Floo had scarcely faded when he moved resolutely into the middle of the mattress, telling himself it was a relief to be able to stretch out all he wanted in his own bed.

The next few days followed a new pattern.

As before, she came to him when she had need, accepted the attentions he provided, and departed when the need was assuaged. He imposed a new, rigid control of

himself, pulling out when she found the relief she sought, denying her the satisfaction of seeing him in such an unguarded state. He realised he would not manage it every time he was, after all, only human but it helped him to re-establish in his own mind his place in her life. His purpose was to provide relief for her from the effects of the compulsion curse. He would be civil, but she would have to find her emotional solace and support elsewhere.

He was, after all, only human.

On the next Friday morning, Minerva McGonagall accosted him before his first sip of coffee.

'Care for a friendly flutter on the game, Severus?' she inquired, seating herself beside him at the high table.

Severus took a sip of coffee, his expression blank, and cast about in his mind for what she was on about.

'Next Saturday,' she goaded him. 'Slytherin versus Gryffindor, Severus it looks like the fourth year in the row for Gryffindor winning the Quidditch Cup.'

He turned a stony glare upon her. 'Gryffindor has won the last *two* years not three.'

McGonagall smirked and helped herself to food from the serving platter. 'Well, we can't count the year of the Triwizard Tournament, can we? And Gryffindor won the Cup the year before that so, I say it's four years running.'

Severus turned his eyes away from the disgusting fried egg on McGonagall's plate and regarded his porridge. 'Don't count your dragons before they're hatched, Minerva,' he advised her acidly. 'When Slytherin defeats Gryffindor, our chances will be even.'

McGonagall poured strong black tea from the earthenware pot by her cup. 'It was such a shame when Slytherin lost to Hufflepuff,' she said with false sympathy, obviously relishing her opportunity to take the piss out of him. 'But I thought you might enjoy a bit of a flutter just to make it interesting.'

Severus affected a shrug of indifference, making a mental note to have a chat with the Quidditch team. 'If you like,' he said. 'What are you willing to lose?'

The old hag chuckled darkly. 'Now you're entering into the spirit of the thing,' she said. 'It should be something that will cause a pang, don't you agree?'

Severus responded with a grunt of assent, ignoring his cooling porridge in favour of another cup of dark roast.

'Right, then,' McGonagall said briskly. 'When Slytherin loses, you'll pay me with a bottle of Bruichladdich Single Malt the 40 year reserve, of course.'

Severus blanched. Dumbledore had lost a wager with McGonagall during the tenure of the Umbridge bitch, and back then, it had cost the Headmaster more than two hundred Galleons to buy a bottle of the stuff. Surely, the price had only gone up in two years?

Managing a bland tone, he replied, 'I have simpler tastes. The same expenditure on your part, when Gryffindor loses, will procure for me a *case* of Ogden's Very Rare.'

McGonagall offered her hand. 'Oh, I would even throw in a crystal decanter, Severus but you won't win, of course.'

Severus accepted her handshake to seal the bargain, struck by the difference in the feel of the old woman's skin, as compared to Hermione's

He released McGonagall's dry, gnarled hand and turned, almost against his will, to seek out the girl. She sat alone, her nose buried in a textbook. Ever since her two so-called friends had learnt of her curse and of how Severus helped her deal with it, her friendship with the Dunderheaded Duo had become visibly strained. Over time, she had come to forgive Weasley for the things he had done and said to her, but she would likely never trust him as she once had done. Potter had stood staunchly by her side, but their friendship had been irrevocably changed by Hermione's curse and her resulting association with Severus.

Wrenching his eyes from her solitary figure, he began to shovel the cooled, sludge-like porridge into his mouth. He well knew how poor nutrition further exacerbated his temper, which needed no additional challenges. With the use of judicious wanking, he had managed to withhold his climax from her in rather more than fifty percent of their encounters in the six days past. He no longer scrupled to leave her gasping from her own orgasm and to lock himself in his bathroom to achieve release by his own hand. She had very nearly ceased to pepper him with questions and pleas to know how she had transgressed; he had long since decided it was better to ignore her than to reason with her.

An excited murmur from the students drew his eyes again to the four long tables below, and he was perplexed to see Potter and Weasley enter the Great Hall in the company of a vaguely familiar looking young man. The students were craning their necks to look at the visitor, and some were pointing the newcomer out to their friends. Turning to McGonagall, he said, 'Who is that?'

McGonagall turned aside from her conversation with Flitwick, following the jerk of Severus' head.

'Oh, excellent,' she said, standing and straightening her hat. 'That's who's covering Rolanda Hooch's lessons whilst she attends a family wedding.'

McGonagall hurried down, apparently to greet the temporary flying instructor, but before she reached him, a peculiar thing happened: Hermione's head turned, as if in response to her spoken name, and in the next moment, she had flung herself into the eager arms of the black-haired, hook-nosed man.

'Bugger!' Severus swore under his breath as the identity of the young man dawned on him.

Viktor Krum had returned to Hogwarts just in time to coach Gryffindor in their Quidditch match against Slytherin. For although Krum had made friends in Slytherin when he was in residence at Hogwarts, Severus had no illusions as to which team Krum would favour with his training tips: Krum and Potter had been as thick as thieves ever since competing against one another in the Triwizard Tournament.

And Minerva had been careful to inveigle him into a wager on the match before he was aware of the arrival of the International Quidditch star how very Slytherin of her!

But what was far more disconcerting was this: Krum was an alumnus of Durmstrang Institute, where the Dark Arts, not just defence against them, were taught to the students from the tender age of eleven years. Krum would unerringly note the change the Nexus had wrought in Hermione and by the glowing look the Bulgarian was bestowing on the girl, he would do all in his power to ensnare her.

Bloody fucking *shite*.

A/N: Please don't hurt me! More is coming very soon. Keep in mind that I posted 12 chapters in 8 weeks. I shan't leave you hanging again!

Chapter 14: Recovering

Chapter 14 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Beta-reading thanks to DeeMichelle; MagicAlly scrubbed the rampant Yank-isms out of the chapter; Shug (sshg316) cheerleaded and alpha-read.

Chapter 14: Recovering

That afternoon, Hermione slipped into N.E.W.T. Potions at the last minute, setting up her cauldron next to Ernie McMillan, near the back of the room. An icy blast had coated the outside of the castle and all its environs with a glittering coat of ice, making the dungeon even more miserable than it usually was in winter. To add insult to injury, the sleet had turned to snow, which was falling heavily and covering everything in a thick blanket of white.

When class began, Professor Snape looked up from what he was doing at his desk only long enough to inform them tersely that the formula for their assignment was on the board.

Hermione tried to ignore the thrumming of the compulsion as it pulsed through her, made worse, as always, by the sound of his voice. It was becoming more and more difficult to bear being around *him*, considering the way he was behaving towards her. She had begun to believe that he cared for her for *her*, not for the frequency of their coupling or for the intensity of the sex. The gesture he had made the day of the Valentine's Day Ball to send Scampy to dress her had been an act of thoughtfulness she could not shrug off as general decency. It had been the action of a man very personally concerned with his woman's state of mind. From the moment she had held the black Bacarra roses to her face and inhaled their scent, she had been on a cloud of excitement and anticipation such as she had never before experienced. For the first time in her life, she had felt like a woman sure of the interest of the man of her choice; she now knew what the other girls had been on about all this time. It was heady and intoxicating, and the feeling was so large it felt as if it would burst from her body like a flock of pealing bells, rising up and up and up until the Great Hall itself was filled with the singing of her exhilaration.

When he had asked her to dance, in front of the entire school, she had felt sorry for every other female in the room. The minor details that he had danced with several others before he asked her, that he had only danced with her once paled beside the fact that he had singled her out in front of everyone. Leaving his arms, she had slipped away from the dance, unwilling to mar the memory by dancing with one more stumbling boy. She had floated up to Gryffindor Tower and fetched her music box, then she had Flooed to the professor's rooms, where she had ordered Winky to provide a tea service. Brewing his tea preparing it just as she knew he liked it had made her feel so ... adult. The other word floating about in her mind *wifely* she had batted away from her consciousness, but only after goose bumps had covered her body with a delicious shiver of possibility.

Now, with practiced efficiency, she set the flame beneath her cauldron and began to brew the assigned potion, doing her best to ignore the fine tremor present in her hands, relic of the building sexual need. She was only sorry that the chopping of the ingredients prevented her from wearing the dragon-hide gloves in her bag, which would more efficiently disguise the shaking

Her attention wandered, again.

With an internal squirm of embarrassment, she remembered what she had said to him just before they had danced in his bedroom. *'You have the finest body, the most regal bearing, and the keenest mind of any man I have ever met and in a roomful of other wizards, in comparison to them, the power radiates from you like rays from the sun.'*

When he had not argued with her impassioned declaration, she had been foolish enough to believe he *accepted* her words. The way he had made love to her there was no other word for it, really over and again, and then called her 'petal' ...

'Wool-gathering in my class, Miss Granger?' a dangerous voice purred from behind her. 'Five points from Gryffindor.'

Startled to hear him speak in her ear, when he had just been speaking and with such tenderness! in her mind, she started, and the involuntary movement knocked her bottle of armadillo bile to the stone floor, where it shattered.

'Inattention will never be tolerated in this classroom!' he hissed, cleaning away the glass shards and the spilt ingredient with a precise wave of his wand. 'Ten more points from Gryffindor!'

'I'm sorry, Professor,' she whispered to the contents of her cauldron, careful not to look at him. She wanted him to move away before he noticed the trembling of her hands. She was not supposed to let the compulsion reach this stage of need, but she had been unable to force herself to go to him at lunch. It was humiliating, the way he never spoke to her, seemed to kiss her only in anger, and withheld his seed as if afraid she would conceive, when he knew very well the potion she ingested to prevent her pregnancy made that an impossibility. He bloody well stood over her every month when she swallowed it, and he brewed it himself *why* was he turning away from her as soon as she climaxed? She knew he was relieving himself in the bathroom. Was she suddenly so distasteful he could only bring himself off by leaving her presence? She bit her lip and fought back the tears starting to her eyes; she had been over this in her mind time and time again without coming to any conclusion, and he was not helping her to understand, for he responded to her questions with nothing save silence.

What had she *done*?

'Your hands are trembling.'

Hermione froze. He was still there, right behind her, and the shaking seemed to increase with the mere knowledge of his presence. She closed her hands into fists and thrust them into the pockets of her cloak. 'It's quite cold in here, sir,' she replied. In the next instant, she felt him touch her, and she whirled to snap at him, only to realise he was rubbing the fabric of her cloak between his fingers. She closed her eyes. She really wasn't strong enough for this confrontation now.

'McMillan!'

Hermione and Ernie both turned their faces to their professor at this hissed communication.

'Sir?' Ernie replied nervously.

'Move to an empty table,' Professor Snape said coldly, wielding his wand and sending Ernie's bubbling cauldron floating away.

Ernie gathered his ingredients and other belongings and hurried to join his cauldron at its new location.

When Ernie had gone, the professor took a step closer to Hermione and said, his anger not disguised by the silky tones in which he spoke, *This is not your cloak!*

Hermione gathered the folds of her inexpensive Muggle-made cloak closer and hunched her shoulders, as if to move closer to her cauldron fire. 'I prefer it,' she muttered, speaking to the flames and trying desperately to battle back the demands of the curse, which dictated she should grab her teacher's hands and put them on her aching quim.

'Look at me when I speak to you, girl!' Professor Snape demanded. 'I cannot hear a word you're saying.'

Feeling her control unravel like a badly-knit scarf, Hermione jerked about to face her tormentor, her voice an unmodulated screech. 'You haven't heard a word I've spoken to you in a week! Why should now be any different?'

Every head in the room turned, shocked eyes staring at the Head Girl, who had just *shouted* at the strictest, least reasonable teacher in the whole school. Hermione was nearly too far gone in sexual need to care, but the professor apparently retained his senses.

'Any person looking at anything other than his or her cauldron will receive a zero for today's lesson,' he snarled, and all heads swivelled away.

'Go to my office,' he ordered her, clearing the unfinished potion from her cauldron with the wave of his wand. She hesitated for an instant and he leant towards her. 'Now,' he added, 'or it will be a zero *and* a detention.'

She turned from him wordlessly, hearing not the threat in his words, but the promise of relief. The trembling had spread from her arms to her legs, and she stumbled a bit as she left the Potions classroom. Desperation drove her blindly along the freezing corridor to the professor's office. The door was locked and warded, but Hermione touched her wand to the doorknob and spoke her emergency password. The door opened and she gained admittance to the gloomy room, its walls lined by shelves of odd specimens, floating in a variety different-coloured potions. She tossed her cloak into a chair, and then she frantically tugged her damp knickers off and stuffed them unceremoniously into her bag, a groan passing her lips as the knuckles of her hands grazed her quim.

Simply being *in* his office was an erotic odyssey how many times had she ridden his hands to orgasm whilst straddling him in that chair? Or been laid out upon his desktop with his hands on her breasts and his mouth on her clitoris? Or been lifted onto the table against the wall a table which just happened to be of the perfect height for him to fuck her?

She had lost count.

When he entered the office a moment later, she launched herself at him, all hurt feelings forgotten, the impact of her body on his driving him into the door and causing it to slam with unwonted violence. She grabbed his right hand and pulled it to her breast as her other hand grasped the hair at the nape of his neck, tugging him down to kiss her mouth. She was aware of his wand hand making the necessary motions to ward the room against intrusion and sound before he yanked her skirt to her waist and slid his hands beneath her bare buttocks, hefting her up; in the spirit of cooperation, Hermione wrapped her legs around him, crying out as the woollen fabric of his trousers abraded her damp thighs.

In two long strides he deposited her unceremoniously on the tabletop, his fingers deserting her flesh to unfasten his fly and to free his unquestionably erect cock. Hermione moaned loudly as he entered her; he braced one hand on the wall behind her as he leant into his labour, the other hand clamped with bruising strength at her hip. On the third thrust, Hermione climaxed with a scream which echoed in the high-ceilinged room. The professor cursed aloud and glared menacingly into her sex-glazed eyes. 'Do that again,' he hissed, 'and I shall gag you.'

Inexplicably aroused by his threat, Hermione climaxed again, shuddering so violently that one flailing hand inadvertently knocked a book to the floor. The crash of the heavy text on the stone floor seemed to bring the professor back to himself, and he sought to disengage himself from her, but Hermione clamped her legs about him with more strength than before. 'No!' she cried. 'I'm not finished!'

His inarticulate growl grew louder as he leant into her again, resuming the steady pace of his thrusts. Hermione rocked her hips in rhythm with him, determined he would not leave this encounter unmoved. With one hand, she opened her plain white blouse and released the front-clasp on her bra, baring her breasts to him. As she had hoped, his eyes went unerringly to the bouncing of her breasts, and she upped the ante by running her hand over first one erect nipple and then the other, knowing quite well how much he enjoyed watching her touch herself thus. She knew then, from the increasingly ragged quality of his breathing, that he was approaching the end of his endurance. Accordingly, her hand deserted her breasts in favour of her clitoris, and she rubbed herself to another orgasm just before he stiffened and closed his eyes, his clamped lips permitting no sound to leave him as he released his seed into her body.

Hermione felt a moment of inarticulate triumph. This was the first time since he had begun to withdraw from her that she had induced him to come in spite of his own desires, and the victory was sweet. Pleased with herself, she rested her head back for a moment, closing her eyes and remaining in place, with him collecting shuddering breaths above her as he regained his equanimity.

Thank God she had *that* sorted, now she would be able to meet Viktor at dinner in a calm and reasonable frame of mind and catch up with him on what they had each been doing lately. Feeling conciliatory, she opened her eyes again and moved up onto her elbows, looking up at the professor.

She was startled when he lunged at her, taking hold of her chin with an ungentle grasp and staring into her eyes. Too late, Hermione wrenched away from him, but she need not have bothered. He pushed her from him with a disdainful snarl and began to button himself back into his clothing, unmindful of the mess they had made.

'Thinking about *Krum* whilst rutting with me?' he hissed, anger rolling off him in waves.

Hermione scrambled to sit up straight, uncaring of her own disarray. 'No!' she cried, distressed. 'I wasn't I wouldn't '

'Pretty poor behaviour, Miss Granger, even for a teenage nymphomaniac!' Danger flashed from his cold black eyes. 'Let him touch you, and you *both* will rue the day,' he promised.

'You don't understand '

But he had already turned from her, snatching her old cloak from the chair upon which she had abandoned it and chucking it into the fireplace, then standing back with arms crossed over his chest to watch it burn.

'Stop!' Hermione shouted, pushing past him with her wand up. '*Accio* my cloak!'

He blocked her spell with a non-verbal one of his own and thrust his arm out to prevent her rushing forward to snatch it up with her hands.

'Don't bother,' he said nastily. 'It's already past repair unlike the cloak I gave you, *this* one did not even have a flame retardant charm on it!' He glared down his nose at her. 'You will wear your proper cloak from now on,' he informed her. His eyes flicked over her once, standing beside him with her bra and blouse open, looking as if she'd just been shagged in a terrific hurry. 'Get dressed and get out,' he advised her. 'I'm going back to your classmates before they incinerate the castle.'

He stalked out without a backward glance, and Hermione's face flamed with a sudden feeling of humiliation. Where had the scorn come from? And the horrid dislike? For all his irritability and his prickly ways, she had come to trust that she was safe with him. Not only physically safe which she did not doubt, even now but emotionally safe, as

well. He had never treated her as if the curse she bore was a personal deficit of some sort. Yet, increasingly since the Valentine's Day Ball, actually he had been treating her differently. When she came to him because she was driven by hapless need, he responded to her as if she was imposing on him. No longer did he seem like her solid support in this horrible ordeal. Instead, when she was with him, she felt as if he was an unwilling participant and as if she was an unreasonable tart. On one or two occasions, in the heat of their exchange, she had found again her safe place in him, but more and more, he left her feeling soiled and hopeless.

Trying to ignore the hurt and anger warring in her breast, she straightened her clothes and hurried cloakless through the icy corridors, eager to reach the safety and comparative warmth of Gryffindor Tower.

Sitting beside Viktor at dinner in the Great Hall, surrounded by her cheerful House-mates, it was easy to be diverted by the semblance of carefree youth. Viktor had grown into his fame a bit and acquired a few more social skills than he had possessed at seventeen. He told Quidditch anecdotes to which the boys listened with appreciation, whilst the girls flicked looks from Hermione to Viktor and back again, calculating.

Hermione was aware of Viktor's attraction to her. He frequently caught her eye, occasionally touching her hand or arm, and once, his fingertips brushed over her knee beneath the table. Clearly, he was still interested in her. Although she was generally unmoved by his touches, her vanity was very much flattered by his gallantry, and the ragged edges of her rapidly diminishing self-regard were smoothed by his open admiration.

Three years before, Viktor had sought her out in the library, and their association had been conducted in private. Now, he was far more sure of himself, and he was perfectly willing for every person present in the Great Hall to know he fancied Hermione Granger. After three months of being Professor Snape's dirty little secret, Viktor's public attention was a welcome relief. She basked in his regard and allowed herself, just once, to exist in the moment.

Professor Snape had not been at the teachers' table when Hermione had taken her seat, and she did not spare a thought for him until Ron, of all people, reminded her. Lavender was leading Ron away from the table when he paused by Hermione and bent to whisper in her ear.

'Good job,' he whispered. 'I've never seen the ugly git look so pissed-off.' Chuckling to himself, Ron nudged Lavender, and they continued on, out of the Great Hall.

Hermione bit her lip and stared at her chocolate gateau. She knew that if she looked up at her teacher, and he was looking unhappy with her, her enjoyment of Viktor's company would be spoilt so, she didn't look. She would see Professor Snape soon enough, after all. For now, it was all right to think of herself, rather than of him.

Viktor leant over to her, his lips close to her ear. 'I would like to talk vif you, Herm-own-ninny. Vif you come to my room for a glass of mead? I haf a sitting room vif a nice fire,' he added.

Hermione smiled down at her pudding. 'I'd like that,' she said, blushing.

Viktor stood and waited for her to rise, then rested one hand proprietarily in the small of her back as they headed out of the Great Hall. A laughing group of Ravenclaws passed through the Entrance Hall, chattering excitedly about a moonlight snowball fight in the freshly-fallen snow. As they moved out the castle doors, a blast of cold air came in, and Hermione shivered in spite of the two jumpers she wore.

'You're freezing!' Viktor said, whipping his fur-lined cloak from his shoulders and draping it around her. 'Vere is your cloak?'

Hermione clutched the garment, still warm from Viktor's body, close around her. 'I don't have one,' she lied. 'It was burnt up in an accident ... in Charms.'

They left the Great Hall, and Hermione was unaware of the malignant glare which followed them until they were out of sight.

Viktor was staying in a guest suite on the seventh floor, along the corridor from the entrance to the headmaster's office, on the opposite side of the castle from the entrance to the Gryffindor common room. When they entered the sitting room, the fire was burning brightly in the grate on Hermione's left, and all the candles were lit. Hermione glanced around, noting the open doorway into the bedroom on her right. Viktor crossed the room to a drinks table set between two windows, beneath a painting of a grumpy-looking yellow-haired shepherd girl and her flock.

'Mulled mead?' he asked Hermione. 'Or would you prefer Firewhisky?' He smiled at her disarmingly. 'I could ask the house-elf to bring a Butterbeer, as vell.'

Hermione laid Viktor's furry cloak over the back of the sofa before the fireplace and crossed to stand beside him. 'Mead for me,' she said, distracted by the scandalised-looking shepherd girl. 'What are you looking at?' she muttered.

Viktor handed Hermione a glass and glanced up at the painting. The shepherdess had gone back to petting a lamb. 'Who are you talking to?' he asked. Hermione didn't answer, so he took her elbow and steered her toward the sofa. 'Let's sit down,' he suggested. 'I vant to hear all about vhat you've been doing.'

Hermione settled on the sofa and sipped at her mead, enjoying the warmth of the fire. She felt slightly nervous to be alone with Viktor in his room; she didn't think it was wrong, exactly, but she couldn't think of anyone who would think it was a good idea, either. She sipped again and stared at the fire, tongue-tied.

'How haf you been?' Viktor asked her.

'Very well,' she answered, looking at him for the first time since they had sat down. His dark eyes were alight with attraction. She felt both flattered and slightly alarmed. She swallowed. 'And you?' she asked desperately.

He began to talk about his Quidditch career, seeming to wish to impress her with the account of his life of celebrity. Hermione sipped her mead and relaxed, lulled by the warmth of the fire on her skin and the warmth of the wine in her tummy and the warmth of Viktor's eyes each time they rested on her face. She knew he was eyeing her up, as well; more than once she caught his gaze wandering from her face, to her chest, to her legs, and back again.

At length he said, 'Are you seeing someone?'

Hermione started and shifted a bit away from Viktor, who had put his arm along the back of the sofa. To cover her evasive manoeuvre, she turned a bit on the seat so that she was facing him. 'It's complicated,' she answered honestly.

He gave her a crooked smile. 'Someone who has left school?' he asked.

'In a way,' Hermione hedged. 'Someone older,' she added.

He glanced at her hands. 'You're not promised to him?'

'Oh, no,' she said, slightly amused at the concept. 'It's not like that.'

His brow furrowed as he studied her expression. 'But he took your virginity,' he said flatly.

Hermione gasped and looked directly into his eyes. 'How ...?' she sputtered.

Viktor reached out, and she froze, uncertain of how to react. Encouraged by her silence, his fingers dipped just beneath the neckline of her jumper, and unerringly, he lifted the Nexus up and brought it out from beneath the layers of clothing. 'This is how I know,' he said simply.

A loud gasp sounded from behind her, and Hermione turned to see who had entered the room but there was no one there. She noticed that the painting on the wall was now populated only by grazing sheep and lambs. Unnerved, she stood. 'I should go now,' she said.

Viktor stood as well, taking her glass of mulled mead and placing it beside his on the table before the sofa. Then he took her cold hands and gave them a gentle squeeze, smiling down into her face. 'I wish you would stay,' he said. 'I have missed you, Herm-own-ninny. The girls I meet are shallow and silly not clever and good, like you.'

Hermione felt confused. Viktor was obviously still besotted with her, as he had been three years before. She knew he was kind and gentle, always considerate of her his very presence was like a balm to her spirit. But she wasn't free to begin a relationship with someone. She had even promised not to kiss boys whilst she was entangled with the professor and, truth to tell, she had no interest in kissing Viktor. His bulk was a comfort, but his body held no fascination for her. It was only his kindness and understanding she craved.

'I really like being around you, Viktor,' she said, 'but I am still ... involved *with*him.'

With the lightest of touches, he cupped her cheek. 'But you are not promised to him,' he reminded her.

Hermione gave a short shake of her head, distracted by the way Viktor's fingertips stroked the soft skin of her cheek. The banked desire stirred, and her quim throbbed once, moisture seeping from suddenly-swollen tissue between her thighs. It was not Viktor of whom she thought, though at the first glimmer of longing, it was the austere, sneering face of Severus Snape which danced before her eyes. She needed him *now*.

'Shocking!' a reedy old voice cried.

Hermione jumped back from Viktor, whirling again to see who had spoken. The yellow-haired shepherdess was back, her arms crossed smugly beneath her breasts, and beside her was an old man with a long white beard and a shiny bald head. Hermione stared hard at the old man where had she seen him before?

'Ignore him, Herm-own-ninny,' Viktor said dismissively, placing his hands lightly on her shoulders. 'Portraits in this castle are given ridiculous liberty to move about and speak I would stun them all into silence,' he added darkly.

'The Head Girl, alone with a man in his bedroom, unchaperoned!' the old man continued as if Viktor had not threatened him. 'I shall report this to the headmaster at once!'

'I know who you are!' Hermione said suddenly, walking away from Viktor and standing before the painting with her hands on her hips. 'You belong in that painting in the dungeon corridor! What are you doing up here?' Her eyes flicked to the smirking shepherdess. 'Aren't you a bit *old* for her?'

The old man began to sputter, and the shepherdess began to screech, and soon they were shouting at one another. Satisfied, Hermione turned away from them and marched to Viktor's door. She had someplace else to be.

'Herm-own-ninny!' Viktor protested as she opened the door, and she turned with a fleeting smile.

'I'll see you later, Viktor!'

She shut the door and hurried down the corridor towards the portrait of the Fat Lady. As she rounded the corner, she heard Viktor's door open again and him calling 'good bye' in a very bemused way.

Moments later she stepped through the Floo into the professor's sitting room, where she found him sitting in his armchair, a glass of amber liquid in his hand. When he saw her, his eyes narrowed, and a sneer settled on his thin lips. Rather than speaking to her, he held out his glass, as if in a toast, his eyes fierce and his expression ironic.

'You think you're very clever, don't you?' Hermione demanded, advancing on him and standing with her hands on her hips, unconsciously mimicking her stance before the portrait in Viktor's room.

'Indeed,' he murmured, taking another sip of the amber liquid. 'Have some Firewhisky, Miss Granger it's not as good as the sort we'll have after I win my bet with Professor McGonagall, but it will do a satisfactory job, nevertheless.'

Hermione's eyes narrowed, and she crossed her arms, her lips pressed in a tight white line.

He studied her as he sipped. 'All right, I'll bite: Why, in your estimation, do I think I'm clever?'

'Because you set the portraits to spy on me!' she cried, her restraint abandoned, her indignation pouring out. 'How dare you?'

In an instant he had slammed the glass of whisky onto the table, and he towered over her, his expression livid and frightening. 'No!' he spat. 'How dare *you*? We had an agreement. No involvement with third parties whilst we are imprisoned by this thrice-damned curse!'

His sudden proximity washed over her like a narcotic, scrubbing her righteous anger from her memory and replacing the impetus with raw passion. She grabbed his hands and brought them to her breasts, reaching out and cupping his testicles through his trousers. 'Fuck me,' she gasped, pleading.

One of his thin, strong hands forced her chin up, and he stared into her eyes as his other hand closed over the Nexus, dangling on the outside of her clothing, exposed. She waited for his questions, but they never came; instead, he probed her mind, and Hermione struggled against him, unwilling that he should witness her time alone with Viktor in his sitting room. Vainly, she attempted to twist away from him, hoping to break eye contact and wrench her face from his hands but he was too strong for her to pull away, and somehow, he compelled her to keep her eyes open, permitting him full access to her memories.

At last, he released her chin and wound his fingers in the hair at the nape of her neck, restraining her. A vicious smile was on his lips. '*Promised* to me?'

Had she been less needful, Hermione might have blanched at the note of mockery in his voice, but as it was, she retaliated by wrapping the fingers of one hand in his hair, pulling him down and nipping insistently at his lips. '*Fuck me*,' she said again, her free hand grasping his shaft through his trousers. He had no need of the potion, tonight he was hard as a rock already. She *wanted* his cock.

His hips jerked forward involuntarily into her fist. With a growl, he pulled his wand free, and a non-verbal spell later, she stood unclothed upon his hearth rug. He had Vanished two jumpers, a matching bra and knickers set, her favourite jeans, and her socks and trainers.

'Damn it, Severus!' she gasped, releasing him and going for her wand to retaliate.

'No,' he snarled, snatching her wand from its sheath before she could reach it and tossing it into the armchair, just out of her grasp. Before she could react to his infamous act, he released her hair and brought both hands to her breasts, first palming them, then beginning to apply pressure to her crinkled nipples with his thumbs and forefingers, pinching and rolling until she thought her eyes would roll up into her head.

'What do you want?' he demanded, his voice now low and silken.

'Oh, God, please fuck me!' she cried, trembling with need.

'Perhaps,' he said and released her, sitting down on the sofa. '*Accio* my glass,' he said lazily, watching as his abandoned whisky zoomed obediently into his hand.

Hermione moved to him, attempting to straddle him upon the sofa cushions, but he prevented her. Frustrated, she stood at his knee, wringing her hands. 'What do you want me to do?' she asked. He had never been this way before.

He took a deep draught from his glass, his eyes raking over her naked form. 'How badly do you want it?' he asked idly.

Hermione sagged to the floor, her knees trembling too badly to hold her. 'You know!' she said. 'You *already* know!' She looked up at him pitifully, seeing no sympathy in his merciless black eyes only calculation.

'What would you do for it?' he asked her, his voice so low she had to strain to hear him.

She simply quivered at his feet, her hands sliding up his thighs, unable to keep from trying to touch him, to somehow persuade him to come into her body and to quench the fire swiftly consuming her sanity.

Unexpectedly, her entire body clenched, as if someone had cast a Full-Body Bind upon her. She fell over, her legs straightening and becoming rigid. In the next instant, she began to convulse, the waves of desire wracking her body as she was pushed beyond her physical limitations.

'Hermione!'

She heard someone calling her name, but she was unable to respond. She could feel her arms and her legs jerking, as if at random. Now, hands were on her body, trying to hold her down, but it was hopeless. At last, a deep, resonant voice said, '*Petrificus Totalus!*' and her muscles froze, ending the horrid convulsions.

She was aware of being levitated, and she soon saw the bedroom ceiling above her, just as she came to rest upon a soft bed; the scent of his body permeated the sheets beneath her, and a new feeling of deep contentment overcame her. It had been days since she had slept in his bed, and being here now was like coming home. She waited for him to say *Finite Incantatem*, but the counter-command did not come. Instead, she became aware of his strong, warm hands massaging her legs, beginning with her feet and moving up, performing the massage with competence, as he did all things.

As his hands massaged her inner thighs, she felt herself flooding with wetness, and she knew he could smell her arousal. She was sure, now, that he would address her needs, and she calmed beneath his ministrations. Undoubtedly, he had decided to let the spell wear off naturally, and in the meantime, he meant to do what he could to soothe her knotted muscles.

When he reached her shoulders she could, at last, see his face, which was tense with concentration. She had seen the same look on his face when brewing a tricky potion and when stroking in and out of her body, carrying them both outside of themselves to a different plane of existence. She desperately wanted to touch him to pull those thin lips down so she could kiss him but she was yet unable to move.

When he had carefully massaged her neck, he moved out of her sight, and she tried to vocalize an objection, but no sound came from her. Next, though, she felt him again at her inner thighs, and her breath stilled in her lungs what would he do?

Her legs were too closely held by the spell for her quim to be spread open to him, but his clever fingers slipped through the curls into the slick heat, and he began to stroke her lightly, pleasuring her as surely, mute and unmoving, as he did with her full vocal cooperation. As the orgasm crested over her, the perceptible loosening of the binding curse began. She could not speak or make voluntary motions, but now he could manipulate her limbs, and he did so, his shoulders pressed into her thighs as he lapped and suckled at her needy clit. He knew her so well, he was able to gauge her climax by her breathing alone. When he rose over her, his body now joined to her, rocking rhythmically, every pass of his ridged cock over her clitoris like a shock directly to the pleasure centre of her brain, she found that she could move again. Her muscles were sore from the convulsion, but she could raise her arms to hold and caress him, the bringer of pleasure and relief. Her body cradled him as he coaxed it steadily to another peak of bliss, and her soft cries were joined by his own gasps as they fell together through the waterfall of completion.

In the quiet dark, as he spooned behind her, a protective arm about her waist, holding her against him, she said, 'That was very odd did you know that could happen to me?'

He sounded strange, his breath ghosting over her ear, making her hair flutter, as he said, 'Convulsions are a known side-effect, usually the result of great stress, but very rare.'

'Oh,' she said, a yawn creeping in and distorting her speech. 'D'you mind if I sleep here?' she murmured.

His only answer was to tighten his hold on her and to pull the counterpane more securely over their spooned bodies.

As she drifted on the edge of sleep, she thought she heard him say, '*I'm sorry*' but she couldn't be sure.

In the wee hours, roused by an erotic dream, she turned into his arms, waking him with a slow, languorous kiss. She closed her fist about his stirring cock, stroking him to rigidity, as his fingertips slid down her belly to tease her clit with steady, circular motion. He pushed her onto her back and moved between her legs, slipping back into her body with a groan matched neatly by her simultaneous sigh. Their coupling was punctuated by no words, but bracketed by the timeless sounds of animal pleasure. She cried out, and still he strove over her, until she whimpered again, shuddering beneath his determined assault upon her senses. He came with a final fusillade of thrusts and ended with his teeth at her throat, scraping her carotid artery as his seed dripped out of her body and seeped into the sheets.

He moved onto his back, and she rolled with him, draping one sticky leg over his and resting her cheek upon his sweat-dampened chest. He held her to him again, and this time, as she surrendered to sleep, she clearly heard him say, 'I'm sorry.'

She did not leave his rooms that weekend. He professed concern over her seizure-like episode and watched over her like a hawk, insisting upon applying some of the Enchanted Mistletoe crême she had given him for Christmas to soothe the soreness of her muscles. Winky was given instructions to excuse Hermione to any visitors for the reason of illness, and Harry and Ron were told privately by the headmaster that Hermione had suffered a bad turn and was being looked after by Professor Snape for the weekend.

They ate and slept and read and had sex, with her professor initiating the intimacy as often as Hermione did. She did not question him about it, but accepted every attention, responded to every overture, whether he was offering pleasure, conversation, a muscle massage, or just a hot cuppa and revelled in the return of their easy camaraderie.

When he took her book from her hands and pressed her back on the sofa with demanding kisses or invaded the bath as she rose from the tub, sweeping her into his arms and carrying her off to his bed he perpetrated such acts of erotic intimacy upon her person that it left her in a state both spellbound and speechless. He touched and tasted every inch of her skin, every crevice of her body, lavishing such intense concentration upon these acts of sex that she soon came to know she was experiencing carnal contrition: He could not look her in the face and say sorry, but he could make amends with such mind-numbing sensuality that she would have forgiven him anything.

On Monday morning, Hermione Flooed back to her room to shower and dress for the day. She met the boys in the common room, assured them she was fine, and the three of them headed down to the Great Hall for breakfast.

As she came down the stairs into the Entrance Hall, her step light and a smile upon her face, she saw Viktor, who was standing with Professor Dumbledore, conversing. He looked up and caught her eye, and a grin spread over his face. He strode across the floor, under the eyes of the headmaster, Harry and Ron, and the loiterers on the stairway coming up from the dungeons, and plucked her off the staircase, spinning her around and making her giggle with glee.

'Put me down, silly!' she cried.

Viktor did let her down, smirking unrepentantly, but it was not until Hermione stood on her own feet that she looked past Viktor to see Professor Snape standing at the top

of the dungeon staircase, looking as if he had been kicked in the stomach by a Hippogriff. Feeling suddenly wrong-footed, Hermione stepped past Viktor, a conciliatory hand held out before her, completely unmindful of the other people moving through the Entrance Hall. Surely he didn't think she was flirting with Viktor? Or that she liked Viktor better than she did him?

Severus Snape turned his back on her in a swirl of black robes and disappeared back down to the dungeons. Hermione began to hurry after him, but she was restrained by a hand upon her arm. Wrenching away, she turned to argue, only to find Albus Dumbledore looking down at her with compassionate eyes.

'Let him go for now, my dear,' the headmaster murmured, looking after the Potions master with undisguised concern.

Chapter 15: Regression

Chapter 15 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe.

Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

The Love You Take

Chapter 15: Regression

Severus hurtled down the staircase to the dungeons, fleeing like a coward from the sight of the girl flinging herself into the arms of the Bulgarian. He found it difficult to breathe, as if a rogue Bludger had slammed into his mid-section. How, after the time they had spent together over the weekend, could the wanton flounce from his arms to those of a rival? Had she no proper feeling at all?

No and neither did she, a treacherous voice reminded him. *She* the green-eyed witch, Lily Evans, had begun behaving in the same way at roughly the same age, throwing herself at James-fucking-Potter, uncaring of who might witness her reckless behaviour. Evans had not gone from his arms to Potter's, strictly speaking he, Severus, had never had the privilege of holding Evans in his arms as he had done with Hermione but the betrayal had felt every bit as acute as this current gaping wound from which he bled ... metaphorically speaking.

Folly! Idiocy!

He gripped his rowan wood wand tightly as he stormed through the dungeon corridors, wishing very much that he had a target at which to cast how he would delight in destroying something now! All of the roiling emotion was like acid in his veins, and his usual reserve was eluding him. What was it about his association with that slip of a girl a mere child! which deprived him of his composure?

Gaining his rooms, he closed and warded the door behind him, breathing hard, striving for mastery of his emotions. He wanted to lay hands upon Viktor Krum and hurt him he wanted to hit him with a Cruciatius Curse and watch him writhe upon the floor he wanted to hurl him from the castle and tell him never to return.

And the girl! He wanted to make her sorry make her feel as he felt to hurt her

'Severus?'

He froze as if he had been caught in wrong-doing and looked anxiously over his shoulder but he was alone in his sitting room. It was the green glow of the Floo which drew him to the fireplace, wherein the head of Albus Dumbledore floated.

'Headmaster?' Severus managed, feeling his mask fall into place; now, he presented an unreadable face to his employer.

'I would like to speak with you,' Dumbledore said neutrally. 'Could you come to my office, please?'

Severus quailed internally; he was not yet in full control of his inner turmoil, and he had no wish to demonstrate this fact to Albus Dumbledore.

'Now, Severus,' the headmaster said implacably.

Severus took a deep breath and stepped into the Floo, whirling to the headmaster's office, where Dumbledore waited, standing before his desk in purple robes embroidered with stars and moons. Severus stepped out onto the hearth rug, keeping his eyes averted from the old man's piercing blue gaze as he brushed ash from his robes.

'Please sit down,' Dumbledore said, his manner warmer now that he had got his way.

Severus crossed his arms over his chest, his feet braced, as if for battle. 'I'll stand,' he replied curtly.

Dumbledore sighed and turned to walk behind his desk and seat himself. 'It need not be a contest of wills, Severus,' he said wryly.

'I have duties to perform, Headmaster,' the Potions master snapped irritably.

'Do you?' Dumbledore asked mildly. 'But you decided not to eat this morning never a good choice on a busy day.'

Severus gritted his teeth. 'I scarcely see how my personal habits are any of your business,' he ground out.

Dumbledore rested his elbows on the highly-polished surface of his desk and steepled his fingers, watching Severus closely. 'I'm afraid we disagree,' he said, sounding a touch sad. 'I gave you a charge, Severus a very serious one and there seems to be a ... problem.'

Severus raised his chin, an action which caused Dumbledore some amusement, judging by the way the old wizard's infernal eyes began to twinkle.

'I am aware of no problems with any of the *many* charges you have given me,' he snapped.

Dumbledore cocked his head to one side. 'But I really cannot have my Potions master attacking the guest flying instructor, Severus.'

Severus felt his fragile control deteriorate further. 'No!' he shouted, advancing on the old man. 'But you have no problem with that Bulgarian *groping* the Head Girl in public!'

Dumbledore watched the advancing wizard with undisturbed equanimity. When Severus stopped at the edge of the desk, glaring down at Dumbledore with murderous rage, the old wizard gave him an affectionate, knowing smile.

'Now, now,' he said soothingly, opening his desk drawer and removing a bottle, 'doesn't that feel better?'

With a howl of frustration, Severus dropped into his usual chair before Dumbledore's desk. 'It's a miracle I've never killed you, old man,' he bellowed, his hands closing convulsively over the lank black hair hanging on either side of his face.

Amusement crinkled Dumbledore's eyes as he poured a shot of something smelling suspiciously like cognac into a waiting teacup and pushed it at Severus. 'Not at all, Severus you care for me far too much to kill me.'

Severus gave a loud, derisive snort and took up the teacup, taking a healthy sip. 'When did you begin encouraging your teachers to drink before the sun is over the yardarm?' he asked snidely, calm enough now to eye his employer over the rim of the non-tea-bearing cup.

'Oh, I would never do that,' Dumbledore said, smiling as he relaxed back into his chair. 'But you're not going to enter the classroom today, Severus.'

Severus replaced the teacup on the desktop. 'And who the devil is going to take my lessons?' he demanded. 'I assure you, I will not attempt mayhem upon the students,' he added a bit guiltily. It was, after all, his job to teach Potions not to storm about his superior's office, threatening bodily harm.

Dumbledore reached out one long arm and nudged the teacup once more toward Severus. 'You, dear boy, are going to take this bottle of cognac and the novel of your choice, and you are going to stay in your rooms and attain some measure of self-possession before you go into the classroom again.'

Severus dropped his eyes to the toes of his boots. 'That should not be necessary, Headmaster,' he said quietly.

'Who is to say what ought to be necessary in these circumstances, Severus?' Dumbledore said musingly. 'I've never before encountered a situation which required one of my teachers to be constantly sexually intimate with a student without giving any suspicion of his activities to others.'

Severus raised his eyes again to his employer's face at this calm statement of fact. 'It's hell,' he said flatly.

Dumbledore gazed at him intently for a moment before saying in a softly chiding voice, 'Occluding so industriously, Severus? One might think you were trying to hide something from me.'

Severus felt himself flush, but he did not look away. 'Nothing, save my own *personal* thoughts, Headmaster.'

Dumbledore pursed his lips and continued to study Severus' face. 'Has it occurred to you that she might be fond of you?'

'No,' he responded tersely.

'Yet,' Dumbledore continued, 'when I saw you dancing with her at the Valentine's Day Ball ...'

Severus' lips thinned. 'No,' he repeated more loudly. 'And she should not be encouraged to be ' his face twisted into a scowl of distaste, '*fond* of me. The very idea is repugnant!'

The headmaster's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. 'I don't see that, Severus,' he said. 'When she has left school, there is no impediment to prevent your relationship and she is less than four months from sitting her N.E.W.T.s as it is.'

'Any feeling she has for me is the product of this damned curse,' Severus said insistently. 'She would never have seen me as anything but her teacher if she had never been cursed there is no basis for affection betwixt us.'

Dumbledore tilted his head to one side, his eyes staring off as if seeing into the future. 'I don't know about that, Severus,' he said. 'She's clever, brave, book-loving and rather fond of the under-appreciated members of wizarding society.' He directed a gently teasing smile at the younger man. 'I think you two would make a good pair.'

Severus' lip curled. 'I think I'm going to vomit,' he said nastily, glaring until the smile left the old man's face. 'Do *not* speak of things about which you know *nothing*.'

Dumbledore's brow knit. 'It's been twenty years, you know, Severus. Things change.' He cast a curious look to the younger man. 'Perhaps it's time for another look at the Mirror,' he said. 'You might be surprised by what you see.'

Severus stood quickly, rage igniting in his body again so quickly that when he spoke, it sounded as if he'd been running. 'I will never look in the bloody Mirror again as long as I live!' he gasped.

Dumbledore rose as well, remorse on his face. 'I'm sorry,' he murmured, coming from behind the desk with the bottle in his hands.

Severus stared at him, his breath coming in short pants, his eyes gazing over Dumbledore's shoulder. In a sickening moment of clarity, he saw it all again.

He had gone directly from the Mirror to her he had seen them together so clearly; it had to be true, didn't it? When she had refused to speak to him, he had held her by her shoulders to plead with her he hadn't meant to do it, but he had been looking into her emerald eyes, and it had been so easy to see into her mind ... to see the distaste turn to revulsion as he told her what he had seen in the Mirror of Erised ...

Dumbledore pressed the bottle into Severus' hands. 'Listen to me,' he said, and the tone of command was so clear that Severus pushed the painful memory away and obeyed. 'Your nerves are fraught. You *must* gain control of yourself again.'

Severus nodded bleakly.

Dumbledore pressed on. 'You cannot allow it to be seen that you are involved with Hermione. It would only take one gossiping student sending an owl home to bring the matter before the school governors we cannot allow that to happen.'

Severus nodded again, humiliation sour in his belly. He knew these things *knew* them! Dumbledore ought not to have to explain things to him as if he was stupid. What was wrong with him?

The old man's hands settled on Severus' shoulders, and the two wizards looked into each other's eyes. 'The first night I brought her to you,' Dumbledore murmured, 'I told you it would be necessary to see to her emotional needs as well as the physical demands of the curse. You *cannot* put emotional distance between you, Severus.' The blue eyes were soft with pity. 'If you don't care for her, for *all* of her needs, she will be forced to seek emotional solace elsewhere, and we simply cannot risk that. Every plan we have worked for hangs in the balance, and one wrong step can destroy your usefulness against Tom forever.'

Dumbledore dropped his hands and stepped back from Severus. 'Off with you, now,' he said more briskly. 'I will take your lessons today and tomorrow or for as long as you need. Take some time to yourself, Severus. I'll let the staff know you're under the weather, and I'll check in with you periodically.'

Severus tucked the bottle into the pocket of his robes. 'Yes, Headmaster,' he said. 'I will do as you wish.' Turning with what little dignity he could muster, he threw the Floo

powder into the fire and returned to his rooms.

She was later than usual coming to him that afternoon; she had skipped visiting him at lunch, and now it was nearing twilight, close to the dinner hour. She was bundled in what appeared to be no fewer than three jumpers, topped by a Muggle-style coat. Her cheeks were rosy from the cold. It angered him to know that she would rather be cold than wear the cloak he had given her for Christmas – the custom-tailored wizard-made cloak for which he had personally chosen the wool, the Acromantula silk lining, and the golden Gryphon-head clasp – but he had sworn to himself he would not quarrel with her, so he kept silent.

He knew from her movements that she was not yet in acute need; she had come to his rooms in anticipation of needing his services later – so she was seeking his *company*, now. The notion pleased him.

She removed the coat and hung it on a peg, then pulled the bulkiest of the jumpers over her head and hung it away, as well. She was left wearing a snug-fitting cranberry red jumper, embroidered all over with a curious object. 'What is that?' he asked.

Hermione glanced down at herself. 'A jumper,' she replied.

He scowled. 'I can see that – what is the sigil sewn all over it?'

She flushed. 'It's a Basilisk,' she said. 'Mrs Weasley embroiders the sweaters she gives us for Christmas – Harry gets Snitches, I usually get books – but this one has the Basilisk.'

Severus shook his head. 'That woman is daft,' he muttered. 'You nearly get killed by the creature and she thinks you want to wear a garment covered with its likeness?'

Hermione laughed, a light sound, reminiscent of the tinkling of bells. 'At least it's warm,' she said, sitting down on the sofa and pouring herself a cup of tea from the service set upon the low table.

'What were you doing outside?' he asked, taking care to keep his tone casual.

'I was watching Quidditch practice,' she replied, 'then listening to Viktor talking to the team about tactics.' She wrinkled her nose and took a biscuit to go with her tea. 'It was boring.'

Severus bristled inwardly at the mention of the Bulgarian. 'Let that be a lesson to you,' he murmured lightly, reminding himself that she was with him now, and that was good enough.

'Too right,' Hermione agreed. 'What have you been up to, all day?'

Severus nodded to the book on the table at his elbow. 'Reading and relaxing.'

Hermione's eyebrows rose. 'I don't believe I've ever heard you admit to relaxing,' she teased.

He narrowed his eyes at her but did not snipe. Her gaze settled on his book.

'You're reading Merlin et Nimüe,' she said. She rose and came to take the book into her hands. 'I don't know why I adore this story so.'

He sipped his tea and watched her surreptitiously through the curtain of his hair. 'What's not to adore?' he said snidely. 'Young witch steals older wizard's magic, seals him in a cave, and runs away with her young lover.'

Hermione gaped down at him. 'That's not part of the story!' she objected. 'There's nothing about a lover!'

He struggled with himself but to no avail; he could not overcome this particular bugaboo. His pride still stung from seeing her laughing down into Krum's face. He raised his eyes to hers and let her see the full force of his sneer as he said, 'That particular telling of the tale does not include Nimüe's lover, but that does not mean he did not exist. When you are as old as I, you will know the world revolves around power, sex and the opportunity to obtain, use, and abuse them. Love does not exist.'

She quite literally staggered back a step from him, the book falling from her fingers. Her eyes were very wide; her lips were formed in a perfect 'o', as if she was surprised. 'Why do I have to be in this with *you*?' she whispered pathetically. 'You hate me – you hate what we do – you hate everything about life. I don't know how you can bear to exist.'

Bugger fucking hell! he thought, looking away from her. *You couldn't keep your bloody mouth shut – you had to set her off again...*

'Spare me the dramatics, Miss Granger,' he said aloud, striving for a bored tone. 'Please pick up my book – and drink your tea; it's getting cold.'

But he was speaking to the air. The Floo glowed green, and she was gone.

An hour passed as he sat in his armchair, mechanically drinking cup after cup of tea. She would be back. She had to return ... it had been nearly ten hours since their last encounter. She was too sensitive. When had he ever minded his tongue in her presence?

Your behaviour with her has been very uneven, of late, the voice in his head commented.

'Sod off,' he said into the silence.

Against his agreement with Dumbledore, after a period of dithering, he went to the Great Hall for dinner. He would see her there – surely, he could manufacture a reason to pass behind her seat and speak to her. It was his duty to look after her, not to drive her away with his unguarded utterances.

He swept into the cavernous room, making a quick survey of the Gryffindor table – but she was not there. All her little friends, including the Gryffindor Quidditch team, were present, but she was absent. Doing an abrupt about-face, he left the Great Hall, opting for a patrol of the castle corridors. He would not go to Gryffindor Tower to find her, but he might stumble over her, wandering about the castle when she ought to be ...

Krum.

All the Bulgarian's protégés had been present amongst the Gryffindors, but Viktor Krum had been conspicuous by his absence. Was she with him? With Krum, when she ought to be naked and wanton in a certain dungeon bedroom?

Jealousy ripped through his body with nausea-inducing intensity, and he gritted his teeth against the pain. Dear Merlin, he had not suffered such agonies of green-eyed insanity since he was at school. Involuntarily, his right arm wrapped across his torso in an unconscious protective gesture, whilst his left hand clamped upon his wand, now unsheathed and in the pocket of his cloak. Image after image flashed through his mind, each more horrific than the last. Hermione, astride a lover, her back arched in pleasure as she moved over the body of a man too powerfully-built to be Severus ... Hermione, transported in orgasm, gasping a name which was not his ... Hermione, sated and sleepy, her cheek upon a chest too densely-furred to be his, encircled by an arm bulging with biceps too brawny to belong to anyone save Viktor Krum.

Stopping at a window, he sagged into the embrasure, staring out into the winter dark. Uncertainty shimmered through him like unwelcome cold flashes. *Where* was she?

Why did she not come to him? Why did she not touch her wand to the fake Galleon she carried and summon him to her, wherever she was?

Why was he spending hour after hour, day after day, fretting over the bushy-haired, limpid-eyed know-it-all?

His hands clenched into fists upon the rough stone window ledge. He would *not* make such a fool of himself over a mere female. She was nothing to him, no more than any of the other students in his charge, no more than any of the other jobs foisted upon him by Albus-bloody-Dumbledore.

And he could prove it. He was not a cringing adolescent he was a man. He was a brave man; even Dumbledore, whose praise seemed saved for Potter, admitted that Severus was courageous. And a brave man had nothing to fear from knowing his heart's desire.

He pushed away from the window, consciously straightening his back and squaring his shoulders before sweeping through the virtually deserted castle corridors, heading down and down into the dungeons.

Only he and the headmaster knew the current resting place of the Mirror of Erised and he was in possession of the password which would give him access to knowledge of his heart's desire.

His lip curled in disdain. He had nothing to fear.

And in a darkened bedroom, floors and floors above the dungeon, an Unforgivable Curse was cast.

A/N: I know this is a brutal way to leave you, and I apologize. The next chapter is fully outlined, and I promise this particular brand of angst will be resolved by the end of it.

This chapter was beta-read by DeeMichelle and Keladry Lupin; it was Brit-picked by MagicAlly.

MagicAlly made the lovely suggestion of Severus' comment about drinking "before the sun is over the yardarm." This is an old British Royal Navy term, harking back to the days when the men drank beer and rum instead of water on long voyages. Wikipedia says, "the phrase seems to have originated in the north Atlantic, where, in summer, this would have typically been at about 11 a.m.. This was the time at which, by custom and rule, the first rum 'tot' of the day was issued to officers and men (the officers had their tots neat, while the men had theirs diluted with water), hence its connection with taking one's first alcoholic drink of the day."

And thanks, as always, to sshg316, cheerleader extraordinaire. Shug has y'all's best interests at heart; she took away my access to PSP until the chapter was complete.

Chapter 16: Possession

Chapter 16 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to sshg316, who asked for one of the scenes herein as a drabble, many moons ago. Here's your prezzie, Shug m'love.

The Love You Take

Chapter 16: Possession

Hermione stumbled out of the fireplace onto the hearthrug in her room and stood breathing hard, her hand pressed to her heart. Professor Snape had always been difficult and prickly ... one had to take care not to offend him ... but, in general, since they had been forced to spend so much time together, she had found him to be good company. And before the Valentine's Day Ball, there had been times when she had felt that he was attracted to her ... that he liked her, for herself. But ever since the night she had taken her music box to his room and they had danced with no audience, heart-to-heart, he had been acting like the world's most malignant *prat*. And his parting shot at her ... 'Love does not exist' ... was like a personal insult. How could he be such an unmitigated bastard? He had to know how she felt about him ... and he damn well knew she was utterly dependent upon him ... how could he jerk from beneath her unsure feet the possibility of *hope*? If she could not hope that one day they might find peace together ... in one another ... what hope did she have for the future?

She staggered to her mirror, too distraught to manage tears, and she stared at her reflection, her mind repeating over and again *Now what? Now what? Now what?*

'Hermione?'

She tore her gaze from the mirror and stared vaguely at Ginny Weasley.

'I'm sorry; I knocked twice, but you didn't answer.' Ginny stood in the doorway of Hermione's room, her hand upon the handle of the open door, and looked at her with undisguised concern. 'Are you all right?'

Hermione passed a trembling hand over her face and managed a smile for Ginny. 'I'm all right. Did you need me for something?'

Ginny grinned, then, reassured by Hermione's words. 'Neville asked me to come up and fetch you. Viktor Krum is down in the common room waiting for you, and the crowd of girls around him is about five deep, now.' She giggled. 'He's ignoring them, but they're blocking the portrait hole.'

Hermione's attention was captured. 'Viktor? In the common room?'

Ginny's 'yes' was lost as Hermione hurried past her and into the corridor, heading for the stairs. 'You might want to do something about your hair,' she called, but Hermione did not respond.

Viktor sat stiffly on a sofa in the common room, oblivious to the growing gaggle of girls sitting around him. His transition from student to fulltime paid athlete had improved him in many ways. One of the best benefits had been the services of a professional trainer, whose workout regimen had bulked up the Seeker's muscles and corrected his pigeon-toed walk. Not much could be done for his dour expression, but the smile he gave when he saw Hermione coming towards him made his face almost attractive.

'Herm-own-ninny,' he said, immediately rising to his feet and going forward to meet her, his hands outstretched.

Hermione concentrated on Viktor as if he was her rock in the crashing sea, allowing him to grasp her hands and looking up into his eyes rather piteously. 'I need to talk to you, alone,' she said.

'Of course,' Viktor responded promptly, and he took her hand and led her through the portrait hole. With the Fat Lady closed behind them, Viktor gave her a hesitant smile. 'We could go to my room'

An observer would have known from the widening of his eyes that he was surprised when Hermione immediately took him up on the suggestion.

'That's perfect,' she said, marching off in the proper direction, trying very hard to ignore the insistent thrumming of the compulsion through her body.

Hermione paced with growing discomfort before Viktor's fireplace, haltingly explaining her situation to him.

'But, Herm-own-ninny,' he said, frowning, 'if you haf been cursed vif *Eternus Perturbatio*, then you would be driven to have sexual relations several times a day with the person who cast the curse. Are you sure that's vat it vas?'

Hermione stopped for a moment, covering her face and fighting against the urge to hurry back to Professor Snape's rooms. After a moment she looked at Viktor with her increasingly stormy eyes. 'Yes, I'm positive! The person who cast the curse is Vol ...' but Viktor's sudden violent move to his feet made her rephrase, 'You-Know-Who. And he did not cast it to imprint me upon him ... he wanted to imprint me on Professor Dumbledore.' She ignored the look of revulsion which crossed her friend's face. 'But Dumbledore took me to someone else ... someone he trusted.'

Viktor took a step towards her. 'Who?' he asked urgently. 'Who took your virginity and gave you the Nexus, Herm-own-ninny?'

Hermione made a gesture as if to hold him off, and Viktor stopped where he stood. 'I can't tell you that,' Hermione said, her agitation mounting. 'Please don't ask me again!'

Viktor seemed reluctant to give up the question, but he bowed to her insistence. 'I vill not ask,' he agreed. 'But how can I help you, Herm-own-ninny? I cannot ...' he seemed to struggle for words before continuing, 'help you vif the compulsion ... only your lover can do that.'

Hermione came closer to him, grasping his powerful arms just beneath his biceps. 'He is terrible to me!' she cried. 'He is unkind and hateful and he says cruel things ... and I would rather die than have to go to him again!'

Viktor looked down at her helplessly. 'Look at you,' he said softly, trying to reason with her. 'Already you burn for his touch. How can I possibly help you?'

She tightened her hold upon his arms. 'You know the Dark Arts!' she cried. 'Isn't there something you can do ... put me to sleep, or into a state of suspended animation ... please don't make me go to him now! He hates me! Please!'

But Viktor was shaking his head. 'Herm-own-ninny, none of those spells will combat a compulsion curse,' he said. His face reflected his uneasiness for her as he began to speak in a coaxing tone. 'You haf quarrelled vif him, but Professor Dumbledore trusts this man ... can't you make up your quarrel?' He grimaced at the wildness in her face. 'I would do anything for you, Herm-own-ninny ... I wanted you for my own ... but I *cannot* make this go away.'

Hermione turned from him with apparent disgust. 'You're no more use to me than Harry and Ron!' she cried. A fresh upsurge of desire dampened her knickers and sent a commanding wave of longing through her body. Her hand was reaching for the fake Galleon to call Professor Snape to her, uncaring that she would be found in another man's room, her need for him beginning to pound in her like a raging tide against the shore. Struggling against the urge, she doubled over, her arms wrapped about her body, and she bit her lip until it bled. Clearly, in her mind's eye, she could see again the disdainful, cavalier expression upon *his* face as he said, 'Love does not exist.'

'Help me!' she screeched, straightening and hurling herself at Viktor. 'If you have ever cared for me at all, help me now!' He seemed frozen, horrified by her frenzy. Impatiently, she grasped the wand sheathed at his waist. '*Do something!*'

She fell to her knees at his feet, incapacitated as she fought to resist the compulsion, and even as her knees hit the floor, her hand delved into her pocket and plucked from it a golden Galleon.

Viktor dropped to his knees before her. 'There is one thing ...' he said, anxiety twisting his features. 'But it's a bad spell, Herm ...'

'DO IT!' she screamed, and he pulled his hornbeam wand.

'*Imperio!*' he cried.

Hermione was aware of the sudden relief which flooded her being. She didn't have to do anything except obey the voice. Everything would be all right, now.

Rising upon the command of the voice, the coin in her hand fell unheeded to the floor, and she left it behind as she followed the voice from the sitting room into the bedroom.

Severus brought down the ward with the jerk of his wand and entered the hidden chamber within which the Mirror of Erised was kept. Not long ago, Dumbledore had used the Mirror as an aid in protecting the Philosopher's Stone ... more likely, Severus now believed, as a prop to create an interesting obstacle course for a first-year to traverse on his first quest.

Created in times long gone by an Arabic djinni as a device by which an enemy might be driven mad by his own desires, the Mirror of Erised had long since been deemed too dangerous for public display. It had been kept hidden away by the Arabian Ministry of Magic, brought out only for academic research ... for the secret of how the Mirror had been created had been lost in antiquity. Gifted scholars in many fields had studied the Mirror, but to no avail; in modern times, the Magic of the Mirror could not be duplicated.

Dumbledore had explained that at a younger age, he and a like-minded companion had avidly studied the arts of ancient magic. They had believed that the Mirror of Erised would show them the locations of even more potent magical items. Dumbledore had spent years of his life researching and looking for the legendary Mirror, but it was not until he became famous for defeating the great Dark Wizard, Grindelwald, that he had been approached by the Arabian Wizarding Museum. Reports of the new hero's ambition to find the Mirror had reached the ears of its keepers, and they had been happy to lend the piece to the most powerful wizard of Light in the world ... particularly as Dumbledore was willing to find a safe place to keep it.

As a student, Severus had stumbled upon the Mirror in the dungeons one night when he was fleeing from James Potter and Sirius Black. He had mistakenly believed his enemies would not dare enter Slytherin territory to pursue him ... but he had been wrong. There was no act of daring too bold for the Gryffindor Golden Boys to undertake. He had rushed, his blood pounding in his ears, through the twisting corridors into the very bowels of the castle, and still he had heard the footsteps and taunting calls of his tormentors. At last, he had stumbled over his own feet and fallen through a hidden doorway into a room whose braziers had burst into flame upon his entrance, showing a massive gold-framed mirror in its centre.

Within the Mirror, Severus had been mesmerised to see himself atop Lily Evans, tenderly and passionately making love to her. Evans' red hair had fanned over the white sheets like copper satin, and as Severus had watched, she had arched beneath him, sighing deeply and breathing, 'Sev.' To this day he could remember every detail of what he had seen, including the matching silver wedding rings they had worn, his Slytherin green-and-silver dress robes lying in a heap upon a chair beside their bed, with Lily's wedding veil overflowing the chair and spreading over the floor in an avalanche of white lace.

Now he entered the room as an adult ... a reasonable, feet-upon-the-ground sort of fellow, with realistic expectations of what the world had on offer. He understood now, as he had not at seventeen, that the Mirror showed one's most urgent desire ... it did not show the future. He would never again make the error of mistaking his dreams for his destiny. Life had been far too clear with him upon that subject: The likes of Severus Snape did not realise their dreams; instead, they sacrificed their lives for the greater good, as it was their destiny to do.

Without pausing or breaking stride, he walked across the room, and a wave of his wand removed the shroud-like cover from the Mirror's face.

'All right, you bastard,' he said aloud, situating himself directly before the looking glass, 'do your worst.'

Hermione lay down upon the bed, as instructed by the voice. Hands touched her face and stroked down her sides; lips pressed to hers, and a tongue sought entrance to her mouth. Hermione stared at the ceiling, her eyes unfocussed. It was delightful to drift along, obeying the voice, but the hands and tongue upon her body were troubling. A forceful emotion welled within her, but she was powerless to deal with it or to act upon it. The voice determined her actions, and the voice told her to relax and to open her mouth.

Over a period of time, hands burrowed beneath her clothing and touched her skin, lips and tongue touched places besides her mouth, the voice instructed her to put her hand here, to move her legs thus, and Hermione drifted along, obeying. Yet the uncomfortable feeling lurked just beyond her fuzzy awareness, disturbing her contentment. Soon, her eyes began to leak.

The voice continued to instruct her. Upon the command to lift her hips, she did so, and she felt hands at the waist of her jeans, but an odd sound escaped her throat, in conjunction with her leaking eyes, and the activity changed. She was pulled against a large, bare, male-smelling chest, and a hand wiped at her face with a piece of cloth. Then she was closed up in strong male arms and rocked, the voice crooning to her. The disquieting feeling receded, and Hermione relaxed bonelessly into the human embrace.

After a period of time, the warm presence left her, and the voice commanded her to remain where she was and to be quiet. From a distance, she heard the voice speaking to another voice. She floated in the quiet, existing. Then the hands were upon her again, helping her to stand, buttoning, straightening, tucking, smoothing. The voice commanded her to walk, instructed her to speak normally when spoken to, and her hand was enclosed in a larger one. Mindless, she was guided out into the corridor, and she walked. Soon, the frigid night air blew into her face as she was led from the castle.

I show not your face but your heart's desire.

The tableau before him was at once striking and mesmerising. It was like a memory loop, which played itself out over and again as he stared, memorising each component.

As the Dark Lord stood upon a hill, a burst of magic from Severus' wand glowed green, and Tom Riddle fell, his corporeal form evaporating into mist, leaving only his empty cloak behind. Severus turned from the pile of empty clothing which had once been his master, and held his wand hand up in the air; his sleeve fell, and the Dark Mark leached away, leaving behind an unblemished stretch of white flesh. Harry Potter then stepped up to him, respect written upon his face, and Severus spoke to Potter, clearly thanking him for providing the diversion which had enabled Severus to cast the Killing Curse upon Lord Voldemort.

From the knot of people gathered below the crown of the hill, Severus saw Hermione Granger standing within the protective arms of Viktor Krum. As he watched her, the compulsion curse was lifted; her entire body pulsed a brilliant blue one time, then the magic dissipated into the air and left her. Before his incredulous eyes, the girl erupted from Krum's hold, racing without a backward glance up the hill and colliding with Severus, clinging to him and sobbing thankfully into his chest. His Mirror-self tilted her face to his, and then, before the eyes of all assembled, he kissed her. It was then that Severus saw the people staring up at him as he publicly claimed his prize, and noticed amongst their number some familiar faces. James Potter and Sirius Black looked on with reluctant admiration; Lily Evans Potter stood beside her husband and watched Severus with acceptance and regret. His mother and father slowly approached the hill upon which Severus stood, their faces filled with love and pride. And standing apart from them all, watching him with approval, was Albus Dumbledore. When Severus' Mirror-self broke his kiss with the girl and turned to grin down into the crowd with saturnine glee, Dumbledore gave him an acknowledging salute ... and then the loop began again, with Severus facing down the Dark Lord, his wand all that stood between Evil Incarnate and the people Severus had striven all his adult life to protect.

Immobile before the Mirror, he watched the sequence play out before him again and again. *It's not the future ... but it's what I wish the future to be,* he reminded himself. *Not what **will** happen, but the deepest, most desperate desires of my heart.*

For once, he did not reject out-of-hand the references to hearts and wishes ... for once, he allowed for the possibility that he might be in possession of each of these things. He had been so fearful that a second session with the Mirror of Erised would show him again the fruitless, puerile infatuation with Lily Evans ... this representation was no less grounded in fantasy, but it showed he had moved on in his life.

For the umpteenth time, he watched as the curse which had imprinted Hermione upon him fell away from her, and she pushed away from the young, muscle-bound Viktor Krum and ran to him, Severus.

*I **want** her,* he thought. *I want her, and I want for her to want me when the curse is done.*

Encouraged by the change in his Mirror of Erised vision, the thrill of possibility buoyed him. *Has it occurred to you that she might be fond of you?* Dumbledore had asked him. Of course it had occurred to him. He was fairly sure the girl *thought* she was fond of him. He had no true faith that any such affection would survive the lifting of the curse ... but suddenly, with an energising ferocity, *he didn't care*.

By *God*, she was *his*. He knew every curve of her body, could interpret every sigh she uttered; he knew how she took her tea, knew her opinions on art, poetry, and literature ... he recognised every change in her facial expressions, and had seen her in exaltation, in agony, in anger and in amusement. He knew her more intimately than her parents knew her ... more thoroughly than her so-called 'best friends' knew her ...

She was *his*.

He whirled on the spot, his cloak billowing about him as if charmed to do so, and he swept out of the room, unaware of the figure which materialised from the shadows and replaced the cover on the Mirror of Erised with a satisfied smile.

Hermione trudged over the frozen ground at the behest of the voice, and she became aware of being surrounded by other voices, some of which addressed her by name. *Speak when spoken to,* the voice had commanded her. She complied.

'Hi, Harry,' she said dully. 'Hi, Ron.'

She was led up steps and settled on a hard surface, then swaddled in a very warm, fur-lined garment and left alone. Content, she gazed into space.

Severus made a quick tour of his rooms, although he felt certain she would not be there. No, on this day, Hermione Granger was leading him on a pretty dance, but he would put an end to that, once and for all.

As soon as he found her.

Untroubled by his usual reticence, he Flooed to her room, which was empty. 'Winky!' he called.

The diminutive house-elf popped into the room and bowed deeply. 'Yes, Professor Snape, sir?' she said.

'Where is Miss Granger?' he asked impatiently.

'Miss is gone with Master Krum,' Winky answered promptly.

'Gone where?'

Winky bowed again. 'Miss is not taking her cloak, Professor Snape, sir, so she must be going to Master Krum's room.'

Severus swore and Winky cringed. 'Bring me Miss's cloak,' he commanded. Might as well lay down the law on everything at once, including her stubborn refusal to wear the cloak he had provided for her.

Winky pulled the garment from the cupboard and Severus tapped it with his wand before putting the miniaturised cloak into his pocket. One foot upon the hearth, he asked as an afterthought, 'Where are Potter and Weasley?'

'They is off to Quidditch practice, Professor, sir,' Winky reported.

'Very well,' he said, rewarding Winky with a nod of his head before he Flooed to the headmaster's office. He didn't really want to speak with Dumbledore right now, but Krum's guestroom was on the seventh floor, as was Dumbledore's office ... much closer than his own quarters in the dungeons ... and he certainly couldn't walk through the Gryffindor common room to get where he wanted to go.

To his relief, only Fawkes was present in Dumbledore's office when Severus stepped out of the fireplace. The magnificent scarlet bird chirped once at Severus as he strode across the room to the door, and the sweet pearl of hope which dropped into his consciousness stayed his feet. He turned to Fawkes. 'Thank you,' he said respectfully.

The golden-beaked creature bowed his head in acknowledgement, and Severus inclined his head as well before turning again and exiting Dumbledore's office, his temper somewhat soothed and his spirit strengthened by the encounter with phoenix-song.

The peace did not last long.

His imperious knock upon Krum's door went unanswered, and a simple *Alohomora!* opened the door. Immediately, he registered the emptiness of the room ... but he spotted the abandoned fake Galleon upon the rug. He picked it up and closed his hand into a fist ... she would not have been able to call for him even had she wished to do so. Had Krum taken it from her on purpose? Or had she cast it away with the same pique which had caused her to scorn the cloak?

He thrust the coin into the pocket holding her cloak and stormed into the bedroom without bothering to knock. It was empty as well, although the bedclothes were in some disorder, as if someone had lain upon the bed without taking the covers down. He frowned and performed a cursory examination of the room.

There! Upon the flagstone floor, half-hidden beneath the fringe of an area rug, was one of Hermione's hair slides. She kept them by her constantly and used them to put her hair out of her way when she brewed a potion or when she took a bath and did not wish to wash her hair ... she always had one in her pocket.

How had the contents of Hermione's pocket landed upon the floor in Krum's bedroom?

It would be his pleasure to require an answer of Krum in the very near future.

The force with which he closed the door to Krum's suite caused the shepherd girl to stumble in her frame upon the opposite wall. 'Someone's in a right snit,' she complained to one of her lambs.

When Severus exited the castle, his eyes were immediately assaulted by the dazzling light coming from the Quidditch pitch. Such spells were, of course, available for professional use, but they had not previously been used at Hogwarts. Severus sneered; this was undoubtedly the work of Krum, supposedly visiting as a guest flying instructor, but truly there to coach Gryffindor to victory over Slytherin in the coming Quidditch match.

Severus' lips thinned into an angry line. He would do something about *that*, as well.

Hermione sat in the dazzling bright light and listened to the shouted instructions from the coach and the captain as the Quidditch players zoomed about on their brooms. She had been told to sit and keep warm; the fur-lined covering made that quite easy. Untroubled by thought, she hovered on the edge of consciousness.

Then a Voice intruded upon her notice ... different from the voice from which she had been accepting instruction, but a very important Voice, nonetheless. At the sound of this new Voice, agitation rose within her with the force of volition, and suddenly, she struggled against the Imperius Curse.

She would push off the warm covering! She would rise up! She would go to the Voice! She struggled to do so to no avail. She couldn't move. The newly-awakened disturbance in her mind quickly communicated itself to her body, and she was inwardly clamouring for the Voice ... she had to reach it! If only she could be in its presence, all would be well ...

Once again, her eyes began to leak, as she fought to throw off the Imperius Curse.

'*Finite Incantatem!*'

The words were spoken with an almost brutal intonation, and Hermione felt the Imperius Curse fall away from her. Immediately, she was on her feet, looking desperately about, but she was quickly grounded by ungentle hands upon her upper arms.

Professor Snape was there, and although she had seldom seen him so angry, she was so relieved by his presence that she sobbed aloud. He pushed the heavy red cloak, lined with fur ... Viktor's cloak, she realised ... from her shoulders and pulled a swatch of black fabric from his pocket. An unspoken incantation restored her own cloak to its proper size, and he wrapped her in it before saying loudly, '...nearly an hour late for detention? Twenty points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger! Were you under the impression that being Head Girl exempted you from the necessity of following the rules? Let me be the first to disabuse you of that notion!'

His words, spoken with wounding venom, did not register with her; instead, the thirteen hours since her last encounter with him assaulted her body with an instant influx of lust. Her nipples crinkled with painful need as a veritable flood of moisture from her suddenly-swollen vaginal tissues dampened the tops of her thighs. She swayed towards him, and she knew from the flaring of his over-large nostrils that he had caught her scent.

'Oh please ... sir!' she whimpered, worried that her legs would not support her.

'To the castle,' he said intractably. 'Walk.'

'I don't think ...' she swayed.

'If you do not wish to apprise your classmates of your condition, you *will* walk,' he snarled.

'Please,' she said.

'Come with me,' he commanded, turning from her.

Goaded, Hermione stood and moved along the bench behind her professor, following him onto the steps. Surreptitiously, she grabbed a handful of his cloak and steadied herself against his back; he paused accommodatingly as she regained her balance, then he continued down the steps of the Quidditch stands with her right behind him.

When they reached the ground, Viktor met them; he was clearly confused. 'Hermione is here with me,' he informed the older wizard.

Professor Snape's lip curled. 'Yes, Krum ... I just relieved her of your Imperius Curse.'

Viktor's face paled; the use of the Imperius Curse was illegal in Britain, regardless of the circumstances. 'There was a reason for that,' he said nervously, his eyes flicking from left to right to see if anyone was close enough to overhear their conversation. But all of the Gryffindor Quidditch players were in the air; no one was listening.

'Of course,' the professor responded silkily, using his most threatening voice. 'You will have the opportunity to explain it to me ... in *detail* ... but not until I have delivered Miss Granger safely to the castle and seen to her comfort.'

Viktor's eyes widened. 'You!' he gasped. 'The Nexus ... it was you ...'

'You're not as stupid as you look,' Professor Snape replied nastily, and suddenly, Hermione had borne all she could of the male posturing.

'Sir!' she cried, not trying to keep her voice down. 'Please!' Her knees finally buckled, and a quiver ran through her limbs, reminiscent of the sensation which had preceded the convulsion she had suffered scant days before.

Professor Snape bent and hooked an arm beneath her knees, swinging her up into his arms, then he turned and walked away from Krum. In three strides they had moved out of the unnatural light illuminating the Quidditch pitch, and they were in the dark.

'It's going to happen again,' Hermione said pathetically, hating her dependency. 'I'm going to convulse!'

She thought he swore then, and she felt a sweep of silky material pass over her face before they were in an enclosure oddly striped with the bright lights from the pitch. She was set gently upon her feet, and her professor thrust his arm up through one of the slats through which the light shone, emerging again with Viktor's furry cloak clutched in his fist.

'We're under the Quidditch stands!' she said weakly as a tremor went through her body.

'Brilliant,' he ground out sarcastically. He spread the cloak upon the frozen ground and murmured a warming spell upon it, then turned to Hermione. 'Lean on me if you need to,' he said gruffly, then began to unfasten her clothes with ruthless efficiency. He assisted her to lie down upon the blanket of fur and tugged her shoes, jeans and knickers completely off.

As her clothing rasped over her mons, she cried out and shivered violently with acute need. 'Oh, God, *please*, sir ... PLEASE!'

He was upon her then, hands and mouth and oh God YES, his erect penis, thrusting into her. His teeth were upon her throat, then his tongue was in her mouth, his lean body moving over hers, and within a minute, she arched beneath him, answering the demands of the compulsion with a quick and dirty orgasm. She had scarcely regained her breath when he pinned her wrists to the ground and rose over her, the slow rotation of his hips wringing a moan of deep appreciation from her.

'Are you listening to me?' he demanded, his black eyes glittering dangerously as he moved relentlessly in and out of her.

'Yes,' she gasped, wrapping her legs about his hips, aware of her housemates moving to sit on the slats directly above their heads and not caring. She hooked her heels around his thighs and deliberately ground her pelvis against his, glorying in the groan her movement forced from his throat.

'For the duration of this curse,' he panted, lowering his head until his lips were upon her ear, *you belong to me!* He stilled then, seeming to require great self-control to halt his movements. He lifted his head and stared into her face. 'Do you understand me?'

Hermione stopped moving as well, shocked into speechlessness by his words. She knew she should object to such out-dated rhetoric, but her emotional and physical response to his declaration was visceral ... her body answered his question before her mind could instruct it. She reached up and buried both hands in his lank black hair and pulled him down until his face was millimetres above hers.

'Yes,' she breathed, her tongue darting out to lave his slightly parted lips. 'Yes, I understand ... yes, I belong to you.'

He growled his approval of her words and nipped at her lips before pushing his tongue into her mouth, where she greedily sucked upon it. He began then to demonstrate the benefit of belonging to him, making love to her with such slow intensity that he brought her repeatedly to climax, seeming neither to tire nor to reach his own orgasm. Mindless, as she had been under Viktor's Imperius Curse, yet finding no comparison between that lack of volition and this transcendence of body and spirit, she writhed and squirmed beneath her professor, her soft cries and eager kisses conveying all she could to him of her agreement and acceptance.

Glad that he had thought to swallow the potency potion before reaching the Quidditch pitch, Severus slowly and deliberately fucked Hermione beneath the Quidditch stands, not a little turned on by the notion of Potter, Weasley, and Krum sitting directly over their heads as he did so. Had one of the dunderheads thought to look between their feet, they would have got an eyeful.

Of not inconsequential further importance was the fact that Krum's entire coaching plan for the Gryffindor Quidditch team was explained whilst Severus pleased Hermione to orgasm after orgasm, at once making up to her as best he could for his unkindness and neglect, and taking the additional opportunity presented as well, as any Slytherin would do.

The meeting between Severus and Krum took place in the wee hours in Krum's quarters, and was unexpectedly attended by Dumbledore, which resulted in a highly unsatisfactory result, from Severus' point of view.

Krum steadfastly averred he had cast the curse upon Hermione's insistence and that he had not taken advantage of her whilst she was under it. Since Hermione had said virtually the same thing ... and because Dumbledore was there to prevent Severus from hexing the Bulgarian ... Severus had no choice but to accept Krum's word as truth.

It was further agreed that Krum would keep his distance from Hermione for the rest of his visit.

Severus left Krum's quarters and returned to his own, entering his bedroom to see Hermione's untameable hair spread over her pillow. She was in his bed ... where she belonged.

Undressing and letting his clothing fall where he stood, Severus slipped into bed with her again, waking her with his lips upon her nipples. She lay languidly, her soft, pleased whimpers filling his head like a symphony. He moved next between her thighs, spreading her labia wide and lapping at her sweetness to the accompaniment of her ever louder cries, then covering her body with his and pushing into her warmth, dipping his face to hers and letting her kiss her essence from his lips.

'Mine,' he told her implacably, reaffirming his claim with every thrust of his hips.

Oddly enough, Slytherin defeated Gryffindor in their match the next weekend. It seemed as if the Slytherin team anticipated Gryffindor's every move. Moreover, Minerva McGonagall lost her bet, and Severus acquired a case of Ogden's Finest, as well as a delicate crystal decanter for the drinks tray in his rooms.

Hermione took it upon herself to make sure the decanter was always full and seemed as proud of its acquisition as if she were a Slytherin, herself ... or, as if she had some score to settle with Krum.

Severus wisely kept his mouth shut and his eyes open. For now, she was irrefutably his ... and if he and Krum ever met in a dark alley ... well, all bets were off.

A/N: This chapter was beta read by Dee Michelle, Brit-picked by MagicAlly, and alpha read, as always, by Shug (sshg316).

Shug, you can hold this chapter to your chest and glare at the other kids and imitate Severus ... say, 'MINE!'

Ten thousand thank-you's to Elfarren, who suggested the Mirror of Erised as a way for Severus to know his own mind, and to FerPorcel, who pointed out to me long ago that the Mirror shows not the future, but the desires of one's heart.

In my description of the Quidditch stands, I took from the movies; when Hermione feels the silk pass over her face, Severus has taken her beneath the cloth covering hanging down from the stands in movie 2. I remember it most vividly from the scenes of Harry and Draco chasing the Snitch under the stands.

Chapter 17: Confession

Chapter 17 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

Chapter 17: Confession

The day after Viktor Krum had departed Hogwarts, whilst the castle still rang with the victorious joy of the Slytherin Quidditch team, Hermione screwed up her courage and requested an after-dinner appointment to speak with Professor Snape. She felt there were matters they needed to discuss, whether he liked it, or not.

Now, returned from a dinner she had been too nervous to eat, she faced him from across his sitting room. Seated in his favourite wingchair, he surveyed her with slightly narrowed eyes.

'What sort of "talk"?' he demanded, infusing the last word with undisguised scorn.

Hermione nudged a pouf across the floor with her foot and sat down on it, virtually at his knee. Dealing with him was akin to approaching a tiger; it was necessary to constantly circle with him to remain out of the range of heavily-clawed paws. But she was ready; she had rehearsed this before the mirror, and she was prepared to hold her ground.

'Well,' she said ingenuously, 'now that I belong to you ...' she darted a glance at his face from beneath her lashes and saw his lips tighten, but he did not move to speak, so she continued. 'Now that I *belong* to you, I think we need ground rules.'

His nostrils flared, but still, he did not speak. Instead, he quirked an inquisitive eyebrow. Hermione took a deep breath this was going better than she had hoped it might. 'What are your thoughts?' she asked, keeping in mind the pointers she had gleaned from careful reading of *Teen Witch Weekly*.

Moving with the speed of a striking serpent, he clasped her about the wrist and jerked her across his legs with one fluid movement. Hermione struggled to right herself and settled for sitting awkwardly on his right thigh, her feet dangling off the edge of the wingchair, alongside his knees.

'Would those be the, "Don't leave your fluffy pink socks on my sitting room floor" kinds of ground rules?' he asked sardonically.

He studied her for several breathless moments before putting an arm about her shoulders and encouraging her to settle against his torso, his right arm slipping down about her waist hold her to him. She relaxed into his embrace, helpless to resist what he asked of her. The curse was quiescent in her blood, yet pulse points in her body throbbed in time with her heart beat, simply from the nearness of him. Expectant, she let her head loll on his shoulder and looked up into his face.

He bent his head to hers, then, burying his nose in the hair beside her ear, and said, 'Or, would those be the "Look one more time at another man and I will commit bloody murder" sorts of ground rules?'

Hermione rubbed her cheek along his slightly stubbly five o'clock shadow, bringing her lips close to his ear. 'I have no interest in looking at another man,' she said softly.

His head reared back from her, his lips suddenly taut with displeasure. 'Then why did I find your hair slide in Krum's *bedroom*?' he demanded, glaring into her eyes.

Hermione held his gaze steadily. In spite of his prickliness, she felt on sure ground, now. 'I would never have run from you to Viktor if you hadn't been persistently unkind,' she said. Taking a deep breath, she added, 'I would prefer to be with you than with anyone.'

'Let's stick to the "ground rules," shall we?' he snapped, clearly disconcerted by her last statement.

'All right,' she said. 'In answer to your question, I suppose these are more in the realm of the second sorts of ground rules that you mentioned...although I will try to keep my socks off your parlour floor,' she added conscientiously. After a lifetime of hearing women both in and out of the wizarding world complain about the untidiness of men, it was curious to her that Professor Snape was more fastidious than she about his surroundings and his belongings.

He appeared slightly mollified. 'You may continue,' he said.

She picked up one of his hands, experimentally running her fingertips over his long fingers. 'You know I'm not a possession, don't you?' she asked.

She felt, rather than saw, the hooding of his eyes as he slanted a glance at her.

'I know nothing of the sort,' he replied shortly.

Hermione struggled to sit up, but he kept her where she was by the simple expedient of clamping his arm around her more tightly. Giving up the effort for the moment, she said, 'This is very nearly the twenty-first century, Professor...men no longer hold women as possessions...not even in the wizarding world!'

He loosened his hold upon her then, and she shifted herself so that she could look into his face, which was very nearly expressionless.

'We are not talking about the wizarding world, Miss Granger,' he said coolly. 'We are not talking about social norms in the late twentieth century.' He took her chin in his left hand and held her head immobile, his black eyes boring implacably into her own. 'You are not my wife, my girlfriend,' he sneered, 'or my...' his lip curled disdainfully, '*significant other*.'

Hermione's face flooded with colour, and embarrassment nipped at her confidence. He could make the normal course of relationships between men and women sound like foolish trivialities. Undoubtedly, he wanted to silence her...to have everything his own way, no matter what...but she would not be spoken of as chattel!

'I may be of no consequence to you,' she said, jerking her face away from his hand, pride straightening her spine, 'but I am a person of value, and I will not have you treat me as otherwise, just because I am dependent upon you.'

A wry expression touched his eyes, but his face remained unfathomable. 'Foolish girl, I never said you were of no consequence,' he replied, his voice rough but his touch gentle as he pulled her stiff form against him again. 'The situation thrust upon us by the *Eternus Perturbatio* Curse puts our association completely beyond society's rules...you cannot expect us to conform to some idealised version of a proper relationship when neither of us chose the other.'

Hermione's lips were pressed into a firm line; she was clasped inexorably to his side, but she was not convinced. She could not deny that there was some force to his arguments, but every instinct rebelled against his calm announcement of his possession of her.

'People don't *belong* to other people,' she said stubbornly.

His left hand cupped her jaw and turned her face to him, gently but insistently. 'A woman in a monogamous relationship with me does indeed belong to me, Miss Granger, or she chooses *not* to be with me.'

Hermione frowned, refusing to meet his eyes, and he continued his long history of playing unfairly by stroking her cheek with his fingers, sending a shiver down her spine.

'Come...this is not such an alien concept, surely?' His voice became warmer, melting her stubborn resistance as the chill leached away, replaced by the liquid velvet of his most seductive tones. 'Do not your parents belong to one another? Did they not promise to keep themselves solely to one another, as long as they both shall live?'

Hermione's eyes darted to his, then, and the tiniest quirk at the corner of his mouth hinted at a smile.

'You see,' he said, his hand now spanning her throat, his thumb moving in slow circles upon her jaw, 'this curse puts us in such an impossible situation; we must deal with it as best we can. I cannot have you constantly in my bed...and in every other nook and cranny of the castle, for that matter...and not be absolutely assured of your agreement to fidelity. It is too much to ask...I cannot function, otherwise, worrying that you will be tempted by the likes of that Quidditch-playing Bulgarian gorilla. Surely you see the wisdom of this agreement?'

Hermione looked into the depths of his midnight eyes, feeling desire stirring in her, and desperately tried to maintain her train of thought. She had begun this conversation with a reasonable request in view...not to be thought of as property...and it seemed to her that he had explained himself adequately in that regard. But if he was getting what he wanted, ought not she to bargain for what she wanted, as well?

'If I am going to agree to *belong* to you, sir, then you must do something for me,' she said, struggling mightily to stay on task.

'Something like this?' he purred, capturing her lips in a kiss. His tongue stroked confidently into her mouth, sure of its way, sure of its welcome, and he mimicked the action of his body within hers with his assured invasion of her mouth, thrusting, retreating, thrusting, retreating...finally capturing the tip of her tongue in his mouth, teasing it as he would her clitoris. The feeling followed the thought, and she was suddenly wet with need, wanting his mouth on her quim.

But a thread of sanity remained, and a voice in her mind demanded, *Hold to your purpose, thicko! Tell him!*

Hermione turned her face from him, breaking the kiss. 'No, *not* like that,' she gasped.

The professor watched her with half-lidded eyes, his erection perfectly evident beneath her bum, a smirk on his face.

Hermione moved quickly, shoving off against his chest as if he were a piece of furniture, and gaining her feet, she attempted to put some distance between them...only to fall arse over teakettle onto the sitting room rug.

'Bloody pouf!' she exclaimed, kicking her erstwhile stumbling block.

Professor Snape stretched his legs out and crossed his booted ankles, settling his hands behind his head, unashamed of the bulge in his trousers. 'This is all quite entertaining, of course,' he said, 'but was it really what you wished to accomplish when you called this meeting?'

Hermione rubbed her sore hip and glared at him from the floor. 'No,' she said crossly. 'If you want me to belong to you, then you can't push me away.'

He raised both eyebrows. 'I assure you, Miss Granger, I am entirely blameless. If I'd had my way, you would be here...' he indicated his tented lap, 'but as it is, I will undoubtedly have bruises from the violence of your retreat.'

Hermione pushed herself to a standing position. 'That's not what I meant, and you know it!' she fumed.

He stood, suddenly towering over her. Hermione thought to step back, but his eyes were mesmerising; she could not move away from him.

'I do know it,' he admitted. 'And I shall endeavour to keep my end of the bargain.' He extended his hand. 'Do we have a deal?'

The sight of Hermione's smile seemed to be a welcome one as she shook his hand.

'Yes, thank you, sir,' she said.

Maintaining his grip on her hand, he lifted it to his lips, taking her index finger into his mouth and nipping at her fingertip, never looking away from her face. Hermione felt the teeth as if upon her flesh, and every nerve in her body thrummed with sudden, overwhelming desire.

'Men are remarkably single-minded creatures,' she said, swaying toward him.

'Indeed,' he replied, heading for his bedroom and tugging her along behind him.

She lay beneath him, both of them slick with sweat. The fingers of her hands were entwined with his as their arms rested above her head, and he slowly, maddeningly fucked her. As the impetus of her fourth orgasm built within her, Hermione admitted deep within herself that she *did* belong to him. She had done, even before he claimed her. Had she not been bewitched by his unremitting honour, enraptured by his unrelenting protection, and enslaved by his unwavering attention to her pleasure? Was she not beguiled by his sarcastic humour? Was she not charmed by his scintillating intelligence and enthralled by his conversation? Was she not captivated by the lean grace

of his body, the glittering of his black eyes...had she not grown to love the angular planes of his dear face?

Wait ... Love?

She was looking up into that face as he watched every change in expression on her face; he seemed to glory in his ability to reduce her to this mass of seething, reacting humanity. When the dreaded L-word crossed her mind, she gasped with the perfection of it...good God, if all the things she felt were not love, what was?

Professor Snape, equating her gasp with the nearness of her climax, purred his encouragement. 'That's right, petal...come for me. Don't be shy...let me hear you....'

And he abandoned their slow dance for a faster, driving pace, finally allowing himself to follow his own inclination and to seek his own pleasure. Full of new knowledge, his endearment...'petal'...ringing in her ears, Hermione tumbled headlong into rapture, her hands tightening on his as she arched her back and cried, 'Love! Love! LOVE!

His own rush of gratification was upon him then, and he threw his head back, arching his neck as his smooth movements deteriorated to uncontrolled jerking spasms of his hips between her thighs. Her legs tightened over his lower back, holding him within her, and he looked bleakly down into her face with a crooked smile.

'You'll have to hold me excused,' he said with mock solemnity, rolling away and collapsing on his pillow. 'I'm afraid I'm quite shattered.'

Hermione took a deep breath of her own...he obviously had not heard her! Thank Nimue, Circe, and all the Graces. Rising up on one elbow, she smiled softly down into his face.

'I think we've both earned a nap,' she said, extinguishing the candles and curling up beside him.

Time enough in the days to come to sort out what *allthat* meant.

A new peace reigned between them in the following days. For the first time since Hermione had been cursed by Voldemort, Professor Snape began to grant her the benefit of the doubt. If he was unsure of an action or a comment on her part, rather than reacting defensively, he *asked* her what she meant. Hermione was so flabbergasted by this underhanded tactic that she retaliated in kind.

The result was unprecedented peace in the dungeon quarters of Professor Severus Snape. If one were not advised otherwise, a stranger to the situation might be under the impression that a couple of rare compatibility shared those cramped rooms.

With her recent awareness, Hermione found the world to be a new place. She felt as if she were looking at her professor with new eyes, and in so doing, she was seeing things about him she had never appreciated properly. Even more than before, his mere entrance into a room set her pulse to racing; the unexpected sound of his voice across the Great Hall or around a corner of a castle corridor could make her breath catch in her throat. She longed to be near him, now, irrespective of the demands of the compulsion. She spent more time than before in his rooms, seeking his presence and proximity, and he made no objection to her preference for his company.

Many were the evenings and endless weekend afternoons they spent before the sitting room fire, but now the wingchairs were unoccupied; Hermione and her professor sat together on the couch, touching, if only their shoulders, side-by-side. More often, she curled into him as they read, and he permitted it, his arm around her, absent-mindedly stroking her hair. Sometimes they put down the books and talked to one another of things they had read, often lapsing into silence, content to wrap themselves in the blanket of the others' presence and simply *be*.

Other times, he would tangle his hands in her crazy hair and press his lips to hers, utterly ensnaring her senses with honeyed, mutually narcotising kisses. His lips and tongue became her entire universe as he feasted upon her mouth, prolonging the agony of arousing her until she felt that she existed in a timeless dimension. When, at last, he would join his body with hers, the infinite variety of ways they could incite one another to the edge of frenzy made the completion of each act a transcendence of its own, never to be revisited but to be set aside and treasured until the next time and the translation to a new plane.

Hermione realised that their love-making, as such it had become, was heavily infused with desperation. She knew some fragment of her own part in their interactions was driven by the compulsion, but she was not blind to the fact that, for the first time in her eighteen years of life, she was hopelessly in love, and she was acting out every trite stereotype of a woman thus afflicted. Her friends, her responsibilities, her classes, her homework...all were mere backdrop and soundtrack to the ongoing drama of her first love.

And she didn't bloody well care...providing Professor Snape never suspected.

The first thaw came, and the promise of spring infected the student body with a world-class case of cabin fever. The teachers, as a body, praised Merlin that the Easter break was not long distant.

On one sunny, if crisp morning, Hermione was daydreaming over her porridge when the post owls flooded the Great Hall with their fluttering and swooping. Nudged into a semblance of alertness by Ginny Weasley, Hermione took receipt of her *Daily Prophet* and let her eyes wander, as they did one thousand times per mealtime, it seemed, to the head table. She frowned to see an eagle owl drop an envelope at Professor Snape's place before wheeling in the air and flying again from the cavernous room.

Had the envelope been *sea-green*?

It was lunch before she could ask.

She entered his rooms and went directly to the bedroom; she had neatly disrobed and slid between the sheets before he came into the room, fully clothed.

'You received mail,' she said, watching as he shucked out of his robes and coat.

'Did I?' he responded neutrally, bending to pull off his boots. His hair swung forward to cover his face, and Hermione frowned.

'You know you did,' she said. 'What was it?'

'Nothing of consequence,' he answered, stepping out of his trousers and pants and pausing to peel off his socks. He straightened and began to unbutton his shirt, his eyes averted.

'Was it from Morgen?' she persisted, hearing the faint strident tone in her voice, but unable to let it go.

He shrugged out of the shirt and stood before her, completely nude and magnificently erect. Now he looked at her, his eyes half-hooded, and deliberately smoothed one hand down his impressive length, eliciting a gasp from her.

Hermione unconsciously licked her lips.

His lips twisted in a sneer as his hand continued down, cupping and lifting his heavy sac, bringing his other hand into play, the palm passing over the tip of his cock before stroking himself.

Hermione whimpered and rose to her knees, suddenly impassioned beyond bearing. Her palms covered her breasts, gently squeezing before flattening upon her ribcage and sliding down her youthfully flat tummy toward the tangle of curls at the apex of her thighs.

His teeth were now bared in an appreciative grimace as he lightly stroked himself, watching her hands upon her flesh. 'Do you want to talk or fuck?' he asked. 'Because if you'd rather talk, I can take care of this by myself.' As if to prove his point, he tightened his grip and gave a twist of his wrist as his fist passed over the head of his cock.

'I need to fuck,' she said, her tone pleading as her fingers dipped into the wetness. 'Please fuck me.'

He walked to the side of the bed, his eyes glittering, his hand still on his erection. 'On your hands and knees,' he said.

Hermione complied, trembling with anticipation. This was a lovely position for her, extending the time before her climax, making it all the more intense when she came. She felt him as he positioned himself behind her, nudging her legs further apart...then he pressed his hand between her shoulder blades.

'Face in the pillow,' he growled, teasing at her entrance with the bulbous head of his cock. 'No talking, if you want me to fuck you.'

In no state to argue, Hermione buried her face in her pillow and was rewarded with his smooth, sure thrust into her heat. He set a fierce pace, the short time of the lunch period not providing for languorous love-making. She fell into his rhythm, pushing back to meet him, moaning her appreciation into her pillow each time his bollocks impacted her vulva, indirectly stimulating her clitoris. The scream, which escaped her when her orgasm went on and on, doubling in intensity until she was shuddering, went into the dense goose feather-stuffing of her pillow, as well. Two more pistol-like lunges of his hips delivered his ejaculation, followed by his groan as he lowered himself to the pillow by her face.

Hermione moved instantly into his arms, and he willingly received her, returning her open-mouthed kiss languidly. When her cheek rested on his pectoral muscle, he tilted her chin and gazed into her eyes for a long time. At last, he pulled her closer and murmured, 'No more pillows...I want to hear you when I make you scream.'

She was surprised, when working out a set of Arithmancy equations that afternoon, to have him come into his rooms from his last class of the day and deliberately seduce her back into bed. The curse was quiet, and it was uncommon for them to have sex during the schoolday when she was not in need. When she was spent, he held her close and stroked his fingers lazily up and down her spine until she slept.

When she woke, she was in the bed alone, and the growling of her stomach informed her she had missed dinner. She sat up, a bit disoriented, and saw her professor pulling on his robes.

'Where are you going?' she asked groggily. 'And why did you let me sleep so late?'

'Call Winky to bring food,' he advised, removing his cloak from the cupboard.

Hermione was instantly alert. 'Did he call you?' she asked anxiously.

He scowled at her. 'No. Attend to your own business, Miss Granger.'

'What aren't you telling me?' she demanded.

He turned and strode from the room.

'Professor!' Hermione cried, outraged, but he crossed the sitting room and walked out of his quarters without a backward glance.

Hermione dressed with concerted speed, her brain whirling. If he wasn't going to a meeting with You-Know-Who, then why was he being secretive about it? She had his patrolling schedule by heart, and staff meetings never took place in the evenings. Besides, he wouldn't put on his cloak unless he was going outside the castle.

Why would he leave the castle at seven o'clock on a Wednesday night?

She didn't know, but she'd damn well find out.

Harry looked up, surprised, when Hermione erupted into his dormitory.

'Is everything all right?' he asked, scrambling off his bed and abandoning the Quidditch magazine he had been reading.

Ron glanced over to her, not bothering to sit up from his sprawled position on his bed. 'You missed dinner,' he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. 'Well spotted, Ronald,' she snapped, walking past him to Harry. She darted a glance around the room to make sure the three of them were alone. 'Harry ... may I please borrow your Invisibility Cloak?'

His green eyes lit with animation. 'What's up?' he asked excitedly.

'Professor Snape left the castle tonight,' she said, looking down at her clasped hands.

'Summoned?' Harry asked. 'You can't follow him, Hermione...that's just insane.'

She shook her head. 'No, he didn't take his mask.'

Ron rolled over on his side. 'The git probably just went down the village for a pint,' he said. 'The teachers do that sometimes at night, you know.'

Hermione ignored Ron and addressed Harry again. 'Please don't ask me a lot of questions,' she implored. 'Just let me borrow the Cloak. I promise to return it in good order.'

Without another word, Harry turned from her and rummaged in his trunk until he pulled the silvery material from it. He held it out to her, a worried look on his face. 'Let me come with you, Hermione,' he urged. 'I worry about you following him...he could be meeting with Death Eaters.'

'I won't let them see me, Harry...I promise. I just ... have to see.'

Harry finally nodded. 'Stay on your guard...and don't forget to let me know you got back safely.'

Hermione pressed a kiss to his cheek and hurried to the door. 'I will...I promise.'

Hermione stowed the Invisibility Cloak in her pocket as she raced through the castle corridors, down the staircases, and into the entrance hall. No one was about as she slipped out the immense front doors and all but ran toward the winged-boar-topped gates.

Beyond the Hogwarts grounds, she pulled on Harry's cloak and Disapparated to the alley behind the Three Broomsticks. She crept into the side street and moved stealthily around the building to the front, waiting beside the door with her heart pounding in her throat for a customer to come or go, so she could enter the pub without notice.

A few minutes later, she got her wish as a chatting couple exited, giving her the opportunity to slip into the welcome warmth. A quick survey of the room revealed her quarry; Professor Snape sat at a table in a murky corner, across from ...

Morgen Singer.

Hermione felt the fury rise up in her until she thought it would burst from her chest. Her hands shook with the excess of adrenaline flooding her body, preparing her to fight or flee...but she could do neither. She could not openly challenge the other witch in this public place, nor could she leave the red-haired menace alone with *her* wizard...the duplicitous bastard! Well, she had Harry's Cloak, at least; she could eavesdrop with ease.

Keeping the fabric wrapped closely around her, she navigated cautiously through the taproom to the table in the furthest corner. Thankful for Professor Snape's choice of seat, if not his taste for company, she slipped behind his chair and insinuated herself into the corner of the room, no more than two feet away from their table, with a clear view of each of their profiles. She stopped breathing when the professor turned his head and stared directly at the spot where she hid, his nostrils flared wide, but his attention was soon recalled by Morgen, and Hermione relaxed again.

'... and George is doing very well in all his classes,' Morgen said, taking a dainty sip from what appeared to be a glass of mead.

Professor Snape kept his unsmiling regard trained on Morgen for several moments of silence. Morgen showed no sign of discomfort at this lack of congeniality; she drank her mead and smiled at her companion with perfect serenity. Hermione noted that Morgen Singer had chosen to arrive at this rendezvous in shimmering grey robes, open over a forest green dress which clung to every curve. Hermione stared at the plunging neckline of the other woman's dress and hated her with every fibre of her being. *Why* did Morgen Singer have to be so beautiful, so elegant, so adult? What was it the professor's cousin, John, had told her about his Aunt Morgen? That she had loved Severus Snape since she was a teenager? And Madam Prince, the professor's grandmother, had told Hermione that Professor Snape wasn't interested in marrying Morgen...so why was he *here*? For sex? But he had promised not to touch another woman

'If I were the least bit interested in the well-being of my cousins, I have no doubt that my mother or grandmother would be delighted to regale me with tales of their exploits...however, I do *not* have the least interest, as you well know.'

Morgen's silvery laugh floated across the table, setting Hermione's teeth on edge. Even the woman's laugh was seductive. *Why* was life so *unfair*?

'Sev, you're so droll,' Morgen said, reaching a perfectly manicured hand across the table in clear invitation.

The professor responded by crossing his arms and glaring at her. 'Don't call me that,' he bit out.

Morgen's patience seemed to slip. 'Why do you have to be so difficult?' she demanded with a touch of petulance. 'I have said a thousand times how sorry I am...what a huge mistake I made...why can you not forgive me?'

Professor Snape sneered and spoke in tones from which Hermione cringed. 'I do not forgive betrayal, Morgen. I, too, have said this a thousand times. So, for the last time, why have you called me out tonight?'

Changing tack, Morgen leant towards Professor Snape, allowing him a clear view down the front of her dress to her bra-less breasts. For a panicked moment, Hermione wondered if the professor had brought a potency potion with him, for surely he was too tired to tango after their afternoon encounter.

'I have a room upstairs, darling,' Morgen said, her sultry air giving Hermione the urge to douse her with a large pitcher of cold water. 'You've found pleasure enough in my bed, haven't you? Come with me now...I promise you won't regret it.' The tip of her pink tongue darted out and passed over a lower lip already glistening with especially charmed lipstick.

The professor reached out and took Morgen's wrist in his hand, and the voice in which he spoke to her was dripping with malevolence.

'I will tell you one last time, Morgen. I have no interest in you...not as a wife and not as a lover. We have other associations...our family is one, our Lord is another. We will always be connected in those ways. Accept that and leave me in peace.'

He stood, as did Morgen, who drew herself to her full height, her haughty demeanour as much a part of her as her cold beauty.

'I hope you won't regret this little talk, Severus,' she said. 'I am not without resources, you know, and I do not despair of getting what I want...so, let us part as friends.' She stepped up to him and placed a kiss upon his cheek, her lipstick leaving a clear red imprint upon his skin. Then she turned from him, picked up her handbag, and walked out of the pub, her head held high.

Hermione exhaled slowly, torn between relief that Professor Snape had turned down a tumble with his former lover and anger that he had come out to meet another woman after lecturing her so sternly about avoiding association with other men.

Her relief was quite short-lived, for when the pub door closed behind Morgen Singer, he whirled and ripped the Invisibility Cloak from her.

'Why is it, Miss Granger, that you cannot do what I ask of you?' he hissed.

'Oh, I don't know, Professor,' she hissed back. 'Why is that you can't tell me the truth about your extracurricular activities?'

Suddenly mindful of their surroundings, Professor Snape took her elbow and steered her to the bar, where he paid Madam Rosmerta for Morgen's mead.

'More troubles, Professor Snape?' the proprietor said, sending an amused look in Hermione's direction.

'Sufficient unto the day, eh, Rosmerta?' he replied as he pocketed his change. He then said to Hermione, 'Come,' before walking out of the Three Broomsticks into the chill March night.

Hermione scrambled to keep up with his long-legged gait. 'What did she mean? Madam Rosmerta, I mean.'

He glanced down at her face, amused. 'So that's your first question?' he said.

'What did she mean?' Hermione asked again.

He smirked at her, slightly moderating his pace to accommodate her shorter legs. 'She thinks you have a crush on me...and you would not be the first student Rosmerta has seen who behaved in that way.'

'You've had students fall in love with you?' Hermione said, amazed.

His amusement turned to a scowl. 'You needn't sound so surprised,' he snapped. 'It is a common problem for schoolteachers in secondary education...and I *am* the youngest teacher on staff.'

Hermione tried to wrap her mind around the notion of students developing romantic feelings for the great git of the dungeons. Then she remembered what she really wanted to say to him, and she stopped dead in the middle of the pathway, illuminated only by the half moon shining amongst the stars.

Professor Snape continued along for several yards before he realised she was no longer at his side, and he turned to glare at her. 'Come along,' he snapped. 'It's getting late.'

Hermione crossed her arms belligerently over her chest. 'No,' she said.

The professor crossed his arms as well, and they faced one another in a classic stand-off.

'How did you make me forget about the letter Morgen sent to you?' she demanded.

'What are you on about?' he said in tone of long-suffering.

Hermione advanced on him angrily. 'Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. You got a letter from her this morning...I asked you about it, and somehow you made me forget about it...I wouldn't have done, otherwise!'

She stopped right in front of him, her hands now fisted by her sides. His scowl deepened.

'A very mild and carefully directed version of Obliviation,' he admitted grudgingly.

'How dare you!' she raged at him, pulling her wand in a blind moment of anger.

He caught her wand-arm wrist in his hand and removed her wand. 'Calm down,' he snarled. 'I didn't want you to be upset.'

'You thought I would be less upset if you skulked out to meet your girlfriend behind my back?' she screeched, wrenching her arm out of his grasp. Shorn of her weapon, she punched him in the bicep.

'Hermione,' he growled, wrapping her up and holding her immobile against him. 'Don't make me put a body bind on you!'

'I trusted you!' she cried, struggling against him. 'I trusted you, and you tampered with my memory and went off to meet with another woman! I *hate* you!'

'You stood there, smelling of my semen, and listened to me talk to her,' he thundered. 'You know very well that I was absolutely faithful to you. I will not deviate from our agreement...and you *know* it.' He gave her a little shake. 'Admit it!'

Hermione closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of him, and her anger began to dissipate. 'I believe that you won't cheat with another woman,' she admitted, 'but you can't lie to me, even if you think it's for my own good. Let *me* decide what is best for me!'

He lowered his face and nuzzled her hair. 'Will you stop being angry if I agree?' he asked gruffly.

Hermione melted into his embrace. 'Yes...and you have to promise never to tamper with my memory again.'

'Very well,' he rumbled. Then, he stunned her by kissing her in the middle of the road between Hogwarts and Hogsmeade.

Arriving back in her room, Hermione called Winky and gave her Harry's Cloak. 'Let him know I'll tell him about it later, please,' she said.

'Yes, Miss,' Winky said, disappearing with a pop.

Hermione Flooed to the professor's rooms; she preferred the privacy of his bathroom. When she had bathed and come out of the professor's bathroom, wrapped in the garish green satin dressing gown, he was sitting on the sofa, staring into the fire. She sat down beside him and watched the play of the firelight across his hawkish face.

'Sir,' she said, and he turned to look at her. 'Please tell me about Morgen. Your cousin told me she had loved you for years, and your grandmother told me your family wanted you to marry her...but you said to her that she had betrayed you.' Hermione reached out to him and caressed his face. 'You've seen into my mind...you know everything about my past...but I know almost nothing about you. I have the right to know about Morgen Singer.'

He watched her with glittering eyes. 'The *right*?' he repeated. 'You believe being imprinted on me by a compulsion curse gives you the *right* to know intimate details of my past?'

Hermione flushed and dropped her hand from his cheek. No, of course she didn't think the curse gave her the right. Her love for him, however, was an entirely different matter. She felt she would combust in frustration if she couldn't understand his complex relationship with the beautiful green-eyed Morgen.

A flash of inspiration came to her, then, and she scooted closer, then straddled him. 'No...I have the right because *you belong to me*,' she said, framing his face with her hands. 'If I belong to you, then you belong to me, as well...and that gives me the right to know about you and Morgen, or I can't be at peace in my mind. It's too much to ask of me.'

His smile transformed his face, alleviating the harsh lines and brightening his eyes. 'Very clever,' he murmured to her, sounding proud of her reasoning. 'Of course, you understand that I will then have the right to demand *your* condition as quid pro quo,' he added.

'Of course,' Hermione agreed too quickly, delighted to have carried her point. 'Now...tell me about Morgen.'

He turned his face into the palm of her hand, pressing his lips there, before taking both her hands in his and saying, 'If you won't find it objectionable, I shall ask to borrow the headmaster's Pensieve for you to view my history with Morgen.' He shrugged. 'Verbal self-revelation is not one of my strong points.'

Hermione nodded. 'That will be acceptable,' she said. 'When will you ask the headmaster?'

'I shall ask to borrow it on Saturday...we'll have more time and energy for it, then.'

Hermione smiled at him, her heart lightened by his cooperative spirit. 'That'll be brilliant,' she agreed, happy now.

'Excellent,' he purred, releasing her hands and taking her face between his palms. 'And now that I belong to you,' he added with a wicked gleam, 'you can't push me away.'

She tilted her head to one side, trapping his hand between her face and her shoulder, rubbing her cheek against his palm. 'I don't push you away,' she said softly.

He gently righted her head again and tightened his grip on her. 'Perfect,' he breathed, and with no warning and no spoken incantation, he slipped into her mind.

Helpless against his invasion, Hermione realised how she had been tricked...he was inside her mind by her invitation, and she had no way to guard her new feelings from him. Still, she scrambled to do so, erecting barriers, hiding, desperately looking for a way to shield her heart from his scorn and disdain. Distantly she heard his deep chuckle as he effortlessly took down her walls, perusing her memories at his leisure. With a whimper of mortification, she felt the last defence crumble, and he held in his figurative hand her deepest secret. The speed with which he jerked away from it...from *her*...was impressive.

Both of them were panting as he disengaged from her mind, and they stared into each other's faces, he, as if he had never seen her before, and she, as if he had never been more beautiful to her.

'I love you,' she said helplessly.

A/N: Beta reading was done by DeeMichelle and Brit-picking by MagicAlly...hugs and kisses for them both! As always, Sshg316 was my alpha reader and cheerleader.

George is the youngest of the Prince boys, Severus' cousins; they were introduced in Chapter 10. Severus is the nephew of Tiberius Prince, the boys' father, and Morgen is the sister of Ava Prince, the boys' mother, so she is their aunt.

'Sufficient unto the day' is a Biblical allusion from the Sermon on the Mount: 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.'

Chapter 18: Exposure

Chapter 18 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.



The Love You Take

Chapter 18: Exposure

Severus sat upon his sofa with his fair torment upon his knees, her confession hanging in the air between them like vapour...but was it a treacherous, miasmic mist or a mere puff of prattle? Did he dare to pass over it lightly, as if she had not spoken?

Her enormous brown eyes studied him fearfully, her lip caught now between her teeth. He did not need to dip into her mind again to know how anxiously she awaited his reaction. One glance into the memory of her realisation of her feelings had sufficed to lay it out before him like one of Dumbledore's cursed knitting patterns: She had been aware of this feeling for some time and had been concealing it from him...and he wished to Merlin he had not felt the mischievous need to bedevil her by Legilimising her. He had not been in pursuit of her *feelings* about him...he assiduously avoided such knowledge, and had done all his adult life...no, he only followed her so determinedly down that particular garden path because she had so diligently attempted to hide something from him. He could no more *not* pursue her efforts, knocking down her defences, than a cat could resist the urge to pursue a mouse. Pouncing, it had been as if Severus-the-cat had jumped upon the helpless mouse, only to discover it was, instead, a rapacious wolf, ready to devour him.

He was rattled.

I love you, she had blurted, as if such words could exist in his rooms...in *his world*. The child was deluded, and she was now in a state more fragile and vulnerable than ever before. His duty in this matter skirted narrowly between two factors: he must not lie to her, and he must not distress her.

How in the fucking hell was he supposed to accomplish *that* acrobatic feat?

She had looked helplessly into his face, and for all the world as if she were placing in his hands a gift beyond price, she had breathed, *love you*.

Now speaking aloud to her, he said, 'So I see,' and carefully watched her face.

She inhaled sharply, as if she had been holding her breath whilst she waited for his response. Hurt seemed to surface, darkening her wide-open eyes, then dignity kicked in, and he could see her spine straightening as her stubborn chin lifted.

'Is that all you have to say?' she said, her voice controlled but rife with indignation.

He remained perfectly still, maintaining eye contact, struggling to hold together through this confrontation. 'It's not your fault,' he said gently, raising a hand to stroke her cheek.

She batted his hand away as if it were a bothersome fly and scrambled up to stand before him.

'*Fault?*' Her voice trembled with suppressed anger.

Paralysed with an emotion for which he had no name, Severus attempted a recover. 'Surely you don't mean to imply that it is *my* fault?' he said, striving for a reasonable tone.

'I don't see that it is a matter of *fault!*' she cried, her cheeks flushed and her just-washed mass of hair beginning to frizz about her face.

He wanted her...wanted to hold her, kiss her, fuck her...wanted her like his lungs wanted air, like his body craved water. For the tiniest moment, his eyes closed against the

weakness of being unable to scorn her love...unable to fling her irately from his presence...unable to pretend to be untouched by it all.

'Sit down, and we will have a drink,' he said then, opening his eyes again.

'I don't want a drink!' the impossible girl replied, the threat of tears trembling in her tone.

Screw what she wanted...he bloody well *needed* a drink. Ignoring her response, he lifted his hand to Summon the tray from the drinks table. She crossed her arms belligerently across her breast and glared her defiance at him...and then it happened: His body broke faith with him, and the hand which he held aloft visibly tremored. Unable to help himself, he glanced at her suddenly still face, and he knew she had noticed.

With carefully schooled features, the girl sat beside him and graciously accepted the glass of Firewhisky which he poured and passed to her. He felt her concerned gaze upon the side of his face, but he did not acknowledge what she had seen. They sipped in silence for a few moments, and at last, he said, 'We have quite enough on our plates as it is, do we not?'

Her affirmative murmur was followed by the press of her warm, reassuring softness against his side as she flowed against him, resting her head upon his shoulder. He breathed an internal sigh of relief...she was going to let it go.

Sending his empty glass back to the tray with a flick of thought, he removed her half-full glass from her hand and sent it away, too. She moved into his arms as he reached for her, their bodies responding simultaneously to the same impulse. His tongue tasted her whisky-flavoured mouth as his hands parted the folds of the green satin dressing gown. Her silken skin begged for his touch, and he lightly hefted her breasts, gently squeezing, as he swallowed her barely vocalised whimper. Then she shifted herself astride him again, her burning lips leaving his mouth to spread kisses down his throat, forcing his head back against the sofa cushion in a form of surrender.

His need flared, matching the momentum of her curse-driven hunger, and she assuaged that need, her passion flowing over him in white-hot waves. She Vanished his clothing without removing her teeth from his flesh, and she encased him within herself, merging their bodies into one. Fiercely, she rode him, driving again and again to impale herself on his full length and rise agonisingly up, only to plunge again, her slick heat engulfing even his bollocks as she paused to grind her hips, wringing a guttural gasp from him. She braced her hands on the sofa back and stared down into his sweat dampened face, her glittering eyes torrid in avidity. Immersed in her, drowning in her, he yielded to the unrepeated words, acceptance gilding the blinding light of completion as he emptied himself, semen and soul, into her, gasping, 'Hermione.'

On Saturday afternoon, Severus placed the headmaster's Pensieve upon his coffee table and stood facing the girl, who sat with poorly repressed excitement upon the sofa, waiting to view his memories of his history with Morgen Singer. Straightening, he studied the face of the only person in memory who had ever professed love for him. If either of his parents had ever spoken the words...which he greatly doubted...he had no recollection of it. Morgen had spoken the words a time or two over the years, but Severus had discounted the declarations without a second thought. In the world of sexual relationships, certain words are spoken at certain times...it was expected. He had been guilty of it, in his youth, believing that the statement of irrelevant untruths was a necessary adjunct to getting what he wanted...and he had wanted sex. What man didn't? The hunger had been worse, then, and it had left him susceptible to manipulation.

He had done what he could to put an end to that.

But would this child understand that? The last thing he needed was for her to be made distraught by the sights and sounds of his youthful pursuit of carnal pleasure. Women, he believed, tended to take such adventures very much to heart, whereas for a man, his heart was usually the least affected part of his anatomy. Morgen, of course, had been a notable exception, but Morgen possessed the mind of a true Death Eater...which left the question of her so much as *possessing* a heart in serious doubt.

Hermione Granger was, in his experience, unique. Not only was she in possession of a heart, but it appeared that she wore it upon her sleeve and lacked the sophistication to pretend otherwise. She was neither embarrassed nor shamed by her feelings...she seemed *proud* of them, bothersome chit that she was. And, as a possessor of sincere, intense feelings, she was at risk for having those feelings *hurt*.

It caused him no end of self-flagellating annoyance that he now would offer himself for immolation before he would permit the girl to suffer injury, whether of body or spirit, if it lay in his power to prevent it.

From the pocket of his robes, he removed a handful of corked phials, each charmed to a different opaque colour, each containing the swirling mist of a memory. He bent and lined up the vessels on the tabletop beside the Pensieve, conscious of the girl's avid eyes following his every move.

'Have you ever entered a Pensieve before?' he inquired neutrally, standing straight again.

'No, but Harry has,' she replied, standing to face him.

He sneered. He would not soon forget the little shit invading the memories he, Severus, had placed out of the way for their ill-fated Occlumency lessons. 'And that is relevant how?' he snarled.

The girl blinked at him, seeming to quail a bit before his tone. 'Only in that he described to me how it is done and what it feels like, sir,' she admitted, subdued.

He glared at her, wondering how much he ought to tell her. Why did he care if her precious feelings were hurt by the sight of him enamoured of another female? *She* was the one insisting upon acquiring this knowledge; left to his own devices, she would never discover from *him* what a fool he had been at twenty. Why had he ever agreed to this insanity, anyway?

The girl darted a look up to him, her wide brown eyes concerned, her little white teeth clamped on her lip. With an inward jerk of impatience, he picked up the first phial.

'This date of this memory is June, 1976,' he stated. 'It provides ... context.'

She nodded, excitement showing again in her face. 'Will you come with me, or will I go in alone?' she asked.

'I shall accompany you,' he replied dryly. 'If you have questions, you may ask as we go and not save them up to assault me with them all at once.'

She had the nerve to twinkle at him. 'That's a capital notion, sir,' she said.

He simply growled. 'Lean over and touch the liquid with your face,' he instructed.

They fell through space until they landed upon their feet upon the edge of the Quidditch pitch. The day was bright, the sky blue, the grass underfoot verdant green and sweet-smelling. The girl turned to him.

'What is the memory about, sir?' she asked eagerly.

Severus crossed his arms over his chest, wishing to hell he was anywhere but here. He jerked his head towards the Quidditch stands, and they began to walk. There was a solitary figure seated in the stands, at the far end, away from the castle. As they walked, voices came from behind them, and the girl stopped, nervously grasping his arm.

'Someone's coming!'

Severus jerked his arm from her grasp. 'We cannot be seen or heard, Miss Granger...this is only a memory,' he snapped. Dear Merlin, how he *hated* this.

The girl pivoted, watching the approach of the four young men who loudly made their way toward the pitch, broomsticks in their hands. Two were black-haired, one sandy-haired, and one mousy-haired. The slighter of the two black-haired boys wore glasses.

'That looks just like Harry!' Miss Granger exclaimed.

'Yes,' Severus snarled, unable to prevent the ugly curl of his lip.

'And that's Sirius!' she added, her excitement evident in her voice. 'So, the other two must be Professor Lupin and Wormtail.'

'Well spotted,' Severus sneered. 'Shall we move on, or did you wish to stay here and moon over this lot?'

Miss Granger frowned. 'If this is your memory, sir, where are you?'

Severus strode off across the Quidditch pitch without bothering to answer her. She followed, trotting to keep up with his longer legs, until they stood just beyond the far edge of the stands, past where a girl with dark-red hair sat, reading. Giving a savage nod toward the shadowy area beneath the stands, he said, 'There I am.'

Creeping soundlessly from behind the stands, sixteen-year-old Severus Snape approached the place where the red-haired girl sat, his greedy eyes fixed upon her form like a ship upon a beacon. At sixteen, he had been exceedingly weedy, slight and stringy, having yet to experience the growth spurt which came upon him at seventeen. He wore shabby, ill-fitting robes and his hair hung in his eyes, unkempt and greasy.

Why had he agreed to his? Now *she* would be privy to just precisely how pathetic he had been when he was at school.

The voices behind them continued their boisterous nonsense as the Gryffindor arse-wipes came closer, and at last, the red-haired girl in the stands lifted her head. A breeze blew across the pitch and ruffled the heavy fall of dark red hair, and the memory girl pushed the hair from her face as she looked toward the source of the sound, the brilliant hue of her green eyes startling in her pretty face. Miss Granger gasped.

'That's Harry's mum!' she said. 'He has her picture on his bedside table...I've seen it a thousand times.'

Biting back the urge to demand why she had been in Potter's dormitory a thousand times, Severus nodded. 'Yes. That was Lily Evans.'

His sixteen-year-old self froze in place when the voices of the approaching group of boys came to his ears. Young Severus looked longingly at Lily Evans, then melted into the shadows beneath the stands.

'Oi! Evans!' James Potter called. 'Fancy a fly? You can use my broom ...'

Enough. Grasping Miss Granger's elbow, Severus removed them from the Pensieve.

She swayed as she found her feet on the hearth rug, clutching at his robes to maintain her balance. Severus peeled her hands from his clothing and stepped away from her, the worst of his self-loathing activated by his sojourn into the past. This had been a bad, stupid idea.

She looked confused as he pushed away from her. 'Why did we leave?' she asked. 'Nothing had happened yet.'

He busied himself returning the memory to its phial and uncorking the next. Seeing himself as he had been irritated him almost beyond bearing. 'Nothing did happen,' he replied tightly. 'I told you before we entered that the memory would provide context.' He poured the next memory into the Pensieve. 'You do recall why we are engaged in this exercise?'

The girl nodded. 'To view your history with Morgen Singer,' she replied promptly.

He turned his most disdainful classroom glare upon her. 'Did nothing in the memory you just viewed seem relevant to that aim?'

He seethed inwardly as she considered, her unlined brow furrowed with thought. He had given her no background for what she had seen...did she not know his history with James Potter and Sirius Black? Was it possible that Potter's son had not told his friends what he had witnessed in Severus' memories?

The girl began to speak in musing tones.

'You didn't do anything in the memory except to approach Lily,' she said. 'We didn't spend any time watching Mr Potter and Sirius...you just wanted me to see Lily...' the girl's eyes grew wide as she looked into his face, 'and to see her resemblance to Morgen.' Her expression softened, and she spoke with great hesitation. 'You ... fancied her, didn't you?'

Lips thinned dangerously, Severus nodded once. Painful as this might be, it was, yet, not so terrible as speaking the words aloud.

'Are you ready to view the next memory?' he demanded tersely.

She nodded without speaking.

'The next memory is from Easter holiday, 1977...my uncle's wedding.' He nodded toward the swirling mist. 'Shall we go?'

The girl did not answer, but bent and touched her face to the substance of memory, and they fell, to land in the middle of a wedding hall.

Gaily dressed wizards and witches abounded; the hum of conversation was cheerful and celebratory. Directly before them, a young and pretty Ava Prince greeted her wedding guests, her face flushed pink with pleasure beneath her bridal tiara.

The girl pivoted on the spot, taking in the scene. 'Oh,' she said, 'your grandmother was so beautiful!'

Severus turned and watched the regal Tatiana Prince working the crowd of wedding guests, obviously in her element as a social hostess.

'But your mother looks uncomfortable,' she added, and Severus glanced to see Eileen Snape standing in a corner, clutching her handbag, wearing finery at odds with her cowering demeanour.

'She was...and *is*...scorned in this society because she committed an unforgivable social solecism,' Severus explained. 'She married a Muggle.'

The girl looked about expectantly. 'Is your father here?'

Severus snorted. 'One does not bring one's embarrassing Muggle connexions to a pure-blood social event,' he replied.

An orchestra began to play, and the wedding guests moved good-naturedly to the tables ringing the room. Tiberius Prince, resplendent in his formal robes, stepped up to his bride, and they began to dance. Severus noted with a sneer that the girl seemed riveted by the pageantry of it all...what was the fascination females held for weddings?

After a time, a handsome middle-aged couple took the floor, joining the bridal couple in the dance. The man was large and fair, whereas the woman was a stunning redhead.

'Parents of the bride,' Severus supplied, unasked. 'Wilhelm and Rita Singer.'

Next came Madam Prince with a squat, ill-favoured man. 'Semaphore Leclercq,' Severus said, 'the richest wizard in Europe and one of the Dark Lord's greatest financial backers.'

The girl turned startled eyes to him. 'Still?' she asked.

Severus smirked. 'No, he's dead.'

'Look at how he watches Rita Singer,' the girl said. 'He's not paying a bit of attention to your grandmother.'

Another couple began to dance, and the girl grasped his arm. 'There you are!'

Seventeen-year-old Severus was a different animal than he had been at sixteen. An eight-inch growth spurt had given him his adult height, and his grandmother had provided the faultlessly tailored robes he wore. His black hair, worn even longer than he wore it now, was tied back in an orderly queue with a black ribbon. And in his arms, looking petulantly bored, was a very young Morgen Singer.

At fourteen, Morgen had already begun to display the promise of spectacular beauty. Her face was still a bit rounded, but she was quite tall, and the hints of womanly curves to come filled out the bridesmaid's robes she wore.

Severus glanced down at the girl and saw that she was riveted by the sight of him at seventeen. Whereas he was looking at Morgen, the girl was looking at him. He felt a touch of pleasure in her absorption. As she watched his memory self circle the dance floor in perfect style, having been drilled unrelentingly by Grandmother's hired dancing master for the week before the wedding, Hermione's arm crept about his waist, and she rested her head against him. At last, she stirred from her reverie and focussed on Morgen.

'What is she scowling about?'

'She does not like dancing with me,' he responded. 'She was the maid of honour, and I was the family member closest to her in age...so it was determined that I would dance with her.' One side of his upper lip lifted in disdain. 'We have just met; it is her first grown-up party, and I do not fit the bill of what she had in mind for her first conquest.'

The girl huffed, and Severus took her elbow, guiding her across the dance floor to approach his younger self. The song ended, and seventeen year-old Severus said gallantly, 'Shall we dance again?'

Morgen stepped out of his arms with unconcealed distaste. 'No,' she snapped and turned away. Belatedly, she glanced back over her shoulder and added, 'Thank you.'

Undeterred, Severus stepped up behind her, bending to murmur, 'Let me get a glass of lemonade for you.'

Suddenly, they were joined by Madam Prince and her dance partner, each carrying goblets of sparkling liquid.

'Young ladies don't want lemonade,' Semaphore Leclercq said, his voice booming as his eyes raked over the young witch. He pressed the goblet into her hand. 'They want champagne, don't they, pretty?'

Morgen's expression cleared miraculously. 'Yes, thank you!' she said, smiling coyly up at the old man.

The girl made a choking noise, and Severus glanced down at her. She said, 'Why is she flirting with him?'

'Because she believes he is harmless...just another old man, like her father's friends, who make much of her and pet her and are courtly and complimentary...she feels much less threatened by that than by me.'

'But he's looking at her like ... well, it's creepy!'

Severus gave a sardonic smile and pulled her with him out of the Pensieve.

The girl sat on the sofa, as if to regain her balance. 'She didn't like you much, did she?'

'No,' he agreed, changing out one memory for the next. 'She was overheard to tell her mother that I was "greasy and ugly and obnoxious."'

'Overheard by whom?' the girl asked curiously.

'Overheard by me,' he answered, his eyes trained on the contents of the rune-inscribed basin.

'It's not true!' she said hotly. 'You looked quite dashing, and you were very gallant. She deserved a good slap for her rudeness!'

Severus set the empty phial on the coffee table and studied the girl's flushed indignation...on *his* behalf. Why should she care so fiercely about something that happened before she was born? It didn't make sense to him, but he could not deny that her outrage soothed him. Oddly enough, her ability to be emotionally connected with events of his past made the process less onerous for him.

'The next memory is during Easter break, 1978,' he said. 'My cousin's naming. Are you ready?'

The girl stood and together they fell into Prince House.

They stood in the great marble-floored entrance hall, the stained-glass representation of Merlin and Nimue glowing like a multi-faceted jewel upon the landing, casting fractured light of a thousand colours upon the wall. The drawing room to the right was open and full of well-dressed people; the second drawing room to the left had been opened for the occasion, and the overflow of guests milled about there, as well, sipping from delicate china teacups and nibbling delicacies from matching plates.

Severus urged the girl up the stairs to the first floor, where his eighteen-year-old self was disappearing down a hallway to the left. They followed him to a door which he opened without knocking, and he leant insolently against the door jamb, his arms crossed over his chest. Severus led the girl through the wall into the room, where Morgen Singer sat. The space was very small, containing a delicate writing table, two matching armchairs, and a well-stocked bookshelf. Morgen had her legs tucked up under her, and she had a book in her hands.

'I never took you for the bookworm type,' young Severus said to Morgen.

A year after her sister's wedding, Morgen Singer was more assured than she had been at fourteen.

'Why don't you run along and find some other Hogwarts types to talk to?' she replied haughtily, dropping her green eyes back to her book and dismissing him.

Her tormentor stepped into the room and snatched the book from her hands. 'Oh, *deep* reading, I see,' he taunted, smirking at the prettily indignant girl in the chair. '*Gurke's Guide to Gentry and Gentility in Wizarding Britain*. How ... illuminating.'

Morgen demonstrated her youth then, by rising and holding out an imperious hand. 'Give that to me and get out, you git!'

The memory Severus chuckled. 'What were you doing...making a wish list of boyfriends?' He tossed the book onto the recently vacated chair. 'Forget it...these blokes want a girl with some substance.'

The next sound was of the flat of Morgen's hand impacting Severus' face; a miscalculation on her part caused the heel of her hand to catch his lower lip, bloodying it against his teeth.

The smile he gave to her was all the more disturbing for the smear of blood showing on his uneven teeth. 'And did I mention class?' he continued, as if she had not slapped him. 'Just a word to the wise, Miss Singer.'

'Get out!' the now red-faced Morgen screeched, and Severus tugged the girl out of the Pensieve.

Noting her clenched jaw with some amusement, he repeated the process of changing out the memories.

'Did you heal your lip before you went back downstairs?' she asked tightly.

One side of his mouth quirked up. 'I was pants at healing charms then,' he said. 'Scampy would have done, but I made her leave it alone.'

'Why?' She sounded genuinely distressed.

He smirked. 'It made Morgen much more uncomfortable that way,' he said. 'She was on pins and needles for the rest of the holiday, worrying about when I would choose to tell her parents how their precious child had conducted herself when not under their eye.'

The girl leaned suddenly into him, pressing her breasts against his arm as she reached up to run her thumb over his lower lip. 'But you didn't tell anyone, did you?' she said, the manic light of the compulsion in her eyes.

His lips parted at the touch upon his mouth, and his tongue darted out to lick her thumb. 'No, I didn't,' he agreed.

Wasting no time on niceties, she reached out and cupped his balls before reaching for his fly.

'Like that, is it?' he said.

She did not speak, too busy seeking out his cock with one hand and laving the palm of her other hand with the broad flat of her tongue before studiously applying a slick fist of encouragement to his readily responding shaft. He grabbed the bottom of her jumper, pushing it roughly up her torso and baring her breasts to his eyes. In the ambient cold her pink nipples crinkled at once, calling for the ministrations of his tongue, the warmth of his mouth. Swinging her up, he crossed the room and went through the door to his bed, depositing her there and following her down, his hunger for her driving all other considerations from his mind.

She had learned...or perhaps devised...more disrobing spells than he had ever known to exist. Whilst he was busy suckling and fondling her breasts, she managed to bare the bottom half of her anatomy, and he willingly travelled down her abdomen, leaving the purple marks of suckled love bites in his wake, until he buried his nose in the drenched cleft of her womanhood.

The way she fisted his hair in her hands, rendering him immobile, clearly demonstrated her wishes, and he endeavoured to explain without the doubtful benefit of words exactly how much he preferred her society to that of the red-haired termagant from the Pensieve, in this or any other incarnation. He was an accomplished orator, regardless of his means of communication, and he did not cease his distinctive articulation until her grip loosened, and she encouraged him to seek other employment by turning slightly to one side, disengaging his mouth from her quim.

He rose up on his knees between her thighs, looking down at her nakedness...save for the jumper bunched up beneath her armpits...and his cock twitched with urgency. Pausing only to unfasten his trousers and to push his clothing off his hips, he pressed into her body to complete the delivery of his all-important communiqué.

When they woke from their nap, they partook of tea and scones before going into the Pensieve again.

'What is the date of this memory?' she asked him, reaching to bind her hair out of her face with a scrunched-up bit of fabric.

'It is Christmas of the same year, 1978.'

She expressed her readiness to press on, and they entered the Pensieve, falling into his grandmother's drawing room.

It was evening, and the room was aglow with candlelight and firelight, made festive by the myriad bunches of holly and ivy, bound with crimson ribbon, which decorated the room. Eighteen-year-old Severus sat in a leather armchair in a corner, unquestionably bored. His grandmother, mother, and Aunt Ava sat together with baby John in their midst, discussing matters of childrearing, and Tiberius Prince sat in the matching armchair across from his nephew, drinking wine.

Severus led the girl to stand beside his memory self and waited for the knock upon the door. It came, and a house-elf scurried out to open the door, permitting a small group to enter the foyer. Grandmother and his mother rose to greet the guests, but his memory self kept his seat, even when the Singers and their companion entered the room.

Wilhelm and Rita Singer were first, each resplendent in holiday finery, and behind them came Morgen and the rotund Semaphore Leclercq, a grotesque parody of a smile on his gargoyle-like face. Tiberius Prince abandoned his wine glass and rose to shake hands and kiss cheeks before relaying drink orders to a house-elf; through it all, young Severus remained silent and disinterested.

The men settled in chairs pulled up to surround the fire whilst the women exclaimed over baby John. Morgen, obviously bored by the adoration of her nephew, hovered behind her father's chair, listening in on the conversation.

'How does the English Ministry feel about the rising popularity of the new Dark Lord, Prince?' Semaphore Leclercq said in a thick French accent.

Severus bent his head to whisper into Hermione's ear. 'Uncle worked for the Ministry of Magic then, in the Office of International Cooperation.'

Tiberius Prince picked up his wine glass from the table upon which he had left it, as if to stall for time. 'There is strong opposition to the Dark Lord in the English Ministry,' he said.

His father-in-law cocked his head to one side. 'Whatever for?'

Leclercq snorted. 'Undoubtedly, the Mudblood-lovers are responsible.'

Severus' uncle inclined his head slightly. 'There is a large contingent, led by Albus Dumbledore, which denounces the Dark Lord and his followers.' His eyes darted nervously toward the silent figure in the corner.

'Dumbledore!' Leclercq exclaimed. 'That fool!'

Hermione huffed impatiently. 'I'll bet you weren't calling him a fool when he was saving your arse from Grindelwald!' she said.

Severus ghosted a smile at her. 'Actually, old Semaphore was one of Grindelwald's lieutenants...but he claimed the Imperius Curse when it was over, of course.'

The memory Tiberius Prince and Wilhelm Singer nodded in agreement with the statement of Dumbledore's character. Leclercq downed his glass of wine, snapping his fingers impatiently for a house-elf to refill it. 'His Lordship would do well to step up his efforts, if you ask me,' he said darkly.

'I will be happy to carry the message for you,' a dangerous, silky voice promised.

All three of the older men jerked their faces then to Severus, who continued to lounge insolently in his chair. Even by the firelight, it was easy to see that Semaphore Leclercq's face flushed an angry brick red.

'Who are you to speak that way to me, you impudent pup!'

Tiberius Prince sat forward anxiously. 'It's my nephew, sir...he's actually ...'

But memory Severus was on his feet, confronting the old man with a horrible sneer on his face. With a violence of motion at odds with the cold emptiness of his black eyes, he ripped his left sleeve up to his elbow, clearly showing his Dark Mark, red against the eerily pale flesh of his inner forearm.

The three older men froze in place, all seemingly riveted by the spectacle of the horrible tattoo. Hermione touched him. 'Why did you do that?'

'If a Death Eater reveals his Mark to another Death Eater, the second Death Eater must reveal his Mark, as well. I was forcing his hand.' Severus shook his head as he watched his younger self behave with such brash confidence, sure that nothing too dreadful could happen to him.

Swearing in French, Semaphore Leclercq stood, dwarfed by the height of the younger wizard, and with a flourish of his wand, caused his cuffs to roll neatly back just far enough to reveal an identical Mark on his own left forearm.

In that instant, Severus' grandmother stepped into the firelit space and a sure wave of her wand covered the Dark Marks again with their respective owners' shirts. 'If you can behave with no more courtesy to a guest in my home, young man, you may take your supper upstairs in your room,' she said with cool authority.

Teenaged Severus Snape swept a deep, mocking bow to the infuriated old man by his grandmother's side. 'My apologies, *sir*,' he said, managing to make the honorific sound like a filthy swearword. Then he stalked past the gaping Morgen Singer and into the hallway, with Hermione and Severus following.

'Aren't you a bit old to be sent to your room without supper?' the girl asked as they walked up the stairs.

'She did it to protect me from Leclercq,' he said. 'That old bugger was a nasty piece of work.'

She slanted a glance at him as they moved along the hallway. 'Then why on earth did you provoke him?'

He shrugged. 'For the same reasons I acquired the Mark itself,' he said starkly. 'I was bored, and I wanted to show off my consequence.'

The memory Morgen Singer swept by them at that moment, in hot pursuit of her quarry. Hermione growled her indignation. 'Oh, so *now* she finds you interesting?'

Just ahead of them, Morgen impetuously opened a door without knocking and entered; Severus and Hermione followed her in. Memory Severus looked up from the chair in which he sat, reading. The corner behind him housed two small bookshelves, each overflowing with leather-bound volumes. The young Death Eater showed no surprise to the beautiful girl who burst in, uninvited.

'You needn't stand on ceremony with me, Miss Singer,' he said, his voice dripping with mockery. 'Feel free to just barge right on into my *bedroom*.'

Morgen didn't respond, other than to reach behind herself to push the door closed.

Severus stood and took a step towards the red-haired witch whose height had not yet reached her adult growth; he towered over her, using his bulk to threaten her. 'Perhaps you've come to borrow a book...I know how you enjoy reading.'

Morgen stood her ground, straightening her spine and lifting her face to return his gaze, but she did not speak.

Severus made a rueful sound and shook his head in a parody of regret. 'Oh, but I don't own any books about how to find a rich, powerful lover.' He bent closer to her, bringing his disdainful sneer within scant inches of her face. 'So *sorry*.'

Hermione took a noisy lungful of air, and Severus smirked down at her.

'Do you *want* her to hit you again?' she said, unable to tear her gaze from the two teenagers facing off a few feet from them.

'Yes,' he said simply, then quieted, for Morgen finally spoke.

'Are you really a Death Eater?' she asked, wide green eyes unafraid, making no move to distance herself from the intrusive intimidation tactics her adversary used against her.

Instead of answering, teenage Severus jerked the girl against his chest and kissed her as if he were administering vicious punishment to a nefarious enemy. The girl answered him by yanking the riband from his shoulder-length black hair and twisting her fingers in the strands. As young Severus pulled away from the kiss, Morgen made a sound like a hissing snake and bit his lip. He responded by backing her against the nearest wall and trapping her there with arms on either side of her, an unholy light in his eyes. Morgen lunged at him and kissed him again, taking one of his hands and placing it on her breast.

Severus wrapped a hand around Hermione's upper arm, and they exited the memory.

She found her footing on his hearth rug and gaped up into his face. 'How old were you there?'

He raised his eyebrows. 'I was eighteen; she was fifteen.'

The girl swallowed. 'Did you ... did you *sleep* with her?'

He sneered. 'It's a foolish wizard who lowers his guard to sleep with *that* witch.'

Hermione set her jaw. 'You know what I mean.'

He rolled his eyes. 'She was the virgin daughter of an influential pure-blood family...of course I didn't *fuck* her.'

The girl bristled at his terminology. 'Couldn't you tell that she was only interested in you because you were a *Death Eater*?'

He turned from her and began the process of changing out the memory for the next one. 'Couldn't you tell I didn't *give* a damn why she was interested?'

He straightened from his task to find wide accusatory eyes trained on him. 'I was *eighteen*,' he reiterated. 'What, in your experience, is topmost on the list of priorities for an eighteen-year-old boy?'

The girl's lips, tightly pursed in displeasure, relaxed to a rueful grimace. 'All right,' she said resignedly. 'What next?'

He surveyed her through narrowed eyes. 'Suffice it to say that we saw one another over the next couple of years on holidays with much the same interactions. The next memory is from Christmas, 1980.'

He waited only for the girl's nod that she was ready, and they entered the Pensieve.

Severus braced himself for her response, and she did not disappoint his expectations. When the girl found herself in a dark, cavern-like space, surrounded by cloaked, hooded, and masked Death Eaters, she uttered a small cry and turned to him, eyes wide with fear.

'We're in a memory,' he reminded her, using the soothing tone to which she always responded. 'No one can see us; you are in no danger.'

She gave her head a shake, a look of embarrassment on her face. 'I realise that...I don't know why I reacted that way.'

He did not respond, but urged her forward to view the group of figures. The Dark Lord stood upon a rocky ledge, illuminated by thousands of floating candles. Two others flanked him upon the ledge, but the greatest number of people stood in a semi-circle before him, their attention focussed on the group of kneeling figures between them.

He who had once been Tom Riddle spoke aloud, his voice high and cold, and all eyes turned to him. 'What better way to celebrate Christmas than to welcome the newest Death Eaters?' he asked rhetorically, to murmurs of general agreement from his followers. 'Let the revels begin!'

A small group of the standing Death Eaters moved forward, taking one of the supplicants kneeling upon the rock floor and moving with the newcomer in their midst to the far end of the room, where they climbed up a set of stairs hewn into the very wall of rock and disappeared. This action was repeated several times, until only four people remained in the room: The Dark Lord, the figure at his side, one kneeling person, and a lone masked Death Eater.

'Come to me, Severus!' the high voice called, and the Death Eater strode forward, past the supplicant, to kneel and press his lips to the Dark Lord's cloak.

When memory-Severus touched the Dark Lord's garment, the two of them Disappeared to a warm, quiet bedchamber, and Severus and Hermione went with them.

'Where are we now?' the girl whispered.

'We were in a cavern below Malfoy Manor,' Severus responded, 'and now we are in the room given over to the Dark Lord's use when in residence at the Manor.'

In the new room, the Dark Lord sat in a gilded, high-backed chair reminiscent of a throne, whilst the younger Severus continued to kneel at his feet.

'The female amongst the new recruits is a member of your family, is she not, Severus?' the Dark Lord asked.

Young Severus replied without lifting his face. 'She is the sister of my uncle's wife, my Lord.'

'She bears a startling resemblance to the Mudblood, does she not?'

'There is a similarity,' the younger man agreed warily.

'I cannot give you the Mudblood now, Severus, though I shall spare her for you, if I can, for you have been of great use to me.' One white, spider-like hand moved over Severus' head, and his mask disappeared. 'Lord Voldemort knows how to reward those who serve him well. I shall give you *this* girl for your wife, instead.'

Severus' head rose as he gawped at his lord. His thin lips parted, but no words came from his throat. Lord Voldemort chuckled, and at last, Severus found his voice.

'But she has not yet left school, my Lord...how am I ...?'

'The details shall be arranged for a summer wedding, at her home in Germany. But for tonight' The Dark Lord let his voice fade as he watched the expression upon the young wizard's face. 'Tonight, my son, you shall have her for your own.'

The door to the bedroom opened, and a young and voluptuous Bellatrix Lestrange entered. She walked past Severus as if he were not there, and she, too, knelt down, pressing her face into the Dark Lord's thigh. 'She is ready for him, my Lord,' she breathed, rubbing her cheek along the great man's leg like a cat.

The tiniest motion of the Dark Lord's hand had Bellatrix up and in his lap, her face buried against his neck. The Dark Lord took the hem of her robes and lifted them until the woman's shaven genitals were in plain view. With no ado, he plunged the handle of his wand into her, and a spoken incantation set the wand to vibrating and the witch to moaning as she clung to him.

Hermione's gasp of disgust was drowned out by the Dark Lord's voice. 'Go to her, Severus...she is in the room next to this one. You may have free of her until morning, when she will have to be returned to her parents. Do nothing to her that will leave her ... unfit for her family to see...if you understand my meaning.'

Young Severus wrenched his gaze away from the squirming Bellatrix to the older wizard's face. 'Yes, my Lord,' he said obediently, and he rose to leave the room.

Severus touched Hermione's arm, and they left the Pensieve.

Back in his sitting room, the girl excused herself to the lavatory, and Severus asked Winky to bring fresh tea, with sandwiches. It was past the supper hour now, and there was still one memory to view, but he felt both he and the girl could do with some refreshment.

When she joined him on the sofa, she smelt of the Muggle face cleanser she kept in his bathroom. She sighed thankfully when he handed her a cup of tea, and tucking her feet beneath her, she took a long sip.

Severus ate a sandwich which he did not taste and waited patiently for her questions. He had not long to wait.

'You slept with her then?'

He raised a sardonic eyebrow. 'Even in my brash youth, I was not so foolish as to disregard a direct order from the Dark Lord.'

The girl made a face at him. 'But you *wanted* to do it, didn't you?'

'Yes,' he answered truthfully. 'I wanted very much to do it.'

She nodded and reached for a sandwich. 'That was Christmas Eve, 1980?' When he acknowledged it, she said, 'That's the date she engraved on the pocket watch she sent on Valentine's Day...how romantic.'

He shrugged. 'It was a significant date in our relationship,' he replied flatly. 'It was *my* first time, as well.'

She turned startled eyes to his face, and Severus could have kicked himself. Why had he felt the need to tell her such a thing? It was entirely irrelevant to the conversation. Obviously, he was getting tired.

'Did her family acknowledge your engagement?'

He abandoned the half-eaten sandwich and poured another cup of strong tea. 'The families knew, but it was not to be announced until she left school in the summer.'

'Does You-Know-Who give people to one another like that often?' she asked, sincerely curious.

'No,' he answered. 'Any marriages arranged by the Dark Lord are to *his* benefit. He did not give Morgen to me...he gave me to her.' Severus privately appreciated the look of shocked indignation this pronouncement produced in his auditor. 'Morgen had come into a small inheritance when she had come of age, and she gave the gold to the Dark Lord in exchange for his agreement to our marriage.'

The girl placed her dishes upon the table with a clatter. 'She must have wanted you pretty badly to buy you like that,' she said sourly. She turned her large brown eyes upon his face. 'Did you ... love her?' she asked in a small voice.

'I was infatuated with her,' he replied steadily, holding her gaze. 'She was not any more pleasant of a person just because she wanted to be allied with someone in my position amongst the Dark Lord's followers. But she was a willing bed partner.' ...and those were few and far between for someone like me. He left the last bit unspoken, trusting her to understand.

'Did you want to marry her?' she asked him, fidgeting with a loose strand of her hair.

'I never questioned it,' he said. 'Others from my year at school had married...it was what one did. My grandmother was pleased about it...the Dark Lord was pleased about it.' He put aside his teacup and stood. 'Let's view the last memory, and then you can ask the rest of your questions...and then we can put this behind us, yes?'

She murmured her agreement as he put the last memory in the Pensieve. 'This memory is from Easter, 1981,' he said. 'Are you ready?'

They landed in a room they had visited once before; it was the wedding hall where Tiberius Prince and Ava Singer had been married three years before. The double entrance doors were right before them and memory Severus came through them. He wore a heavy travelling cloak, and his hair was disordered, as if he had been outdoors on a windy day. Standing near the door was a young Lucius Malfoy, his blond perfection a stark contrast to Severus' dark ugliness.

'Severus!'

Malfoy stepped forward with some urgency, obviously surprised...and somewhat alarmed...to see him.

Severus halted, pulling off his gloves and tucking them into his cloak pockets. 'What's toward?' he asked. 'I arrived back early and found only house-elves at the Manor...Dobby told me all of you were here.' He looked around. 'What an odd place for the Dark Lord to call a gathering.'

Malfoy placed an arm about his shoulders. 'It's not a mandatory meeting,' he said. 'Tell me about your mission...how were you received in Athens and Constantinople?'

Severus snorted. 'The Greeks were uninterested, and the Turks wanted too much control.' He shrugged Malfoy's arm from his shoulders and began to walk across the reception room towards the inner chamber. 'I'll give my report to my Lord, if you don't mind.'

'Well, Severus, he wasn't expecting you back so soon,' Lucius said, beginning to sound a bit desperate.

Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle strolled together from the doorway at the far end of the room, and when they saw Severus, they sported nearly identical expressions of shock. Rodolphus recovered first.

'Sev!' he cried, coming forward with hand outstretched. 'We weren't expecting you! You're supposed to be in Greece!'

Severus ignored the proffered hand. 'Why does everyone keep saying that?' he demanded. 'I finished the Dark Lord's business.' He swept past Rabastan, only to be held up by Rodolphus.

'Wait up, mate,' his former classmate said lamely. 'You don't want to go in there...what do you say we pop down the pub for a few pints?'

An orchestra began to play in the next room, and Severus pulled his wand and snarled, 'Out of my fucking way, Lestrangle, or I'll hex your bollocks off.'

Both Lestrangle brothers fell back out of his way, and memory Severus strode into the next room with Severus and Hermione following him.

Just as it had the last time they had been in this room, it was full of formally dressed witches and wizards. Tiberius and Ava Prince took the dance floor, joining the other two couples already dancing, Wilhelm and Rita Singer...and Morgen, ethereal in her bridal finery, dancing in the arms of Semaphore Leclercq.

Lucius Malfoy entered the room behind Severus and scurried to the table where the Dark Lord was ensconced in solitary splendour. At a nod from the great man, the Lestrangle brothers each took one arm of Severus Snape and frog-marched him over to the Dark Lord's table.

'Did you not see fit to carry out the instructions I gave you?' the cold voice demanded, and Severus executed a stiff bow, the only obeisance the Dark Lord demanded in public.

'I spoke to the contacts you provided for me in both Greece and Turkey,' he replied, sounding strained, having a difficult time keeping his eyes from Morgen, floating like a fairy across the dance floor as she towered over her dance partner.

'Sit, Severus,' he was commanded, and he complied, accepting from the Dark Lord's own hand a glass of champagne.

'So, you will accord the bride and groom your congratulations,' the Dark Lord said. 'I did not mean for you to see this,' he added in what passed for a kind tone in Lord Voldemort. 'I would not have caused you pain...but my plans changed, and it became desirable for my dear Semaphore to marry Morgen. You understand, do you not, Severus?'

The memory Severus let the crystal champagne goblet fall from his fingers, and it shattered on the table. The pain on his face was plain to see, and Bellatrix Lestrangle approached, laughing.

'Look at Snape!' she said gleefully, turning to include her husband and brother-in-law in the joke. 'He looks as if he were kicked by a Hippogriff!'

Hermione grasped Severus' arm, and he tore his eyes from the pathetic drama to glance at her. 'Yes?' he asked.

'Please, can we leave now?' she said. 'Haven't we seen enough?'

He looked at the tears tracking down her cheeks, and without another word, they left the Pensieve.

Safely back in his sitting room, he guided her to the sofa and pulled his handkerchief from his pocket. Why was she crying?

'Why? Why did he do it?' she whispered, taking his handkerchief.

He frowned, wondering at her violent reaction, and said, 'Semaphore Leclercq wanted her. He had wanted her mother, Rita, but she had chosen to marry Singer. So he went to the Dark Lord and offered a large sum of gold for Morgen. Later, I was told that the Dark Lord offered him other women, in an effort to save Morgen for me, but Leclercq was interested in no other witch. I was sent on the mission to Asia Minor to get me out of the way for the rush wedding, but because I took no part of the whores and drugs provided for my entertainment, I was back much sooner than expected.'

'How could he do that?' the girl cried, bounding up from the sofa. She began to pace the room, so Severus sat down on the sofa and watched her. 'How could he tell you that Morgen would be your wife, then send you out of town and marry her to that *horrible* old man!'

'You should calm yourself, Miss Granger,' he said, feeling both confused and disturbed by her behaviour. One would think she was ... moved by the sight of his foolish reaction to Morgen's marriage.

'It was so unfair!' she said, her tears evolving now into anger. 'You-Know-Who manipulated you and lied to you and humiliated you! He let that crazy Lestrangle woman *laugh* at you!'

'She was far more in his favour than I,' he told her.

The girl stopped her pacing and stared across the table at him. 'The way she behaved with him in the previous memory ... is *she* under the same curse I am?'

Severus nodded. 'He put her under the curse when she was fifteen years old,' he told her.

'But she's married to Rodolphus Lestrangle!' she objected.

'The Dark Lord needed the gold ...'

The girl let out a sound between a growl and a howl. 'That terrible man! He shuffles people around as if they were pieces on a chess board!'

Severus relaxed a bit and smirked. 'It is the way of great men to do so, you know. It's how wars are won and governments are formed.'

Impetuously, she came over to him and knelt at his feet. 'How can you bear it?' she asked, tears shining in her eyes again.

Moved, he cupped her face with one hand. 'It has been a part of my life for so long that I no longer think on it,' he admitted quietly.

'We'll just see about that,' she said fiercely.

Relieved to have the ordeal of relating his sordid history behind him, he did not reply, but stroked her cheek. She crawled up onto the sofa and curled against him. Amazed that such a small thing as her warmth at his side could make such a difference, he turned his face and buried his nose in the top of her sweet-smelling hair. He would not think on *that*, either.

A/N: Beta reading thanks, as always, to DeeMichelle, and Beta reading kudos to MagicAlly. Sshg316 alpha read.

Chapter 19: Recognition

Chapter 19 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: This chapter was beta read by DeeMichelle and the first four pages were Brit-picked by MagicAlly...because I sort of managed not to send the rest to her! I vow that if she finds more errors, I will be back to correct them. As usual, Shug alpha-read.



The Love You Take

Chapter 19: Recognition

Spring warmed the air, and the old snow melted from the mountainsides as the Easter holiday approached. Hermione was happy for the coming period of time when she could focus on revising for her N.E.W.T.s...but she wasn't terribly happy about her destination.

'But *why* do we have to go to Prince House?' she asked.

Her professor flicked his eyes over her, then directed his attention back to his marking. 'Are you under the impression that repeatedly asking the same question will produce a different answer?'

She glared at him without speaking, and he smirked.

'You are obviously accustomed to dealing with weak-minded dunderheads...unlike *me*.'

The all but imperceptible emphasis on the last word drew her eye to his face, and she felt the familiar sensation of the curse quickening her blood. It seemed that the longer she loved him, the more often *he* triggered the compulsion. Her tongue darted out to moisten her suddenly dry lips, and it was obvious to her from the abrupt sharpening of his gaze that he had noticed. He lay down his quill and relaxed infinitesimally into his chair as he awaited her next action. He was not above initiating intimacy between them, but he seemed to particularly relish her precipitate pouncing, when the urge came upon her with little warning. Her new familiarity with his past interactions with women explained this to her...he had spent a good deal of his life believing he was undesirable. She proved to him, over and over again, that this was incorrect.

Now, if she could only convince him of the truth of her attraction, aside from the *Eternus Perturbatio* Curse.

Hermione rose from the sofa before the fire and walked to him, brown eyes locked to black, her heart rate increasing with the slick ache between her thighs. Stopping before the desk, she tugged her jumper over her head and let it fall, revealing her braless state. Her tongue laved her lips again, and she was aware of the division of his attention, his eyes moving from her tongue to her breasts and back again.

'Please,' she said, her fingers plucking at her tight nipples.

'What do you want?' he asked her quietly. It was Friday night, and they had time for such niceties.

She came around his desk. 'Suck me,' she said, her own words causing a profoundly pleasurable sensation deep inside of her.

Wordlessly, he pushed his chair away from the desk, providing an empty lap for her. With hands now fumbling with urgency, she unfastened her jeans and stepped out of them and her knickers, straddling his thighs wearing nothing but her socks. He apparently found no objection to his mode of dress, for he tugged her head down to his and kissed her, drawing her tongue into his mouth and suckling it as his hands covered her breasts, encompassing them and gently squeezing.

Hermione slid further forward, bringing her wet quim into contact with the bulge in the front of his black trousers, her moan echoing in the room as he released her lips and guided her breasts to his mouth.

'Yessss,' she hissed, feeling his teeth with the lightest of pressure against the tender skin of her areole. He sucked hard, flooding synapses with wondrous sensations. She arched her back, offering her breasts more fully, and gripped his hips more firmly with her thighs, grinding herself against him.

When he had her emitting whimpering pleas for more, he deserted her breasts to press kisses to her throat. 'Up on the desk,' he purred into her ear.

Hermione scrambled ungracefully from his lap, and his steady hands at her waist saved her from an ignominious tumble onto the floor, her knees as wobbly as a new fawn's in her advanced state of excitement. Secure again on her feet, she backed up to the desk and hopped up on the blotter. He remained where he was for a moment, his lazy gaze taking in her hair, with tendrils escaping the thick plait down her back, her pleading eyes, her parted thighs, and the fragrance emanating from her.

'Sit back,' he instructed, and she obeyed, scooting her bottom to the middle of the desk and placing the flats of her feet on the desktop as well, leaning back to support herself on her hands, braced behind her. 'Good girl,' he murmured, and Hermione quivered with the visceral reaction of her body to that particular tone of his voice.

Now, he moved his chair forward again, as if he were going to resume his marking...but her quim was before him, sloppy-wet and redolent. His murmured incantation caused the desk height to adjust, until the edge was at his shoulder level; he had but to lower his head ...

He raised his hands and applied pressure to her inner thighs; she splayed them wider, displaying herself even more lewdly than before. Further murmured words of praise wrung a moan from her, and his eyes flicked up to her face once before he lowered his mouth, his long fingers spreading her labia as if she were a melon to be opened and devoured.

The first touch was the tip of his tongue, beginning at her perineum and lapping up and up, completing the tortuously slow trip with a gentle lipping of her clitoris. 'So sweet,' he purred, and Hermione fell back onto her elbows with a groan, straining to press herself more insistently into his face.

'Suck me,' she begged, almost a whisper, and laid back on the desktop, uncaring of the way the desk edge dug into the back of her neck as her head dangled over the side. It didn't matter...nothing mattered, save the insistent tug of suction upon her quim, the fingers which plumbed her depths, curving, reaching for and finding that spot which produced the most guttural of cries from her. He growled in response, redoubling his efforts as she slid from one blinding peak to the next, never quite coming down, her body now a vessel for the river of molten passion, burning away all else. Her eyes closed; she was aware only of the golden white lights generated by the twin stimuli of his fingertips upon her vaginal wall and his lips and tongue, warm and suckling...until at last her body convulsed at the zenith, and she was airborne, free of gravity, soaring.

She came to herself again when he lifted her limp form from the desktop and carried her into the bedroom, where a non-verbal spell drew back the counterpane, and she was placed upon crisp, fresh-smelling sheets. She entangled one fist in his hair and forced her eyes open to see the glittering jet of his gaze. 'Come to bed,' she murmured. 'Fuck me.'

'Oh, I shall,' he promised, releasing her and straightening to shed his clothing, letting it drop to the floor, as he seldom did...except when his need overcame his fastidiousness.

She stretched, knowing how he enjoyed seeing her body with muscles taut, nipples rigid, and quim receptively slick. She flicked her fingers and the candles in the wall brackets sprang to life, illuminating his body for her visual delectation. The breadth of his shoulders, tapering along the too-thin lines of his torso to his narrow hips never failed to excite her. He could...and would, if she had anything to say about it...stand to gain some weight, but the defiant erection he sported spoke nothing of ill-health or fragility. She hungered for him, for him alone, and the smirk upon his face said he knew it very well. How had she ever imagined the muscle-bound physique of Viktor Krum was superior to the lean grace of her own personal panther?

She received him eagerly between her thighs; she reached to guide him into her body but he tauntingly caught her hands and thrust them over her head as he stretched out atop her. She had to settle for wrapping her legs about his hips and straining up to kiss his sneering lips; as his tongue slipped into her mouth, his hardness filled her softness, and she sighed into his mouth, longing to speak again the words he had no desire to hear.

I love you, she thought, watching his face, his eyes closed, nostrils flared, lips slightly parted as he pounded into her. She watched him until the repeated exquisite friction of his gloriously formed male parts and her eminently receptive female ones claimed her undivided attention. She cried out as she crested again, inarticulate sounds of unspeakable pleasure, and she was aware of the change in his breathing which indicated the approach of his own climax. Still vibrating with the aftershocks of her orgasm,

she opened her eyes to bear witness as he visibly shattered, losing himself for a priceless moment in *her*.

I love you, she thought again, mouthing the words to his tightly closed eyes.

His movements slowed, the spasms of his pleasure passing, leaving in their wake what peace he seemed to derive from the act of intercourse. 'Hermione,' he murmured, slipping to his pillow at her side and pulling her against him, holding her as if he would not let go.

'I love you,' she whispered, but there was no sign he heard.

Standing before the looking glass in her bedroom at Prince House, Hermione was thankful for the gently nagging, reassuring presence of Scampy, the house-elf. She had heard the arrival of the Tiberius Prince family scarcely an hour before, and she had opened the door to her bedroom just long enough to ascertain, by the sound of her very annoying voice, that Morgen Singer had accompanied her sister's family on their Easter holiday.

'Where is Miss Hermione's party dress?' Scampy enquired, looking askance at the meagre selection of clothing hanging in the wardrobe.

Hermione shrugged out of her dressing gown, revealing the simple but pretty white matching undergarments she wore, and sat down before the dressing table. 'Scampy, would you please Transfigure something for me to wear? And arrange my hair?'

Scampy snapped her long fingers and the plain black satin robes transformed into an elegant white strapless sheathe. 'Scampy knows her business, Miss,' the house-elf replied repressively, now frowning over Hermione's sensible low-heeled black dress shoes. 'Scampy will make Miss much prettier than Miss Morgen.'

Hermione was startled into laughter. 'What did you say?'

Scampy snapped her fingers again and elegant silvery-white sandals replaced the mundane black, complete with four-inch heels and sexy ankle straps. The house-elf placed the shoes reverently on the floor and turned to Hermione, levitating herself and beginning to brush through Hermione's unruly brown hair.

'Miss Morgen has been coming to this house for years and hurting Master Severus,' Scampy said, a fierce scowl upon her round face. 'First she's too good for him, then she has to have him, then she's going to marry him, then she married that Bad Man.' Scampy glanced nervously over her shoulder and shuddered. 'The Bad Man was very bad to house-elves, Miss. And when she was married to him, Miss Morgen was no better.'

Hermione listened and watched clever elf fingers smoothing and twirling her hair until it was piled artfully upon her head, secured by elf magic, rather than by hair pins.

'Scampy knows Miss Hermione loves Master Severus and will be a good girl for him to love,' Scampy added, motioning for Hermione to stand and magicking the white sheathe carefully over her head without touching the fancy hair-do.

Hermione stood still as Scampy worked the back zip on the dress. 'You ... you *know* I love him?' she asked shyly.

Scampy smoothed the linen sheathe over Hermione's hips and moved in front of her to adjust the empire waist belt, above which the boned bodice, with its flattering sweetheart neckline, hugged her breasts.

'Scampy has known Miss loves Master Severus since Christmas,' the house-elf proclaimed, fetching the shoes and placing them before Hermione like an offering at a shrine.

Hermione accepted the help of the elf's strong steadying arm as she stepped into the shoes, thankful that Scampy placed a charm on the high-heels, permitting Hermione to walk in them without falling. 'Do you know, Scampy?' she asked, feeling her face flush with embarrassment. 'Does Master Severus love me?'

Scampy secured the dainty straps about Hermione's ankles and stepped back to look her over. 'Miss is as pretty as a picture,' she said with great satisfaction.

Hermione turned to the full-length mirror and stared. Why could she never produce the results when she dressed herself that Scampy brought about so handily? The chic dress fit her perfectly, the hem just skimming her knees, the boned bodice emphasizing the gentle curve of her breasts and the smooth expanse of her back, from the shoulder blades up. The shoes were smart and sexy without being slutty. The four inch heels made her silky bare legs look shapely and showcased her feet, which Scampy had managed to groom to a smooth polish, including barely-there pearlescent lacquer upon her toenails. Her hair was piled in an impossibly complicated up-do, with artful corkscrew wisps emphasizing her delicate throat and her vulnerable nape. Her hand went briefly to her collarbone, wishing she had a necklace to wear.

'A Revealing Spell will show the Nexus, Miss,' Scampy said.

Hermione turned shocked eyes to her. 'Isn't that rather bold?' she said uncertainly.

Scampy shrugged, her fierce expression still in place. 'My Mistress gave Miss the chain to wear it, didn't she?' Scampy glanced nervously about the room again. 'Showing the Nexus will help everyone remember who you are, Miss,' she said significantly.

Hermione understood the small creature clearly: Openly showing the Nexus would remind Morgen of who shared Severus' bed. Briefly, she wondered if Morgen had done something to make Scampy angry with her, other than slighting Scampy's beloved Master Severus.

She fetched her wand and tucked it securely in its sheath, giving Scampy a small smile. 'I'll think about it, Scampy,' she murmured. She seated herself again upon the dressing table bench, more on level with the tiny creature. 'You didn't answer my question, Scampy,' she said. 'Does Master Severus love me?'

Scampy's tennis-ball sized eyes narrowed and her lips pursed tightly. 'Master Severus does not know, Miss...but he needs to find out.' Scampy nodded once to emphasize her point.

'Right,' Hermione said, standing and looking one last time to make sure all was as it should be. Then she took a deep breath and went downstairs to dinner.

The only concession to the Easter holiday to be found in the drawing room was a huge bank of hot-house Easter lilies, each in their own foil-wrapped pots and artfully arranged in a corner. Otherwise, the room was a bit dark and drear, less enlivened by the presence of the three Prince brothers than one might have expected. The young men were sitting together at a games table across the room, engaged in what appeared to be a game of Exploding Snap.

'Good evening, Hermione,' Madam Prince said, her strong voice belying the fragility of her appearance as she sat in her high-backed chair.

Hermione came forward to take the frail, veined hand and made the tiniest of curtsies. 'Good evening, ma'am,' she replied politely.

The keen blue eyes of her hostess surveyed her minutely from her toes to the crown of her coiffeur, and the old lady nodded appreciatively. 'You've grown since Christmas,' she pronounced.

Hermione flushed. *Grown?* That was ridiculous! She was eighteen years old; she'd done with *growing* ages ago!

The aged witch chuckled, as if she could read Hermione's thoughts. 'Not in stature, perhaps,' she allowed, 'but you have matured...it sits well upon you.'

Hermione blinked as the stately old woman inclined her silvered head in a regal salute. Good heavens! Would she *ever* understand the professor's grandmother? The old harridan went from scary to kind and back again without drawing breath.

'Thank you,' she said, clueless as to a more appropriate response. She glanced about the room, but other than the boys, they were alone.

'The others went for a stroll in the garden,' Madam Prince informed her. 'Eileen always has to have her "alone time" with Severus, or she feels ill-used.' She sneered, her expression no doubt the genesis of the one Hermione had come to love in the professor. Now the old woman raised her voice. 'Boys! Say hello to Hermione!'

The Prince brothers rose to their feet upon their grandmother's command, coming forward with varying degrees of gladness to greet her.

'Hermione!' John said, taking her outstretched hands and looking her up and down in frank admiration. 'You look smashing!'

Paul, who had truly grown since Christmas, nudged his brother aside and carried Hermione's hand to his lips. 'We meet again,' he said, giving her a saucy wink.

Hermione laughed, cheered by the stunningly ordinary behaviour of Severus' cousins. Thirteen-year-old George flushed beet red when Hermione turned to shake his hand, but she spoke to him so sensibly about his classes at Durmstrang that he quickly got over his embarrassment.

She was immersed in playful conversation with the Prince boys when the others came in from their stroll in garden. Hermione turned politely to greet them, shaking hands in turn with Tiberius and Ava Prince, the boys' parents, and receiving an unnervingly kind greeting from Eileen Snape, whose cheeks were so pink from the chilly air that she looked better than Hermione had ever seen her.

Her duties as a good guest discharged, she became aware of eyes upon her, and she turned to face her professor, who lounged with one shoulder upon the mantelpiece, sipping at a glass of liquor and watching her. Forcing herself to swallow, Hermione walked over to him, stopping only a foot away from him, wanting very much to slip her arm through his and rub her cheek against the velvety black of his dress robes.

As if reading her intent, he said quietly, 'Mind where you are, Miss Granger.'

Hermione hesitated. She *had* rather forgotten she was in his grandmother's drawing room. Nevertheless, she eased one step closer, feeling quite confident in her very grown-up clothing. 'You said yourself that the whole family knows about us...why do we have to pretend in front of them?' Her heart sped up as she said the words; what would it be like to be seen in a group of people with this man, acknowledged as his woman...to have *him* acknowledged as her man? The very notion was intoxicating.

The pure ice in his voice froze her in her tracks. 'Have you lost what little sense you possess?' he demanded softly but lethally, his tone flaying her like a whip. 'You will behave with decorum in my grandmother's home, or I will see to it that you don't leave your room for the rest of our stay!'

Hermione turned her face away to hide her sudden tears, feeling herself pale with mortification. Dear Merlin, but the man could be the veriest bastard!

As if sensing some bit of what was transpiring between them, John approached her, nodding tersely to his cousin before speaking. 'Come have some Butterbeer, Hermione...or we have mulled mead! I know you don't want any of that Firewhisky my cousin drinks.' He accompanied this pronouncement with a genuinely sweet smile.

Hermione thankfully took his proffered hand, feeling pathetically grateful for the easy way to save face. 'Thanks...I'd love some.' Without glancing at her professor, she followed John to the drinks tray, where he poured a glass of mulled mead for her.

'I don't care if you *are* his,' John said, his voice for her ears alone, his dark eyes warm with concern. 'He has no business speaking to you in that tone.'

Hermione sighed. 'Did you ... could you hear what he said?'

John shook his head. 'No, but it was clear he was telling you off.'

Hermione gave him a rueful smile. 'You're a terribly nice boy, John. You're going to make some witch very happy.'

He grinned back at her. 'I have to tell you about Elspeth!' he enthused, and Hermione was glad of the diversion from her embarrassment to his exciting new relationship with a young witch from the French Ministry's Department of International Magical Cooperation.

Ava Prince and Eileen sat together near Madam Prince, speaking quietly, whilst Tiberius Prince spoke with his nephew. Hermione listened as John chattered happily, feeling herself calming under his pleasant influence. She was so involved with him that she failed to notice the sudden silence of the others in the room, until its cause spoke to her.

'Look at you, all in white!'

Hermione turned slowly, checking to make sure her wand was in its ornamental sheath at her waist. Morgen Singer stood in the doorway, drawing the eyes of the other adults, her manicured hands placed at her hips, managing to pull her tightly-fitting emerald gown even more tautly, emphasizing her small waist and slim hips. Her almond-shaped eyes reflected the colour of her dress, and her hair tumbled over her shoulders in burnished waves of copper. With her height and her manner of pure-blood superciliousness, she might have been a goddess descended in their midst.

Hermione felt like a candle burning valiantly to outshine the sun.

Morgen looked her up and down dismissively. 'White dress, white shoes ... you look quite *bridal*, my dear.'

Hermione could feel the eyes of Professor Snape upon her, and although she still felt the sting of his rebuke, she knew with a certainty that he *wabers*. Even if she could not lay claim to him in the presence of his family, for the duration of the compulsion curse, they belonged to one another, and nothing Morgen Singer said or did...no matter how many times she tried to humiliate Hermione before other people...would make Severus want her, ever again. She had been good for a tumble, but he would never trust her again with his heart.

Buoying herself with this knowledge, Hermione lifted her chin and said in a light tone, 'Bridal? Me?' She managed a creditable laugh; not silvery, as Morgen's was, but young and carefree, as Morgen would never be again. 'No, I'm not thinking of marriage...I'm too young, really...and I will take my time to be sure, before I become engaged. It would be a terrible shame if I changed my mind in the middle of it all and decided to marry someone else, wouldn't it?'

She heard Eileen and Ava gasp at this jab, but it was the ghost of a chuckle from her professor which encouraged her to go for broke.

'Just think of the disgrace, if I were to become engaged to one man and then marry another!' She looked into the blazing fury of Morgen's face with mock chagrin. 'I would never be able to hold my head up amongst decent people again if I were to behave like that.' She delivered a shining smile to the dangerously angry witch in the doorway, and with magic surging in her like waves at high tide, she cast a non-verbal Revealing Spell, and touched her throat. At the touch, the Nexus was visible, its delicate silver chain suspending the powerfully magical object just above the valley between her breasts. Even George was aware of the forceful pulse which rolled from Hermione, and the room as a whole held its breath to see how the two witches would resolve the contention between them.

Hermione stood straighter, wearing the emblem of her womanhood, the ancient enchanted Nexus given to her by her professor. He had been forced to take her virginity, and this had been the highest honour he could conceive of bestowing upon her. It was not a badge of shame, but one of honour, and she would wear it openly and proudly and let the chips...or bitches...fall where they may.

With one finger tracing the wrought silver Nexus, she said, 'So, no...I've no plans to marry ... at present.'

Morgen moved precipitately into the room, walking over to the sardonically smirking Severus Snape, who still lounged against the mantelpiece. Tiberius Prince stood there, as well, and at Morgen's approach, he stepped back into the shadows, as if to put himself out of range. Ignoring her brother-in-law's retreat, Morgen stopped in front of

Professor Snape, her breasts rising and falling magnificently with each agitated breath she drew.

'Are you going to stand there and permit that insolent little Mu...'

'Aunt Morgen!' John said warningly, his voice stopping her cold. 'Remember where you are!'

Morgen gave no indication that she had heard John. 'Do you mean to allow your *student* to speak to me in that way?' she said to the impassive wizard, her tone between insistence and entreaty.

'Excuse me, Morgen,' Professor Snape said silkily, 'but I'm afraid that I do not follow your reasoning. You rather impolitely compared Miss Granger's very attractive ensemble to that of a bride, and instead of demanding what business it is of yours how she dresses, she explained to you precisely in what way you were wrong.' He drank the remainder of the Firewhisky in his glass and set it on the mantle before turning from her indifferently. 'Uncle, did you say the Potions master at Durmstrang is retiring at the end of summer term?'

Tiberius Prince cleared his throat nervously. 'Yes, Severus, I did say that,' he admitted, darting looks to his sister-in-law, who stood staring at Severus as if he had grown another head.

Hermione dug her nails into her palms, forcing herself to remember where she was, for she wanted nothing so much as to disregard every Prince in the room save her own dear love and to throw her arms around him and thank him for standing up for her. She felt as if she had just passed all of her N.E.W.T.s with Outstanding in each subject.

A squeaky voice spoke from the doorway into the dining room. 'Dinner is served, Mistress,' Scampy said.

Madam Prince stood, leaning upon her cane. 'Paul, please escort your mother in to dinner,' she said with calm authority. 'John, you may escort your Aunt Eileen.' The two older boys moved with their charges into the dining room as their grandmother extended her hand to her youngest grandson. 'Come along, George; you can walk your old grandmother in to supper.' As she waited for George to reach her side, she glanced over at the end of the room where stood her son, her eldest grandson, Morgen, and Hermione. 'I'll leave the rest of the grown ups to sort themselves out,' she said, her words a warning, and she allowed George to guide her out of the drawing room.

Hermione bit her lip, waiting with a wildly beating heart to see what would happen next. Would her professor pour oil upon the troubled waters and offer his arm to Morgen?

Doing his part to preserve the peace, Tiberius Prince moved toward Hermione with a charming smile. 'Come, Miss Granger...allow me to escort you to supper.'

Swallowing her disappointment, Hermione nodded to Tiberius Prince, and Morgen moved toward the professor, a victorious light in her eyes.

'Excuse me, Uncle,' Professor Snape said smoothly. 'I'll escort Miss Granger to supper.'

Hermione's heart turned over in her chest and her tummy swooped as if she had missed a step walking down the staircase. He reached her side and offered his arm with a purely enigmatic expression, and she smiled up at him with all her roiling emotion in her eyes.

Placing his hand proprietarily over hers as it rested in the crook of his elbow, Professor Snape began to lead her across the room, murmuring sotto voce, 'If you go about looking at me like that, we will have no secret at all.'

Their passage through the room was halted by a screech.

'Don't touch me!'

Hermione and her professor turned to see Tiberius Prince backing away from Morgen, his hands lifted, palms facing outward. 'Come and have your supper, Morgen,' he said coaxingly.

Rather than responding to him, Morgen looked across the room, raising her hand as if she would cast a spell at Hermione and Professor Snape. The professor swiftly propelled Hermione behind him. 'Don't even think of it, Morgen,' he said coldly.

The red-haired witch answered shrilly, her eyes wild. 'I warned you!' she shrieked. 'Just don't try to say I didn't tell you it would come to this!'

Ava Prince appeared in the far doorway. 'Morgen!' she scolded, very much the big sister. 'Stop this at once!'

Morgen turned angrily on her sister. 'Shut up, you stupid cow!'

Ava's cry of outrage was drowned out by the professor's thundering voice. 'You're raving, Morgen. Go to your room and calm yourself. I'll send a house-elf with a Calming Draught.'

'I'm not staying here to watch you cuddle and coo with your child whore!' she screamed, and she Disapparated in a flash of violet light.

Tiberius Prince quickly crossed the room to embrace his wife, who was crying softly into her hands. Holding her close by his side, Tiberius began to walk her slowly to the entrance hall. As they passed Hermione and Professor Snape, the older wizard said, 'Would you send up the Calming Draught for Ava please, Severus?'

'Of course,' the professor responded, pulling Hermione toward the dining room. 'Scampy will bring it up directly.'

The professor seated Hermione in the chair usually occupied by Morgen and excused himself to speak with Scampy. Hermione unfolded her napkin and placed it in her lap, aware that all eyes were on her. She picked up her water goblet and drank.

'I apologize that you were spoken to that way in my home, Hermione,' Madam Prince said, her tone grave. 'I would not have had it happen for the world.'

Hermione looked up into the startling blue eyes and read there her hostess's sincerity. 'Thank you, ma'am,' she replied graciously, 'but I really don't see that it was your fault at all.'

Madam Prince smiled at her. 'Perhaps not, but we, as a family, have tolerated Morgen's childishness for far too long. She will not be invited back again any time soon.'

Professor Snape entered again, taking his place beside Hermione.

'Do you agree, Severus?' his grandmother said.

The professor picked up his goblet, swallowing water before he said, 'Agree with what, ma'am?'

'That Morgen will not be invited back for our next holiday gathering,' the old lady replied, watching his face closely.

'Good God yes, Grandmother,' he replied, motioning for the house-elf to serve the soup. 'I've said so many times these past few years.'

Madam Prince's gaze flicked from Hermione to Severus. 'So you have,' she agreed evenly, allowing the house-elf to ladle soup into her bowl.

Professor Snape indulged his grandmother with a game of chess after supper, and Hermione played Exploding Snap with the boys until the tremors of need forced her to lay down her cards.

'I'm too sleepy to play one more game,' she proclaimed with as much gaiety as she could manage. 'I will see you all tomorrow!'

She accepted the good-night wishes of the other occupants of the room and escaped upstairs before she disgraced herself, hoping that her professor would be close behind her.

She had scarcely closed the bedroom door behind her before Scampy appeared.

'Miss did it!' the house-elf cried with great excitement. 'Miss showed the Nexus, and Miss Morgen went away!'

Hermione took a firm hold of the nearest post of the four-poster bed and tried to force herself to concentrate on what the house-elf was saying rather than on the throbbing in her quim.

Scampy came forward. 'And Master Severus knows, now,' Scampy added, still very excited.

The bedroom door opened again, and Professor Snape stood there, frowning down at the house-elf. 'Master Severus knows what, Scampy?' he asked, closing the door.

Scampy bobbed a curtsy. 'Scampy will come back later!' she squeaked and popped out of the room.

As soon as she was gone, Hermione wriggled out of her knickers and faced the professor, her hands upon her hips.

'Shoes on or off?' she demanded tersely.

He advanced upon her, unfastening his robes as he came. 'On.'

Calmed and languorous, Hermione lolled against his naked chest and kissed his throat.

'Thank you,' she said, truly sleepy now.

'For what?' he said, sounding as sleepy as she felt.

'For standing up for me,' she said dreamily. 'For choosing me.'

He cleared his throat, obviously uncomfortable. 'It was nothing.'

She pushed herself up so that she loomed over him. 'It was something to me,' she said firmly. 'It was brilliant.'

He evaded her eyes and shifted to his side, away from her. With a flick of his wrist, the candles were extinguished. 'It was the right thing to do,' he said to the wallpaper.

Lying down again, Hermione curled up against his back, kissing his shoulder blade. 'I love you,' she said, beginning to drift to sleep.

When the ruckus began, they had been sleeping and were startled awake. Identifying the pounding as someone knocking on the bedroom door, Hermione lit the candles, her heart racing from being so rudely awakened. She pulled the bodice of her dress back up into place, magicking the zip up as she stumbled to the door, half her attention on her professor, who had awakened with a hiss, clutching his Dark Mark, and was now dressing himself with grim efficiency.

Hermione flung the door open and was too off balance to do aught but fall back as Morgen pushed her into the room and followed her in.

Professor Snape never slowed his methodical buttoning of his robes; he only stared at Morgen as he did it. 'What have you done?' he asked flatly.

Morgen did not answer his question but walked right up to him and thrust an envelope into his face.

'From the Dark Lord,' she said triumphantly, her eyes alight with a mad glee.

Hermione moved past the other witch, her mind in turmoil, desperately trying to make sense of what was happening. 'What is it?' she asked quietly.

Her professor crushed the parchment in his fist, staring at Hermione, but clearly not seeing her.

'Is he summoning you? Why would he summon you and send a letter, too?' Hermione asked, ignoring the insane chuckles emanating from Morgen.

Professor Snape blinked once, his long, thin face leached of all colour, taking him from sallow to pasty. When he blinked, his eyes focussed again on her face. 'To tell me to bring you, too,' he said hollowly.

Hermione shook her head; nothing was making sense. 'To tell you what?'

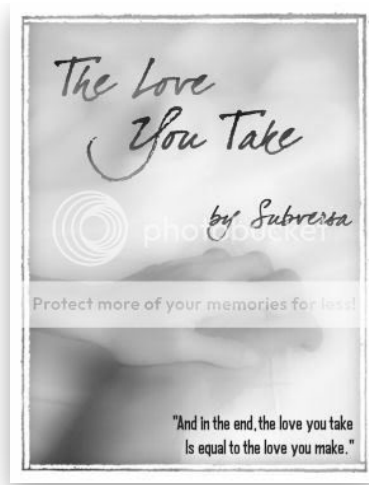
His hands closed about her shoulders. 'To bring you,' he said again. 'You're coming with me to see the Dark Lord.'

Hermione saw the truth of the words in the endless black tunnels of his eyes, and she swayed on her feet, the only sound in her ears Morgen's maniacal laughter.

Chapter 20: Consternation

Chapter 20 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.



A/N: Thank you for your patience.

This chapter was beta read by DeeMichelle and Brit-picked by MagicAlly. It was alpha-read by Sshg316 (Shug!) and by minuet99.

The Love You Take

Chapter 20: Consternation

The girl sagged, and Severus caught her, laying her out upon the rumpled bedclothes as Morgen continued to cackle her mad laugh.

'Shut up, you stupid cow!' he roared, and she stopped instantly, gaping at him in amazement.

'How *dare* you speak to me like that!' she gasped. 'How *dare* you?'

He turned his back upon her with supreme indifference. 'Go. I shall bring her with me.'

Morgen moved next to him, and he was subjected to her cloying perfume. The girl never wore such nauseating scents. She ...

No! He could not indulge himself with mooning over the girl. There was desperate work to be done.

With the mere flick of his fingers, he Summoned the required accoutrements, and he cloaked and masked himself, ignoring the irritant at his side.

'I am to bring her with me, Severus...get out of my way,' Morgen insisted.

Now the Mark on his arm burned, and Severus was out of time. He grabbed the girl from the bed and threw her over his shoulder, so that her head dangled below his shoulder blades. Without speaking again, he turned on the spot and Disappeared.

In a forest clearing, he knelt by her side and touched her face. 'Wake up,' he commanded sternly.

Her eyes fluttered open, unfocussed and confused.

'Do not speak,' he said tersely. 'Listen to me.'

She struggled to sit, accomplishing it after a moment, clearly making every attempt at coherence.

'I am taking you into the presence of the Dark Lord,' he said. 'Do not move unless I or the Dark Lord tell you to do so. Do not reply to anyone but him or me. Do not listen to what others will say to you or about you.' He took her chin firmly into his hand and looked into her eyes. 'I will do all I can to prevent lasting harm from coming to you. Every action I take will be toward that aim. Do you understand me?'

She nodded once, her large eyes wide with fear; he could feel an erratic pulse beating in her throat. 'Yes, Professor.'

'He may invade your mind. Make no effort to block him. His primary interest will be in Potter; I would suggest that you offer up those memories straightaway to spare yourself the discomfort.'

Severus released her and stood, cradling his burning forearm. He had wanted, had *argued* to make her proficient in Occlumency, but the headmaster had disagreed; if she were taken, Dumbledore wanted her to be guileless under the probing of the Dark Lord's Legilimency...towards which end she had steadfastly been denied insider knowledge of the Order's war plans since she had been cursed with *Eternus Perturbatio*. She, however, was unaware of the innocuous nature of what she knew; she would do all she could to defend her knowledge, believing it vital. Severus dared not enlighten her now.

'Come,' he snarled. '*He* does not care to wait.'

The girl scrambled to her feet and gripped his arm tightly. Feeling like Judas himself, Severus Disappeared to the Dark Lord's side.

They arrived in a large, ill-lit room Severus immediately identified as the ballroom of the Black family townhouse in Mayfair. His masked, hooded compatriots were grouped about the walls, and the Dark Lord stood upon the orchestra dais, with a triumphant Morgen at his side.

Severus pushed the girl roughly from him. 'On your face!' he barked to her, and she immediately prostrated herself upon the highly-polished ballroom floor, the evening's hairdo half-hanging from her head in tangled disarray, the shoulder-baring white dress ghost-like in the candlelight.

Without glancing at her again, he advanced and fell to his knees, raising his lord's robe hem to his lips.

'My Lord,' he said.

'You took your time, Severus,' the sibilant voice observed coldly.

Probably had to button his trousers a voice from the crowd muttered, audibly enough for those surrounding him to chortle.

'Explain yourself,' His Lordship commanded Severus, ignoring the ribald jests of his followers.

'I paused to instruct the Mudblood in the proper form of behaviour for an audience with you, My Lord,' Severus responded smoothly, forcing himself into the mindset which had always served him well in the presence of the Dark Lord. There was no room for fondness for the girl in that frame of mind, but such concerns were of no moment now.

'I see,' His Lordship responded. 'We shall discuss the Mudblood later, perhaps.'

Severus tensed as the buzz of excitement around him increased in volume. What was toward?

'Get up, Severus,' the Dark Lord said testily.

Severus rose obediently, his eyes never straying towards the girl, who had made no sound he could hear. The Dark Lord looked him over critically, but forbore to comment upon Severus' appearance. Instead, he smiled his eerie, serpentine smile. The susurrant of anticipation amongst his fellows increased, and Severus willed his stiffening body to relax; whatever was coming, he could ride the storm more effectively if his muscles were loose.

'You have been a good and faithful servant, Severus, and I believe that you deserve a reward for your long, exemplary service.'

Severus schooled his expression to polite inquiry and fought the rising tide of dread within him. Anything which caused the Dark Lord to mouth such insincere platitudes...and which also excited the bloodlust of the Death Eaters...could not be a good thing for Severus.

'My Lord, you flatter me,' he responded. 'You know I ask only to be allowed to serve you.'

Old Snape isn't going to be able to talk himself out of this one! a gleeful voice whispered.

Severus felt gooseflesh break out over his arms and was thankful for his layers of clothing.

'Yes, Severus, Lord Voldemort knows who is worthy of his praise,' the Dark Lord said meaningfully, causing a fearful hush to fall over his Death Eaters. 'Therefore, I must insist that you accept your due.'

Severus cautiously raised his eyes to the Dark Lord's face. 'I will, of course, accept any gift you bestow, My Lord,' he responded obediently.

The Dark Lord's horrible smile widened, as if the viper had trapped his prey in a corner from which there was no escape, and he held out one white, spider-like hand to Morgen. Morgen laid her hand in that of the Dark Lord with a blush. Severus restrained himself from snorting in disgust. Morgen had been bereft of the ability to blush at age fourteen; now, more than twenty years later, such a delicate colour on her countenance was an abomination.

'Severus, in answer to your heart's dearest wish, I have decided to give you Morgen for your wife.'

Severus drew himself erect, his posture no longer suggesting that of the cowering supplicant, but rather that of a man unjustly maligned.

'My Lord, you must excuse me from receiving such a signal honour. I respectfully decline.'

There was a group intake of shocked breaths from the Death Eaters.

'Come, Severus,' the Dark Lord said, choosing coaxing from his repertoire of persuasion. 'You have desired to have Morgen as your wife for the last twenty years!'

Severus bowed courteously. 'The operative word, My Lord, is "desired"...I have, thankfully, been free of the desire to marry Madam Leclercq since the day she married her late husband.'

Impossibly, the Death Eaters gasped again, and Severus wondered vaguely if they would all expire from lack of oxygen.

Morgen's face had gone pale, and her anger was becoming evident. She had undoubtedly made a huge contribution of her deceased husband's gold to the Dark Lord's war chest for His Lordship to have agreed to sell Severus to her. Idly, Severus wondered if his price now were higher than it had been when Morgen had bought him the first time, so many years before.

'Lord Voldemort is not amused by this levity, Severus,' the cold, high voice warned.

Severus bowed again. 'Respectfully, My Lord, I must ask why you believe that Madam Leclercq will be any more likely to keep faith with me today than she was then?'

The Dark Lord's ghastly smile touched his lipless mouth. 'Is that your concern, my boy? You need have no fear. I shall not permit such a thing to happen, this time.'

Trying for simple sincerity, Severus looked into the Dark Lord's face, concentrating upon the snake-like nostrils. 'I understand that you wish to offer a valuable reward, My Lord, but I must ask you, as one man to another: Would *you* wish to be gifted with another man's leavings?'

The silence in the room was complete. Severus' eyes never wavered from the Dark Lord's hideous face, but he was acutely aware of the lack of sounds from either the Death Eaters or from the girl. Never, in all his servitude, had he stood up thus to the Dark Lord, but in this instance, he would not back down. His very masculinity was in question.

The Dark Lord seemed to consider this question, but Severus well knew that the older wizard was calculating how best to bring him to heel.

'So,' His Lordship hissed, 'this is your Mudblood slut.'

Severus felt the cold grip of fear clutch at his belly. 'It is, My Lord,' he agreed.

'You have enjoyed having the use of her,' the Dark Lord observed.

Severus shrugged. 'A wizard has needs, My Lord. And it convinced Dumbledore that I was ever more his tool, to take on this distasteful task.'

'Bring her to me,' the Dark Lord commanded.

The ice in his gut began to rise, touching upon his lungs, impeding his ability to breathe. Turning sharply, Severus strode to the girl and nudged her none too gently with the toe of his boot.

'On your feet,' he snapped.

The girl rose, her extremities visibly trembling. Her eyes were dilated black with terror; there was little brown to be seen. She gave him a look of entreaty, and he was certain that in spite of her mortal fear, she was trying to put on a good show. Severus grasped her upper arm and dragged her forward to the dais, then shoved her down.

'On your knees to the Dark Lord,' he ordered.

The girl sagged obediently to her knees.

'What is her name?' the Dark Lord inquired, as if he didn't know.

Morgen, still standing at the Dark Lord's side, shifted impatiently, but she was ignored.

'She is Hermione Granger, My Lord,' Severus replied.

'Hermione,' the Dark Lord said in a grotesque parody of kindness, 'you may look up and speak with Lord Voldemort.'

The girl's chin came up, and Severus could all but read her dilemma on her parchment-white face. She was torn between doing what she could to protect him, and doing what she could to be loyal to Potter and the Order.

'I have nothing to say to you,' the girl replied, her voice thready but clear.

'Insolence!'

Bellatrix Lestrange lurched from the crowd of Death Eaters, and for the first time the lot of them seemed to take a breath. The crazy woman had her wand levelled at the girl, and her lips were pulled back from teeth in an ugly grimace, making her appear more than usually skeletal.

'Shall I kill her for you, My Lord?' Bellatrix asked, her wand never wavering from Hermione.

Severus stifled a yawn and examined the cuff of his robes.

'That will not be necessary, Bella,' the Dark Lord reprimanded. 'Severus can issue any necessary correction.'

'Then why does he stand like a statue while this filth spews her disrespect?' Bellatrix said, her tone just short of petulance.

Severus flicked a glance at the witch who had been his enemy ever since he had first obtained the attention of their master. 'Perhaps it is because I know that our Lord is perfectly capable of interrogation without my assistance, Bellatrix,' he purred, turning the accusation back upon her. 'He will tell me if he wishes my active participation.'

Abruptly, the Dark Lord asked, 'Hermione, are you fond of Professor Snape?'

The girl jerked as if she had been struck, and the Dark Lord swept down the dais steps to tower over his victim.

'Don't even think about lying to me, Hermione,' the Dark Lord said, bending until his abhorrent red eyes were mere inches from hers. 'I'm sure you know I can *compel* you to tell the truth.'

Severus fought to maintain an impassive countenance as the ice within him rose ever higher, encroaching upon his heart...and surely, if his heart were so much as touched by such arctic cold, it would seize in his chest. He parted his lips to help bring air into his lungs and kept his attention on the girl.

Hermione drew back from the serpent face, obviously repulsed. 'I'm not afraid of you,' she said.

The Dark Lord looked to his enthusiastic gallery of observers. 'She's not afraid of me,' he said drolly, and his sycophants laughed appreciatively at his scintillating wit.

The Dark Lord considered the girl. 'Should I use the Imperius Curse?' he wondered aloud. 'Or Legilimency? Or perhaps I should use a few drops of Professor Snape's Veritaserum, Hermione.' Then, with a suddenness made more surprising because he seldom moved about in the presence of his followers...it was quite easy to forget that he was agile and quick...he lunged for Severus and pushed the tip of his wand into Severus' throat. 'Or shall I use the Cruciatius Curse on Professor Snape, Hermione? Would that be the best way to persuade you to answer my questions?'

Severus did not react. He had no fear of the Dark Lord hurting him; this little charade was entirely for the amusement of Death Eaters. There was no surer way to guarantee the girl's willing participation, and unfortunately, the Dark Lord knew it well.

'Yes!' the girl cried, beginning to rise to her feet. Bellatrix came forward and pushed Hermione down again, but the girl continued to speak. 'Yes, I'm fond of Professor Snape!' The last word ended on a sob, and tears began to fall unchecked down her face.

The Dark Lord nodded. 'I see that you are,' he said. 'But is Professor Snape fond of you?'

'N-no,' the girl stuttered, and Severus was amazed that she managed to infuse the word with a plaintive quality. 'He...'

The Dark Lord prompted her. 'He ...'

She ducked her head, and Severus realised that she was recouping, even as she faced down the most frightening Dark wizard in all the world.

The Dark Lord's patience deserted him. Pivoting from Severus, with the flick of a wrist, the madman sent a Strangulation Hex at the girl, and she fell upon the floor, her fingers scrabbling uselessly at her throat, her eyes bulging.

The Dark Lord glanced at Severus and nodded toward the writhing Hermione. 'Have you ever cast this one on her?' he asked, sotto voce, though he need not have bothered, for the Death Eaters were loud again, entertained by the floor show. 'I found it invaluable in training Bella.'

Severus watched the girl thrash about, every instinct screaming for him to release her from the discomfort of the hex. He pushed the impulse down, deep within. With the faintest ghost of a smile, he responded in a man-to-man way, 'I shall have to add it to my catalogue, My Lord. Thus far I have employed ... other methods.'

The Dark Lord leered knowingly, and Severus responded in kind, dimly realising the girl would never forgive him for engaging in lewd discussions over her thrashing body.

Apparently bored with the diversion, the Dark Lord released the girl from the hex, and she rolled into a protective ball, hoarse sobs issuing from her contused throat.

'Put her on her feet,' His Lordship ordered, and Severus stepped forward to comply.

He grabbed the girl by her upper arms, which already showed marks from his earlier rough handling, and jerked her upright, his every action against her a deeper condemnation...how could she ever forgive him for this barbarity?

'Finish your sentence,' the Dark Lord commanded her, 'or I shall find another way to compel you.'

Standing immediately behind her, his hands still upon her arms, Severus took advantage of their proximity and stroked his thumbs soothingly along her skin, willing her to hear him. *Don't stop now!* he thought, his eyes averted from his master. *Stay strong! You are a warrior.*

Hermione responded instantly to his feathery touch, seeming to derive strength from his mere presence. Although it obviously hurt her to do so, she forced words out, her voice croaking. 'He isn't fond of me, but he likes to fuck me.'

A violent rush of admiration welled in Severus, even as he steeled himself for the next attack upon her. She would be punished...and he would be responsible for allowing it to happen, for to defend her would be to condemn them both.

A frightening hissing sound began, becoming louder and louder, a high-pitched, sibilant wheeze.

The Dark Lord was *laughing*.

After the Death Eaters exchanged cautious looks with one another, they began to laugh as well. Only Morgen, Bellatrix, and Severus refrained. Severus stood quietly by, his hands still upon the girl's flesh, continuing the feather-light contact, as she rubbed her throat with one hand and stared silently at her feet.

The Dark Lord strode again onto the dais, and his followers quieted. He stared down at Severus and the girl, and Severus ceased his soothing gestures.

'Severus,' the Dark Lord said, his sibilance was marked, 'we are but wizards and witches; I doubt there is one amongst us all who has not, at some time, loved a pet or a familiar.'

As if in answer to her master's call, the slithering of Nagini's great sinuous body could be heard across the room, and His Lordship's snake moved to join him. The Death Eaters were careful to give the snake a wide berth. Bellatrix showed no sign of revulsion, but a tic began to jump in her cheek, giving her the bizarre appearance of a person who was grinning and winking. Gliding past Severus, Nagini came for the first time into Hermione's view, and Hermione cried out in terror.

'Basilisk!' she croaked, then swooned at Severus' feet.

The Dark Lord's eyes fused with his, and Severus launched himself into the encounter, sure of his Occlumency. He flooded his mind with images of the girl: naked on her knees upon the floor while he, fully clothed, fucked her from behind; bound to his headboard, her legs propped upon his shoulders as he pounded into her; spread facedown across a table in his laboratory, her schoolgirl skirt tossed up, her glistening slit open and ready to be fucked.

Abruptly, the Dark Lord disengaged and Severus staggered back a bit, as if he had been pushed, then steadied himself, the adrenaline singing in his body like a drug.

'There is no shame in being fond of your fuck-toy, Severus,' the Dark Lord said quietly. 'She has been a willing pet, but now you can have a wife in your bed...an equal, to share your life and bear your children...the wife your master has *chosen* for you.' He raised his wand and pointed it at the girl. 'I can relieve us all of her unfortunate stench,' he said, 'or Morgen could do it for me.'

For the first time in several minutes, Morgen stirred, moving forward with alacrity, her wand drawn, the mad intent to kill glittering in her green eyes.

'No!' Severus roared, his silent Shield Charm disturbing the air in the room with the force of its casting. The forest green aura settled over Hermione's prone form, and Severus addressed the Dark Lord. 'If the girl dies, My Lord, my usefulness as your spy at Hogwarts comes to an end.'

The Dark Lord motioned for Morgen to lower her wand, which she did with every evidence of disgust. 'I understand, my boy; a wife may not be so *accommodating* as a Mudblood whore under the influence of a lust curse. She is important to your comfort ...'

'My Lord, not at all,' Severus replied. 'I never asked for this duty given me by Dumbledore. I do what I must to keep myself in his good graces so I can bring information to you.'

Voldemort smiled his dangerous smile again. 'Excellent,' he said. He looked into the crowd of Death Eaters, his red eyes flicking from face to face. 'Wormtail,' he said, and Peter Pettigrew detached himself from the crowd and came forward, his air of suppressed excitement setting Severus upon high alert. The Dark Lord, however, was still visually riffling through his followers. 'Antonin,' he added, and the brutish Dolohov came forward as well.

The tense, blood-spout atmosphere in the Black family ballroom increased tenfold, and Severus, in response, deliberately relaxed his muscles even as his senses sharpened.

The Dark Lord beckoned to Pettigrew and Dolohov, and the two wizards climbed up to join him on the dais. 'As the Mudblood is not necessary to your happiness, but her continued existence is essential to maintaining your position with that Muggle loving old fool, Lord Voldemort shall provide a solution to the dilemma.'

Severus kept his eyes attentively upon his master while his mind roiled, attempting to guess what new catastrophe the Dark Lord would next generate. Severus had known for all his adult life that it meant taking his life into his hands every time he stepped into His Lordship's presence, but never before had he experienced the nerve-wracking horror of being responsible, additionally, for the life and well-being of someone he ... cared for.

'Severus, I shall release the Mudblood from the compulsion curse and free you of her. Would that please you?'

Severus' adrenaline high flew directly into the iron wall of the question posed by the Dark Lord and thudded to the pit of his stomach, joining the acid terror. Whether he would like it or loathe it was immaterial...what was important was what the Dark Lord wished to hear.

'Certainly, My Lord...particularly if I am able to intimate to Dumbledore that I was instrumental in having you remove the curse.' He spoke with his usual measured calm, but his attention was divided now between not only his master and Morgen, but also Wormtail and Dolohov. Why had those two been called forward?

'Now, Severus, you can help me decide. After I have lifted the curse and freed you from your burden, upon which of your brothers shall I have her imprint when I curse her again?' The Dark Lord spread his arms as if to gather them to his side. 'Wormtail, who knew her when he was a rat, or Dolohov, who tried and failed to kill her in the Ministry of Magic?'

Chapter 21: Prostration

Chapter 21 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: This chapter was betaed by Sshg316 and DeeMichelle, and Brit-picked by MagicAlly.

This chapter is not good reading material while you are eating.



Chapter 21: Prostration

Hermione lay upon the wooden floor, barely conscious of what was happening around her. Her throat throbbed and burned in the aftermath of Voldemort's Strangulation Hex. Her arms were sore from Professor Snape's rough handling, and her knees ached from kneeling on the hard surface. Now she was on her side, curled in a tight, defensive ball, praying for her professor to get her out of this. *I will do all I can to prevent lasting harm from coming to you* he had said. *Every action I take will be toward that aim.*

It wasn't exactly a *promise*, was it?

She remembered falling when the giant snake had slithered past her feet. In confusion, she had first taken it for a Basilisk, but as she lay at her professor's feet, she realised it must be Voldemort's own pet snake, Nagini. Talking progressed above her; she heard the horrible high sibilance of Voldemort, as well as the calm, measured baritone of Professor Snape. Were they talking about her? She hoped not, but she could scarcely bring herself to care; it was much more comfortable to be left alone, unnoticed, safe beneath the protective shield he had cast, until her professor could take her back home.

Home ... where was her home? The suburban house with the neat garden where her parents lived? The Head Girl's room at Hogwarts? Or Professor Snape's dungeon rooms, where they could be together with no artifice or shame? Might it even be the elegantly appointed room at Prince House where she slept curled against him?

That was the answer, really. Home was where *he* was. It wasn't a place; it was a state of being. She was only at home now when she was with him, and she feared that it would always be that way, regardless of what choices were forced upon them in the future.

Abruptly, the Shield Charm was lifted, and hands grabbed her roughly by the hair and wrenched her upward. Hermione cried out in pain but very little sound was heard because of the bruising of her larynx. Scrambling upwards to loosen the unrelenting grip upon her hair, she found herself much too close to Bellatrix Lestrange, with her mad eyes and her sickly scent, reminiscent of mothballs and ambergris. Hermione twisted, attempting to pull away from the other witch, but Bellatrix held her cruelly, her long, horrid fingernails digging into Hermione's arms nearly hard enough to break the skin.

Standing to her right was Professor Snape, whose attention was focussed on Voldemort. Hermione looked up at the group on the dais: Voldemort, Wormtail, and Dolohov, all of whom were looking at Hermione expectantly, and Morgen, whose eyes shone with a disturbing malice. Frantically, Hermione searched her mind for the last words she had heard spoken...had not her name been part of it?

Dimly, it came to her that Voldemort was speaking of her curse...was speaking, somehow, of removing her curse...no! No, if it were taken, she would have no excuse to be with her professor! Even in her terror, surrounded by dire enemies, with her throat so badly bruised she could scarcely speak, she had it within her to feel panicked at the notion of being separated from her touchstone, as Professor Snape had become.

Sluggishly, her brain caught up with the conversation, and Voldemort's last words solidified, communicating themselves to her reason with sickening clarity:

Wormtail, who knew her when he was a rat, or Dolohov, who tried and failed to kill her in the Ministry of Magic?

Hermione lurched forward helplessly, her hand flying to her mouth, to no avail. Further ravaging her poor, abused oesophagus, what little remained of her dinner revolted against her digestive system and hit the floor with a disgusting splatter. Both Morgen and Bellatrix sprang back with cries of revulsion, but Professor Snape simply threw Hermione a look of brutal indifference before addressing himself again to Voldemort.

'While my brothers are no doubt *both* completely deserving of the attentions of the...' he cast another disdainful glance at Hermione as she stood in the midst of her own sick, her hair tangled and wild, before he continued, '*charms* of the Mudblood,' here there was a rising murmur of merriment from the surrounding Death Eaters, 'might I make a suggestion, My Lord, for your consideration?'

Voldemort's eerie red eyes were riveted on the professor's face. 'You have frequently given Lord Voldemort good counsel,' he stated. 'You may continue, Severus.'

Professor Snape bowed. 'You are gracious, My Lord,' he said. 'It occurs to me that neither of my brothers have a reason to be at Hogwarts, which means that the Mudblood would be unable to return there. Even if Dumbledore were not to hold me responsible for her death in such a case, I would still be held responsible for her loss. My trustworthiness would be called into question by Dumbledore, which would only lessen my usefulness to you, My Lord.'

Hermione stood off-balance in her sick-spattered dress; she wished neither to draw forward, towards Morgen, nor back, towards Bellatrix, either of whom would be glad to further punish and humiliate her for having the temerity to exist. Adding to her burning shame was hearing her professor speak of her fate so clinically, in tones of such disregard, his glance, when he could be bothered to look at her, one of dismissive indifference.

Morgen stepped towards Voldemort, her tones honeyed but insincere, even to Hermione's ears. 'My Lord, Severus seeks to talk his way out of obeying you,' she murmured urgently, her voice pitched for intimate conversation but easily carrying in the sudden silence in the room. 'He wishes only to preserve his position at the school and to keep the Mudblood in his bed...he cares nothing for what *you* wish!'

With an elegance of motion, Professor Snape fell to his knees, drawing all eyes with his dramatic gesture, and he brought Voldemort's robes to his lips, his face reverently averted. 'My Lord!' he cried. 'I wish for nothing but your victory. I live to see you in complete power and in utter control of the wizarding world! As your spy at Hogwarts, the Mudblood gives me increased credibility with Dumbledore and unsurpassed access to Harry Potter...have I not brought you particularly useful intelligence these past six months? Such information as I have provided to you is invaluable; it cannot be measured in mere gold.'

Hermione knew from the whispers behind her that her professor spoke the truth. Not for a moment did she consider that he might have actually betrayed Harry or the Order in any way; all that she cared for was the minute shift of momentum in the professor's favour, for even she could see Voldemort's speculative stare at the top of Professor

Snape's unkempt head.

'Surely, My Lord, there will be time after the war has been won for our petty, unimportant *personal* issues to be addressed.' The professor lifted his face to gaze with burning earnestness into his master's face. 'It is my opinion, My Lord, that it would be ill-advised to throw away *any* advantage we currently have to be nigh to Potter as the time of your final triumph grows near.'

Morgen thrust herself forward, pushing Wormtail out of her way as if he were a house-elf. 'Lies!' she screeched at Professor Snape, her face pulled into a rictus of rage so hideous that no trace of her famous beauty was evident. 'You care nothing for victory! You care only for your Mudblood slut!'

Hermione dared not breathe in the ringing silence which followed Morgen's outburst. With her face averted, she was aware of the shift in mood in the room only because of the feeling of the rising excitement of the Death Eaters surrounding her. Obviously, the blood-thirsty bottom-feeders saw something which electrified them, but Hermione was fairly certain that she was the only one to witness the supremely self-satisfied smile her professor directed to the wooden floor.

'You will be *silent!*' Voldemort hissed at Morgen, the motions of his hands sending Pettigrew and Dolohov skittering back to their respective places amongst their fellows. Hermione bit her lip and watched with grim satisfaction as Morgen's colour fluctuated wildly from rosy fury to ashen fear. 'A loyal Death Eater, such as Severus, would think of *nothing* during wartime except how to bring me to ultimate power!' Voldemort harangued. One stride brought the horrific Dark wizard within mere inches of Morgen; he loomed over her threateningly, his red-eyed face thrust belligerently towards her. 'Do you place your own paltry, insignificant concerns above those of your master, Morgen?'

At last Morgen fell to her face, her fingers scrabbling miserably for Voldemort's robes. 'No, Master!' she cried. 'Never! I am your faithful servant...have I not always given of my time and my wealth? Have I not obeyed your every dictate?'

'You forget yourself, Morgen,' Voldemort hissed, jerking his robes from her fingers. 'You have taken for granted Lord Voldemort's over generosity,' he added, his red eyes looking away from her and scanning the group around them, 'which is an unwise thing to do.'

Instantly, all faces save that of the snake-wizard were directed to the floor. Hermione watched from beneath her lashes as Voldemort flicked his wand at Morgen, effectively shoving her from the dais to the floor with the rest of the rabble, uncaring that the costly-clad witch fell directly into the pool of sick. Morgen stifled her moan of abhorrence, and Hermione felt a fierce jab of satisfaction at the sight. Voldemort then drew himself to his full height and lifted his arms so that he resembled nothing so much as a malevolent bat.

'There will be time, my Death Eaters, when Potter is dead and Dumbledore's forces defeated, for Lord Voldemort to attend to the comfort and satisfaction of all his faithful followers,' he said, his words a perfect parody of the promise of a magnanimous dictator. His arms dropped again and his tone changed, becoming brittle with rebuke. 'As entertaining as this interlude has been, we have more important matters to which we must attend. Lord Voldemort has matters of consequence to consider, and you all have your assigned duties...*perform them.*'

And in an impressive swirl of green smoke, he Disapparated.

Hermione closed her eyes, relief flooding through her body with force, raising gooseflesh. She wasn't home yet, but the concentrated *evil* that was Voldemort was gone, and her confidence that Professor Snape would yet bring her safely off from this nightmare increased.

The Death Eaters began to break up into groups, chatting idly amongst themselves, some taking immediate advantage of the order to get busy and Disapparating away. Shifting slightly to one side, Hermione was able to see her professor more clearly, exchanging small talk off-handedly, almost *pointedly* dawdling, as if to emphasise his victory over Morgen. Clearly, he would not be the first to retreat from their field of battle. Hermione wished only that he would move closer to her; standing half-dressed and vomit-covered in the middle of a group of Death Eaters gave her still a feeling of vulnerability. Taking a deep breath, she struggled to maintain her submissive posture, wishing not to attract the attention of any of the milling crowd.

As Hermione watched, Antonin Dolohov approached Professor Snape, who greeted him with perfect equanimity. 'Antonin,' he said, inclining his head politely.

'Snape,' Dolohov answered, sneering. 'Near miss for you tonight, eh?'

'Oh, much more a lucky miss for you,' the professor replied silkily. 'You're not as young as you were, Dolohov, and you're not terribly fit...I sincerely doubt you could properly attend to a lust-cursed teenage girl.'

'Tell me, Snape,' Dolohov said, his pasty complexion now flushed with anger, 'when the Dark Lord succeeds in selling you to Morgen, will you be called Mr Leclercq or Mr Singer?'

The tightening of Professor Snape's lips was his only response to Dolohov's question. Apparently oblivious to the tension between the two wizards facing off before him, Peter Pettigrew sidled up to them.

'Tough luck, eh, Dolohov?' Wormtail said, his ratty little eyes gleaming salaciously. He nudged Dolohov with an elbow. 'A tasty little morsel, she is...for a Mudblood.' His tongue moistened his lips, and he looked from Professor Snape to Dolohov and back again, waiting for them to join in his idea of manly conversation.

Antonin Dolohov drew away from Pettigrew, gathering his robes about him as if to keep them from trailing in filth. 'Don't speak to me, you despicable vermin,' Dolohov spat before turning on his heel and sweeping across the room.

Pettigrew gasped his outrage and turned to the professor, who gave him a thin, cold smile. 'I cannot defend your honour, *Wormtail!*' he said. 'After all, he spoke only the truth about your ... rodeny? Rodenhood?' With one long, thin finger, he traced his lower lip, seeming to ponder. 'What is the proper word for you, I wonder?'

Hermione's covert observation of the professor's conversation was interrupted as Bellatrix Lestrange walked into her line of sight. Bellatrix moved stealthily, her Death Eater robes whispering over the floor. Her shining black hair fell heavily down her back, almost a mockery of the former beauty of her face, now marked by her years of incarceration. Hermione realised that Bellatrix was watching Morgen, her expression jealous. Morgen had moved only so far as to sit on the edge of the dais, where she was spelling the sick from her garments and muttering irately to herself.

'It is fortunate for you that the Dark Lord is so generous,' Bellatrix said to Morgen, her tone haughty.

'Go away, Bella,' Morgen said irritably, continuing to tidy herself.

'If it had been me, you would be in the dungeon at the Manor, with the other ingrates,' Bella continued. 'How dare you importune my master when he is so busy with important matters?'

Morgen snorted. 'I didn't importune him...I made a generous contribution to the war chest. He *offered* to grant me a boon.'

Bellatrix took a step forward, her indignation on behalf of her master driving her. 'And it was your duty to decline! Decline, as I have done time and time again!'

Morgen stood wearily and shook out her robes, inspecting them for any further evidence of Hermione's sick. 'Bella, it's not precisely a secret that you receive your "boons" from *our* master in different currency than the rest of us do,' she said absently, her attention elsewhere as she found a stain near her hem and cast a cleaning charm on it.

'Outrage!' Bella screamed, her dark eyes alight with fury. 'How dare you befoul him with your filthy, unworthy tongue!'

Fully conscious of her danger, now, Morgen whirled to face Bellatrix, a move which she had undoubtedly employed with perfect grace many times in her life...but this time, her robes were wrapped about her awkwardly, from the twisting and turning she had done to clean them, and she lost her balance. Falling back onto the dais, she cracked her bony bottom upon the hard wood surface, crying out in pain.

Hermione snorted in dark amusement, drawing a puzzled glance from Bellatrix...and the focus of Morgen's fury.

Rising from the dais, Morgen twitched her shoulders once, causing the folds of her robes to fall correctly down her tall figure, then advanced upon Hermione, her wand outstretched, her face full of murderous ferocity. Hermione stepped back from her, her bare foot coming down with a horrible squelch in her own vomit, her right hand scrabbling uselessly at the empty ornamental sheathe at her waist. Of course the professor had not allowed her to come armed into the presence of Voldemort! Enraged that the other witch would draw down on an unarmed opponent, her chin came up, and she sneered in the best imitation of the wizard she loved. She would *not* show fear to this mad bitch.

Without a word of warning, Morgen cast her offensive spell in a voice barely above a whisper, almost as if she did not wish to be heard by others in the room. '*Crucio*.'

Hermione fell, the jolt of pain so intense that she was unable to keep her feet. A vicious knife was scoring her nerve endings, laying them open for the fire which burned like an inferno in its wake. She snapped rigid with agony as the full force of Morgen's considerable unhappiness with her poured into the spell, and an unearthly scream was torn from Hermione's staggered vocal chords.

As suddenly as it had begun, it ceased, and Hermione curled again into a protective ball, too traumatized even to cry. Above her head and coming from a great distance she heard voices, talking all at once. She very much wished for unconsciousness, but the fighter in her made her struggle to hear and understand.

Bellatrix, annoyed: 'You're too soft on the Mudblood, Snape...the Cruciatius Curse is all she deserves. Morgen is thoughtless and greedy, but she casts an exceptional Unforgivable.'

Morgen, incensed: 'Give me my wand, Severus...give it to me this *instant*.'

Professor Snape, insolent: 'Or what, Morgen?'

Hermione's body ached and her muscles cramped in the aftermath of the curse, yet even so, the low throb of the compulsion woke and began to pulse painfully; she realised that it had probably been building for some time, but her fear had overshadowed it. Now, however, in spite of the fact that she lay in her own sick in a room full of Death Eaters, the compulsion rose to the top of the multitude of impulses plaguing her.

Opening her eyes, she saw her professor and the two witches standing over her. Morgen lunged for her wand, and the professor held it high over his head, out of her reach. Bellatrix laughed, and Morgen spoke again.

'Give it to me, or I shall *kill* you,' she threatened.

'Oh, that would certainly please the Dark Lord,' the professor said sardonically. He held the wand at her eye level. 'I'll have your word that you'll not use it again on the girl,' he said brusquely.

Bellatrix snorted. 'I would not make that promise, Morgen, but it is none of my concern,' she said, suddenly languorous, and Hermione knew with a certainty that the lust-cursed Bellatrix Lestrange was in the same condition as she was. Bellatrix ran a hand over her hair. 'The Dark Lord waits for me...I must go.'

Bellatrix turned on the spot, and nothing happened. With a mutter of annoyance, she turned again, with the same result. In the next moment, a loud clatter from without echoed about the ballroom like a gunshot.

'Anti-Disapparition Jinx,' Professor Snape said tersely. 'We're under attack.'

Bellatrix whirled to face the double doorway, instantly transformed to a confident battle commander. 'It's the Order of the Phoenix!' she cried. 'To me, Death Eaters!'

The mass of black-hooded figures converged upon Bellatrix and formed a defensive line, wands drawn.

'Severus,' Morgen said, a note of desperation in her voice.

With a sigh of disgust, Professor Snape tossed the wand to Morgen, and she caught it neatly. 'Don't put your eye out with it,' the professor said with disgust, then turned his back to the others, his unfathomable eyes focussing firmly on Hermione for what felt like the first time in an eon.

Hermione looked up at him, torn between the compulsion-driven need in her quim and shame for her vomit-caked condition. She saw that he understood at a glance that she was in need. 'Hang on,' he murmured, then more loudly, '*Tergeo!*'

The sick was removed from her body and her clothing, followed by a further cleansing spell. An imperative hand was held out to her, and she took it, rising with his assistance and steadying herself against him.

'Disillusion, Snape,' Bellatrix hissed over her shoulder as the doors shivered on their hinges. 'Do you want your fellow Order members to find you here?'

Without deigning to speak to Bellatrix, Professor Snape rapped Hermione sharply on the top of the head, and she felt the Disillusionment Charm spread down her body. He repeated the spell upon himself, then put an arm about Hermione and led her up onto the dais, half-supporting her weight when her uncooperative legs nearly collapsed beneath her. He wrapped her shivering form in his cloak and seated her with her back against the wall.

'Do not move, and do not speak,' he said urgently. 'Do you understand me? I cannot protect you if I do not know where you are or if you give your hiding place away.'

'I understand,' she replied, clutching the warmth of the cloak around her.

The double doors shuddered one more time and then burst open in a flurry of movement; in the middle of it was the bubblegum-pink of Nymphadora Tonks.

'First time I've ever been glad to see that atrocious hair,' Professor Snape muttered...and then the spells began to fly.

Hermione saw Order members amongst the invaders, as well as Aurors who weren't members of the Order. She watched the battle without breathing, torn between absolute terror on behalf of her friends and the desire to have her wand in her hand so that she might help them fight. She could not see Professor Snape, but she could feel him standing before her, moving restlessly from side to side. The Death Eaters fought their attackers with wild flashes of red and green, orange and purple, yellow and blue; no streams of light issued from Professor Snape's wand, yet she knew he was casting spells, for the backwash of the magic tingled over her skin.

At last, the great chandelier in the centre of the room came crashing down to the floor, setting the room in near-dark and pinning two Death Eaters beneath it. Jumping back just in time was Bellatrix Lestrange, who turned upon the perpetrator with feral ferocity.

'You!' she screamed, and Hermione blinked to see a witch who might have been Bellatrix's twin cast a Stunner at her. 'How dare you bring this filth into our father's house?'

Hermione gasped, earning a warning growl from Professor Snape. The other woman was Bellatrix's sister...that meant she was Tonks' *mother!*

'How else could the Aurors get in to capture the murdering rabbleyou brought into our father's house!' Andromeda Tonks roared, sending another spell at her sister, who

neatly deflected it.

'Mum!' Tonks cried, fighting her way over to her mother, covered from the rear by Alastor Moody and Remus Lupin. 'Mum, you promised to stay out!'

Andromeda did not answer her daughter but cast again at her sister, until the two Tonks women stood shoulder to shoulder, desperately duelling the Death Eaters.

In the very thick of the fighting was Morgen, who fought with great skill, Hermione grudgingly noticed. She seemed to fight as if Voldemort himself were standing at her back and urging her on; Hermione rather thought she was trying hard to do well to earn back some of Voldemort's regard. It was bad enough that she had angered her family so much that she was no longer to be invited for family holiday gatherings; if she alienated her master, as well, she would be without allies.

Some of the Death Eaters had battled their opponents through the double doors into the hallway; from shouts Hermione heard echoing into the house from outside, it was clear that the Death Eaters were Disapparating as soon as they were free from the Anti-Disapparition Jinx. The ballroom was emptier now, but the Tonks women still fought, as did Morgen and Bellatrix, and a few other dark-cloaked figures too far from the fallen chandelier for Hermione to make out who they were.

Bellatrix finally hit her sister, slashing with her wand and shouting, *Sectumsempra!*

Andromeda Tonks fell heavily, bleeding, and her daughter leapt before her fallen body with a shout and engaged Bellatrix in combat, firing spell after spell in such quick succession that Hermione was unable to keep count. Morgen dispatched the Auror she was duelling, sending him hurling against the wall, and she circled to her right, drawing up behind the pink-haired Nymphadora.

'Oh, Bella,' she called gaily, 'is *this* your charming Muggle-loving niece about whom I've heard so much?'

Hermione tensed, seeing the two Tonks women effectively hemmed in by Bellatrix and Morgen, with no succour in sight; although there were sounds of duelling from outside the room, Tonks' cry for help produced none.

Bellatrix did not dignify Morgen's taunt with an answer, but struggled to move to one side or the other of her whirligig niece; it was obvious that Bellatrix wanted very much to finish the job she had begun on Andromeda. Morgen still laughing, called, 'Let me assist you with your little family problem!' and a jet a horrifying green light shot from her wand.

'Oh, fuck,' Professor Snape muttered, and then the most powerful swell of magic yet pressed Hermione back into the wall.

Tonks fell as if she had been tackled by an invisible assailant, and Morgen's Killing Curse found as its target the dodging, weaving figure of Lord Voldemort's most faithful servant, who veered directly into its path.

Bellatrix Lestrange went down like a puppet whose strings had been cut, dead as a doornail, a look of arrogant surprise upon her face.

Before Bellatrix hit the floor, Hermione's entire body seized, and she cried out at the debilitating pain which sliced through her. In an instant, Professor Snape grabbed her.

'What happened? Are you hit?' Blindly, his hands ran along her body, feeling for an injury, and just as suddenly as the pain had hit her, it ceased, leaving her as weak as a kitten.

'No,' she gasped. 'It was a sharp pain, but it's gone now.'

'Quiet!' he hissed and released her, moving to his feet again.

Hermione leaned feebly against the wall, watching the fallen Tonks as she lay inert across her mother's body, and a bubble of grief rose in the swamp of emotion within her. Would this night never end?

The last duel in the far dark reaches of the room ended in a flash of red light, and Antonin Dolohov ran up behind Morgen, with Peter Pettigrew following. 'You killed Bella,' Dolohov said, staring at the dead witch in disbelief. Then he turned to Morgen and snatched her wand from her hand.

'No!' Morgen cried, beginning to back toward the double doors. 'The Tonks girl did it! It wasn't me!'

Peter Pettigrew was nearly bouncing in excitement. 'It was you, Morgen! I saw you!'

Morgen backed further away, then turned to flee, but Dolohov was upon her in an instant. 'Oh no you don't,' he said. 'The Dark Lord's going to want to talk to you, Morgen.'

Morgen struggled and fought against him, but Dolohov had her in an iron grip. 'If you'd rather, I can leave you here for the Order of the Phoenix to deal with,' he offered nastily, as sounds of approaching footsteps echoed from the hallway, and Morgen went as limp as a rag doll in his grasp. 'Get Bella's body, Wormtail,' Dolohov barked.

Pettigrew approached Bellatrix, pausing to glance down at the bodies of the pink-haired Auror and her mother. 'Oi, Morgen...you didn't have to kill the whole family,' he smirked.

'They're coming!' Dolohov snarled. 'Get Bella or I'll tell the Dark Lord you left his favourite behind for the Aurors to desecrate her body!'

Pettigrew ran to do his bidding.

By the time Lupin and Moody re-entered the ballroom, Dolohov and Pettigrew were at the far end of the room.

'Tonks!' Lupin cried, and he ran to kneel at her side.

Moody saw the dark figures across the room and shouted to them. 'Stop!'

Luck, however, finally favoured Dolohov and Pettigrew, who managed to shatter the windows and to escape the house, Disapparating. By the time Moody had limped over to the window, they were long gone.

The grizzled ex-Auror turned from the window and spoke in a voice etched with sorrow. 'Well, Remus?'

'Alive!' Lupin gasped, wand in hand as he began basic Healing spells. 'But we need to get them both to hospital.'

There was nothing left for the Order and the Aurors to do but to deliver the wounded to St Mungo's and the captured to Azkaban.

Hermione watched it all as if it were a play, becoming more detached from her surroundings by the moment. She thought vaguely that some shock might be setting in, but she couldn't rouse herself enough to care. When the last Auror had left the house, she was rapped sharply on the head, followed by a warm sensation which spread to her toes and fingertips. She blinked once and gazed into the abruptly visible face of Professor Snape.

Without speaking, he clasped her firmly to him and Disapparated to the same forest clearing they had visited before. Hermione sagged to the damp ground when he released her, and he crouched by her side. She shivered violently and hugged the cloak to her more firmly, staring down at the ground.

Taking her chin firmly in his hand, Professor Snape tilted her head until her eyes were forced to meet his. He smelt of sweat-soaked fear, his lank black hair hung on either side of his pale face in greasy curtains, but his eyes burned with intensity as he looked at her. 'Well played,' he said simply, his caressing tone communicating more than the words he would not speak.

And Hermione, who had been jerked from sleep, taken before a madman, forced to bow and scrape, been violently ill, tortured, and frightened in so many different ways she could not begin to enumerate them...finally began to cry.

'Ah, petal,' he said, and tenderly gathered her into his arms.

Chapter 22: Manifestation

Chapter 22 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: So yesterday, I drove to Droxy's house to visit with her and with SBrande. I had scarcely made it in the door with the bakery box of muffins before they turned their wands upon me and did a joint *Imperio*.

Now, I don't know about you, but it seems to me that a joint spell cast by two powerful Death Eaters carries quite a punch ...

Accordingly, please find below the next chapter of The Love You Take. This one's for you, Drox and Sonia!

Chapter has been partially Brit-picked by MagicALLY, beta-read by Deemichelle, and alpha-read by AnnieTalbot. Much love and chocolate to them all!

Chapter 22: Manifestation

Exhausted, as close to broken as he had ever been, Severus Snape huddled in the forest clearing near his grandmother's home in Yorkshire and held the crying girl to his heart. Safe! Sweet Merlin, they were safely away, against all odds. He had by no means been sure he would succeed in delivering her from a meeting with the Dark Lord.

Her sobs began to abate, and he cradled the back of her head with one hand whilst using the clean handkerchief he had conjured to dry her face. The faintest change in the quality of light told him that dawn was near; he had taken her to bed at ten the night before, so she had gone now for eight hours without relief. It was certainly no record; she had gone for longer times without having the compulsion assuaged, but his experience with her had been that stress exacerbated the curse, and she had certainly looked at him with need in her eyes before the battle had begun.

Peering down now into her wan, pinched face, he felt as if he were seeing his own handiwork, and he hated himself for it. Without speaking, he reached down and ran his fingertips up her inner thigh, and she trembled.

'Like this, for now,' he whispered into her hair. 'Properly, when we return to Prince House.'

She nodded, her cheek rubbing against his robes. 'Will you ...' she tried, her voice harsh and painful sounding.

'Don't try to speak,' he said.

She lifted her fingertips to his face, touching the edge of the dreadful mask.

His lips tightened in self-reproach...how could he have forgotten how he appeared to her? He swept the offending item from his face and touched her cheek.

'Better?'

In answer, she turned her face into his hand, her lips pressing a kiss of thanks there. He moved the hand again, beneath the ruined white cocktail dress to the damp slickness of her quim. Relaxing against him, she allowed her thighs to fall open, and he deftly parted her labia, two fingers slipping into her body with practiced ease. She sighed and ground against his hand, fisting his robes in one hand as she gave herself over to him. With his thumb, he circled her clit, earning a guttural moan. She would need a proper fucking before he could sleep, and as much as he enjoyed sex with her, he wanted nothing now but a shower and his bed. Nevertheless, there was sufficient potency potion amongst his toiletries at Prince House, and it had never failed to help him rise to the occasion; he would do the necessary to make her comfortable, and then he would set Scampy to make sure that no one woke them.

She shifted position, releasing his robes and wrapping her fingers about his wrist, pressing his hand against her with more force than he would have used, raising her hips and grinding until she gasped and stilled. He removed his hand to her upper leg. 'Are you comfortable?' he asked. 'Shall we go on to Prince House?'

Her nod, with slumberous eyes fixed upon his face, wrung a glimmer of interest from his libido. He stood and pulled her to her none-too-steady feet, then wrapped his arms securely about her and Disapparated to their room in his grandmother's house, reflecting wryly on the peculiarities of the male physiology.

He did not call for the house-elf, but while she repeatedly brushed her teeth, he drew a bath for the girl himself, and then he assisted her to ease her battered body into the warm water.

'I'm going to my room to shower, and then I will return,' he told her. 'Do you have everything you need?'

She nodded wordlessly.

'Speak Scampy's name if you need her,' he instructed. 'Even with your whisper, she will hear you.'

She nodded again, her eyes closing as she slid down further into the water.

When he next entered the bathroom, the girl looked as if she had not moved. Was she breathing?

'Hermione?' he said urgently, moving swiftly to her side, and she opened her eyes, her expression haunted. He crouched beside her, on her eye level. 'How can I help?' he asked, his treacherous prick stirring to the sight of the naked girl in the bath.

In answer, she slipped momentarily beneath the water, emerging mere seconds later to a sitting position, passing to him a bottle of shampoo. He took the bottle willingly, pausing only to remove his dressing gown...there was no point in getting it wet. Naked, he poured the fragrant substance into his hand and rubbed his palms together before beginning to massage it into the girl's hair, which appeared nearly black when wet. A shudder passed through her body when he touched her scalp; she would need his cock in her quim before she slept, and the knowledge brought his hardening, lengthening prick to further attention. He needed her, as well...needed the comfort of her needing him, needed the knowledge that only he could bring to her the relief she required...needed the safe harbour he found when he reached deep inside of her with his cock and his mind and ...

He frowned and gave his head a tiny shake as if to dislodge an improper thought, the damp ends of his clean hair slapping against his neck. He was exhausted and rattled and distraught after the ordeals of the audience with the Dark Lord and the battle; he would do well to guard his thoughts and control his emotions.

Conjuring a ceramic pitcher of warm water, he tilted the girl's head back with one finger to her chin, and he poured the water through her hair, filling the ewer again and again and rinsing until she was shampoo free. Vanishing the pitcher, he looked down into her face, now scrubbed clean and relaxed, her dark eyelashes sooty upon her ivory cheeks, her full lips parted in pleasure at his ministrations. Her breasts were half-submerged, the coral of her nipples tantalisingly visible to his eyes; he could barely discern the dark of her pubic patch beneath the water, yet he felt an immediate desire to bury himself within her.

Bending over her, he nuzzled her throat and allowed his hands to trace down her shoulders to cup her breasts, lightly lifting and squeezing them as his teeth nipped at her skin, his long tongue sweeping out to soothe the bites in quick succession. She sighed and murmured as he began to arouse her, twisting and squirming. She reached for him and pulled his mouth over to hers; for the first time, he experienced a full-on upside-down kiss, his tongue in her mouth from this new angle feeling simultaneously foreign and electrifying. He slowly tongue-fucked her warm mouth, his fingers tormenting her nipples with plucking and gentle pinching, until she was moaning against his lips. He stood, his cock hard and glistening, and waited for her to stand.

She astonished him by turning and rising to her knees so that she faced his groin. She took his cock into her hands, as she had done many times before, but before his mind could process what he was seeing, he felt her lips seal over his slick knob. Her eyes closed again, as if to aid her concentration, and he felt the tip of her little tongue swirl over the head of his cock. He groaned out loud and pushed her head away from him, his knob popping out of her mouth with an audible slurping sound; the sight and sound were so erotic that his cock visibly twitched.

She knelt in the cooling water of the bathtub, her nipples crinkling in the chilly air, her head tilted to one side as if to question him. He swallowed and stepped out of her reach, a slight frown on his face. She was undoubtedly feeling grateful to him for bringing her safely away from the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters; she had never made such a gesture before, and he had certainly never expected such a thing. He was well aware that decent women never performed such acts, although indecent ones did, if they were properly paid.

'Come,' he said, taking up a towel and holding it for her. 'You need to rest, but before you sleep, we will attend to the compulsion.'

She stood and stepped from the tub; he wrapped her in the thick towel and set about drying her. He did not linger with touches and kisses as he might have done at another time; her gesture had unnerved him. He wanted to do what had to be done and then to sleep; he did not want to think...not for one more moment.

She turned away from him and walked into the bedroom; his eyes riveted upon her bottom, he dropped the towel on the floor and followed her. He was privileged to see her breasts bounce as she climbed onto the bed, then she lay back and confounded him by holding out her arms to him. Would her acceptance of him ever cease to baffle him? Would he ever feel he deserved her?

In his mind, desire collided with compunction, and desire won, hands down. Climbing to kneel betwixt her parted thighs, he positioned himself and slid his cock deep into her quim, their bodies synching in rhythm. Her channel at once sheathed and welcomed him, warm, squeezing and releasing, expanding to permit his intrusion, then snugly encasing him, making him wish this perfect moment could last forever, with her needful eyes fastened upon his as he fucked her. He shifted, his thighs widening and urging hers wider as well, and he snapped his hips at the apex of each thrust, watching as her eyes darkened to incoherency. Her head tossed upon her pillow, hopelessly tangling her wet hair, and then she emitted a rasping cry as she began to come undone. In his mind, Severus saw again her lips closing over his cock, then he forced his gaze to her face, where her passion-smudged eyes regarded him as if he were a god descended to earth to ravish her. Feeling like one, indeed, he began to climax, each gush of seed into her womb shattering him a bit more, until he splintered into infinity, his fragments blending with hers into a mosaic of spent passion.

And then, they slept.

It was a dream...he knew it was a dream...but he couldn't make it stop, couldn't make himself wake up. Repeatedly, the Dark Lord turned to Morgen, who stepped forward, raised her wand, and cast Avada Kedavra! In his mind, repeatedly, Severus measured his affection for the girl against the best for the Greater Good, and each time, he stood and watched the girl fall bonelessly to the floor, her eyes staring and lifeless. Repeatedly, Dolohov and Pettigrew scurried forward, jostled by the other Death Eaters, to be the first to ravage and rape her dead body.

'Hermione!' he shouted hoarsely. 'No!'

Gentle hands smoothed hair back from his face, damp with sweat...and tears?...and cool lips pressed to the corner of his mouth. At last, Severus was able to force himself out of the dream, and his eyes were open. The room was hazy with the frail sunlight of an early spring morning, and the girl, her eyes all but closed, soothed and calmed him with her touches and kisses. The miniature ormolu clock on the table reported that they had been sleeping less than two hours before he had woken them with his foolish nightmare...but here was the girl, warm and soft and naked in his arms, wishing nothing but his peace and comfort, even in the depths of her own exhaustion.

He rose on one elbow and tilted his head to the side, pressing his lips to hers. She sighed into his mouth, and his tongue stroked against hers, his fingers wandering her flesh as if to reassure himself that his dream had been all untrue. His hands encompassed her breasts, drawing a murmur from her, and he slipped down to suckle, finding a primitive comfort in the sensation of her nipple between his lips, pressed to the roof of his mouth by the action of his tongue. Her hands found his head, her fingers twining in the strands of his hair, as if to pull him more firmly to her, to urge him to suck harder. He complied, applying the slight pressure of his teeth to her areola, pleasuring first one breast, then shifting to the other.

Glancing at her as she lay upon her pillow, he might have thought she was deeply asleep, save for the demands of her hands in his hair. Soon, her hips began to squirm towards him as her hands deserted his hair in favour of pressing upon his shoulders, as if to encourage him to move down her body. He released a nipple, smiling against the soft curve of her breast and drawing the milky flesh into his mouth, deliberately marking her with a love bite. The greedy wench could have her quim eaten out, if she wanted, but he would mark her as his...oh, yes, for she most assuredly was.

He nibbled his way down her abdomen, smirking as she strained towards him, and when he reached his destination, he lifted her leg and settled between her thighs, the musk of her slick arousal sweeter to him than clover in summer. He opened her up and laved her perineum, pausing to delve his tongue into the channel so preferred by his ever harder cock, then continuing up the labia minora to her clitoris. Closing his lips about this delightful protrusion, he subjected it to the same treatment lately enjoyed by her nipples, sucking as much of the surrounding flesh as possible into his mouth and lashing the bundle of nerves with his tongue, then releasing it with a soft popping noise, only to repeat the process.

When she shuddered her climax, he delivered a parting kiss to her inner thigh before moving again to his pillow and urging her to turn her back to him. Spooning up against her, he took himself in hand and found her entrance, then buried his face in her crazy mass of hair, rocking within her for an eternity, until the pulsing of his release ejected him from his body again into sleep.

The first blow barely stirred him from the depths, so deep down in slumber was he, and the clout was glancing, at best. The second, delivered from a sharp elbow to his solar plexus, woke him with a gasp of annoyance. Why the fuck could he not enjoy an uninterrupted sleep? The girl had never been a restless sleeper before, but enough was enough. He would return to his own room to rest.

Summoning his dressing gown from the bathroom floor, he stood to slip it on, turning to glare down at his erstwhile sleeping companion. Her bushy hair had dried into a frizzy halo upon her pillow, knotted and tangled. Her face, usually smooth and innocent in sleep, bore a frown. And as he watched her, knotting his dressing gown about his waist, her frown deepened to a scowl and her limbs began to twitch beneath the bed clothes, the earlier jabbing shove which had brought her elbow into contact with the pit of his stomach devolving now to irregular clonic movement.

Good God, she was having a seizure.

'*Petrificus Totalis!*' he commanded, and her body snapped to rigidity. He flipped the bedclothes from her, doing a visual inspection for abnormalities, but he saw nothing amiss. He covered her again against the cool air and turned to the wardrobe, where he found the bag containing her toiletries. He opened the bag with a murmur of approval; the girl was, as always, faultlessly prepared. He extracted the jar of Enchanted Mistletoe Crème, and settling beside her upon the bed, he began to massage it into her muscles, beginning with her ankles.

She had experienced a convulsion once before, when her level of need had reached an extremity, but that could not possibly be the reason for this seizure. He had brought her to orgasm several times in the last few hours. Methodically, he worked the crème into her flesh, and mentally, he reviewed all possible reasons he could imagine for her attack.

When he had rubbed the unguent into her shoulders, he sat back on his heels and inspected her again. She slept naturally, it seemed, the Full Body Bind having worn off during the course of his ministrations. With an inward sigh of weariness, he covered her, then stretched out beside her upon the bed again, on his side, facing her.

'We'll have no more of that,' he admonished her sleeping figure, then he closed his eyes and slept again.

The next time, his eyes were open at the first shift in her position.

'Miss Granger,' he said sharply.

She didn't answer him, and he moved up onto his elbows. Her eyes were closed, as if she were asleep, but her face did not show repose; her lips were pressed firmly together, bracketed by a grimace he recognized well.

He cast the Full Body Bind and called for Scampy. The house-elf popped into the room at once. 'Sit with Miss Granger,' he ordered her. 'I am going to bring the Enchanted Mistletoe Potion.'

He hurried through the connecting passage to his room, setting his hand unerringly on the potion she had brewed for his migraine headaches. It had helped him through his recovery from an hours-long session with Lord Voldemort's Cruciatus Curse...surely it would completely alleviate the symptoms of less than a minute under the wand of Morgen Leclercq.

Three hours and two convulsions later, this optimistic thought was completely banished. The girl lay upon the bed, wan and unconscious, and Severus was out of options. The unguent and potion created from the Enchanted Mistletoe lay abandoned on the bedside table, having failed him for the first time. He turned to his grandmother, who had willingly come at his request.

'I cannot help her, Severus,' the old witch said, sheathing her wand again, the glow of her diagnostic spell fading as she spoke. 'We need professional assistance.'

He looked down at the girl, panic scabbling sickeningly about the edges of his mind. How could it be that he had carried her off successfully from the aftermath of a Death Eater battle, only to lose her, somehow, in this inexplicable, senseless way? What if the convulsions brought on a cerebrovascular accident of some sort? What if she never regained consciousness?

What if she died?

The disturbing notion dribbled like acid into his bloodstream, spreading through his body in a slow burn of agony. He crouched beside the bed, staring at her, fruitlessly fumbling for indifference. It was not his place to feel these emotions. Unconsciously, he shielded his belly with his left arm, pressing as if to contain the sudden onset of terror-induced nausea. His right hand hovered just above the girl's brow, halted in the motion of smoothing her hair back from her face, just as she had earlier done for him. With agonising deliberation, he withdrew his hand and stood to his full height.

'Scampy,' he said, and the house-elf was immediately at his side, her enormous eyes fixed unblinkingly upon him. 'Go to Hogwarts and bring back Professor Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey. If necessary, follow them to wherever they are spending their holidays. Tell them a student is in urgent need of their assistance.'

He wrenched his eyes from the girl and looked down into the anxious face of his grandmother's servant. 'Tell them to hurry.'

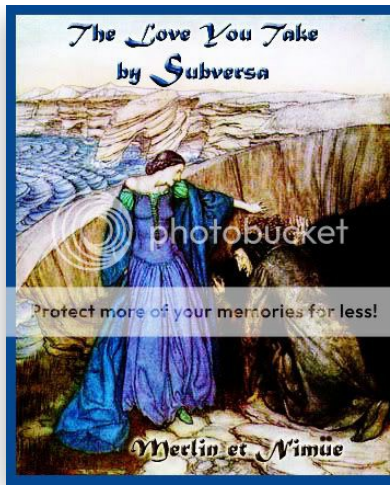
Chapter 23: Manifestation, Part 2

Chapter 23 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Beta reading thanks go to DeeMichelle and AnnieTalbot; Brit-picking was done by MagicAlly. Love to Shug for alpha reading!

It's hard to see how a lust curse story could be any more dub-con than it is, but this chapter may need a further dub-con warning.



Chapter 23: Manifestation, Part 2

Poppy Pomfrey rose to her full height and turned the complete force of her glare upon Severus Snape, who stood across the bed from her, a look of tightly wound insolence on his face. Turning her eyes to Albus Dumbledore, who hovered solicitously at her side, she demanded in a low voice throbbing with indignation, 'Who is responsible for cursing this child?'

Severus shifted his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. 'Does she bear evidence of a curse?' he snapped, disdainfully to answer her question.

The mediwitch frowned, momentarily distracted from her question, and recast the last charm she had used. A silvery light limned Hermione's form as she lay supine atop the bed sheet, wearing the simple nightdress (and knickers) in which Severus had dressed her when the house-elf had left to fetch the headmaster and matron.

'Yes,' Madam Pomfrey muttered, almost as if to herself. 'There is a Dark curse upon her...but there is also a trace of something else' She lowered her wand and the aura faded away. 'This child has suffered an allergic reaction to an Unforgivable Curse, Headmaster, and I demand to know who is responsible!'

Severus' eyes flicked to Dumbledore, who gave him a warning look. 'Poppy,' Dumbledore began, placating, but Severus interrupted him.

'I am responsible,' he snarled. 'She was with me when she was cursed, so feel free to direct your ire at me, madam.'

The witch turned to face him, undeterred by his tone. 'I'm not suggesting that you cursed her, Severus,' she said evenly. 'But it is obvious that the child has been through the wringer, and she needs better care taken of her.'

'Tell me more about the allergic reaction, Poppy,' Dumbledore said before Severus could speak. 'I've heard of such a thing, but don't believe I have ever seen it.'

Madam Pomfrey sheathed her wand and began unpacking her small black bag, lining up potions bottles upon the bedside tabletop as she spoke. 'Oh, they're very rare,' she said, 'but can sometimes be seen in a person who has been badly cursed before.' The matron took a measuring cup and poured out a dose of a viscous liquid the colour of baby Hippogriff excrement. 'I had Miss Granger in my hospital wing for the best part of two weeks after she followed Potter off to the Ministry of Magic on a fool's errand to save the wizarding world...or whatever they were *really* doing.' She sent a glare at Dumbledore, intent upon letting him know that she was well aware that she had not been told the truthful version of the story. Then she directed her attention back to the dose she was preparing, adding two drops of a narcotic muscle relaxant. She took a tiny glass rod from her capacious pocket and began to stir the two potions together. As she stirred, she lectured. 'She was gravely injured then, Headmaster...she must not be permitted to duel anymore. Her magical defences are damaged and cannot recover from offensive spells meant to injure...particularly not *Dark* ones.'

Severus watched Madam Pomfrey's efficient hands at work, his mind in turmoil. Had Dolohov's curse, delivered two years before in the Department of Mysteries, permanently vitiated the girl's magical health? Or had months of labouring under the *Eternus Perturbatio* curse irretrievably harmed her?

And how the fuck was he supposed to prevent Potter's best friend from duelling in Potter's defence?

'Well?' Madam Pomfrey said impatiently. 'Who's going to raise her so I can administer this potion?'

Severus curled his lip. 'Scampy,' he said coldly, and the house-elf was there instantly, elevating the girl's shoulders and supporting her head whilst the matron coaxed the foul-smelling concoction down her throat. He wanted to take the potion from Madam Pomfrey and shout at them all to leave...then he could take the girl in his arms and attend to her...but he was loath to touch her in the presence of these witnesses, who would look upon such contact between teacher and student as unseemly.

It was worse than *unseemly*...it was obscene.

Dumbledore spoke softly. 'When can we expect Miss Granger to fully recover?' he asked.

Severus tensed, his lips pressed into a thin white line. *This* was the question he most wanted to have answered, but he refused to show any personal interest in the girl's welfare.

Madam Pomfrey finished administering the potion and motioned for Scampy to lower the patient to the pillows. 'She may be unconscious for as long as forty-eight hours,' the mediwitch began, beginning to tidy her array of bottles and to repack her case, 'but I have given her an anti-spasmodic to prevent the seizures and a narcotic muscle relaxant. When she wakes up, she'll be sore and will need to continue with the potions twice a day for seven days, after which she can discontinue them. She's going to be fine, but she must be told what her limitations are, now.' Madam Pomfrey looked up at Severus. 'Why aren't you writing that down?' she demanded irritably.

Severus opened his mouth to inform her that *he* would not be attending to the girl's needs, but a voice from the doorway forestalled him.

'I have no need of writing it down; my memory is as good as it ever was,' Tatiana Prince stated, moving into the room and closing the door behind her. She stood with majestic calm, managing, despite her inferior height, to look down her nose at the room's occupants, her blue eyes flashing. 'Hermione is to receive the anti-spasmodic and muscle relaxant potions twice a day for the next seven days, and she is to be told her limitations, which I'm certain my grandson can do...it is one of his talents, you see.'

Severus kept his place upon the far wall, the corner of his mouth twitching in response to his grandmother's entrance. She really *was* a scary old broad. Madam Pomfrey looked as if she was fighting the impulse to curtsy, and Dumbledore was ...

The headmaster executed a profound bow, rising to take the old witch's hand. 'Tatiana, it has been much too long since we have met.'

Madam Prince allowed Dumbledore to kiss her hand, then she removed it pointedly from his grasp. 'You *will* choose to keep the most lamentable company, Albus,' she

replied, her usual crisp tones surprisingly softened as she addressed the headmaster.

Severus straightened from his negligent posture, the inclination to smile passing. Was his grandmother *flirting* with Dumbledore?

'Is that all?' he asked abruptly, rudely intruding upon what was shaping up to be a geriatric chat-up.

'Severus!' his grandmother murmured reprovingly, but he could tell she was amused.

Dumbledore took the opportunity to place a hand on Madam Pomfrey's arm. 'Do you have any further instructions for Severus and his grandmother before we leave Miss Granger in their care, Poppy?'

The mediwitch raised the bedclothes over the patient, smoothing the counterpane with a gentleness she did not customarily show the young people under her care. 'You'll keep us informed of her condition, Severus?' she said, raising her eyes to his stern face.

Seeing her sincere concern, Severus relented. 'I will,' he said gruffly.

Poppy Pomfrey nodded once and picked up her bag. 'I'm ready to go, Headmaster,' she said.

When Severus' grandmother returned from seeing their guests to the front door, she entered the room and spoke with finality. 'You will go to your room and sleep,' she informed him, 'whilst I look after Hermione.' A wave of her wand summoned an armchair close to the bedside, and she sat, never doubting that he would obey her.

Severus stood, looking down at the girl, who lay so still and quiet upon her pillow. Shadows etched purple lines beneath her eyes, too dark for her pale skin. Her mass of hair had dried from her bath the night before...it seemed like an aeon ago...in a horrible tangle of knots and snarls. 'Her hair needs to be combed,' he said inconsequentially, as if that were the most important thing to be considered.

'Severus,' his grandmother said, and he turned his face to her. The compassion in her eyes was nearly too much for him to bear, translating seamlessly in his mind to accusation. 'I'll sort out her hair,' she promised. 'You're overwrought...if you wish to be of any use in caring for her, you must rest.'

Severus grappled with his Occlumency shields as if to prevent her too-acute comprehension of his state of mind, but all was in place: his grandmother had ever been far too adept at reading those things in him which he most wished to keep from her.

'I need a drink,' he muttered, and turning on his heel, he left the girl in the care of his most trusted family member.

In his room, he flung his robes over the back of an armchair and strode across the room to the desk, where reposed the small decanter which held the amber glory of his grandfather's finest cognac. The Hors D'Age Charentais in Grandmother's cellar was the last vintage produced by the now defunct French wizarding vineyard owned by the Charentais family. After his grandfather's death, the remaining bottles had been kept in a special, climate-controlled section of the wine cellar. Grandmother was known to be exceptionally stingy with the Charentais, but from the time of his thirtieth birthday, when she had judged that he had developed an appropriate palate, a small amount of the precious drink had been placed in Severus' room each time he came to visit. Surely, this preposterous disorder of his mental processes called for extreme measures, including Grandfather Prince's Charentais.

But peace did not come.

Sprawling in his armchair, the exquisite bouquet of the cognac wafting soothingly up his nostrils, he was plagued as his mind replayed for him again and again the happenings of the last twenty-four hours: Hermione, amazing in her all-white ensemble, standing up to Morgen; Hermione, on her knees to the Dark Lord, baldly stating, 'I have nothing to say to you'; Hermione, her lips fastened about his cock; Hermione, languorous at his side; Hermione, jerking in convulsions. How could he have been so foolish as to flatter the girl's vanity at the risk of Morgen's retribution? How could he have endangered her by taking her into the Dark Lord's presence? How had he ever managed to bring her safely away?

And if she died, how would he be able to persevere, to do what had to be done?

He groaned audibly and took another mouthful of cognac. How fatuous! As if he could have done aught else than what he *had* done, in each step of this pathetic *pas de deux* composed and orchestrated by Albus Dumbledore. No, he had made each choice of action based on maintaining his precarious balance between the respective camps of Dumbledore and the Dark Lord, with no more than a passing nod to the safety and well-being of the girl.

As for what they got up to in private ... His actions there had long been given over to a different sensibility, based not upon what was most rational, but upon what she desired...and upon what *he* desired, as well.

He growled aloud and set the crystal balloon of drink upon the table at his side, his elbows resting upon his knees as his face came to rest in his hands. It was a ridiculous situation; there was no excuse for the way he permitted her to carry on with him. From a cold, remote distance, he could easily see the series of idiotic mistakes he had made in his handling of her. She ought never to have been permitted to make free of his quarters, or to sleep the night in his bed, or to speak to him with such familiarity, as if she were his equal in age and station. He should have been adamant about maintaining his emotional aloofness.

He had no one to blame for this foolish attachment but himself.

He rubbed his sandpaper-lined eyelids and raised his face to glare at the glass-fronted cabinet situated against the near wall. That wasn't really true, was it? *She* bore a great deal of the blame for this sorry turn of events! She was needful and seductive, amorous and enticing, then thankful and pathetically affectionate. She had the barefaced gall to desire him...never mind that the desire was purely curse induced! ...and then she had begun to take over his entire life, leaving her hair in his bathtub drain, her knickers upon his bedroom floor, her books scattered about his sitting room ... and her scent upon his towels, his sheets, and permeating the very air he breathed.

He snarled and flicked his wand at the fancy shelving showcasing an array of dainty figurines; the glass doors opened, baring the frippery statuary to his magical wrath. With narrowed eyes, he watched a small sculpture of Merlin and Nimue float in the air and rise toward the ceiling.

The girl bore no guilt for his turmoil. She had been cursed by a madman, and Dumbledore had been the unlikely *deus ex machina* whose actions had, rather than resolving her dilemma, complicated it beyond imagining. God help the hapless fool who fell prey to Dumbledore's manipulations...was Severus himself not proof of that maxim? He and the girl had been thrust into an impossible situation, and Dumbledore's initial instructions had been to deal with the girl kindly, to see after her emotional needs as well as the physical ones, and to, when the time came, let her go on to live a normal, Snape-free life.

There had been no consideration for how *he* was to go on and live a normal life without her.

The delicate glass ornament began to spin in the air, and a harsh sound, meant to be a laugh, came from his throat. Ah, how could he have forgotten? He wasn't *supposed* to live once she was ready to leave him...for that wouldn't happen until the Dark Lord fell...and by then, Severus was meant to be dead. Dumbledore never admitted it, but Severus knew it was what the old wizard fully expected, and it was a price the greatest proponent of the Light was altogether willing to pay: Severus' life for the decisive defeat of the ultimate advocate of the Dark.

A sneer pulled at his harsh mouth. *Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished*, he thought sourly, and the glass figurine began to plummet toward the top of the unforgiving wooden cabinet.

What had possessed his grandmother to place her priceless collection of eighteenth-century Dresden figurines in his bedroom? She knew his temper...she knew his propensity to shatter delicate things. How could such fragility be permitted to exist in his room? How could it be permitted to exist at all?

The image of Hermione, still and wan upon the bed down the hall, intruded upon his consciousness, and he lurched to his feet, cursing. Another flick of his wrist halted the descent of King Arthur's sorcerer and his young witch seductress; the blameless figurine came to rest upon the cabinet top, none the worse for its aerial excursion.

Whirling to snatch up his robes, he donned them and left the room, anxious to return to the girl.

In the late afternoon, Severus ate from a tray beside Hermione's bed, hoping that the freshly made spotted dick and custard, her favourite pudding, would cause her to wake up and demand to be fed. He kept a warming charm on it, prolonging the time period during which the mouth-watering aroma would persist, but she did not stir.

Scampy popped into the room and spoke softly. 'Master Severus?'

He turned to her. 'Yes?'

'Mr Lucius Malfoy is calling for you. He's waiting in the small drawing room.'

Severus frowned. 'Is Grandmother with him?'

Scampy shook her head. 'He asked to see Master Severus alone, sir,' she answered.

Severus stood. 'Sit with Miss Granger,' he instructed the house-elf as he moved to the door. 'And keep the pudding warm!' he added tersely as he exited the room.

He made it down the stairs and into the room where Malfoy awaited him without encountering any of the family members.

'Ah, Severus,' Malfoy said, by way of greeting.

Severus inclined his head in reply. 'What's toward?' he asked abruptly.

Malfoy made a small moue of distaste. 'Aren't you going to offer me a drink?' he asked plaintively, his natural charm on full force.

Severus snorted his amusement. 'No,' he replied shortly. 'I am quite busy today, Lucius. What do you want?'

Malfoy surveyed him through wide grey eyes. 'You know, old chap, there was a time when I thought we had taught you the social niceties,' he complained.

Severus turned to go. 'I'm sure you can find your way out,' he said rudely. 'Don't bother me if it isn't important.'

'Oh, all *right*,' Malfoy said, and Severus turned in the doorway to hear what the older wizard had to say. Malfoy reached into his inner cloak pocket and brought out a silver case, which he opened to disclose the slim black cheroots he had specially made in wizarding Cuba. 'Let's walk in your grandmother's garden and have a cigar. I have a few things to tell you.'

Severus sneered. 'I knew you'd get to the point eventually,' he said, turning and leading the way out of doors.

The two wizards moved into the garden, which had been ruthlessly cut back in the autumn and was only just beginning to awaken for spring. Severus placed the costly cheroot between his lips and accepted the light Malfoy provided with his wand tip. For a moment they stood in the last rays of the setting sun, facing one another, drawing the aromatic tobacco smoke in and blowing it out almost simultaneously, each of them showing off with elaborate smoke rings. Malfoy gave him a devilish grin, and Severus smirked in response.

'Narcissa still won't let you smoke them at the Manor,' he said knowingly, beginning to walk.

Malfoy shrugged philosophically. 'One makes compromises,' he said, treading companionably along. 'You will see, Severus, when you're married.'

Severus studied the tender shoots upon the lowest branch of a nearby tree as he passed. 'I have no plans to marry,' he said idly.

Malfoy darted a glance at him. 'The Dark Lord is rather unhappy with Morgen,' he said. After a sombre moment, he added, 'Bella's funeral was this afternoon.'

Severus blinked. 'That was fast,' he said.

Malfoy's lips tightened. 'The Dark Lord said it had to be today or ...'

Severus frowned. 'Or?' he prompted.

'Or we might have to wait an undetermined length of time.' Malfoy turned a serious look on Severus. 'You should have seen him, Severus...neither Bella's husband nor her sister had any say in planning the funeral. His Lordship arranged it all without consulting them, as if *he* were her ... husband.' He shook his head.

'No wonder you wanted to get away from the Manor,' Severus said frankly.

One side of Malfoy's mouth twitched. 'Yes, but the Dark Lord asked me to come to you,' he objected. 'I have a message from him.'

Severus turned from his contemplation of a bed of early blooming fairy wings, dread gripping him at these words. 'What is the message?' he asked quietly.

Malfoy continued walking to a stone bench set amidst a cluster of rose bushes and sat down as if he were too tired to remain on his feet. 'He wants you to be ready at any moment; the time is coming soon.'

Severus forced himself to swallow, his fleeting pleasure in the cigar gone. He glanced about the twilight garden, wondering how it could be that nature was coming alive again, even as the world was coming to an end. Unnerved, he dropped the half-smoked cigar on the mulching beneath the rose bushes and murmured a spell to extinguish the spark of fire at its tip. Such observations about the beauty of the natural world were uncharacteristic for him, particularly in the face of such dire news. Vaguely, he wondered if he were taking ill.

'Severus?' Malfoy said.

He felt a sudden urgency to be away from the garden, to be in the house again, sitting with the girl. 'Is that all, Lucius?' he asked.

Malfoy stood again, looking pained. 'You might give a fellow the chance to finish smoking his cigar before you put him out,' he said.

Severus began to walk away from him. 'Please, make yourself at home,' he said over his shoulder. 'Stay as long as you like.'

Malfoy laughed. 'I don't suppose your grandmother wants me lurking in her garden in the dark,' he said, but Severus had disappeared into the house, and did not hear him.

'I am not going to waste a perfectly good cigar,' he said aloud, and seating himself again upon the bench, he continued to smoke in the peace of the Prince House garden.

Severus entered the girl's room precipitously, his eyes going directly to her unmoving form.

'Any change?' he asked Scampy.

'No, Master Severus,' the little house-elf answered. 'Miss hasn't moved.'

'I'll take it from here, Scampy,' he said, beginning to measure out the potions Madam Pomfrey had left.

Scampy departed, and Severus removed his robes and boots and climbed on the bed, propping himself on the headboard and pulling the girl against him into a half-sitting position. Summoning the measured dose, he patiently coaxed it down her throat, murmuring to her all the time.

'...and when you wake up, you can take your medicine without my assistance, which will be a relief,' he scolded, the long fingers of one hand gently massaging her throat, helping her to swallow. 'If you imagine that I am entertained by nursing your inanimate form, let me disabuse you of that notion.'

When he was sure the last of the potion had gone down her throat, he sent the cup floating back to the table and inched down until the girl lay again upon her pillow. Rolling to his side, he propped his head on his hand and studied her by the light of the oil lamp, details he had never noticed before flooding his consciousness like manna in the midst of famine.

Her hair was not simply *brown*; the intricate colour was made by the blending of strands of honey, auburn, mahogany, chestnut, gold, and copper. He stroked the hair back from her face, marvelling at the softness of her skin under his fingertips. He touched the bruise-like colours beneath her eyes, as if he could erase the signs of her illness from her face. Like fairy wings, his fingers ghosted over her mouth, noting the fullness of the bottom lip, complemented by the dip in the middle of the upper lip, and he knew the urge to kiss her.

Resisting that urge, he buried his nose in her hair, and the scent that was simply and undeniably hers filled him. It was undoubtedly a combination of her shampoo, and the soap with which she washed herself, and her own natural smell; regardless of its provenance, it had come to mean *Hermione* to him, and drawing in great lungs-full of it acted upon him like a Calming Draught. It occurred to him that her scent was not unlike that of Grandmother's garden as it woke to the new season; she *was* spring, on the cusp of her life, her chances unsquandered. It was imperative that she have the opportunity to seize that life and to apply her own particular brand of determination to creating an existence worthy of her.

As he lay beside her, the hours of no sleep crept up on him, and his eyelids fluttered closed; he allowed his head to settle upon her pillow, and he fitted himself against her side, holding her securely to him. At last, he slept.

He felt her restless movement and was instantly awake. With dread, he watched her, waiting for the convulsions to begin. She shifted slightly, a murmur of sound escaping her lips, and he became aware of the faintest aroma of her arousal. It had been nearly twenty-four hours since he had last brought her off; apparently, the compulsion was pushing through even the illness-induced coma state to torment her with need.

'I've got you,' he said quietly, magicking himself beneath the bedclothes with her and reaching to slide her nightdress up. He slipped his fingers beneath the elastic of her knickers and found her quim wet. 'You're all right,' he told her, 'I'll take care of you.'

He Vanished the underpants, wishing that she were awake to object to the loss of another pair of knickers, and he began to touch her. Her murmuring continued, as did her restless movement, but as he finger fucked her, the movement ceased to be random, and soon she was moving with him.

'Good girl,' he rumbled, ignoring his own rising need. She would undoubtedly benefit more and for a longer period with a proper fuck, but he could not bring himself to do that to her when she was unconscious. It was one thing to take care of her needs, but it would be wrong, somehow, for him to derive pleasure from the act when she was unable to tell him to bugger off if she wanted.

She emitted an actual moan of pleasure, and he was insensibly cheered. 'Oh, good job,' he said, bringing his lips closer to her ear. 'Come for me and maybe you'll wake up,' he said. 'Come for me.'

As if in response to his words, her body shuddered in climax, and she sighed. His lips curved against the shell of her ear. 'That's better,' he murmured, relaxing again upon her pillow. 'Now it won't bother you for a while.'

He drifted again into sleep and did not wake when she moved onto her side and twined herself about him like a climbing vine.

When next he woke, the pale light in the room informed him that it was just past dawn. He had to get up; his grandmother would be coming soon to relieve him, and he was damned if she would find him in bed with the girl.

It was then that he realised that he was on his side, as was the girl, and that her legs were tangled up with his own. This was a much more natural sleep position for her. 'Hermione?' he said, but she did not respond.

He looked down at her face and was aware of the pain which arced through his body like a lightning strike, leaving him aching, weak, and breathless in its wake. This was not caring, nor was it concern. This was not the obsession he had felt for Evans, nor the possession he had felt for Morgen. This was not passion, and this was not lust. This was something he had never before felt; it was something far more frightening, something horrific, something lethal.

This was *love*.

Dear Merlin, it had to be love. What but love could burn through him with such exquisite agony? What but love could have him looking at the world as if it were a brand new place? What but love could reduce his entire universe to the woman he held in his arms?

He attempted to draw breath into his body, but he felt as if he had been hit with a world class *Stupefy!* And despite his breathlessness, energy surged through his body, tingling along his nerve endings as if he could lift the earth and set it upon his shoulders, as a Titan of old. Yet he held in his arms a creature so eminently breakable that he marvelled he could touch her without seeing her shatter.

'Hermione,' he breathed, for the first time saying it just to hear her name spoken aloud.

She did not stir, but he did not despair. He knew to his core that she would wake when her body had healed, and that she would be safe. All he had to do now was to *keep* her safe. And that, surely, was within his power? He might not be able to live through what must come, but he could make his end meaningful. Fuck Dumbledore and the greater good...*here* was his hope and his reason. If he could provide for Hermione a world free of the Dark Lord...if his end could truly buy her beginning...then he was more than willing to make it so. Even if he would not be there to see her find herself in a post-war world, he could make sure that *this* blossom had a spring in which she could spread her petals and bloom.

Tenderly, he disentangled himself from the warm, sleeping young woman and rose from the bed. He had many things to do; the end was coming, for the Dark Lord had decreed it...and Severus had much to make ready.

Madam Prince looked up as Scampy poured tea into her cup. 'Where is Master Severus?' she asked. 'Isn't he going to eat his breakfast?'

Scampy moved around the table to pour tea for Eileen Snape, as well. 'Master Severus is in his room, pacing and talking to his quill,' she said in her squeaky voice.

Eileen frowned. 'He's what?'

'And the quill is dancing,' Scampy added, replacing the teapot on the sideboard.

'Dancing?' Eileen said blankly.

'Don't be a fool, Eileen,' Madam Prince said impatiently. 'He's obviously dictating something.'

Scampy nodded, her eyes wide. 'He's talking to Miss Hermione, but she's in her room, so only the quill and parchment is listening,' she explained.

Eileen applied herself to eating her eggs and toast, but Madam Prince stared into the distance, her blue eyes calculating.

Severus had only just finished filling the parchment with his spiky handwriting when the Mark burned black on his left arm. He rose from the writing desk and sent the numerous crumpled pieces of parchment and the discarded Dicta-Quill to the fire, destroying the evidence of failure even as he pulled his Death Eater cloak and his mask from the cupboard. He donned the cloak, his purpose burning in him with a brightness which centred his focus with laser-like precision. He crossed again to the desk and picked up his quill, scrawling *Hermione* on the folded parchment on the blotter, between the decanter of Grandfather's cognac and the figurine of Merlin and Nimue, which he had moved from the top of the cabinet to the desk.

He picked up the figurine and the note and strode from his room to Hermione's. He placed the sorcerer and his enchantress on Hermione's bedside table, slipping the note between the two figures where it held securely. 'She put you in the crystal cave and took your power,' he told the figurine, 'and you're still known as the greatest wizard who ever lived. I'm not doing *that* poorly.'

He knelt by the bedside. 'Hermione?' he said, but she didn't move. He lifted her hand from the counterpane and leaned over to place a kiss upon her lips.

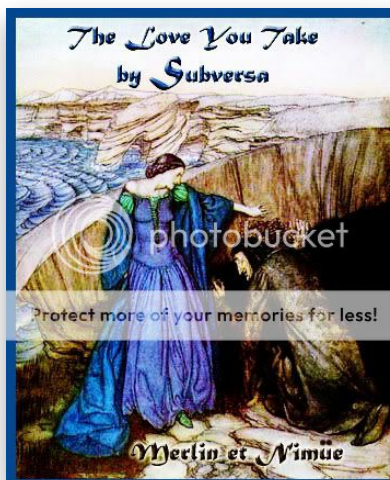
'Good bye, my love,' he said, then he released her and stood, and without a sound, he Disappeared.

He left too soon to see the girl's eyes open, eagerly searching the room for him. At last, she reached with a slightly trembling hand and plucked the note from its place between Merlin and Nimue.

Chapter 24: Validation

Chapter 24 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.



The Love You Take

Chapter 24: Validation

She held the folded parchment gingerly in her hand, tracing with one fingertip the slanted, spiky handwriting showing her name *Hermione*. Where had he gone? Why had he left a note for her?

With an audible *pop*, Scampy appeared at her side.

'Miss is awake,' the little elf squeaked, plucking the note from Hermione's hands and placing it again between the figures of Merlin and Nimue. 'How is Miss feeling?'

'I'm feeling tired,' Hermione admitted, reaching again for the note. 'How long have I been asleep?'

The door to her room opened, and she was distracted, her eyes tracking Madam Prince as she entered the room. The old lady was looking a bit pale herself, and Hermione wondered vaguely if the illness which had befallen her was contagious.

'Good morning, Hermione,' Madam Prince said, walking to her side and taking her hand. 'You've given us quite a scare.'

Hermione managed a wan smile at her hostess. 'I'm not sure what happened to me,' she admitted.

Retaining Hermione's hand, Madam Prince seated herself in the squishy armchair pulled up close to the bed. 'My understanding is that you experienced an allergic reaction to an aggressive offensive spell...do you recall being cursed?'

Hermione nodded, a slight frown between her brows. 'Yes,' she said, not wanting to admit to the professor's grandmother that Morgen Singer had attacked her. 'It was the Cruciatus Curse.'

Madam Prince made a moue of distaste. 'Dreadful,' she murmured, pressing the hand she held. 'I am very sorry you were exposed to that, my dear.'

Hermione averted her gaze; she wasn't sure the extent of the old woman's knowledge of her grandson's affiliations. 'Where is Professor Snape?' she asked quietly.

Madam Prince placed Hermione's hand gently on the counterpane and picked up one of the two potions phials on the bedside table. 'Severus has gone out to attend to some business,' she said vaguely, pouring the foul-looking concoction into a cup.

'What is that stuff?' Hermione asked, belatedly aware that she sounded rather rude.

Madam Prince regarded her a bit haughtily. 'This *stuff* is the anti-spasmodic you're to take,' she answered. The old woman picked up the second phial and removed the cork.

'And what is that one, ma'am?' Hermione inquired, taking care to speak respectfully. She began to believe she knew where the professor had got his prickly nature.

'This is the narcotic muscle relaxant,' Madam Prince said.

'May I please not have that one now?' Hermione said plaintively. 'It will make me sleepy, and I don't want to sleep again just yet. I promise I'll take it later.'

Madam Prince eyed her speculatively and then nodded once. 'All right, Hermione. As long as you take it when Scampy gives it to you, we can leave off the second potion for now.' She turned to the waiting house-elf and said, 'Fetch Miss Hermione a glass of water, please.'

Hermione smiled in thanks and obediently swallowed the smelly brownish glop in the cup, quickly followed by the glass of water pressed into her hand by Scampy.

Madam Prince replaced the cup on the table and settled back into her chair, her sharp eyes intent on Hermione's face. 'Professor Snape desired me to tell you a bit about your illness,' she said, and Hermione straightened, suddenly attentive. With a ghost of an approving nod, the old woman continued, 'The school matron made a visit whilst you were unconscious; she diagnosed the allergic reaction and told us that a previous injury for which she treated you has damaged your ability to recover from Dark offensive magic.' She paused and studied Hermione's face. 'Do you understand what I'm saying?'

Hermione frowned. 'Madam Pomfrey never told me that,' she objected. 'I've not had this sort of difficulty recovering from duels before, and I've been hit with loads of spells in duelling practice.'

'But not Dark spells, surely?' Madam Prince inquired gently.

Hermione felt a sinking feeling. 'No,' she admitted.

'And perhaps in duelling practice you had a wand with which to protect yourself,' Madam Prince said bitterly, 'rather than being unarmed, as you were when my grandson took you before the Dark Lord?'

Hermione watched the old woman, who showed no emotion save for the angry fire burning in her blue eyes. She was a bit surprised that Madam Prince knew the details of her audience with Voldemort; did her professor share such knowledge with his grandmother?

'You're right, ma'am,' she conceded. 'I *am* always armed in duelling practice, and we don't use Dark spells.' She shifted a bit restlessly, her interest wandering. She didn't want to be rude to the professor's grandmother, but she really wanted to read the note he had left for her. 'Why didn't Professor Snape tell me about this?' she asked, her eyes straying to the parchment again, snugly situated betwixt the figures of the wizard and his young enchantress.

'Men are notoriously awkward when imparting information of a personal nature,' the old witch stated philosophically. 'We cannot expect more of them than they are capable of delivering, if we wish to be happy with them.' After a moment, Madam Prince said pointedly, 'You'll be happy with Severus, won't you, Hermione?'

Hermione jerked her head back to Madam Prince so quickly that the room tilted slightly; apparently, she was still a bit unsteady. 'Ma'am?' she said, unsure of how to answer such a strange question.

'You want to be with Severus, do you not?' Madam Prince said, elucidating her question. 'To have him for your husband?' she added.

Hermione felt her face burn. 'I ...' she began, too embarrassed to piece together a coherent sentence.

'You have no need to colour up,' the implacable old lady stated coolly, her piercing eyes unwavering. 'There is no shame in loving a good man and wanting him for your own.'

Hermione looked uncomfortably at her hands, now clutched across her stomach. 'I don't know how to answer you, ma'am,' she said with quiet dignity.

'You have an ally in me, Hermione,' Madam Prince told her. 'I have always...*always*...wanted Severus to have a witch who loves him and will stand up to him and stand *with* him when necessary.'

Hermione continued to look at her hands, wondering if she were dreaming. Why would this stiff-necked old pure-blood martinet want her grandson to marry a Muggle-born witch?

'Look at me, child,' the old woman said, and the naked entreaty in her voice was so compelling that Hermione was driven to raise her eyes. 'He will fight you,' Madam Prince said bleakly. 'He is proud and stubborn and self-denigrating. You must fight fire with fire if you wish to win your way with him.' She leant forward, lowering her voice. 'He gave you a powerful tool, Hermione. He didn't know he was doing it...I'm sure he never thought you might wish to use it to bind him to you...but don't forget that you have your Nexus.'

Wordlessly, never looking away from Madam Prince, Hermione's fingers sought and found the heavy silver amulet hanging between her breasts. Closing her fist around it through the thin fabric of her nightdress, she said, 'It's not a *weapon*.'

'Of course it isn't,' Madam Prince responded, her tone almost caressing. 'It's an implement...a means by which you can prove to him the authenticity of your love for him.'

Hermione shook her head slightly, as if to clear it of cobwebs, not bothering to deny the older woman's words. 'But how?' she said dolefully. 'How do I prove it?'

Madam Prince relaxed back into her chair, as if she had accomplished an objective. 'You'll know when the time comes,' she said, fatigue showing in her voice. Her eyes flicked to the parchment on the bedside table. 'Why don't you read your letter from him whilst Scampy prepares your bath?' she suggested. 'You'll feel much better when you've washed and changed into a fresh nightdress.'

Hermione smiled her acquiescence and Scampy, who had been standing at the ready, scurried into the bathroom to run the bathwater.

The girl's fingers seemed to quiver as she took the parchment into her hands. Madam Prince's lips curved into a tiny smile; she remembered well the excitement one felt upon the receipt of a letter from one's love. She laid her head against the chair back, pretending to rest her eyes, and surreptitiously watched the girl's face as she read the note.

Severus had once mentioned that the girl's emotions played across her face so readily that one scarcely needed Legilimency to know her thoughts; Madam Prince quickly saw this to be true. First, the wide brown eyes narrowed, then grew very wide, and soon a smile of beatific proportions touched her very pretty mouth. At last, the letter fluttered from Hermione's fingers to the bedclothes, and she stared into the distance, apparently completely lost to the world.

'Your bath is ready, Miss,' Scampy's voice proclaimed.

Madam Prince stood and pushed her chair back, moving out of the path to the bathroom. 'Allow Scampy to help you stand, Hermione,' she admonished.

The girl sat up slowly and leant heavily upon Scampy's strong arms as she cautiously rose from the bed. Madam Prince waited for the bathroom door to close behind them before lifting the parchment from the bedclothes.

Hermione,

I have been called, and I may be away indefinitely. In my absence, you will oblige me by doing as my grandmother asks. She has in her possession a very potent enchanted sleep draught to use in case of extreme need. Do not attempt to travel in your weakened state. Easter holidays continue for another week, and it is my wish that you recuperate at Prince House.

After the first of several paragraphs, Madam Prince looked up from her grandson's familiar handwriting and shook her head. Good heavens, was this the boy's idea of how to write a billet-doux? Had this drivel been worth wasting half a sheaf of her best notepaper and three broken quills, including an expensive Dicta-Quill? Obviously, she had sadly neglected her grandson's education if this was his idea of how to woo his lady-love.

'Grandmother?'

Starting guiltily, Madam Prince looked up to find her son's eldest standing in the doorway looking at her quizzically.

'Father sent me up to fetch you down for lunch,' John Prince explained, looking curiously at the parchment she held.

Madam Prince let the parchment fall to the bed and held out an imperious hand. 'Give your grandmother your arm down the stairs, John,' she commanded irritably.

Scrambling to do her bidding, John offered his arm, forgetting all about the private note his grandmother was not supposed to be reading.

Severus sat with perfect composure at the table in the Malfoy dining room, his demeanour showing no hint of the tide of anxiety crashing about in him like a storm at sea. In a clear, revolving bubble above the table, the naked form of Morgen Singer Leclercq rotated obscenely, her wrists and ankles bound, her mouth gagged. After one glance when he entered the room, Severus kept his eyes from the grotesque spectacle. He was very angry with Morgen, but this humiliation was not something he would have wished upon her.

His Lordship sat at the head of table receiving reports and issuing orders, very much an emperor instructing his generals in war. Severus watched and listened, cataloguing each piece of information for future use with one part of his mind whilst worry for the girl nagged at him with unflagging urgency.

Dolohov and Wormtail sat across from him; Dolohov appeared interested but detached, whilst Wormtail squirmed about in his seat as if he had boils on his bum.

At length, the Dark Lord spoke to him. 'Severus, your little Mudblood is well, I hope?'

Severus nodded tersely. 'She is, my Lord.'

The red eyes bored into his, and he flooded his mind with images of Hermione: kneeling in her bath, her mouth upon his cock; writhing beneath him in her Prince House bedroom; transported as he slowly rocked into her from behind.

'So I see,' the Dark Lord said, withdrawing from Severus' mind again. 'Very good.' With a spider-like, long fingered white hand, His Lordship flicked a bit of lint from the sleeve of his silver-embroidered black robes. 'I believe it is time for you to relay the information I gave you to the old fool.'

Severus rose with alacrity, relief at doing something...anything!... flooding him. 'As you wish, my Lord,' he responded, bowing.

The door closed behind the billowing cloak of Severus Snape, and Lord Voldemort turned his red-eyed gaze to those of his Death Eaters who sat across from Snape's empty chair. 'Do you know what you're to do now?' he asked.

Dolohov inclined his head and said, 'Of course, my Lord,' but his words were overborne by those of Wormtail.

'We're to fetch Snape's Mudblood to you!'

'Unharm'd, Wormtail,' the Dark Lord reiterated softly, with menace. 'She is to be used as bait for the Potter brat, and I will have her in pristine condition, do you understand?'

The rat nodded eagerly, his eyes darting to the bubble above the table before he said, 'And afterwards, My Lord?'

'Afterwards, Wormtail, when Lord Voldemort is victorious, every Death Eater who served him will receive a boon,' His Lordship responded, turning from them dismissively.

Severus strode purposefully through the nearly empty corridors of Hogwarts, bearing down on his destination: Albus Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore was waiting for him in the open doorway when he reached the top of the moving spiral staircase. 'Hermione?' Dumbledore asked sharply.

Severus sneered and brushed past the headmaster. 'She is well,' he said curtly.

Dumbledore closed the door and stroked the head of his phoenix, Fawkes, once before crossing the floor to resume his seat behind the desk. 'Then, to what do I owe the honour?' he inquired uneasily.

Severus placed his palms upon the desktop and leant in. 'It appears the game is afoot,' he said. 'I've been sent to tell you that the Dark Lord will strike Hogsmeade tonight.'

Nervous energy poured from Severus, combining with the power he wore like a second skin to create a field of crackling might all about him. As he leant across Dumbledore's desk, each arm tensed like a spring, it seemed that the slightest provocation would release him from earth's gravity, and he would take flight, a terrible, purposeful bird of prey.

In spite of Severus' tension, the headmaster, with obvious effort, maintained his composure. For uncounted seconds, the silence stretched between them. At last, in a carefully modulated tone, Dumbledore said, 'And are you telling me so, Severus?'

Dumbledore's words seemed to be the catalyst, for Severus turned in a swirl of black robes and began to pace. 'Yes, an attack is coming, but it is merely a diversion...punishment for Morgen Singer, who will lead the raid. *She* is unaware of the diversionary nature of her assignment; the Dark Lord intends for her to be overwhelmed by Order members and killed in battle.' He turned on his heel and watched to see the effect of his pronouncement upon the old man.

With a show of irritation, Dumbledore said, 'This is all very interesting, of course, but if this is a mere diversion ... a diversion from *what*, precisely?'

'*That*, I don't know!' Severus spat. His shoulders sagged, the gravity of the situation claiming him once more. 'I have been unable to ascertain the rest of the plan, despite my efforts...for some reason, he's keeping it from me.'

Dumbledore's brows contracted. 'Have you done something to make him suspect your loyalties? Something when you took Hermione to him, perhaps?'

A harsh bark escaped Severus' lips. 'Other than manhandling her unmercifully, forcing her onto her face before him, allowing her to be cursed by a crazy bitch and leaving her lying in a pool of sick, I showed no further signs of humanity than any other Death Eater, I assure you.'

Dumbledore surveyed him steadily over the tops of his spectacles. 'Be that as it may, Severus, as you say, the game is afoot. You must ...'

Severus' lips twisted, and he bared his yellow teeth, forcing the words through them. 'I am ready.'

Unflinching, black eyes met blue, and he permitted the old man access to his mind, his disdain bleeding copiously into the grudging obedience he had ever shown to Albus Dumbledore. He withheld nothing, virtually daring his so-called *benign* master to *know* him, to give a tinker's damn about what Severus thought of what he had been asked to do. He was aware of the headmaster's glancing interest in his last interactions with Hermione, followed by the intense concentration with which he examined, with meticulous precision, the length and height and breadth of Severus' ironclad resolve to finish what had been begun so long ago.

At last, Dumbledore withdrew, and Severus turned away from him, sickened by the necessity of baring himself in such a way before anyone.

'I see,' the headmaster said, and Severus fancied that he heard sadness, as well as satisfaction, in the old man's tone.

Still, he remained with his back to Dumbledore, gazing out of the window into the deepening shadows of late afternoon.

'I shall put Aberforth in charge of the defence of the village,' Dumbledore said, his thoughts already veering away from Severus. 'I believe a small contingent of Order members and an Auror or two will suffice to organise the villagers.'

Severus swallowed, forcing himself to focus. 'Caution them to allow no outward signs of preparedness,' he said, turning to face his employer once more.

'Leave it to me,' Dumbledore said, rising with sudden energy. Advancing to Fawkes' golden perch, the headmaster addressed the beautiful scarlet bird. 'It is time, my friend,' he said softly.

Severus watched with fascination as Fawkes flew across the room, and it seemed the phoenix would fly into the wall. But as he flew, the wall dissolved, and a new room was revealed. Severus noted with some surprise that the numerous curious silver instruments which had always occupied places in Dumbledore's office had been moved into this space, along with their supporting spindly-legged tables. These were now arrayed about a larger table bearing several crystal balls, such as the ones in the Divination classroom, and large bowls of the size and depth of Dumbledore's Pensieve.

'My War Room,' Dumbledore said, answering the question Severus had not asked. 'I can monitor many different people and places from here.'

A wave of the headmaster's hand caused the crystals to fill with swirling mist. 'Taking up Divination at this late date?' Severus inquired sardonically, entering the room.

'These orbs are agents not only of prophecy,' Dumbledore replied, setting the waters in the deep, rune-inscribed bowls to gentle movement with a flick of his fingers, 'but also of farsightedness...they permit one to see events at a great distance.'

A feeling of unreality washed over Severus as the headmaster began to arrange about him the implements with which he would direct the coming battle, and he was unnerved by the sudden acute similarities he saw between this master and the one to whom he must soon return.

'I shall be back when I have further intelligence,' he said shortly, turning to go.

'Take care,' Dumbledore admonished him, but Severus walked out of the office without responding.

Hermione woke from her nap with a start. She had been wont, all afternoon, to doze off for short periods of time between bouts of wakefulness, during which she read and re-read the professor's hand-written note. Even now, it was clutched in her fingers, and she raised it, to peruse it again, as if she had not, already, committed the contents to memory. Skipping over the first bossy bit, she read,

It seems likely that you will soon be free of your current encumbrances, allowing you to freely assess your circumstances and to determine the course of your life, henceforth.

I wish to thank you for your thoughtful consideration of the difficulty of my situation in our late dealings. It has not been entirely unpleasant.

A fond smile curved her lips, and she traced the written line with one fingertip. Not entirely unpleasant? Why, from her dear love, such a statement was tantamount to a panegyric. She could hear him *saying* it, and closing her eyes, she imagined his face as his voice uttered those words, his hands upon her flesh as he spoke. She felt it as a blow to the body, a sudden twinge of desire so acute that she rolled to the side and curled protectively about her womb, which ached with the want of him. Rolling brought her close to his pillow, and she let the note drift to the counterpane as she pulled the pillow into her embrace, need of him throbbing from every pulse point in her body.

'Severus,' she whispered into the pillowcase, inhaling deeply, searching for the least sign of his physical presence. 'Come back.'

Rocking herself, his pillow pressed to her face, she remembered the next bit he had written.

It has not been entirely unpleasant...in fact, quite the contrary.

Her arms tightened about the entirely insufficient pillow, and she spoke again to its unresponsive goose feathers. 'Come back here and say it to my face, like a man.'

Ah, but the next phrase in the note ... the next phrase was the one which made her feel as if she were filled with light. *made* of light!

And curled about his pillow, she slept again.

And Scampy remained watchfully at her side, ready to act as necessary to follow Master Severus' orders: to protect Miss Hermione at all costs.

Dolohov and Pettigrew arrived upon the Prince House grounds and walked up the path to the front door. Standing upon the rather elegant stoop, they knocked upon the door and waited.

The door swung open and the two Death Eaters found themselves looking down upon an elderly house-elf. 'May Bandy help you?' the house-elf inquired politely.

Dolohov spoke curtly. 'Tell your mistress that Antonin Dolohov and an associate request a moment of her time.'

Bandy the house-elf bowed low. 'Bandy will ask Mistress,' he said, and without blinking an eye, he closed the door in the face of the wizards, leaving them standing upon the doorstep.

'Hey!' Pettigrew yelled, reaching past Dolohov to knock again, but Dolohov prevented him.

'Show a modicum of restraint, you fool,' he ordered.

Pettigrew sulked and did not reply.

Madam Prince showed little response to Bandy's announcement of her visitors, save for the tightening of her fingers upon the arm of her chair.

'I shall let the visitors in, Bandy,' she said, her voice steady. 'Go up to the guest room and tell Scampy that there are Death Eaters in the house.'

Bandy did not wait to bow, but scurried from the room and up the stairs to obey his mistress; behind him, he heard her walking slowly through the entrance hall to the door.

Hermione was startled awake, but this time Scampy was shaking her, and another of Madam Prince's house-elves was standing just inside the doorway, wringing his hands.

'Wake up, Miss Hermione!' Scampy said urgently.

Hermione struggled to sit up, feeling disoriented and thick-headed. 'What is it?' she mumbled.

'You have to go,' Scampy replied.

'Go?' Hermione said stupidly, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. All day Scampy had been fussing over her as if she were truly ill, and now the little house-elf was trying to make her wake up and go ... where?

Hermione dropped her hands from her eyes and saw Scampy throwing things willy-nilly into Hermione's magical bag. As she watched, Scampy turned to Bandy. 'You go back downstairs,' she ordered him, as if she were senior to him, even though it was obvious that he was much older than Scampy. 'You go and make sure that those men don't come up here until Miss Hermione is safely away!'

Bandy scurried away as if he had just received an order from Madam Prince herself, and when the door closed behind him, Scampy was upon Hermione, tugging the nightdress up and over her head.

'Death Eaters are here, Miss,' Scampy said, her voice lowered. 'Master Severus told me to get you out of the house if Death Eaters came here.'

Hermione accepted the tee-shirt Scampy handed her and pulled it over her head, following it with a loden green jumper. At the mention of Death Eaters, her heart rate had suddenly tripled. 'Did Master Severus say where I'm to go?' she asked, taking the jeans Scampy thrust into her hands.

'Go to Hogwarts, he said, but use a Disillusionment Spell and don't let yourself be seen by anyone.' Scampy stepped back as Hermione stood to tug the jeans over her hips; when they were fastened, Scampy gently pushed the girl back onto the bed and began to fit her feet into her trainers.

'Why are they *here*?' Hermione said plaintively as Scampy tightened and tied the laces of her trainers.

'For no good,' Scampy said firmly, producing a phial of Pepper-Up Potion from within her neat tea towel. 'Master Severus said you're to take this for energy, but don't forget to take your other potions on schedule...Scampy has put them in your bag, Miss.'

Hermione downed the Pepper-Up and scowled as the resultant steam gushed from her ears. Scampy grabbed the figurine of Merlin and Nimue from the bedside table and thrust it into the travelling bag.

'Hurry, Miss!' Scampy said, taking Hermione's hand and pulling her again to her feet. The house-elf whirled to the cupboard and took out Hermione's cloak; with the snap of her long elf fingers, the cloak was draped about Hermione's shoulders.

Hermione took the bag Scampy handed to her and accepted her wand, as well.

'Miss is to go to Hogwarts,' Scampy said again, as if instructing a very young child, 'without being seen, and wait there until Master Severus comes for her.' Very lightly, Scampy pushed against Hermione's side. 'Go now! Scampy's locking charm won't keep a wizard out!'

Scarcely had the words left her mouth before there was pounding at the door, and Hermione felt as if her heart was in her throat, pounding in her ears and obstructing her breathing. With crystalline clarity, she remembered being in a room surrounded by Death Eaters, and she suddenly felt as if she were made of nothing but fear.

Nevertheless, she slipped past Scampy and seized the letter from her professor from the bedclothes, tucking it securely in her cloak pocket.

'Open the door!' a harsh voice demanded, and Hermione did not need further instruction from Scampy: she clearly recognised the voice of Antonin Dolohov.

Turning on the spot, she Disapparated.

Madam Prince waited whilst her guests seated themselves in her drawing room before taking up the teapot.

'How kind of you to come to escort Hermione to Severus,' she said, pouring a stream of fragrant tea into a nearly translucent bone china cup. 'Cream?' she inquired, raising an eyebrow at the rat-faced one, studiously keeping her eyes from his silver hand.

Pettigrew nodded and said, 'And two sugars, please.'

Having passed a cup and saucer to the rat, Madam Prince focussed her attention upon the supercilious-looking Dolohov. 'How is your grandmother, Antonin?' she inquired innocently, firmly placing him back in the nursery.

'My grandmother is deceased, ma'am,' he replied thinly, accepting his tea from her.

'Oh, not your Grandmother Jones,' the old lady replied evenly, taking a sip from her teacup. 'I was referring to your Grandmother Dolohov...she was kind to me when I was a girl, you know.'

'I have not seen or spoken to her in over twenty years,' Dolohov said, showing some discomfort.

Madam Prince made a murmur of sympathy, knowing full well Dolohov's grandmother had disowned him when he had been arrested for the murders of the Prewett brothers. 'Your mother and father live in Exeter, still?' she continued. 'A lovely woman, your mother...she had her pick of all the boys in her year at Hogwarts, but for some reason, she chose your father.' Madam Prince pursed her lips, as if she were pondering that choice, and watched with utter enjoyment as Dolohov began to shift about in his seat; apparently, he was well aware that there had been much gossip and conjecture as to his true paternity. She found that she was rather enjoying herself.

'Did you know my grandmother, ma'am?' the rat inquired.

Madam Prince turned her icy blue gaze upon Pettigrew and stared at him. She did not speak, nor did she look away from him. After a few seconds, he began to fidget; after a full minute, his small, watery eyes dropped to the carpet. Only then did Madam Prince speak.

'No,' she said succinctly.

Dolohov placed his cup and saucer on the table at his elbow and rose to his feet. 'We must thank you for your hospitality, Madam Prince, but Peter and I dare not tarry any longer; you know how impatient your grandson can be. We must collect the young lady and take her to him, now.'

Madam Prince set her cup upon the tray. 'I was meaning to ask you about that, Antonin,' she said sweetly. 'Why did not Severus come for her himself?'

Pettigrew answered promptly, his façade of courtesy now put aside. 'He's busy with the Dark Lord,' he said. 'We told you that.'

'Did you bring a note from him?' she asked, ignoring Pettigrew and speaking to Dolohov, stalling desperately as she waited to feel the flutter which would mean someone had Disappeared from her home.

'He knew you wouldn't mind sending her with his friends,' Dolohov said, taking a step towards her.

Madam Prince saw the intent in his eyes, and she was pleased that she had sent her son and his family to Scarborough for the afternoon, to attend the wizarding faire; if Tiberius and his boys had been here now, wands would already have been drawn in her parlour. No, it was imperative to her plan that she be perceived as a defenceless old lady.

'You know young girls,' she said, picking up her teacup again. 'They take forever and a day to dress. Please, allow me to refresh your tea.'

'We'll just go up and fetch her,' Dolohov said, and he walked out of the drawing room with Pettigrew at his heels.

'No, please don't,' she called after them, infusing desperation into her voice. Then she picked up her tea and drained the cup, feeling she had done her part.

Next, she heard Bandy playing out his part. 'May I help the sirs?'

'Where is Hermione Granger?' Dolohov demanded.

As he had been instructed, Bandy replied worriedly, 'Miss is the third door on the right down the east corridor...but she isn't well...she isn't seeing visitors, sirs!'

When she heard their footsteps on the stairs, Madam Prince moved into the entrance hall and climbed to the first landing, pausing before the stained glass representation of the betrayal of Merlin by Nimue, listening. Soon she heard it, the pounding followed by, 'Open the door!'

In the next instant, she felt the flutter against the wards she had placed on the house, and knew that Hermione had Apparated safely away.

'Thank you,' she murmured, laying her fingertips upon the cloak hem of the great wizard's stained glass replica.

Now it was all up to Scampy.

Morgen Singer Leclercq fell to the tabletop in a graceless heap, prevented by her bindings from so much as breaking her fall; her side would be badly bruised, but she was out of the bubble, and that was an improvement of her circumstances.

The Dark Lord sat in his throne-like chair, watching her with his cold, frightening eyes. 'How good of you to join me, Morgen,' he said courteously. 'Won't you have a glass of wine with me? I find we have something to celebrate.'

Morgen blinked at him, lying upon her side upon the tabletop, nude, unable to move because her ankles and wrists were bound; she couldn't speak to answer because she was gagged.

His Lordship chuckled. 'How thoughtless of me,' he said, and a lazy flick of his fingers freed Morgen's ankles.

Clumsily, she tried to sit up, but her long unused limbs refused to obey her.

'Dear me,' the Dark Lord said, watching her struggles as a boy might watch a turtle he has deliberately placed on its back. 'Help her, Lucius.'

From beyond the periphery of Morgen's vision, Lucius Malfoy appeared and pulled her from the table, supporting her when her knees threatened to buckle. Malfoy pushed her unceremoniously into a chair across from the Dark Lord and retreated again.

The Dark Lord waved his hand, and two glasses of blood-red wine appeared before him, one of which slid neatly to the edge of the table before Morgen, then it stopped.

'Let us drink a toast to you, dear Morgen,' the Dark Lord said, raising his glass to her in a mocking gesture, still without unbinding her hands or removing her gag so she could pick up the glass and drink.

Morgen closed her eyes for an instant. She had been bound and revolving in that damn bubble for perhaps thirty-six hours; she was so thirsty she thought she might die of it, and the Dark Lord taunted her with liquid she could not drink.

'Yes, I really must commend you,' the Dark Lord continued contemptuously. 'You may have killed my darling Bellatrix...the closest Lord Voldemort has ever come to having a mate, Morgen...but you have also provided me with a very useful trinket.' From between the white fingers, His Lordship produced a simple hair slide. 'I really must commend you on your pick-pocketing abilities,' he said in his cold high voice.

Morgen had no difficulty recognising the cheap clasp as the one she had filched from Severus' cloak pocket at their last meeting in the Three Broomsticks, a month before. The tiny engraved *HG* had identified its owner, and she had meant to use it against the Mudblood, if she could, but it had slipped her mind.

The Dark Lord stood suddenly, and Morgen flinched back into her seat, which brought a thin smile to the snake-like face. 'I will give you twenty minutes to prepare yourself for the task I have for you,' he said to her. 'If you succeed, I will honour you above all others, Morgen...I will curse you, as Bella was cursed, and you will become my lust-bound slave.'

Morgen felt the cold horror of the Dark Lord's pronouncement creeping through her veins, but she made no sound.

'If you fail,' His Lordship continued, his eerie red eyes staring into her green ones, 'your lieutenants will execute you upon the field of battle.'

To complete her humiliation, the Dark Lord entered her mind and brutally sifted through her thoughts and feelings, seeming to linger over her horror at the prospect of being imprinted upon him.

When he had satisfied his curiosity, he extricated himself from her mind, and his eyes flicked once, scornfully, down her naked body. 'And don't neglect to clothe yourself,' he added. 'Already, I grow weary of looking at your nakedness...no wonder Severus prefers the Mudblood.' He sighed gustily and turned to leave the room, saying carelessly over his shoulder, 'I *do* hope you're fond of snakes.'

Morgen sat like one Petrified, her mind playing over and again the Dark Lord's last words, until a Malfoy house-elf pulled her, unresisting, from her chair and led her away.

Scampy opened the door and allowed the two Death Eaters into Miss Hermione's bedroom, her tennis ball-sized eyes wide with simulated fear. 'Don't be hurting Scampy!' she cried, skittering back from the door.

'Where is the girl?' the taller Death Eater demanded, as the ratty one pushed into the bathroom.

'Scampy does not know,' she replied, wringing her hands. 'Miss went down the back stairs...she said she was going into the garden.'

She followed the wizards down the back stairs, chattering all the while. When they reached the kitchen, Scampy planted herself firmly in front of the cellar door and pointed to the door into the back garden. 'Miss went that way,' she said.

Pettigrew barrelled out the back door, but Dolohov eyed Scampy suspiciously. 'What's through that door?' he demanded.

'Only the cellar,' Scampy replied. 'Miss is not in the cellar.'

But Miss was also not in the garden, and the wizards came back into the kitchen...through the simple wards Scampy put up to keep them out...very angry. As she had been instructed, she followed them up and down the stairs, into and out of each of the rooms, repeating over and again that she did not know where Miss had gone. At last, they were in the kitchen again, and Scampy stood before the cellar door.

'What's in the cellar?' the rat-like one demanded, his irritation making his voice squeak like a house-elf's.

'Move, or I shall move you, elf,' the taller one commanded, his wand pointing at Scampy's chest.

'Sir does not want to go into the cellar,' Scampy objected, her voice trembling with fear. 'There is a dragon in the cellar!'

'Step aside, elf!' the tall wizard thundered, and at last Scampy moved away.

In an instant the wizards had broken the wards on the cellar door, and they moved down into the darkness with their wands held before them to light the way.

Scampy slammed the door behind them and warded it again, this time using her strongest elf magic.

'Well done, Scampy,' her mistress said, coming into the kitchen and laying a rare hand upon Scampy's shoulder.

Scampy turned to face Mistress, her green eyes burning with determination. 'I did what Master Severus wanted!' she said, as if awed by her own actions.

'You shall be his house-elf when he marries Miss Hermione, Scampy...that would make you happy?' her mistress said kindly.

Scampy burst into tears and covered her face with the tail of her tea towel.

'I'll take that for "yes",' Mistress said.

Arcticus sprawled upon the stone floor and looked about his realm, his tail moving about a bit like that of a big cat. He was a Miniature Cerulean Siberian...an ice dragon. The species had been cross-bred with the Siberian snow leopard for use in tropic zones, where even cooling charms did not always keep dairy products from spoiling. A Miniature Cerulean Siberian in the larder took care of that problem and provided the additional benefit of discouraging the presence of rodents.

Of course, dragon breeding had been outlawed nearly three hundred years before, and the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures would have bypassed the Dragon Research and Restraint Bureau and turned Arcticus over promptly to the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures ... if they had been aware of his existence.

As it was, he lived in the Prince House dungeon, where he provided special climate control for a portion of the wine cellar, a level above, and where he was permitted to laze about and enjoy a life of eating and sleeping. Occasionally a small rodent found its way into his territory, and that provided an extra element of entertainment for him, but most of the time, he was content to interact with his house-elf keepers and await the infrequent visits of his mistress, who knew to a nicety just how to scratch the spot behind his cat-like ears, beneath his dragon-like scales.

After a fruitless search in the dark, oddly chilly cellar, Pettigrew was whinging like a girl, and Dolohov was furious. The door to the upper level was now warded so strongly he could not break through, and an Anti-Disapparition Jinx prevented him from Disapparating out of the cellar.

Worst of all, he had found no sign of Hermione Granger, and he feared the Dark Lord's wrath.

Cursing, he lifted his wand and shouted, *Incandescere!* The light of ten thousand candles filled the cellar, and he began to investigate it minutely again, ignoring Pettigrew, who sat upon an old trunk with a petulant look upon his face.

He noticed an odd arrangement of boxes in one spot, and when he touched it, it moved easily aside, revealing a trap door beneath. 'Why didn't you find this, rat?' he demanded testily. 'Doesn't your kind root about through the rubbish?'

Pettigrew rushed over and grasped the iron ring on the door. 'Hermione is through here,' he said, pathetically eager.

Dolohov stepped back to allow the heavy door to be lifted. 'She had better be,' he said darkly. 'You go first.'

Pettigrew began to descend the stairs, light from Dolohov's spell showing the way down into the murky lower level. 'It's colder'n a Muggle's tit down here,' he complained.

Dolohov stepped onto the top riser. 'Be quiet,' he snapped. 'Listen for the Mudblood.'

Unseen by either Death Eater, the house-elf who had plagued them all over the house had Apparated into the cellar when the trapdoor had been lifted, and when Dolohov's head moved below the level of the trapdoor, it slammed behind them with floor-shaking violence.

'Damn it!' Dolohov swore as the light from his previous spell was cut off.

'I'll do it this time,' Pettigrew said, and at his incantation, the Prince House dungeon was fully illuminated.

The gale of ice pellets which struck them knocked Dolohov from the last step to the stone floor, his body transformed to a solid mass of ice. Pettigrew, in a desperate attempt to save himself, transformed as he fell, landing upon the dungeon floor with four rat paws, still never having seen what hit him. With the speed and agility of his kind, Pettigrew fled across the floor, heading for the wall, and hopefully for shelter.

Arcticus felled one of the humans on his first try; they didn't smell like food to him, and he never investigated them once he had dealt with them. Then, he sat back on his haunches, wondering where the first human had got to. His scaly tail flicked back and forth as he watched. Very soon, a rodent-like figure shot across the floor in a flurry of dust-coloured fur, smelling very much like food.

With a bound inherited from his Siberian snow leopard forebears, Arcticus leapt up and came down again on the rat with both dragon-clawed front paws.

Arriving in a small copse of trees just off the road to Hogsmeade, Hermione held onto the trunk of a small beech tree as she caught her breath and found her balance. Her illness had left her weak and a bit unsteady on her feet, that was certain. She allowed herself to slip to the ground, where she leant against the tree trunk to rest for a moment.

Staring through the stand of trees to the buildings of the village, she pondered her flight. Why were Death Eaters looking for her at Prince House? How could she have left there? Ought she not to have stayed to help defend Madam Prince? Why had Professor Snape left instructions with Scampy to send her to Hogwarts?

And where was he?

Thinking of him brought back the sharp, sweet ache and longing for him, a physical pain that had her wrapping her arms about herself as if to fend off the hurt. How long had he been gone? Eight hours? Ten? And how long had it been since he had made love to her? How long would she bear up and be able to continue beneath the scourge of the compulsion...how long, before her need of him drove her to incapacity?

She pressed her face to her pulled up knees, her arms now encompassing her bent legs. He meant for her to sneak into Hogwarts under a Disillusionment Charm and to wait for him there...but what was she to *do* whilst she waited? How could she help him, even though he was far away from her?

She knew it was weakness to dwell on his words so incessantly, but they filled her with light, and she could no more prevent herself from repeating them over and again in her mind than she could choose not to take another breath.

I wish to thank you for your thoughtful consideration of the difficulty of my situation in our late dealings. It has not been entirely unpleasant; in fact, quite to the contrary.

Despite my best efforts and intentions, I find life refreshingly new...and dare I say joyful?...because of your presence. I fear that I can only conclude that I must be in love with you, for there is no rational explanation for the inexplicable light in these terrible, dark days.

I thank you, Hermione, for I never thought, hoped, or dreamed I would find myself in this state, and if my life were to end tomorrow, I would feel it to be complete because of what you have made of me.

Until we meet again, my life, I remain,

Ever Yours,

SS

The joy that surged through her every time she remembered his words of love transported her again, and for a moment, she was entirely unaware of her surroundings; all that existed was her love for him, his love for her, and the certainty that she would see him again soon.

Still smiling foolishly against her upraised knees, it took her a full minute to process what she was hearing as a strangely amplified voice said *Morsmordre!*

When Hermione raised her disbelieving eyes, she saw the unthinkable: a spray of green sparks flew into the sky, and the Dark Mark spread malevolently over Hogsmeade.

A/N: This chapter was alpha read by Sshg316, beta read by Annie Talbot, and Brit-picked by Magically. Looks like two more chapters to go.

Chapter 25: And, In the End ...

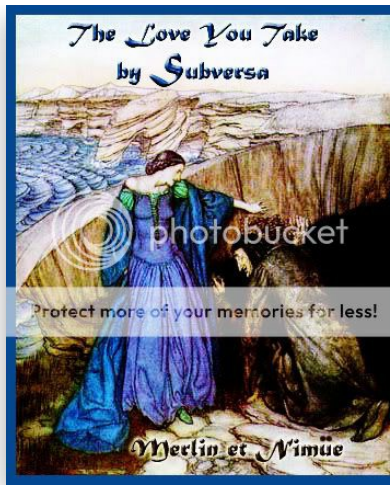
Chapter 25 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe.
Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: This chapter has been alpha-read by sshg316 and beta-read by Annie Talbot; it is still with Deemichelle and with my Brit-picker, Magically, who is on holiday. I will insert their corrections when I receive them.

Warning for minor character death.

There will be one more chapter after this one, my darlings. Thank you for sticking with me!



The Love You Take

Chapter 25: And, In the End ...

Voldemort stood over Hermione, his wand extended, and looked down into her white, tearful face. 'Has Dumbledore taught you to duel?' he sneered, nudging her fallen wand with one foot. 'Come, stand and fight...even Harry Potter was not afraid to duel with me, little Mudblood...'

Harry woke with a start, reaching for his wand even as his eyes opened.

'Look who's decided to join the party,' Ron said acidly, looking up from his Potions textbook. 'I wish I could drift off in the middle of studying.' He darted a sour look at Lavender, who was assiduously reading over Parvati's Divination notes.

'Less than *two months* to our N.E.W.T.s,' Lavender replied without looking up. 'You can sleep when we've passed and got our qualifications.'

The Gryffindor Common Room was crowded with seventh-years studying for their N.E.W.T.s and fifth-years studying for their O.W.L.s. The scattered students from the other forms were engaged in recreational pursuits, but most of the students who had remained behind for the Easter holidays were there to prepare for examinations. Harry had been sprawled in one of the squishy armchairs before the fire ... and he had dreamt that Voldemort had Hermione. That wasn't possible, was it? Hermione was with Snape, in Yorkshire, and although Harry loathed his Potions professor, he could not deny that the git was good at keeping students safe.

He sat up, rubbing the heels of his hands against his eyes, and picked up his Charms notes, attempting to concentrate on the theory behind a proper Shield Charm.

A few minutes later, a sleek eagle owl flew in the window, directly to Harry; it dropped a letter in his lap, then wheeled in the air and flew out again. Harry stared at the envelope in his hands, which had a bit of a bump in the middle, as if it contained a hard object. The handwriting was vaguely familiar...where had he seen it before?

With mounting dread, he ripped the envelope open, and a girl's hair slide fell into his hand.

'What's that, mate?' Ron inquired, now watching his friend with some concern.

Harry wordlessly set the slide on the table at his side and extracted the folded parchment from the envelope; as his fingertips touched the parchment, his scar seared with pain. Clutching at his forehead with one hand, he twitched the note open and read.

I have your Mudblood friend, Harry. She begs for her life very nicely. Do not delay. Come to the Centaurs' Clearing in the Forbidden Forest to meet me, and I will release her to you. Come alone, or she will die. It is time for you to meet with Lord Voldemort, wizard to wizard.

Be there before sunset, or suffer the consequences.

Lord Voldemort

With each word Harry read, the pain increased in his head until he was nearly blind with it. The words blurred before his eyes, and he dropped the note as if it burnt him, for he had recalled when and where he had seen the handwriting before: when he was twelve years old, in the diary of Tom Riddle.

Lavender leant past Ron and picked up the hair slide. 'Who would mail you Hermione's hair clip?' she said, perplexed.

Harry stuffed the parchment back in his pocket and stood, moving away from the table, clutching at his head. He hadn't been dreaming ... he'd been seeing through Voldemort's eyes. Tom Riddle had Hermione, and he had sent Harry her hair slide to prove it.

He had to go and get her.

At the decision, the pain in his scar receded, and he was able to raise his head and look out the window. He had to be in the Centaurs' Clearing by sunset, and it was already late afternoon. There was no time to waste.

He turned from the window and found himself nose-to-chin with Ron. Neville stood uncertainly at Ron's elbow, with an obstinate look on his round face.

'What's up, Harry?' Ron asked urgently. 'Who sent you that letter?'

Harry spoke quietly, pitching his words for their ears alone. 'Voldemort,' he rasped.

'What?' Ron squawked, his voice breaking.

'He has Hermione...'

'But she's with Snape!' Ron exclaimed, aghast. 'How did You-Know-Who get her?'

'I don't know,' Harry said, 'but if I don't meet him alone in the Forbidden Forest, he'll kill her.'

Ron scowled. 'I'll bet Snape took her to him,' he snarled.

'Let's tell Dumbledore!' Neville interrupted. 'He'll know what to do!'

Harry shook his head stubbornly. 'He'll never let me go alone,' he said.

'We're not going to let you go alone, mate,' Ron said, his hand closing convulsively over the handle of his wand, sheathed at his belt. 'Are we going now?'

Harry shook his head impatiently. 'Alone, Ron...I can't take you with me.' Panic was rising in Harry; he had to get to Hermione. 'I need you to call for Dumbledore's Army,' he said desperately, glancing from Ron to Neville. 'Organise a defence of the castle...I'm counting on you to do it.'

Neville looked ever more mulish, but Ron nodded. 'All right, Harry...we'll gather the DA. You watch your back, all right?'

'Yeah, thanks,' Harry said, relieved. 'I'll bring her back,' he promised, heading for the portrait hole.

Directed thence by a house-elf, Severus entered the underground cavern beneath Malfoy Manor and strode quickly to the Dark Lord. Going down on one knee, he bowed his head and said, 'I have done as you instructed, My Lord. Dumbledore is scrambling to defend Hogsmeade.'

'You may rise,' the Dark Lord replied. 'Morgen will set forth momentarily, and I will proceed with the rest of my plan.'

'Indeed, My Lord?' Severus said, infusing just the right amount of courteous curiosity into his voice.

The Dark Lord's uncanny red eyes rested upon Severus' face. 'I will finally make good use of your Mudblood, Severus,' he said.

Icy fear suffused Severus' body. 'Excellent, My Lord,' he said, thankful for the commonplace tone of his voice. 'In what way will she serve you?'

'I have ordered Dolohov and Wormtail to collect her from your grandmother's home,' Lord Voldemort informed him. 'I have sent to notify Potter that his Mudblood friend is in my possession and that he is to meet me in the Forbidden Forest alone, before sunset, if he wishes to save her.' His chuckle was cold and mirthless. 'I think that should serve to motivate him, don't you?'

Severus nodded blandly, his mind gathering and assimilating information even as he frantically tried to think of a way to prevent this from occurring. 'Yes, Potter is unable to resist the opportunity to play the hero,' he said disdainfully. 'Does he know where in the Forest to find you, My Lord, or will we capture him as he wanders about, searching for you?'

'The centaurs have the space nearest the centre of the Forest,' the older wizard said. 'I have instructed him to meet me there.'

Severus nodded. 'And the centaurs have agreed to ally themselves with us?' he asked, knowing full well the answer to that question.

'No,' the Dark Lord replied shortly, obviously annoyed. 'The centaurs have suffered an unfortunate attack upon their village and have gathered there to protect their mates and their young. Sadly, they have been trapped in a great net and are pinned down, one and all.' His Lordship flicked a speck of dust from his sleeve, apparently bored.

'When do we expect Dolohov and Pettigrew to return?' Severus asked, projecting idle curiosity.

A small frown touched the snake-like face. 'I do not know what can be detaining them,' he admitted.

A cold smile touched Severus' lips. 'Perhaps Grandmother insisted upon tea,' he said. 'Perchance I could go to free my brothers from my grandmother's hospitality,' he added smoothly, distaste for the term *brothers* causing bile to rise in his throat.

The door to the underground chamber opened, and Severus could hear Lucius' and Morgen's voices. The Dark Lord looked at him for a moment, then nodded his acquiescence. 'Yes, Severus, you may do that. Bring the girl back to me.'

Severus made a profound bow, then turned on the spot and Disapparated.

He slipped into the Prince House kitchen from the back garden, looking about for signs of the presence of Dolohov and Pettigrew. Fighting panic, he sought out his grandmother.

The old lady and Scampy met him in the entrance hall, the stained glass window on the landing above bathing the light with jewel-toned colour.

'She is safe, Severus,' his grandmother said bracingly, before he could speak. 'Scampy got her away before the Death Eaters found her.'

Severus turned his eyes to Scampy; there was no need to speak.

'Scampy did as Master Severus asked,' the little house-elf squeaked. 'Miss Hermione knows to go to Hogwarts without being seen and to wait for Master Severus to come for her.'

Severus felt a slight loosening of the seeming block of ice surrounding all of his internal organs. 'And the intruders?' he demanded.

Scampy held out one fist, as if to hand him something, and Severus reciprocated, extending his hand, palm up. Without speaking, Scampy dropped a small, shiny item there. Severus raised it to his eyes, and a grim smile touched his thin lips: it was a silver rat's paw.

'There's no need to investigate the cellars,' his grandmother said comfortably. 'There's nothing to see.'

He pocketed the silver object. 'You're confident that she's safe?' he asked.

'She's a clever, competent witch,' his grandmother reminded him sharply. 'She is fully capable of following your instructions, and I am confident she escaped safely to Hogsmeade.'

Severus thanked Grandmother and Scampy and turned into his Apparition, hoping desperately that Hermione had not seen fit to tarry in Hogsmeade on her journey to Hogwarts...and to safety.

Neville stared at Ron as if at a stranger. 'I can't believe you just did that!' he said, backing away from him. 'He's going to get himself killed!'

Ron gave Neville a withering look. 'Use that brain of yours!' he said fiercely, his ears turning an alarming shade of red. 'He was never going to agree to us going with him...we're going to have to follow him and watch his back!' Ron glanced over his shoulder to the table of friends watching them tensely. 'Ginny, go see if he makes it out of the castle and which way he goes. Neville, set the fake Galleon for the DA to meet us in the Room of Requirement.' With a rather becoming air of authority, Arthur Weasley's youngest son straightened his back and said, 'This is it...we're moving against...' He stumbled over the name, but his vivid memory of Hermione's insistence upon using it steeled his resolve '...Voldemort.'

In the next moment, the room was full of people moving in every direction, preparing to march to Harry's defence.

When Severus came again to the Dark Lord, he found him in the dining room of Malfoy Manor. The walls of the room were lined with cloaked Death Eaters; undoubtedly, the time was near for the Dark Lord to move into action.

'You do not bring the girl to me?' the Dark Lord said peevishly.

'She is with my brothers, My Lord,' Severus replied simply, his head bowed. 'My grandmother served them tea, then they went upstairs to fetch the girl, and Grandmother did not see them again.' He waited at the madman's feet, relaxing every muscle in anticipation of the anger with which His Lordship frequently met bad news.

'I have no time for this now,' the Dark Lord said testily. 'I shall deal with them later. I do not, after all, actually need the girl to make Potter believe that I have her.' He surged to his feet, commanding, 'Arise!' and Severus instantly obeyed.

The Dark Lord motioned impatiently, and Lucius came forward with a goblet in one hand, followed by Goyle senior, escorting a young witch with a firm grip upon her elbow. The young woman appeared to be in her mid-twenties, and she bore an unfortunate resemblance to Goyle; Severus recognised her as Gregory's older sister, Gretchen. She appeared frightened, but she was not struggling against her father's grip upon her.

His Lordship reached into his robes and extracted a few hairs, which he dropped into the brownish gloopy substance in the goblet; the contents began to froth and turned a clear shining gold.

With rising dread and disgust, Severus watched Gretchen Goyle willingly take up the goblet and swallow the contents; in mere moments, the large, bulky witch transformed into Hermione Granger. Severus bore down hard to prevent himself from betraying any dismay at this turn of events; he cultivated an air of patient boredom whilst quashing his revulsion.

'We have one hour,' the Dark Lord said, eyeing his fake hostage critically. 'Would you take her for the Mudblood, Severus?'

Severus forced himself to look Gretchen's Polyjuiced form up and down once. 'As long as she does not move about or open her mouth, Potter should be taken in,' he said coolly.

The Dark Lord turned abruptly to face Severus. 'Go to Hogwarts, Severus, to see how Dumbledore's plans progress, and then make sure Potter has set out alone to meet me in the Forbidden Forest. After he had departed, my Death Eaters will attack the castle, so that Dumbledore will be too preoccupied to run after his favourite boy.'

'And where shall I come to make my report to you, My Lord?' he asked.

'Why, to the Centaurs' Clearing, of course,' the Dark Lord replied with the glimmer of a smile upon his lips. 'Do you not wish to see Potter's end?'

Severus moved along the periphery of Hogsmeade, Disillusioned, scarcely noticing the furtive lurking of Tonks and two unnamed Aurors behind the Hogs Head. He had seen Morgen and her small group of Death Eaters slinking through the trees on the other side of the town. Undoubtedly, the villagers and their supporters would provide a nasty shock for Morgen's band of marauders.

He hastened along the lane towards the school, his eyes searching everywhere for Hermione. Had she already made it to the castle? Had she found Potter, giving the lie to the Dark Lord's ruse? Or was she in his dungeon quarters, even now, waiting for him to return? Ruthlessly, he repelled the rising desire to see her, to hold her and lose himself in her sweet certainty. She was his standard, not his safe haven...she was his reason, not his reward.

He would do well to remember that.

With a non-verbal incantation, he passed through the chained gates as if he were a mist rather than a corporeal man, and his strides lengthened again, carrying him towards the castle. Constantly surveying his surroundings, he saw a flicker of movement in the distance, just beyond Hagrid's hut, and Fang, the drooling boarhound, bounded across the small garden, barking. The flicker solidified into the figure of Potter, repulsing the joyful advances of Hagrid's unruly pet dog as he struggled to settle the Invisibility Cloak over himself again.

Bugger fucking hell! Potter and that Invisibility Cloak! How was Severus supposed to follow after the boy and keep him out of trouble if he couldn't see him? Well, at least he knew Potter's destination; in this case, it would have to do.

Muttering dark imprecations, Severus mentally checked an item from his list: Potter was setting out alone to meet the Dark Lord.

Avoiding the great oaken doors leading into the castle's Entrance Hall, Severus skirted the building, intending to use the kitchen entrance near the vegetable garden. He narrowly avoided ploughing directly into Ronald Weasley, who stood sentry at the near corner of the ancient stone walls, his arm raised as if to halt a column of marching foot soldiers. Giving Weasley wide berth, he was grimly pleased to see the group of students at his back; they were of that motley group calling themselves Dumbledore's Army. Potter was hopeless in many ways, but there was no denying he had inspired devotion in this lot and had used his dismal so-called competence in defence to train them in duelling skills.

Potter wouldn't be going into battle alone, then. Severus hoped it would be enough.

Severus would have to make sure of it.

He found Dumbledore in the War Room, staring into one of the bowls of gently rippling water, murmuring incantations under his breath.

'What news, Severus?' the headmaster said, never looking away from what he saw in the water.

'The Dark Lord has lured Potter out of the castle,' Severus stated baldly.

Albus Dumbledore tore his attention from the distant movements of the puppets he had set in motion and stared at Severus with sheer disbelief. 'Impossible!' the old man declared. 'I had Dobby check on him...he was dozing over his schoolbooks!'

Severus sneered. 'Do you imagine that house-elf's loyalty to you exceeds his devotion to Potter? Call him and see if his hands aren't in bandages from punishing himself for lying to you!'

Dumbledore sat, as if suddenly bereft of the ability to stand. 'Why did Harry not come to me?'

'He believes the Dark Lord has Miss Granger,' Severus informed him. 'The Dark Lord does *not* have her, of course; Grandmother got her safely away...but Potter believes it and has set out to retrieve her.'

'I must go to him,' Dumbledore said, reaching blindly for his wand.

'You cannot,' Severus snarled. 'A contingent of Death Eaters will march upon the castle, next...the Dark Lord means to take the school, kill Potter, and begin his reign in possession of the students and teachers who survive the siege.'

Dumbledore looked at him bleakly. 'Who will help him?' he whispered. 'I meant to stand with him ... or die trying.'

A sneer curled Severus' lip. 'We are not always privileged to do what we had intended,' he said bitterly. He looked down at the man who had condemned and forgiven him, denigrated and encouraged him, loathed and loved him, and he felt a moment of his greatest weakness...compassion. 'Leave it to me, Albus,' he said quietly.

Dumbledore lunged across the table, fisting Severus' cloak in one age-spotted hand. 'You'll do this for me, Severus?' he said desperately. 'Lily would thank you ...'

At the mention of *her* name, Severus wrenched his clothing from the old man's claw and stepped back, out of reach. 'I'll do it,' he ground out, 'if you agree to do something for *me*.'

'Yes,' the headmaster said distractedly, 'of course, Severus...whatever you need'

'Headmaster!' he said sharply and was rewarded by the blue eyes fastening on his face. 'In the event that I die and the Dark Lord survives,' Severus said, 'Miss Granger will still be under the curse with no hope of surcease.'

Dumbledore's nostrils flared, and Severus knew the old man was recoiling in distaste from the mental image of a sexually needy Hermione Granger being sated by her Potions professor. Exasperated, he continued implacably, 'You must provide relief, by the only means possible.'

The headmaster's eyes grew wide with consternation. 'She's just a girl ... so many have already died ...'

Incensed, Severus slapped his palms upon the tabletop. 'I'll have your word, old man,' he snarled.

The aged head bowed into trembling hands, and Severus felt rage mounting in him as the old fool dithered over the inevitable. At last, Fawkes fluttered from his perch, landing with a soft cooing sound upon Dumbledore's shoulder, from whence he proceeded to fill the room with phoenix song. Severus felt his anger recede as illogical hope touched his mind, and as he watched Dumbledore, he saw the old man visibly gather himself and rise to his feet.

'You have my word, Severus,' the headmaster said. 'Go...render Harry all the aid you can...and I shall raise the defence of the castle.'

And then the old man did the unthinkable...he held out his hand to Severus Snape. 'Good luck,' he said simply.

Severus stood like a statue, staring first at the old man's face, then at his hand...what was he playing at? There was no time for these theatrics.

Without speaking again, Severus turned and left.

On the ground floor, he knocked upon the door of the classroom which had been transformed into a replica of a forest clearing, and hearing the invitation, he entered.

Firenze, the Divination teacher, looked at him with calm dignity. 'Professor Snape,' he said formally, bowing his head in respect. 'What tidings do you bring?'

Dispensing with ceremony, Severus spoke bluntly. 'The Dark Lord has your fellows trapped in the Forest, and I think the Light will be in dire need of their friendship before this day is done.' He withdrew his offering from an inner pocket and extended it to the proud centaur. 'Are you familiar with how to use these?'

Firenze approached him and accepted the heavy golden scissors from Severus' hand. 'Enchanted?' he inquired, demonstrating his knowledge of how to use the implement.

'Yes,' Severus replied. 'Hopefully they will suffice to break through the enchanted net within which the other centaurs are trapped.'

Firenze turned aside and secreted the scissors in his quiver before slinging it over his shoulder and picking up his bow. 'You understand that I cannot promise you the cooperation of the centaurs in your human endeavour?' he said gravely.

'I understand,' Severus said, choosing his words carefully, 'but you may yet find this to be not only your opportunity to reach an understanding with your fellows, but an opportunity for all centaurs to show loyalty to Dumbledore for his years of defence of your kind in the affairs of humans.' He shrugged, then. 'Dumbledore understands that centaurs do not share his view of the urgency of the Dark Lord's defeat, but he nevertheless asks for your assistance.'

Firenze regarded him soberly. 'You do not speak for Dumbledore,' he said acutely. When Severus opened his mouth to respond, Firenze held up his hand. 'Your request will, nevertheless, be presented to the centaurs as you have stated it.'

Severus bowed politely and turned to go.

'And Professor Snape?'

Severus stopped with his hand upon the door handle. 'Yes?' he said.

'The heart of the female you love is full of love for you, and because of that, she will fight like a warrior.'

Severus' heart contracted in fear at these words...how he hoped she would steer clear of trouble!...but he recognised that the news was given in good faith, as payment in kind for his intervention on behalf of the centaurs.

'Thank you,' he said and left the room.

After walking steadily into the trees for over twenty minutes, Harry felt a sudden jolt of delight, and he knew he was feeling Voldemort's unholy joy and that it could be for nothing good. Determinedly, he continued into the heart of the primeval forest.

At the same moment, Dumbledore stumbled to the window, and Severus paused in the middle of the castle's kitchen garden, his eyes riveted on the sky: the Dark Mark rose inexorably over Hogsmeade.

Hermione felt adrenaline flood her body as if a phial of pure energy had been tipped into her bloodstream. Strapping her bag across her chest from shoulder to hip, she took her wand in hand and Disillusioned herself. Madam Prince's words from that morning...about how she lacked the ability to recover from offensive spells, particularly Dark ones...flashed through her mind, but she pushed those thoughts away. Death Eaters were attacking Hogsmeade, and she had to help, if she could.

Beginning to run, she moved through the trees towards the village, every sense alert for danger. She heard them before she saw them: black-cloaked, masked intruders stalking the High Street, blasting open the doors of the businesses and homes and shouting for the inhabitants to come out. The leader of this group of Death Eaters paced in the middle of the deserted street, shouting instructions. Hermione stared at this hooded, masked figure, trying to determine who it was.

But the greater question was, where were the villagers? Why were the businesses deserted at this time of day? Circling back behind the buildings, Hermione moved swiftly along, bent nearly double, trying to keep her breathing even enough not to interfere with her hearing. Thus occupied, she was knocked breathless when she collided with another Disillusioned figure, and the two of them fell in a tangle of confused limbs.

'Stand in the name of Magical Law Enforcement!' a voice ordered her, prodding her stomach with the wand trapped betwixt their bodies.

Hermione gasped. 'Tonks!' she said. 'It's me...Hermione.'

Dropping their Disillusionment Charms simultaneously, the two girls grinned at one another. 'Wotcher, Hermione,' Tonks said. 'Now, get yer arse into the Hogs Head, there's a good girl.'

'Forget it,' Hermione responded, standing again. 'There are Death Eaters in the village...you need every wand you can get.'

Tonks eyed her speculatively for a moment, then shrugged. 'You're of age,' she said. 'Come on, then. I only came this way because you tripped Aberforth's alarm.' And turning with an agility which belied her frequent clumsiness, the Auror led the way back the way she had come.

As they rounded the last building and came onto the High Street again, Hermione could see that the villagers had surrounded the Death Eaters, coming up either end of the street, fanned out so the Death Eaters could not get past them.

'We're aiming to Stun them,' Tonks said, 'then bundle them off to Azkaban to await their trials. But do what you have to do, Hermione.'

'I will,' Hermione promised.

Tonks ran down the street towards the duelling wizards and witches, and Hermione followed her. Hermione was surprised to see that what had seemed like a huge number of Death Eaters when she had first seen them turned out to be no more than fifteen or so, in reality. Spells flashed and banged in flares of primary colours, and Hermione was appalled to see villagers falling to the wands of the trapped Death Eaters. One flash of green followed quickly upon another, and Hermione redoubled her speed; it appeared that the Death Eaters had not received the memo about duelling only to Stun. With a shout of pure anger, she directed a spell at the attacker who had dealt out two Killing Curses in a row.

'*Petrificus Totalus!*' she cried, and she watched with satisfaction as the Death Eater stiffened and keeled over.

The air was full of noise and screams and moving bodies; Hermione was frightened, but all she could do was focus her wand on the opponents before her. Again and again she cast her Shield Charms, followed by spells designed to disarm or disable; she would not attempt actual harm.

After what seemed an eternity, a great concussive spell blasted from the centre of the battling group, and Hermione and the other defenders were knocked from their feet; only the Death Eaters located in the middle remained standing. A mad, feminine laugh came from one of them, and then there was a rush of flying feet as all Death Eaters save the laughing one scattered in every direction.

'Stand!' the female screeched at their retreating backs, throwing her head back in her rage, and her hood fell, revealing her disordered red hair.

'Morgen,' Hermione breathed, her hand tightening upon the handle of her wand.

The fleeing Death Eaters paid no heed to the threats directed at them by their erstwhile leader, and it became quickly apparent that Morgen felt now that *retreat* was the better part of valour. Glancing about at the fallen villagers and the Aurors who had moved to bind and transport the disabled Death Eaters, Hermione realised that no one else was paying the least mind to the sole remaining attacker. As Morgen began her solitary strategic retreat, Hermione barrelled after her, intent upon preventing Morgen's escape.

Taking aim as well as she could whilst running at full tilt, she cast a Stunning Spell, only to have it bounce back off Morgen's strong Shield Charm. Now aware that she was being pursued, Morgen whirled to fight, and the sight of Hermione seemed to enrage her.

'You Mudblood *whore*,' she screeched, casting a spell.

Hermione had the good sense to dive to one side and to roll, which meant that the Killing Curse hit an empty stretch of earth. Infuriated, she leapt to her feet. She cast the DA's variation on the standard Jelly Legs Curse, and when Morgen was immobilised by jittering legs which would not hold her weight, Hermione followed up with a vicious stinging hex, marking the redhead's unblemished cheek with an angry red welt.

'Let's see how you do fighting an *armed* opponent!' she cried angrily, advancing on Morgen, who was casting *Finite Incantatem* as she watched Hermione come.

'You dare raise your wand to me, Mudblood?' Morgen shouted, directing a slicing hex at her.

Hermione threw up the Shield Charm she had practiced so frequently that she felt she could cast and hold it in her sleep. The slicing hex failed to reach her, and she darted to one side, sending the same hex back at Morgen, moving ever closer.

'Oh, has the cat got your tongue?' Morgen asked, blocking Hermione's hex. 'No matter...after I kill you, I shall remove it from your filthy mouth with a Severing Charm and keep it as an ornament for my drawing room, as a warning to other jumped-up Mudblood tarts who get ideas above their station.'

Hermione's fury sent a blast of red light from her wand so intense that for a moment it seemed the entire world was bathed in her wrath. The Stunning Spell struck only the weak side of Morgen's shield, spinning her to one side; in that moment, it seemed that Morgen realised fighting Hermione was no sinecure, and she stopped her taunts, settling down to duel in earnest.

Hermione fought to win, fuelled by her loathing of Morgen Singer Leclercq. She felt as if she had swallowed a dose of *Felix Felicis*; certainty flowed through her wand with every spell she cast. Never had her focus in a duel been so intent. She fought with a ferocity she had never known she possessed, feeling as if she were defending not only herself, but everything she loved; the whole of the war was concentrated now between the two witches who fought one another so desperately: right versus wrong, good versus evil, Light versus Dark...love versus hate.

When Morgen reeled back from a particularly brutal Leg-Locker Curse, nearly losing her footing, Hermione gathered her strength to follow that up with a Stunner, but it seemed Morgen had reconsidered her decision to try her hand at putting Hermione in her place. The older witch cried, '*Tarantallegra!*' and turned to run.

Hermione batted the curse away from her as if it were a bothersome fly, and when inspiration came, it was with a blinding clarity that brought a forbidding smile to her lips. It should work...if she just drew her wand through the air, as if tracing a line, she ought to be able to...

Without speaking a word, she gathered all her skill and flourished her wand; blue fire flew from her wand tip and streamed toward Morgen as if Hermione were holding a high-power hosepipe on her. Hermione watched the fire touch ground before Morgen, stretching thirty feet across; with a flick of her wrist, the bluebell-coloured fire grew to be a waist-high wall, preventing Morgen from retreating to the north.

Morgen darted then to her left, and with another flourish, Hermione sent the next firewall to prevent Morgen's retreat to the west. Frantic, Morgen whirled in the other direction, and irritated, Hermione flung the third stream of fire, uncaring of how close it came to striking the red-haired witch.

Morgen, who saw the new streak of blue flames coming for her, tried to outrun it, only to be stopped dead by a wall of fire which flashed up to shoulder height as she approached too close. Startled, she turned back the way she had come, and Hermione jerked her wrist, drawing a new line of shoulder-height fire just before Morgen's fleeing figure. Morgen emitted a high pitched scream, darting now towards the first line of fire Hermione had placed, but that line danced across the earth, flaring to a height above Morgen's head even as its heat pushed Morgen back towards Hermione.

With her teeth bared, there's nothing pretty in the least about Morgen Singer. Hermione decided as she determinedly maintained the walls of fire to the north, east, and west of the other witch. Hadn't Harry always been proud of her speciality, portable fires? Well, her affinity with fire was working to her advantage now...the only course left to Morgen was to run to Hermione.

She began moving in on the other woman, and Morgen seemed to lose control of herself, for she did not attempt to cast a single spell, but ran first this way and then that, looking for a way past the flames which now burned higher with every increase in Hermione's anger. At last, Morgen tripped over her own feet, and falling, she dropped her

wand. It rolled away from her, and still, Hermione advanced upon her.

'I hate you!' Morgen screamed, her face twisted with hatred and fear. 'Die, you stupid cunt!' She reached wildly for her wand, only to have a rather grubby Muggle trainer come down on her wrist, pinning her wand hand to the ground.

Hermione, carefully keeping her wand trained on the twisting, screaming redhead, said, 'No you don't, Morgen.' Bringing all of her weight to bear on Morgen's wrist, she bent and picked up Morgen's wand. She looked at the wand which had empowered acts of Darkness and destruction, then looked into the insensate green eyes of its owner. 'You're over,' she said mercilessly, and without looking away from Morgen's eyes, she flung the wand into the towering blue flames nearest to her.

Morgen reacted with such primal ferocity that she was able to dislodge Hermione's foot. 'My wand!' she screamed, scrambling to her feet and cradling her broken wrist to her chest as she ran. She fell to her knees and thrust her other hand into the fire, but the wand had incinerated in the conflagration; there was nothing to retrieve.

Staggering again to her feet, she whirled on Hermione, madness gleaming in her eyes. One hand horribly burned, the other broken, she ran at Hermione, heedless of danger, completely beyond reason.

Hermione brought her wand to bear on the charging witch, feeling every indignity she had suffered at the other woman's hands coursing through her...remembering how Morgen had repeatedly betrayed Severus...and her magic roiled like magma. She could do it: she could bring enough hatred to the fore to cast an Unforgivable Curse, and Morgen would be *dead*, which she so richly deserved.

A nearly inhuman scream distracted Tonks from the report she was giving to Robards, the supervising Auror who had arrived to transport the prisoners to Azkaban. Immediately alert, she whirled around, looking for trouble. The sound had come from the direction of the turnstile leading out into the rocky hills, and she ran that way, her wand in her hand, with Robards at her heels.

She had run less than five yards when she saw the unnaturally blue flames rising into the sky and recognised Hermione standing in the midst of them. As Tonks watched, a black-cloaked Death Eater ran at Hermione, and Tonks did not hesitate; she raised her wand and cried, '*Stupefy!*'

The red light shot through the blue flames, and the Death Eater dropped headlong. In an instant, the bluebell-coloured flames fell and extinguished, and Tonks rushed to her friend.

'Did she hurt you?' Tonks cried, even as ropes shot from her wand, firmly binding the Death Eater. She turned and looked closely at Hermione, who appeared pasty and unwell.

'No,' Hermione said. 'No, I'm not hurt...but I feel so odd...' Then she swayed on her feet and fell bonelessly to the ground, incapacitated as surely as if she had been hit by a Stunner, as well.

Severus cast another Disillusionment Spell and set out to follow the path taken by the Dumbledore's Army members. He knew that a contingent of Death Eaters were set to march on the castle, but another contingent would be staggered at intervals around the circumference of the Centaurs' Clearing, their mission to permit none but Potter to penetrate to the Dark Lord's position. He knew Dumbledore and the staff could defend Hogwarts; he was less sure of the DA members' abilities to defend themselves.

With anxiety for Hermione nagging at the back of his mind, he set off determinedly to follow Potter's defenders into the Forbidden Forest.

Fifteen minutes of his long-legged strides into the trees brought him to the stragglers of the DA. Dennis Creevey had to hurry to keep pace with the older students, and Longbottom and Ginevra Weasley formed the rearguard, their eyes constantly scanning their surroundings. Nodding with satisfaction that they had themselves in hand, Severus moved soundlessly abreast of the group and looked over each of them as he passed them by. He was pleased to see that none of them demonstrated fear to a debilitating degree; even the most timid of the group looked determined as they marched along behind Weasley.

A strangely echoing voice reverberated from behind them, saying, '*Morsmordre!*' Severus whirled, as if expecting to see Death Eaters, but all he saw was the ever-darkening Forest, the trees growing so closely that he was unable to see aught but their trunks and branches.

'Look!' Luna Lovegood said in a penetrating whisper, and Severus was moved to look where she pointed, just as the students did. Up through the tree branches, a patch of the sky was visible, and its twilight hue was tinted a terrible green. Severus knew they were seeing the residue of the Dark Mark now cast over Hogwarts, and his own resolve hardened at the sheer *wrongness* that such a thing could happen.

'There's nothing we can do about that! Keep going!' Ginevra Weasley ordered them heatedly, and the DA stirred to life again, trudging on towards the Centaurs' Clearing with Severus moving along with them.

'*Avada Kedavra!*' a guttural voice cried, and Ernie Macmillan fell to the ground, lifeless eyes staring.

A group of six Death Eaters materialised from the murk, and the DA members raised their wands and began casting spells as one.

Severus did not wait to see how effective the students would be against these attackers; instead he shifted behind the DA and sent his spells over their shoulders, moving amongst them like a phantom, silent and unseen. In the wild flurry of spell-casting, it would be impossible to determine whose spell had felled an attacker. His first Full Body-Bind brought down Macmillan's murderer, the vicious Thorfinn Rowle. One of the students successfully Stunned Amycus Carrow, and Severus followed up with a Full Body-Bind on his sister, Alecto. The next hulking figure in black was the elder Crabbe, whom Severus felled with a resounding Stunner. Ronald Weasley needed no assistance to Stun the elder Goyle.

'Tie them up!' Longbottom called, coming forward to begin the job. 'And take their wands!'

Confident that the students would properly deal with the fallen, Severus moved forward, senses on high alert for the next wave of Death Eaters.

Harry climbed the steeply rising hill to the Centaurs' Clearing as the crimson rays of the setting sun were fractured by the limbs of the trees which ringed the sacred space. He had passed unseen through three groups of Death Eaters, but standing on the periphery of the clearing at the top of the rise, he saw that only two figures were awaiting him there: Voldemort and Hermione.

His stomach plummeted when he saw his second-best friend trussed hand-and-foot upon the ground at Voldemort's feet. Perhaps he could circle behind them, creep in and free Hermione, cover her in the Invisibility Cloak, and send her out of the Clearing before facing Voldemort. The chances of success seemed slim, but he had to try *something*.

The next group of Death Eaters encountered by the DA included ten of the black-cloaked Dark wizards. Ron felt that he spent far more time casting and holding his Shield Charm than he did actually duelling with the bad guys. Harry had always told them that being able to protect themselves in an attack was half the battle, and the DA had worked tirelessly on Shield Charms. Yet in spite of the fact that the DA members were getting off fewer offensive spells than the Death Eaters, the masked figures were being methodically felled by Stunners and Binding curses.

When the last of the attackers fell and the DA hurried forward to take their wands and tie them up, Ron turned to look suspiciously behind him. He met Ginny's eye, and the two of them demanded in unison, 'Who's there?'

The DA members paused and turned to stare at Ron and Ginny, but all that met their question was echoing silence, until a faint resonance of birdsong reached their ears, bringing feelings of confidence and Light. The eyes of the students stared up into the purpling evening sky to see a great crimson and gold bird fly overhead, streaming songs of hope trailing in its wake, filling its auditors with new determination to move forward to face whatever lay ahead of them.

Turning with their friends, Ron and Ginny helped to tie up the Death Eaters.

Along with the students, Severus lifted his face to see Fawkes flying overhead, and noted, even as inappropriate hope flooded him, that the phoenix was on course to reach the Centaurs' Clearing, as well.

For a moment, he was torn; it went against every instinct he had to leave students in possible danger, but it was time for him to make one of the damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't decisions which had ever plagued his life.

His black eyes narrowed as he watched the members of Dumbledore's Army methodically shooting ropes from their wand-tips and collecting Death Eater wands. What this lot lacked in offensive capabilities, they had in spades in the ability to defend themselves from unfriendly spells; grudgingly, he had to admit that Potter had prepared them well.

Leaving Dumbledore's Army to the objective of guarding Potter's back, Severus moved forward into the murk at a near lope. His place was with Harry Potter when the boy finally stood to fight the Dark Lord.

Harry crept along the edge of the Clearing, five feet back into the tree line, his heart pounding loudly in his ears as he moved from tree to tree. The encircling Death Eaters were staggered at distances farther into the darkness of the trees, so he was able to move along swiftly, without having to go around potential enemy sentries.

He was directly behind Voldemort and Hermione when he heard Fawkes. Hope surged in his chest...help was coming! He watched breathlessly as the great phoenix dodged the jet of green fire Voldemort shot at it, then wheeled in midair and flew at Hermione, as if to bite through the ropes binding her.

'Gerroff!' Hermione screeched, bucking in the dirt, trying simultaneously to scare the bird away and to escape from it. 'My Lord! Don't let it hurt me!'

Harry's eyes narrowed, even as his lips compressed angrily. That wasn't Hermione! Voldemort had succeeded in fooling him again, just as he had done with Sirius, in the Department of Mysteries.

Standing straight, Harry shrugged off the Invisibility Cloak and stuffed it into his pocket before stepping forward into the Clearing, wand in hand.

Voldemort smiled mirthlessly. 'Welcome, Harry,' he said conversationally. 'You've arrived just in time to see me kill Dumbledore's bothersome bird.' Another greenish burst flowed toward Fawkes, and the great phoenix flew obligingly toward the beam of green, opening his beak to swallow the light. Next moment, Fawkes fell to the ground, a pile of ashes.

Harry forced himself to keep his eyes on Voldemort, his mind scrabbling for a plan...any plan...to put the Dark wizard down like a rabid dog.

Voldemort jerked his wand and the fake Hermione was levitated between them. 'Now, Harry,' Voldemort said, still as if they were chatting over tea, 'throw your wand to me, or I shall kill your friend.'

Harry shrugged. 'Do what you have to do,' he said. 'I don't know who that is, but it isn't Hermione. She would never have been afraid of Fawkes.'

The fake Hermione fell again to the dirt as Voldemort sneered at Harry. 'You heard that, did you?' Madness flared in the merciless red eyes, and without looking at her, Voldemort held his wand upon the Hermione look-alike, and the Killing Curse struck the young woman. 'She is of no use,' he explained to Harry, as a sweep of his wand caused the now-lifeless body to be sent flying heedlessly into the trees.

Harry's heart quailed at the effortless brutality, but still he forced himself to keep his eyes on the madman. Gathering his wits about him, he shouted, '*Expelliarmus!*'

Severus stood over the body of Gretchen Goyle, transformed back to her own likeness in death, and watched in amazement as Potter attempted to use a second-year spell to defeat the greatest Dark wizard of all time. Had the boy lost what passed for his mind?

Voldemort's *Protego* was accompanied by a laugh. 'Do you imagine you will disarm Lord Voldemort, Harry? You have no more notion of how to stand before me than had your poor, dead, Mudblood mother.'

Potter fired up immediately, as the Dark Lord had known he would. 'Don't you talk about my mother, you murderer,' he snarled, casting a non-verbal spell. 'I loved my mother!' And as he spoke the word love, the spell glowed briefly gold, limning Potter in guilt.

Severus nodded to himself; rather than striking out at the Dark Lord, Potter had cast a defensive spell of some sort. That showed rather more sense than Severus had credited him with.

'What magic is this?' the Dark Lord demanded, frowning at the glimmer which now encapsulated the boy.

Severus frowned, as well. He was unaware of any defensive spell signature resembling Potter's aureate gleam. The boy did not speak, and Severus knew that Potter had no idea how he had created the glimmering golden spell. At any rate, the Dark Lord was unlikely to wish to chat about it. He darted between them, just as the former Tom Riddle levelled his wand upon Harry and said, '*Avada Kadavra!*'

Severus hurled himself forward, shouting, 'Now, Potter! Now!' and awaiting the nothingness of death.

Harry stared in amazement as his Potions professor materialised out of nowhere, coming between him and the shaft of deadly green light rushing at him with the sound of an oncoming freight train. Acting on pure instinct, Harry thought of the love he had seen in Hermione's eyes when she looked at this man, and the golden capsule bulged outward, covering Snape and pulling him backwards, almost into Harry's arms. As the two collided, the Killing Curse burst on the golden lamina like a water balloon on a brick wall, colouring the world green for a moment, then sliding off harmlessly onto the ground.

'What the fuck are you doing, Potter?' Snape demanded, pushing away from him angrily, but the capsule wouldn't let him go far.

'I think I'm loving people,' Harry replied, not wishing for a moment to imply to the indignant Slytherin that Harry loved *him* specifically. 'Professor, I think we have to pull Voldemort in here with us.' As Harry spoke, he made an effort to push the enveloping membrane out to capture Voldemort, but he could not project it far enough. 'Help me,' he said, pushing again.

Snape was staring at him as if he were mad, his lips pulled back over bared uneven yellow teeth, through which he spoke. 'What are you babbling about?'

Harry gave Snape an encouraging nudge and began to walk towards Voldemort, who paced back and forth at a distance from them. It seemed that the snake-like wizard was shouting words at them, but they could not hear him within the capsule. 'Come on,' Harry said, 'we have to take it to him.'

Snape did not answer him, but he began to walk with Harry, and as they moved, the protective shield moved with them. 'Try to push it out to enclose him,' Harry told his

teacher.

Snape seemed to try for a moment, with no result. 'Are you sure about this, Potter?' he snarled.

Harry closed his eyes and thought of his mother, letting himself feel his love for her. With his thought, the capsule expanded about them, allowing Snape to draw further away from him, which he promptly did.

'How do I push it?' Snape demanded.

'Love him?' Harry said to himself.

'What?' Snape shouted.

Harry pushed again, this time imagining the poor orphan boy in the Muggle orphanage; upon that thought, the capsule expanded again. 'We have to love him,' Harry said again, more firmly. 'We have to love Voldemort.'

Snape looked as if he wanted to hit him. 'You're raving, Potter.'

'Think about him as a little boy with no parents and no one to love him,' Harry said. 'You don't have to like him! Just feel compassion for the little boy ...'

Snape snarled swear words under his breath, but the Slytherin's eyes closed in concentration, and Harry felt the capsule enlarge a bit. 'That's it!' he whispered. 'You're doing it!'

Harry stared determinedly into the red eyes of Tom Riddle, and very much against the older wizard's will, Harry loved him. His effort, combined with Snape's, seemed not to double their results but to quadruple them. The gold-limned membrane billowed towards Voldemort until it enveloped him, as well.

Voldemort's unearthly screams rent the night but had no effect on the golden bubble. Harry slammed his hands over his ears, trying not to hear the anguished shrieks of the one creature on earth so diametrically opposed to love that he could die of it. Snape, he saw, was watching Voldemort's writhing agony with an almost avid fascination on his sallow, ugly face. Harry frowned when the bubble seemed to flicker around them, and he realised that he had ceased to think of love, and was thinking only of how horrible were the death throes of Tom Riddle.

'We have to think about love!' he shouted, leaning close to Snape's ear. 'We have to keep the capsule strong until he's dead!'

Snape did not challenge him, but closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears, just as Harry did. Harry thought of his mom and dad, Hogwarts, Ron and Hermione, Professor Dumbledore, the Weasleys, and last of all, he thought of Luna. He did not know of what Snape was thinking, but between the two of them, they maintained the strength of the bubble until the screams of Voldemort diminished.

Harry opened his eyes and dropped his hands from his ears, staring at the dried up, brittle husk in the place where Voldemort had been. The screams faded into silence, and Harry glanced at Snape. 'What do you reckon?' he asked uncertainly.

Snape threw out his arms in a gesture of dismissal, and the protective spell dissipated, leaving behind glittery gold particles in the air. Without answering Harry, he lunged forward and brought his boot down forcefully on the fragile shell which had once housed Voldemort; the husk shattered into powder, and Snape continued to grind each fragment into dust beneath his heel.

At last, Snape looked at Harry with a manic grin. 'I reckon the bastard is dead,' he answered.

In the next moment, a great shout went up, so loud that Severus was tempted to clap his hands back over his ears. A sudden red glow lit the sky, and Severus looked up into the blackness, where a shower of red sparks resolved into the emblem of a phoenix.

'Dumbledore has successfully defended the castle,' he said aloud to Potter.

Now new sounds came from the Forest, and in moments, a swarm of cloaked Death Eaters converged on the clearing, hotly pursued by Dumbledore's Army. Severus quickly secured his hood as Potter leapt into the battle fray. The DA students had fought successfully to join with their leader, but Severus could see that they were showing signs of battle fatigue. Approximately thirty of his one-time colleagues streamed now through the trees, undoubtedly in retreat from the castle defenders and hoping to join forces with the Dark Lord in the Centaurs' Clearing.

They were destined to be disappointed.

For a shower of arrows rained upon the approaching Death Eaters, and a herd of centaurs thundered up the rise from the east, with Firenze in the lead. A great black centaur, the one called Bane, reared and shouted as his fellows attacked, 'How dare you profane the Centaurs' sacred place? You shall pay!'

'Potter!' Severus shouted. 'Get the DA out of it!'

Potter nodded his understanding and began shouting orders, which were taken up and echoed by Weasley and Longbottom. Dumbledore's Army began a retreat from the Battle of the Centaurs' Clearing, even as the accomplished centaur archers were making quick work of the disordered Death Eaters. Not wishing to be taken for one, Severus melted into the trees in the wake of Dumbledore's Army, meaning to see them safely back to the castle. He followed along silently, his mind awl with competing thoughts...the Dark Lord was dead, he was alive, but where was Hermione?

Thus distracted, he was taken completely unawares as the youngest Creevey, who had fallen behind the rest of the DA, turned and saw him. When the twit's eyes grew wide, Severus realised he had neglected to replace his Disillusionment Charm.

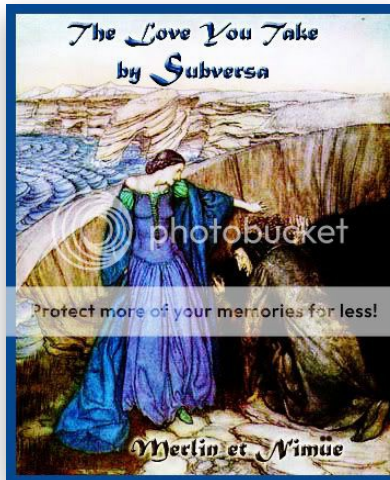
'Death Eater!' the fourth-year screeched, wildly brandishing his wand, and then Severus knew no more.

Chapter 26: The Love You Take

Chapter 26 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

A/N: Subversa FanFic Math® strikes again - two more chapters after this one; the last chapter should post on Halloween. Thanks to the usual crew of Shug, Annie Talbot, MagicAlly, and DeeMichelle!



The Love You Take

Chapter 26: The Love You Take

'Po-tee-wheet?'

Severus opened his eyes to find himself beak-to-beak with a tiny featherless chick of a bird. The chick had its diminutive head tilted to one side, watching him with beady little black birdie-eyes.

'What are *you* looking at?' he snarled, struggling to sit up.

The chick hopped backwards, demonstrating great presence of mind for an avian of no great size, and continued to watch him as his fingertips felt along his scalp, searching out the source of his pounding headache. 'Fuck!' he exclaimed as he encountered a protrusion roughly the size and shape of a chicken egg. He glared at the chick, as if *it* were somehow responsible for his injury. The chick, noting his attention, attempted further communication.

'Po-tee-wheet?' it said again.

'Must you babble?' Severus demanded irritably, glaring about at his surroundings. To be sure, this was not the first time in his experience that Severus had regained consciousness in a wood, unable to remember how he came to be there, but it seemed to him that something of great import had occurred, and he struggled to remember what it was. As he mulled it over, the fingers of his left hand stole again to probe the bump on the back of his skull, and the sleeve of his robes fell back to reveal his gooseflesh covered forearm.

He stared at the pale white skin, then jerked his right arm up as well, as if to compare the chill bumps present on each...but this gooseflesh had little to do with the dew drenched dawn.

Where was his Dark Mark?

'Po-tee-wheet?' the chick interpolated helpfully.

'Yes, probably,' Severus answered absently, now running fingertips over the newly pristine skin. He had been Marked since he was eighteen years old; he had believed he would wear the hideous emblem of his enslavement for the rest of his life. He felt his spirit take flight, unlike the earthbound chick before him, and as his hopes soared, a flood of memories saturated his mind. The Dark Lord was obliterated from the face of the earth, and he, Severus, was alive and well...and he was in love.

He had to find Hermione.

'Fawkes?' he said, just to make sure he wasn't mistaking some other, lesser bird, for Dumbledore's familiar.

The chick hopped closer to him, as if answering to his name.

Severus lifted the nearly weightless Fawkes in the palm of his hand. 'I suppose you've let me grab onto your tail-feathers a time or two,' he said equably. 'In payment, I shall let *you* be the passenger this time around...if you're agreeable to that, of course.'

'Po-tee-wheet!' the newborn phoenix answered with baby bird enthusiasm.

'Very well,' Severus said, and he slipped the ball of fluff into the pocket of his cloak before casting a Disillusionment Charm and beginning the hike to the castle.

Hermione's eyes fluttered open. The pearlescent light of dawn shone about the edges of the window curtains. She frowned. Those weren't the draperies of her bedroom at Prince House...they looked, instead, like the curtains in the Hospital Wing ...

'Miss is awake!' a squeaky voice said, and Scampy's face appeared. 'Scampy is to say that Madam Pomfrey put a spell on Miss to keep Miss still so she can get strong again.'

Hermione attempted to open her lips to ask why, but found that she couldn't even speak. She frowned again. So, the Restraining Spell impelled her to remain still and quiet, but it did not freeze her facial muscles. Well, that was something, she supposed.

'Miss Hermione was in a battle,' Scampy said, sounding awed. 'Miss Hermione duelled with Miss Morgen and *won!*'

Of course...she had fainted away after her duel with Morgen. She exhaled sharply. It was really becoming very tiresome, this business of falling unconscious every other day.

Another figure entered her line of sight as Madam Pomfrey appeared. 'Good, you're awake,' she said. 'I *told* Professor Snape not to let you duel, didn't I? Did he even tell you not to do it? I'll be giving him a piece of my mind the next time he shows his face around here.' The matron cast a series of spells. 'You're improving, but you're still as weak as a kitten. I'm going to remove the restraints so you can sit up and take your potions, but then I'm putting them right back on you again, Hermione. This is a very serious condition, as I thought I had explained plainly to Professor Snape.'

Madam Pomfrey released the Restraining Spell and Scampy assisted to support Hermione in a semi-sitting position. The matron held the first of three potions to Hermione's lips, patiently tilting the phial until Hermione had swallowed it all. Simply being raised up made her feel light-headed and weak; she couldn't deny that Madam Pomfrey was correct about how enervated she was.

When she was finished swallowing potions, Scampy lowered her again to the pillow, and she whimpered in relief.

'Yes,' Madam Pomfrey said, not unkindly, 'you're exhausted, both physically and magically, but we'll have you up and about in a day or two.*if you do as you're told!*

'How ...' Hermione began, wanting to ask about the professor, but her voice was barely a whisper, and Madam Pomfrey promptly replaced the Restraining Spell.

'No talking,' she said firmly. 'You will rest until I am satisfied that will not endanger your health, young lady. Madam Prince sent a house-elf to help look after you, and I'm glad for that, because we're rather full-up, at present.'

Hermione opened her mouth again, but the spell would not permit her to speak.

'Rest,' Madam Pomfrey commanded her before hurrying away.

Severus entered the deserted halls of Hogwarts, having trekked back from the Forbidden Forest and walked through the signs of a pitched battle. The grounds immediately around the castle looked as if a hurricane had blown through, judging by the felled trees, fallen branches, and scattered debris which were the result of the magical mêlée which had taken place there the day before. Silently, he climbed the staircases to the seventh floor and walked to the gargoyle guarding the headmaster's office.

'Canary Creams,' he said and stepped onto the revolving stairway.

Dumbledore was standing in the doorway when he arrived, attired in a rich purple dressing gown with matching nightcap; he did not, however, look as if he had slept.

'Severus! Harry said you were all right, but when you didn't come back ...'

Severus swept past the old man and walked to Fawkes' perch, where he placed the featherless phoenix.

'*Po-tee-wheet?*' Fawkes said, obviously happy to be back home.

'Fawkes!' Dumbledore exclaimed and hastened to the bird, placing a gnarled finger upon its head, stroking gently. 'I am very glad to see you, my old friend.'

'Touching,' Severus said scathingly.

Dumbledore turned back to him. 'I am very glad to see you as well,' the old man assured him.

'One of your DA twits took me for a Death Eater and knocked me flat with a Full Body-Bind,' he said. 'I hit my head, only woke up this morning when your bird began chirping at me.'

Dumbledore stepped closer to him. 'Harry told me what you did,' he said softly. 'I know you stepped in to intercept a Killing Curse, Severus...how can I ever ...'

Severus turned his back on the old man and strode restlessly over to the window. 'Have you seen Miss Granger?' he asked tightly.

'Hermione is in the Hospital Wing,' Dumbledore replied. 'She fought in the Death Eater assault on Hogsmeade and was personally responsible for the capture of the leader of the attack.'

Severus turned abruptly from the window. 'Morgen Singer?' he asked.

Dumbledore nodded. 'Tonks was there when it happened; apparently Hermione ringed Morgen in with a wall of fire.'

Severus smirked appreciatively before asking, 'What is her injury?'

Dumbledore looked grave. 'You will remember Madam Pomfrey explaining that Hermione ought not to duel anymore, because of her infirmity?'

'Of course I remember,' Severus replied impatiently. 'My grandmother gave her that information.'

'Apparently, Hermione chose to disregard those instructions, and she joined the villagers in defending Hogsmeade. She collapsed at the scene, and Tonks had her moved to the infirmary.'

Severus' fists clenched at his sides, and he took a step towards Dumbledore. 'Don't toy with me!' he snarled. 'What is her condition? Her prognosis?'

Dumbledore held up a placating hand. 'She is physically and magically exhausted,' he said. 'Poppy has placed her under magical restraint to force her to rest. With the proper bed rest and potions, Hermione should be well in a day or two.'

Severus felt relief flood him, and irritation with Dumbledore fell back before the onslaught of an almost giddy cheer. He strode across the room to the door and opened it to leave; Dumbledore's next word stayed him.

'You do remember your promise, Severus?'

Severus closed the door and turned back. 'What are you talking about?' he demanded. 'The boy is safe...I did as I said I would. What else do you want?'

The old man took a step towards him, speaking soothingly. 'You did a fine job of protecting Harry,' he said, 'but don't forget your promise about Hermione.'

The soaring, giddy feeling fell away from him like water sliding down a duck's back; such emotions had never been meant for the likes of Severus Snape. 'What do you mean, old man?' he demanded dangerously.

Dumbledore took another step towards him, his gaze sharp, his tone now implacable. 'We agreed on the night I brought her to you that when the curse was done, you would let her get on with her life as it ought to have been without Tom's interference. Let her be, Severus.'

Now Severus took a step towards Dumbledore, sudden rage inundating him. '*You* told me she was *fond* of me! *You* encouraged me! You said we would make a good pair!'

Dumbledore stood tall now, and power seemed to radiate from him, laced with indignation. 'I said what was necessary to bring about a favourable outcome!' he thundered. 'It was for the greater good, man, surely you can see that?'

Severus recoiled blindly, a sick feeling now pervading him. She had said she loved him, over and again...but surely that was merely the result of the compulsion...if he were

to leave her alone, to stay away from her, she could regain her perspective, and she would know that her feelings for him had been tied to the curse which bound her to him.

It would only take a little time.

Turning again, he staggered to the door, feeling as if he had aged ten years in less than ten minutes.

'Where are you going?' Dumbledore asked brusquely.

'My quarters,' he replied, turning the door handle.

'Severus, if you need time away...she'll be gone from here for good after Summer Term ...'

Severus did not respond to these words, but lurched out of the headmaster's office and made his way to the dungeons...where he belonged.

Hermione lay staring at the ceiling, waiting for the potions to take effect and make her sleepy. Where was Severus? She wanted him with every breath she took. It felt as if an aeon had passed since last she had been in his arms, and she longed to be there again.

Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to imagine the smell of him, sated and sweaty after lovemaking; she dwelt upon his physical strength...amazing, really, when one considered his body size; she thought of standing on tiptoe to kiss him, and a physical ache began low in her belly from sheer want of him.

Was he injured? Was he lying somewhere, wanting *her* and unable to ask for her, much less go to her? Or was he ...

Her eyes filled with hot, unbidden tears, and she endured them dripping down the sides of her face into her hair, unable to dry them. An instant later, a freshly ironed handkerchief passed gently over her cheek and down over her temple, to her hairline.

'Miss mustn't fret,' Scampy said, leaning over to dry the other side of her face. 'Mr Harry Potter says Master Severus is alive; he'll be here soon.'

Awash with relief, Hermione mentally blessed Scampy's perceptiveness in all things relating to the professor. He was alive and well and he would be with her soon...which was good, because she had something very important to tell him.

She closed her eyes, hoping for sleep.

Harry and Ron came at mid-morning, their faces filled with concern as they sat in the visitor chairs.

'Wow,' Ron said, 'you're in a little private room...they didn't even put you in here when Dolohov cursed you at the Ministry.'

'Yeah,' Harry concurred. 'The only time I ever knew anybody kept in here was Mad-Eye, after Dumbledore let him out of his trunk.'

Hermione scowled, unable to turn her head to them. She wished that she could see their faces.

'Anyway,' Ron said, after a moment of silence, 'you helped defend Hogsmeade from the Death Eaters...and you chased down and won a duel with the leader. She's in Azkaban, with the rest of them! You should be proud, Hermione!'

'Ron led the DA into the Forbidden Forest to cover my back,' Harry told her. 'They battled through about four different groups of Death Eaters before they found me in the Centaurs' Clearing. They were responsible for the capture of about thirty Death Eaters, all told.'

'Yeah,' Ron interrupted, 'but we had help...someone really fast, who cast really strong Stunners and Full Body-Binds. Harry reckons it was Snape, Disillusioned...what do you reckon, Hermione?'

At that point, it seemed to dawn on them that she wasn't looking at them. Their two faces appeared over her: Harry looking concerned and Ron giving a lop-sided grin.

'You can hear us, right?' Harry said softly.

Hermione blinked once.

'See?' Ron said excitedly. 'She *can* hear us!'

'Blink once for yes and twice for no,' Harry said. 'All right?'

She blinked once, and both boys grinned as if she had just invented liquorice wands.

'So, do you reckon it was Snape following the DA in the Forest?' Ron asked again.

Hermione stared at them unblinkingly until Harry said, 'Blink three times for "I don't know".'

Immediately, Hermione blinked three times, surprised by the exhaustion which accompanied such trivial movements as these.

'I distinctly told you two *fifteen minutes!*' Madam Pomfrey began to scold as soon as the door was open. 'Now, shoo! You can come back to see her after supper if she feels up to it.'

The boys looked sheepish. With promises to return that night, they beat a hasty retreat.

'Potion time again,' Madam Pomfrey said, closing the door behind them.

Sitting in his wingchair with the decanter at his elbow, Severus glared into the fire and determinedly kept his eyes off the little evidences of Hermione's pervasive presence in his rooms. She was *everywhere*, in his quarters as well as in his heart, and every brush of her memory burnt him anew, as searing as Fiendfyre.

'Sir is needing food,' a house-elf voice proclaimed near his elbow.

Severus glanced blearily at Winky, who stood beside his chair looking quite stubborn. 'Bugger off,' he said rudely.

Winky plucked the glass from his hand with deft elf fingers. 'But first, sir is needing a bath, and Winky has filled the tub.'

Severus glared at the elf and picked up the crystal decanter, removing the cap and taking a swig of Firewhisky directly from the carafe. 'Go 'way,' he said.

Winky snapped her fingers, and a tray of food appeared on the coffee table: roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, his favourite meal.

'I'll eat,' he decided abruptly, sitting forward to reach for the plate.

'After your bath, sir,' Winky said, taking the hand he reached forward with and using the leverage to haul him to his feet. 'Bath first, then food, and sir will feel better.'

Severus yanked his hand away from the house-elf and found he was a bit unsteady on his feet. Winky took the opportunity to magick his robes off, leaving him standing on the hearthrug in his vest and trousers.

'Does sir wish to have his Death Eater robes cleaned and mended?' Winky squeaked, as if it were a question she had asked before.

Glaring down at his tormentor, Severus snatched the robes away from her, and plunging his hand into the pocket, he withdrew his Death Eater mask. Triumph blazed like the fire in the hearth when he threw first the mask, and then the robes, into the flames and watched them burn. The Mark was gone, and now the robes and mask would no longer live in his wardrobe under a Concealing Spell.

The thoughts and action were rather sobering. 'Put the food under a warming charm whilst I bathe,' he ordered.

'It is done, sir,' Winky assured him. 'And after sir eats, the Aurors wish to see him,' she added.

Severus glared down his nose at her. 'I'm sure they do,' he said grimly.

At mid-afternoon, Hermione woke abruptly from a nightmare; she had been writhing and screaming from Morgen Singer's Cruciatus Curse. Awake, she felt the cold sweat on her skin and the trembling of her muscles, despite the Restraining Spell.

But she'll never hurt me again, she thought. *I bested her in a duel, and she's in Azkaban now.*

The events of the battle played through her mind, and when she arrived at her pursuit of Morgen, it slowed like a slow-motion film: chasing Morgen, dodging her spells, blocking her spells, ignoring her taunts ... confiscating and destroying her wand ...

Gooseflesh covered her arms as she remembered Morgen's unearthly scream and subsequent charge. Hermione had faced down the other witch, who had hurt Severus over and over again...the witch who had delighted in attempting to humiliate Hermione at every opportunity...and she had felt the purpose gathering within her to kill another human being. She had stared into the eyes of madness and paused to consider if she would wilfully take the life of another living thing.

Tonks had taken the decision from her hands by casting a Stunning Spell through the wall of fire and felling Morgen in mid-stride. Another layer of gooseflesh covered Hermione's skin as she wondered: would she have done it? Would she have cast an Unforgiveable Curse and killed Morgen Singer?

She wanted to be able to say she would not...would *never*...have done such a thing, but she wasn't sure. In that moment, she had been so full of rage towards Morgen...as well as resentment, she had to admit...she had teetered on the edge of being forced to make that choice. She could not swear she would not have chosen to end the existence of a witch who, for her entire life, had made it her business to leave a trail of havoc in her wake.

With sudden clarity, Hermione understood that *this* was the dilemma which had plagued Severus all his adult years. She had, until now, shrugged off that part of his life...yes, he was a spy, and he had to commit acts he would not have done, otherwise...but she had never considered how the commission of those acts might have plagued his soul. Had he struggled to decide what he would do? Had he gone against his conscience to maintain his position as a Death Eater? How could she have been so callous about such a sensitive issue? She, who professed to love him, had thought to herself, 'He's Severus Snape. Of course he's done despicable things.'

And in the silence of the afternoon, Scampy came once again to dry her cheeks...this time, from tears of remorse. 'Master Severus is fine,' she said firmly, her fingers gentle upon Hermione's face.

Yes, *he is*, Hermione thought.

At dusk, Madam Pomfrey came into her room and lit the oil lamps. 'I'll release the spell so you can sit up and eat some soup,' she said, 'but you must allow Scampy to feed you, and you must not talk.'

Hermione was relieved to be able to move her arms and legs a bit, and when Scampy raised her and plumped the pillows to support her, she did not feel dizzy. Docilely, she allowed the little house-elf to spoon-feed her like a baby. When she had polished off a bowl of broth, Scampy gave her a sponge-bath and dressed her in a fresh nightdress...one of her own, from her bag. She noticed that Scampy used her own hairbrush to smooth her hair before plaiting it, and she saw the figurine of Merlin and Nimûe on her bedside table ... how odd that Scampy had packed it with her things...but it had been necessary to pack in such a hurry ...

She was dozing when a familiar voice woke her.

'May I come in, Hermione?'

She opened her eyes and smiled at Professor McGonagall.

'Yes,' she whispered, realising that Madam Pomfrey had not yet replaced the Restraining Spell.

Scampy excused herself to eat in the kitchens with the other house-elves, and Professor McGonagall took the seat Scampy had vacated.

'I'm so pleased to see that you're on the mend,' the older witch said, uncharacteristic warmth in her eyes. 'It was a terrible thing, but it's over now...finally, really over.'

'Voldemort?' Hermione whispered.

'Have you not been told?' McGonagall said, sounding surprised. 'I would have thought Potter and Weasley ...'

Hermione rolled her eyes and shrugged, drawing a snort from her Transfiguration teacher. 'Well, let me tell you about it,' McGonagall said, and Hermione listened raptly for the better part of a quarter-hour to the story of the defence of the Castle, in which McGonagall had participated, and the story of Harry, Severus, and the golden Shield Charm. 'Riddle fought to get inside the shield to attack them,' McGonagall said. 'He had no idea that it would be lethal to him.'

When the old lady finished speaking, Hermione croaked, 'Professor Snape?'

McGonagall frowned a bit. 'Pardon my indelicacy, Hermione, but the curse is lifted now, is it not?'

Hermione nodded her agreement.

McGonagall's face cleared. 'Good,' she said. 'Well, Professor Snape has been with the Aurors since early afternoon; I'm sure there are a number of questions for him to answer.'

Hermione felt as if she had been struck a blow to her tummy. The Aurors had him? Why? And who was helping him?

McGonagall sat forward, placing a hand upon Hermione's arm. 'Don't distress yourself,' she said soothingly. 'Professor Dumbledore has been with them for most of the time; I do not think there is danger of Professor Snape's role being ... misinterpreted.'

Hermione sniffled, fighting tears for the umpteenth time that day. She wished Scampy had left the handkerchief for her. Perhaps there were some tissues in the bedside

table. She struggled to reach over to the knob of the drawer, but the effort required more strength than she had yet recovered.

'What do you need?' McGonagall said, rising and walking around the bed to the small table. 'Don't tire yourself...Madam Pomfrey will scold me like a first-year if you do!'

'Tissue,' Hermione said thickly, sniffing.

McGonagall pulled open the drawer, but it was empty. 'Take my handkerchief,' she urged, pressing the daintily embroidered lawn cloth into Hermione's hand.

Hermione gave her a watery smile of thanks and shakily applied the handkerchief to her face. Her teacher watched her with an indulgent smile for a moment, then she glanced back at the table, her gaze sharpening as she stared at the figurine. After a moment, she reached a marvelling hand, and her fingertips ran lightly over the surface of Nimûe's gown.

'I haven't seen one of these since I was a girl,' she said wonderingly, 'and that one was behind glass in the Edinburgh Wizarding Museum...may I?'

Hermione nodded, and McGonagall took the statuette in her hands. With an awe approaching reverence, she inspected the small sculpture minutely, even going so far as to turn it upside down and study the bottom of its pedestal.

'It's rare?' Hermione said curiously, her voice thready.

McGonagall seemed surprised. 'A Vinculum? Quite,' she said dryly. 'May I ask where you came by this?'

'It's not mine,' Hermione explained. 'It belongs to Madam Prince, Professor Snape's grandmother. The house-elf packed it by accident, I think.'

This speech tired her; she sagged back on her pillows, feeling ridiculously weak.

Professor McGonagall replaced the figurine on the tabletop. 'I've tired you,' she said, concerned. She stepped over to the bed and laid a fleeting hand upon Hermione's hair. 'You did so well, my dear...we're all very proud of you. And now, you must get well.'

Hermione was too tired to respond; she simply turned her head until she could see Merlin and Nimûe and fell again into sleep.

Deep into the night, Severus sat before the fire and stared into the flames.

The Aurors had indeed had many questions for him. Nymphadora Tonks had been excluded from the interrogation room...they could call it an interview all bloody day long, but it had *been* an interrogation!...and when Gawain Robards had taken over the questioning, things had begun to go ill for Severus. Robards had been a year of two ahead of him at Hogwarts, a Ravenclaw with a disdain for Slytherins, and he had begun by getting right up Severus' nose. Severus had become uncommunicative, Robards had become abusive...and then the headmaster had deigned to show up.

After that, things went more smoothly; Robards was persuaded to leave the room, Kingsley Shacklebolt took over, and Severus provided the Aurors with a glut of information. When they finished, at nearly midnight, Shacklebolt had gazed at the numerous rolls of parchment and said, 'It will take a while to process all of this information, Snape...we may have further questions for you, then ...'

'You know where to find me,' Severus had replied and exited the room, robes billowing behind him.

Now, in the dark of the night, urgent business taken care of, he longed for Hermione with every cell of his body. He could not bear to go to bed, for his bedroom was desolate without her. He did not dare to drink, for the drink made him dangerously maudlin, and he could not afford weakness now. All he could do was sit, his knuckles white from the grip he kept on the padded arms of the chair, and try not to think of the times she had straddled him in this very chair and driven him slowly from the shores of rationality. Clearly, it would be necessary for him to throw out every stick of furniture in his rooms, to fumigate the place, to erase...no, to *eradicate* the very memory of her ever having been here.

Otherwise, clearly, he would run mad.

Dumbledore said Hermione had duelled with Morgen, captured her, and turned her over to the Aurors to be sent to Azkaban to await trial. The duel had exhausted Hermione. How was she now? He glanced at the clock over the mantel. Surely she would be sleeping at this hour?

He was on his feet before the decision was clear in his mind. He could steal into the hospital wing now and see her...see that she was well...and *then* he would be able to rest easy. He cast a non-verbal Disillusionment Charm before he could think of any reasons why he ought not to go.

He traced a path through the corridors and traversed the stairways without encountering another living soul. Slipping unseen through the doors to the Hospital Wing, he frowned to see so many of the beds occupied. Moving silently from bed to bed in the dark room, he searched for the familiar bushy hair upon the white hospital pillow linen, looking for the too-pale face he had seen last in her bed at Prince House.

He was nearly startled into a shout by the sudden grasp upon the fingers of one hand. Jerking away, he stared down into the enormous, concerned eyes of Scampy the house-elf, whom he had never in his entire life managed to evade with a Disillusionment Charm. Scampy took his hand again and led him firmly away from the ward and into one of the tiny private rooms, where she left him, closing the door behind her.

Hermione lay still upon her hospital bed, her hair neatly twisted into a bulky plait upon her pillow. She was still too pale, but it seemed to him that she looked marginally better than she had done when he had left her at his grandmother's house ... had it been only two days before? Stealthily, he moved closer, shoving his hands resolutely into the pockets of his robes to keep from reaching for her. He froze as her head turned upon her pillow, her face towards him, now, her nostrils flaring, almost as if she smelled him. She moved restlessly beneath the bedclothes, then subsided again, her breathing steadying and deepening.

Severus relaxed and paced about the foot of her bed, the low illumination of the oil lamp permitting him to drink in the details of the shape of her lips and the delicate line of her throat. Upon her bedside table were lined the potions with which she was being dosed; he picked them up in turn, noting his own spiky handwriting upon each of the phials. Setting the last precisely back in its place, he saw the figurine of Merlin and Nimûe.

What in the world was his grandfather's Vinculum doing in Hermione's hospital room? He picked up the figurine and touched it with his wand. '*Reducio*,' he murmured and stashed the statue in the pocket of his robes. It had been foolish of him to put it in her room at Prince House, but at the time, it had seemed an appropriate holder for the note he had left for her.

Turning about in a slow circle, he scrutinised the room, looking for her bag; he saw it tucked neatly beneath the edge of her bed. His hands itched to pull the bag from its place and to rifle its contents in search of that foolhardy note. What were the odds that she had not yet read it? Perhaps he could pinch it from her bag, and she would assume it had been lost in the scuffle of her flight from Prince House and the battle in the village.

He bent to reach for the bag, and Hermione shifted again, whimpering in her sleep. He straightened and moved closer; her brow was furrowed, fine tremors of her eyelids proclaiming the dream which distressed her. Severus' belly clenched; every instinct bade him lie down beside her and gather her against him to quiet her torment. Instead, he laid one hand across her forehead, and at his touch, she stilled, the fluttering of her eyelids diminishing.

'Severus,' she breathed before subsiding again into peaceful sleep.

He fled into the darkened castle, ever downwards to his dungeon quarters, the Vinculum clutched in one hand, vision blurred with hot anguish.

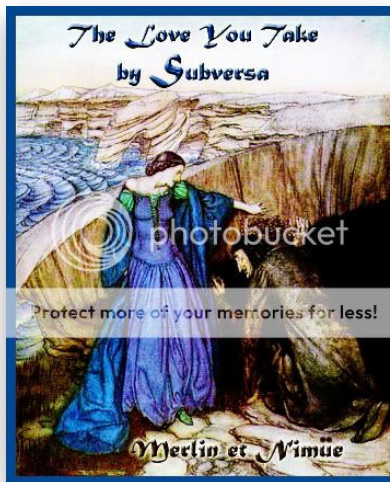
Chapter 27: ... Is Equal To ...

Chapter 27 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student.

As promised, here's the other half of those 12,000 words I wrote over the weekend. Look for chapter-the-last to post on Halloween, or thereabouts. This chapter has been alpha-read by Sshg316, beta-read by Deemichelle and Annie Talbot, and Brit-picked by MagicAlly.

(Psst ... lemons are ahead!)



Chapter 27: ... Is Equal To ...

Hermione stirred into wakefulness, reaching for her love. He had been there—she had smelled him—felt him! Her eyes opened upon the dimly lit little hospital room. Turning on her side, aching for him in her very core, she saw the statuette was gone. He had been here, in her room, and he had not so much as spoken to her; he had only collected his grandmother's property and departed.

Desolate, she stared at the wall until sleep claimed her again.

Severus was roused from his fitful slumber in the wingchair by the irritating repetition of his name.

'Snape—Snape—SNAPE!'

'Fuck off,' he snarled, even as his eyes opened to the sight of Shacklebolt's head in his fire.

'In the interview room, Snape,' Shacklebolt barked. 'Five minutes, or I'll send someone to collect you.'

With a rude gesture as his only answer to the Auror's request, Severus staggered into his bathroom and began to splash cold water upon his face. He knew very well that the only way to keep himself from seeking out Hermione would be to occupy himself with pressing business ... helping Magical Law Enforcement to make their legal cases against the Death Eaters would be just the thing.

Hermione woke up with sunlight flooding the room.

'Good morning, Miss,' Scampy said brightly, producing a tray of food. 'Madam Pomfrey says Miss can have real food today.'

The smell of eggs and toast made her mouth water, and her stomach rumbled loudly in approval. 'Thanks, Scampy,' she said, finding it much easier to sit up than she had done the day before. 'I'm feeling better.'

The house-elf allowed her to feed herself, which Hermione did for several minutes, savouring the taste of the food. When the worst of her hunger was assuaged, she turned her eyes upon Scampy, who was laying out another fresh nightdress.

'So, how was Master Severus when you saw him last night?' she inquired.

Scampy dropped Hermione's hairbrush and it clattered upon the floor. 'Scampy did not say Master Severus was here last night, Miss!' she said nervously.

'He came to my room, he laid his hand on my face and he left—and he took the statue of Merlin and Nimue with him!' Hermione said, holding Scampy's gaze.

Scampy did not answer her, but anxiously twisted the tail of her tea towel in her long-fingered hands.

'Please tell me, Scampy—why didn't he stay?'

Scampy's eyes darted from one side to the other in a rather shifty manner, then she stepped very close to Hermione and spoke in a whisper. 'Master Severus did not tell

Scampy why he did not stay, Miss.' Then, she did a rather odd thing—she reached inside her tea towel and produced Hermione's note from him. 'Scampy put this away so Master Severus could not take it back,' she confided.

Hermione let her fork drop with a clatter and snatched the note, holding it to her chest as if it were a favourite teddy. 'Thank you!' she said, her spirits lifting dramatically. 'Help me dress, Scampy—I have things to do!'

The door opened and Madam Pomfrey entered the room. 'Sitting up and eating solid food—you're ever so much better today!' she said cheerfully. 'Another day of your potions and bed rest and you'll be as good as new!'

'No!' Hermione cried. 'Please, I can't stay here for another day! I have things to do—important things!'

Madam Pomfrey's expression became very serious. 'If I must, Hermione, I'll put you under the Restraining Spell to compel you to obey me, but if you'll behave, there is no reason why you cannot talk with visitors or read books whilst you rest today.' She withdrew her wand and raised her eyebrows. 'What shall it be?'

Hermione's face fell; she most wanted to get dressed and go to find Severus, but she certainly *did not* want to encounter the Restraining Spell again. 'I'll stay in bed,' she said.

'I'll have your witch's word on it, if you please,' the matron said.

'Yes ma'am,' she said glumly, 'but how much longer? Do you think I might be well enough to go after lunch?'

The matron picked up the first of Hermione's potions from the bedside table and passed it to her. 'We'll see,' she said noncommittally, watching like a hawk as her patient swallowed the brew. 'We'll just have to see.'

Never had a day dragged so. It was true that her friends from the DA came by in groups, but Madam Pomfrey's rule of fifteen-minute visits persisted, so no one stayed for very long. In between visits, Hermione read and re-read her note from Severus, studying the familiar handwriting as if she were translating an assignment for Ancient Runes; what he said was clear enough, certainly—but what did he *mean*?

In the quiet moments, she still found herself drifting into sleep, though her naptimes were becoming shorter and shorter. Time was creeping along, yes—but she was getting stronger, and soon she would be well enough to do as she wished.

Severus entered his quarters wearily and pushed the door closed. After another entire day spent in the company of the Aurors whose job it was to mop up the end of the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, Severus wanted nothing more than a liberal glass of Firewhisky and to sleep. He had no further worry that he might go after the girl in a fit of drunken mawkishness; she was no longer his concern. Every time she had crossed his mind all day, he had recited this fact to himself: *The girl is no longer my problem.* That repetition had undoubtedly done the trick. He was a man of intelligence with great powers of self-discipline; he had only to grasp the complexities of a situation with his logical mind to be able to act rationally.

'The girl is no longer my problem,' he informed the crystal decanter before pouring a glass of smoking liquor.

Scampy left the room with the remains of Hermione's dinner tray, passing Madam Pomfrey on the way in.

'Please, ma'am,' Hermione began immediately. 'I feel perfectly fine—please let me go.'

Madam Pomfrey looked at her critically and cast a series of diagnostic spells before standing back at last with her arms crossed over her chest. 'If you can stand up and dress yourself without falling on your face, I'll release you,' she said.

Hermione threw the bedclothes aside and stood on the cold floor in her bare feet, surreptitiously steadying herself with a hand on the bedstead. 'I can do it!' she said fiercely, squatting to retrieve her bag from beneath the bed.

Madam Pomfrey did not answer, but sat down to watch her efforts.

Hermione had not failed to use her time of confinement wisely; she had discovered from Professor Vector that Professor Snape had spent the day again closeted with the Ministry officials in a large conference room on the ground floor. She went first to this room, but found it empty of everyone save the house-elves who were tidying up the mass of teacups and litter of sandwich and biscuit crumbs littering the tabletops.

Undaunted, she hitched her bag further on her shoulder and marched up seven flights of stairs to the headmaster's office, where she used the information she had extracted from Professor Flitwick on his visit to her sickbed: 'Pepper Imps!' she said to the gargoyle guarding the stairway.

The headmaster bade her enter when she knocked upon the stout wooden door, and she did so rather energetically.

'Sir,' she said impetuously, forgetting to greet the old man, 'might I borrow your Pensieve for a little while? I'll take great care of it, I promise you.'

'Hermione!' Dumbledore said, rising to his feet and smiling at her bouncy manner. 'I'm so very glad to see you up and about.'

Hermione smiled at him. 'Thank you!' she said. 'I'm fine now.'

Dumbledore turned to the cabinet behind his desk and opened it, bending to retrieve the Pensieve from its place. Hermione watched with great attention as the headmaster lifted silvery strands of memory from the Pensieve and replaced them one by one with a touch of his wand to his temple.

That task complete, the headmaster conjured a large purple canvas bag, embroidered all over in colourful thread with symbols such as those etched about the lip of the great stone Pensieve. He then fitted the Pensieve into the bag and held out the bag straps to Hermione.

'I don't like to shrink it, for fear of impairing its magical capacity,' he told her, 'but I have placed a Weightlessness Charm on it to make it easier to carry.'

Hermione thanked him again and took the bag, which felt as if it were empty, although she could clearly see the outline of the great stone Pensieve bulging through purple canvas.

'Hermione,' the headmaster said tentatively, 'may I ask what your plans are, now that the *Eternus Perturbatio* Curse has been lifted?'

Hermione blinked. 'My plans?' she repeated stupidly. What was the headmaster talking about?

'I hope you won't think me tactless for speaking of it,' Dumbledore said, 'but I know you will want to make the transition as easy as possible for everyone involved.'

Hermione felt an unfamiliar thump of anger towards the old man. 'Headmaster, who, in your opinion, is involved in my curse?' she said, forcing herself to sound polite.

'Very few people,' Dumbledore assured her gravely. 'I put a great deal of effort in making sure of that. Only I, Professor Snape, and you were involved in the situation; I later informed Professor McGonagall.'

'And for which of us do you anticipate an uneasy transition?' Hermione inquired tightly, feeling the tide of anger swelling in her breast, making it difficult to breathe easily.

'Only for you and Professor Snape, I would think,' Dumbledore admitted.

Hermione's chin lifted, a sign which Harry and Ron—or Severus, for that matter—would have recognised as a warning; the headmaster, however, did not know her well enough to judge its significance. She demanded tersely, 'Do you really believe it is your business, sir, how Professor Snape and I make this transition?'

Dumbledore frowned and spread his hands as if his words were self-evident. 'Hermione, you are an intelligent young witch. Surely it cannot have escaped your notice that your professor has grown inappropriately fond of you?'

'Inappropriate?' she whispered, appalled by his word choice.

'Certainly,' he replied strongly. 'I have reminded him of the promise he made when this began, to let you go once the curse was over. It is only fair for you to let him go, as well, my dear.'

Hermione stared across the desk at the wizard she had revered since she was eleven years old. She had sometimes questioned his good judgment in permitting Harry the amount of license he had done through their early years at school, but she had *never* doubted his ultimate wisdom in all matters. When she spoke to him, it was in clipped, precise tones.

'Let me make myself perfectly clear, Professor Dumbledore,' she said, her voice sounding unnaturally loud to her in the silence of the room. 'I am in love with Severus Snape, and I am convinced that he is in love with me. I don't care what sort of promise you may have extracted from him about *me* without my knowledge or consent, but I promise you this: If you attempt to interfere between us now, I will make you sincerely regret it.'

Unable to look at the startled old man for one moment longer, Hermione turned from him and strode to his office door. 'And sir,' she added as she passed through the doorway, 'if you doubt my abilities to do so, I suggest you speak to Rita Skeeter or Dolores Umbridge.'

Hermione skipped down the revolving staircase and set out with hurried steps for the dungeons, the temerity of her actions reverberating through her; she did not hear Albus Dumbledore as he murmured, 'Merlin help poor Severus.'

Severus was sitting in his customary leather wingchair and drinking his second tumbler of Firewhisky when the wooden door of his chambers opened with such violence that he started and slopped drink on his shirtfront. Hermione Granger, looking rather pink-cheeked and healthy for someone as impaired as she was reputed to be, entered his sitting room and kicked the door closed behind her.

Clearly, he had been remiss in not changing the password to his quarters.

He did not bother to stand in greeting; she was, after all, no longer his problem. 'Lost, Miss Granger?' he snarled.

'Hiding, Professor Snape?' she riposted crisply, her brown eyes blazing.

He sneered, determined not to demonstrate to her how her loveliness rattled him. She was not his and never had been. He had no more right to think of her as he did than he had to think of any student in that manner.

'Do me the courtesy of collecting your possessions and removing them from my rooms,' he said, rising, his tone cold and remote. 'I do not want you or any of your belongings here when I return.'

Turning from her, he passed out of the sitting room into his private brewing room and closed the door behind him. He leant heavily upon the nearby work surface, his eyes closed, his fingers curling around to grasp the edge of the table. His heart pounded in his chest, and the drink he had imbibed muddled his mind muzzily.

'The girl is no longer my problem,' he muttered experimentally, but neither the relief nor the assurance he had felt when saying the words earlier in the day came to him; he simply felt sick with a desperate need to walk back through the door and enfold her in his arms.

It seemed a very long time had passed before the door opened and the girl entered, wearing the garish green satin dressing gown he had allowed her to wear the very first night she had been in his rooms; he closed his eyes against the sight, struggling not to remember how naked she was beneath the garment.

'Don't,' he croaked, abandoning all pretence of strength and determination.

'You don't,' she replied, her tone implying loving exasperation.

He opened his eyes again, and she reached to peel his fingers from the tabletop. 'Come with me,' she said quietly. 'I have something to show you.'

He suppressed a groan as he permitted her to tug him back into the sitting room. He had hoped to blast her out of the dungeon with icy indifference, but it appeared he was going to be forced to reason with her, instead.

Merlin help him.

'Why didn't you come to see me?' she asked, nudging him to sit upon the sofa and then seating herself beside him.

'I've been busy,' he muttered.

'Why?' she persisted.

He sighed and expelled air noisily. 'There is no point in prolonging the inevitable,' he said flatly. 'The Dark Lord is gone, the curse is ended—you have no further need of my services.'

'Severus,' she breathed, and he was forced to turn his face and to look at her. 'You know I love you,' she went on inexorably, her eyes boring into his, 'and I know you love me. What are you talking about?'

'The curse,' he replied wearily. 'The Dark Lord is dead, the curse is ended, and so is our association. It's not so hard to comprehend,' he added, trying for his usual nastiness, but to his own ears, he sounded merely grouchy.

She reached into the pocket of the over-large dressing gown and withdrew the thrice-cursed note he had penned to her just days before. How could he have been such a fool?

'You love me,' she reiterated fluttering the parchment at him.

'I thought I was going to die,' he snapped. 'A man says things when he's going to die that he wouldn't otherwise say.'

She bridled. 'Are you saying that I'm worth dying for but not worth *living* for?' she demanded dangerously.

Her challenge rankled him. 'I'm not supposed to *be* here!' he shouted, standing and rounding on her. 'I was supposed to die making sure Potter had his chance at the Dark

Lord—it has been my only priority these last seventeen years!

The girl sat forward, her eyes strangely intent. 'Do you mean to say that you have lived these last years believing you would *d*ie when Voldemort did?'

Severus shrugged, turning from the intensity of her eyes. 'It was not an issue until the Dark Lord returned, but from that time, yes: It was understood that I would spy for the Order until such time as my usefulness was at an end.'

She surged to her feet, tugging at his sleeve until he turned back to face her. 'You mean until Voldemort killed you for betraying him!' she cried.

The mixture of hot indignation and compassion in her demeanour very nearly unmanned him; he jerked his sleeve from her fingers and stepped away from her, his ugliest sneer upon his face. 'I do not expect a silly little girl to understand such matters,' he said scathingly.

She glared up into his face, her breath coming in angry pants. 'Are you saying that you wrote this note—' she fluttered the damn thing at him again 'because you thought you'd never see me again?'

He bared his crooked yellow teeth at her in the parody of a smile. 'Precisely,' he grated.

As he watched her, she slowly cocked her head to one side, and a smile stole over her lips. 'Just stop,' she said softly.

He opened his mouth to annihilate her, but she turned from him and went to stand beside the coffee table, where the headmaster's Pensieve rested.

She drew herself up to stand straight and looked him directly in the eyes. 'I am in love with you, Severus,' she said clearly. 'You've been in my mind; you know it's true.' She lifted the incriminating note and held it up. 'You are in love with me; I know it's true. All we have to do is decide how we're going to proceed, now that the war is at an end, and we're free to make plans.'

He looked at her, with her unfortunate hair and her generally unremarkable features, and knew she was not a beautiful woman, yet she was the loveliest creature on earth in his eyes. The effort to send her away as he had promised to do was the most difficult thing he had ever attempted. He would rather have stood against the Dark Lord ten more times than try to convince Hermione Granger that he did not want her.

Drawing a ragged breath, he spoke in his most reasonable tones. 'The curse brought us into unnaturally intimate association with one another,' he said. 'It is only natural that you should believe yourself attached to me, under such circumstances, but you'll see, Hermione—the longer we are apart, the more the feelings will fade, until they are only a distant memory to you.' Dear Merlin, he hoped that would be true.

She extended a hand to him. 'I have something to share with you,' she said. 'Will you view a memory with me, please?'

He frowned, ignoring her hand. 'I cannot see the point,' he said firmly. 'It will be best if you will take your things and go.'

'This is really important to me—please.'

Moments ticked past; at last, he sighed and stepped over to stand beside her. 'Very well,' he said wearily. 'What memory are we viewing?'

'This is the night of my abduction,' she replied. 'Come along.'

She grasped his hand, and he felt the contact like an electric current travelling up his arm, flooding his nervous system with a riot of impulses—but then, they were bending to touch their faces to the surface of memory and tumbling into a dark November night.

They stood just beneath the canopy of branches at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, watching Hermione walking toward Hagrid's hut.

'Is that the Mudblood?' a coarse voice inquired, and Severus turned to see the Lestrage brothers beside Antonin Dolohov.

'It is,' Dolohov said. 'Take her, quickly!'

Rodolphus Lestrage cast a Full Body-Bind and the girl fell headlong.

'I thought you didn't remember the night of your abduction,' Severus said, looking down at her.

'Voldemort modified my memory,' she said. 'When I woke up in the Hospital Wing, after he died, I remembered what had happened—his Memory Charm ended.'

The Forbidden Forest blurred around them and slowly resolved into the Malfoy dining room; the girl was being revived by Wormtail. She opened her eyes and cried out in fear to find herself surrounded by a coterie of cloaked and masked Death Eaters.

A cold high voice pierced the room, silencing all but Hermione, who continued to sob in fear. 'What have you brought to Lord Voldemort, Antonin?' the Dark Lord asked, walking into the room with Bellatrix clinging to his arm.

Severus shuddered to see his late Master alive again, and the girl turned her attention from her memory and wrapped her arms about his waist, pressing her cheek to his upper arm. 'It's horrible to see him again, but he *is* dead,' she murmured to him. 'You and Harry killed him—he's *gone*, Severus.'

He struggled to free his arm, where it was trapped between her body and his; she loosened her grip on him so he could move, and he wrapped the arm about her, pulling her against him, reciprocating her warm embrace.

'I bring Potter's Mudblood, My Lord,' Dolohov said, bowing deeply.

The Dark Lord turned his eerie red eyes on his old school friend. 'I believe I asked for Dumbledore,' he said icily.

Dolohov flushed a nasty brick colour. 'My Lord, we have had no opportunity to even come close to Dumbledore! But we were able to Apparate to the outer edges of the Forbidden Forest and make our way through the forest, over the school boundary, as far as the gamekeeper's house.'

The Dark Lord waved the Death Eaters back and walked in a broad circle around the sobbing girl. 'How am I to use this Mudblood to punish Dumbledore?' he demanded waspishly, his displeasure causing the Death Eaters to draw even farther from him. 'Can none of you complete a task properly?'

Bellatrix Lestrage, dressed in a diaphanous black negligee with an obscenely low décolletage, glided to the Dark Lord and stood upon her tiptoes to whisper in his ear. Her crimson, dagger-like fingernails slid suggestively down the front of his robes, openly caressing him, unmindful of the sickened faces of the room's occupants. His Lordship's frightening laugh echoed amongst his followers.

'Have I not always said you were born to be Lady Voldemort?' the Dark Lord purred, lazily flicking one of Bella's nipples, clearly visible through the transparent garment she wore.

'My Lord!' Bellatrix cried, her eyes wild with need.

'Soon,' he promised, flicking the other nipple. 'For now, clear the room for me.'

Bellatrix turned like a virago on the Death Eaters cowering against the walls. 'Did you not hear Our Lord?' she demanded shrewishly. 'Clear out! Give us the room!'

In a swirl of black cloaks, the Dark Lord's followers gladly left, and Bellatrix fell to her knees, nuzzling her Lord's genital area. 'May I, My Lord?' she begged.

'What you may do, Bellatrix, is put the Mudblood into an enchanted sleep and then curse her. It wouldn't do for her to see Lord Voldemort after she is cursed, would it?' The Dark Lord smiled his cruel, lipless smile at the dark-haired witch.

Bellatrix lunged to her feet and drew her wand. 'I would kill her first!' she cried.

'You will obey me,' the Dark Lord told her mercilessly. 'If I desire you to curse ten witches and bring them to me for imprinting, you will do so—will you not, Bella?'

A tortured sob was wrenched from Bellatrix. 'Yes, my Lord!' she agreed pathetically.

'Then do as I bid you, Bella; I have an owl to send to Dumbledore.' The Dark Lord turned and swept out of the room, leaving Bellatrix alone with Hermione.

The Death Eater turned to the sobbing girl and with a mighty sweep of her wand, she said, *Quiesco!*

The room blurred and in the next moment, Severus stood again upon the sitting room floor, hand-in-hand with Hermione. He blinked and stared down into her face; she gazed up at him expectantly.

'Bellatrix cursed you?' he said.

'Yes,' she answered simply. 'And Voldemort modified my memory so I would think he had done it—to make it seem worse, I suppose.'

Her lips were parted as she looked up at him, and he wanted so badly to taste her sweet mouth, knowing the horror of seeing the Dark Lord alive again would be washed away by the purity of Hermione.

Wrenching his eyes from her, he released her hand and stepped away. 'I appreciate this additional information,' he said courteously. 'I'll be sure the appropriate authorities are informed ...'

She pursued him, grasping his shirt in her fists. 'Don't you understand?' she said, giving him a little shake. 'The last time we made love—the last *three* times we made love!—I was no longer under the curse, Severus!'

He glared down his nose at her, trying not to notice how very much of the curve of her breasts he could see in the loosely belted dressing gown. 'Of what, exactly, are you accusing me?' he hissed.

'I am telling you that I wanted you so much without the benefit of the curse that you had to fuck me three times just to make me leave you alone!' she cried, and her indignation lent strength to her arms as she pushed him into a sprawl upon the sofa. He struggled to right himself, but froze in his tracks as she shrugged out of the dressing gown and stood before him, naked and golden in the candlelight.

He stared at her, want of her drowning his promise to Dumbledore in a tsunami of indifference. He struggled feebly to remember that promise—never had he allowed his own desires to overrule his duty!—but for the first time in his life he felt an emotion which dwarfed his devotion to Albus Dumbledore, and he found that he had no will to stand against it.

Wordlessly, Hermione knelt upon the floor at his feet, her hands busy at this waist. Dumbfounded, he watched her unclasp his belt, unfasten the placket of his trousers, and draw his pants out and down until his cock and bollocks were free of constraint. She stroked one hand down the shaft of his erection, her other hand cupping, lifting, and gently rolling his balls in their sac.

'Hermione!' he gasped.

She answered with a smile, pumping her fist slowly up and down, then up and down again. 'This relationship has been too much about me for too long,' she said, her voice husky. 'I really want to taste ...'

She dipped her head and for the second time in one week he felt the bliss of her lips closing over the knob of his cock. He gasped again, but formed no intelligible words, simply allowing his head to fall back on the sofa, feeling as if his eyes were rolling back in their sockets. Holy fuck!

Her tongue swirled slowly over his cock head as she applied gentled suction, then her mouth began to slide with exquisite leisure down his length, and the hand which grasped him travelled ahead of her mouth, as if blazing the way to his bollocks. Her other hand moved to lay flat upon his hip before sliding upward, beneath his shirt; her fingertip invaded his navel just as the tip of his cock touched the back of her throat, and his hands closed convulsively over the sofa cushions as he fought the impulse to thrust.

Now her mouth began the slow trip back up his shaft, the hand which followed applying perfect pressure in its wake; the hand beneath his shirt charted a course to the flat disc of his nipple, her thumb and forefinger giving the nub the tiniest of pinches before sliding across to repeat the process. The hand upon his chest was nice, but oh dear *Merlin*, the mouth on his cock trumped everything.

Her tongue swirled once, twice, thrice, and he emitted a strangled groan, striving for some measure of control. Tentatively, he laced the fingers of one hand in her hair, and she moaned deep in her throat, sending a mind-blowing vibration down the length of his erection. Instinct wrested control from him, and he thrust shallowly into her mouth; she approved this action so whole-heartedly that the questing hand deserted his chest and clamped upon his hip, as if to urge him more deeply into her incredible mouth.

An intense few minutes passed with him slowly fucking her mouth, alternating between staring down disbelievingly at his cock moving slickly between her lips and throwing his head back, eyes closed, his fingertips splayed over her cheeks and her upper throat, feeling her muscles work as she sucked him.

Some measure of sanity came slowly back to him, and he reached down insistently, closing his hands over her shoulders and tugging until she let his cock loose with a *pop*, her out-of-focus gaze as much a goad to him as the greedy little tongue which swept over her lower lip, as if to taste his cock again.

'Bed,' he croaked to her, urging until she moved unsteadily to her feet, and he followed suit, prodding her to begin walking and following her into the bedroom, holding up his clothes with one hand.

The wanton looked over her shoulder at him, deliberately showing him her tongue again, making a licking motion. He released his clothing and let the pants and trousers fall to the floor; he stepped out of them, unbuttoning his shirt as he went, his slick, bobbing cock leading the way to the inviting orifices of his tormentor. Her passion-muzzy eyes dared him as she scrambled up onto his bed, and she paused on all fours, the pink of her inner lips glistening amidst the dark curls. With an inchoate utterance, he lurched forward and buried his nose and mouth in the pink, nuzzling, licking, suckling, as she squirmed and moaned, simultaneously pressing back to fill his mouth with her nectar and wriggling away, requiring him to pursue, until he immobilised her with the strength of the fingers digging into her hips. He did not release her until she cried out, the sound he knew so well he heard it in his sleep; he pressed a final kiss to her clitoris and climbed properly onto the bed, pulling her along until she sagged at his side, sated and smug.

He moved over her, fastening his mouth to hers, his hands at her breasts, and she responded immediately, lacing her fingers in his hair, parting her thighs to accommodate him, and lifting her hips to take him within, moaning her appreciation into his mouth. He filled her, releasing her lips and grasping the bedstead, staring down into her face as he pumped in and out of her body. Her eyes were wide, her mouth a perfect 'o' of pleasure, her breaths panting. He drank in the sight of her abandon, knowing without a shadow of a doubt that *this* passion existed for his sake, and for no other reason, the empowerment of this knowledge driving him deeper into her body,

eliciting from her now little whimpers of pleasure with each snap of his hips.

'Tell me,' she begged, raising her hands to frame his face.

'Tell *me*,' he responded in a growl, ruthlessly rotating his hips, the tip of his cock stroking up one side of her vaginal wall.

'I love you!' she gasped, her fingernails digging into his back, and she arched her neck, her eyes scrunched closed, her mouth opened in a soundless scream.

With an almighty spasm, he let loose a guttural cry of completion, continuing to move over her body until utter exhaustion caused him to drop at her side, sweating and heaving. For several seconds he strove to calm his breathing, feeling as if he had just set the stars alight in the heavens for her delectation.

When he opened his eyes, she watched him with brown eyes alight with wonder. Jubilation overcoming his enervation, he pulled her against his sweat-covered body and kissed her as if for the last time ... as if for the first time.

'I love you,' he said and held her against his heart as she cried her happiness into his flesh, his own tears mingling with the sweat which traced down his angular face.

When she woke up, she found she had burrowed close beneath his arm, her nose all but buried between his armpit and his chest wall. She could not prevent the ghosting of her lips over his flesh, and his grunt of protest informed her that he was not asleep.

He murmured and the candles about the bed were lit; she raised herself up on an elbow and looked down into his beloved face, noting the overlarge hook of his nose, the sensual curve of his lips, and the unending night of his eyes. She cupped his cheek and kissed his mouth softly, chastely. 'Mine,' she said, stroking her thumb over his stubbled cheek.

One side of his mouth quirked up in a smile.

'I think, for the sake of our relative positions, I should stay in the Head Girl's quarters until the end of Summer Term,' she said, smoothing his oily hair back from his forehead.

His eyes remained fastened upon her face, moving from her mouth to her eyes to the shadow of the cleft between her breasts, then back to her eyes again; he did not speak.

'After the students go home for the summer, I can move in properly,' she went on, stroking his flanks, watching the changes in his eyes as she touched him. 'I reckon I can take you home to meet my parents the week after term time ends—they probably won't be too happy about me living with you, but meeting you will help them not to worry quite so much.'

He continued watching her, as she spoke; when she mentioned her parents' probable discomfort with her living arrangements, one wicked eyebrow rose interrogatively. Still, he said nothing.

'Well, of course they're going to object, at first, but they'll come round—everyone will come round, when they see how happy we are together.' She smiled happily down into his face, and the crinkling of the lines at the corners of his eyes was his only response to her. It was enough—it was more than enough. She bent her head to him and her lips touched his, her tongue tickling the corner of his mouth until he parted his lips to allow her full access. He lay quiescent within her arms and allowed her to kiss and caress him, soaking up the affection like a sponge. At last, she trailed a hand down his belly and encountered his hardening member.

'You liked it when I sucked you, didn't you?' she whispered, lightly stroking him.

He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and drew her hand from beneath the bedclothes to his lips; he held her hand as if it were quite fragile and kissed it.

'We can't do this,' he whispered, and the anguish in his eyes was very real.

Hermione felt cold fear in her lower abdomen. 'Of course we can,' she whispered back.

His hand stroked her hair tenderly back from her face. 'You're too young—I'm too old—it would be wrong on so many different levels, Hermione.'

She sat up abruptly, her heart beginning to flop about unpleasantly in her chest, as if having difficulty remembering how to beat properly.

'Stop,' she said, her throat hurting terribly as she tried to speak past the lump forming there. 'Don't—you're scaring me.'

'I would be the worst of bad men to allow you to throw yourself away on me,' he told her gently, moving now to sit up as well.

Hermione stared into his implacable black eyes and knew he was deadly serious about what he was saying. Tears started to her eyes—what was she to do with him?

You'll know when the time comes, the voice whispered in her ear.

She touched the Nexus with her fingertips and it became visible, dangling between her breasts like a finely wrought silver baby's rattle. Severus' eyes darted to her chest as she touched the Nexus, and she was fairly sure she read alarm in his expression.

'You gave this Nexus to me when you took my virginity,' she said, taking his hand and bringing it to her breast, where his fingertips touched hers upon the surface of the heavy pendant. 'It was the greatest gift you could conceive of—an ancient magical item in which to store my virgin's blood—a token with which I could make a lifelong commitment with the wizard of my choice at the time of my choice.'

She moved up onto her knees, kneeling over him; he removed his fingers from the Nexus, looking as if he would very much like to remove himself from the bed, but Hermione wrapped her fingers now about his wrist.

'Will you not kneel with me to hear what I have to say?' she asked him, sounding more confident than she felt, the fingertips of her right hand holding the Nexus.

Swallowing audibly, Severus shifted into a kneeling position, facing her upon the bed where he had taken her virginity.

'Severus Snape,' she said, feeling the words forming in her mind, but having no idea from whence they came, 'I offer you my commitment to our love, bound by the magic of this blood-consecrated vessel, to encompass all our interactions and the lives of our children, until such time as our vow is broken by death or design. What say you?'

Never had she seen him so open, his eyes unshuttered, twin pools of liquid ebony, shining in the candlelight; his expression was awe and admiration, foreboding and faith, despair and desire, all at once.

'I say that your offer humbles and amazes me ... and catches me a bit by surprise,' he said quietly. 'May I entreat you to give me time to consider? It is, you will admit, a weighty decision, not to be made lightly.'

Hermione threw herself into his arms, and he received her with all signs of gladness, dipping his head to capture her lips in a kiss. He had not said 'no'—he had not spoken of age and unworthiness—he had not laughed or turned her away. She communicated her happiness with the ardour of her kiss, and he, in turn, communicated his reciprocation with the hunger of his response, pressing her back onto their pillows and visiting every one of his favourite places on her body with lips and fingers seemingly made all the more wicked by their mutual craving. When he plunged again into her body, it was with a wordless ferocity which quickly carried her beyond herself; only the

touch of her flesh to his anchored them to one another, until at last they floated as fellow fragments in the aftermath, and thence, into sleep.

When morning came, Hermione woke with a smile upon her lips, which persisted as she searched for him through the empty rooms, not finding him in the bathroom, the sitting room, or the brewing room. She was standing in the bedroom, frowning at the empty wardrobe, when Winky popped into the room and handed her the note, inscribed with only her name, in his spiky black handwriting.

Chapter 28: The Love You Make

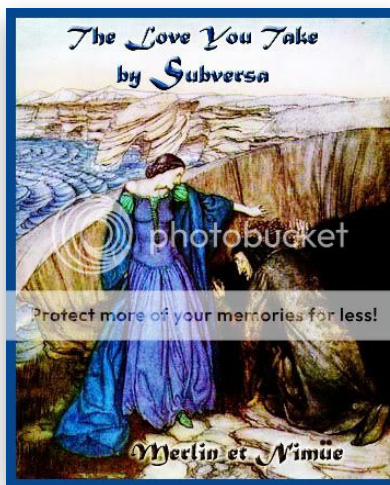
Chapter 28 of 28

Now Complete! ~Winner Rd 3 Quill to Parchment for Best Fanon Het, Best AU, Best WIP!~ Hermione is cursed by the Death Eaters, and Dumbledore believes Professor Snape is the only one who can help her and keep her safe. Hermione is 18 years old in this story, but she is still a student. h

A/N: Beta-reading thanks for this chapter go to DeeMichelle and AnnieTalbot, Brit-picking was done by MagicAlly, and, as always, Sshg316 held my hand and cheered all the way.

I can't tell you what a learning experience it has been to share this journey with you all. This began as a project to keep me busy until I got my Exchange prompt for last year! It was just a bit of PWP which had been bumping around in my mind for a year or two. In truth, I now understand that it was my therapy to get over DH, just as His Draught of Delicate Poison was my therapy to get over HBP. When JKR hurts my feelings, I retreat into AU, and really, that is where I most like to be in my fanfic writing.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for all of your reviews. I have been terribly lax about answering them, but I have read each and every one with true enjoyment.



The Love You Take

Chapter 28: The Love You Make

Hermione moved through the remainder of the Summer Term as one in a dream. She attended her classes, she completed her homework, she studied a set number of hours every day, and she lived for the letters she received from Severus by owl post.

His note to her upon quitting Hogwarts had been warm, snarky, sexy, sardonic, and autocratic...very much like the man himself. The Ministry of Magic had requested the assistance of Severus Snape in the preparation of the cases against the Death Eaters who had been captured and were waiting to stand trial. Severus had taken the opportunity to away to London, insisting that his absence would serve a number of purposes, chief amongst them the fact that he could not remain in the castle without having her in his bed, and he felt that it would be wrong for them to continue as they had done now that the necessity no longer existed. In addition, she would be better able to concentrate on preparing for her N.E.W.T.Ss without the distraction of his presence...and admittedly, it would be an opportunity for her to gauge how her feelings for him would hold up during an extended separation. He assured her that he anticipated no change in *his* feelings, but he felt that it was, in his words, 'only fair' for Hermione to be given the chance to see if her attachment would hold up in his absence.

Professor Dumbledore had taken over Severus' classes, as well as assumed the duties as Head of Slytherin House. A number of the older Slytherins, as well as those from the families of known Death Eaters, had failed to return to school after the Easter holidays. The headmaster had, in a public statement at breakfast on the first day of classes after the fall of Voldemort, admonished the students to make no assumptions regarding their classmates' reasons for not returning to school. The war had taken a toll on everyone in the wizarding world, and each family would deal with the fallout in its own way.

Hermione wrote to Severus daily, telling him everything that happened to her each day, assuring him of the endurance of her affections, and beseeching him to return as soon as possible. He replied to her every second or third day, commenting upon her news and giving her scant information regarding his activities, saying simply that he was working as a consultant for Magical Law Enforcement, carrying out the duties assigned to him. In typical Severus style, he did not encourage her to continue telling him about every day in minute detail.

I state under threat of enforcement that if you wish to actually have me read your missives, you must refrain from regaling me with the puling minutiae of the personal lives of your friends. My interest ends before the first detail is transcribed, I assure you.

Tell me instead of the gossip regarding my former colleagues, whom I greatly love to mock...and of course, I am always entirely fascinated by the workings of your convoluted mind, my dear delight.

After the first few weeks without him, Hermione began to realise that he was not coming back any time soon. At that point, she resolved to enjoy her last term at Hogwarts, and she threw herself into every activity, even going so far as to scream herself hoarse at the last Quidditch match of the season, in which Gryffindor defeated Ravenclaw by an enormous margin and won the Quidditch Cup.

On the night of the final Leaving Feast, she sat between Harry and Ron, reminiscing about all their years at school. It was easy to laugh with her friends, knowing that on the morrow she would board the Hogwarts Express and return to London...where a Floo trip from the Leaky Cauldron would deliver her safely to the Atrium of the Ministry of Magic ... and thence to her love.

Everyone loved surprises, didn't they?

Hermione moved wide-eyed through the second level corridor of the Ministry of Magic, her heart pounding, anticipation coiled in her tummy. She was mere minutes away from seeing Severus again, after over two months of missing him desperately. How would his face look when he saw her? Would he smile that rare smile she loved so well? Would they embrace? Kiss?

She saw the doorway leading into the Aurors' office, and she paused for a moment to press her hands to her cheeks and to take steadying breaths.

'Hermione?'

She whirled to see Tonks, standing with a stack of parchment clutched to her chest, her violet hair spiking in every direction.

'Hermione!' she cried again with genuine gladness and rushed forward to give her a one-armed hug. 'You look terrific! You scared me at the battle, passing out like you did...I was so worried.'

Hermione returned Tonks' hug, laughing.

Tonks released her and stepped back. 'But what are you doing here?'

Hermione spoke softly, as if conveying a great secret. 'I'm looking for Severus...do you know where he is?'

Tonks gaped at her. 'For *Severus*? But why? Do you have a message for him from Dumbledore?'

'No!' Hermione replied, knowing she was flushing and feeling annoyed about it. 'I want to see him...to ... to ask him to dinner,' she finished lamely.

'To dinner?' Tonks repeated, as if Hermione were speaking a foreign language. 'Is Molly cooking dinner for everyone tonight?'

'No! I mean, I'm sure she *is* cooking dinner at the Burrow, but *I'm* not going there...I meant to invite Severus to have dinner with me here, in town.'

'Like on a *date*?' Tonks could not have been more incredulous had Hermione announced her intention to court the Giant Squid.

'Yes!' Hermione flared. 'Good God, Tonks, you act as if a woman never asked a man out before. I know good and well *you* asked Remus out first. What's so surprising? Don't you think Severus *wants* to go out with me?'

'No! I mean, I don't know,' Tonks amended, seeing the stormy look on Hermione's face. 'I don't think Snape wants to go out with anyone, frankly. He's an irritable git...he'll just try to humiliate you if you ask him out, Hermione.'

'Well, that's my problem, then, not yours. Where is he?' Hermione asked, her patience waning.

'He's not here,' Tonks said.

Hermione felt a sinking sensation where the bubble of anticipation had been. 'But where is he?'

Tonks shrugged. 'On the continent, I think...he's been spending a lot of time in Belgium, gathering evidence for the Leclercq woman's trial.'

'For *Morgen*?' Hermione gasped. 'Is he trying to help her defence?'

Tonks snorted. 'No! Morgen Leclercq has been slinging mud at Severus so much that it's amazing none of it has stuck! No, he's working to put her away in Azkaban for life.'

'But he never *told* me he was travelling out of the country,' Hermione protested, disappointment adding a whinge to her tone. 'We write constantly ...'

Tonks interrupted her. 'So *you're* the one he keeps getting owls from!' She laughed. 'Remus tried teasing him about it, but it didn't go down well.'

Hermione's face cleared. 'That's right! He's staying at Grimmauld Place with you and Remus! I can go there to wait for him!'

But Tonks was shaking her head emphatically. 'No, he and Remus didn't get along at all...so Remus and I got our own place, and Snape did the same. I don't know where he's staying now.'

Hermione stomped her foot in frustration. 'That man!' she fumed. 'Trying to pin him down is like trying to nail jelly to the wall!'

Tonks gave her a rueful grin. 'But he's been answering your owls,' she said musingly. 'I would have bet against him even doing that, Hermione.' She leant confidentially nearer. 'Why? Why do you want to go out with Snape?'

Hermione withdrew imperceptibly; she couldn't confide in Tonks about the curse and the time they had spent as lovers...she had to protect Severus. 'You don't know him,' she said simply. 'No one does. If you did ...' She shrugged and sighed. 'I had really hoped to see him today.'

Seemingly touched by her sad tone, Tonks laid a hand on her arm. 'Do you need a place to stay tonight?' she asked. 'Remus and I would be happy to put you up on the sitting room sofa.'

Hermione shook her head. 'Thanks, Tonks, but I'll just go home...I know my parents are anxious to see me.'

The girls said good-bye, and Hermione trudged back down the corridor she had traversed earlier with such anticipation, wanting to cry. She entered the lift with the lavender paper airplanes and rode to the Atrium, from which she Disapparated home.

Using her key to open the back garden door, Hermione entered the kitchen. 'Mum? Dad?'

With cries of greeting, her parents descended upon her with hugs and kisses, and with her mother's arms around her, she finally gave way to the threatening tears.

'Hermione!' her mother said in surprise, gathering her closer and stroking her hair. 'What's wrong, poppet?'

'Oh, Mum,' she whispered, 'there's this man ...'

Severus responded to Hermione's attempt to see him with a bothersome lack of enthusiasm.

I cannot fault you this time, for you were unaware, but let me assure you that Slytherins do not appreciate surprises of that sort. I ask that you do me the courtesy of allowing me to decide when I am prepared to see you again. You must try to understand that the work I am doing now consumes all of my time and attention, and when we see one another again, I wish to provide our reunion with my undivided attention...unless you should undergo a change of sentiment, of which I hope you would apprise me with no delay.

For the time being, Petal, know that you are my Hope and my Reason.

As ever yours,

SS

Summer whiled away in a haze of warm, golden days, which Hermione spent alternately dreaming about her future with Severus and fuming over whether or not he would ever decide it was time for them to see one another again. He seemed determined to provide her with space she neither wanted nor needed, and even though she was annoyed with him, still, her sheer physical want of him eclipsed all. She lay awake in her bed at night, her hands now able to deliver some measure of relief from the ache in her quim, her thoughts saturated with memories of how he felt within her, how he smelled, sounded, tasted ... and looked. Dear Merlin, but the sight of him, lean and fit, lounging in their bed beside her, his midnight eyes glittering above his self-satisfied smirk, was such an erotic memory that she would soon drive herself to another peak, aching for him in her very bones.

The results of her N.E.W.T.s were delivered on Harry's birthday, whilst she and her friends lounged about in the Weasleys' back garden. Luna, Neville, and Lavender had been invited for Harry's party, to be held that evening, and the arrival of the five owls bearing the exam results created a moment of tense silence amongst them. Hermione stared at the official-looking envelope, remembering how anxious she had been upon the receipt of her O.W.L. results, and reflecting on her lack of anxiety this time around. Could it be that she finally felt as if she belonged? Was accepted? Had proved herself?

With a mental shrug, she joined the others in ripping open her exam results.

'Well?' Ginny and Luna inquired simultaneously; they were the only ones without N.E.W.T. results clutched in their hands.

'An O in Defence, E's in Charms, Transfiguration, Potions, and Herbology, and an A in Astronomy,' Harry said happily.

'An O in Divination!' Lavender exclaimed, ecstatic.

'Five passes!' Ron said.

'Me, too,' Neville agreed.

Six pairs of eyes turned to Hermione.

She grinned at them. 'Nine passes,' she said.

Harry leant over and snatched the parchment from her hand. 'You even got an Outstanding in Defence!' he said.

'Only because you taught me so well,' she assured him. 'We all did better in Defence because of the DA, Harry.'

The others nodded and murmured, and Hermione took her results back and folded them to stash in her pocket, already composing in her mind the letter she would write to Severus.

Harry and Ron sent their N.E.W.T. results in to the Auror Academy to complete their applications, but Hermione declined to join them. Although she had no intention of telling them so, she had already caught the only Dark wizard in whom she was interested, and she had no interest in chasing any others...she'd had enough of that to last a lifetime. She would have preferred to have things settled with Severus before she began job-hunting, but her pride would not permit her to admit it to anyone. She was not going to be one of those women who sat around, putting her life on hold whilst waiting for some man to pull his head out of his arse. With great determination, she began studying the brochures the Ministry had sent with her N.E.W.T. results, making lists and doing research into the career she wanted to pursue.

September first arrived, and with a pang, Hermione thought of all the children who would be crowding platform nine and three-quarters, setting off for their first adventure at Hogwarts. She realised this was the first year since she was a very little girl that she had not set out for school on the first day of September.

The morning of her nineteenth birthday dawned fair and bright, with only a touch of crispness to the air to remind her that autumn was upon them. She was sitting at breakfast with her parents when a large eagle owl swooped into the kitchen window, bearing an unwieldy package. Dropping its cargo into Hermione's lap, the bird turned without stopping and flew away again.

'One of your friends remembered your birthday,' her father remarked, rattling his newspaper.

Her mother watched her carefully. 'Is it from ...'

Hermione nodded, breaking the seal on the letter attached to the package.

Happy Birthday, Hermione.

Every successful young witch needs one of these, and you will be more successful than most.

As Ever Yours,

SS

Ripping the paper from the package, in a puff of the smell of the most expensive leather, Hermione found a butter-soft calfskin briefcase in a shade of brown which exactly matched her hair. She released the golden clasp engraved with her initials, to another puff of the leather scent, and stared down into the case to find a copy of the *Daily Prophet* and another envelope.

Curious, she withdrew the newspaper; it was today's edition, which she had not yet read. The top story was about the Ministry setting a date to honour the recipients of the Orders of Merlin to be awarded for distinguished service in the late war. The entire article had been circled in slashing red ink, with the date underlined: 31st October, 1998.

With trembling fingers, she opened the second envelope, unaware that both of her parents were watching her with bated breath.

May I solicit the honour of escorting you to the Ministry of Magic Gala on the evening of 31st October? If this is acceptable, I shall collect you at your residence at eight o'clock that evening.

Severus

When Hermione jumped from her seat and fled into the back garden with her letters and her briefcase, her mother and father exchanged a significant glance. When her squeal of delight reached their ears, they could not help but laugh.

That afternoon, Hermione was lolling about in her room, alternately reading from one of the books her parents had given her for her birthday and filling out job applications. She was surprised to hear a knock upon the front door and even more surprised when her mother called her down.

Glancing in the mirror to make sure she was presentable, she skipped lightly down the stairs, only to be arrested by the sight of Madam Tatiana Prince standing in her parents' entrance hall with her daughter, Eileen Snape, standing behind her.

'Ma'am!' Hermione gasped, starting forward with both hands held out.

'Hello, Hermione,' the old lady responded, grasping her hands and leaning forward to press a dry kiss to her cheek. 'Happy birthday.'

Thanking her, Hermione turned to offer her hand to Severus' mother, as well. 'How do you do, Mrs Snape?' she said with a friendly smile.

Turning to her parents, who waited expectantly behind her, Hermione said, 'Mum, Dad, these are Professor Snape's grandmother, Madam Prince, and mother, Mrs Snape.'

Turning back to the Severus' family members, she said, 'Madam Prince and Mrs Snape, allow me to introduce my parents, Richard and Leigh Granger.'

Everyone shook hands, and Hermione's mother invited everyone to sit in the lounge whilst she prepared tea. Moving into the lounge, Hermione wondered why on earth Severus' grandmother would have decided to come see her...for she knew that Mrs Snape was not the decision-maker of the two. Both of the ladies were dressed in Muggle suits, and they wore hats and gloves and carried boxy handbags, very much like the Queen...and like Neville's gran, only minus the stuffed-vulture hat!

They chatted about inconsequential things whilst waiting for the tea, with Mrs Snape speaking only when spoken to and otherwise staring down at her lap; Madam Prince, however, was ruling the conversation and taking in every detail of the Grangers' furnishings. At last, Hermione's mother returned with the tea service, and she pointedly directed Hermione to pour whilst she engaged the witches in polite chit-chat.

Performing the duties of hostess just as her mother had instructed her in her formative years, Hermione handed round the teacups and followed up with the delicate petit-fours which were only bought at the baker's for birthdays and holidays. At long last, Madam Prince opened her bag and withdrew a wrapped gift box, adorned with a large green satin bow.

'I have brought a birthday gift for you, Hermione,' she said, a slight smile upon her lips as she extended the offering. 'I understand that you are attending a formal gathering next month, and I thought it might come in handy.'

Hermione slipped the ribbon from the box and quickly rid it of the decorative paper. A jeweller's box was revealed, and when she snapped it open, she saw silver filigree earrings, set with garnets.

'The metal is white gold, so you need not fear that it will tarnish,' the old lady said, and Hermione knelt impetuously at her feet.

'Thank you, ma'am,' she said mistily. 'I'll wear them very proudly.'

Madam Prince placed a hand upon her hair, then bent to whisper in her ear. 'They were my very own, when I was about your age,' she murmured. 'It will make me very happy to have you use them.'

Soon after, the Prince women took their leave. At the doorway, the old lady turned to Hermione's parents and spoke in her most supercilious tones.

'Your daughter is an exceptionally fine girl,' she announced. 'I hope you are very proud of her.'

Assuring her that they were, the Grangers waved as their guests walked down the drive and only closed the door when Madam Prince and Mrs Snape had disappeared around the bend.

'What a frightening old woman,' her dad said, turning the lock on the door.

Hermione looked down at the garnet earrings and smiled. 'Dad, you have no idea,' she said.

On the first of October, Hermione began her job in the Wizengamot Administration Services as a Research Assistant. She had wanted a job with regular hours which would allow her to exercise her passion for library research, and Arthur Weasley had assured her that a position as a clerk for the Wizengamot was a springboard to just about any other department in the Ministry.

Accordingly, she moved in with Harry and Ron at Grimmauld Place, explaining to her parents that it would be much easier to commute from there than from home, but a large part of the truth was that three months at home was about her limit; she wanted some independence. Kreacher fussed over the three of them as if they were still at school, his new-found adoration for Harry seasoning his interactions with all of Harry's friends with fond respect.

The Wizengamot had spent the summer in continuous trials, and many Death Eaters, including Morgen, had been convicted of crimes and received life sentences, to be served in Azkaban. Hermione was proud to think that Severus had been instrumental in putting those Death Eaters in prison, but she missed him desperately, even so. She continued to watch out for him at the Ministry, but she never saw him there, and the few times she met up with Tonks, she didn't receive sufficiently specific information. According to Tonks, Severus had been 'around' occasionally, but not long enough to stay and chat. There were times when she suspected her friend of being in on a plot to keep her from the wizard she loved, but to be fair, the number one offender in that category was the wizard, himself. Still, Halloween was coming, and she would see him then.

She thought she might expire of expectation.

Halloween fell on a Saturday, so Hermione was able to sleep in on that day ... but she didn't. She couldn't. She felt almost sick with excitement. In twelve hours ... eleven ... ten ... she would see him again.

At eleven o'clock, Hermione was in her room, flipping through a magazine full of different hairstyles, still trying to decide how she would wear her hair that night. Unexpectedly, there was a knock upon her bedroom door, then Harry peeked around the doorjamb.

'I think you'd better come downstairs,' he told her, a huge grin on his face. 'If you don't, there might be elvish warfare in the entrance hall.'

Intrigued, Hermione followed Harry downstairs, where she found Kreacher standing with his back against the closed front door.

'What is it, Kreacher?' she asked kindly.

'Kreacher thought Miss was happy with his service!' the elderly elf cried. 'Kreacher thought Miss *liked* him!'

Hermione came forward and knelt beside him. 'I *do* like you, Kreacher,' she assured him.

'Then who is this?' he demanded tragically, throwing open the front door.

For a moment, all Hermione saw was an enormous bouquet of roses upon the stoop...then she realised the roses were being held by little elf hands.

'Scampy!' she cried, bending to take the roses from the house-elf. 'Come in!'

Scampy came in nervously, and Hermione closed the door behind her. 'Scampy is happy to see Miss,' she announced, 'but the other house-elf is not happy to see Scampy.'

Hermione turned to introduce Scampy to Kreacher and to explain the reason for her presence, but Kreacher had retreated in a huff to the kitchen.

'Never mind,' she said, lifting the Black Bacarra roses to inhale their scent. A slip of parchment nestled amongst the blooms, and she plucked it out to read it.

Make an effort, my petal, not to put these lesser blooms to shame.

SS

'Miss?' Scampy said anxiously. 'Does Miss need to sit down?'

'She's all right, Scampy,' Harry said with a chuckle, and Hermione looked up from the note, her cheeks flushing even as the faraway look faded. 'Miss Hermione is just happy.'

Scampy straightened her tea towel and looked up the stairs. 'Happiness is no reason for Miss to scare Scampy,' she declared. 'Let's go to your room, Miss, so Scampy can begin to prepare you for the party.'

Finding no fault with this program, Hermione obediently led the way up to her room.

The Hogwarts students who were due to be honoured had been permitted to come to London for the weekend, and were being put up at the Leaky Cauldron, so Harry went there in the early afternoon to be with Luna. Ron left at six to have dinner with Lavender before the gala began, so Hermione was alone in the house, save for Kreacher, as eight o'clock approached.

Scampy had surpassed herself. Hermione wore garnet-coloured velvet robes, deeply décolleté, which clung to every curve, ending just above her knees. The stockings she wore were silken, and the shoes, bearing Scampy's signature Balance Charm, which would permit her to walk in such unnatural high heels, were stunning. Of a dark garnet dragon hide leather, a delicate ankle strap held the shoe upon her foot, which was left naked to the toes, at the base of which a narrow strip of the garnet leather crossed; the heels were at least four-inches tall, but as always with shoes Scampy Transfigured for her, she was able to walk easily in them.

Scampy had insisted upon putting her hair up for such a formal occasion, pointing out that Madam Prince's earrings would show to best advantage that way. Accordingly, her hair was swept up on top of her head, where it was sleekly wound into a complex chignon, with the tiniest of wispy curls left to grace her nape. As once before, the Black Bacarra roses nestled in her hair. From her ears dangled the garnet earrings given for the occasion.

How many times had she dreamt of being seen in public with Severus Snape...of being acknowledged as his woman? And tonight it was going to happen; she would walk into the Ministry of Magic Gala upon the arm of a bona fide war hero, a completely grown up, powerful wizard, whose slightest smile turned Hermione's insides into goo. She felt giddy with delight just thinking of it.

As the hour approached, Hermione felt as if she could jump out of her own skin. Her tummy kept swooping at unexpected times, giving her a feeling of light-headedness. It had been more than six months since she had last seen him...how would it be when he was standing in front of her, looking down into her face with those endless eyes...eyes in which she would gladly drown? Again, her tummy swooped and her heart fluttered ... and a knock upon the door compounded it all.

He was here.

Having banished Kreacher to his room for the night, it was up to Hermione to answer the door, and she approached it with measured steps, wanting at least to appear dignified when she opened the door to him. Grasping the doorknob with a trembling hand, she turned the knob and opened the door to her love.

He stood upon the stoop in dress black robes, over which he wore a long black cape lined with dark green satin. His head was bare, and his black hair was tied back, exposing his face to her. A very slight smile upon his lips increased the trembling in her extremities, and as her eyes rose to meet his, she noted that he was no longer quite so gaunt as he had been. The expression in his eyes deprived her of breath, and she thought she might have whimpered.

'Hello, petal,' he said, his voice falling upon her ears like an auditory aphrodisiac. 'May I come in?'

She fell back before him, and he swept into the entrance hall, closing the door behind him.

'Hello,' she said belatedly, feeling her heart pounding erratically in her chest. He was her own dear Severus, she knew from his eyes, which made a leisurely trip down her body, absorbing the details of how she was dressed...but it had been so long since she had seen him that she scarcely knew how to act. She had thought she would throw herself into his arms, but she felt wrong-footed and awkward.

'Beautiful,' he murmured, his eyes now upon her lips.

Nervously, she licked her too-dry lips, and he pounced upon her like a panther upon its prey.

'May I kiss you?' he asked, one arm about her waist, the other hand upon the nape of her neck.

She answered by wrapping her arms about his neck and pulling him insistently into a kiss, their lips parting and tongues twining as if they had never been apart. He kissed her languidly but thoroughly, seeming to savour every thrust of her tongue and every throaty whimper she made. His hands travelled down her back, over her bum, and back up her sides.

When he released her lips, she made a sound of protest; her entire body was on fire from his touch, and all she wanted to do was drag him into the nearest room and tear his clothes off. He chuckled, as if he had read her thoughts, and she opened her eyes to look up at him; almost immediately, his gaze darkened.

'No one else has touched you...kissed you...in the time we've been apart?' he asked, his voice gruff.

'No,' she said fiercely, tightening her grip upon him. 'And you...have you been touched or kissed by someone else since we've been apart?'

'No,' he assured her, dipping his head to bury his nose in her throat.

Pressing herself against him, she said, 'Let's go up to my room.'

With another of his chuckles, which he gave with his lips upon her throat, sending sensation skittering along her skin, he lifted his head and stepped back from her. 'We are expected elsewhere,' he reminded her, lifting the black cloak he had given her from the hook upon which it rested and fitting it about her shoulders. He became suddenly still, and Hermione turned to face him.

'What is it, Severus?' she asked.

'Where did you get those earrings?' he inquired, sounding a bit odd.

'From your grandmother,' she replied with a smile. 'Remember, I told you she brought me a gift for my birthday.'

'Yes,' he said, 'so you did.' With a half-smile, he turned to open the door.

'Wait!' Hermione cried. She picked up a perfect Black Bacarra rosebud from the table beside the troll-leg umbrella stand and reached to fasten it upon his dress robes.

He stared down at the flower in his button-hole, then bent and pressed a kiss to her mouth. 'Thank you,' he said quietly.

Smiling with true pleasure, Hermione stepped with him out onto the stoop, where they turned as one and Disapparated.

Having surrendered their wraps to a courteous house-elf, Severus pulled Hermione's arm through the crook of his elbow and led the way to the Grand Ballroom, feeling himself swell with pride to be seen with such an attractive young woman at his side. Approaching the *Prophet* photographers stationed outside the entrance to the room, it occurred to him that this was the first time in his life, aside from his shadow existence as a Death Eater, that he had been in public with a woman on his arm.

It felt good.

For all that, they did not stop to pose for the photographers, but continued past them, deaf to their entreaties, and entered the venue. Severus found they were standing at the top of an elegant curving staircase. The tables for the dinner for the honourees were spaced about the edges of the dance floor below, whilst the Minister of Magic's table was upon the raised platform at the front of the room.

An elderly couple were directly ahead of them, speaking to a young man dressed like a footman. The young man held his wand to his throat and announced in his magically amplified voice, 'Mr and Mrs Jedediah Pratt.'

Glad of the example of what to do, Severus led Hermione to the footman and gave their names.

'Professor Severus Snape and Miss Hermione Granger!'

Severus knew it wasn't his imagination when the enormous room became quiet. Placing his free hand possessively upon the small one tucked in the crook of his arm, he looked down into Hermione's face. 'Are you ready for this?' he asked her softly.

She smiled up into his face before the *crème de la crème* of the entire wizarding world, her heart in her eyes. 'Oh, yes,' she said happily.

'Good girl,' he said and led her down the stairs.

The evening was rather like every dream he'd ever had of paying off scores for every insult and injustice he had ever experienced. People who had been students at Hogwarts with him...people who had never given the skinny, ugly, ill-kempt Slytherin the time of day...came up to speak to him, to thank him for his service to his country, to look curiously at Hermione and wonder about her. He pointedly ignored every hand that was stretched out in greeting, looking down his nose at the toadies and answering their questions and comments in a tone bordering on insolence. When the last of the fawners had departed with their figurative tails betwixt their legs, Hermione tugged on his sleeve.

'We're going over now to speak to *my* friends,' she said, 'and you're going to be civil to them.'

'Am I?' he asked, raising the hand upon his arm and kissing it. It was heaven to have her beside him. 'Are you sure?'

She lightly stroked his cheek before drawing her hand away from him. 'Yes, I'm sure,' she told him, and he felt that she was answering a different question entirely. It made him feel as if he could easily hold the earth upon his back, for her sake.

'Then lead on, petal,' he murmured.

Before he could be entirely bored by the hero-worship of the younger DA members...before he had ceased to be amused by the covert, horrified glances the older students were darting between him and Hermione...the Minister called the room to order, and they all found their way to the tables to partake of dinner. Claiming Hermione from the chatter of Longbottom and Ronald Weasley, he led her up onto the platform where the Minister would dine with the recipients of the Order of Merlin, First Class. Potter and his girlfriend, the pop-eyed Miss Lovegood, took the seats immediately upon the Minister's right. Severus continued down the table past the Minister, on whose left sat Albus Dumbledore.

'Good evening, Headmaster,' he murmured, pulling out the seat beside the old man for Hermione.

Dumbledore stood with an expression of genuine pleasure. 'Hello, Severus,' he said, remembering at the last moment not to offer his hand. Instead, he placed the hand upon Hermione's shoulder. 'And hello to you as well, Hermione.'

Hermione responded to the headmaster with such a cool, reserved greeting that Severus had to repress a grin when he seated himself beside her.

Dinner seemed to take much too long...very much too long, when Hermione was sitting beside him looking good enough to eat. He found that she frequently glanced at him, as well, and neither of them ate very much of the food which magically appeared before them. He debated whether eating the food would simply weigh him down in the evening he had planned or if he might need it for fuel in order to maintain his stamina later. Having her so close made him happier than he had any right to be...but what he most wanted to do was to take her away from here.

At last, the tables were magically cleared of food and cutlery, and the Minister of Magic began to speak about the wonderful way the wizarding community had risen to fight against the Dark Lord. He began the handing-out of awards with the DA students, who had fought against and captured many of the Death Eaters. Severus caught himself feeling proud of the little berks as they tramped up to accept their Orders of Merlin, Third Class, and the pride was so foreign an emotion that it took him a while to identify it...at first, he thought it was indigestion.

When the Lovegood girl had resumed her seat beside Potter, clutching her award, the Minister began awarding the Second Class Orders. Most of the members of the Order of the Phoenix, including the Weasleys and their five oldest sons, Lupin and Tonks, McGonagall and Flitwick, and his own Hermione, accepted these awards, and the feeling of pride increased exponentially when the splendid Order was placed in Hermione's hands.

He stood to applaud for her, and the shining look she directed to him took his breath away. Had there ever been a lovelier girl? If his grandmother was right, and one's love only grew stronger through the years, how would his being be large enough to contain this feeling, when Hermione was Grandmother's age?

Finally, it was time for the Minister to distribute the First Class Orders. First up was Dumbledore, who received tumultuous applause from everyone in the room, including Severus and Hermione. Next was Harry Potter, and this time, had they not been far below ground, Severus believed the roof would have been blown off the building by the riotous response to the announcement of the boy's name. Last, the Minister gave way to Dumbledore, who raised his hands for silence before beginning to speak.

'Eighteen years ago, a young man came to me with a daring offer. He was willing to carry information to me and the Order of the Phoenix from directly within Tom Riddle's inner circle.'

'That young man's name was Severus Snape.

'At great personal risk, Severus moved back and forth from his position as Potions master at Hogwarts to his position in Riddle's organization, providing intelligence. Then Riddle fell, and we all hoped he was gone forever. As you know, we hoped in vain. Riddle rose again, and Severus went back to him, professing loyalty and devotion, so that he might place himself in the position to provide information on the movements of the Death Eaters. He did this tirelessly...ceaselessly...twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, knowing that at any time, he could be betrayed to Riddle and be killed for treachery.

'He also managed to teach a few of you a thing or two about Potions during that time.'

The room responded with chuckles of appreciation, and Severus was astonished to see the looks of admiration directed at him by the audience members.

'In the end, of course, it was Harry Potter who had to face Riddle, as the Prophecy had foretold so long ago. Harry set out alone for this confrontation...but he was not really alone. Severus Snape followed him to the Centaurs' Clearing, and I am going to tell you a part of the story which has never been made public: Tom Riddle cast the Killing Curse at Harry Potter, and Severus Snape stepped in front of Harry to intercept that curse, willing to the very end to do what was necessary to bring about the end of Tom Riddle...up to and including sacrificing his own life to give Harry one more chance.'

There was an audible, collective gasp in the room, and excited whispering broke out as people leant over to say to their neighbours, 'Did you know that? I didn't know that!'

Dumbledore lifted his hands for silence again, and again, the audience responded to his request. 'You all know what happened then...Severus added his strength to the Shield Charm Harry had cast, and Riddle was drawn into that shield, and he died of it.'

Dumbledore turned away from the audience and looked at Severus, and Severus looked back at him, struck dumb by what was happening in the room. Dumbledore continued to speak.

'Severus Snape has devoted his entire life, since the age of twenty, to bringing an end to the power and influence of Tom Riddle, and he has sacrificed personal goals to do so. In the last battle, he demonstrated courage and bravery above and beyond the call of duty, and was personally instrumental in bringing about the death of Tom Riddle. For these acts, the Ministry of Magic awards him the Order of Merlin, First Class.

'Wizards and witches of Great Britain, I give you Severus Snape.'

Thunderous clapping began as the crowd rose to their feet as one person, and whistles and shouts added to the raucous cacophony. Hermione stood, looking down at him with such love and admiration that he thought his chest would burst from the unaccustomed emotions roiling there. After a full minute of looking down into his incredulous face, she leant over and kissed him softly on the lips, whispering, 'Go. They're waiting for you.'

As if in a dream, Severus stood and walked to Dumbledore, who extended to him the glittering Order of Merlin, First Class. Through eyes strangely blurred, he was able to read his name inscribed upon the Order, and he reached to take it into his own hands, the swelling feeling of unreality increasing with every passing second. Then he looked up to see Hermione watching him, applauding him...*loving* him...and the surreal quality of the moment began to subside.

He looked at Dumbledore, who was standing back from the podium so that Severus could approach it, and Dumbledore was clapping for him, with tears running abashedly down the old man's face. Without pausing to think, Severus took a step towards his mentor and extended his hand; with a tremulous smile, Dumbledore clasped it.

'Thank you,' the headmaster mouthed.

'You're welcome,' Severus answered, and he meant it.

Then he turned to face the people...*his* people?...and he let the tumult pour over him. The crowd gave acclamation, and he absorbed it, for what seemed a very long time. At last, they became quiet, and after a longer time, they resumed their seats.

'Let us observe a moment of silence,' Severus said, his classroom voice magically magnified and filling the room, 'for those who died so that we might live in a world free of Tom Riddle.'

Bowing his head respectfully, he thought of Lily and James Potter, Emmeline Vance, Sirius Black, Sturgis Podmore, the Prewett brothers, and the men who had been his boyhood friends, who had chosen the Dark over the Light and had died for that choice.

At last he raised his head and looked out at the faces, now sombre with remembrance. 'Thank you for this honour,' he said gravely. 'Now, let us celebrate life and victory.' He stepped back from the podium and bowed formally, then walked back to sit down beside a beaming Hermione.

They were coming to the end of their second dance when Severus dipped his head to nuzzle behind her ear and to ask, 'Do you wish to stay, or would you be willing to let me show you my home?'

She turned her face and pressed her cheek to his. 'Oh, let's go!' she said eagerly.

'Would you like to take leave of your housemates?' he asked.

'No,' she replied, taking his hand and beginning to weave her way through the crowd. 'Let's go.'

He wrapped her up in his arms and Disapparated, holding her close to make sure she had found her feet before he released her at their destination. The moonlight was shining brightly down on the quiet countryside; she looked about curiously. 'Where are we?' she asked, and he turned her to face the other direction, pointing down the gentle slope upon which they were situated.

'Do you see the roofline?' he asked.

'It's Prince House!' she said. 'I didn't know you had a cottage here!'

He did not answer but led her up the path to the door, and when he reached for the doorknob, the door was pulled open, and golden light poured out onto the stoop.

'Welcome, Master,' Scampy said with a deep bow. 'And welcome Mistr...'

'*Scampy*,' he said sharply.

The little house-elf stepped back from the door and bowed again, not speaking. Severus took Hermione's hand and led her into the cottage. They stood in a sitting room lit by a brightly crackling fire and furnished with a sofa, two armchairs and a coffee table, not unlike his sitting room at Hogwarts.

'Welcome to Crystal Cottage,' he said, watching her closely.

'Oh, Severus,' she said, 'what a wonderful room!'

He removed his cape and held out his hand for her cloak, then passed them to Scampy. 'We won't need you again tonight, Scampy,' he said.

Scampy bowed again. 'Yes, Master,' she said, scurrying off to put their things away.

Hermione frowned a bit. When had Scampy stopped calling him 'Master Severus' and begun simply calling him 'Master'?

'Would you like to see the rest of the house?' his warm voice rumbled in her ear, and Hermione turned and kissed him full on mouth.

'I'll take that for yes,' he said when he broke the kiss, which was growing heated. He tugged her hand. 'The kitchen is through here.'

They went into the kitchen and then into the dining room, with its cherry wood table, chairs, and sideboard. The furniture looked very old and very well cared for. She trailed her hand above the tabletop, not wishing to mar the polished surface, then she noticed several official-looking parchments covered with curious handwriting, the top one complete with a red beribboned seal at the bottom. She recognised goblin-writing when she saw it.

'What are these?' she asked.

Severus picked up the parchment and studied it. 'They deal with the future of Grandmother's estate; this one conveys ownership of Crystal Cottage to me,' he admitted, seeming to be rather amazed by the turn of events.

He offered the documents to Hermione, and she looked over them carefully. 'This implies that the big house will be yours upon her death,' she said, surprised. 'I would have thought your uncle...I mean, he *is* her son, and presumably, his father's heir.'

Severus took the proffered parchments again with a sardonic smirk. 'More than implies,' he agreed. 'This cottage was offered to my Uncle Tiberius at the time of his marriage, but he declined, preferring to live on the continent. It was offered again when he accepted his teaching position at Durmstrang, it having been hoped that he would prefer to spend his summers and holidays away from the school, but it was again declined. He and my Aunt Ava preferred to keep a home near her parents, in Germany, and to stay with Grandmother at Prince House when they visited England.'

For a moment, his gaze became somewhat unfocussed, and he stared at the parchment with unseeing eyes. Then his lips thinned into a harsh line, and he put the parchment back upon the tabletop. Hermione watched quietly and waited for him to speak again.

'When Morgen was taken prisoner, it was revealed that she was a guest at Prince House, and Aurors were dispatched to ask questions. My uncle and his family were detained in England for a time, whilst the investigation progressed. The British Ministry decided that my uncle and aunt were in a position to be aware of Morgen's political leanings and questionable activities, and the word "collaborator" came up more than once in those conversations.'

Hermione gasped; persons who were considered to have collaborated with the Death Eaters in England had been sentenced to serve time in prison! It was a very dangerous time to have that designation placed upon one.

'In the end, they were permitted to leave the country, but only upon the understanding that they were not to return. Grandmother made it possible for my uncle and aunt to live in the style to which they were accustomed...but in return, Tiberius signed away his rights to inherit the estate upon Grandmother's death. So, it will come to me.'

Hermione placed her hand upon his arm, and he immediately clasped it, raising it to his lips.

'I'm very sorry that your uncle and aunt were made so uncomfortable,' she said softly.

Pulling her into his embrace, he laid his cheek upon the top of her head. 'Don't be sorry,' he said gruffly. 'My uncle tried to sit on the fence and ended up falling on the Dark side. I was quite horrified to discover the extent of their knowledge of and involvement in the activities of Morgen and her husband. I shared some of the information with John, because I felt he was old enough to know the truth. The ban from Great Britain will not affect my cousins; they will be free to come and go as they please. But John is currently out of communication with his parents; I don't know how long that breach might last.'

Hermione wrapped her arms around him, the scent of his shaving lotion igniting her desire, and she clung to him, all thought of his uncle's misfortunes gone from her mind. After a time, he stepped back and took her hand, tugging her across the hall, into his study.

She smiled at the book-filled walls, and he smirked at her. 'I thought this room might please you,' he said. 'I work from home occasionally, so the papers I leave upon my desk will be off-limits to you, my know-it-all.'

Diverted, Hermione asked eagerly, 'What work? What are you working on?'

He rolled his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest in a gesture she recognised from his classroom...but the warmth of his expression lessened the effect, she noted with satisfaction.

'If my papers are off-limits to you, what makes you believe that my work is open for discussion?'

'Are you still working on the Death Eater prosecution? Because I never see you in the Wizengamot offices, so ...'

He sighed noisily. 'No. I will tell you what my position is, and then you will not ask me any further questions, do you understand?'

Her mouth dropped open. 'You're an Unspeakable!'

He jerked her against him. 'You *are* the brightest witch of your age,' he teased.

She laughed out loud, and he paused to kiss her again, very thoroughly, before leading her up the stairs to the first floor.

'There are two bedrooms up here,' he said, pausing in the doorway of a room that, as yet, bore no furnishings.

Hermione looked into the room, thinking it was just the right size for a study for her ... she wasn't foolish enough to believe he would let her use his desk, particularly if his work was of such a confidential nature. But she was getting a bit ahead of herself; he hadn't yet implied that he wanted to share this lovely cottage with her...so far, he was only showing off.

He indicated the bathroom, then continued on into the room at the end of the hall, situated directly over the sitting room, with very nearly the same proportions. A fire crackled in the large fireplace on the far wall, and before the fireplace was a cosy-looking loveseat and coffee table, which held a tray of sandwiches and cakes, with a teapot and two teacups.

To the right was a large bed, covered with a luxurious duvet the colour of burgundy wine. On either side of the bed was a table, and at right-angles to each table was a bookshelf. The bookcase on the left side of the bed was full of many books Hermione recognised from Severus' rooms at Hogwarts, and on the very top of the bookcase was the statuette of Merlin and Nimüe, which Professor McGonagall had called a Vinculum. The bookcase on the right side of the bed was bare save for two items which sent her rushing to examine them.

On the very top shelf, in solitary splendour, stood the copy of Alain Foucalt's *Merlin et Nimüe*, which she had read repeatedly in his rooms at Hogwarts. And two shelves down, at eye-level, was a framed photograph of her with her mother and father on holiday in Nice...the same photograph which had stood upon her bedside table at home for years.

'Severus,' she said, 'where did this come from?'

He came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her and peering over her shoulder. 'Your mother brought it when your parents came for lunch,' he said, as if such things happened every day.

She turned, breaking his hold on her. 'My *parents* were here? When?'

He watched her with fond amusement. 'They've been twice; the first time, just to speak with me, and the second time, they stayed for lunch...that's when your mum brought the photograph.'

'You saw them when you wouldn't see *me*?' She didn't know whether to be angry or amused, but right now, she was leaning toward seriously annoyed.

'I saw them in preparation for seeing you,' he corrected. 'Your father, by the way, found me to be ... almost adequate, but your mum is far more inclined in my favour...plus, she loves the house.'

Before she could respond to that comment, Severus murmured an incantation, and all of the candles in the room, plus the large oil lamp on the ceiling, were lit...and she saw, for the first time, the mural painted on the wall behind the bed. It was a reproduction of the stained-glass window which stood on the first landing of the staircase at Prince House. However, what could not be done in stained-glass was the wonderful detail of the painting on the wall; Nimüe, the young enchantress, stood before the Crystal Cave, her arm extended as if to invite Merlin to enter, and the older wizard bowed his head in acceptance of his fate.

She turned from the mural to find Severus watching her attentively. She smiled at him, and he placed his hands tentatively upon her shoulders.

'Do you know,' he said, 'that there is another version of the story of Merlin and Nimüe?'

Hermione shook her head. 'No, I didn't know; I've never read a different version.'

He smiled down into her face and rubbed a thumb over her lower lip. 'Would you be agreeable to having tea with me here, before the fire? And I can tell you the second version of the story.'

'I'd like that very much,' she admitted.

Severus poured the tea and plied her with cakes, and they ate companionably, as they had done so many times in his quarters at Hogwarts. They chatted about his family and hers, about his job and hers, and when he had sent the tray back down to the kitchen, he brought the Vinculum from the top of the bookcase and set it on the coffee table before them.

'This Vinculum is another thing that came to me because my uncle did not want it,' he mused. 'He and his family might have had this cottage, but it remained unoccupied for decades after my great grandparents died, and my grandparents moved out, to occupy Prince House. I believe my grandfather must have been rather disappointed in his son.' He remained quiet for a moment, drinking in the vision of Hermione sitting upon the loveseat at his side, so lovely in the firelight in her ball finery, smelling of the roses in her hair. She looked back at him fearlessly, invitingly, waiting in all patience for what he next would say.

'The true account of the story of Merlin and Nimüe has been told in my family for centuries,' he told her. 'In that version, Merlin was not seduced or tricked into bestowing the gift of his magical powers upon the woman he loved...instead, he gave them freely, by his own choice, as a measure of his love for and devotion to her.'

Hermione listened to him raptly, her lips parted. Holding her gaze, he picked up the Vinculum and placed it in her hands.

'This Vinculum is a fulcrum...an agent, through which vital powers are exercised...and for centuries, the wizards of my family have used it to bind themselves to the witches who became their wives.'

Hermione stared down at the ancient magical object in her hands. 'It wasn't a coincidence that you left it in my room with the note you wrote for me,' she said softly.

'No, it wasn't a coincidence,' he agreed. 'It also was not a coincidence that my grandmother placed the Vinculum in my room upon our last visit to Prince House.'

Hermione looked up into his face, her eyes wide.

'It was her less-than-subtle reminder to me that when she and my grandfather bound themselves to one another, there were two magical binding agents involved: her Nexus and his Vinculum. It made for a very powerful bond betwixt them.' He watched her eyes, resisting the urge to perform Legilimency upon her to discover what her thoughts were. No, there was no need, and there never had been...this was Hermione, and given the opportunity, she would share every thought in her head with him.

'Why are you telling me this?' she said, her voice barely a whisper.

'Can you guess?' he asked gently, reaching to cup her cheek in the palm of his hand.

'Are you accepting my offer?' she asked, her fingers straying to the Nexus, which, at her touch, became visible.

'Yes,' he affirmed, moving his hand down until they both touched the Nexus, and placing his other hand upon the Vinculum in her lap. 'And I am making one, as well. Of my own free will, as a measure of my love for and devotion to you, Hermione Granger, I offer to bind my magical powers to you, through the agent of this Vinculum, until we are parted by death or design...what say you?'

Her eyes were bright with tears as she said to him in a small, scratchy voice, 'I accept your offer.' A tiny sob escaped her, and she said, 'Now what do we do?'

'We keep on touching both the Nexus and the Vinculum,' he said, leaning in and stopping with his lips mere millimetres from hers, 'and we seal our bond with a kiss.'

Surprising him, as she was wont to do, Hermione took the initiative from him and pressed her lips to his, effectively sealing the bond, binding their magic each to the other. The power which formulated at the contact of their lips and spread over each of them was electrifying, and feeling the surge of magic, their lips clung with more determination, each breathing the other's breath, until the blaze of power had run its course, leaving a sensation like fire burning in their veins. Severus moved cautiously back from her, and she cried, 'Look!'

The Nexus was now gold, rather than silver...and the Vinculum was encased in a transparent capsule, as if Merlin and Nimüe had stepped together into the Crystal Cave.

'The Vinculum looked like this when my grandfather was alive,' Severus said, hearing the awe in his own voice. 'When the bond between him and Grandmother was active ... I'll never forget coming back to Prince House with her after his death, and finding her holding the Vinculum and crying...the capsule and their mortal bond had been dissolved when he died.'

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and began to tenderly wipe the tears which had spilt onto her cheeks. 'I hope you're going to agree to marry me, as well,' he said with a wry smile. 'I'll be in disgrace with Grandmother, otherwise...the earrings she gave you were her betrothal gift from my grandfather ... and besides, it was the understanding I reached with your parents.'

In answer, Hermione leant forward and placed the Vinculum on the coffee table, safely out of reach, and held out her hand to him. 'I'll marry you, but only if you seal the bargain by making love to me. I need you so much ...'

Severus extinguished the lights, and they undressed one another before the fire, going slowly, as they had seldom had time to do before; he marvelled at the flawlessness of her body, the softness of her skin, and the brilliance of her eyes. She was perfect, and she had bound herself to him without reservation.

When she was naked save for the Nexus, now golden with their bond, he took her in his arms and carried her to their bed. 'I need you so much,' he said, echoing her sentiment, and they wound themselves about one another, as if to seek out a way to merge their very beings. As she became more heated in her response, he slipped two fingers into her body and his thumb circled inexorably about her pleasure centre until she came apart in his arms.

He rolled then, covering her body with his, pressing his leg between hers, parting her thighs and shifting until his hips were cradled by hers, his aching cock seeking the home of her heat. He stared down into her eyes, slipping into her mind and simultaneously invading her body. Physically, he thrust and thrust, each glide of friction carrying him higher; mentally, he sought out and absorbed her every erotic thought, every carnal fantasy, feasting in body and mind. She welcomed him completely, wrapping her legs about his hips and straining to take him as deeply within her body as she could; sheathing him as well in her mind, she surrendered every sensual impulse, every impassioned inspiration, immersing his mind in concupiscence even as she bathed his body in the essence of her desire for him.

Coming closer to his orgasm, he felt as if his very consciousness were expanding, with every sensation twisting and elongating to carry him completely outside of himself; melded with Hermione in mind, he opened this prolonged rapture to her, and he felt her falling into his bliss, shattering into glittering shards of exaltation as she fell, and he impaled himself upon those shards, coming utterly undone in a shower of jetting completion which went on, it seemed, into infinity.

Lying with her in their afterglow, his body humming with the euphoria only she could bring to him, he thought of how this day had been the realisation of one impossible dream after another. Never in his life had he hoped to know such elation, and he desperately hoped he would not wake again to find himself in the life he had known before.

'If this is a dream,' he said, turning his face to her, 'never let me wake from it.'

'I shall make it my life's work,' she promised, twining herself about him, parting his lips with her open kiss, and beginning to make again the love he had never thought to possess.

Standing in the embrasure of her private sitting room window, Tatiana Prince looked out at the cottage on the hill, and the windows of its upper story were illuminated from within. Patiently, she waited and watched, and at last, a flicker of magic fell away from her, and passed, with a shiver, through and out of her body. She sighed, recognising the significance. Soon after that moment, the upper story cottage lights went out.

Turning away from the window, she walked slowly back to her chair and sat down before the fire, glancing over to her husband's portrait with a smile.

'Are they settled in?' he asked.

'Yes,' she answered, 'and the bond is made.'

'May they have as much joy of it as we did, my love.'

She laid her head back upon the cushion and closed her eyes. 'Of that, I am quite certain, my love.'