

# Conversations

by KingPig

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*\*\*\* A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

## Conversation

Chapter 1 of 19

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She waited until she heard the soft *snick* of the door close before she reached for a handful of Floo powder. Five minutes late, yes, but she couldn't keep herself from being detained without sparking curiosity and unadulterated suspicion. With two quick, nervous glances over her shoulder, she lifted her fist, tossed the powder into the fireplace, whispered a location clearly and carefully, and stepped into...

The office was always cluttered, untidy, and "lived in." She smiled, reveling in the fact that, as the world changed around him, Remus Lupin remained a little messy, a little disorganized, and able to make everyone and everything around him very comfortable. It was, at this point, the only consistent and dependable thing in Hermione's life, which was why, she suspected, these appointments for tea were so important to her and pushed her into an anxious frenzy when she was but a moment late.

Remus looked up from the cracked and worn leather chair to smile merrily at Hermione. She blushed, knowing she looked every bit the nervous wreck that she was. He quickly stood, handed her a cup of warm tea, and motioned for her to sit before taking his seat across from her.

He sipped delicately as she broke the ice. "You are incredibly wealthy, now, Remus, as a war veteran and hero, as well as a very well-respected professor, so why don't you buy some new furniture, at the very least?" She grinned at him. This was a tradition with them; she would in one way or another humorously chide him about his meager lifestyle, and he would laugh and provide his standard answer, "Hermione! You too? I happen to love these chairs, and you know very well that Tonks will no longer let me keep them in the house. My office is their only safe haven!"

Now that her anxiety was relieved with his good humor, she relaxed into her weathered leather chair with a contented smile. "How is your family?"

He smiled warmly, his eyes glazing over as he recounted several new tales of his young son, Teddy, and his clumsy and equally endearing wife, Tonks, that earned several giggles from the young woman curled up opposite him. His eyes snapped back to Hermione as his tone grew serious. "And how are you doing with your apprenticeship? I can see by your state of exhaustion that things haven't improved much, have they?"

She frowned and studied the hearth with interest as she replied, "No. I don't understand it, Remus! I try so hard to gain his respect, to show him I'm more than some silly girl, but every time I think I've made a breakthrough, his behavior changes drastically, leaving me completely confused." She shot a pleading look at the older man. "And you know how I hate to be confused."

Remus chuckled deeply and shook his head slightly. "Hermione, you've only been with him for six months. I've known him since we were eleven years-old, and he is still a mystery to me." He leaned forward and then whispered, "And I personally think his mood swings are so drastic only because he's afraid someone figured him out."

She smiled into her cup. "Remus?"

"Yes?"

"I know about Lily. I understand the situations and positions in his life could make anyone bitter and resentful. I keep that in mind when he lashes out at me, and I try not to take it personally. Harry has told me so much, though of course Professor Snape doesn't know. But you're the only one I can talk to, other than the Headmistress, who can help me understand him."

"Hermione," Remus said with a soft tone, not unlike the tone used to explain a tricky complexity to a child, "you don't have to understand Severus. You just have to get through the next two years and six months of your apprenticeship unharmed."

"But that's just it! I'm practically living with the man, spending all my time, free or not, under his watch, and he won't let me move past potions that first years learn how to brew! I know I have to prove myself, and prove that I'm willing to do the grunt work, but now it's six months past, and all I've learned is that the man never sleeps and expects me to do the same! I thought he might have changed after the war, since he wouldn't be so stressed and on constant guard all the time." Hermione was so agitated, she stood and paced the floor, animating her speech with several gestures, the last of which was to throw her hands in the air and drop dramatically back into her chair with a deep sigh. Remus hid his smile and decided that now was not the time to point out that she *had* learned how to imitate the sour Potions master very well, if nothing else.

Instead, he cleared his throat and began, "I know he can be tough, Hermione ... Okay, okay, 'tough' wasn't exactly the right word," he quickly added under her withering glare, "but of all the Potions masters in Europe, you told me yourself, he is the best. And you're his first apprentice, the only one he's ever accepted, so..."

"What happened to his parents?"

Remus stared blankly at her for a moment following her interruption until he realized that he was expected to reply. "His ... Severus' parents?"

"Yes, I was wondering...what Harry told me doesn't really deeply delve into Professor Snape's past, just surface stuff."

"Well ... he keeps his private life very guarded, Hermione. I'm not sure I really know the answer to that question."

"Can you tell me anything? Without any potions to challenge me, I find I can't stop wondering about Professor Snape and why he is so different from both Harry and Voldemort."

He still winced a little when he heard the name. Old habits die hard. Remus swallowed audibly before continuing, "Well, you know he was singled out by the older Slytherins in his first year because of his knowledge of the Dark Arts and curses." He waited for Hermione to acknowledge his words before he began again. "He was a loner and wasn't friendly. But then, no one exactly embraced him either, I suppose. I shared quite a few classes with him over the years, but even more infirmary visits."

Hermione cast him a puzzled look. "Infirmary visits?"

Remus nodded. "Yes, though most of those that fell during the school year can be attributed to my best friends' antics. For those, he didn't stay very long and was really fine with walking out on Madame Pomfrey with several 'battle' scars to show off. No, it was the ones right after holidays and breaks that I was curious about. His behavior was different: he wanted to hide these scars quickly and quietly. Even the ones beyond skin deep."

Hermione had a sharp intake of breath. "So ... his father?"

"I suspect so. There were bruises, gashes, and on more than one occasion several Blood-Replenishing Potions had to be administered. There were also wounds that were whispered about between the professors and Madame Pomfrey that were more of a ... well, a sensitive nature."

Hermione blinked. "You mean ... he was ... *sexually* abused too?"

Remus frowned and stared at the dirty floor. "Yes. I know that now, of course, but was not sure then. I..."

"Wait! You know that '*now*'?"

"I ... Yes, Minerva, Albus, and I spoke of it. You were in your ... fifth year at Hogwarts, I believe. In a nutshell, we, also, were curious about the differences between Harry, Severus, and," here he spat out the name quickly, "*Voldemort*."

"And Professor Dumbledore...why didn't he do something? In Muggle schools, there are programs to help children like this! And criminal action against the abusers! What did the professors do? Nothing?" Her voiced dripped with revulsion.

Remus cringed slightly. "Hermione, I know that it sounds very terrible, and *was* very terrible, but there was nothing they could do! Please trust me when I tell you that Minerva, and several other professors who knew, were devastated that this could happen and tried to give much more leniency toward his behavior ... but over time, they grew so frustrated with him and his acting out that they thought that maybe they would just ... just treat him like they would treat any other Slytherin. They treated him as they treated the Black sisters, or Lucius Malfoy." Remus deeply sighed and averted his eyes from Hermione as he continued in a controlled whisper. "Albus confessed to me much later that he saw Severus as a way to correct his past mistake with the young Tom Riddle. He thought himself too soft on the young man that became the most feared wizard in all of Wizarding Britain. He fancied he saw the same warning signs in eleven-year-old Severus. Being the most powerful wizard to emerge from, or even enter, Slytherin House since Tom Riddle himself, Severus was always under Albus' constant scrutiny. And, Hermione ..." Remus stopped and met her dumbfounded gaze while placing his hand over hers, continuing softly, "Albus was the first to admit he made a grievous error in judging the surly little Slytherin. But, at the time, please understand he felt it warranted. He feared that Severus would grow up and join Riddle's cause; their power combined, if even for a short time, would be and in fact turned out to be undeniably vicious. However, Albus was so distressed over this possibility that he convinced himself it would be prudent to be proactive in Severus' case. This negative attention ensured the proper response...Severus was isolated, interrogated, and alienated. Albus was indifferent to Severus' pleading, crying, or flinching. He looked past the bruises, the broken bones, and obvious physical trauma.

"Albus wanted Severus to be magically weak, if not mentally, so that it would be difficult for Tom Riddle to make him an ally. However, Severus was very much like Harry; he refused to become weak and dependent. Every punishment received from his family, his so-called friends, my own best friends, and Albus only strengthened Severus' power and sharpened his wit. Without knowing when the next blow would descend on him, or from what source, he developed a powerful sense of perception. Even before becoming a powerful Legilimens and Occulmenses, it seemed Severus could read your mind simply by observing your speech patterns or body language. And very much like you, Hermione, Severus devoured every book within his reach, increasing his magical knowledge. I imagine he must've felt that the knowledge was akin to armor, able to fend off attacks from every angle. This threatened Albus, and he tried even harder to break Severus. In the eyes of other professors, it seemed that Albus merely seemed coldly indifferent to the boy. But in my eyes, as I spent many nights in the infirmary after my monthly transformation, I could see that our Headmaster was truly disgusted at my Slytherin classmate. Before hearing the confession from Albus himself, I assumed that it had been something Severus had done each time to particularly annoy the Headmaster. Some stunt it must have been, I thought each time, because Albus never even raged at Bellatrix like that.

"There was a curtain that separated us in the hospital wing, and I never tried to speak to him...I was terrified he would correctly identify who I was and, eventually, why I was always in that particular bed every month. I do believe he thought himself alone because I don't imagine that he would make a sound to show his pain, or '*weakness*' as he would call it, if he weren't alone. Sometimes after school holidays, he would be in the bed next to me, again separated by a curtain, unconscious as Madame Pomfrey cried over him. When awake, Severus cried out for the Headmaster, his voice cracking with choked sobs. He begged the Headmaster, when Albus did show up, to allow him to stay at the school during holidays and breaks. Severus swore he would behave, though I don't know what definition of 'behave' Albus was truly looking for. The words Severus would invariably say next haunted me. He would offer his *body* to Albus. The headmaster would snort. Then he would offer his *soul*. Albus would shout that the 'unwanted' boy *cannot give what he does not have*

"My heart broke, and I pleaded with James and Sirius to leave Severus alone. I didn't want to tell them what I saw it seemed I would violate Severus' trust in some way by doing so, though he didn't know he was entrusting his secrets to me. I said nothing to Peter; I knew he'd do whatever James and Sirius did, even if that meant suddenly being nice to the most hated kid in the school. I continued to watch Severus, and of course you know that I've consistently tried to gain his friendship. I noticed jagged cuts along his arms whenever his sleeves were pushed back impatiently during Potions classes. I gathered enough nerve to question him about it one day, but he sneered and pushed me bodily away. The next day, and ever since, his arms ... no, nearly his entire body has been covered by his ultra-conservative attire.

"I think Albus' treatment of Severus was the ultimate betrayal to the boy. To see that twinkle always directed at your enemies, to hear the warmth in his voice as he spoke to all the other students, to be called unwanted, unloved, unworthy by the very man that loved every other child in the castle as though they were his own. It was a mistake, a *costly* mistake, but please believe me when I tell you that their regret for this is immense. Albus never forgave himself, Minerva still grieves over the child she knew and tried to care for ..." Remus trailed off, again afraid to look Hermione directly in the eye.

Hermione stared at the older man, tears cascading down her cheeks as she fought the emotions from erupting. Hate, disbelief, anger, revenge; all these warred within her for immediate gratification. An uncomfortable, thick, heavy silence descended upon the two, only broken when a snuffle escaped her.

"I'm late, I need to get back. If he finds out I was taking tea with you ... I gotta go. I'm so sorry. I ... I have to go. Bye." She threw the powder into the fire and stepped through without waiting for a response.

Remus studied the floor intently, murmuring something softly before rising to return to his desk. He absently sorted essays into a neat pile when a sharp, loud knock intruded onto his thoughts. "Come in!" he called out in what he hoped was a comforting, cheerful voice, should any of his students have come to request some of his time.

The door was pushed open with such force that it rebounded off the wall and shook the hinges. Remus didn't have to look up to know who had just stepped into his office. The room itself just dropped a few degrees in temperature.

"Severus?"

"*Professor* Lupin." Severus Snape stopped short after crossing the threshold and held out a vial in his hand. Remus smiled weakly as he carefully stepped up to receive the Wolfsbane Potion, taking the opportunity to examine his former classmate. The words from the previous conversation still hung heavily in the air, and Remus felt a surge of panic at the thought that Severus need only to look up to read the words clearly. Words like "*sexually ... abused*," "*disgusted*," "*alienated*," and "*begging*."

Severus' eyes, instead, bored into Remus'. The slight temperature drop the Slytherin brought into the office with him was nothing when compared to the icy chill that gripped Remus' heart as that smooth, deep voice slowly hissed, "*What. Did. You. Tell. Her.*"

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**Author's Note** Loads of hugs for my wonderful betas, the *incredible* Angel Mischa and Amsev, who have helped this sad little illustrator write her second ever fanfic. \*glomp\*

## We Need to Talk

Chapter 2 of 19

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Remus glanced away from the irate man as he quickly said, "Severus, I do not want to quarrel with you. She only asked about my life as a student... Honestly, we were just having tea; your name rarely came up in the discussion."

Snape snorted loudly as he crossed the room and eyed the tea settings hungrily. Remus followed his line of sight to the tea and asked, "Would you like some? She only just left, and I have plenty more." He poured the tea into a clean cup and leaned forward to hand it to his ex-schoolmate, but found that Severus had dismissed his offer and helped himself to Remus' best scotch. Remus grinned despite himself. Even the unpredictable have predictable manners.

It seemed that several moments went by as both sipped their drinks. Remus stared into his cup, nervously counting the holes in his leather chair as Snape eyed him dangerously. The air crackled with his negative energy, his anger nearly tangible as it slowly filled the room like a noxious gas. Remus reached a total number of twenty-four worn spots before the silence was lifted.

"Do you know, *Lupin*, how dogs determine their dominance?" Snape drawled as he began to walk aimlessly about the office. Remus winced, but continued his examination of the chair. A hollow laugh issued from Severus' lips before he continued, "Who am I talking to? *Of course* you do. You know the importance of eye contact better than any other in this castle. Tell me, *wolf*, why don't you ever look me in the eyes?" There was a hint of lethal humor in his voice as he stopped to stare at Remus.

Lupin continued to gaze at the chair and replied, "I'm not interested in a staring contest, Severus. I think we are above needing to create a pecking order."

"Yes, Lupin," Snape sneered. "We have already established your submission, haven't we?" He began to slowly circle Remus' leather chair as he asked, "Tell me, what was it like for you? I've seen Greyback at his worst, or 'best' as he would say, and I always wondered what it was like for you as a child. Did you feel lonely, Lupin? Outcast?" He swooped down and whispered into Remus' ear, "Did your parents still want you? Did they still *love* you? Or did you become something different to them? Something like you were to your beloved 'Mauraders,' a personal *pet*? Tell me, did you suffer?" The last phrase was whispered softly, almost seductively, within Remus' ear.

Remus knew Snape was only baiting him, but he could not keep himself from retorting, "Not any more than you suffered through *your* childhood."

The tumbler of scotch in Severus' hand fell to the floor with a resounding crash followed by a sinister hiss. Lupin gripped his wand under the cover of his robes and cast a nonverbal *Reparo* to mend the glass. Snape swept into Remus' line of vision in a black blur, grasping the arms of the chair and leaning in so that the tip of his hooked nose was inches away from Remus'.

"Don't you dare *presume* to know me. And don't you *dare* speak of me to anyone. My life is my business. Do you *understand*, you filthy creature?"

"Oh," muttered Remus, gaining courage swiftly, "I do understand. It is all right to advertise my business to the school board and trustees, but should anyone..."

"Silence!" Snape raged, leaning in closer still. "Having a *werewolf* near innocent children is a dangerous game." His lips broke into a sadistic smile as he purred, "Surely you understand the consequences of such a situation?" Before Remus could retort, Severus slid toward the door, only pausing to look back and raise his wand to mutter a spell aimed behind Remus. The door promptly slammed as the decanter full of scotch shattered, spreading amber liquid down the shelves of the open liquor cabinet.

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Hermione sat apprehensively at her old Potions table, absently tracing her fingernail along the various carvings of generations of witches and wizards. She had returned to the Potions classroom just in time for Snape's class to file out, young students pushing past her and muttering under their breaths about their professor's flight from the room earlier that period. Her heart began to beat erratically as her eyes searched frantically up and down the corridor for any trace of her employer and finding nothing to ease her worry. So, she found herself sitting at the table she spent seven years behind, her fingers inattentively mapping out the abuse it suffered on its surface from decades of use, and idly contemplated which table her missing professor once occupied.

Just as she convinced herself that Severus Snape's table would be the furthest to the front and closest to the window, the thick dungeon door burst open and collided into the stone wall with a resounding *crack!* Mentally, Hermione rolled her eyes at her professor's flair for the dramatic before taking in the sight of the slightly deranged-looking man standing at the threshold. Suddenly, all light-hearted visions of the Potion master's theatrical tendencies vanished.

"Sir, I took a break when your class began, I thought you wouldn't mind..."

"*Silence!*" he roared. Hermione's mouth obediently snapped shut as he thundered past her, not once looking in her direction. She watched him warily as he crossed the room, tables and materials crashing to the ground in his wake.

"Sir..."

He abruptly stopped and turned on his heel to face her. His voice perilously low, he seethed. "What part of '*silence*' do you fail to understand?"

She indignantly raised her chin, stared into his obsidian eyes and said, "I *fail* to understand what I've done to warrant this kind of behavior," she paused and then added for emphasis, "*sir*."

It seemed like an eternity passed in silence as they stared each other down; his eyes grew narrower and narrower until she wondered if he could see at all. She knew that his silence was meant to make her uncomfortable, to make her rethink her insolence. She knew his intimidation tactics, she'd been on the receiving end of them for years; however, that's not to say they weren't working, even now. Internally, she squirmed as externally she exuded confidence and Gryffindor bravado. She briefly wondered if he could smell fear.

He began to stalk towards her. Her breath quickened with each step he took she began to feel beads of sweat collecting on her skin. Still, she gave no outward sign of discomfort. She would not look away. Her back stiffened, her muscles tensed, her body prepared its "flight or fight" defense. He growled, low and threateningly, now just a few steps in front of her, and still advancing. *Flight!* her body screamed. *Fight!* countered her mind.

He stopped, his body rigid, his eyes peering down at her from their lofty height, his chest inches from her nose, and still she did not back away. Her own eyes narrowed. He visibly bristled. The air around them was charged with tension an electricity that crackled and surrounded them. She held her breath. His eyes grew impossibly darker. They both drew in breath together, mouths open, tongues poised to inflict deadly wounds on their foe with poisonous words...

When for the second time in less than fifteen minutes, the heavy door to the dungeons flew open, the hinges screamed in protest. "Severus Snape!" shouted a shrill female voice.

This was soon followed by a slightly out-of-breath male voice that cried, "Hermione?"

Neither of the combatants' eyes moved from their locked position when Severus' lips suddenly quirked up at the ends in a devious smirk. "Minerva!" he sneered in a sickly-sweet voice, "just the person I wanted to see."

The Headmistress bounded into the room with Remus at her side, both glaring daggers at the Potions master as he placed his hand on Hermione's shoulder and forcefully spun her around to face them. "We," Snape motioned around the room, "need to talk."

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**Author's Note** Loads of love and gratitude to my beta, the *fantastica!* Angel Mischa! Any mistakes found are mine cause I ...am human! That or it's because I forgot to change something AM told me to. Which is still me being human. Hehe.

Also, I'm sorry this chapter is so short. The next one will be longer, I promise!

## Discussions

Chapter 3 of 19

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Hermione found it difficult to match the pace of her formidable Headmistress, who led the way from the dungeons to her office with an agitated speed. Behind the two women, the professors followed: one with a malevolent smirk and a slight swagger, the other with a determined step and a stern frown. All four traveled in silence.

With each turn around the corridors, Hermione's uneasiness grew. She couldn't fathom why Headmistress McGonagall had interrupted the standoff between herself and Professor Snape or why Professor Lupin had accompanied the scowling older woman. *And where had Snape been?*

Hermione didn't have a moment to continue that thought, as the group soon alighted the hidden staircase leading to the Headmistress' office. The ancient gargoyle spun with a groan when Minerva hastily whispered the password (it was spoken so quickly and vehemently, almost a hiss, that Hermione hadn't a chance to catch it). McGonagall stomped up the steps, and as Hermione approached the hidden staircase, she was roughly pushed aside with a muttered curse as the Potions master mounted the stairs before her. With a huff and a resentful glare, Hermione followed her employer with Remus close at her heels.

Upon entering the room, the Headmistress quickly deposited her cloak on a nearby Victorian, high-backed chair that stood sentinel by the doorway. Hermione stood to the side after crossing the threshold, allowing Remus to come in and valiantly stand between her and Snape before casting her a look that she couldn't quite interpret. Snape caught the exchange and his eyes glittered maliciously. Without looking away from Hermione, he addressed Minerva. "Headmistress, I believe you and I have a private matter to discuss."

"Quite right, Severus. Please join me in my chambers. The two of you," she spoke briskly, "please stay here. We will return in a moment." With that, Snape and McGonagall disappeared behind a carved wooden door with a brusque *snap*.

Hermione threw herself into the nearest seat with an exasperated sigh. "Remus, could you please tell me what is going on?"

"I should ask you the same," came his curt reply. She noticed that he would not meet her eyes, and his entire demeanor cast off waves of discomfort and even fear as he began to pace the room.

The occupants of the many portraits shuffled forward in their frames in order to glimpse the goings-on all except for one, of course. Albus Dumbledore's accurately rendered self gazed off into the distance, portraying indifference and obliviousness to the surroundings. Hermione was not fooled. She opened her mouth to speak to the late Headmaster, but no sound escaped her lips as Lupin's voice in the back of her mind reminded her of Dumbledore's antipathy toward the child Snape. She felt her heart actually harden against the thought of ever seeking advice from this man, and her stomach grew queasy at the long-held vision of him as a kind, grandfather-like figure in her life. She tore her eyes from the likeness of her former Headmaster and instead focused on the bookshelves that lined the walls behind the immense mahogany desk and framed the arched windows that looked over Hogwarts' grounds. *How many times have I stood here when my life was on the brink of change? How many hours of my life were spent here, in this room, in this very spot?*

Her musings were cut short by Remus' quiet voice as, with an air of defeat, he spoke. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I shouldn't be upset with you. He came," the 'he' in question being, of course, Severus, "just as you stepped into the fireplace. He knew you were there, and he suspected that we talked about him... I denied it, of course, and he didn't believe me, which shouldn't surprise any of us." He paused for several tense moments, taking a deep breath to begin again, never lifting his gaze from the stone floor. "Part of me feels like I did when the thought of telling Sirius and James about his life when I was younger struck me...I felt... I *feel* like I've betrayed him. I shouldn't have told you anything, Hermione, even if the thought of sharing this with someone else could release me from a burden and... and even if I thought you might..."

"I might what, Remus?" She turned to him and felt his overwhelming sense of regret surround and crush her.

"That you might... *help him*." He whispered so softly that her ears had to strain to hear the words. Silence engulfed them again as Hermione was overcome with a sense of guilt, realizing she had pulled the strings of their friendship very taut and that he was suffering the worst for it.

After a long expanse of time, in which they both awkwardly avoided the other's gaze, Hermione broke the silence. "Remus, why were we called in here? Why were you with Professor McGonagall when she nearly broke down the door in the dungeons?" She turned again to face the windows as she softly asked, "Are we in trouble?"

Lupin looked up and stared at her back for several moments before replying, "We? I don't think you're in trouble, Hermione, unless you did something I don't know about. You haven't been making any more Polyjuice Potion, have you?" He attempted a weak smile.

She twirled to face him. "... I was disrespectful to a professor..."

Lupin genuinely grinned at her now. "Hermione, love, you aren't a student anymore. You are allowed to voice your opinions, even as an apprentice. In fact, you are technically a part of the staff now, and there isn't a staff member here today other than perhaps Filch who hasn't said or done something a little 'disrespectful' to Severus. There's also never been a time, that I'm aware of, that he hasn't deserved it." He spread his arms in a gesture for Hermione to come to him, and when she sat down in the chair beside his own, he drew her into a friendly embrace.

She beamed up at him. "Thank you, that makes me feel a little better. You're sure the Headmistress isn't angry with me?"

"For the display we walked in on? Gods, no, Hermione! I daresay she's proud of you for at least attempting to put him in his place. Though I must warn you not to get too ahead of yourself here; he is a violent man, and your verbal showdowns are all well and good when there is a third party present, but please don't engage in them when alone.

And to answer your question, I was with Minerva because I wanted to check on you. She entered my office just after Severus left, and she inquired about the shouting and sounds of breaking glass..."

Hermione gasped, and Remus quickly waved his hand in a dismissive gesture before continuing, "He just broke a decanter, nothing a Reparo couldn't fix. As I was saying, she came in and asked, so I told her everything. Don't look so upset, Hermione. Her reaction to your questions about Severus might be different from what you expect. We are all too aware of your inquisitive nature, and she knew it was only a matter of time before you decided to find a reason and solution to his anti-social behavior. No, she was only upset about the repercussions that might occur now that he, somehow, has found out. Which was why we rushed to find you. He left my office in a foul mood, and we only interrupted because we feared he would take everything out on you..."

"I can take care of myself, thank you." Hermione sullenly interrupted. "I've battled with the both no, ~~the~~ *three* of you against Voldemort," she allowed a dramatic pause for his infallible wince before resuming, "and I survived. Why do you think I cannot face a man who I've known for more than seven years?"

"Because you *don't* know him, Hermione, at least not yet. You were much more protected then; if he would have hurt you, Harry, or Ron he'd have hell to pay not only from all of us, but from Vo...Voldemort himself. But now you are, for all intents and purposes, an adult. Despite what we may believe here, legally he does not have to restrain so much from hexing or cursing you."

"Then let him!" she angrily exclaimed. "Let me learn things for myself! Like you said, I'm not a child anymore! Quit coddling me. I know he's a petulant, immature, rash man. That hasn't changed from my school years. But give me a chance to show him that I can handle his maniacal mood swings and be a responsible, intelligent woman both of you need to quit coming to my rescue; it only cements the fact that I'm still a nosy schoolgirl to him!" Out of breath, she leapt from the chair and paced during her speech. Now that she had finished, she walked back to the door where the subject of their debate had vanished. Refusing again to even glance at Remus, she focused her attention on calming herself as she stared at the window. Lupin merely gave a dejected sigh before the silence enveloped them both once more.

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Snape stood as the Headmistress seated herself in a wingback, leather chair next to the roaring fire contained in the stone hearth. She glanced up at him and gave an annoyed gesture, indicating that he should take the duplicate chair opposite hers. He made a dramatic show of settling into the comfortable chair as she asked through a clenched jaw, "Tea?"

He smiled and dismissively waved his elegant hand, watching with undisguised glee as she narrowed her eyes at him. She grasped the nearby tea kettle with more force than necessary, causing it to *clink* against the rest of the tea settings as she poured herself a cup.

Severus took this moment to allow his gaze to travel around the room, marveling at how different it felt now that Dumbledore's belongings were absent. It was a small sitting room, one he had had the misfortune to be trapped in before, but the energy of the room had changed since its previous owner no longer resided within these private walls. The air no longer suffocated him, the smells no longer made him nauseous. The stone walls now seemed to emit a warmth that surrounded him; a warmth that had nothing to do with the fire cackling beside him. There was now an aroma of sandalwood and vanilla that danced around his nose, inciting a taste of near contentment (if contentment could have a taste, and Severus was convinced it should) instead of the familiar tang of vomit and blood that assaulted his senses when left alone in a tiny room with his surrogate father, Albus Dumbledore.

The room itself only consisted of the two occupied chairs, a hearth, a large, looming, arched window, a battered, medieval-looking table between the two chairs upon which *always* sat the same sterling silver tea settings and a large, woven wool rug that claimed nearly the entire expanse of the floor. Two doors stood on opposite ends of the sitting room: one led back to the Headmistress' office, the other led to her private bed chambers (which Severus knew, from past experience however short-lived as a headmaster himself, also housed a bathroom, separate study, laboratory, and small - but equally adequate library).

Snape was sharply brought back to his surroundings when a small sigh issued from Minerva's lips. She had been staring at him wistfully.

"I've missed you," she said suddenly. "I've missed those few unguarded moments I've been blessed to witness around you. That look, there, on your face," Severus quickly masked his emotions to resemble disdain, and she rolled her eyes before continuing, "the look that revealed the man *inside*..."

"You're quite mistaken, Minerva," he snorted, seizing the opportunity to interrupt. "That was no 'look' of reflection or introspection. I was merely passing gas."

Her sharp laughter filled the room, invading his already overwhelmed senses, filling the air around them with more ~~o~~*warmth*. He scowled to quickly contain the smile that threatened to slip out.

"I've missed your strange sense of humor as well, Severus," she gasped out between subsiding giggles. Not knowing how exactly to respond to this comment or her behavior, he merely sneered at her. He belatedly realized his error in judgment as she fell into a fit of laughter again. He was just beginning to convince himself that the house-elves had spiked her tea when she spoke again, completely out of breath from her hysterics. "Severus, I..." She paused to collect herself. "Severus, what I mean to say is that I haven't seen this side of you for far too long. I am delighted to see that circumstances, being as they are now, have allowed you to be..."

"Circumstances as they are now,' Headmistress?" he asked silkily with a slightly raised eyebrow.

"Mmm, yes, Severus. Circumstances as they are now I believe that is what I said."

He glared at her menacingly and growled, "I apologize; I am *unaware* of what you said, I'm afraid I am a little lost at your *meaning*."

Her mouth disappeared into a thin, straight line as she glowered at him. "Severus, there is no need to get that attitude with me. Nor is there any reason for you to *growl* at me. We are adults, please speak like one." Just as his eyes began to flicker dangerously (this was a warning sign to those that knew him best, and Minerva felt she definitely fell into that category), she interrupted his attempts at retaliation by saying matronly, "Now, now. No need to get in a snit. What I meant by 'circumstances' is now that the War is over, and you are no longer under the thumb of two organizations that used you as a spy, now that you no longer wake up each day wondering if it will be your last...oh, Severus, please quit being so melodramatic," she replied to his look of incredulity. "Teaching potions does not endanger your life daily, no matter what stories you tell of Weasleys, Longbottoms, and Potters in the staff room. As I was saying, now that your life is decidedly free of most external dangers, and you've a new apprentice..."

"Ah," he drawled, "*That* is what this is about. To remind me how much *easier* my life is with Miss Granger as my apprentice?"

Minerva frowned and stated, "Well, you cannot deny that she *has* been a great asset..."

"Has she?"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, please quit interrupting, Severus!" She took a moment to calm herself by sipping her tea and closing her eyes before continuing, "She has done all the 'grunt' work and without complaint. She's scrubbed the cauldrons, replenished Madam Pomfrey's potions supplies..."

"*Grunt* work, Minerva? Unlike most professors, masters and mistresses in their fields as they may be," here he mischievously met her eyes before continuing, "I actually enjoy *all* aspects of my profession of potions. Including this so-called '*grunt*' work. Furthermore, I hadn't realized that I advertised to the rest of the staff just what Miss Granger's duties actually were. I certainly don't recall informing *you* that she was replenishing Madam Pomfrey's stocks. This leads me to believe that she does, in fact, '*complain*' of her assignments. Well," snarled Snape as he rose from his chair and headed for the door leading to the office, "I suppose if it is more ~~e~~*challenging* work she is looking for, I won't disappoint."

"Severus!" Minerva called after him in a commanding voice. He came to an abrupt halt, but did not turn to face her. There was a pause before she demanded, "What were you two doing when we walked into your office?"

"Setting the rules. Why was the werewolf there?"

"We were both concerned about your behavior..."

Severus snorted sardonically and spun to meet her eyes with a lethal glare. "My *behavior* does not concern either of you. It never has, has it *Professor*?" Minerva found herself at a complete loss of words as her mind screamed that she was quickly losing control of the situation.

"Regrettably, I cannot change the past, Severus but your behavior has always concerned me." She stood straight and stared into the inky eyes of her former student; only the slight tremble of her fingers gave her uneasiness away.

"Yes," he purred, advancing on her, "the past, no matter how unrelentingly it repeats itself in my mind, cannot be changed. I would appreciate it if it was also no longer spoken of."

"I cannot guarantee that, Severus. Though I regret many things in my life, the biggest has been my treatment of you." Her gaze melted from hardened steel to concern as her pose relaxed and her fingers stilled. Minerva knew better than to reach out to this man, but it did not stop the desire to hold him from gripping her. Would he have still abhorred touch so violently if she had made more of an effort to embrace him as a boy? As she watched him storm from the room in palpable fury, she resigned herself to the devastating realization that she could have changed so much had she been more of the Gryffindor she so prided herself on being.

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Hermione jumped as the door behind which the Headmistress and Potions master had recently disappeared burst open and revealed a very angry Severus Snape. Very angry at *her*, she realized with a start, as he was openly glaring at her with such malice and pure hate that she felt her stomach drop to somewhere in the vicinity of her knees. Before she could gather the words necessary to launch a scathing and deeply satisfying (*Gods, that has to be Slytherin transference, she thought*) attack on her employer for his behavior, the subject of her displeasure pinched the bridge of his nose and moved aside to make room for the Headmistress to enter the office.

Minerva McGonagall tersely pushed past Snape and took her post behind the massive desk, indicating that he and Hermione should sit. Biting back her fury at the Potions master, Hermione abruptly strode to the chair she had vacated only moments before. Snape, of course, remained standing. *Must he challenge everyone?* thought Hermione.

"Yes, well, I've asked you all here to discuss a few... issues that have recently been brought to my attention," stated the Headmistress. Both Snape and Hermione glanced at the silent professor still sitting near the hearth. "First off, when I visited Professor Lupin to ask for his lesson plans earlier this evening, I heard shouting from down the corridor. Severus, whatever you and Remus feel the need to discuss, I trust you should be able to keep your voice at a civil level and your tongue in check." The last part of her speech was openly directed at Snape while he stared at Lupin malevolently. Remus, for his part, cocked his head slightly at Severus in defiance. Minerva cleared her throat to gain the attention of the two men before continuing, "Now, Miss Granger..."

"Please call me Hermione, Headmistress." Hermione politely interrupted.

"Hmm? Oh, yes, of course, dear," McGonagall absently agreed, "Hermione, I feel the need to ask you, as I haven't had a chance yet during this busy school year are you fairing well in your apprenticeship?"

Hermione caught Snape's hopeful gaze before sweetly replying, "Oh, yes, very much so I thank you for asking, Professor." A pronounced sneer escaped Severus' lips, and Hermione had the bad grace to grin mischievously at him.

"Oh, dear, please call me Minerva Merlin knows you've earned that right many times over!" McGonagall was either blissfully unaware of the exchange between the apprentice and her professor or was astonishingly tolerant of the former student's baiting behavior Hermione couldn't decide which, but had a sneaking suspicion of the latter.

Both women trained their gaze on Snape as the Headmistress said, "Good. I trust you are doing quite well with your first apprentice and her current work, Severus. Although, again I must stress that you should learn to control your outbursts in the future, especially when students might hear. That said, the main reason I asked you all here is to inform you that some of the Order members will be coming to dinner to visit at the end of this week and I would like all of you in attendance. All. Of. You. Now, you are dismissed, but welcome to stay for tea!" It was obvious that this speech was mostly aimed specifically at Severus and spoken so that no room was granted for interruptions.

After the dismissal, the Potions master swiftly took his leave, his robes billowing in an infuriated fashion in his wake. Their past altercation ignored in light of the announcement, Hermione turned to Remus, gestured toward the exit, and whispered, "Well, I'd say we got off relatively painlessly."

"That remains to be seen," Both Minerva and Lupin stated in unison. All three shared a look of apprehension as he and Hermione started toward the door.

"Both of you, though I know this falls on deaf ears, please seek me if he..." The Headmistress allowed her voice to trail off, knowing that to the two listening the meaning of her statement was not lost.

Both nodded to her before slipping out, leaving Minerva alone with her thoughts. She glanced up at the portrait of Dumbledore, who gazed down on her with grave distress apparent in his two-dimensional eyes.

"Albus, my heart breaks for the boy..." She was scarcely able to finish the sentence before tears escaped her and raced down her cheeks.

Dumbledore mirrored her emotions as he whispered, "I am so sorry..."

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**Author's Note** Loads of love and gratitude to my beta, the *magical* Angel Mischa! Any mistakes found are mine cause I ...am human! That or it's because I forgot to change something AM told me to. Which is still me being human.

Also, I haven't stated this, so now's a good a time as any - all characters belong to JKR, I'm not making any money off this story, yadda yadda.

## Recurring Dialogue

*Chapter 4 of 19*

*\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

No amount of consoling seemed to breach her melancholy mood as Minerva finally said goodnight to her late best friend. Albus' canvas likeness nodded to her as the candles were snuffed, and he was left among his snoring predecessors, the painted twinkle in his eye now absent. The door released a soft *snick* as it was slowly closed behind the retreating form of the Headmistress.

In her elaborate bedchamber, Minerva paused before reaching for her tartan nightgown, her thoughts still on the tense conversation that she had with her three former students. All full-fledged adults now, even the small girl...*woman*, she quickly corrected herself...who reminded her so much of herself at that age. However grown they were, Minerva was unable to properly see them as anything but their child-selves in moments like that which had transpired in her office the bickering they engaged in rapidly dispelled any semblance of maturity, however subtle (or oftentimes obvious, as was the case with Severus) the quarreling might seem.

As she slipped the nightgown on and rolled back the comforter and sheets of her four-poster bed, she reflected on the dilemma that seemed to surround two of her cubs and the sliver of a serpent. The two boys...*men*, she corrected herself...made no secret of past injustices and animosities that sprung from their shared childhoods within the castle; although, at least one of them had, since his graduation, tried vainly to bridge the gap with the promise of friendship. Minerva shook her head sadly, the thought of her Gryffindor professor offering a platonic relationship with all the brashness, forwardness, and unrestraint of his House that it would entail to a boy...*man*...who shied to the shadows of human interaction the very thought made her wince. They both seemed forever destined to be on opposite ends of the spectrum, and she wondered if at least civility, if not friendship, was too much to hope for. Knowing Severus as she did, she knew it would be too much indeed.

Which brought her mind to another track of thought: that of the young apprentice who bravely entered the serpent's den without any thought of caution. Severus had never physically hurt another student or staff member (with the exception of the string of DADA professors that Albus was ill-advised to appoint, and even then, Snape had shown remarkable restraint) since he began his teaching career at the age of twenty even while he was under astonishing amounts of stress that continued right up until the end

of the War. That he had never really harmed Harry, the child of his sworn enemy and the woman who was the recipient of his deepest infatuation and possible love, the child whom Severus had seemed to project all of his own failings and mistakes as well as that of James' that no real injury was visited upon Harry had made Minerva's respect for the Slytherin reach new heights. Yes, Severus was capable of self-control, despite all those around him who harbored opinions to the contrary.

However, the recent events of the War had changed something within the Potions master, as war is known to do. The only other person who could have been affected by the events surrounding the battle as deeply as Snape was Harry himself, though it could be argued that even Harry did not have the full weight of the world on his shoulders as the Slytherin had carried, and without complaint. Harry had the support of the Wizarding world at his back, despite even the *Daily Prophet's* best attempts. Severus had only the unwavering support of Albus Dumbledore (*though "support" might not have been the best word to describe it* she mused), and Minerva could admit to herself that even she had questioned the Potions master's agenda several times, though she was only vocal about it after the death of her employer. Yet, even then, Hermione had showed amazing faith in her professor, whispering faintly, "'Evil' is a strong word..." in reply to Harry's assessment of the man that evening.

And now this young woman was employed by the irascible man whom she had placed all her trust in which, shamefully, worried Minerva. Severus' already fragile state of mind had bent a bit more with the effects of the War, and he had confessed to her that he wished he had not ingested the anti-venom potion hours before Nagini had attacked him, that he wished he had perished on the dingy wooden floor of the Shrieking Shack. She reminded him that he had taken the antidote as a safety measure should he be bitten before he had a chance to reach Harry, but he had dismissively waved her off and changed the topic.

Now, the man lashed out at others almost uncontrollably, hid even more in shadows, and was even more difficult to draw into conversation. His eyes, while always haunted, at moments began to cloud over and empty of all emotion, reminding her harshly of the eyes of the Inferi. She happily reveled in the times when he seemed to be himself, when his unique blend of black humor rose to the surface, the way he seemed to deign himself to the company of perceived inferiors (which was everyone, she noted, herself included), the irritation he displayed at anyone who was unable to catch on to something he felt was infinitely simple that was the Severus she knew and loved, but his appearance was rare and instead often replaced by a cold, numb, ghost of a man. She did not know this side of him well, did not trust this change that had come over him, and her only solution thus far was to treat him with kid gloves. How could she expect Hermione to understand this? Hermione the former student that, even on his best day, could reduce the surly professor to primal fits of rage? Yet... yet, Minerva had more glimpses of the Severus she knew, the man hidden deep inside, since Hermione had accepted her position as an apprentice...

The Headmistress lowered herself onto the soft mattress with only a minimal creaking of joints and a contented sigh of relief. Pulling the bed coverings up to her neck, she snuggled into the soft embrace of slumber after determining that the enigma of the snake and lioness could be analyzed further after a good night's rest.

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*The air was heavy and cloying and completely still one of the most humid July afternoons she would ever recall as she wound her way around the nearby greenery to discreetly observe three children huddled together at the far corner of the park. Two girls and a boy had segregated themselves from the rest of the playing children and were intent on quietly discussing something that seemed of great importance. Cautiously, she crept closer, careful not to alert them to her presence or to engage the attention of any passersby.*

*The girls stood a slight distance away from the boy, shooting him looks of both disgust and palpable curiosity. The tallest child, and most evidently the eldest, was a girl of plain looks with shoulder-length, dishwater blond hair, small, squinting eyes, and a pointed nose that was slightly upturned. She stood with both hands placed on her hips, legs slightly apart, with an expression of now pure revulsion aimed at the boy. She wore a white, pleated skirt that hung above her knees and seemed to swell and stretch around her hips in a most unflattering fashion. Her top was a striped orange and yellow, short-sleeved piece that barely covered her bellybutton as it glued itself to her gangly body in the heat. She kept surreptitiously tugging the shirt down self-consciously during their discussion and peeking over her shoulder nervously to ensure the group's secrecy.*

*The other girl, who shared some of the features of the older one next to her (Minerva guessed they were sisters), had long, auburn hair that shone like gold in the sunlight and fell down to her shoulder blades. Her almond-shaped eyes were tinted in several shades of emerald green with yellow flecks that glittered as she stared at the young boy in front of her, her expression conveying complete awe and wonder. Her clothes fit her in a much more becoming manner, as she seemed yet unaffected by any sudden growth spurts like that of her sister. She dressed in simple earth tones that only accentuated her natural beauty, and she seemed utterly out of place between the two children surrounding her.*

*Minerva slowly turned her attention to the boy that captivated both the sisters. He was painfully thin, nearly emaciated, and only slightly shorter than both girls. The t-shirt he wore was stained with a dark substance near his collar, long since dried, and sported a few tiny holes. It was striped black and dark gray, and seemed as though it was a few sizes too small as it clung to his tiny chest. He wore a pair of navy denim jeans that flared slightly below the knee, dirty with the same color stain that his shirt bore. The pants hung off his skeletal frame and were only held up by a black leather belt that seemed to have been wrapped around his waist twice before being fastened. His sneakers were black canvas with white laces, white soles, and a white semi-circle of rubber covering his toes.*

*Minerva brought her sharp, feline gaze up to inspect the boy's face. His hair was jet black and stringy, reaching to just underneath his chin. His eyes were pools of liquid ebony that set in stark contrast to his porcelain skin. His nose was long, aquiline, swollen and colored with harsh bruises of black, purple, and blue obviously recently broken and the source of the dark stains on his clothes. As she watched, a thin trail of blood trickled down to his upper lip, which he unceremoniously licked away. Her sight gradually traveled back up to his inky eyes and was instantly taken aback at the glare that leveled back at her.*

*Beside the child, his two young female companions stood fixed, staring ahead, frozen in time as silence descended. Minerva took two swift steps back and away from the boy, never once dropping his gaze or blinking. Years spent among various cats that populated the Hogwarts castle had taught her how to establish dominance, as well as the small signs that indicated submission or weakness. The child before her seemed to understand this primal communication as he slowly advanced on her, always keeping eye contact. "Kitty, kitty," he maliciously purred to her.*

*Minerva inwardly frowned and searched from the corner of her eye for an available escape and only caught a fleeting glimpse at the other inhabitants of the park, all suspended unnaturally in time. She began to panic. The boy calmly circled her. She heard Albus' voice rising over the sound of blood rushing in her ears, chanting over and over in a matter-of-fact tone, "The boy is dangerous. The boy is dangerous. The boy..."*

*"Shut up!" the child screeched in visible rage, his head tilted towards the sky as if in search of the source of the words that still repeated. The bleeding from his nose resumed enthusiastically as tears began to flow down his pale cheeks. The voice droned on in the background, but the volume lessened drastically. He lowered his head slightly and sought her eyes while taking another step towards her.*

*Minerva was now caught between the urge to flee for safety or to stay and embrace the child who now looked at her with pleading eyes. She wanted to say his name and comfort him, she wanted to transform out of her cat form to hold him and ease his turmoil, but she was trapped in silence. She watched in horror as he fell to his knees before her.*

*"Why? Why did you turn away?" His sobs broke to the surface now, hoarse and soft and broken. He stared at her through his tears and asked, almost inaudibly, "Why didn't you believe me?"*

*Minerva tried to shout, "Severus!" but all that escaped her lips was a high-pitched wail. He broke their eye contact then and reached into his grimy jeans pocket and extracted a thin, Muggle razorblade. Once again their gazes locked as he whispered with the voice of his adult self, low and deep, "I'm sorry." Her eyes widened as the blade slid into the soft skin of his throat without resistance in a smooth, graceful, practiced motion. The arc of the dark, thick liquid carried enough distance to thoroughly shower her as it spurted from his wound; the sticky substance clung to her as her mind registered a distance scream penetrating the silence that enclosed them. She*



*squeezed her eyelids close and allowed herself to focus on the noise, let it carry her away.*

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When Minerva opened her eyes once more, she found she was shrouded in darkness. She barely registered the scream she was hearing was her own, and the sticky substance she was coated in was not blood, but sweat. Her hands flew out to her sides and rummaged around under the bed coverings to assure her of her location and to reassure herself that she was, in fact, in her natural human form. After a few calming, deep breaths, her panic subsided marginally just enough for her to feel safe in throwing off her covers and wordlessly, wandlessly, light the candles that surrounded her bed.

She reached for her simple night robes with a quivering hand and donned them over her nightgown with difficulty. She paced a few moments before making a decision and rushing through two sets of doors to her main office that held the Floo connection. Against all reasonable thought, she let emotion guide her to this conclusion she must speak with Severus Snape, no matter what the ungodly hour.

The Headmistress took a deep breath to compose herself, then grabbed a handful of Floo powder and in her haste, upset the ceramic bowl that enclosed it and sending the container crashing to the floor. Unaffected by the amount of crushed powder and shattered clay shards that littered her fireplace, Minerva resolutely pitched the contents held in her right fist into the green flames and shouted the name, "Severus Snape!" With the standard wave of nausea that she felt every time she contacted someone by Floo, she strained to focus her eyes as she pressed her head into the fire.

On the other side, she felt a blast of cool air assault her face before she could register her surroundings. She called out, "Severus!" several times, but to no avail. The room was pitch black and nothing stirred. The feeling of panic rising again, she cried out twice more before taking the plunge and pushing her entire body through the flames.

Arriving in his office, she quickly dusted herself off and ignored the nagging thought at the back of her mind that she should not be here. Throwing caution to the wind, she strode purposely toward the back of the room and rapped her knuckles futilely on the heavy wooden door that led to his personal chambers. "Sever..." she began to call out again, but immediately silenced herself as she noticed the large door was already slightly ajar. Cautiously, she peeked through the opening and saw a dim, blue light seeping through the darkness. Immediately, and without thought, she transfigured herself into her Animagus form and slipped noiselessly into the room.

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**Author's Note** Three cheers for the most awesomest beta ever: Angel Mischa! Any mistakes found are mine cause I ...am human! That or it's because I forgot to change something AM told me to. Which is still me being human. Hehe.

## Correspondence

*Chapter 5 of 19*

*\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

The Great Hall was silent in the pre-dawn of the following winter morning, all the students still tucked into their warm beds, snoozing contentedly. This, of course, was the faculty of Hogwarts' favorite time the solitude of the early hours that were sans children, absent of headaches and responsibilities. A moment in time for reflection, introspection, planning and for the Headmistress, a time for uninterrupted worry.

Minerva drank her black tea in tiny sips as she studied the door that the staff lazily trickled through, most of them still rubbing the sleep from their eyes in a childlike manner. She was still troubled by the previous night's events and searched every face that entered the Great Hall with trepidation, willing her Potions master to be the next that strolled through the door. But he was not. When at last she resigned herself to making small talk with the professors that attempted to engage her attention, she noticed his apprentice slip into her chair and lock gazes with her, mirroring Minerva's concern in her young face.

The two did not have long to dwell on their shared anxiety, as Severus Snape emerged at last, took his seat next to Hermione, and flashed his customary look of such vitriol at Minerva that she felt immediately calmed. He turned and treated Hermione to the same expression, and Minerva frowned as the girl's face withered under his gaze. Satisfied that the women would remain silent, Severus turned to his coffee and glared at the double doors to the entrance of the Great Hall, preparing himself for the onslaught of teenage hormones that would infiltrate the room and invade all senses in a matter of moments.

Hermione pursed her lips, intent on not nibbling at them, and looked down into her breakfast. The gears of her brain turned over the events of the past few days, analyzing each piece of new information she had gleaned about the mysterious professor. The things she had always known about Severus Snape were neatly written on a dry erase board in her mind: cruel, brilliant, sarcastic, dry, moody, overlooked, loyal. Next to this was listed the new facts: abused, neglected, isolated, alienated, *must be in control* This was underlined three times in red ink. He had loved, that was known. But had he been loved? Was he ever on the receiving end? And what about last evening?

While she knew that she should feel lucky that Snape seemed to have forgotten any sort of punishment he might have wished to dole out to her after the meeting in the Headmistress' office the day before, she knew better. Snape was not a man to forget. She fidgeted slightly in her seat, her fear escalating as the minutes ticked by and the man next to her remained silent. She had not seen or heard of him since the meeting and imagined that he had sat in his dungeons all that time, fingers touching in a steeple over his lap like a comical cartoon villain, a deep, maniacal laugh on his lips as he contemplated ways to torture her for the rest of her apprenticeship. Though the image might have once made her laugh, she knew Snape all too well and knew that this fear might not be too far from the truth. She stole a glance at his stony profile and tried to suppress a shiver.

It was then that the heavy entrance doors burst open, admitting a flood of raucous students hungry for the start of their day. All at once, the professors allowed a mask of authority to slide over their features, all dreams of tranquility pushed aside as though they were an unattainable dream. Hermione mustered up her own look of cool indifference and sternness as she overlooked the children throwing themselves onto the benches in a whirl of black robes and multicolored badges. She felt a fleeting loss for her best friends, for her own childhood, before reminding herself that tomorrow she would see them all again. A rush of joy filled her heart, and she momentarily forgot about the mercurial man seated beside her who at that moment leveled his gaze at her.

A sound of fluttering wings drowned out the noise of the students then, and small squeaks and hoots could be heard as the owls descended upon the Great Hall, bearing post and parcels. Hermione gasped as she recognized the tiny form of Pigwidgeon racing at her and grasping in his talons a thin envelope. She held out an outstretched

arm for his landing, which he promptly overshot and landed in a tangle of bacon, china, and feathers at the far end of the staff table with a great *crash*. Several of the professors tittered and patted the poor owl as he made his way back to Hermione, swaying left to right, as though intoxicated, the envelope now safely in his beak. She ruffled his feathers and offered him several owl treats that he gratefully took as she lifted the envelope from his mouth. On the front of the envelope was scribbled, in Ron's typical hen-scratch penmanship: *Hermione Granger, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry*. Warmth flooded her fingers as she quickly tore open the envelope to reveal the letter inside, on which was written, in that familiar scrawl:

*Hermione,*

I hope you are doing all right. We haven't heard much from you since you landed that apprenticeship with the Greasy Old Git. I thought he might have used you for potions ingredients or else stuffed you in a glass jar, but Harry told me to shut it, and Ginny said I 'lack imagination'. Whatever that meant. Anyway, just writing to let you know that I'm bringing Lavender with us tomorrow and I hope you don't mind. It's just, you know, she got mad when I said I was going and didn't invite her. Oh, and Harry and Ginny are going to have some big news for you tomorrow, too. They won't tell me what it is 'cause they said I had to wait and find out with you. Berks. Anyway, thought I'd drop you a note before I see you tomorrow. Hope he lets you out of the glass jar for the dinner!

See you,

Ron

Hermione folded the letter and placed it in an inner pocket in her robes, the one closest to her heart. She could not wait until the feast tomorrow evening, and no silly, red-headed, overgrown child or tyrannical Potions master could take away the sheer happiness that flowed through her veins. No, not even the addition of a manipulative, ensnaring, boy-crazy, brainless, idiotic... girl to their company would steer her thoughts away from the exultation of seeing her three best friends, even if one of them was an ex-fiancé who had apparently made no short work of moving on...

Her thoughts had so engulfed her that she missed the large, haughty, eagle owl that landed neatly next to her left elbow, its leg extended toward the scowling professor beside her, and its head tilted toward the ceiling with an expression of sheer disgust at its surroundings. Severus quickly untied the scroll attached to the owl's proffered limb, and when the bird stared up at him arrogantly as if waiting for a treat or a tip, he unceremoniously shoved it off the table. In a whirl of fury, shock, and stray feathers, the owl took flight again, screeching in an ear-piercing pitch as it left.

Severus watched the owl's retreating form for a few moments before dragging his attention back to the scroll. Glancing around suspiciously, he unfolded the parchment and glowered as he recognized the formal calligraphy that was the most familiar handwriting known to him. But then, he had known the source of the letter before the owl had even descended. Smoothing out the parchment, he silently read:

*Dearest friend,*

I do hope this letter finds you well. We have missed your company at our celebration party of my son's nuptials, though we did receive your apologies and reasons for your absence. The gift of Felix Felicis was most pleasantly received by your godson and his new bride...

Severus then began to skim through the next two pages of meaningless flattery until he happened upon the point of the correspondence, at the very end of the third, and last, page:

*Dear friend, you must know how difficult it has been for our family to once again rise above the labels forced upon us. My son and his wife have found few opportunities to advance their careers, though my son has a better chance now that his Auror training has been completed. It is on my new daughter-in-law's behalf that I beseech you for your help now. She wishes to become a fully trained Healer employed at St. Mungo's, but they have refused her entry without an apprenticeship in Potions. You, of course, are the most accomplished Potions master I know, and it is for that reason, and that of our enduring friendship through troubling times, that I ask you for this favor: please accept her as your apprentice. It has been said that you have already accepted your first apprentice the lovely Muggle-born Granger, but I assure you that my daughter-in-law's talents far surpass Granger's, as do the opportunities presented to her as one of my family. Please accept our gift of a donation to your private research fund as a symbol of our gratitude. We will be expecting your appearance at tea tomorrow.*

Sincerely,

Lucius Malfoy

Pure fury caused his hands to tremble as he reread the last paragraph. Extend an offer of apprenticeship to *Pansy Malfoy, neé Parkinson*? For a substantial sum of money? *Money*? What use had he of wealth?

But then...

He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Hermione Granger, who grinned almost smugly back at him *Smugly*. He leered at her, pleased at once that she was taken aback and quickly diverted her gaze from him. Rolling up the scroll, he made his goodbyes (which generally consisted of a sneer, a curt nod, and a glare) as he tucked away the parchment into his robes and slipped out of the Great Hall before the Headmistress could detain him.

He made it only half the distance to the dungeons before he recognized the small *click, click, clicking* of footsteps far behind him as belonging to his nosy apprentice. He stopped abruptly and melted into the shadows as her footfalls came closer. Soon, a figure passed his hidden spot in an agitated blur. Turning his head slightly, he peeked out from the alcove to watch her small form as she continued on her search. Smiling inwardly, he listened as the footsteps echoed the owner's confusion as they came to a halt, then clicked softly, almost timidly, as Hermione spun around to find him.

So enthralled was he in the ancient game of predator versus prey that he nearly missed the subtle scent of femininity that wafted to his highly sensitive nose from the opposite direction. He knew the scent well; it was as deeply ingrained into his senses as a mother's scent is to her child. He inhaled deeply and stepped out of his hiding place and directly into the path of Minerva McGonagall with only the slightest trepidation.

"Will you ever outgrow that, Severus?" asked Minerva exasperatedly.

"Whatever do you mean, Headmistress?" questioned Snape, both his eyebrows raised in an innocent expression.

"You know well what I mean. Hiding! Sneaking up on unsuspecting..."

Severus interrupted what was quickly amounting to a rant with a dismissive flick of his hand. "Is there something you needed, Headmistress?" He glanced back to the spot that he had last seen Hermione, but she was no longer there.

His eyes returned to Minerva's as she spoke in a halting tone, clearly upset. "Severus, I came to talk to you about last night. I was..." She was interrupted again, this time by a guttural growl. Peering quizzically at him, she began again, "Severus, I had only enter..." Now it was a roar that effectively halted her speech.

"Here?" he spat at her. "Here? You are going to discuss this *here*?"

"Well, I don't see any reason..."

"No, you're right. You never see any *reason*, do you?" With that, Snape spun on his heel and defiantly strode down the corridor, his robes billowing in his wake. It took Minerva a few moments to digest what he had said and for the residual shock to wear off as she stared at his retreating form descending down to the dungeons. Belatedly,

she shouted his name in admonishment.

From another alcove a few yards from the scene, hidden in the shadows, Hermione couldn't stifle her sigh of pent-up frustration. Her curiosity for her employer had waned this morning in the excitement of the upcoming event with the Order, but it had just peaked again when she had watched him read the scroll, and this argument that she had just witnessed only proved to fan the fire within. Taking a deep breath, she decided to try and confront the situation head-on. Waiting until Minerva was out of sight, Hermione dashed down to the dungeons, intent on getting answers to her burning questions.

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With hands shaking in rage, Severus fumbled slightly in removing the wards on his private chambers. He did not want to be reminded of last night. He did not want to hear lectures on his behavior. Fury boiled within him once again as he thought of McGonagall in his rooms, examining, prying, *trespassing*.

He thundered to his desk and ripped the quill with violent force from its holder. Grabbing a stray piece of parchment, he began to write:

*Lucius,*

I thank you for the gift to enable my research. Mrs. Malfoy is welcome in these dungeons. I look forward to her addition to our staff as my newest apprentice. I am honored to be invited to tea, but ask that you make preparations for one more guest in addendum to myself.

Regards,

Severus Snape

Severus rolled the parchment up, sealed it with wax, and attached it to the leg of a school barn owl that he kept in his office for this very purpose. School owls were expendable to him and therefore were the only animals he used to transport messages back and forth to various allies and enemies; sent on paths that almost certainly condemned the animal to death.

He sent the owl off, watching it with amusement as it flew up the fireplace. Unable to use the Floo network, of course, and with no open windows to escape from in the dungeons, the owl simply used the fireplace to fly up the chimney to the exit at the top of castle to begin its journey.

A sharp rapping at his door interrupted the silence. "Enter," he growled menacingly, staring down at his desk and contemplating which stack of papers needed his attention first. He need not look up to know who crossed the threshold into his office her footsteps, timid yet determined, her scent of vanilla and peppermint, the crackling electricity in the air: Hermione Granger.

Reminding herself to breath, she opened her mouth to begin the interrogation, when she was suddenly struck dumb. Severus had looked up from his desk and into her eyes with the most chilling, disturbing, vicious grin she had ever imagined.

"Ah, Granger..." he purred at her, causing her blood to freeze.

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**Author's Note** Three cheers for the most amazing, brilliant, charismatic beta~~ever~~: Angel Mischa! Any mistakes found are mine cause I ...am human!

**Also:** You may have noticed that the updates are a bit slower. Well, it's going to get a little worse. As it is a busy holiday season right now, and in less than a month a new semester starts for me... I'm going to be spread thin. So, please, please be patient, I will not abandon you!

## Lost in Translation

*Chapter 6 of 19*

*\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's**dark** and violent past.

Severus' smiled rivaled that of the fabled Cheshire Cat and made Hermione feel as terrified and lost as the young Alice. He stood slowly, stretching to his full height with that sadistic smile never leaving his lips, and leaned over her menacingly. "Granger... Granger..." he silkily whispered in a low voice. She strived to feel no fear, lest he sense it. She mentally chastised herself for thinking she could burst into his, *his*, office and demand answers. *Stupid, foolish Gryffindor*. She had proved him right.

She closed her eyes tightly and braced herself for whatever cruelty might spew forth. She resolutely stood, determined to not allow his words to slice through her. She was ready. *He is nothing but an overgrown, hurt boy. A bully. He needs to be in control, let him think he's in control* That last sentence became a mantra in her mind, repeating over and over. *In control, let him think he's in control*...Yes, she was ready for anything.

"Granger..." he drawled again, disrupting momentarily her mental chant. "Granger, tomorrow you will be accompanying me to an event. I want you dressed appropriately in professional attire. Bring nothing but your wand. No parchment, no quill, no ink, just your wand. Is that clear?"

Yes, ready ready for *anything* but *that*. "S...Sir?" she asked, opening her eyes to gaze up at him in confusion.

"Hmm. It seems something was lost in translation. Let me attempt this again, so that the *brightest witch of her age* can understand. You. Will. Go. With. Me. Tomorrow. Bring. Wand. Nothing. Else. Clear?" His obsidian eyes glittered with malice and a spark of... was that humor?

"I apologize, sir," she growled indignantly, all fear forgotten in the face of such an insult. She opened her mouth to say more, to say so much more, and her tongue was poised and her breath had been drawn when her mind whispered to her, *Control. Let him think he's in control. You can manage him if he feels he is in contro* So Hermione instead closed her mouth and smiled demurely at him, feeling victorious as she caught a glimpse of his expression before it was masked. He expected her to

rage. Her smile twisted into a grin. He was caught off-balance. *Control, control, girl!* Her mind scolded her. The grin was wiped from her face.

He glared at her for a few moments longer, his calculating eyes boring into her, making her feel self-conscious, naked, afraid. A feral energy rolled off him in waves; a primal unpredictability cloaked him. Her mind quickly reeled with the realization that *he was in control. Always has been. In. Control.* Like an animal toying with his food, he seemed to beg her to challenge him, to give him a reason to tear her apart and feast on her every insecurity, every flaw, every...

"You are dismissed, Granger. I will see you here, at my door, tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock. I have no more use for you today."

She was the one off-balance. She stared at him in confusion again, feeling once more like Alice, falling through the rabbit-hole. Unsure. Terrified. *Prey.*

"Get out." He said it softly, almost tenderly, but she knew it was the only offer she would receive to escape unscathed, just as she knew he hoped she would stay. To fight. To give him reason to attack. To make the kill sporting. And so she remained rooted to her spot. Anger warred with fear within her, but she welcomed the feelings with passion. *Control, stupid girl, give him control.* She physically shook her head both to her inner monologue and to his statement *No.*

His eyes narrowed, his glare scalded her skin. *No. He can't hurt me. Not physically. And only emotionally if I allow it.* Her chin rose, her muscles tensed, she was again ready for battle. *This is stupid; you can't win the battle like this!* her mind screamed. *You must adapt, think! He expects this. He waits for this. He uses this!* Thoughts continued to race through her head, confusion flooded her senses.

Through it all, that brutal, pitiless, spiteful twist of his lips remained. The grin that forcibly reminded her of a crocodile. His voice was deeper, lower, and as soft as a whisper when he repeated, "Get out."

Her eyes flicked away from his momentarily. *Do it. Let him think he's won.* But she still paused, afraid to back down now, fearful that she would lose any respect she gained (if she had indeed gained any) by her courageous display. Confusion settled over her like a blanket, and she at once heard Ron's voice in her mind, *What's your next move, Hermione? Think about it, don't rush in.* He had tried to teach her the strategies of chess, and it was that memory that was vocalized in her brain as she returned the glare of the man before her.

His expression never wavered. His eyes never blinked, never moved. And yet the change that washed over him seemed physically altering to Hermione. The tone of his voice was one of resignation as he said, "Fine. Get together the ingredients for Wolfsbane, if you please. And a cauldron. Can you tell me when the next full moon is, Granger?"

She blinked. He seemed to patiently await her response. *What just happened?* "Or are you going to refuse me your assistance as well?" He paused, and yet she still could not speak. "I see. Very well. You reject my kind *suggestion* for you to leave, and you decline to work, so what is it that you want *Miss Granger*? Perhaps you are hoping that I could be of some assistance to you?" Finally, his sickening smile vanished. It was instead replaced by a cold, icy sneer.

*Ice. He is ice. So, then, shall I be fire.* "Yes," she purred with false bravado, "I was hoping you might tell me more about this engagement you have invited me to. Will there be others present? Are we gathering ingredients? Are we purchasing or selling potions? Will there be brewing involved? Should I wear my hair up or down?" She clasped her hands behind her back in order to shield their trembling. What had gotten into her? *Why am I provoking him?*

"Sarcasm doesn't become you. But then, nothing really does become you, does it?" He paused, watching her impressively impassive face absorb the blow. "No, we will not be brewing, although having your wild mane tamed and trapped is always a welcome sight. Or, at least, more welcome than its present state. Also, I would like to remind you to be respectful when addressing your superiors. We wouldn't want the prized cub of Gryffindor to forget her manners or her *place*, now would we?"

Indignation infused her speech as she scathingly replied, "Is it good form to attack the physical characteristics of those who threaten your personal views, *sir*? Surely you can find enough ammunition with my personality faults without resorting to my undesirable hair? Because, if hair care is going to be fair game, then..."

"*Enough!*" he bellowed. She had the good grace to look chastised, though not contrite in the least. "Get out, and quickly, Granger. I do not want to see you again until tomorrow afternoon. *Is that clear?*" He bit the last sentence out as he leaned into her, his face merely inches from her own. His scent reminded her of wormwood mixed with the smell of sandalwood and a hint of citrus. It was not unpleasant.

"Until tomorrow, sir." She then audaciously curtsied and proudly strode out of the office, convinced she had won the battle. *Hermione: 1, Snape: 0.*

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Remus settled into his desk with a small sigh of contentment. Today was Friday, and on Fridays he had a planning period until lunch. This gave him the opportunity to sleep in, spend breakfast with his family, and then to retreat from the bustle of a home filled with an endearingly clumsy wife and noisy toddler to a blissfully silent, peaceful office of seclusion.

His tranquil solitude did not last long, however; a sharp rap at the door intruded upon his musings. He stood and called out, "Enter!" He broke into a genuine smile as Hermione Granger opened the door and graced his threshold. "Come in, do come in!" he cried out to her warmly. She returned his smile and made her way toward him, closing the door softly behind her with a muffled *snick*.

The two embraced fondly, and when they broke apart, Remus quickly conjured up two teacups and summoned a deliciously full teapot, which was still steaming slightly. "And how is my favorite resident of the dungeons?" he asked genially, pouring her a cup of piping hot, black tea.

"Oh, Professor Snape is doing fine, he'll be so happy you asked!" she giggled and broke into an outright laugh at his expression.

"Yes, well... and how are you?"

She waited for her giggles to subside, took a sip of the delectably strong tea, and said, "I'm fine. No, actually, I'm more than fine. I think this apprenticeship will really work out." Remus peered at her quizzically. She waved his questions off with a delicate flick of her wrist. "So, how are you, and Teddy and Tonks? Excited about the feast tomorrow? Oh, I do hope everyone shows up, it's been so long since we've all been together!"

Lupin laughed softly at her before responding, "My family and I are doing wonderful. Dora and I cannot wait until Christmas; we love to play Father Christmas to the little guy. Although, truth be told, he's still more interested in the packages, ribbons, wrappings, and bows more than the actual gift itself." Hermione giggled at the image of little Teddy playing with cardboard boxes while expensive gifts surrounded him, unconcerned with the numerous unwrapped presents that littered the floor.

"Maybe I should just get him a box, then?" she asked.

"Then your gift would undoubtedly be his favorite." He watched her as she fell into a fit of soft giggles again, patiently waiting for her to catch her breath before he resumed speaking. "Dora is still trying to find a sitter for him for tomorrow night; we unanimously decided against bringing a toddler within fifty feet of Severus Snape." This time, he joined her in the laughter.

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The next day, Saturday, had been the most pleasant day Hermione had experienced ever since being accepted as Professor Snape's apprentice. After spending another morning (including breakfast and lunch) with Remus, she relaxed in her rooms in a sudsy bubble bath and with an old Potions text, allowing her mind to wander over the previous day's events. She had no room within her head to worry about the consequences of her victory over Snape; it was filled to the brim with excitement over the

upcoming feast and reunion with her best friends.

She lazily glanced at the ancient clock on the opposite wall and then jumped with a start. It was already two thirty, and she hadn't picked out her clothes yet! Although, truthfully, all her garments were contenders for the job ahead all were professional, conservative, flattering, and impeccably clean.

After standing in front of her wardrobe, clad only in a towel, for several minutes, she finally came to a decision about her dress. It would be a beautiful, yet comfortable, linen skirt in a pale shade of heather gray topped with a crimson cashmere sweater with the smallest bit of the gold-tinted camisole underneath peeking out at her collar. Professional and undeniably Gryffindor. She twirled in front of the mirror, grinning unabashedly at her reflection. She topped off the look with a demure, black silk robe that clasped at the base of her neck with a golden lion, beneath which the robe flared open to reveal her clothing. The garment hugged her figure in all the right places.

She next tackled her hair, pinning it up with both magical and Muggle methods, and dusted her face with a light, loose powder to remove the sheen. She grabbed her warm, wool traveling cloak and slipped her wand into her robes. She felt ready, she felt confident, she felt feminine, she felt... *sexy*.

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When she had, at last, reached the door of the Potion master's office, she knew she had only seconds to spare. Knocking soundly on the door, she composed herself and drew herself up to her fullest height, feeling as though she were about to walk into a combat zone with only the thinnest armor. The length of time it was taking him to answer the door made her feel edgy and unsure.

Finally, the door was flung open, and Hermione was face to face with Severus Snape, watching his eyes travel from her head to foot and back again in cold appraisal. She raised her chin and treated him to the same.

He wore black boots and black trousers, as per usual, and a white linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up almost to his elbows. The white shirt was, of course, unusual compared to what she normally saw on him, but she said nothing. He ushered her in and promptly closed the door behind her with such force that the thud reverberated around the room.

"Take a seat," he muttered to her as he strolled to a wooden worktable. "You were nearly late, but I'm afraid that it will be me that delays our journey." She sat on a nearby stool, gazing at him in curiosity. His back was to her, so she quickly changed seats to better observe him. He seemed to be rubbing something onto his right arm, which was as pale as porcelain save for a set of angry red marks that formed a semicircle on his forearm. Hermione softly gasped when she recognized the pattern.

"Something bit you?" she asked with a voice laced with concern.

He snorted derisively. "Your powers of observation astound me, Granger."

She ignored the comment. "But what animal has such a small mouth, yet..."

"The worst kind," he interrupted, now unrolling a sterile cloth bandage and placing the back of his arm atop it.

It took the daughter of two successful dentists a moment to realize that bite marks, with that particular pattern, that size, and with that amount of force, could only belong to a human. She gazed at the wound in wonder as he began to wrap it with the bandage. *It's too small to be a man's mark, so it must be that of a child or woman.* Fear coursed through her. Why would a woman or child bite her employer? *In defense?*

"It was not in defense," he growled at her, and she noticed he had turned and was staring directly into her eyes. "It was in passion. And decidedly *not* a child. Are you ready?"

Her jaw dropped. She was sure it had to have made a giant thud on the ground. *In passion? Then why on his forearm? Passion! Someone... with Snape? Snape?*

"Contrary to popular belief, I'm sure, I do engage in *consensual* sexual activities. Close your mouth and let's go."

She blinked and gazed dazedly up at him. He had unrolled his sleeves during her temporary lapse and added his customary black, buttoned-up robes and similarly standard black traveling cloak. He held out his hand to her and growled at her impatiently when she only stared back. "Come now, Miss Granger. *I won't bite.*" And his sarcastic laughter rang in her mind even as they descended the path to the gates of Hogwarts and past them to the Apparition point. With another sadistic grin, he hooked his arm around her waist and pulled her tightly to him, and with a loud pop the world spun away from sight, taking with it all her courage and sense of security.

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**Author's Note** Three cheers for the \*BEST\* beta ever: Angel Mischa! Any mistakes found are mine cause I ...am human!

**Also:** Okay, so I found some free time to get this chapter written and up pretty quickly. The same may hold true for the next chapter, of which I'm writing currently. I found that my days will not be all that busy until the beginning of January, so for this month (Dec.) you can expect the normal turn around for updates! Thank you to everyone who has hung in there so far!

**Up Next:** We finally make it to the tea party at the Malfoys, and Hermione discovers a treasure chest of information about Snape. Erm.. hope that made sense. (I need a beta even for my comments...)

**Update:** I feel the need to reassure my readers that Snape will not continue to bully Hermione for much longer, as she will no longer stand for it. He's bullied her for 7 years, so it's a bit of a nasty habit. So please stay tuned, things will get better ;) Oh, and, just a reminder, this story is AU.

## Evasive Answers

Chapter 7 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

When Hermione's weightlessness abruptly ended, when she could make out images beyond incomprehensible blurs, when the strong arm around her waist suddenly ceased to support her staggering form, she knew they had reached their destination. The world around her still spun wildly, but she knew it had nothing to do with the Side-Along Apparition.

The man beside her moved forward at a brisk pace, leaving her behind as she gasped for breath. They had been transported to what seemed to be an unfriendly and uninhabitable neighborhood. Houses lined the streets in various states of disrepair and decay, and the only sounds she could hear were soft noises made by small creatures that lived in the grassy fields that must have, at one point, been manicured lawns. Yet again the icy fingers of fear gripped her stomach and heart. This place was deserted. She was alone. With *him*. Fleeting thoughts of Apparating herself back to Hogwarts flooded her mind, but before she could even successfully concentrate on the destination, a hand clutched her wrist roughly. The man, Severus Snape, had turned and stalked back to where she stood, as if summoned by her thoughts of fleeing.

"Come with me," he growled, then paused, stared at her a moment, and whispered painfully with a wince, "*Please*."

For the second time that day, she felt as though her jaw met the ground with enough force to shatter her teeth. *Please? What game is this?* She stood her ground and wrenched herself from his grip. "I will not move an inch until you tell me where we are going and why."

He raised his eyebrow at her, his black eyes searching her own, and eventually acquiesced. "While it may be encouraging to see that you refuse to blindly follow others into what could be the path of danger, I must confess I am disappointed to see that you honestly believe, at this point, that you have the authority, or ability, to demand anything. This little rebellion is a bit too little, too late... Although it has proven that you interpret signs of kindness as an invitation to take advantage of any given situation. Thus, kindness is something that I will no longer take pains to repeat in your presence." He grasped her forearm much more harshly than before and dragged her to his side. "However, I will tell you where we are going, so that I might avoid further delays. That," he pointed down the street to a house at the end with crumbling brick walls and an odd shaped chimney before continuing, "is my home, in which we will spend a few moments while I gather some... supplies." He looked down at her and arched his eyebrow once more, as if in a non-verbal challenge. She simply nodded numbly, and they began to walk toward the dilapidated structure together, his hand still tightly wrapped around her right arm, her eyes desperately seeking a means of escape.

When at last they stepped up to the last house on the row, Snape relaxed his grip on her. Hermione risked a quick glance at his face in hopes to catch a glimpse of his expression any tiny hint that might explain what she should expect next. His profile, however, was shrouded in the curtain of lank, jet hair. He released her after pushing her ahead of him to the front door and blocking her exit with his lanky form, ensuring she could not break free. The silence that hummed between them was a tense, living thing.

He raised his right arm, wand in hand, and performed a series of complicated movements accompanied with muttered words that she could not comprehend. The door before them shimmered slightly and after a few seconds returned to its original, dull, weathered finish. The wards on the house had been disarmed.

Severus reached around her, causing her to start slightly, and turned the doorknob. The heavy door slowly creaked open to reveal... darkness. She turned and gazed up at him expectantly. He shoved her forward, causing her to stumble into the nothingness before them ungracefully.

The door shut silently, and from somewhere in front of her she heard his malicious voice drawl sardonically, "Welcome to my humble home." At his words, the house was suddenly lit, and she frantically spun around to find him, her wand pointed directly in front of her.

"Put that away," he commanded in a bored voice. Whipping her neck around, she saw him leaning against a bookshelf at the opposite end of the room, arms crossed, gaze directed at something she couldn't see. Obeying the request, she slowly slipped the wand back into her robes, all the while casually observing her surroundings with an air of nonchalance, though her body visibly trembled.

They were in a small room that seemed to serve as a living room of sorts and smelled faintly of tobacco smoke. There were two ratty armchairs positioned in the center and facing a stone fireplace. A few small tables were placed around the chairs and were coated in a thin film of dust. There was a grand bookcase that took up the entire wall across the room, the same piece of furniture that her employer was presently inclined against. The rest of the room was indiscernible, as books and parchment littered every nook and crevice, pouring out of alcoves and shelves, stacked upon anything remotely stable enough to support their weight.

Though the room was shabby and in dire need of tidying up, it still was suffused with a certain warmth a cozy feeling that Hermione attributed solely to the amount of books. After her brief observation was completed, she returned her attention to Snape, who, she was pleasantly surprised to see, was staring at her with a look of trepidation. Another awkward silence descended as the two stared at each other, each willing the other to speak first.

"Where is... May I use the restroom?" squeaked Hermione. She winced at how helpless and pitiful her voice seemed to sound.

His eyes flickered briefly then shifted in the direction of the corridor. "It's the last door on the left. Hurry up, we will leave soon." He pushed himself away from the bookshelf in a lithe, graceful motion and exited the room through the long, dark corridor, himself taking the first right.

"We're returning to Hogwarts?" she called after him, curious as to why she had to dress in 'professional attire' if they were only going to his home, unless it was to meet someone? Her heart fluttered nervously. The house *seemed* empty, except for the two of them.

"Don't be daft," he replied to her from the other room, "This is merely a scheduled stop. Now, go and be quick, I don't want to arrive late because a slip of a *girl* wasted my time by asking *ridiculous* questions."

She rolled her eyes and started down the dark hallway, unsure if she would be able to *find* the last left in the absence of any light. It was of no real importance, however; Hermione, of course, did not need to use the facilities. This was her opportunity to find a way out, to find a way back to Hogwarts, to *escape*. That word kept scrolling through her mind in an endless cycle. *Escape*. She quickly continued down the corridor, her ears perked for even a ghost of a whisper to gauge her captor's whereabouts. She fumbled for her wand, cast a quick *Lumos*, and looked around.

The corridor was simple and as dingy as the first room she found herself in; the walls were adorned with faded, cracking wallpaper, and the wainscoting was yellowish, dirty, chipped and decayed in a few spots. Affixed to the walls were numerous picture frames; most of them were empty or else sporting the fantastic burns of hexes, obliterating the contents. One, however, remained untouched, though not by lack of trying (Hermione saw the scorch marks and holes in the wall that surrounded the picture, but the object itself was intact and in pristine condition). As she leaned forward to examine it more carefully, she pressed her hand onto the wall for support and felt something blunt push into her palm. Glancing underneath her hand cautiously, she found a common light switch. A *Muggle* light switch. Bemused, she flicked the tiny lever upward, illuminating the hall with artificial light.

Hermione returned her gaze to the undisturbed portrait. It seemed to be immune to dust and dirt as well as hexes and jinxes. Within the spotless glass enclosure was placed a slightly faded magical photograph, depicting a small family. A tall, wiry man was glowering at the camera, perched behind the other two inhabitants, and sporting a beak of a nose. He had short, black hair, dark eyes, and wore a thin, white t-shirt and dirty denims. He also wore a pair of black worker's boots that were caked in some sort of dark substance. Standing next to him, with an expression of dreamy listlessness that would rival Luna's at her best, was a frail-looking woman with fine, black hair that was tied back and revealed a thin neck with several suspicious-looking blemishes that formed a shadow of a hand. She wore a wispy sundress that fluttered in the wind and looked several sizes too large. Between them, though, was a figure that captured the most of Hermione's attention. A small boy, no more than four or five, stood with an air of solemnity that was far beyond his few years. He shared the same shade of black hair as the two adults, and it was also cut short to resemble the style of the man's behind him. The boy's nose was thin and long, his eyes as dark as his hair. There was no doubt in Hermione's mind that she was staring at a young Severus Snape.

And the more she examined the photo, the more disturbed she felt. The young Snape's fists were tightly clenched at his sides, his legs slightly apart, and anger seemed to radiate from his tiny form. His left cheek and the area surrounding his left eye were noticeably darker than the rest of his face and it was here, when she was staring into

the boy's eyes, that she saw an action that troubled her more than the obvious bruises that decorated Mother Snape and Child Snape's skin. Every five seconds or so, the boy's eyes rolled back into his head for a fraction of an instant, and his entire body trembled slightly, listing to the side as though he were about to collapse. Then the enchanted loop of the magical picture would start again, and the boy would return to, for lack of a better word, *normal*.

Was the boy seizing? Was he being cursed, hexed, jinxed? Hermione quickly ran these symptoms through the catalogs of medical information stored within her mind, magical and Muggle alike. She remembered tales told from other Muggle-borns that similar physical ailments were suffered due to the suppressing of magic within one's body for an extended period of time. That, of course, would make complete sense, were Snape a Muggle-born. Which, she knew, he was not. But she did know that he was a half-blood, that his father was a Muggle, and by the evidence in this picture, he was not a tolerant man. But was he a man that would abuse his child for accidental, involuntary displays of magic? Harry's relatives did. Was Tobias Snape the same? Or, possibly, even worse?

Hermione tore her gaze from the picture and resumed searching for avenues of quick departure; she could no longer stand to see the young child in obvious pain. She passed the room that Snape was engaged in with only a secondary glance. It looked to be a kitchen or dining room she wasn't entirely sure which. She hazarded another brief, cursory peek inside, and it revealed his figure bathed in natural light from an unseen window; his black robes and cloak discarded once more, the sleeves of his white shirt pushed up, the bandage on his arm exposed with a faint, red semi-circle seeping through the cloth. Around him was an assortment of what seemed to be liquor bottles. The rest of the scene she was unable to retain in such a short span of time. She quietly slipped away, journeying deeper into the hall.

Following that room was a door on the right, the surface scratched and riddled with large pieces of wood missing in chunks that were not fresh, judging by their smoothness and dark color. Hermione surreptitiously glanced down the hall in the direction of the kitchen area before cautiously, soundlessly, turning the knob and entering the room. Once on the other side, in complete darkness, she used both hands to close the door to ensure its silence. She stood absolutely still for a few tense moments, straining to hear if the Potions master had somehow been notified of her trespass and was on his way to... to what? Kill her? *Not likely*. Punish her? *Definitely*.

But no heavy hand of scorn rained down upon her, no roaring voice split her eardrums, no indication whatsoever that he was aware of her presence in this room. Cautiously, she stepped further into the chamber and wordlessly cast *Lumos*. At once, the shadows surrounding her yielded to the bright light that burst from the tip of her wand, revealing a tiny bedroom fitted for a child.

Thick layers of dust lined everything in sight a great amount of it disturbed by Hermione's entry, causing her to forcibly stifle a few coughs behind her free hand. The bedroom seemed to currently double as a storage room with stacks of discarded items littering the dirty wooden floor. Through the heaps of neglected objects she could discern a small bed in the corner near the only window which was boarded up to prevent any light from leaking through. The bed was covered in blankets of dull gray and green, the sheets a silver hue, the pillowcases mismatched in differing shades of emerald. It looked as though it had not been slept in for several years.

The walls were also a matte gray with a coating of a thin film of dirt, and nearly bare, save for one faded poster too worn to distinguish. There was a closet opposite the bed, and a chest of drawers shared the closet wall. Hermione was unable to differentiate anything else amid all the clutter.

Sinking to her knees while listening for any indication that Snape was near, Hermione gingerly began to sort through the mess, unsure of what she may find, or even why she was still interested. A few minutes into her dividing of used Hogwarts standard textbooks, a few packs of Exploding Snap, and the shattered remains of a Quidditch broomstick, she happened upon a curious-looking box. For all intents and purposes, it appeared to be an old Muggle shoebox advertising the name of a popular footwear company. Quite ordinary to find in a Muggle child's room, but for some reason, it struck Hermione as an odd object to find in the boyhood bedroom of Severus Snape. When she had first spied the container, she felt an intense spark of curiosity. However, upon touching the box, she felt a faint flutter of anxiety and a sudden determination that it was *only* a box a plain, common shoebox. Puzzled, Hermione set the box back down and cocked her head to the side as all the previous thoughts immediately drained from her mind.

She smiled, recognizing at once that some sort of cloaking spell had been cast over the container. Judging by its present weak state, the spell must have been cast decades ago, and most likely by a child. Possibly, a young Snape. "What is in this box that you don't want anyone to see? What secrets could a little boy possibly need to hide?" she whispered quietly at the shoebox.

Hermione took a moment to once again check for any sights or sounds of her employer within her proximity. Satisfied, she focused her attention to a quick wandless disarming spell, should the box contain any traps. Slowly, she pulled away the cardboard cover and gazed inside in wonder. The shoebox had been magically expanded and was filled to the brim with loose parchment, photographs, broken toys, medals, coins, snapped quills, sweets, and a petrified rat carcass, among other things. Hermione let out a tiny shriek and dropped the box at the sight of the animal corpse, then quickly covered her mouth and listened for footsteps approaching. Though none came, she realized that she had been absent for far longer than time normally allotted for a toilet break. She quickly gathered the shoebox and lid together, cast a charm to reduce its size and pocketed it in her robes. As carefully and silently as she entered the room she exited, undetected.

When she returned to the sitting room, he wasn't there. Retracing her steps, she stopped again at the first right off the corridor. The kitchen/dining room. This was where she found him, still bent over the suspicious looking bottles with an expression of intense concentration. Again, her mind screamed at her to escape, to flee while he was distracted. Yet she was intrigued with the mystery of where he planned to take her, of what he was doing with these bottles and potions ingredients spread out before him. She was intrigued by *him*.

Her sharp gasp at this sudden epiphany startled Snape, and before she could blink, he was before her, his wand digging sharply into her throat. A few moments passed, agonizingly slow, before he frowned, narrowed his eyes and lowered his wand. Tilting his head to the side slightly, his eyes traveling from her head to her feet and back again, he quipped, "Were you struck by an illness of some sort?"

"An illness? No..."

Snape cocked his eyebrow at her response, but said nothing. Belatedly, she realized he was offering her an out as to why she had taken so long to return from the toilet. Frowning inwardly as she mentally chastised herself, Hermione quickly shifted her gaze to the left of him to avoid his probing stare. More minutes ticked by, the silence making her shift uneasily. When she gathered the courage to glance back at him, he was once again behind the worktable, corking the two bottles with a silent charm.

Without looking up from his activity, he stated, "Where we are going, you will need to present a gift. Seeing as you have nothing valuable, I purposely refrained from informing you of this before." Hermione clenched her jaw to prevent a retort. He continued, addressing the ingredients he was now cleaning up, "You will offer this Muggle wine a Japanese plum wine. They will accept, though they will not drink it. You will request that it be served, and you will drink it, and *only* it. It has added elements of crushed bezoar and other anti-poisoning agents, should you forget my instructions, or should you be offered food that you will, undoubtedly, have to consume." Snape at last looked up at her, waiting for a sign of understanding that she soon rewarded with a slight nod of comprehension.

"And that bottle?" she inquired bravely, indicating the green glass container that was crafted with a magically embossed fairy that circled around the circumference of the bottle lazily.

"That will be my gift. And it will be consumed. Though, again, not by you." Severus began to unroll his shirt sleeves, starting with the left and covering the faint bubblegum-pink scar that was the only remnant of the Dark Mark, and reaching over to his right before abruptly stopping with a mutter curse that sounded suspiciously like the word "fuck." Hermione's eyes widened perceptibly at the obscenity it was a bit of foul language that she never expected to hear from her former professors, not even *him*. Her vision of her boss, in a long standing position of authority over children, on the high pedestal she placed him upon with all the other former teachers in her life, all the *adults* this vision cracked and wavered a bit for the second time in a day. *Professor Snape has sex. Professor Snape says 'fuck.'* *Professor Snape is.. human.*

The entire thinking process took only a few seconds, leaving her dazed slightly at yet another epiphany. She glanced at the source of his frustration: his right arm. It had bled through the bandage. He glared at his limb with such irritation, an expression that she and her two best friends were often treated to in her school years, that she briefly wondered if he would attempt to take points from it.

Snape peeled the bandage back slowly, barely suppressing a wince as he tugged on the piece of cloth that stuck to the wound. Despite her conflicting feelings toward him of equal parts fear and fascination, she could not resist walking toward him and leaning over the worktable slightly to get a better look at the offending injury. The area

surrounding the abrasion was swollen with an angry red color. The bite mark bled freely now; the removal of the bandage had taken with it any healed skin, reopening the series of small cuts. As she leaned even closer, Hermione saw that not only blood, but also a yellowish liquid oozed from the lacerations. She recoiled and stated, more to herself than to the man present, "It's infected."

"Again, your skills of observation astound me." he growled. Snape turned his back to her and rummaged through a few drawers and cabinets before returning to his spot and laying his right arm roughly on the table surface. In his other hand, he set down a jar filled with a brilliant red paste and glanced up at her. "Open that, but be careful not to touch the contents." he commanded.

She did as he said, all the while watching him keenly as he snatched a nearby bottle of Firewhiskey. Snape then turned away from her once more, retrieved a small shot glass and faced her again as he filled it with the liquor. Placing the bottle aside, he reached toward her with his uninjured limb, and after a small awkward moment of confusion on her end, Hermione quickly offered him the opened jar. She watched with growing interest as he set the jar down, wincing slightly as he gathered up some of the crimson paste and proceeded to apply it to the wound. She gasped as the affected area began to audibly sizzle, barely visible smoke rising from his skin as the smell of burning flesh assaulted her senses. Snape's wince had graduated to a painful grimace, his eyes tightly shut as he blindly fumbled around for the glass. Hermione reached forward hesitantly to assist, but he finally grasped the shot glass, throwing back his head as he downed the amber liquid... and subsequently collapsed.

In a panic, Hermione rushed to his side, kneeling down on the floor as she did so. "Professor?" she inquired in a high-pitched voice. He didn't answer. His body rocked somewhat, listing to the left then the right as he cradled his injured limb, his eyes still clamped shut. She watched in horror as the skin on his right arm sealed itself and the sizzling sound slowly subsided.

Snape panted and carefully opened his eyes after a few minutes, then sat up and rubbed the newly formed scar gingerly. An eternity seemed to pass by as they both stared at his forearm, the silence hanging between them like the stench of burning flesh that still filled the room. Slowly exhaling, he carefully unrolled the right sleeve and stood, a bit shakily at first, and donned his robes and cloak, flexing his arm every so often.

Hermione was at a loss for words. She knew better than to acknowledge his display of humanity, *owekness*, as he would undoubtedly perceive it to be. Her only option was to ignore the scene that had played out before her only moments ago. Snape was gathering the bottles together as she rose to her feet and cleaned off imaginary dirt from her skirt, wishing that she could somehow dissolve the thick tension between them.

"Let's go." He hissed curtly, gripping her wrist gently and leading her back into the living room area. Snape let go of her then and glanced over his shoulder to ensure that she followed as they made their way out the door. Pausing on the steps, she patiently stood aside as he reset the wards, then turned to face her, his left arm bent and aloft in a gentleman-like fashion as he waited for her to grab on. Once Hermione did, they walked together to the end of the street, and she had just a moment to look back at the home of Severus Snape before the world around her once again spun violently.

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They gracefully landed in a thick blanket of snow with a faint *pop!* There was a *swoosh* sound that grew louder and louder as she waited for her senses to stop reeling. As she opened her eyes, she jumped back in alarm as a brightly colored sleigh rushed by them, propelled by magic, with two figures seated at the top, laughing derisively as they passed. Snape did not move, but watched the event with a bored expression before offering his arm once more to her and assisting her across an expansive lawn that was inhabited by the strangest creatures Hermione had ever seen: *white* peacocks that preened and pranced around in the snow, visible only by the sheer radiance of their unblemished plumage against the suddenly dingy, off-white fluff that coated everything else in sight. She vainly tried to locate a female amongst them, but the effort was futile. The male birds huffed and haughtily strode out of their path when it became obvious that Professor Snape preferred to barrel through them, rather than gently wind his way around their bodies, as Hermione attempted to do.

"Where are we?" Hermione asked, still trying to keep up with Snape and step around the peacocks as he dragged her forward. A bird squawked at her as her knee connected with its flank, causing her to dance awkwardly as she tried to avoid tripping over it.

"You'll know soon enough," was his gruff reply. They walked together in silence, Snape seeming to take pleasure in the occasional squeak of a peacock that had the bad grace to fall underfoot. Angry at both his lack of concern for the well-being of the animals as well as his evasive answers and the manner in which he dragged her from place to place as though she were a leashed dog, Hermione suddenly locked her knees and refused to go any further. Snape also stopped and turned to look at her with a curious expression on his face.

"I want to know where you are taking me. If you don't tell me, I'll Apparate back to Hogwarts immediately!" Fury infused her voice, and she glared up at him defiantly.

He smiled genuinely. An action that frightened her more than his infamous temper tantrums and rages. Still, she glared. "You can't Apparate from here. You've already been seen, so to leave now, without my presence, will leave you unprotected. But, by all means, if you feel you still need to prove something, go ahead."

Her eyes narrowed. "It is a simple, logical question. Please answer me. Where are we?"

"Malfoy Manor." He waved his hand around dismissively.

"Why?" she growled, her eyes narrowing even more, obstructing her vision.

"We've been invited to tea."

"Tea?"

"Yes. Tea. It's a afternoon event, in which you sit..."

"Let me rephrase. I know what *tea* is. My question is *why* are we having tea with the Malfoys? Why did you bring *me* here? Is this another intimidation tactic, because *I will not* be..." Hermione was cut off mid-rant as another voice, a sickeningly familiar voice with a false cheeriness interrupted.

"Severus! You had me worried; you are known for your punctuality! Oh, who is this, then? Your mystery guest? What woman this week...Oh! Oh, it's the M...Ms. Granger. Really now, Severus, I thought you had better taste than..."

"Spare me, Lucius, you know why she's here. Let's skip over the *pleasantries*, shall we?"

Lucius' voice suddenly dropped an octave into his normal pitch as he replied, "Jovial as ever, I see. Come then. Narcissa's setting the table as we speak." Malfoy senior then led his guests to the grandiose mansion that sat atop the hill a short distance away. Had Hermione been in a mood to appreciate the beauty of the house, she would have marveled at the architecture, the stone walls with ivy climbing to the uppermost top of the roof, the stained glass windows that rounded slightly before peaking sharply at the pinnacle. The Manor seemed to be elegance and beauty personified, yet it was bathed in a cold, emotionless energy, surely mirroring the family that resided inside.

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**Author's Note** *Happy Holidays to all!*

Angel Mischa truly is an angel for taking the time to correct all my grammatical errors, spelling errors, and my comma binging. Any mistakes found are mine cause I ...am human!

And special thanks goes to both Angel Mischa and Amsev for suggesting titles for this chapter (I was at a loss), and again to Amsev for not only coming up with the title you see here, but also changing it for me! Whoo, Amsev's awesome! (\*leads everyone in a big round of applause\*)



Up Next: Pansy enters stage left.

# Introductions

Chapter 8 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's *dark* and violent past.

The brisk walk to the Manor heralded no further fanfare, only a moody silence that brewed between the two men and a brooding sense of danger that gripped the young woman in their midst. Once inside, however, Narcissa Malfoy appeared in the large entrance hall and, applying the oozing, saccharine coating to her voice, welcomed both the younger witch and wizard to her magnificent home which she also described as "humble." The stark difference between the two "humble" homes she had visited today was great indeed they stood on opposing sides, yet undeniably reflected the lives and personalities of those that lived within their walls.

The Malfoys were elegance personified: smooth, sleek, streamlined features with aristocratic privilege, controlled by the desire of power in every thought, word, movement, and action. All three shared a cold, stunning beauty, as though they were etched from glass. And, despite herself, Hermione was fascinated by this Wizarding family, so unlike her own. To be raised with such favor, to be bestowed with everything and anything money could buy, to be so classically striking, as though specifically bred for perfection what was that like? She would have questioned the ability for this family to ever feel authentic, genuine love had she not seen it with her own eyes during the War. Truly, the selfless actions of the parents to ensure the safety of their child revealed a depth within the Malfoys that Hermione would have doubted could ever existed had she not witnessed it time and again during that horrible night.

That terrible night, the Malfoys had shattered what was left of Hermione's child-like, monochromatic view of the world. It was not divided simply into black and white, not good and evil, but into varying degrees and shades of gray. It was a forceful reminder to her that not everything is as it seems. Once first acquainted, it seemed a paradox that the pale haired, alabaster-skinned, pristinely gorgeous beings contained such a vicious, seething darkness within. Though by no means were the Malfoys ever redeemed fully in her eyes, she had had to relinquish the vision of them as being soulless creatures, incapable of love, of passion for anything other than power. Ambition. No, Hermione had to realize that they, this family, *felt*. They were not inhuman.

Next to Hermione stood another enigma. Another walking contradiction. Severus Snape was the antithesis to nearly everything *Malfoy*. Where they *physically* resembled the archetypal heroes in a children's fable, Snape unquestionably shared the physical characteristics of the typical villain. The jet-black, greasy hair, the hooked nose, the black eyes, the black attire, the sneer, the calculating eyes: it was all there. He was the black to their white. But it was he who sacrificed everything in the War, beyond the sacrifices of Dumbledore, beyond even the sacrifices of Harry. So deep was his regret, so consuming was his self-hatred, he willingly gave his life to the Cause. Never trusted but by the one man who orchestrated his own death by the hands of Snape, never fully recognized... Hermione knew that in life, nothing is done completely selflessly. Dumbledore's behind-the-scenes actions had taught her that much. Snape was far from a saint. But he was just as far from being a villain.

Here she stood, between the polished Malfoys and the tarnished Snape, reflecting on her own maturity to see through the façade of childish reasoning, when the voices surrounding her breached her consciousness. "Here come Draco and Pansy now!" It was Narcissa's voice that penetrated her contemplations first. She was looking beyond Hermione and Severus, through the crystal glass window next to the door, motioning at two dark silhouettes trudging their way through the snow and albino peacocks.

"Ah, they can meet up with us in the drawing-room," said Lucius as he strolled lazily in front of the group, gesturing grandly to the room off to the left and gently pulling his wife away from the massive oak door. Hermione stole a glance up at Snape as he carefully removed his traveling cloak, bent forward slightly to assist her with her own, and passed them gently into Narcissa's outstretched hands. His expression was closed, his eyes flitting around the room curiously. Narcissa retreated further down the long hall, cloaks resting on her arm. As Lucius led the way into the next room, Hermione whispered out of the corner of her mouth to her employer behind her, "Are there no house-elves?"

He leaned down to her level, his eyes still staring straight ahead, and whispered facetiously into her ear, "I was under the impression that you succeeded in liberating them all."

She smiled at his quip in spite of herself and strode confidently into the room behind their host. The drawing-room was lavish, as ornate as the outside of the house; it contained gilded furnishings, plush, thick carpeting, and a tasteful diamond chandelier that lit the room with a soft, yellow light, enhancing the beauty of every twinkling object in sight. There was a massive, circular, mahogany table spread before them, tea settings laid out for six upon its gleaming surface. At once, Hermione realized that she had not given the bottle of wine to the Malfoys as she was instructed. Panicking, she whirled around to face Snape, trying to indicate the importance of the situation as she harshly whispered, "I didn't give him the wine. *Where* is the wine? I don't remember..."

"I gave the gifts to Lucius. When he serves you, politely request the wine," he retorted calmly.

"Have a seat, old friend. And you as well, Miss Granger. So, ah... marvelous to have your company, dear." Lucius paused slightly, observing the young woman with a look of intense fascination, and only when the conspicuous clearing of a throat caused Lucius' eyes to shift away from Hermione to meet Snape's did his deep, rich voice continue, "Severus, care for tea? Or should we dive right into the delectable treat you brought with you today?"

The differing implications of his last sentence were not lost on the inhabitants of the room, and there was a tense silence before Snape spoke. "The absinthe, if you please, Lucius."

"Excellent." As Malfoy senior began to busy himself with the preparation of the drink, pulling out the mysterious green bottle with the magically-embossed fairy that the Potions master had given him several moments ago, Snape added, "And the wine, Lucius. *The Muggle wine* for the young lady." To his credit, Malfoy paused for only an infinitesimal second before resuming his actions with a mumbled assent.

For a short while, the room was silent save for the tinkling of glassware as drinks were prepared and dispensed. Snape had pulled out a chair for Hermione to sit in before taking his own seat to her immediate left. Unfortunately, it was Lucius who took the seat directly to her right, much to Snape's obvious disapproval.

Hermione sipped delicately at her wine, her eyes fluttering from one man to the other as a power play seemed to take place above her. It was a great relief, then, when the

three remaining hosts walked into the drawing-room, although the conversation on their lips hushed immediately upon seeing her. Malfoy junior seated himself across from Hermione, motioning for Pansy to take the chair beside him, closest to Snape. A look of sheer fear crossed her features before finally sitting, and she quickly edged closer to her new husband and continued to dart nervous looks at the sour man to her right. Severus drank the green liquid he was served with a sense of blissful obliviousness to Pansy's distress and stood once more when Narcissa waltzed by, smelling of expensive perfume and handing glasses of elven wine to her son and daughter-in-law before seating herself in the last available chair, next to her husband.

Once the dance was completed and everyone was positioned around the table, seated somewhat comfortably with their respective beverages, the stilted conversation began. "We missed you at Bellatrix's funeral, Severus. Of any funeral, I would have thought you would have deigned to visit hers," stated Lucius pompously as he winked slyly at Hermione, watching with undisguised glee as she shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"And why is that?" drawled Snape, cocking an eyebrow. All eyes turned to the patriarch Malfoy.

Lucius chuckled. "I had always thought you harbored some... feelings toward her, young friend."

"Feelings?" Snape tilted his now nearly empty reservoir glass to one side, seemingly admiring the way the light played off the last remains of the foul liquid inside. An angry glance at Draco from his father caused the young man to leap from his chair and rush to refill a small portion into Snape's glass before darting off, only to return moments later with a pitcher of ice water, a silver sugar bowl stacked with sugar cubes, and a pewter slotted spoon before reseating himself.

"The budding of first love, perhaps?" Lucius' icy, gray eyes glittered. "A young, eleven-year-old boy and the *infinitely* experienced girl six years his senior?"

Draco glanced at Snape with the look of idolatry in his eyes. *'Eleven?'*

Pansy's eyes passed back and forth between Draco and Snape's faces with an expression of utter confusion. "What's so strange about that? Loads of eleven-year-olds fall in love..."

"Allow me to enlighten you, then, Madam Malfoy..." Severus' features took on a hard, predatory look as Hermione, Draco, and Pansy all stared at him in rapt attention. He had never seemed quite as vicious as he did then, grinning triumphantly at his former Slytherin student as she withered under his gaze. Narcissa quietly interrupted with a harsh whisper. "Severus, don't!"

The grin grew even wider as, much to Draco's obvious dismay, Severus simply acquiesced, nodding to Narcissa with mock contrition. The room fell silent. The newest addition to the Malfoy family continued to search the faces around the table in a slight panic, hoping to see the answer to her question written in the expressions of those surrounding her. Then, quite suddenly, Pansy seemed to finally understand the implication in Lucius' earlier statement, as her cheeks began to flame and her eyes, almost imperceptively, narrowed.

Hermione, puzzled by this emotional display of her former Slytherin classmate, had, of course, understood the Malfoy senior's meaning immediately, but preferred to not dwell on the imagery that it manifested within her mind. In fact, upon hearing and deciphering this news, she quickly ignored it, preferring immeasurably to pretend it had never been revealed. So it was thus that Hermione, other than the two older men, was the only occupant in the room that was not visibly startled by the information, and she lifted her glass of wine to her lips, took a delicate sip, and smiled serenely at the witches and wizards gathered around her. This action, done while everyone else seemed to be frozen where they sat, earned her Snape's full attention. Looking down at her, he gave her a tiny hint of a smile. An actual, genuine *smile*.

Then it occurred to Hermione that, in addition to anti-poisoning agents and crushed bezoar, she tasted a hint of Calming Draught. She knew that she should be inconsolably angry, but as it seemed tranquility itself flowed through her veins, she decided she could revisit these feelings of betrayal and distrust and confront him about it later. She focused her attention back to Pansy the witch was glaring openly at her behind eyes now so narrowed they were nearly shut. Hermione cocked her head to the side in a quizzical fashion while she stole another sip of her wine.

Hermione was not the only one who had noticed the young woman's actions. Draco had followed Pansy's eyes as she stared at Snape with an expression that the young Malfoy heir had never seen before. He saw the exchange, the smile, between the Potions master and his apprentice. He felt a response from Pansy instantly: her muscles became taut and stiff, a heat radiated from her; she seemed poised to leap across the table at the young witch opposite. Suddenly feeling enraged, Draco broke the silence as he snarled, "What are you two doing here anyway?"

Narcissa quickly admonished Draco for such ill-manners, but he paid her no mind, centering his attention instead entirely on Snape. His former teacher drawled, "Bad form to interrogate guests, Mr. Malfoy." Snape slowly pulled a single cigarette from within his robes, and with a snap of his fingers, the cigarette was magically lit. He took an infuriatingly long pull off the cigarette, and Draco watched in escalating tension as the man parted his lips, allowing the smoke to pour out. "Try asking me again, Mr. Malfoy, a bit more... politely."

Completely incensed, the young Malfoy sputtered a bit before finally asking, through clenched teeth, "May I inquire as to what business you have here, Professor Snape?"

"You may." Another long pull off the cigarette. Hermione tried desperately to hide her grin. She must have failed, as Draco's jaw clenched tighter still when he glanced at her. There was a significant pause as the young man tried to compose himself.

"Professor Snape, what is your business here?" Draco tried again. Hermione tilted her head to observe the Potions master. She, too, had been very curious as to why they were there, why he would bring her *here*, of all places. She sipped her drink again as she joined Draco in awaiting Snape's reply. She noticed that, out of the corner of her eye, Pansy suddenly looked down into her lap, avoiding her husband's questioning gaze.

"Well?" screamed Draco, abandoning all attempts at controlling his temper. A tiny metal creature resembling an insect scurried across the table to Snape and halted directly under the cigarette before its entire back broke open, unfolding itself over and over until it spread out nearly six inches in diameter. The rest of its body followed suit until it became nothing more than a small, steel bowl, catching the ash that crumbled off the end of Snape's cigarette. Hermione found it suddenly odd that she was so enthralled by a magical item, so intently focused on it, that she nearly missed the conversation that was taking place around her. She wondered briefly if it was another effect of the Calming Draught, or if something else had been slipped into the wine. She wrenched her attention back to the argument, hearing just a small snippet:

"*No, no, no!* I refuse to let my wife go back to that fucking castle with that bastard," Draco punched a well-manicured finger into the air, pointing at a smirking Snape, "or that damned, *filthy* Mudblood..."

A sharp, resounding *crack* caused both Hermione and Pansy to visibly flinch. Snape had leapt to his feet, allowing his chair to dive to the hard floor, while leaning over the table and shoving his wand against the young man's throat. It was a movement that was so fast, so graceful, that Draco had utterly failed to pull his own wand out in time. Instead, he squirmed under the hard stare of the man before him, a proud sneer on his face even as he attempted to back away.

"*Do not ever say that word in my presence again*," growled Snape. "*Is that clear?*" When the young Malfoy opened his mouth to retort, Snape's wand dug deeper into his skin, causing Draco to gag and wheeze.

"Severus, kindly remove your wand from my son's jugular and aim it elsewhere," Narcissa hissed with such a calm, icy chill that both Pansy and Draco shuddered. Unnoticed until this moment, she had risen to her feet just as Snape's chair rebounded against the floor, aiming her own wand at her former classmate's profile. Snape seemed to ignore her, focusing intently instead on the writhing boy before him. Hermione's eyes met those of a fearful Pansy. Palpable energy sizzled and audibly buzzed around the room.

Lucius leisurely stood, unaffected by the tension surrounding him. "Narcissa, if you would please take Draco to the kitchen and administer something to calm him." It was less a request than a polite, gentle command. His eyes slowly lowered her wand, her eyes never wavering from her target as she slid between her child and the older wizard and tenderly pulled Draco to safety, holding on to him as though he might collapse as she led him out of the room.

Lucius turned to Snape and motioned for him to take his seat. "I'm truly sorry," and here he still addressed his apology solely to Snape, never once glancing Hermione's way, "my son's thoughtless words were both rash and beyond rude." For dramatic effect, Lucius stooped slightly and pinched the bridge of his nose as he let out a long-suffering sigh. "My family has graciously been given a second chance, and we are among the first to volunteer to reform this vile prejudice..." His speech droned on and on, and Hermione found that she could no longer listen to the blatant lies that were pouring from Malfoy's mouth. Instead, her mind reeled over Snape's reaction to a word that she, truthfully, had learned long ago to dismiss. Severus Snape. Former Death Eater. Upset over a word like "Mudblood"? *Why the hell am I here?* she wondered.

Snape reseated himself next to her, then glanced her over, as though to make sure she was all right. She gave him a puzzled look in return. *Perhaps I've been drugged with a confounding ingredient also?* she pondered. Her thoughts didn't make sense to her, her mind was completely disorganized. That, in itself, would have angered and frightened Hermione beyond all sense, yet... she felt extremely at ease, utterly immune. She didn't seem able to grasp onto her anger when it flared, or if she did, she was unable to retain it.

Snape smoked the cigarette, tapping the accumulated ash into the small bowl. The paper-wrapped stick of tobacco had never left the fingers of his left hand, even during the dangerous confrontation just moments ago. Pansy trembled like a leaf in her seat, darting glances at Hermione, Snape, and her father-in-law, looking as though she was ready at a moment's notice to flee the scene.

Lucius peered at Pansy curiously, then said, "Ah, don't worry dear, Draco will be fine. Being coddled like a whelp by his mother, no doubt." He mistook Pansy's obvious signs of fear as concern for her husband or, he just chose to invalidate her emotions; Hermione was unsure. Either way, Pansy's shivering grew more intense under his gaze.

Snape reached into his robes and pulled out a small scroll. He unrolled it carefully and slid it across the table to the young witch. "The agreement. Read over it and sign it if you find it amenable."

She reached for it with shaking hands and perused it quickly. "I...I agree," she stammered. "W...Where is the quill?"

Snape smiled and handed her a quill he had retrieved from the depths of his robes. "You agree to everything, Mrs. Malfoy? Think over it carefully, for the consequences of breaking the contract will be dire. You will obey my every instruction and command?" Pansy nodded her assent. "You will treat me with respect?" Again, she nodded, though faintly. Hermione watched the goings on with confusion. "You will treat all faculty, staff, and apprentices with equal respect?" Another nod. "Above all, you agree to report directly to Hermione Granger and treat her as you would treat me? Should she have any complaint of your behavior, or find you wanting in any area of potions work, you will be dismissed, is that clear?" Hermione mirrored her expression as Pansy nodded once more, numbly. "Then it is agreed." Pansy lifted the quill from his hand and signed the parchment with a small gasp and a wince. In horror, Hermione saw that the ink the quill drew was not ink at all, but blood from the back of Pansy's hand, reminding Hermione of the sadistic torture Harry endured under Umbridge. This time, she caught the anger boiling within her and held it tight.

The parchment glowed a brilliant gold, the light illuminating the entire room, before it emitted a soft *pop* and ceased to exist. "Mrs. Malfoy, if you would be so kind to greet your fellow apprentice." Pansy swayed as she stood, bracing herself on the table as she extended her hand to Hermione for a shake. Hermione, however, *screamed*.

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The rest of the events within Malfoy Manor passed in a blur for Hermione. She vaguely remembered a feeling of guilt when she had glimpsed Pansy's expression as she had screamed. She had a sliver of a memory of a bag of jingling coins being handed to Snape from Lucius, and then to her from Snape moments later when they were alone with something spoken to her about needing to purchase her own supplies for brewing. She faintly recalled Snape's quick farewells as he led her out the door and steadied her with his hands. But that was all she could remember. Once outside, near the entrance gate to the Manor, standing in the snow in the late afternoon sun as it slowly set in the horizon, things seemed much clearer. Her mind tidied itself up, no longer under that strange spell that caused it to wander aimlessly. Her anger was quick, and it flooded her senses, causing her limbs to twitch with the need to physically relieve the rage boiling inside by throttling the man beside her.

The man, however, seemed not only to sense this urgent necessity brewing within the young apprentice to tear him limb from limb, but he seemed to welcome it as he stood near her on the lawn, spreading his arms out to each side. And faced with this opportunity, Hermione did not even slightly hesitate as she strode up to him, glaring into his laughing eyes, and slapped him soundly with every ounce of strength in her, every molecule of anger against current and past injustices guiding her hand to his cheek. He was hit with such force that his head snapped to the side with the sickening sound of neck bones popping, his entire body following his head as it spun to the opposite side. He was airborne for a moment before landing a foot away, breathing ragged, in the snow. She silently gasped in awe of her own power, never doubting for a moment that magic had played a vital part in her attack.

She stood resolutely, unsympathetically, as she waited for him to rise. She welcomed any kind of retaliation. She cared not for consequences. Her hand hurt, but her anger was not yet fully released. He slowly picked himself up, brushing snow off his clothes. He shook his head violently as though trying to regain his wits. There was a hushed silence across the expansive hills of the Malfoy Manor lawn. Snape staggered to her, staring into her eyes with an emotion that Hermione couldn't place. "How *dare* you..." he began in a deep growl.

Fear and anger once again compelled her as she advanced on him and, once reaching him, kneed him solidly, forcefully *powerfully* in the groin, effectively rendering him unable to continue his sentence. He crumpled before her with a hiss of pain before rolling over, away from her direction, and violently vomiting. Her anger dissipated immediately, replaced by guilt, shame, and another rush of fear. Haltingly, she stepped forward to his prostrate form.

He seemed to be bracing himself for another assault. His teeth and jaw were clenched, but as he looked up at her, she saw no rage in his eyes. She noticed a bruise already forming on the side of his face. She stumbled backward. He raised himself onto his elbows, then his knees, then into a kneeling position, and finally into something that could barely be called a stand, before collapsing and retching into the sparkling snow once again.

Hermione's eyes were wide as saucers in pure fear as she watched him struggle to right himself. *What have I done?* she mentally shrieked. As she fought hard to gain control of the situation, she remembered her state within the Malfoy home. The wine. The drugged feeling. "Did you drug me?" she suddenly shouted at him. "The Calming Draught? And something else? Answer me!" He flinched.

"No... Miss Grang..... S...something... drink... f-felt... it too..." he hissed in between deep, gulping breaths.

"What?" she demanded, though her voice had lost its edge. "You felt it too?" He nodded, then spat out what looked like the remains of sick. She sighed, stooped down to help him up, valiantly ignoring his attempts to pull away. "If you're going to be sick again, let me know, so I can...I'll hold your hair," she said softly, in a much more gentle voice, though her tone was dripping with uncertainty and fright even as she attempted to channel Molly Weasley's shrewd and matronly attitude. "And I'll Apparate us both back to Hogwarts. Come on, that's it. Quit being so proud and lean on me! I can steady us both." With a plan of action, she could ignore the pangs of guilt and overwhelming shame. Together they staggered through the gate to the Apparition point she attempting to focus on anything but what just happened, and he just trying to stifle groans of pain and the need to be sick.

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**Author's Note** *Happy New Year to all!*

Huge, huge gratitude and loads of hugs to my beta (a brave soul who voluntarily wades through my ocean of mistakes with nay a compliant), Angel Mischa, and to Amsev, who has provided invaluable assistance with various aspects of this chapter and the next. Without these two, this story would not exist. And as always, any mistakes remaining are mine, because I tend to not listen very well. ADD and all.

Oh! And just explain a little about Hermione's violence: First, if you were dragged to a "tea party" with questionable and dodgy people, then found yourself subsequently drugged you'd be pretty upset as well. Second, let's face it, Snape's been a git. Third, there is evidence in canon of Hermione's violent outbursts (i.e. punching Draco in third year, the painful canary incident with Ron, and so on). Fourth, I wanted Snape's crotch to make an entrance somewhere in this chapter. Seeing as going around and flashing everyone is a bit out of character, this will have to do. Rest assured, he's very angry with me right now.

# Discretion

Chapter 9 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's *dark* and violent past.

The Side-Along Apparition is difficult under normal circumstances. It is a complex maneuver that requires the most concentrated of the three D's: destination, determination, and deliberation all the while avoiding not only the splinching of oneself, but also that of one's passenger. When one is in an intense emotional state, slightly drunk and drugged, clinging to an irate, struggling passenger hissing in pain and nearly a foot taller than oneself, as Hermione found herself in this present condition, some might say it would be impossible to Side-Along Apparate. Some might say the attempt alone would mean certain death for one, or both, of the travelers. Some might even wince and refuse to even entertain the idea. But these people had never met the *very* indomitable, extremely stubborn, and incredibly powerful Hermione Granger.

While many young (or even old) witches and wizards may not be able to overcome the flooding of emotion mixed with the physical and mental effects of wine and potions that pelted Hermione to sufficiently focus on their goal, or to overpower and physically manipulate a fully grown, enormously powerful, particularly incensed wizard (who was, at that moment, thrashing about wildly in both pain and rage) in order to safely and magically reach their destination, Hermione both could and *did*. Though it took much effort on her part, they both arrived securely, and wholly intact, at the gates of Hogwarts.

Snape swayed on his feet beside her, the expected nausea of the ride now overwhelming as it coupled with the queasiness he was already experiencing. His face was paler than she had ever seen it, completely devoid of color, a mask of white that surpassed even the ashen, pallid state of his near death those many months ago. Her eyes widened as she watched him double over and tilt dangerously in all directions before finally buckling and crashing to the ground, striking his head on the gates as he fell. When she prompted him "Professor Snape?" he did not answer. Not even a soft groan, growl, or hiss. Just a piercing, unbearable silence. Hermione's breath hitched in her throat.

He lay face down in the crisp snow, and Hermione felt herself swaying when she saw the trickle of blood that slowly crept from his scalp across the pure, white powder. Firmly instructing herself not to panic, she gathered her thoughts and, upon seeing no other person on the grounds to assist her, decided the next action for her to take would be to spin his motionless body around, face up. She did this with only slightly less effort than it took for the Side-Along Apparition he was extremely thin, but both his height and dead weight countered her attempts at first.

Now that she had him on his back in the icy snow, she could see the blood originated from a cut on his forehead, which yawned open frighteningly, but, fortunately, was not very deep. She rubbed her freezing hands harshly against the wool of her cloak, trying to keep her mind grounded as she considered the next step. She stared at him, squinting slightly as the gears turned in her head. When unconscious and devoid of his usual scowl or sneer, his features were relaxed and softened, and he resembled his age, rather than ten years his senior. *At least he's not retching anymore*, her brain informed her, albeit humorlessly. She needed to get him into the castle, of course, but how? She knew, after attempting to shove him into his present position for the better part of five minutes, that she could not carry or support him across the grounds. The Mobilicorpus spell was more than likely out of the question as well, as the Side-Along Apparition had drained her of her already weakened energy. She worried, nibbled, and then bit her lower lip frantically. Panic had started to seep in, despite her best efforts to keep it at bay.

She fumbled for her wand as she collected the dregs of her exhausted power, held it aloft and called out, "*Expecto Patronum!*" A faint, dimly flickering, silver otter appeared and then dashed off in the direction of the castle, leaving Hermione crumpling to the ground with a barely audible plea, "*Please work.*"

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Remus Lupin was blindly stuffing various parchments into a battered leather bag in a rush. He was hoping to leave the castle in time to get home, change into more informal clothing, and give a goodbye kiss to his son before he and his wife departed together for the feast this evening. However, so far he was falling a bit behind. A young student had accosted him at his office door immediately following a class and asked a few random questions, one of which concerned the elements of something called "mystery meat" that had been served to him in his Muggle primary school in America. Finally accepting Remus' restating that he knew nothing of this substance, the boy wandered aimlessly back down the hall and left his professor in peace. Remus had to smile at the child; he strongly reminded Lupin of Luna Lovegood: equal parts highly intelligent and blissfully eccentric.

Remus glanced back up at the clock; it was already six. The meal didn't start until seven, but he wanted to be there early to greet his friends as they strolled in. Faintly, he could hear the distant, booming voice of the Headmistress for the children to return to their common rooms. The students would be given their usual access to the castle except for the Entrance and Great Halls, and they were to take their dinners in their rooms with their housemates. Several professors who were never actively involved with the Order reluctantly agreed to patrol the halls and ensure that the students stayed clear of the feast and out of mischief. Lupin felt very grateful and had gone out of his way to personally thank each one of them, but only received grunts and, in the case of Hooch, an icy cold shoulder in response. It was no matter, though, as he was too excited about his reunion with the Order to be brought down by anything today.

That is until he glimpsed the muted light encroaching on his peripheral vision. Turning slowly, he gazed at the fluttering, feeble form of an otter and recognized the Patronus at once as belonging to Hermione Granger. A feeling of fear for the young witch took residence at the pit of his stomach as he nodded empathically to urge the otter to divulge its message.

Its light fading slightly, the otter spoke in the voice of its creator, "Remus, please come to the gate at Hogwarts, we need your help. Prof...Professor Snape is hurt and I c...can't... Remus please hurry, don't tell anyone else, d...don't bring anyone else, just help me take Professor Snape to his rooms!" With that, the otter blinked out of existence, and Remus rushed out the door, wand in hand.

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Hermione winced as she tried to stand; her knees had taken the brunt of her earlier fall and bled freely from several scuffs underneath her robes. It was growing darker and darker by the second, and with the night came a bitter wind that shook the trees and chilled her to the core. She glanced back down at her prostrate professor to check his status. Though he was still "out cold," she was more concerned with the threat of hypothermia, as his lips had already changed to a shade of dull blue. She realized with a

start that this was the second time in a handful of years that she had stared at an unconscious Snape and faced the issue of getting him into the castle without too much fanfare. But then, in her third year, she had help. There was Harry, Ron, Sirius and even, momentarily, Lupin. And there was the use of the Mobilicorpus spell, the same spell that eluded her power presently. She feared his temper upon waking as much as she did then, knowing she had been one of the sources of his condition. Just as she was now.

When Remus finally reached them, out of breath and wheezing just a bit, she felt a glimmer of hope and a wave of relief. "What... happened?" he gasped out.

"It's really a long story, and it's... Oh! I didn't mean to scare you so much, we're not in any danger! Well... Maybe he is, I don't know. Oh, just help me get him into the castle without him being seen! I... I Side-Along Apparated him, so I'm too exhausted to use the..."

"*Mobilicorpus!*" cried out Remus. Snape's body drifted upwards between them. Lupin removed his scarf and placed it on Severus' forehead to staunch the bleeding.

"...Yes, that spell," continued Hermione.

"Hold this down on his head and apply pressure. We'll slip into the school using the side entrance closest to the dungeons. I don't want to try any disillusionment charms, not without knowing what's wrong with him... Are you hurt?" Remus had taken over the situation grandly, and she was more than happy to relinquish the responsibility.

"No. Well, I mean, I scuffed up my knees, but they're okay. He's... uhm..."

"Unconscious?"

Unwilling to reveal more, Hermione just smiled and nodded at her friend's ability to inject even this situation with a bit of humor. "Right then," he continued, "stay opposite me and keep that scarf on...more pressure, Hermione!" She had let her concentration and grip slip, and as a result, blood seeped through the makeshift bandage quickly. Chagrined, she pressed down on the scarf even harder.

"Okay, walk slowly and watch for others. Ready?" he asked. She nodded in agreement, and together they crossed the grounds and entered into the bowels of the castle without further incident.

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"You do know that you are going to have to explain this to me," said Remus softly as they navigated Snape's motionless body into the empty Potions classroom before carefully setting him upon a cleaned student's worktable. Hermione made a noncommittal sound in reply, busying herself with the laceration on her employer's head. Lupin sighed and leaned back against the edge of the opposite worktable, observing Hermione with fascination. "Hermione," he tried again, "I need to know. Are you terribly hurt? Where were you? What happened?"

"I'm fine, Remus, really. I just..."

"Did he hurt you?" he sharply whispered, already glaring at his former classmate's body.

"No! No... No, I...I hurt him."

"What did he do?"

"I really don't want to get into it right now, Remus, if you don't mind... please."

He frowned, then stood and offered a calming embrace to her. "You don't have to tell me, Hermione. But if you want to, I'm always here. Just please tell me he wasn't violent or..."

Hermione gasped. "No! No, not like that at all, no."

A few moments of silence ticked by as he watched her clean Snape's wound. Remus grinned suddenly before asking, "He wasn't Expelliarmused by three young teenagers again, was he?"

In spite of herself, Hermione found herself giggling. "No, there was no magic, just me."

"Well, we all know how formidable you are, even wandless." He smiled at her kindly before asking, "Do you need me to get Madam Pomfrey? She might still be up in the hospital wing."

Hermione gasped as she hurriedly glanced at her watch. It was 6:30. "Oh, no, Remus, it's all right. You have to get home and get ready! Tonks'll be really upset if you are late, or worse, make her late!"

He frowned slightly and removed the scarf from the table, watching her cross the room again and again, searching the potions cabinets and returning each time with handfuls of vials.

"Hermione, I think my wife would be more than understanding given the situation. I can't leave you here with him in this state, and I cannot leave him with him in this state either."

"Remus, please. I know what I'm doing. If I need further help, I'll kindly ask Madam Pomfrey to come down here, or Floo her, or take him to her, if need be. Honest, Remus, I just need to clean him up and revive him, and I'll see you at dinner. You can go home and change and retrieve Tonks; it will be fine. Just please don't mention it to anyone; he'll be incredibly upset if he thinks the school's gossiping about him, whether good intentioned or not."

Remus squinted at her and cocked his head to the side. "You're sure?"

"When have I ever been unsure, Professor Lupin?" She smiled sweetly at him.

"Duly noted. If you aren't back by dinner, I'm coming down here, all right?"

"Of course. Remus, go home and get ready, you don't have much time! Tonks'll have my head! Go, *go!*" She ushered him out the door, quickly expelling his protests. She locked and warded the classroom to the best of her current ability, adding a few charms like Muffliato to soothe her worries.

Returning once again to the Potions master's unconscious form, Hermione cast a quick diagnostic charm she recently learned from a newly published book, *Household Healing Charms*. A bright red light flashed above his pelvic area, indicating intense pain and likely swelling and bruising. A green light flickered above his abdomen, signifying extreme nausea and possible vomiting. She sighed it was only reiterating the problems she was already aware of. She looked for the color of purple hovering over his head, demonstrating a concussion, but nothing flashed in that direction, only a fluttering blue that meant he was unconscious. No signal of hypothermia either, which allowed Hermione to let out a deep breath of relief that she didn't know she held. There were signs of a fever, however, and obvious bruising on the side of his face.

Hermione now shifted her attention to the numerous beakers and vials of potions that were gathered and placed on the surface of another worktable. She meticulously studied the label, coloring, density, and volume of every container present. Setting aside the potions that were of no use or were otherwise rejected during her examination, she narrowed down her options to five: a cream to alleviate pain, a bruise-healing paste, Deflating Draught (used to combat swelling), a rejuvenation potion (to bring him back to consciousness), and the Draught of Peace (to soothe agitation and anxiety and, Hermione noted, to administer *before* Snape was fully sentient). She quickly

dismissed the Elixir to Induce Euphoria, however tempting it was, because the effects would eventually fade and leave him even more livid than she already expected him to be. The thought, however, entertained her as she rubbed in the thick, yellow bruise-healing paste into his cheek. A singing, nose-tweaking Professor Snape would likely be more of a punishment to herself than to him.

Putting down the jar of paste, Hermione chose the cream next and applied it carefully to the same area on his face, rubbing it deeply into the porcelain skin. After carefully setting the cream aside, she held his head up slightly and forced the Deflating Draught past his lips and compelled him to swallow by running her hands up and down his throat in smooth motions, urging the muscles within to reflexively obey. Once satisfied, she lightly laid his head down on the table before backing up and glancing at his body. She winced. She dreaded this upcoming part, but the paste and cream would have to be applied to *all* affected areas.

After another quick glance at the clock to remind her that time was not on her side, she removed her cloak and robes and set them on the back of a nearby chair, then pushed up the her sleeves, determined. *I just have to dissociate myself like healers do. Compartmentalize my emotions and get through this* She hastily snatched the jars of the bruise-healing paste and the pain alleviating cream and set them down next to his torso. She paused. She fidgeted. She checked her wards. She checked to make sure he was still unconscious. She checked the cream and the paste, looking for reasons to delay or even cease the next course of action. She sighed.

Fixing her gaze on the wall to her immediate left, her hands fumbled around until they found purchase on his robes. Hermione unbuttoned them and pushed them to either side, revealing his white shirt underneath. Looking down at her progress only briefly, she pulled the shirt up and out of his trousers and then stopped. Exhaled. His cloak and robes were open, his shirt untucked. Leaving only the trousers next. Deciding instead that his shirt was far too long and would only get in the way, Hermione pushed the garment up to his chest and allowed her gaze to wander over his flat stomach. She gasped and bent down for a closer examination.

Across his abdomen was a ragged scar, starting at his left side, below the trousers, and traveling above his belly button to the far right. Upon closer inspection, the scar indicated a wound caused by tearing rather than a clean slice. It was pale, but seemed to sit atop his skin like a flat, frayed rope. Hermione found herself touching it, then running her fingers up the length of it. *Magic cuts cleanly*, she thought, *this looks as though the skin was ripped open* Hermione shuddered. She couldn't imagine what type of wound could cause a scar like that, nor what type of weapon would create such a wound.

Moving her eyes upward, she noticed several smaller scars crisscrossing across his torso, most notably across a nearly hairless chest, where the most concentrated density of the healed-over wounds were gathered. Some she recognized as the healed lacerations of curses and hexes, others seemed more curious, and she was unable to reason their source. Still intrigued by the ragged line that stretched diagonally across his center, she carefully and with extreme effort lifted him slightly so that she could gaze at a portion of his back along the right side where the ghastly line abruptly ended. It didn't taper off, just *stopped*. And then, inches away, the most peculiar marking of all: she had to cock her head to the side to peer at it to be sure, but carved into his back, deeply imbedded within the skin, was a small, stretched, uppercase "T". Her eyebrows knitted together as she carefully set him back down, her curiosity now awake and hungry.

His arm stirred and caused her to leap back in terror, as though caught doing something naughty. Hermione held her breath as she waited for more signs of life, but Severus Snape was as still and quiet as ever. His breathing remained slow and steady. *Just get on with it!* her mind screamed at her. Hermione exhaled before taking another deep breath and awkwardly tugging his belt free from its buckle. Her entire body tensed, and her fingers shook as she unhooked the button and unzipped the surprisingly modern pair of trousers. Surprisingly *Muggle*.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut as she jerked the trousers down to his knees, then bravely allowed one eye to peek at what lay before her. Underwear. Black y-fronts. She growled, somehow hoping that this barrier wouldn't have been an issue. She certainly never thought about Severus Snape's underwear, but the unexpected thought of the alternative suddenly made her very glad that this thin shield of cotton and polyester was there. *Not that it would matter now anyway*, she berated herself. *It still has to be removed*.

Now beyond the need to cover her eyes as she began to feel the anxiety of her time limitations, she swiftly yanked the underwear down to join the rest of the trousers... And exhaled a long breath. Hermione never made it a mission in life to gather a strong basis for comparison, but the man that lay before her was certainly more well-endowed than Ron, yet not obscenely so. Hermione felt the rush of blood to her face as she fiercely blushed. *Right, time to get down to business*, she chastised herself, then winced at the words chosen.

Cupping a large amount of the bruise-healing paste in her fingers, she pressed his legs as far apart as the gathered up fabric at his knees would allow and generously applied it to his injured, extremely swollen (or so she assumed), painfully bruised testicles. Sudden guilt again attacked her as she examined the effects of her violent outburst. She rubbed even more vigorously and yet ever more gently, as though in an effort to erase the shame she felt. As she returned after gathering more of the yellow paste from its jar, she observed yet another effect her actions were causing, and she blushed anew. *It's normal*, she told herself, *not personal, now get back to work!*

But she found it rather difficult to apply the paste without being distracted by an erection. Even more so as it was an erection of a *man*, not a *boy*, and...*Right, right, now the cream. Back on track, Hermione*, she scolded herself. She reached for the cream and gingerly spread it over the affected area, all while watching with amusement the reactions of the rest of his body out of the corner of her eye...

...Then he moaned.

Hermione shrieked and flung herself away from him. Paste, cream, vials and breakers flew through the air as her flailing arms struck them, and yet... he was still. Her heart hammering in her chest, she waited for another sound, a movement, anything. Her brain screamed at her to leave, to get out, but she was frozen. The clock struck 7:00. She leaned over him cautiously and used one hand to gently lift his eyelid, and watched in silent horror as the pupil of an inky black eye contracted and shifted to stare at her. Before she could shriek again, he sat up and grabbed her wrist roughly, seemingly unaware of the state of arousal his body still exhibited. While in an upright position, his shirt fell down his abdomen and successfully covered his crotch, though the tented fabric could not effectively hide its condition.

His body tilted to the side precariously, his head tipping backwards momentarily before he was able to regain stability. "What do you think you..." His rant was abruptly silenced as he followed her intense gaze to its obvious source between his legs. Snape opened his mouth and then quickly closed it, unable to voice the undoubted flood of vitriol poised at the tip of his silver tongue. Hermione covered her own mouth with a trembling hand to veil her very unfortunate, very audible intake of breath as the tented fabric grew more strained. His eyes flicked from his crotch to her eyes, and she witnessed the pupils expand and shrink rapidly as he growled low and menacingly at her. He gripped her wrist painfully, his eyes narrowed, and yet still the fabric stretched slightly more.

His voice was dangerously soft as he snarled, "*Don't look at...*"

There was a sharp knock at the door, and both their heads whipped around to face it. "Hermione?" called out the unmistakable voice of Remus Lupin.

"Wotcher, Hermione, let us in!" cried out a female voice.

Black and brown eyes met once again. There was a long pause before Snape released her and vaulted off the table nimbly, pulling up his trousers and underwear in one smooth motion. Impressively, he swayed only slightly on his feet with an indistinct hiss of pain. With his back to Hermione, he quickly zipped, buttoned, tucked in the shirt extremely roughly (as though he solely blamed it for the compromising condition he found himself in), and latched his belt before sliding into his robes. It took only a matter of seconds, though Hermione glimpsed, with a wry (and utterly inappropriate) grin, that the evidence of his arousal was still visible, if one only focused on it, which she currently was.

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**Author's Note** Huge, huge gratitude and loads of hugs to my beta (a brave soul who voluntarily wades through my ocean of mistakes with nay a compliant), Angel Mischa, and to Amsev, who has provided invaluable assistance with various aspects of this chapter. Without these two, this story would not exist. And as always, any mistakes remaining are mine, because I tend to not listen very well. ADD and all. (Yes, I know this is the same A/N as the last chapter, but I'm tapped of creativity, and I still mean every word of it.)

And while this isn't exactly lemony yet, hopefully it will sate the appetites of my dear readers for now. There will, of course, be more as the story unfolds.

**Up Next:** Awkward dinner conversation.

## Commentary

*Chapter 10 of 19*

*\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

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Heed the warnings. Dark material below.

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Severus Snape glowered at his apprentice as she shakily unwarded the room and opened the door for Remus and Tonks to enter. Hermione could feel the heat of his stare burning her face, but she steadfastly refused to look at him and instead focused on the advancing forms of two of her friends. "Oh! Severus, are you feeling better?" Remus asked politely, though he directed the question more at Hermione.

"I'd say he's feeling... all right," said Tonks with a slight, lop-sided grin after running her eyes up and down his figure. Hermione's eyes grew large as she turned to Tonks and quelled any further commentary with her admonishing glare. The pink-haired witch quickly covered her mouth with her hand to suppress her giggles and then shrugged at Hermione. Lupin peered quizzically at the women. Severus looked dumbstruck.

"Right..." Remus said after an uncomfortable silence. "Well, then, we've come down here to check on you both, and Hermione, there are some people upstairs who would..."

"Excuse me," growled Severus as he pushed past the group and stalked out the door. Taking the opportunity, and utterly unable to keep her quip to herself, Tonks shouted after him, "Oi, Snape, you might want to stop off at the loo to, uhm, freshen up before heading to dinner!"

Hermione didn't have a chance to make sure her withering stare hit its mark, as immediately following Tonks' comment, the Auror threw all three of them to the floor when a jet of light penetrated the room, crashing into a vacant worktable behind them. The older witch let out a barking laugh as they were all showered in sawdust and slivers of wooden debris. Her husband haltingly stood, dusting his clothes off with a frown. "Really, Dora, you shouldn't make fun of his personal appearance..." His reprimand was cut short when another series of infectious giggles erupted from the Auror. He let out a long-suffering sigh, though it lacked conviction as he was now openly grinning at her. "Right, well, let's be off then. As I was saying, Hermione, there are some people upstairs impatiently awaiting your arrival."

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Severus Snape was easily the most challenging patient Poppy had ever had the opportunity to treat over her many years as a Healer. He routinely protested, fought, fled, growled, groused, screamed, and cursed. Once, as a child, he even bit her. In fact, the quick-tempered little boy radiated a feral energy from the first day she met him, and thus she was extremely pleased to watch him grow into a slightly more civilized man. Civilized, at least, when he was at full health. However, when injured or ill, Severus simply regressed to that eleven-year-old state of mind where instinct overpowered reason. This was one of those times.

The Healer had been making her way from the infirmary to the Great Hall for the Feast when she found him: a thin figure dressed in black, slumped against the barrister of the Grand Staircase, trembling violently. She had not needed to get a closer inspection to know it was the Potions master, especially since, upon noticing her, he quickly tried to spin his body around and make his way in the opposite direction. "Severus?" she prompted, but received no answer. This, of course, was expected.

Poppy rushed to the form that was now threatening to collapse, rocking dangerously from side to side. His skin was devoid of any color, much more than usual, and his pupils were dilated as his eyes flitted nervously around. "Severus, come with me," she stated in a brusque, matronly tone that brooked no argument.

Despite his seemingly weak state, he shoved her aside roughly and shook his head violently. Anticipating this, as it was his usual behavior, Poppy had braced herself firmly and showed him that she could not be deterred so easily. With a silent flick of her wand, Severus found himself prone and restrained on a conjured stretcher, struggling in vain and hissing incoherent curses with vehemence.

The Healer ignored him and led the floating stretcher to the hospital wing, taking great care to maneuver around the moving staircases and fidgeting furnishings. Speaking more to herself than to him, she scolded, "I don't know why I even bother, quite honestly. I keep hoping for the day that you will wake up and cease this mindless self-destruction! What is it this time, eh, young man? Pick a fight? Overdose on potions? I don't see any blood, so it's not a self-inflicted wound, I assume? Although, truly, they are all self-inflicted injuries, aren't they..." She rambled on even as they reached their destination, and she gently transferred the wildly thrashing man to a solid bed. "All right, you know the drill," she said wryly. "Will it be Silencio and restraints, or do you think that, for once, you can act like an adult and lie there quietly?"

He grew very still and looked up at the Healer hopefully, and though she smiled back down at him, she was not fooled. It took only a matter of seconds before he tried to stand, screaming obscenities at her as he toppled off the bed. She leaned against the wall and observed him with an eyebrow raised, watching humorlessly as he tried to crawl out of the room.

With a dramatic sigh, she said, "I see. No need to break tradition, is there?" A few delicate, wordless, flicks of the wrist, and Severus Snape was restrained on the bed, his mouth opening and closing in blissful silence.

"Yes, that's better. I'm going to administer the usual: the modified Calming Draught first, and a potion for anxiety, then we will run some diagnostics, all right?" His dark eyes glittered maliciously at her.

Poppy had long ago adopted this particular bedside manner, especially the reciting of her every action to the patient, because of this man before her. Her first time to attend to him, small child that he was, she did not bother to explain her actions, as most children at Hogwarts did not care *what* she would do, just so long as it *worked*. But for this little Slytherin, any touch on his person (especially, and understandably, when restrained and silenced) that was not given a full commentary resulted in very, very

extreme panic attacks. (Although, truth be told, even when she took great care to describe her treatments, his stay in the infirmary was always punctuated with anxiety-induced complications.) Poppy had even enlisted his help to create a specialized Calming Draught to ease his stay, one she always had in stock just for him.

In fact, ever since Madam Pomfrey was first introduced to the young man, Severus Snape had provided a peculiar challenge to the Healer. Unlike most of her patients, this wizard required a special, careful treatment both psychologically as well as physiologically. His violent mood swings were tolerated, if not subtly encouraged, by Poppy. Outside these walls, she knew that he never expressed his fear or pain instead, he dissociated himself from his emotions. It was a survival technique, a coping mechanism, employed by many children that hailed from severely abusive homes. A learned response: *never* show weakness when threatened, shut down.

Yet, Poppy was able to somehow establish a trust between herself and the younger man over the years. With her, and only her, he allowed himself to *feel*, to convey his emotions to her, never fearing that she would twist the circumstances to her advantage. She supported his intuitive need to scream, curse, cower, hide, and even cry. The only action she prohibited was physical harm, especially as it was nearly always directed at himself.

It was a link, a deeply etched connection. It united them both, allowing him to *know* he was protected while in her care. Subconsciously, the two shared a profound, maternal relationship, something that defied speech and emotion: an impenetrable bond.

While ruminating over this, the Healer administered the potions to him and was pleasantly surprised that he drank them without resistance. Poppy waited for his body to release its tension before she rattled off her diagnostic spells, intensely focused on the colors the waves of light emitted.

She *tsked* *tsked* a few times before staring him directly in the eye and inquiring, "If I lift the Silencio, will you be calm enough to explain your injuries without resorting to idle threats?"

He shook his head.

"Fair enough." She left the small room momentarily, returning with a vial that she explained patiently, "This contains the general pain reliever." In a more cohesive state of mind, Severus would know immediately what the container held but Poppy did not want to risk any chance at unsettling him, so she quietly described every medicinal element that she used.

The Healer lifted his head slightly and pressed the potion to his lips, slightly concerned that he drank it so greedily. "I'll leave you alone for a bit, and when I return, I'll see if you feel better enough to be released from the two spells so we can continue treatment, all right?" He nodded in silent acquiescence.

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Fifteen minutes later, Madam Pomfrey peeked in on her irascible patient. His wide, dark eyes followed her every moment as she confidently strode into the makeshift room, carrying with her a few jars of cream. He still trembled, though it was not nearly as pronounced. His eyelids drooped sleepily; his breathing was slow and steady.

"Feeling better?" she asked kindly.

He nodded in agreement and gave a lopsided smile.

"Nausea?"

He shook his head slowly.

"I'm going to check your temperature." Poppy stated as she leaned over his motionless form while casting another diagnostic charm. "You still have a fever, but it is much more mild. Ready to move and talk again?"

Another slight nod.

"You agree to the rules? No cursing, no screaming, no biting, kicking, or hitting? No harm to me, and certainly no harm to yourself? And *you will* stay in this bed?"

An emphatic nod this time.

"All right. There's a good lad," she said gently as she lifted the charms and gingerly perched on the edge of his bed.

He immediately sat up and laid his head in his hands, rubbing vigorously at his temples. "Headache still," he gasped out in a raspy, hoarse voice. Poppy retreated from the room and returned with another vial that Severus recognized immediately: a headache potion. He downed it in one gulp as she resumed her position, taking a seat next to him on the bed.

Severus looked around the room, taking in the present scenery for the first time since arriving. His head throbbed with growing intensity, his stomach still fluttered as the last vestiges of anxiety slowly began to dwindle. He did not want to look up at Pomfrey, did not want to see the pity in her eyes, did not want to hear platitudes from her lips. He was bested, physically, by a slip of a girl. It was beyond humiliating, beyond shameful, and *pity* would push him over the edge of any shred of reason he still entertained.

Yet, Snape could not help watching with trepidation as the Healer reached out to him, then asked, "Severus, mind if I adjust that hair of yours?"

He nodded and only flinched minutely when her fingers tucked a lock of his hair behind his ears. Inwardly, he berated himself for the display of weakness. Though Madam Pomfrey was one of the elite few people he allowed to touch him, and she had always respected his boundaries by asking first, a flinch was still a flinch, and there was no mistaking the irritatingly condescending compassion in her question.

"I brought in some salve for your more pressing injury, and I'll give you privacy to apply it yourself. When I return, we'll take a look at your forehead... Although, it seems that it has been partially healed already. I didn't realize that you were *properly* self-medicating now?"

"I'm not."

"Ah." She knew better than to question him. He always explained his injuries to her in his own time, if he felt it was necessary. She stood and smiled down at him lovingly before exiting the area, drawing the curtains closed as she left, securely ensconcing him in comfortable seclusion.

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The dinner had ended both far too quickly and not soon enough. Hermione's head ached as the feast wore on, and she found herself too emotionally drained to truly interact with her friends. At best, she was able to smile and laugh at their recounts of their current affairs; at worst, she was unable to fully concentrate on the thread of conversation and just nodded dumbly in what she hoped were the appropriate places.

Their company soothed her frayed nerves, allowing her to fixate on the swirling, musical sounds of tinkling laughter and crescendos of heated debates and discussions that played out through the massive room. An immense, vocal symphony surrounded her, distracted her, comforted her. It was a paradox, then, when the same relaxing tones would sharply, unexpectedly, attack her senses. When the solace of her tightly knit cluster of friends suddenly sparked within her a deep, penetrating loneliness.

So it was with a mixture of relief and profound sadness that Hermione found herself in her rooms and alone once again. Her brain hurt. Her heart hurt. Her soul hurt. She didn't want to dwell on the events of that afternoon, nor did she want to revisit the wave of emotions that had assailed her when she had come to the sudden realization that Professor Snape would not be making an appearance at the dinner. Her lips broke into a small smile when she remembered the livid expression on the Headmistress's



face when she reached the same conclusion.

With a long stretch, Hermione made her way to her wardrobe. Stifling a yawn, she stripped herself of the cloak, robes, sweater, skirt, shoes, and stockings (in that order) and dropped them at her feet. Leaving on the camisole, she slipped on a pair of crimson red pajama pants and made her way to the bathroom. It wasn't until she returned that she noticed the tiny box protruding from the pile of clothes. She gasped. She had completely forgotten her stolen treasure. *No, not stolen, just borrowed*, she assured herself.

She sat heavily down on the thickly carpeted floor, crossing her legs and leaning forward slightly to pluck the tiny shoebox from its confines. Reaching for her wand, she muttered the quick counter charm and restored the cardboard rectangle to its original size. She felt the tiny tendrils of magic wrapping around her mind, urging her to put the box down, reminding her overworked brain of uncompleted to-do lists, whispering of the allure of sleep, but she resisted. As soon as she removed the top of the box, the feelings vanished immediately.

Hermione sifted through the container, carefully avoiding the rat corpse. The first thing she pulled out was a photograph that resembled a Muggle Polaroid picture, the kind that had to be shaken vigorously before anything would appear. Peering closely at it, she could make out a tiny human form: a toddler. It appeared to be a boy, though at that age, it was difficult to tell. Especially when said child was clad only in a diaper. She had a strong feeling, however, that it was another image of a young Severus Snape. This feeling was validated as she looked at the bottom white strip of the photograph, which was labeled: "Subject: Severus Snape. Age: 3" in bubbly, feminine handwriting. Below that was something indecipherable typed in faded ink, obviously stamped on some years ago.

Puzzled, Hermione continued to stare at the unmoving image, willing it to reveal its secrets. It was in black and white, and in the background seemed to be a wall on which was painted a mural of some sort. The child sat staring off into the distance, seemingly oblivious to the small mountain of toys set before him. Squinting her eyes and bringing the picture closer, Hermione was able to make out the corner of a clipboard intruding into the photograph. *Curious*, she thought to herself as she laid the picture gently down on the carpet, off to the side.

She reached for another photograph: it was a magical image she retrieved, one that presented an auburn-haired young girl of around nine or ten. The girl giggled and reached for the camera, causing the scene to tilt from side to side, before a lanky boy rushed into view and sat next to her, pointing at Hermione.

A single tear traced a path down Hermione's cheek as she watched the magical loop cycle over and over again. The boy was the same child she had seen in the other pictures, and yet he wasn't, because she had never seen Severus Snape laugh so freely. She had never seen him *happy*. She had never seen the look of wonder and awe that crossed his face as he gazed at the girl next to him. She had never known the innocent face that stared up at her, the black eyes that hinted at playfulness. She never knew *this* boy; she had never seen him before.

Wrenching her eyes from the photograph, she quickly set it down and reached for another object, pulling out a crisp envelope with the broken seal of Hogwarts on the flap, and displayed across the front "Severus Snape," along with a smudged address. Hermione smiled though her tears, her heart warming to the fact that young Severus thought this letter to be a prized possession, much like she did when she received hers. Briefly reading the standard letter sent to all eleven-year-old witches and wizards and allowing herself a moment to reminisce, Hermione set the envelope and its contents carefully down beside the picture of the laughing young Lily Evans and Severus Snape.

She resumed her digging with renewed vigor, pulling out a very thumbled-through, dog-eared, paperback book. The faded cover revealed a title, *Oliver Twist*, in a simple black typeface. She carefully pried open the novel, inhaling as she did that beautiful musky scent that accompanies all older books. On the back of the front cover, scrawled in the poor penmanship of the very young, was written:

*I am an orphan in this house. These people share only my blood, nothing more.*

Hermione furrowed her brow in a mixture of despair and concentration. She flipped through the rest of the pages, looking for more notes in the margins, but found none. As she lifted it gingerly to set it aside, an object fell from a hidden spot near the end of the book.

Another photograph.

Hermione picked up the Muggle Polaroid and studied it carefully, even though her body fought valiantly to release it in disgust. It was also in black and white, portraying a tiny Severus Snape, no older than four or five. His hair had been shaved off to within a half inch of his scalp, and he was completely nude. His dark eyes bored into Hermione's, but they were shuttered, lifeless, cold, numb. Even at his young age, he looked starved, his ribs protruding frighteningly above his concave belly.

A plump, large hand was splayed across the crown of his head, nearly fitting the boy's skull into its palm, as it pushed the child forward, into the camera.

Another hand, with long, thin fingers, was between Severus' legs.

With a rising wave of nausea, Hermione threw the photo across the room, unable to examine it any further. Her body began to shake. Her mind screamed within her head, in one long sentence, *Ohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygodohmygod!*

With tears pricking at the edges of her vision, her stomach wrenching itself into knots, Hermione conceded defeat to the overwhelming need to distance herself from her recent discoveries. Carefully packing the box back up, she slid it deep into her wardrobe, hidden from view.

She crawled into bed, doused the lights, and after several hours of broken sobs, she fell into a fitful sleep. That night, she dreamt of the sweet, laughing, dark-haired boy...

Only to have the vision replaced by a child staring at her with eyes already dead.

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**Author's Note** Three cheers for my amazing beta, Angel Mischa, and the awesome Amsev both of whom take time from their busy schedules to help out this struggling author. Without their combined efforts, this story would not exist.

**Up Next:** Childish behavior.

## Quid Pro Quo

Chapter 11 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's *dark* and violent past.

Severus Snape was sulking: his arms crossed in front of his chest, his body slumped in the chair, a tiny scowl marking his face as he stared distantly off to his left side, resembling nothing more than a petulant little boy. Minerva sighed. "Severus, I thought I made it clear that you were *required* to attend the dinner last night." His only response was a noncommittal grunt, forcing a little smile upon her face in spite of the situation. In the Headmistress' eyes, Severus Snape would always be a reflection of the little misanthropic first year she had first met those many years ago. "*Mr. Snape*, please remind me why you felt that the *mandatory* attendance did not apply to you." His head snapped up in attention when she addressed him, his face a fleeting mask of contrition.

"It's *Professor*, now, Headmistress, unless you are alluding to a termination of my position on the grounds of missing a dinner?" he asked innocently with a twisted smile.

She huffed. "Professor, indeed! I don't recall any *professors* that I've witnessed sitting and pouting in the corner of my office or deliberately disobeying a Headmistress' request. What sort of example are you setting for the children in your house, hmm?"

"I am not *pouting*!" he shouted a little too enthusiastically and demonstrated her point by further sliding down in the chair with a snort.

"Indeed." She fought valiantly to withhold her chuckle only a peek of an indulgent grin displayed itself. After a while, a comfortable silence settled upon the two as she continued to observe him, and he continued to mutter incoherently under his breath.

"Something came up," he finally stated with a grumble.

"Oh?"

"Issues... with my *apprentice*."

"She seemed to be able to adhere to my request. She showed up with Professor Lupin and his wife, Tonks, if my memory is correct."

"Yes, well, I'm sure she did," he spat out derisively.

Long used to his cryptic manner of speaking, Minerva gave Severus a few moments to explain his meaning. When nothing more was said, she prompted, "What sort of issues, my boy?"

"I'd rather not get into it, if you don't mind," he grouched, not meeting her eyes.

"Hmmm, I see. You won't object if I invite her to this impromptu meeting, then, I assume? Perhaps she can better explain?"

"By all means, Headmistress," Snape growled with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Minerva gracefully rose to her feet and gingerly maneuvered her way around her desk to the fireplace, noticing the younger wizard's narrowed eyes following her every movement. Slowly, she extracted the Floo powder from within its porcelain container and tossed it into the fire with the words, "Hermione Granger," pretending not to notice the contemptuous snort that issued from behind her. As she leaned into the fire to retrieve his apprentice, Severus took the opportunity to adjust his posture and place a more intimidating scowl upon his features.

Moments later, McGonagall pulled herself away from the fireplace to make room for the younger witch to step through. The younger witch who looked decidedly frazzled and slightly frightened. Snape stood and flashed her a predatory grin, watching with undisguised glee as the color drained from her face.

Minerva took a few minutes to observe this interaction with fascination before she said kindly, "Please, take a seat, Hermione. Would you like some tea?"

"N...no thank you," the apprentice stammered, her eyes still locked with the narrowed eyes of the older wizard. The Headmistress frowned at Severus, wordlessly conveying to him to cease his customary bullying tactics as she summoned forth a chair for her former Gryffindor. Snape merely shot Minerva another innocent look in response.

Ignoring him, she spoke to Hermione, who was currently taking the seat offered to her beside the Potions master, her expression flushed with uncertainty. "Dear, please tell me how you have been? How is the apprenticeship going?" Here, McGonagall noticed a questioning glance that the younger witch sent to Severus, so the Headmistress quickly added, "Don't look at him, Hermione. Please, just ignore his presence for the time being." At this, the wizard snorted loudly.

Hermione found herself fidgeting as she looked up to her former Head of House, who was presently standing and leaning back against her desk. "Uhm... well, I think everything's going all right. We... erm... we had a few bumps, but I think we've smoothed them out?" Again, she stole a quick glance to the sour man seated to her right and was rewarded with yet another obnoxious snort.

"Right, right. Well, Severus was just telling me you and he had met with a few issues last night preceding the dinner, and though he won't explain this problem, he seems to think it excused him from attending the feast. I asked you here to see if you could clarify to me what happened, so that I might better address this concern. I, of course, expect the two of you," and here she glared openly at Snape, "to get along *amicably*."

"I... Well, that is," Hermione began haltingly. "We had a bit of a disagreement, and..."

"She molested me," stated Severus matter-of-factly. His expression was shuttered.

"*I did not!*" the younger witch shrieked in terror, her eyes darting between her two former professors frantically. The memory of the photograph Hermione had recently discovered surged to the front of her mind, unbidden. She felt a deep, heart-wrenching pain that he would insinuate that she would have been capable of committing such an atrocious act that he would even remotely compare her attempts at healing to that. Her palms began to tremble in sudden shame. *Did he really think that was what I was doing?*

"Severus!" shouted Minerva angrily. "That is quite unnecessary! There will be no outlandish accusations *in this* office!"

Snape shrugged indifferently as he leveled a dark stare at the Headmistress.

Watching the exchange, Hermione stammered, "I... He was hurt, Professor McGonagall, and I thought..."

Minerva blinked, the words rousing her from her reflections. "Hurt, Hermione? How?"

"Yes, please explain, Miss Granger," drawled the wizard as he leaned back in his chair and spitefully began to examine his fingernails thoughtfully. Both witches turned to glare at him.

"HHe... I didn't mean to...I mean, I did mean to, but not so hard, I swear!" Hermione pleaded.

"She slapped me," he clarified.

"Well, yes, all right, I did slap him..."

"Hard," he amended.

"That's enough, Severus! Let her speak!" scolded Minerva as she focused her attention back to the apprentice. "Go on, dear."

"I did. I slapped him. I'm terribly sorry...it was awfully disrespectful. I'm really, *really* sorry!"

As Minerva drew in a breath to further question the young woman, Snape interrupted with a smooth tone, "That's not all she did."

"I don't need your commentary, Severus! Let *her* speak! If you recall, I gave you a chance to tell your side of the tale, and you wasted it!" hissed the Headmistress. Again, the wizard gave a dismissive shrug. She looked again to Hermione with an expression that urged the young witch to continue.

"I...I kicked him between the legs really hard and he got sick and I'm sorry!" the apprentice cried out in one breath as she leapt to her feet.

"*What?*"

"I was scared, but that's no excuse, I know! I... He came at me..."

"*I did not!*" howled Snape as he vaulted from his chair. Minerva hushed him violently.

"He came at you, dear?"

"Well, I mean... I slapped him, and he fell, and then he said, '*How dare* you,'" Hermione did her best to impersonate her employer before continuing, "And he started walking toward me, and I just... I kicked him. I'm sorry. I take full responsibility." Hermione sighed and proudly pushed out her chin, looking for all the world as though she would willingly march to the gallows for her sin.

McGonagall had a deep frown etched into her face as she gazed at the brave young witch before her. "Well, I am certainly disappointed in your actions, Hermione..."

"Ah, she has more to tell," interrupted Snape with a sly grin.

Hermione shot him a nasty look and then winced as she said, "I... I Side-Along Apparated the both of us, and he was...well, he was sick, because of... of..."

"The assault," Snape calmly offered.

"Yes, and... it made him more sick. And he fell because he was dizzy, you see, and hit his head on the gates...the, the gates here at Hogwarts, you know, and it cut his head, and he passed out, and I, uhm... I was scared, and I couldn't get him into the castle, and I asked Remus to help." Here, she paused briefly at the sight of the malicious glare directed at her from the wizard before continuing, "So, so Remus and I, we...I used up all my energy to Side-Along! He, he Moblicorpused Professor Snape, and we took him to the Potions classroom, and I thought I could heal him because...because he wouldn't want anyone to know! I know he wouldn't! I was trying to protect his privacy." Snape snorted loudly once again, throwing Hermione off track for a moment before she could once again pick up the thread of her plea. "So I told Remus to go home and get Tonks because she was waiting on him, you know, and I... I found some potions there to, uh... to heal the bruising from when I slapped him and... and... well... Deflating Draught for the, uhm... the, the swelling... and I applied... cream for the pain to... to all affected areas!" The last part of her speech ran together quickly as she threw herself back in her chair, tears beginning to flow down her cheeks freely.

Snape smirked satisfactorily, returning to his seat, and motioned at Hermione as though this explained his absence from the dinner, and subsequent behavior, perfectly. The Headmistress peered at both her former students in absolute shocked silence. For moments, the only sign of life was that her mouth opened and closed in perfect demonstration of a fish. Severus' smirk grew into a smile that inched its way to larger proportions by the second, becoming more sinister and dangerous as the minutes passed by.

Finally, Minerva found her voice. "Miss Granger, your actions were deplorable! I thought I could expect better of you!" Snape perched on the edge of his seat, his joy no longer contained by a smile alone; it had graduated into a fully villainous grin. "However," and here Snape's expression fell as McGonagall shifted her gaze to him, "I would like to know where you two were when this happened. Why did you have to Apparate at all?"

The wizard made a short, sharp noise at the young woman beside him, trying in vain to wordlessly convey to her that she should remain silent, yet she ignored him. "Because he took me to the Malfoys, Professor. He didn't say where we were going, just said I had to go. When we got there, I wanted to leave, but he said to stay. He offered another apprenticeship to Pansy Malfoy, and it all happened so quickly because I think one of the Malfoys drugged me...or us, I don't know."

"*What?*" the older witch shrieked. She stared at the wizard with an expression of pure, undiluted rage.

"Now, Headmistress, it really is not quite as terrible as Miss Granger makes it..."

"*Severus Snape*," she growled. "How *dare* you take Miss Granger, of all people, to the Malfoy home unprotected..."

"*Unprotected?*" he roared. "She was fully protected! I did not let her out of my sight for..."

"*Enough!*" Minerva shouted. She placed a hand over her eyes in exasperation.

A tinny voice suddenly piped up, "If I may, Minerva, the lady's actions certainly warrant legal action. If ever a student disrespected me..."

"Shut up!" all three shouted in unison at the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black.

"Well, I *never!* A pox on the whole lot of you!" he cried out before disappearing from his frame. A few nervous titters were heard throughout the office from the remaining portrait figures as they looked on.

Snape resumed his sulking position, slumped down in his chair with arms crossed over his chest and a pouting expression, glaring down at his shoes. Hermione tried desperately to wipe away her tears.

"I just don't know what to do with you two," sighed Minerva. "I'm deeply disappointed in your behavior, both of you." She paused. "I'm at a loss right now, to be quite honest. Though you both may act like it, you *aren't* children anymore, and this can't be resolved with detentions, docking of house points, or even expulsion." She shook her head. "Both of you leave my office. There will be punishments, but I need time to think on it. If you both insist on acting like children, you will be punished like children. Go."

She watched them stroll out of the room in silence. "Oh, and Severus?"

Both turned, but it was Snape who replied, "Yes, Headmistress?"

"There will be no other apprentices."

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Hermione walked briskly beside her employer through the dark corridors of the dungeons. Despite his attempts to subtly shake her off, she had followed him, intent on resolving this issue that created an impregnable barrier between them. Indignation swelled between the two, a passionate anger that embraced them both more and more tightly with each step they took. Finally, she could keep quiet no longer.

"You...you arrogant bastard!"

He halted abruptly and glared down at her from his impressive height, but held his tongue. Further encouraged, she roared, "I meant it when I apologized! I..."

But he silently interrupted her impeding rant by quickly advancing in her direction, a dangerous glint surfacing in those black eyes. Her heart rate tripled in speed as she was backed up against the cold wall; her breath hitched in her throat.

He continued to stare down at her pensively, cocking his head to the side as though she were an intriguing potions ingredient, an object to be studied, rather than a human being. Hermione felt a sharp twinge of claustrophobia under his scrutiny as he edged even closer still, closing the space between them rapidly. She could smell his scent, feel the heat his body radiated. She could also feel the surging power that sparked around his figure, as well as his fierce, masculine energy that circulated around the tiny hallway, drowning her.

"What do you want from me?" he asked in a quiet, silky tone. The pitch, the timbre of his voice melted away her thoughts, her anger, but not her fear. In the Headmistress' office, mere moments ago, he was a cheeky, disdainful, insufferable, immature, cocky semblance of a whining child. Now, the guise was gone, and she shakily stood before a commanding, compelling, potent *man* and where she expected terror to flood her veins, she instead felt a rush of *primal attraction* overwhelming her instinctual fear. His body was flush against hers now, and while her breathing had become ragged, his remained detestably steady.

She winced as she heard the word escape her mouth: "Bastard."

He chuckled: a pleasant, low, rumbling laugh. His knee inched upwards, prying apart her legs carefully. Seductively. *Quid pro qua*, Miss Granger?" he whispered into her ear, pressing her shoulders back against the wall, holding her captive with not only his body, but also his voice.

Too dazed to attempt to decipher his question, she merely nodded. He held her attention as she watched, entranced and confused, his tongue sweep over his lips suggestively. She found herself slightly aroused under his lustful gaze, this dangerous, unpredictable, powerful man that she felt she *knew* felt as though she had shared his emotional past in some way... He laughed again, though the tone of it changed perceptibly it seemed malicious, suddenly.

She stared into his eyes, seeking for some tell-tale sign that would express his mood, his thoughts. But they were blank. Cold. Shuttered. Much like the image of him as a child that haunted her dreams. Now came the terror, washing over her every sense, the horrifying realization that...

"This is what you want, Granger?" His voice dripped with revulsion.

*No, this is wrong: something, everything, is horribly, terribly wrong!* she screamed internally. She opened her mouth to try and explain, to attempt to reverse the dynamic that now played out before her but her words were soundless.

Smiling malevolently at her, he retreated slowly, silently mouthing the words, *"Quid pro quo."*

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**Author's Note** Loads of gratitude to the amazing, gifted, magical Angel Mischa for tirelessly sifting through the mounds of mistakes to get this polished chapter to you and also heaps of thank yous to the always-deserving, wonderful, talented Amsev for late night chats and plot discussions. Without these two, this story would not exist.

Also, this chapter is probably the first that has no warnings attached to it. If I've overlooked something that needed a warning, please let me know. I figure that those of you who stuck with this tale after the last chapter, well, this chapter should seem G-rated.

Pffft. Warnings, who needs warnings?

**Up Next:** Pansy enters stage left.

## Non-verbal Communication

*Chapter 12 of 19*

*\*\*\* Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008 \*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's *dark* and violent past.

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**Author's Note** WARNING: Okay, this is a grisly chapter, so please proceed with caution. This chapter contains graphic accounts of childhood abuse, so if you feel at any point that you need to stop, just scroll to the bottom of the page to my author's note, and I will include a much more subdued summary so that you will get the gist of it and will be able to continue on with further developments. Hope that made sense. Again, please, please proceed with caution...

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"*What*," he growled menacingly, opening the door only a fraction with his long-fingered hand poised to slam it at any given moment. It was not a question, but a statement infused with such resentment and loathing that it gave Hermione the distinct impression of having been spit on. Evidently, Severus Snape was not a morning person.

"I...I wanted to apologize again for last night," Hermione stuttered, losing all semblance of confidence and bravery when faced with his foul mood.

"Apology," he drawled, pausing to let the word linger with anticipation, "*not* accepted. Now, please remove yourself from my presence and do whatever it is that you do at this God-awful hour." He attempted to slam the door, but Hermione wedged her foot in at just the right moment, effectively and painfully (for her) halting his retreat.

"No." This was all that she said, as though her actions needed no justification. His pale face flushed in indignation.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Sight."

"No. Not until you hear me out."

His eyes flickered dangerously. "Who the *fuck* do you think you are?"

She bristled visibly, but continued as though he had not spoken. "I am sorry for my inappropriate manners..."

"*Manners?*" he sputtered.

Again, she ignored him. "When attempting to heal you Saturday. I meant no harm, but I can see now that harm was done. And I'm sorry. As for last night, I'm sorry that I wasn't more sensitive to your feelings..."

"Get away from me."

Still, she kept the door propped open with her foot, unrelenting. "I realize now that it may have seemed as though I was attacking you, and I'm sorry. I can understand how you might feel..."

"Do *not* even *entertain* the notion that you can possibly *ever understand how I feel*!" he hissed softly, so quietly that she had to strain to hear each acidic syllable as it fell, heavy with an emotion she could not decipher, from his lips.

She said nothing. He was breathing hard, and his jaw was clenched, as though he were physically holding himself back from unleashing his anger on her. His hand clutched the door tightly; his knuckles were a stark white against the contrasting dark wood. Black eyes met brown. She could smell her own fear in the air, yet she was frozen, paralyzed by the black pools that bored into her with a fierceness she had never before witnessed.

Time stood still. There was no sound but the deep breaths of witch and wizard in tandem. She stood transfixed by his raw gaze. His pupils dilated and contracted.

*You can't hurt me. Nothing can hurt me. You can't hurt me. Nothing can hurt me now.*

Hermione felt as though she was falling, hearing the same mantra repeating in her head, but in *his* unmistakable voice: *You can't hurt me. Nothing can hurt me. You can't hurt me. Nothing can hurt me now.* She struggled in vain to comprehend. To stay in the present. To wrench her eyes away from his. But she was motionless, petrified, unmoving, unblinking, falling into the depths of the dark pools that continued to stare at her.

Darkness engulfed her.

Flashes of light assaulted her, flying by at unbelievable speeds.

She was weightless, surrounded by nothingness. Fear surged within her, but the fear was not her own. No, she felt eerily calm; the fear seemed like a detached, sentient being. Yet it surged, and she could feel adrenaline pumping within her, without her, around her, tingling in her extremities. Fear was a color. Fear was white. Cold, sterile. It was a bright light that blinded her as it grew larger and larger, finally swallowing her whole.

The darkness was gone.

She looked around her; she was in a place she did not recognize. She fleetingly contemplated the possibility of a Portkey, yet she had not touched anything. Side-Along Apparition? Where was her employer?

She knew she should feel frightened, yet the emotion was strangely absent.

*I can still feel you. All I do, yet I can still feel you.*

It was a whisper, yet it was silent. It had a voice, but it was not spoken aloud. *His* voice. She whirled around, hoping to find him, to question him, to find an explanation...

But she was alone.

More light snaked around her, changing the scenery.

*After all I've tried, you are still inside.*

"Me?" she asked the voice. "Are you speaking to me? Where am I?"

Like a deck of cards, the environment around her shuffled. Shifted.

"You filthy, lying, *pig*!" The shout rang out like a shot. She spun around, trying to locate its source.

She found herself face to face with an aging man sporting a hooked nose and lank hair arranged in greasy clumps. He was looking at her. *No*Through her. Spit foamed at his mouth, giving Hermione impression of a rabid dog.

There was a shuffling noise behind her. She cautiously turned, still concerned with the strange absence *of* her fear. *This* terror, the one that she did feel, was foreign, invasive, dissociated, unfamiliar.

She had to search for the origin of the rustling. It came from an open, small room, most likely a closet, hidden under a pile of ragged clothes.

It was a child.

It was Severus Snape.

Hermione nearly lost her balance.

"Get out of there!" the man shouted again. The boy complied. He looked to be around eight or nine years of age, this young Snape, his eyes large, his face soft and not yet comprised of sharp angles. He was naked save for a pair of underwear.

Wet underwear.

He was painfully thin. Blood trickled from his slightly parted lips. Morning sunlight penetrated the scene from somewhere, shining across his face and creating dark shadows around his eyes.

"What did I tell you? *What did I say would happen if you fucking pissed your bed again?*" The man looked deranged in his senseless rage, yet the little Severus stared up at him indifferently.

This seemed to anger the man even more. Roughly grabbing the child by the hair, he dragged the boy to a bed that materialized into existence a small distance away. There was a large wet spot on the sheets, only barely discernable by its darker color from the dried stains that surrounded it.

The man, Tobias Snape Hermione felt sure it was the same man she had discovered in the family portrait at Snape's home brought the child before the bed, still clutching a handful of hair. "Say it," Tobias demanded. The boy was silent.

Growling, Tobias violently shoved Severus' face into the damp spot, vigorously grinding the child's nose in the urine-soaked sheet. *Say it!* the man screamed as he yanked the boy's head up, allowing Snape a moment to breathe.

The boy's voice broke as he whispered, "I'm a filthy boy."

"Louder!" shrieked Tobias, tugging harder on his son's hair to emphasize the word.

"I'm. A. Filthy. Boy!" cried the young Severus Snape as his father stripped him of his underwear, his only remaining protection, and pushed him face down in the mattress, quickly disposing of his own trousers and undergarments.

Hermione wanted to scream. She wanted to be sick. She wanted to cry, to close her eyes, to intervene, but she could only remain horrifically still. Suddenly, she glimpsed something she had not seen before, but felt *certain* that it had been there the entire time.

Eileen Snape stood, watching as helplessly as Hermione, as her son was brutally abused by her husband. She said not a word, moved not an inch, cast not a single protective charm, but bore silent witness to a brutality of such depths that Voldemort himself may never have sunk to: the physical, emotional, psychological abuse, torture, and rape of a child.

*All I do, I can still feel you. After all I've tried, you are still inside.*

Light suddenly permeated her vision as the environment changed around her, her stomach suddenly rising as she felt herself falling, being swallowed whole by the brightness.

It seemed an eternity before her feet once again found purchase. The light dissipated away slowly like tendrils of smoke, revealing a new scene before her.

A boy, a slightly older Severus Snape with shoulder-length, jet black hair, no more than eleven years of age, stood defiantly before an older boy that Hermione immediately recognized from the smug sneer: Lucius Malfoy.

"So, you have impressive knowledge of the Dark Arts, I hear," Lucius whispered seductively, leaning in close to young Severus' ear.

"So?" bit back the black-haired boy.

"Wilkes, teach this disgusting half-blood a lesson in manners when speaking to his superiors," Malfoy purred, his eyes never leaving the younger wizard before him.

A great, lumbering bulk of a teenage boy shoved past onlookers assembled and clenched his hulking fist around Snape's throat. Severus did not squirm, did not move, did not express anything but a mask of cool indifference.

The large boy, Wilkes, grinned evilly, displaying a row of yellowed, rotting teeth. Rearing back, Wilkes placed all of his weight into his fist as it suddenly crashed soundly into Snape's right cheek.

Other than spitting out a tooth, the black-haired boy made no noise, no movement, not even a flinch. Angered and threatened by a loss of masculinity before a large crowd, Wilkes threw another punch, then another, and another, and still the boy made no sound. Not a whimper. Instead, a slow smile crept across his bloody face.

"Kill me," Snape stated calmly, clearly. "Because you cannot hurt me otherwise."

Wilkes dropped him suddenly, a fleeting look of intense confusion flashing across his face. He looked to Lucius for leadership.

Malfoy only stared at Snape.

Frowning, the crumpled, bloody form of the young Severus Snape cried out, "Finish it then! Coward!" No one moved.

The environment rippled, then faded as another scene came into view.

Eleven-year-old Snape lying naked on his back, an equally unclothed young Bellatrix Black straddling him, riding him, crying out. His eyes were numb, dead.

Flash.

Thirteen-year-old Snape, waking to find Malfoy holding his chin roughly, thrusting his penis into the young boy's mouth.

Another flash.

Albus Dumbledore towered over a teenaged Snape, hissing, "You disgust me."

Another flash; the scenes were changing so rapidly now, Hermione barely had time to register what she was seeing before it evaporated and another memory shoved itself forward.

Professor McGonagall was teaching. Lily Evans glared at Snape from across the room.

Flash.

Adult Snape stood over the grave of Lily Potter, placing a large flower on the tombstone.

Flash.

A woman writhed and moaned as she straddled another vision of an adult Snape, though he stared into the distance, his eyes reflecting little, his expression shuttered. Angered that she was not getting a response, the woman slapped him across the face.

He didn't look at her. His body was still.

She grasped his arm and bit into it, drawing a copious amount of blood. He turned his head to calmly stare at her with lifeless eyes. There was a long pause before his voice broke the silence, "The money is on the nightstand."

The woman laughed hollowly as she said, "Keep it. You're the whore here, love."

"*Stop!*" roared a familiar voice, his voice. It came at her from all directions, reverberating around her. She felt a feeble push at her consciousness before the voice repeated its plea: "*Stop!*" Another shove, this time more successful. She felt herself being pulled into the darkness, the bright light receding. Dim flickers of memories passed her by in a haze.

Hermione felt a disorienting sensation as she focused on the darkness that grew smaller and smaller until she found that she was staring at two holes of blackness, a dizzying array of light attacking her peripheral vision.

Belatedly, she blinked, and the familiar corridor spun around her. She fought to keep her balance, fought to hold back the tears and the wave of nausea that threatened to force its way up her throat. She felt pain, unending, unfathomable, unrelenting pain, despair, and conflicting numbness. She felt too much and yet not at all.

Her former professor sank to his knees before her, his body silently trembling and shaking. He hid his face from her. She reached out to him. He flinched away from her with a hissing intake of breath.

"Professor Snape?" called out a female voice from a short distance away, the sound reverberating off the corridor walls. A recognizable voice, though Hermione could not tear her eyes away from her employer to glance at the intruder. It was a female, that much Hermione could discern. There were other strange noises, odd noises, but Hermione couldn't place them.

"Professor Snape? It's Pansy, Pansy Malfoy. Oh...oh, God. I'll get Madam Pomfrey."

Just as darkness began to invade her senses and her body began to sway dangerously from side to side, Hermione realized the sounds were of Snape retching.

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**Author's Note** Thousands of thank-yous to my extraordinary beta, Angel Mischa, and the invaluable advice from both Amsev and Irishredlass. Without their encouragement this chapter would never have seen the light of day.

Also, the lines "*All I do, I can still feel you.*" and "*After all I've tried, you are still inside.*" and all variations are lyrics copyrighted by the incredibly talented Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails fame. They all come from the song, "Underneath It All" from the album, "The Fragile". If you have not listened to this song, or the entire album, I highly recommend you do so.

The song (and this just might be my projection here) seems as though it could be written from the POV of a survivor of child abuse.

Or not.

The "*You can't hurt me, nothing can hurt me...*" is also by Trent Reznor, from the song "The Ruiner" on the "Downward Spiral" album. Again, highly recommended.

**Up Next...** Shit hits the fan.

Below is the chapter summary...

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**Brief Summary** (Please bear with me, I'm absolute crap at summaries, I'm sorry.)

Intent on apologizing and smoothing things over with Severus, Hermione shows up at his door unannounced the next morning. Angered by her persistence to see the matter put to rest, and angered by her existence in general, Severus attempts to close the door in her face.

Our little heroine uses her foot as a door-stopper, and bravely demands that the two discuss the past events in a civilized manner. A staring contest ensues, both unwilling to back down, to look away.

Suddenly, Hermione finds herself in completely new surroundings, but unsure what exactly took place. She hears Severus' voice speaking in the distance, but can't make sense of what he says.

Belatedly, she realizes that she is trapped within his memories, as scenes of his abusive childhood flicker before her. Scenes of abuse (sexual/mental/physical) by his father flash by her, as well as visions of abuse from Bellatrix, Lucius, and Wilkes. There is a brief recollection of Dumbledore telling a teenaged Snape that Snape disgusts him.

There are recent scenes as well, including adult-Severus visiting Lily's grave, and an excerpt of a night with a prostitute where Severus does not actively participate in. His eyes are lifeless, his body is immobile, and in an attempt to illicit a response, the woman bites Severus' arm, drawing copious amounts of blood. He doesn't flinch, but instead calmly tells her that the money is on the nightstand, to which she replies, "Keep it. You're the whore here, love."

Finally Severus is able to push Hermione out of his memories, and as Hermione begins to lose consciousness, she hears Pansy's voice in the hall asking if Snape is alright and that she will get Madam Pomfrey. The chapter ends with Snape retching.

Okay. I think that covers it all.

## Intermission

*Chapter 13 of 19*

\*\*\**Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008*\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

An inarticulate roar and the resounding *crash* that followed startled Hermione into consciousness. Warily blinking her eyes in a vain attempt to make sense of her

surroundings, she had only a moment's respite before another howl of pain assaulted her ears. She struggled to sit up, but a firm hand held her still. Slowly, her vision began to focus.

"R...Remus?" she asked, her voice sounding hoarse and broken to her ears.

"Hermione, love, shhhh. Lie back down." He turned his head away from her and whispered, "She's awake," to the room at large.

A room that looked eerily familiar, though her exhausted brain could not quite begin to place the names of the people and objects that crowded her view. In fact, their mere presence was quickly becoming overwhelming.

"Mione! Merlin, you gave us a scare..." Ron's recognizable voice chimed.

"Hermione? Are you alright?" This was, unmistakably, Harry.

"Give her room to breathe, you two, gods!" Classic Ginny.

"Alright, loves, she's awake. Let's give her a bit to collect herself. C'mon, let's grab some lunch, yeah?" Hermione smiled as Tonks' unique blend of insight and authority infused the air as she ushered the muttering group out the door, leaving the young witch alone with a very relieved and also concerned Remus.

"How do you feel?" he asked quietly, searching her expression for any visible signs of pain.

"Where?" It was all she could get out. Her mind seemed to decide it would not supply the rest of the sentence.

"The hospital wing," came his calm answer.

"Professor?" She felt silly being reduced to one-word questions.

"He's here too."

"Alright?"

"Don't worry about that, Hermione. What matters is that you've returned to us. I'm more concerned at this moment for your welfare."

She swallowed thickly. There was so much she wanted to say, so much she wanted to ask, to explain, to understand. And yet... and yet, a feeling of intense apathy washed over her.

Another spectacular *crash* invaded her thoughts, and she visibly jumped. Remus' head whipped around at the noise with a strange expression plastered over his face.

"Alright over there, Poppy?" he called out tentatively. There was no answer. "Minerva?" he asked a bit more loudly.

"We're fine, Remus, we're fine," came the exasperated, curt tone of the Headmistress from a distance away.

"What?" Hermione asked Remus, again only able to verbalize the first word of her question.

The wizard turned back to her and belatedly feigned a small smile. "Nothing to worry about. Are you hungry?"

Confused at the rapid change of conversation, Hermione shook her head vigorously. The thought of food made her stomach turn. The thought of withstanding the pitying look that appeared on her former professor's face any longer also made her feel decidedly queasy. She turned away, intent on investigating her surroundings further.

She was in a partitioned area of the Infirmary, a curtain enclosing a small space that included herself, her bed, a cluttered nightstand, a comfortable-looking armchair, and Remus. It was sparse, it was clean, it was cold, it was sterile. Vases full of flowers charmed to last an indefinite amount of time littered the top of the nightstand, crowding her personal space. They let out a cloying perfume that tickled and teased her sinuses.

Stacks of books and newspapers were piled haphazardly next to the armchair, along with a few extra blankets and pillows strewn about. Hermione glanced up at Remus, her eyes full of fear. "H...how long?" There. She had graduated to two words. Her small feeling of victory was fleeting, however, as she witnessed a wince appear on the older wizard's face, darkening his expression. "Remus?" she queried again when he was not forthcoming with an answer.

He seemed to have found the crisp sheets of her bed suddenly very interesting as he mumbled, "Two weeks."

Her sharp intake of breath caused him to meet her eyes once again. "Two weeks?" she asked in a disbelieving tone.

"Yes, Hermione..."

"And him?" There was no question whom "him" referred to.

"Not quite awake yet. But," he quickly added upon seeing the sudden crestfallen expression she adopted, "don't worry about him, Hermione. Let's focus on your recovery right now..."

"That noise?"

"Well, he's showing definite signs of life," quipped Remus weakly. Another incomprehensible roar and the shattering of one of the nearby vases seemed to accentuate his point.

She watched with a certain lack of concern as the vase's water swelled silently across the tabletop before being spelled away by Remus. The displaced flowers met the same fate. "He's doing that?" she asked. Up to three words. Her progress seemed to go unnoticed by the wizard, however.

"Hopefully not intentionally."

"Non-verbally?" *What a stupid question*, she berated herself.

"And wandlessly, unconsciously."

She made a non-committal noise at that, followed by a rather large yawn. She felt a complete absence of fear that Snape's subconscious magical ability might affect her in any way, and it worried her slightly. Shouldn't she be afraid? Shouldn't there be more safety measures in place? Magical boundaries of some sort?

She suddenly realized that she didn't care. That she almost welcomed the danger. Would she feel any different if she was in pain? Would she feel less detached? Would she feel anything at all? She wondered if there were a way she could subtly provoke him to attack her, but quickly dismissed the idea at the thought that he would, almost certainly, be blamed, unconscious or not. Would she feel guilty? No, she shook her head, best to not test that theory.

"Take this," Remus lifted a chilled potion to her lips, "and try to sleep. I'll see if we can't manage to keep the noise down a bit."

The last words that left her lips before she succumbed to sleep were, "Don't silence him. I need to hear."



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Hushed voices were penetrating her deep slumber, and she ineffectively tried to swat them away. Instead of drowning into the background, however, they seemed to grow louder and clearer. Hermione amused herself by attempting to place the voices. There were three, all adults, one male and two female. She allowed the last remnants of sleep to escape her as she began to focus on their conversation, slyly keeping the outward appearance of unconsciousness.

"How is she?" asked a brusque female voice that Hermione immediately recognized as belonging to Minerva McGonagall.

"Taking well to the treatments," replied the second female voice, one familiar to Hermione from her years as a student that seemed to attract trouble wherever she went. Madam Pomfrey.

"How long has she been sleeping, Remus?" asked the Headmistress.

A low voice answered tiredly from her immediate right, "For nearly twelve hours now. Him?"

"We've finally managed to sedate him, thank Merlin," Poppy responded in an exhausted, clipped tone. "I heard you speaking with her earlier. I'm sorry I wasn't able to assist you. She didn't, by chance, mention what happened?"

"No, and I didn't think it wise to press the issue. She had no idea where she was."

Silence blanketed the room for several minutes. Hermione was about to make a display of waking when suddenly Minerva spoke. "Run by me again what Mrs. Malfoy said?"

"She told me that she happened upon Severus and Hermione in the corridor in front of his office, that he was vomiting excessively and that Ms. Granger had collapsed quite suddenly. By the time I reached them, they were both unconscious and unresponsive," replied the Healer.

"What do you think, Remus?" asked the Headmistress.

"I don't know, Minerva. You said something about them having a heated disagreement not too long before this incident?"

"One you knew all too well about, young man."

"I had no idea the extent..."

"Well, while that explains his bruises, it doesn't quite explain the situation at hand, does it, dears?" interrupted Poppy in a clipped, no-nonsense tone.

Hermione nearly groaned aloud. *How could I have been so insensitive? So violent? So hurtful?*

"Do you think he...that it to say, they, might have attacked each other?" asked Remus suddenly, bringing Hermione out of her thoughts.

"No, I don't think so. I gave them both quite a stern warning, and I don't think *either* of them truly intended to hurt the other in the earlier incident. I doubt they would suddenly dissolve into a duel..." began McGonagall.

"I don't mean to insinuate..." the wizard quickly amended.

"Remus, I agree with Minerva. I don't think either would set out to do the other harm, especially this grave."

"Of course, not intentionally. I was merely wondering aloud if he might have let his temper get the best of him..."

"Let's not point the finger of blame, shall we? It doesn't matter *who* did what, just the *what* is all I'm concerned about," said Poppy.

"Remus, if you don't mind, would you watch over Severus? I'll take over for you with Hermione."

"Of course, Headmistress," replied Remus diffidently. Hermione heard him shuffle away. A tension dissolved in the air that she had not noticed had been there before. A few moments of uneasy silence ticked by.

"Hermione, dear, I know you're awake," whispered Minerva into the young witch's ear, startling the girl into opening her eyes. The Headmistress and the Healer both stared at her expectantly.

"He didn't do anything." It was all she could think to say. She heard Minerva mumble something under her breath and felt a prick of familiar magic on her skin.

"Silencing charm," the Headmistress explained off-handedly in answer to Hermione's confused expression. "What happened, Hermione? Do you remember?"

The young witch was silent, trying to gather the proper words in order to explain her theory. Poppy, however, had misunderstood her lack of response to mean that Hermione was unwilling to clarify. "Miss Granger," the Healer said in an affronted tone, "it is imperative that we know exactly what happened..."

"I know!" Hermione shot back petulantly. "I'm trying to figure out how to explain it. I think... Can Legilimency be performed without intent?" The last sentence was directed at Minerva.

"It has happened before, yes," answered the Headmistress.

"I think it happened in this case. I was trying to apologize for, well, for everything, but he was, and rightly so, still angry, and I might have pressed it, my apology, you see... Well, whatever the case, we were arguing, and then we were just glaring at each other, and I just, *I fell in*"

"Fell in?" asked Poppy in a somewhat softer tone.

"Into, into his memories. I didn't mean to. Merlin, I didn't mean to! The last thing I wanted to do was invade his privacy *again*..."

"Again?" prompted Minerva, but Hermione ignored her, not feeling that it was the right time to disclose the information she gained from the stolen shoebox. If there was ever a right time, that was.

"Well, the memories, they, they..." Hermione stopped short suddenly; the flashbacks of those visions was sending both her mind and the contents of her stomach reeling.

Correctly interpreting Hermione's instant sickly pallor, Poppy quickly conjured a sick bucket just as the young witch emptied her belly of whatever nourishment it had found within the bottomless vials of medicinal potions from the past several hours.

"I see," stated Minerva as soon as Hermione had ceased retching. She gently laid her hand upon the young witch's shoulder as the girl's body began to tremble with silent sobs. The Headmistress exchanged a knowing look with the Healer.

"Hermione, why don't you take a sip of this now," Poppy fed her a vial of foul-smelling potion, "and we'll let you rest. If you need anything at all, call out, dear."

The young witch settled back into her pillows and closed her heavy eyelids without protest, feeling emotionally and physically drained from the entire ordeal.

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Days and nights slipped quietly away without the young witch's notice as she collected a small library of her own within the tiny space allotted to her in the infirmary. The books splayed across her bed were an assortment of Muggle psychology books as well as printed works that delved into the art of Legilimency and Occlumency; books that Remus and Tonks had tirelessly gathered for her during her continued imprisonment.

Hermione's third week of being sequestered in Madam Pomfrey's care was coming to a close with the fourth week dawning on the horizon. Yet still, Severus Snape had not regained consciousness. Still, the young witch drowned in a sea of guilt, fear, and a strange sense of apathy. Her books did nothing to settle her mind or to pique her interest as they once would have done. They seemed now to be merely an exercise in keeping desperation and boredom at bay. With a weak sigh, she trudged on through a paragraph outlining the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the Muggle text *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*, more commonly referred to as the "*DSMIV*."

"Wotcher, Hermione!" called out a female voice suddenly. Startled, Hermione shrieked and dropped the heavy manual instantly. "Oh, didn't mean to scare you! I keep forgetting. Sorry, love," whispered the owner of the high-pitched voice, one Nymphadora Tonks.

"It's fine, Tonks. It's fine," sighed the younger witch. "You're here early, I think." Hermione blinked and looked around for the clock. The ancient timepiece mounted on the wall clearly stated it was one o'clock p.m. "I guess not. Lunch with Remus again?" She was not fooled by Tonks' sudden interest in her husband's eating habits; the older witch had taken it upon herself to make sure that Hermione was not without company for more than a few hours at most. A plan that reeked of Tonks', Remus', Minerva's, Harry's, Ginny's, and Madam Pomfrey's combined plotting.

"Yep, we had steak and kidney pie. *Again*." The older witch comically rolled her eyes.

Hermione nodded meekly and rescued the thick text from its fallen position.

"Hermione," Tonks began, her tone at once soothing and serious, "you still aren't eating very much. Do you want me to fetch something more, uhm, tasty than that?" She pointed at a discarded lunch tray adorned with an untouched Shepherd's Pie, her nose wrinkling in distaste.

"No, I'm okay."

"You sure? It's no problem. Want me to grab you a bite of Muggle food?"

"No, but thanks. I just want to rest a bit more. I'll probably be hungry when I wake up," Hermione lied. She knew by the sharp glance of the older witch that Tonks didn't buy it. Hermione added a faint smile belatedly. Tonks snorted in disbelief.

"All right, then, let me at least help you get all these books off the bed. It makes me feel better that you're reading again, though, mind you. You seemed so lost earlier this week..." And as Tonks continued what passed as her daily motivational speech, Hermione easily tuned it out in favor of snuggling into the warm blankets. She was asleep before the Metamorphmagus could finish her thought.

\*

A strange sound, so soft it was nearly whispered, woke Hermione with a start. Lying still, she waited and listened for it to repeat. The Hospital Wing was doused in inky darkness, all the inhabitants sleeping it seemed, save for her. Silver shafts of moonlight pierced the blackness every few feet, illuminating patches of her room. The cold seeping through the stone was effectively halted by the Warming Charm cast on the patients' blankets, and it gave Hermione a feeling of security in the midst of such a brisk night.

Just as she began to drift off into another dreamless slumber, the odd noise tickled her eardrum once more, and she was once again awake and highly alert. She strained to hear as it sounded again, her brain quickly cataloguing the various possible sources. When it breached her auditory senses once more, she felt sure that she could label it as a yelp of distress, or pain.

And it came from... the adjoining room.

Hermione uncurled herself from her tense, prostrate position and gingerly stepped out of her bed, keeping her ears trained to the repetitive cry as she followed. It was low, so muted, that during the breaks of silence in between, she questioned whether she had heard anything at all. But then it would break through, so hoarse and pleading, a whimper almost, that it pushed all thoughts of imagination and dismissal out of her head.

Slowly, cautiously, she advanced. Pulling back the curtains that separated the patients' beds from one another, separated her from *him*, separated her from all the injured students she located the origin of the haunting noise.

A pale, rogue moonbeam sliced through the opening of the curtains and landed on the deathly-pale face of her former professor. His eyes were closed, his black eyelashes a stark contrast against his chalky complexion. His face was gaunt, far thinner than she had ever remembered seeing before. He trembled uncontrollably, and his sweat-soaked, jet hair clung to his face. He thrashed slightly as another aching yelp escaped his parted lips.

Hermione cast a quick glance of appraisal around his room, looking for something, *anything*, that might alleviate his near-silent agony.

It was bare. No books, no flowers, no empty glasses left behind by visitors, no cards, nothing but a solitary chair protruding from the darkness. A glint of reflecting light that hovered underneath the spartan piece of furniture blinked out of existence as Hermione stepped near. Her heart burned with raw anger at his neglect. A feeling that suddenly banished her suffocating, week-long indifference.

She finally *felt*.

Quickly drawing the chair to his bedside, she sat before him with a mixture of gratitude and fear. Tenderly, she reached out with her small fingers and brushed the hair off his face.

Encouraged by his sudden silence, she hurried back to her room, only to return seconds later with her wand. Once again taking her seat, she began to quietly talk in calm, comforting tones as she transfigured a nearby quill into a washcloth. Using a modified Aguamenti charm, she wet the rag with cool water.

As she placed the cloth on his forehead and gently wiped his brow, his head turned slightly into her touch. With an aching heart, Hermione continued her ministrations, only staggering back to her own bed when the break of dawn approached and exhaustion overwhelmed her.

Following the young witch's exit, an oddly-marked feline slunk out from the shrinking shadows and repositioned herself at the foot of the wizard's bed, her body relaxed and fluid as she stalked her perimeter in silent sentinel, a pensive expression dancing in her eyes.

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**Author's Note** Thousands of thank-yous to my extraordinary beta, Angel Mischa, and the invaluable advice from both Amsev and Irishredlass.

And, okay, so I said in the last A/N that shit would hit the fan in this chapter. Apparently not. I guess the characters needed a tender moment before launching into another heated exchange. To which I say, "Bah."

And, yes, I did some research, and the DSM-IV is actually used in the UK psychological field as a reference tool, and is highly respected, from what I've read. If you have evidence to the contrary, please let me know!

**Up Next...** The sleeping serpent awakens. That sounds really ominous, doesn't it?

# Interrogation

*Chapter 14 of 19*

*\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

Over the next few days, Hermione alternated between throwing herself into her studies of psychological disorders, as well as updated Potions techniques, and losing herself in carefree conversations with her oldest friends. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and even Lavender provided more than adequate company in the dreary infirmary room, keeping her mind from dwelling on The Incident, as she had begun to refer to it in the safety of her own thoughts.

Though she had been technically released from the hospital wing and the generous care of its matron, she found that she was reluctant to leave.

Alright, more than reluctant, if she were to be honest with herself. Whether it was from guilt, compassion, fear, selfishness, or a mixture of all of those emotions and more, she could not terminate the nightly vigils she held at the bedside of the man who was quickly consuming her every thought. She delved into the psychiatric manuals with an unbridled, burning curiosity that she had not experienced since her first year at Hogwarts. She researched case studies of the documented effects of extreme childhood abuse with unconcealed fervor. She equally applied herself to becoming familiar with the latest Potions discoveries, intent on showing the irascible wizard her worth in the discipline.

She anticipated his return to consciousness with both anxiety and an unfamiliar aching deep in the pit of her stomach. A feeling of strong desire... *need*, for him to awake soon, to unleash his verbal vitriol at her, to howl in rage at her, to show her that he was still himself. That he was, and always would be, the powerful, misanthropic, sarcastic, manipulative bastard: Severus Snape. Constant. Unchanged.

So it was the fourth morning after her first expedition to his bedside that Hermione found herself gently awakened by a soft shake of her shoulders. Blinking rapidly to expel the sleep from her eyes, she saw a blurred female form hunched over her who spoke with a muted tone, "Hermione, dear, wake up. No use wasting your days away in this place. Come now, up, up, that's a dear."

Hermione's brain quickly identified the source of the voice as the Headmistress. The fuzzy figure quickly clarified in her vision. The older witch wore an expression of tenderness and concern as she helped pull Hermione up into a sitting position.

Hermione was about to protest when the sound of distant voices caused her own to catch in her throat. "...scrub them clean. And, Mrs. Malfoy?" a male voice, rough from lack of use and with a deeper timbre than she had ever heard from it before, spoke from the adjoining room.

"Yes, Professor?" answered a young female's voice, thick with trepidation and uncertainty.

"Don't. Use. Magic," he stated, emphasizing each word emphatically.

"Yes, sir," the young woman replied with a squeak, and before Hermione could begin to categorize the familiar voice, her curtained partition was flung open and a blur of what Hermione recognized to be Pansy Malfoy sped through the room. The curtain lazily closed behind her, as if in protest at being so roughly thrust apart.

Unaware of Minerva's arms still assisting her, Hermione leapt from the bed with a spirit she had not possessed for several weeks, nearly toppling the Headmistress over in her fervor. Muttering out an apology as she snatched her wand from the nearby table, the younger witch gave not a thought for modesty as she summoned fresh clothes and quickly changed. She was only two steps away from the thin sheet of fabric that separated herself from her employer when a hand suddenly clutched her shoulder from behind, fingers pressing into her collarbone uncomfortably.

"Hermione," Minerva whispered as she forced her former student to turn around and face her. "Not so fast, please. Wait for a moment and allow me to enter first, so that I can gauge his temper."

Reluctantly acquiescing, Hermione stepped to the side and followed the Headmistress' entrance into the second room with only her eyes, straining for a glimpse of the Potions master even as the cloth settled back into place, isolating her.

She listened, but could hear nothing, not a scrape of a chair, not a murmur of conversation, not even the welcome sound of a snort. She waited.

And waited.

And waited yet some more.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, the curtain parted to reveal Minerva gesturing for her to enter.

Stepping forward uneasily, wondering where on earth her famed Gryffindor courage had fled to, Hermione entered the room noiselessly. He sat on the edge of his bed, clothed in a white oxford shirt with sleeves rolled up just underneath his elbows and black trousers of an impossible length that finally ended in black boots, his head resting in his hands.

The silence was oppressive.

Minerva glanced between her two former students and said with an odd sort of finality, "Right. I'll leave you two to talk things over. And please keep in mind what I told you earlier, Severus."

He made no indication that he heard her, but his lack of response seemed to satisfy the older witch, and all too soon she had left, leaving Hermione, Severus Snape, and the tangible tension alone together.

\*

The thin piece of fabric that isolated the room seemed to Hermione to be suddenly made of iron; a thick metal wall that offered no hope of escape or rescue. She tried to stand before it stoically, tried to retain a semblance of calm, tried to affect a sense of patience even though every bone in her body was poised flee, every muscle tensed painfully, adrenaline surging through her veins as she tried to rest her eyes on anything but *him*.

He, for the most part, seemed to be struggling to achieve the same. He tugged distractedly at his sleeves, rubbed the palms of his slightly trembling hands against the cloth of his trousers.

Their eyes avoided each other, their gazes powerfully repelled as though within them laid matching poles of a strong magnet.

Both witch and wizard studied their surroundings in discomfited silence.

It was several minutes later before he broke the hushed discord.

"Miss Granger," he began, glaring into the distance with ill-disguised agitation, "I am... glad to see that you are well. Minerva said that you, also, were adversely... affected."

"Professor," she started, staring at a point just over his left shoulder with purpose, "I apologize..."

His hand that pale, bony, spidery hand, raised slightly, indicating his desire for her silence. Her eyes caught its movement and stared, transfixed, as it was roughly run through his dark hair before descending to his nose where it pinched the bridge and caused him to wince.

"Don't," he said in a harsh, forced whisper.

Her eyebrows knitted together in confusion, but she remained quiet.

Another ten minutes of averting eyes and uneasy silence.

Then, all at once, things seemed to *click* back into place: Snape gracefully leapt to his feet and reached for his teaching robes and wand, ignoring her presence completely as he fastidiously, disdainfully dressed. His trademark sneer had presented itself, affixed securely, as always, to the left side of his mouth. The *professor* had returned, had grandly retaken control of the awkward situation.

And although Hermione felt more secure in the presence of this known role, she felt a distinct loss, deeply within her, of something she could not quite define.

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The next day found Hermione employed in scouring the worktables in the Potions classroom silently, accompanied by Pansy Malfoy, who had taken up the task to restock several of the classroom cabinets with various potion supplies. Hermione had tried valiantly to draw the other witch into conversation, but the newest member of the Malfoy clan had ignored her, focusing all of her attention to her duty.

Snape had been suspiciously absent so far this morning.

"Well, I think these worktables are as clean as they will ever be," Hermione stated, breaking yet another uncomfortable silence as she abandoned the steel mesh cleaning utensil. Leaning back against a nearby tabletop, she allowed her aching arms to relax as she watched Pansy covertly through half-lidded eyes.

The other woman acted as though she was the sole occupant of the room and never once let her gaze linger on Hermione. She carefully levitated the various flasks and bottles safely to their destination, taking care to observe and abide by Professor Snape's meticulous arrangement patterns. She worked quickly, silently, and with a sense of determination that Hermione had never before witnessed from her.

Wrenching her gaze from Pansy's flurry of activity, Hermione began to study her surroundings with feigned interest. Her thoughts eventually returned to her last encounter with her employer, analyzing and dissecting his behavior towards her. She absentmindedly nibbled at her bottom lip as she wondered why he had not acted as she had expected. Raging, roaring, hexing; all of these were reactions that she had predicted, had prepared for. But the silence, the ringing stillness...

The suffocating tension.

His obvious anxiety with the subtle undertone of fear.

*Fear.*

The thought that Professor Snape the man who defied death, the man who stood before Lord Voldemort countless times, feeding the madman lies, the man who killed Albus Dumbledore on command and was thus damned by all of Wizarding Britain, the man who drowned in his own private hell day after monotonous day, the very thought that *this man* could feel *fear* in her presence made her stomach churn with self-loathing.

Hermione grasped the lip of the table for support. Her head swam with only random snatches of coherent thought as her body began to quiver. Some incessant sound buzzed in her ears, but the roaring noise of her own conscience blotted all else out. Something cold and hard slammed against the back of her head.

She was sinking, and yet she was berating herself for doing so how could she allow herself to descend into selfish oblivion, how dare she permit herself to be submerged in such self-pity? She struggled valiantly against her own mind, thrashing her mental limbs to try and stay afloat, resisting the alluring pull that tried to tug her into its blissful depths.

And when at last she could fight it no more, when at last exhaustion took its toll, something grasped her from above and saved her from the great below.

Ascending to the surface, she felt a warm presence surrounding her, overwhelming all of her senses. To her olfactory sense, there was an aroma that reminded her of comfort and strength, of safety. Of power.

To her auditory sense, a rich, deep timbre that soothed her protesting limbs and calmed her tense muscles.

To her tactile sense, the warm, smooth feel of wool and linen and the skin of another, causing her nerves to vibrate pleasantly.

The sense of gustation, or taste, was engulfed with a sweetness that was carried on the air she breathed.

And when she opened her heavy eyelids, her vision was flooded with a glittering blackness as a pair of dark eyes stared into her own. Long, thick eyelashes fluttered before her, and when they descended, Hermione noticed that the eyelids attached to them were covered with a dusting of the color green.

The only thought that entered her mind was the word *odd*.

And when the voice that accompanied those eyes squeaked, "She's awake, Professor," reality crashed down.

She was staring at Pansy.

Horrified, Hermione scrambled backwards in an effort to sit up, but a spidery hand was gripping her wrist tightly, keeping her in place. Her gaze traveled to it apprehensively, expecting it to be adorned with false, painted nails and gaudy rings of fashion but it was not. It was talon-like, but undeniably masculine.

His voice broke through her thoughts, rumbling from a close distance near her head. "Feeling alright, Granger?"

Hermione winced. She doubted his words could be infused with any more venom. "Yes, fine, sir," she croaked. Snape's hand released her wrist suddenly as though it burned him.

"Help her up," he commanded to Pansy. "Take her to the hospital wing..."

"No!" Hermione cried out, pulling herself up and offering a silent prayer that he wasn't witnessing her obvious swaying. Once standing, with one hand again on the nearby table to support her, she thrust out her chin and attempted to stare down her nose at him. "I feel absolutely fine."

From at least a foot above her, he arched his eyebrow and cocked his head just slightly, a barely suppressed, amused grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Struggling to keep her balance and affect grace simultaneously, she repeated, "I am fine."

"So I see," he murmured. "But, nevertheless, go and be 'fine' with Madam Pomfrey." He flicked his wrist in a gesture of dismissal and turned away. He had only progressed a few steps away from her before the sound of her indignant tone caused him to halt.

"No."

He spun around to face her, his eyes narrowing dangerously. Hermione stared defiantly back, her own eyes merely tiny slits that radiated fury. Minutes ticked by slowly as their gazes became locked in a stalemate. Finally, he spoke: "Leave us, Mrs. Malfoy."

"Sir?"

"Leave us. Granger and I have a few things we need to discuss.*Privately*." He dared not break his focus by looking in Pansy's direction; his eyes never left Hermione's. Not another word was spoken until the soft *click* of the door confirming Pansy's exit rang from the room.

Without preamble, he began to slowly advance on Hermione, a predatory glint shining in his black eyes. "Just what are you playing at?" he snarled at her, still stalking toward her with an almost feline grace.

"Sir?" Hermione asked in confusion, echoing Pansy's response from earlier.

"How uncanny your resemblance to your idiotic friend, *Miss* Granger," he said harshly.

Her eyebrows raised in retort. "Which friend would that be, *Professor*?" she hissed back with emphasis.

He bared his teeth and spat out the word, "*Potter*," as though it left a bitter taste in his mouth. "And watch your insolent tongue."

They circled each other defensively in a strained silence.

"What do you want?" he asked suddenly, so softly that she had to strain to hear him. "What do you want from me?"

"What do you mean..."

"*Enough!*" he bellowed, his entire body twitching with rage.

Her eyes flitted around the room for possible escape routes as she began to retreat slightly. "Professor Snape, I don't understand what you mean," she explained calmly, all indignation and insolence draining away in favor of paralyzing panic and fear.

"Going to share your newfound knowledge with your *disgusting*, sycophantic friends? Is that it? Did someone put you up to this, Granger?" he howled, stepping toward her once again. His face was contorted in fury, his complexion deathly white, his trembling body now violently shaking. Still, he pressed on, matching every inch of her retreat with forward movement. "How did you do it?" he demanded in a volume far below a whisper.

"I, I don't know..."

"Quit fucking lying to me!" he screamed. His eyes were frantic, jumping from side to side, his pupils dilated. He resembled nothing more than a rabid animal.

"Stop it!" Hermione roared.

And to her complete and utter amazement, he ceased all movement, save for the incessant twitching.

Snape's breathing was erratic and heavy. Twin, thin trails of blood trickled from his nose, of which he seemed oblivious.

Hermione's heart raced. She slowly let out a breath that she didn't realize she had been holding.

Both stood, frozen, rooted to their positions.

"Why?" whispered Snape, his voice suddenly broken and pleading. "Why did you...for what reason, what need..." He swallowed thickly. "What do you want?"

There was no question what he referred to. "I don't want anything," she whispered, "I don't know what happened, how it happened, I don't know!" She threw up her arms in surrender. "I don't know Legilimency, I never studied it, I never cast a spell!" She tried to hold back the tears that now viciously burned her eyes. "I'm," she inhaled deeply, "I'm sorry."

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**Author's Note** Thousands of thank-yous to my extraordinary beta, Angel Mischa, and the invaluable advice from both Amsev and Irishredlass. Also, Amsev helped with the title of this chapter and all the credit for the summary goes to her... it made me giggle. Profusely.

And, I'm sorry for the long, ah, "intermission." I finally graduated school (yay!), but am on my way to yet another school (not-so-yay). Also, I am professionally illustrating a children's book, but that shouldn't soak up as much time as the last semester did. So, hopefully, updates will come much faster. Thank you to everyone who has stuck with me this far. Things are about to get very interesting indeed...

# Demonstration

Chapter 15 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

Snape slumped to the floor as Hermione repeated, "I'm sorry," in a faint whisper. His mouth moved mechanically, mouthing an echo of her words, yet no sound escaped from his thin lips. His usual clear, glittering black eyes now seemed clouded and dull, as if the light behind them had been snuffed out.

Hermione trod carefully closer to him, fearful of the now diminutive shape that her former professor posed. His clothes seemed to have swallowed him whole, his entire posture seemed to crumble upon itself. He resembled a small child to her suddenly, and this chilled her. Again, the self-loathing she had tried to repress was openly feeding upon her conscience now, even as it prompted her to kneel beside him.

"P...Professor?" She stumbled on the word as she fought valiantly to silence her tears.

He did not respond in speech or in manner, but continued to stare at her oddly with eyes unseeing.

"Sir?" she asked firmly, unwaveringly, her voice laced with concern, but her tears now held in check.

Still no response. He did not blink, did not twitch, and only barely breathed.

Hermione wrung her hands nervously before her as she studied the still flowing stream of blood spilling from his nose and languidly dribbling onto his lips. She could not help her slight cringe when the pink tip of his tongue slowly licked the blood away from his mouth indifferently.

Taking a deep breath, she called out, "Severus?"

Snape blinked several times before fixing her with an inquisitive gaze; the film of despondency covering his eyes was now clearing rapidly, a bright flame within sparking to life.

She released her breath in a sigh of relief.

The silence thrummed and vibrated in the room. And although Hermione was no more than a foot away from Snape, her kneeling and him half-sitting, half-coiled, she felt as though a vast sea existed between them, stagnant and diseased.

"Severus," she whispered again, testing the waters with a gentle, coaxing tone, "I don't know how this happened, but it did, and I can't change it." She swallowed thickly before trudging ahead, "But you, we, need to talk about it. I think..."

His hollow, broken bark of laughter interrupted her. "'We need to talk?'" he hissed at her incredulously. *Talk?* What do you suggest *we talk* about?"

She frowned disapprovingly at him. "Well, I think it's obvious..."

"*Obvious?*" he bit out through clenched teeth.

Her eyes narrowed to tiny slits at the evasive tactic he was employing. He twitched as though he could feel the heat of her glare scorching his skin.

"What *are* you?" he inquired quietly, unable to meet her gaze.

"Your apprentice. Your former student. The 'insufferable know-it-all.' A Gryffindor. Are any of those the answer you were looking for?" Each sentence she spoke was a harsh staccato that reverberated throughout the room, making the silence that followed all that more deafening.

Hermione shifted her weight on her knees and smoothed her robes as she mentally counted to ten to ease her building frustration. When she next spoke, it was in a far gentler tone. "I am someone who wants to..." She paused for a steadying breath. "Someone who wants to help you," she whispered.

The pallor of his face became infused with crimson.

A vein pulsed near his temple frighteningly.

A fresh fountain of blood poured from his nose.

He sneered at her with the bald expression of disgust.

She was undeterred.

She reached out determinedly, her fingers slowly seeking out their target despite their conspicuous trembling. When her hand brushed against his shoulder, he recoiled violently, his shoes fighting to gain purchase on the stone floor as he scrambled away.

She let her outstretched arm fall lamely to her side. "Your nose," she pointed out, "is bleeding pretty badly."

With a fleeting look of surprise that was quickly suppressed, Snape wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve, smearing it across his face. With a sigh, Hermione fished around in the pockets of her robes until she produced a clean handkerchief and offered it to him. He examined it disdainfully and made no move to accept it. After several long minutes, she stowed the piece of cloth back into her pocket.

She rose to her feet noiselessly and slowly headed for the door. Before she exited, she turned back to face him, her eyes roaming over his rigidly tensed form. "I will not give up on you," she whispered.

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Remus Lupin left his office with a full feeling in his stomach and lightness in his heart. It was not often that his lunch hour was free from professorial obligations, and in the

rare occasions that it was, he always sent an owl to his wife moments beforehand and spent the rest of the blissful, student-free hour stowed away in his office with Tonks and his toddler son, Teddy, sharing a meal at Hogwarts' expense.

This afternoon was no different, and these stolen moments with his family fed his hungry soul as much as the food fueled his body. It was always difficult, near the end of the hour, when it came time to say their goodbyes, but the feeling of sadness was fleeting when they knew they would see each other again in a matter of hours.

Remus was one of the few professors in the history of Hogwarts to be both married and be blessed with a child, as well as have the option to live outside school grounds. And though his relationship with his students did suffer at bit with the absence of their professor's availability, he gladly traded this for the opportunity to nurture the bonds within his own family for the very idea of a *family*, a true family, was a new and novel discovery for the werewolf.

Within the walls and halls of Hogwarts, he had, over his relatively short life, been lucky enough to be surrounded with friends that not only did not mind his condition, but worked tirelessly to create an environment where he would not be alone during his darkest hours this was a deep love that he never took lightly. He had many surrogate family members, many who cared for him far more than his own parents had, many who had put their lives in danger for his well-being, which he always attempted to reciprocate in kind.

But *this* family, this newly born and tenderly cherished family, this one which consisted of a beautiful wife and a gorgeous son, this family brought from the furthest most depths of his heart and his soul a love that he had never known existed. And now, now that these feelings had been unearthed, stirred, awakened, he knew he could never exist without these two people. They were a part of him as surely as the drowsing wolf was; they were connected to him, bodily, spiritually, mentally.

And so it was this realization, this epiphany, that swelled in his mind as he casually left his recently vacated office for his daily afternoon stroll about the castle, this comprehension that distracted his brain from the mundane task of setting a clear destination for his feet to follow. And it is why he found himself suddenly at the threshold of the dungeons, mere inches away from a head-on collision with a frail, equally dissociated young woman, who fostered a look of immediate surprise and expression of apology to match his own.

"So sorry, Mrs. Malfoy," Remus quickly said, halting effectively in mid-step.

"No, no, my fault, I should have paid attention to where I was going," murmured the apprentice as she stepped back and allowed him room to pass her. Her face was drawn and pale with a lackluster expression, her eyes heavy-lidded and framed underneath with dark, purple bags. She was painfully thin (almost nearly enough to match the emaciated frame of her employer). Her hair was dull and stringy.

He stared at her with unconcealed concern, and she squirmed uncomfortably under his gaze.

"Are you alright, Mrs. Malfoy? Here, let me take you to the Infirmary," Remus whispered as calmly as possible, reaching out to her in a gesture of help.

She waved off his hand dismissively as she spoke. "It's alright, really. I just, I just need to finish up a few things."

"Surely you can take a few hours to rest? Severus isn't denying you the basic need of sleep, is he?"

"No, no! No, it's not that at all. I just," she sighed, "I just have some other business to attend to." She moved forward in an attempt to brush past him, but he swiftly, gently, grasped her forearm and held her until she stilled.

"Mrs. Malfoy, I understand that we have not exactly gotten on in the past, but I want you to know, and don't dismiss this, I want you to know that my door is always open, and anything you say will be held in the strictest confidence."

She merely stared at him in response, her eyes probing his expression for evidence of dubious intent. Without another word, she gave the slightest of nods, released herself from his grip, and continued forward without a look back.

\*

He was staring at the corked vial with a hunger dancing within his black eyes, delicately grasping the glass container between his thumb and forefinger, watching the light glittering through the clear liquid inside. His expression was of childlike wonder and awe. His back was pressed against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chest with a thin arm snaked around his shins.

His nose still bled profusely.

He paid it no mind.

When the thundering sound of a knock on the door echoed throughout the room, Severus Snape seemed oblivious. He continued to stare longingly at the vial that held his attention captive, his eyes both unseeing and unblinking.

This was how Remus found his former classmate upon entering the room. Once his thrice knocking went unanswered, and his calls unheeded, he took it upon himself to proceed through the unlocked door, the risks of doing so weighing heavily upon his mind.

But he need not have worried.

Severus was as incapable at this moment of barring Lupin's entry as a Diricawl could take flight.

The state of the Potions master, in the eyes of the werewolf, looked nothing like the severe figure that was always associated with Snape. Instead, he looked like an awkwardly tall, gangly boy, drowning in a sea of black robes and gazing at a glass vial with an expression Lupin likened to that which James Potter wore when presented with his first broomstick.

For several minutes, Remus could only gape in horror at the sight before him.

When he at last had the presence of mind to make his attendance known, Lupin noisily cleared his throat. Several times. But it was to no avail.

"Severus?" he asked gently.

There was no response.

"Snape?" He affected a firmer voice. "What's that you have there?" Remus pointed to the container in Severus' fingers.

Snape shrugged.

"You're bleeding!" The werewolf rushed to the perplexing wizard's side in one bound, his hands roaming his own robes for a handkerchief. Once one was located, Remus unceremoniously pressed it against Snape's nose without a thought. It was a bold and brash and thoroughly *Gryffindor* thing to do, and had it been any other time than the present, Lupin was certain he would be writhing on the floor under the effects of a painful curse for his troubles. As it was, Snape did not so much as flinch at the physical contact. This worried Remus far more than the threat of an Unforgivable.

Muffled by the linen that was currently pushed against his face and stifling his breathing, Severus stated in a broken voice, "Bad blood will out."

"What?"

The bleeding man said nothing more, but locked eyes with Remus with such a fierce gaze that the werewolf stumbled back and momentarily lost his grip on the soiled handkerchief.

"Snape, what's going on? Where's Hermione? Why are you bleeding? Why does Mrs. Malfoy look like she hasn't slept in weeks?" Lupin's voice was getting frantic now, panicked, and the words began to run together in a rush. "*Snape!* Tell me what the hell is going on!" He snatched the vial violently from Severus' hand.

This seemed to break the spell that had fallen over Snape, and within an instant, he was on his feet, his previously occupied fingers now crushing Lupin's windpipe, holding Remus inches off the floor. The vial shattered across the stone ground. The werewolf struggled, his legs kicking wildly into the air, his hands scrambling, clawing at the hand that held his throat in a vise-like grip.

And then, just as quickly, he was released, crashing down to the floor spectacularly, inhaling deeply with rasping breaths and vigorously rubbing his neck.

"Lupin?" Snape asked, blinking rapidly and staring at the man sprawled on the floor with marked confusion. "What the f..."

"What," Remus hissed with a deep gulping breath, "is," he coughed and sputtered, "going on?"

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**Author's Note** Thousands of thank-yous to my extraordinary beta, Angel Mischa, and the invaluable advice from both Amsev and Irishredlass. Since I haven't spoken to Amsev in a while, my summary has suffered. You will notice it is quite redundant. It's all Amsev's fault. Hehe!

## Revelation

*Chapter 16 of 19*

*\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\**

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.



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**Precaution** The warnings selected for this chapter (Abuse/Rape, Incest, Horror, Squick, etc.) are not really explicit, but merely a warning that the dialogue within this chapter touches on these issues. This is a dark chapter, but not quite as much as some of the previous chapters.

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She slipped past the Great Hall in a noiseless flurry of dark robes that clung to her slender frame, passing the sights and sounds of hundreds of people, staff and children alike, settling down to their dinners. Had she stopped and allowed the sweet aroma of the delicious foods to slink its way into her senses, she would have been lured away from her task without a second thought. Her stomach painfully roared at her at all hours of the day, unsatisfied with the meager portions she fed it when she found the few moments she could indulge. But now, with her arms laden with the stacks of parchment, she fled from even the slightest temptation.

Her hair was stringy and stuck to her forehead and cheeks in clumps, wet from the torrent of rain that pelted her as she had awaited the inconspicuous barn owl's return in the Owlery. The owl had taken more time than usual in delivering her post, and her anxiety had risen in direct correlation to the amount of minutes that ticked by at a snail's pace. Finally, the nondescript owl had returned carrying a reply, a piece of parchment merely stating that the recipient had the document she had sent safely in hand. There was no signature, though she hardly expected one. She had gathered her things and headed down to the dungeons, taking a few not-widely-known paths that allowed her to bypass the highly trafficked areas above the ground floor of the castle, but, unfortunately, also forced her to pass by the Great Hall and all of its alluring smells, sights, and sounds.

Perhaps she could pause just a moment to inhale the sweet scent of... was that roasted chicken? She gingerly tasted the air around her, halting in her tracks.

No. No time.

Her face screwed up with a newfound determination, Pansy shoved all thoughts of food, drink, and company far past the boundaries of her overworked mind and focused instead on the duty at hand.

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With a deep and clearly audible sigh of disappointment, she placed her fingers at her temples, attempting to massage away the burgeoning headache. Her worn patience had evaporated when the heavy doors of the Great Hall had slowly shut. Dinner had started, and the pronounced absence of two of her professors had caught the attention of those present at the staff table. Murmured concerns mixed with hushed gossip wafted toward her, and when she was no longer able to shut the noise out, she suddenly rose, pushing her large, gilded chair back with a minimum amount of noise, and left the Hall in palpable anger.



When Minerva first accepted her position as the Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, she fully expected to exhaust her attentions and concerns solely on the underage inhabitants of the castle. Instead, she found her focus to rest mostly on her professors *one* particular professor, if she were to be absolutely honest with herself.

It should not have surprised her. Severus Snape was often on her mind, from the moment he had emerged as the silent, brooding, violent, yet vastly intelligent first year in her Transfiguration class, to his misadventures as of late. It should not have come as a shock to her that she would spend a vast majority of her time surreptitiously watching him in the aftermath of the War. He had always been a sensitive, emotionally fragile boy. The darkest days were over, but not without taking their highest toll on the man who spent his entire life prepared even expecting to perish at any moment.

The guilt had assailed her for many years for her countless misinterpretations of his character. Never before had anyone made her preconceived prejudices so glaringly obvious.

Yes, he was moody. He was difficult. He was, at times, irrational, impulsive, vindictive, dominated by his emotions. Yet, other times he was logical, methodical, cunning, sly, cold, and emotionless. He was simultaneously intensely vulnerable and incredibly powerful. His tongue was always sharp, his intellect unchallenged.

And despite, or because of, the culmination of all these facets in his personality, she loved him. She knew it now, allowed herself to embrace it now. She loved all of her students, past and present, but this love was deeper. His bad decisions wounded her, and she felt responsible, somehow, for all of them.

He had been an unwanted child, just as Tom Riddle and Harry Potter had been. Harry, however, had found love and acceptance with friends and with authority figures who had stepped up to take over the roles of father and mother. It had been too late for Tom, who had never found the acceptance he so dearly needed. And in a world where Harry had always been equated with the light, the whiteness of Good and Innocence, and Tom had been associated with darkness, the blackness of Evil, Severus Snape had, as always, fallen through the cracks to become the gray, the one who could never be interpreted, comprehended, or understood. The white and the black had their supporters, their followers, but the gray was avoided by all.

And as she made her way, hurriedly, to the dungeons, where she knew by some sort of instinct that she would find both professors, she felt a surge of determination that no matter how late, she would make it her duty to watch over him. Protect him. Be the maternal voice that no one else bothered to be.

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Snape seemed oddly disconnected from his surroundings. It was almost comical how his nose continued to trickle blood, even now, as if in defiance of being ignored.

Remus' breathing was reduced to shallow, quick breaths, his adrenaline spiked, the pain encircling his throat nearly forgotten. He sat up, still slightly slumped over. Snape turned away from him, his head bowed.

Remus asked in a whisper, "What was in that vial?"

"Get out." The words were said simply, without malice, without any emotion at all.

"No," Lupin replied, just as passionless.

Though his back was still facing Remus, Severus' head swung to the side, and his right hand, which had been empty previously, now suddenly clutched a wand, the slender object dangling carelessly. Lupin eyed it with suspicion.

"Severus..." he began cautiously.

"Do not speak to me as though we are friends," Snape hissed.

Lupin sighed audibly. "You'll never let that go, will you? We *were* kids, for fuck's sake! They're *dead*..."

Remus had been so lost in his own building rant that he did not notice the movement until it was too late. Snape had whipped around to face him, his expression murderous, even though a sinister smile plagued his lips. In a manner of a few seconds, Lupin found himself yanked up from the floor and crushed against the frigid wall with fingers piercing the flesh just under his chin, holding him up in excruciating pain, and a wand digging into his cheek.

"Lupin." He drew out the name slowly, as if savoring it. His tone was condescending, as though he were disappointed. "For all your vaunted intelligence, you never got it, did you?"

Remus' eyes were wide with fear, and he dared not look away.

Snape went on, casually, "It was never so much about your group of inbred, idiotic, pureblood*friends*," he spat out the last word as though the very taste of it was bitter. His head was still bowed, his brows lowered to half-obscure his eyes as he stared at the other wizard. He then inclined his head to the side, quizzically, his eyes slowly combing over Remus' form, coldly appraising the man he clenched so tightly.

After a few tense moments, he continued conversationally, "After holidays, you were with me in the hospital, weren't you? *You* saw me at my weakest..."

Lupin had tried to interrupt with pleas for Snape to understand that he had *never, would never*, use those moments against him, but all that came out was a series of muffled mumbblings, as the hand that held his face allowed no room for his mouth to open and enunciate his thoughts. Snape raised an eyebrow in faint interest. The wand was pressed harder into the hollow of Remus' cheek.

"Don't interrupt," Severus said lightly in admonishment, accompanied by a *tsk*-ing noise. He paused momentarily, seeming to try and get his thoughts in order before proceeding with, "Since my personal history seems to be the new fodder for flippant discussions within the immediate circle of certain Gryffindors, I'm sure the revelation of my father's heritage will be of no surprise to you. You knew, probably even back then, that he was a Muggle. But let me tell you something that maybe you weren't aware."

He paused again, readjusting his grip on the other wizard's face, forcing Remus to look into his eyes. "Look at me when I am speaking to you," he hissed, "you disrespectful piece of shit."

Lupin whimpered in pain.

"Then again," he said offhandedly, carrying on the thread of the previous subject, "your little lioness may have already told you, but now you will have the chance to hear it from the source.

"My father was a difficult man, *Remus*," he spat, using the other man's name in a mock-friendly, yet unkindly, tone. "He did things to me that were beyond Potter and Black's wildest dreams. Hogwarts was supposed to be a haven, *my* haven, like it was for you. Like it was, momentarily, for the Boy Who Fucking Lived. Do you know what he did to me?"

Remus tried his hardest to answer in the negative, even going as far as to attempt to shake his head. The effort was not lost on Snape, who bestowed Lupin with a malevolent smile. Remus' body began to quiver uncontrollably; his stomach began to feel as though it were slowly being filled with lead.

"He *fucked* me. And I don't mean that as a way of expression. He would remove my clothes*touch* me..."

With the first word of Snape's sentence, Lupin could feel the bile rise up his throat. The image of a young Snape, the thin, sallow boy he once knew, flashed into his mind, followed by a sequence of visions of that same child at the mercy of a despicable man, a man he could only picture as one who shared many of the same physical qualities of the adult Snape, leering before him now. And by the time the word "touch" was mentioned, he could no longer keep the nausea at bay. Vomit spilled out of the corners of his lips, him internally coughing and spluttering, trying in vain to open his mouth, to expel the substance, but Snape's grip didn't lighten, and Lupin's jaw remained clamped shut. Severus' smile grew maliciously.

"It is sickening, isn't it? Something I've tried to forget. But *nothing* erases the stains of those memories, does it, Lupin? Have you been able to forget your one night of hell? Can you no longer smell the stench of Greyback, that unique odor of rotting flesh and urine? Can you no longer feel the distinct coarseness of his fur? Can you no longer remember the bitter taste of your own blood?" Each word was spoken with a tender, caressing tone, as though each had given him a sadistic pleasure to voice.

Remus was choking, his face red and flushed, his eyes filled to the brim with tears that hung on to the precipice, threatening to fall. His hands clawed at Snape's grip, his feet swung uselessly below him.

"Of course," Snape continued, his tone still light, abruptly backtracking in the conversation, "others knew. My mother knew, though she was too weak and frail to do anything about it. But others, of more *importance*, knew."

Lupin began to struggle violently, fervently wishing he could end this conversation, wishing he could shut out Snape's poisonous voice, which held an undertone of disturbing glee.

"Oh, yes, Dumbledore was well aware." He laughed bitterly, menacingly. "He helped keep it quiet. It would be a shame if it upset the other students, wouldn't it?"

Lupin could not hold back the tears that began to fall; his expression was wounded and terrified.

"He almost *expelled* me after that little stunt that Black and Potter pulled, when I discovered what you truly are. He almost, gladly, sent me back to that hell! Do you know who convinced him to let me stay? I don't blame you if you don't because I had only found out somewhat recently. Minerva, who did not fully know the situation, fought for *me*. The conditions of my ongoing education, of course, dictated that I say nothing about you. Dumbledore wanted you, wanted Potter, wanted ~~Black~~ more than he wanted me!" To punctuate this last sentence, Snape kicked the wall behind Lupin with force, missing Lupin's leg by mere inches.

There was a ringing of silence that followed before Snape resumed his speech, "But I made him want me in the end, didn't I?" He said this in a whisper, more to himself than to the other wizard. "He *needed* me in the end. But I was still disposable. *Am* still disposable."

And with those last words, Snape released his hold on the other wizard, watching dispassionately as Remus tumbled to the ground for the second time. Lupin quickly recoiled from the taller man, opening his mouth to let the sick drain before taking several deep breaths. He was sobbing now, he knew it distantly, as though he was witnessing it from afar.

He wanted to speak, wanted to apologize, wanted to erase this last hour from his life. But that emotion warred with a fierce rage that begged for release inside of him: a violent anger at Snape, at Dumbledore, at his late friends, at *himself*.

Severus crouched down next to him, watching him with a detached, clinically fascinated expression. He reached down and gingerly pushed aside the hair on Lupin's head that had been plastered there by sweat. It was a demonstration of tenderness that held such a distinct emptiness behind it, as though Snape was familiar with the action, but had no inkling of the emotion that often accompanied it.

Remus looked up into the other wizard's face, as though seeing Severus for the first time, and instantly felt his heart shatter.

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**Author's Note** Finally, updated! Whoo! I would like to thank everyone involved with the TNL awards for both nominating this story and for the esteemed award as Judge's Choice. I'd personally love to thank sbrande, Angel Mischa, Emmeline33, Irishredlass, and Amsev for their continued support. Especially Angel Mischa, my extraordinary beta, who finds time to not only look over this story but several other amazing stories as well, has created a wonderful community called The New Library on livejournal to showcase new and/or not-well-known authors, and has managed to provide us all with inspiring drabbles and updates to her own fics. Thank you to all those who have reviewed and stuck with this story so far, and I'm terribly sorry for the long delay before this update. Thank you to those who nominated me and gave me a chance to receive such an incredible award, and congrats to all fellow nominees and winners of the first ever The New Library Awards. Thank you.

## Communion

Chapter 17 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.



**com-mun-ion** [kuh-myoon-yuhn]: interchange or sharing of thoughts or emotions; intimate communication: *communion with nature*.

Within the darkest recesses of the damp and winding corridor stood Minerva, perched at the threshold of Snape's office, listening intently for any sounds from within reverberating off the thick stone walls. Much to her discomfort, her sensitive ears could only pick up the distinct, piercing ring of silence.

Slipping inside the room noiselessly, her eyes adjusting to the seemingly blinding light of the few scattered candles, she paused to take in the enormity of the scene before her.

Remus lay in a crumpled heap against the wall, his chest heaving, his face slick with tears, his amber eyes wide and glossy. Beside him sat Severus, his head cocked to the side in the imitation of someone deeply perplexed, his black hair obscuring most of his features from Minerva's line of vision. His elbow rested casually on his knee, one slender finger tracing the outline of his mouth delicately before his lips parted and the digit slipped inside, where it was absently chewed upon.

There was a pool of sick near Remus, a dotted pattern of what looked to be blood in various stages of drying, and a puddle of an iridescent liquid that shimmered in the dim light.

The Headmistress swallowed. Loudly. Her voice audibly trembled when she could finally break the grotesque spell the room and its inhabitants had cast over her. "Re...Remus?"

The amber eyes shifted slowly in her direction, unblinking. He gave no other response.

Hot, blinding adrenaline surged through her veins, prompting her into action. Within a few bounding steps, she was at his side, her thin but strong arms encasing his torso, struggling to lift him up. It was when she was so near that she noticed the dark, purplish signs of bruising on Lupin's throat. Horrified, she pressed her face close to his, her eyes level with his own and burning with questions.

He allowed her to support the majority of his weight as he slowly stood, his body quivering and damp with sweat. Remus slowly and gently released her embrace and leaned against the wall.

Quickly brandishing her wand, McGonagall cast a few nonverbal charms before closing in on him again, equipped now with the damp washcloth that she applied to his forehead. She snatched his hand and pressed it against the cool cloth as she simultaneously let go of it, watching him for several seconds until she was satisfied that Remus would hold it in place.

Without further preamble, Minerva spun around to face the other wizard who continued to sit on the floor in the same position, resembling nothing more than a statue in his disturbing stillness. She crouched down before him, her hand silently and carefully grasping his arm, gently pulling until she had liberated his finger from its perilous proximity to his teeth.

Severus gazed up at her, his expression full of innocence and curious wonder, his face smooth, relaxed. She bestowed on him a timid smile, reaching out to tuck the curtain of hair behind his ears.

"I'm tired," he said simply.

"I know," she answered softly.

Minerva slowly returned her attention to Remus, a bald expression of deep concern etched into her features. When she had first arrived, her actions had been bold and quick but now every movement, every word she spoke, was delivered with a deliberate slowness and calm. She drew in a deep breath before announcing, "I think you both need to take some time away from the castle."

Remus gave a slight nod. Out of the corner of her eye, she witnessed Snape's small shrug of indifference.

"I'm going to Floo Poppy in here to take care of you both, and once everyone is cleaned up, we will discuss your," and here she paused a moment, as though searching for just the right word, "holiday." With a great, solemn grace, she rose to her feet and silently made her way to the fireplace.

\*\*\*

So focused was Pansy on her immediate task that she allowed her attention to her surroundings to slip. It was something she had done very often in the past, so often that it earned her the reputation of being a daydreamer at best and, at worst, the Slytherin equivalent of Luna Lovegood.

And, as it so often had happened before, her distraction led her straight into disaster.

She had rounded another corridor corner at an impressive speed, only to collide spectacularly with a solid mass of curls going at approximately the same rate. She had very violently slammed into the frame of a young woman of nearly the same height and weight, who had also been suffering the exact same lack of attention to her environment.

Parchment rained down upon the two witches as they both struggled to their feet, apologies already flowing from their lips.

"I'm so sorry...wasn't looking," they both absently recited in unison.

Pansy frantically attempted to gather the pieces of parchment, not noticing that the other young woman was trying her best to help. It wasn't until a slender hand plucked a sheet of the correspondence right from under her nose that Pansy looked up.

Shocked and fearful, she cried out, "Give that to me!"

The owner of the hand, one Hermione Granger, froze instantly. "Pansy? I'm so sorry..."

"Give it back!"

Hermione blinked. Giving the parchment a quick scan, she then hurriedly passed it to the angry Slytherin. "Are you writing a story?"

"Yes," came the hissed lie without a moment of hesitation.

"Could I read it sometime?"

"Absolutely not!"

Undeterred, Hermione calmly stated, "I could probably proofread, if you need it." She looked around and snatched up another loose parchment. Glancing it over, she continued, "Who is 'X'?"

Reaching over, Pansy wrenched the damning evidence from Hermione's grasp. "None of your business!" Before the other witch could come to any more conclusions about the true nature of the correspondence, the newest Malfoy managed to collect the mass of papers and clutched them protectively to her chest.

There was a moment of silence and time seemed to stand still as their eyes met and locked; Pansy's gaze radiating fear, anger, and a strange fierceness, while Hermione's expressed only confusion that slowly changed to concern.

"You look like you haven't slept in ages!" accused the Gryffindor.

"I...what?" The Slytherin asked in surprise and apprehension.

Hermione frowned. "Where are you staying? Are you in the guest rooms in the dungeon?"

"No, I stay in Hogsmeade..." Pansy abruptly halted. She felt a surge of anger that she had admitted such personal information to an outsider. She immediately attributed it to her exhaustion.

Hermione was on her feet, suddenly, with a hand outstretched to the other witch in a gesture of assistance. Pansy felt too physically weak and tired to refuse it. As Pansy was pulled into a standing position, she heard Hermione offer, "Why don't you stay in the guest rooms I'm in?" When Pansy looked skeptical, Hermione rushed on, "You don't look like you would make it to Hogsmeade tonight. C'mon, it's just one night, and you can leave at any time if you feel uncomfortable. There's an extra bed, an extra wardrobe..."

"Fine, fine," Pansy interrupted with a defeated sigh, "but only if you shut up."

"Deal," Hermione replied with enthusiasm.

"And quit looking so damn smug."

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The Headmistress delicately poured a fresh cup of soothing chamomile tea for the trembling man who sat before her. A full vial of Calming Draught sat, untouched, on the edge of the table, and she eyed it purposefully.

"Stare at it all you want, I'm not taking it," grouched the wizard.

"You're very distressed..." she calmly began.

"You're damn right I'm 'distressed,'" he roared. "You knew, didn't you? *Youknew* and you didn't *do anything!*"

"Knew what?"

Remus growled and shoved the porcelain cup away. The steaming liquid sloshed generously over the lip before spilling onto the face of the table. "He said Dumbledore knew. *I* knew. Why didn't you...you were a *professor*, for fuck's sake! Why didn't Albus, why didn't he...Snape was just a boy!"

Minerva visibly flinched at his tone. She looked away, unable to answer.

"Dumbledore knew what happened to him, didn't he?" Remus didn't seem to want a response. Minerva didn't give one. "I think I already knew that, might've guessed it, but I never wanted to really believe it. He was unfair to Snape, he was always unfair to Snape, but I thought..." He trailed off, glaring at the teacup.

"You must understand..."

"No, I don't have to understand his reasoning, I don't want to hear your excuses for him..."

"It was his greatest mistake, Remus," she whispered. "It... it was mine, too."

"Why?" Remus asked, his voice breaking, his eyes imploring her to help him justify Dumbledore's actions, all of their actions.

With tears flowing silently down her cheeks, Minerva whispered, "For the same reason he, *we*, did anything..."

"*The Fucking Greater Good*," he spat.

Taking a few moments before responding, Minerva closed her eyes in an attempt to regain her composure. "What exactly did he tell you?"

"He said Dumbledore knew, and that he threatened Snape with expulsion, knowing exactly what...exactly what sort of perverse, hellish...I cannot even begin to describe what sort of environment Dumbledore would have banished him to," Remus said in a solemn, flat tone.

"Do you dare think that I had no sleepless nights, no concern whatsoever, when I heard of that threat?" Minerva sharply retorted, her pitch and volume rising with each word.

"I should have been expelled..." Lupin began.

"Oh? And leave yourself to be exiled from all Wizarding society? I think not! None of you should have been threatened with such, such..." Unable to find the right words to convey her emotions, she abruptly stopped and let out a frustrated, inarticulate roar. Following this, she leapt to her feet and began to pace fiercely before the younger wizard.

After a few moments of thick, tense silence, Remus asked in an exasperated tone, "How long will my 'holiday' be, exactly?"

Minerva halted. "How long would you like it to be?"

"I would like some time to spend with my family. To see my son. I, I cannot imagine Teddy going through such a life as Sna...Severus has been through. I cannot imagine why anyone would do such," Remus paused, drawing in a deep, stuttering breath before continuing, "such horrific things to a child, let alone his own son. I need to be with him. Possibly a week. Maybe more." Remus glanced away, fresh tears welling up in his eyes.

Minerva only nodded.

"And Severus? How long will you keep him away from the castle?"

Minerva sighed. "Please don't use that tone, don't accuse me of wanting to get rid of him, Remus."

"I didn't mean...I just meant, I know that your decision for time away from Hogwarts was mainly directed at him and that you only added me so it would not seem that you were..."

Minerva held up her hand to stop him from continuing. "I intended it for you both. I didn't want to impose your teaching duties on either of you at this moment; each of you are badly injured, both physically and, to be honest, emotionally. Contrary to what you may believe, I am concerned for the well-being of *both* of my professors, my friends, and dare I say, my *family*."

Lupin nodded abashedly. He picked up his teacup with sudden renewed interest and took several sips in the uncomfortable quietness that now enveloped the room. He tapped the side of the cup nervously with his fingers, unsure of how to pose his next question.

Finally, with a deep breath, he plunged ahead, asking, "Will he be all right?"

"I'm sure he'll be fine, though Poppy is still with him. I'm sure it was just a bloody nose," she stated, purposefully ignoring the true intent of the question.

"You know what I mean," he said with a dark undertone.

The Headmistress slowly returned to her seat, taking an obscene amount of time before replying, "I can't say, Remus. He has been through... through quite a lot and has managed to always bear that burden with an inner strength that astounds us all. I don't know if, if..." She turned away, unable to verbalize what they both feared.

"Do you have replacements for the both of us?" he asked, diverting the course of the conversation completely.

"I will find worthy substitutes; you needn't worry."

"I was not worried for my own sake, but for you and the terrible strain you must be under."

She dismissively waved her hand at him. "Don't think of it."

"Minerva," he said in a warning tone, "please don't..."

"Shhh," she interrupted, "please don't worry, Remus. Go, and enjoy your time with your family." She looked up at him with watery eyes. "When you return, we can discuss this more. But please put it out of your mind for the next week focus on your recuperation and your wife and son."

He stood and stepped toward her before bending down to bestow a warm hug. Kneeling down before her, he whispered, "Should you need *anything*, and I mean *anything at all*, please don't hesitate to call on me. I can be here in a heartbeat."

She simply nodded.

He rose to leave, pausing only at the door to turn back and gazing at her in equal parts concern and fear. "I mean it, Minerva *Anything*." And with that, he left the room, leaving her alone to finally give in to the anguished sobs she had succeeded so valiantly to withhold in his presence.

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**Author's Note** Thank you to my extraordinary beta, Angel Mischa, who somehow manages to not only muddle through my grammatical mess, but also to clean it up and make it all sparkly! Yay!

I'd also like to thank Amsev and Emmeline33 for their invaluable input; without you three this story would never see the light of day!

As I am now in the deepest midst of work and attempting to write out my SS/HG Exchange prompt, I feel I need to warn anyone who read this that another update may be delayed a bit. Hopefully not too much, though. \*ducks\* Please forgive me!

Thank you to everyone who reads and takes the time to leave reviews! I know my responses are somewhat delayed, and I apologize, but each and every review means the world to me, and without them, this story would have ended long ago as a one-shot. Thank you!

## Dissemination

*Chapter 18 of 19*

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\*

A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.



A big, warm thank you to the wonderful members of Potter Place for placing *Conversations* on your holiday wish list! It really means a lot to me. And thank you to SW69 for the beautiful banner displayed above.

---

The chill of the dungeons never seemed to permeate Madam Pomfrey's demeanor as it did so many of the other staff at Hogwarts. Her gentleness and warmth were impenetrable to the desolate gloom and bitter cold of the bowels of the castle, and she never seemed to be satisfactorily affected by the icy manners of its only inhabitant.

As she stood over the sitting figure of Severus Snape, her eyes showed no fear, no discomfort, no anger, but only pure, undiluted concern. She placed a soft handkerchief under his nose, tittering blithely away at him, unmoved by his glacial stare or his distinct silence.

"Hold this in place," she ordered, and when his hand did not raise on its own volition, she pulled it up herself and pressed it against the cloth, letting go of his arm only after she was satisfied that he would keep it in place. "And don't..." she began as he threw his head back, "tilt your head backwards," she finished with a sigh. Poppy delicately pressed his head forward once more. "It can cause the blood to drain into your lungs," she explained.

He only stared back at her.

"Right. Well, I suppose you're going to fight me on this, but I need you to take this Calming Draught." Poppy picked up a nearby vial and pushed it into his free hand. "And I really wish you could just take it, just this once, without a fuss."

His eyes were empty as he continued to gaze at her.

"Well, I know you have a reputation to uphold," she continued on as though he had argued a valid point, "but if you just help me out this once, I promise I won't tell." She pressed her index finger against her lips in a gesture of silence.

He blinked. Slowly.

She frowned. Her entire body suddenly seemed to slump slightly, and this carefree façade she had tried so valiantly to keep in place began to crumble. She crouched down before him, eye to eye, and rested her hand on his left forearm. "I don't know what is going on, Severus, and I'm not going to pretend that I do." She flashed him a watery smile as she tried desperately to keep her voice steady.

He stared at the spot where her hand touched him.

She swallowed with slight difficulty. "What I do know is that I miss you," she whispered between a soft, shuddering breath. She looked away as a single tear escaped her. "I miss your wit, your sharp intellect," she paused for a moment as she let out a nervous laugh, "I even miss the way you constantly question my every diagnosis."

She returned her gaze to his inky eyes. "I know you won't talk to me, Severus, though you have no idea how many times I fervently prayed to the gods that you would. But please, *please* speak to someone. Anyone. Because," more tears escaped her now, her voice breaking, "because we want you back! need you back." Poppy wiped her tears away roughly. "Just, just *come back*."

He was silent.

"Wherever you are, right now, I hope some of what I have said has reached you." She suddenly placed her hands on either side of his face, her eyes searching his, their noses only inches away. "*I love you*."

Poppy leaned back in her uncomfortable position, waiting for what seemed to be an eternity for any response from him.

But there was only a blank stare followed by more deafening, ringing silence that seemed to mock her, assault her.

When she could finally take no more and when the sobs threatened to break the thin resolve she had left, she quickly stood and walked toward the door that led out into the dungeon corridor. "I'll be right back," she said in a strange voice, "I just need a moment to freshen up."

But when she had returned only mere moments later, he was gone.

And the Calming Draught lay, unopened, on his desk.

\*\*\*

Hermione glanced up from her bed to once more ask her guest if there were anything Pansy required.

Mrs. Malfoy, resting on a spare bed, her eyes staring up at the ceiling in a long-suffering expression, once again responded in the negative.

The candles had been extinguished, the room sinking into a tense silence. Every few moments a creaking of bed springs or a shuffling of bed covers could be heard as each witch tried to mimic the sounds of someone blithely seeking the comfort of sleep.

Both women lay uneasily on the soft mattresses with their crisp, clean sheets, each wanting desperately to say something to the other, to confide in one another, but neither able to form the words that would complete the first step for a connection, and neither were certain that it was a risk worth taking.

When rest finally found them both, it was several hours later.

\*\*\*

The brisk, biting wind assaulted his face just as he appeared on the desolate street, stepping cleanly out of his Apparation with his professorial robes flapping wildly in agitation. In silence, he stole quickly to the house on the end, his rapid steps instinctively avoiding every divot in the small lawns he crossed.

Once at the door, he waved his wand in a series of complicated movements, deftly disarming the several extreme, and often redundant, sets of wards. Glancing over his shoulder in a lifelong habit to check that he was not followed nor noticed, Severus slipped swiftly inside his 'home' at Spinner's End, the door closing behind him with a barely audible *click*.

\*\*\*

The latest member of the Malfoy family shifted once again on the silky, crimson-colored sheets, her sleep interrupted by the sound of soft whimpering from the neighboring bed. With a grumble of impatience, Pansy shed the bedcovers and silently pulled back the curtains that shielded her from the rest of the room.

Peering out, she could see through the gaping curtains of the next bed to where the figure of Hermione slumbered noisily, as though purposefully intending to make Pansy's overnight stay as uncomfortable as possible.

After a snort of annoyance, Pansy's gaze flitted over to the spare wardrobe where, within its closed doors, her stack of correspondence lay, secreted away from prying eyes. If she were to be honest with herself, she knew that her inability to find a peaceful sleep could not be attributed to the sounds of her roommate, but to the anxiety that pulsed through her in regards that singular stack of parchment.

She had nothing new to report.

She had everything to report.

She had a duty but to whom? To the recipient of these letters? Or to herself, her self-worth, her own dignity and self-respect, dammit?

She sat back against the pillows, nervously winding a lock of hair around her index finger. She hated not knowing the "bigger picture," the "grand plan" that she knew she was involved in. A true Slytherin, she reminded herself, would never allow themselves to get wrapped up in a plot without a calculated understanding of all sides involved and a knowledge of how to work the situation to their advantage. And Pansy knew nothing, nothing other than what she was ordered to do.

Sitting up suddenly, she resolved to do what she had done all along: do as she was asked, but keep a steady stream of information stored away as a bargaining chip. It wasn't the best plan, she would be the first to admit, but in dealing with the two opposing forces that she had found herself in the midst of, it was the safest route she could currently devise. To opt out completely was unfathomable and extremely unwise, to say the least.

She fumbled around on the nightstand for her wand, and once it was firmly in her grasp, she resolutely flung her arm through the bed curtains and aimed it at the nearest wardrobe. Silently, she issued a summoning charm for the unfinished correspondence with a surge of power that belied her frustration.

The twin doors sprang open violently, and as the sound of rustling parchment hit her ears, she realized her mistake. The unwitting force she had supplied to the spell caused not only the stack of letters to haphazardly fly toward her, but they caused the wardrobe itself to tremble, and a strange cardboard box suddenly fell from the topmost shelf. Quickly, she cast another *Accio* at the box before it hit the ground, causing it and its contents to soar at her, slamming into her arm before she had a chance to brace herself, and spilling out across her bedcovers as the parchment rained down around her.

She winced and waited for Hermione to wake, to come over and inspect, but after a few moments there seemed to be no sign that the other witch's slumber was disturbed. A few minutes of breathless silence later, and Pansy finally allowed herself a sigh of relief.

She began to gather the parchment together, trying frantically to place it all in the right chronological order, when something suddenly caught her eye.

Amidst all the clutter, a single envelope bearing the Hogwarts seal lay innocently before her, addressed to Severus Snape.

\*\*\*

*She was shuffling through the corridors of Hogwarts; the familiar sensation of being invisible was welcoming, if not strictly desired. Unbidden thoughts formed in her mind, thoughts that this would be the last time she would walk these passages as a nobody, the last time she would ever be overlooked, the last time she would be considered unworthy of attention.*

*Taller girls pushed passed her, on their way to their classes, their eyes never once flitting in her direction. Deeply within herself, she considered questioning why this should matter, when had it ever mattered that other girls ignored her? But the thought was fleeting, immediately deemed unimportant, and she felt a strange need to be noticed by these young witches, to be noticed and desired. But she was ignored, just another obstacle to be overcome as they made their way deeper into the dungeons, intent on not being late to class.*

*She was never late to class, she reflected. But this time she felt a small panic inside her, an urge to hurry, a realization that this time, if she didn't rush, she would be late. Late for Potions. Her favorite class. With her.*

*Hermione broke into a slight trot, her books clutched tightly to her chest. She had a strange fear that she might be delayed, purposefully, from her goal by a group of boys that hovered just within her line of sight, only a few feet away from the classroom door. She slowed her pace, tilting her head down so that her hair might obscure her face and, hopefully, hide her entirely from their view.*

*She exulted when she entered the room unscathed and within time. A beautiful girl sat at a workbench at the front of the class, the seat next to her empty. Hermione tried to look around the room, but found her eyes would only stare straight ahead, directly at the red-headed girl. She felt her face flush as the girl returned her gaze, and she almost forgot to place one foot in front of the other as she made her way toward that coveted empty seat.*

*"Bout time," greeted the girl impishly.*

*Hermione opened her mouth to explain why she had been almost, very nearly late, but all that came out was a dull, "Yeah."*

*Suddenly, the girl's hand reached out and rested on Hermione's right knee in a warm, friendly gesture. "Just make sure you aren't late again; I won't have you being the only reason that I don't achieve an 'O' in this subject."*

*Hermione gulped as her brain became flooded with panic. Where the girl's hand lay felt foreign, yet it radiated heat and a strange energy. Hermione's body trembled slightly, and she felt the oddest sensation between her legs. A hunger seemed to rage deep in her lower abdomen, a fire that was rapidly escalating out of control. She blinked, looked away, swallowed hard, trying desperately to regain control of the situation.*

*"Oh, sorry, I forgot," whispered the girl in concern. She pulled back her hand quickly and offered an apologetic smile.*

*Hermione wanted to scream at her, to tell her it was fine, to beg her to put her hand back, to rage at the girl for putting Hermione in this impossible situation. When she opened her mouth, however, all that came out was a gruff, irritated, "I don't like to be touched."*

*The girl flashed Hermione another apologetic smile. "Someday, I hope you get over that, Sev," she said kindly. Her smile turned slightly sultry (or was it just the lighting?) and she continued, "Touching isn't always all bad, you know."*

*Much to her own surprise, Hermione let out a snort of derision. Under her breath and out of earshot of the enchanting girl, she found herself muttering words that were not*

her own: "When it's with me, it is."

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**Author's Note** Wicked big hugs to my beta, Angel Mischa, who finds time in her overworked schedule to whip this chapter into shape. Thank you, AM!!

I'd also like to thank Amsev and Emmeline33 for their invaluable input; without you three this story would never see the light of day!

I apologize for the delay in the updates - by no means am I planning to abandon this story! It's just that work is down to the deadline and there's no way I'm gonna be able to pull it all off in time (begging for an extension), and with the holidays upon us, well... yeah, so, enough excuses. I'm terribly sorry, and I hope to update the next chapter very soon!

Thank you to everyone who reads and takes the time to leave reviews! I know my responses are somewhat delayed, and I apologize, but each and every review means the world to me, and without them, this story would have ended long ago as a one-shot. Thank you!

# Lost Connection

Chapter 19 of 19

\*\*\*Winner of the Judge's Choice: Best Avada Kedavra in The New Library Awards 2008\*\* A conversation between two friends ignites a passion, if not an obsession, to uncover Severus Snape's **dark** and violent past.

Shafts of bright sunlight danced across her face as Hermione struggled to open her tired eyes. The events scheduled for the day scrolled across her mind, seemingly unending. With a groan, she pushed herself off the bed and into a sitting position, rubbing her eyes fervently, as though she were attempting to physically wipe away her exhaustion. Placing her bare feet on the plush rug that extended from underneath the four-poster bed, she glanced around the room slowly, gathering her wits about her.

Pansy, it seemed, was still sleeping; the soft murmur of snoring escaped from behind the bed curtains located directly across the room. Hermione broke into a small smile before she silently gathered fresh clothes and headed for her morning shower.

When Hermione returned, freshly cleaned and smelly faintly of cocoa butter, the room and its only other occupant remained unchanged. She gathered her purse, containing the necessary funds for the day's errands, and quietly left the room, but not before drawing the drapery closed around the windows to allow Pansy to continue to rest peacefully.

Hermione continued through the corridors and down several flights of stairs before reaching the Great Hall, where she took a seat briefly at the High Table and indulged in a quick breakfast of black tea and a honey-drizzled croissant. She failed to notice the distinct lacking presence of Professor Lupin, Professor Snape, or even the glaring absence of the Headmistress. With her mind focused fully on the upcoming events of the day, Hermione was even oblivious to Madam Pomfrey's abrupt, anxious appearance, speaking in hushed tones to Professors Flitwick and Sprout.

Normally, her curiosity would have drawn her into Pomfrey's conversation, but not even trivial gossip could catch her attention today. Setting off before her empty dishes had even had the chance to disappear, Hermione strolled through the Entrance Hall and past the heavy, battle-scarred doors, crossing the vast expanse of greenery that was Hogwarts' lawn, contentedly on her way to the Apparition point, then on to Diagon Alley to pick up the school-sanctioned supplies for the Potions classroom and adjacent private lab.

While weaving through the various streets of Diagon Alley, her feet taking her through the swiftest and most isolated paths that she had come to know by heart, she slipped in and out of the throng of other shoppers, her steps quick and light and always moving. She successfully ignored the pull of Flourish and Blotts, though it was no small feat.

Nevertheless, she finally acquiesced to popping in quickly to browse only after her official Hogwarts business was finished.

As she reluctantly passed the bookshop and continued on her path to the Apothecary, the signpost for Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes caught her eye *What could it possibly hurt?* As she strode towards the shop, she noticed a familiar, wispy figure standing just outside the building, idly staring through the large glass window.

"Luna?" asked Hermione as she parked herself next to her childhood friend.

"Hermione," Luna stated in a soft tone, never once looking in Hermione's direction.

Hermione turned her gaze to Luna's reflection in the vast window before them, attempting to discern whether the blonde witch's attention was held by the visible chaos occurring within the shop, or if she was merely staring at her own mirror-image. After a few beats of shared silence, Hermione offered, "Do you want to go inside?"

"Oh, no," said Luna with a serene smile. "But, thank you. I rather like watching the drama unfold from out here. That way, I can imagine the dialogue to be whatever I wish."

"Er... All right." They continued to gaze through the transparent glass in mutual silence as, inside, George and Ron scrambled around the ever-present cresting wave of customers.

After a moment, Luna piped up, saying, "He hates it here."

Taken aback, Hermione asked, "Who? Ron?"

"No, George."

"George? Why? Isn't this his dream?"

Luna's reflection shook her head. "It was, I think, when Fred was still alive. Now, Ronald has tried to take over the business bit of it, and they have a lot of arguments when they think no one is listening. I do believe George wants to just vanish from it all one day. Leave Ronald with everything and start new."

"Oh, I thought... I thought he was... I mean, he seemed so enthusiastic when Ron offered to help." But even as she said the words, Hermione realized that George did seem singularly unhappy, and his "enthusiasm" did seem to be a bit flat, in retrospect.

Luna merely shrugged.



"How's Neville?" asked the Gryffindor witch once the renewed silence started to feel a little awkward.

"Oh, he's all right." Luna pivoted gracefully to face Hermione. "And you? What is all this tension?" She waved her hand in Hermione's general direction.

"Tension? No, no tension, just... I guess this apprentice thing was harder than I imagined."

An unladylike snort erupted from the Ravenclaw's lips. "I don't believe you."

Hermione took on an affronted expression. However, before she could begin her retort, Luna continued, "You're an old soul, Hermione Granger."

"I...wait, what?"

Luna didn't offer an explanation, and Hermione was not surprised. "Isn't that what everyone says to everyone else? 'Oh, you're an old soul,' like it's supposed to explain everything." She couldn't hide the cynicism from her voice.

Another peaceful smile spread over the blonde witch's face, unfazed by neither the tone nor content of Hermione's statement. "I expect it's said a lot," said Luna, her gaze returning to their reflections, "as it's harder to find a young soul."

Against her best wishes, Hermione found herself drawn toward this new facet of the conversation. "What do you mean, exactly?"

"They aren't very common; it's rare to see even one in the span of just a lifetime."

Mentally kicking herself, Hermione asked, "And how can you tell which is a young soul?"

Luna's eyes met mirror-Hermione's. "There are many stages, of course, just as in a lifetime, there are varying ages of people who you encounter. All are not classified just as a child or an elderly adult," she said in a professorial tone, though it did not seem condescending, but rather kind and soft. "Your soul, for instance, is younger than my own." She stated it in a way that did not leave Hermione feeling childish or disdainful, but surprisingly interested. "As Professor Dumbledore's is older than the Headmistress', just as yours is older than, say," she paused, momentarily, as though searching for an example, "Professor Lupin's."

"But how do you know that?"

"Younger souls tend to make greater mistakes in their lifetime," Luna declared simply, as though it needed no further explanation.

"What was Professor Lupin's mistake?"

"He's backtracking now, trying to replay his greatest regrets in order to smooth them over. But that isn't how it works, and you know that, just as I do."

Hermione rather thought Luna's reasoning was growing more cryptic, but she could not resist asking further questions. "So, the older a soul is, the less mistakes we make in life?"

"In a way, I suppose. The older our souls are, the greater the knowledge and understanding we have of how things flow. The mistakes we do make are small and insignificant, in the larger picture. The younger the soul is, the more catastrophic and chaotic the life, as they appear to just stumble through it. Much like a toddler, I guess."

"And so Remus, after making some mistakes, is trying to right them, and that makes him younger than me?"

Luna slid a penetrating gaze toward Hermione, oblivious to any intentional or unintentional sarcasm and doubt. "In a way."

"So, then, Tom Riddle would be a young soul, by your definition?"

"No." Luna's voice had become more dream-like, high and lilting and weightless.

"No?"

"No, he wouldn't say he made many mistakes. His soul was a corrupt thing, and I think it's obvious he had no major regrets."

"Other than not achieving immortality."

"Of course."

"So... then Professor Snape would be a young soul?"

Luna immediately turned to face Hermione, her bright blue eyes alight with excitement, her face positively beaming with pride, as though Hermione had just discovered that the Earth was, indeed, round. "He's the only young soul I've seen, at least in this lifetime." Her eyes grew slightly larger as she stared off blankly into the distance just above Hermione's left shoulder. "I bet this is a strange world to him."

"Er... right." It was all Hermione could think to say.

Luna's eyes gradually became clearer as she returned her attention to her former classmate. "He's lucky to have you to show him the way."

Hermione blinked, utterly speechless. Her throat felt constricted and dry, and she found she could not hold Luna's gaze for a second longer. "Right," she croaked as soon as she could regain control over her vocal chords. "Right. I have to...I mean, I came to see..."

Luna leaned forward slightly and smiled conspiratorially at the flabbergasted witch before placing her hand consolingly on Hermione's left shoulder. "I'm sure Ron will be pleased to see you."

Hermione waved goodbye before dashing into the shop, putting as much distance between herself and the intrinsically perceptive Ravenclaw as humanly possible.

\*\*\*

Pansy Malfoy sat in deep contemplation upon the crimson duvet, the articles of the hidden shoe box now lay in disarray before her. When she had first awakened, now three hours earlier, she had spent a good twenty minutes thoroughly reprimanding herself for the gluttony of rest she had enjoyed. Once finished, she searched the room for any hint of her new roommate, anxiety warring with relief that the witch in question had clearly exited some time before.

As it was far past the breakfast hour, and lunch had been a distant four hours away, Pansy had decided the security of her present isolation would be ideal for her to return to her correspondence. And now, three hours later, a parchment lay neatly before her, its siblings now littering the bed in a mass of crumpled forms, evidence of several attempts to convey her message in the most neutral way possible. A rare technique of using statements and facts without leaking subliminal or subconscious material from the writer must be employed when one is a Slytherin. Even more so when one is communicating with another Slytherin, where all sequences of letters and words instantly become transparent and telling, and when any and all dialogue could be twisted to suit an unknown, and often unintentional, purpose.

It was both psychologically and physiologically draining, and more than once Pansy had wished she had been sorted into Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw, where language was just that: language. No hidden meanings, no accidental leaking of one's true thoughts or loyalties spilling forth onto a physical sheet of parchment that could be kept, read, used in the present or future to hold her accountable for something she never intended to share. How she envied her brash roommate in this sense. How she wanted to

write simply what was on her mind without the need for subtlety, without the necessity of defining each word separately before committing it to eternity in unforgiving ink. The wrong synonym and all her work up to now could disintegrate before her very eyes. She could be revealed, exposed, by simply arranging letters to form a single, thoughtless, utterly insignificant word that would broadcast (to any self-respecting Slytherin) her raw emotions.

She reread the letter for the ninth time, reassuring herself that it was completely devoid of any unwittingly informative factors. Satisfied that the message had a flat effect, lacking in any suggestive material or personal voice, she sealed it magically, being careful to include a faded Muggle newsprint clipping which cried in big, block lettering "Newly Orphaned Boy Survives Murder-Suicide Tragedy" underneath a still, faded photograph of a young Severus Snape, no more than twelve years old.

Pansy had read and reread the article in rapt attention, its contents describing a suspicious encounter between Snape's father and mother the mother, Eileen Prince, beaten violently to death by one Tobias Snape, and his death following mere moments later by a knife wound to the chest. The paper had deemed it a suicide, but as Pansy stared into the dead eyes of the child in the photograph, she had a strong feeling that it would be far too convenient for the murdering bastard to stab himself in the heart. Far too suspect to believe that, as the newspaper claimed, a self-righteous fuckwit that routinely beat his wife within an inch of her life would, inexplicably, be too overcome with remorse at her subsequent death (by his own hands) to continue living. Not when the paper reported a nauseating amount of both fresh and long-ago acquired wounds on the child as well: broken bones that had failed to heal properly, horribly infected cuts lining the young boy's body, as well as fresh, gaping, blood-gushing wounds inflicted by the same smooth, razor-sharp blade that served as the father's weapon of choice for his assumed "suicide." No, a man that monstrous, that *evil* (and here, in her mind, she did not want to mince words), would never have taken his own life, just as Voldemort himself would never have entertained such a notion.

As she stared into the child Snape's cold eyes, and the tiny smile playing on the edge of his lips, she *knew* he had taken his father's life that night. And the Muggles surrounding him, the authorities and the press, were all fooled. He was just a boy, after all, and who could think such a small, thin, scrawny thing could be responsible for extinguishing a life, even if it had been (and she believed with all her heart that it had been) a form of self-defense? Or an act of vengeance against the sudden demise of his mother?

She felt an odd surge of pride, a new-level of respect for the man she knew today, surpassing even her existing wealth of respect, as well as a surprising need to protect the boy that appeared so fragile, so confident in his own perception that he was beyond help, beyond saving, that boy that gave her a hint of a smile in the photograph. A smile that seemed even slightly forced, the more she stared at it, as though he was playing at the idea of becoming a sadistic sociopath, but lacked the ability to truly shut out the fear and remorse that clearly showed in his expression. The upward tilt of his brow, the hardening of the jaw that would otherwise be soft and relaxed on the face of an unfeeling murderer.

Just a boy, trying to isolate himself from all emotion, attempting to alienate those around him a talent he later honed to an adept skill.

Could Muggles really be this blind? Could they not see the need this child had for support? Could they really just leave him, without a care, into the "trusting hands of an elderly grandfather with the surname Dumbledore"? Did they not even attempt any sort of research of his existing family? Did they never come to check on him, later?

And did Snape really live at Hogwarts, under the cold, appraising eye of the late Headmaster? Or did Dumbledore leave him to his own devices, washing his hands of the boy early on? Dumbledore, a Gryffindor through and through, only served to fuel the division between the Houses; at least, he was the major factor that caused herself and her fellow Slytherins to perceive that Gryffindor House contained nothing but a ragtag group of individuals who would do anything to be awarded with praise, even if it meant sending their own to become meaningless casualties in wars that they had created and spun to the public so that they always landed on top.

But then, the Slytherins had flaws as well, and Pansy struggled with accepting the fact that not all Gryffindors are carbon copies of Dumbledore, even if they did follow him in blind faith, just as not all Slytherins were mirror images of Voldemort, even if some followed *him* in blind faith.

Pansy never bought the ridiculous propaganda that Voldemort spewed forth, and she knew she was not the only one. However, existing within a House full of influential children of highly dangerous and unhinged Death Eaters, she, like Snape, had to play the part to survive and ensure her family's survival. And she played it well.

Her life lessons were simple to understand: never trust anyone, never speak until every word and possible construed context had been thought out beforehand, and avoid Gryffindors at all costs, especially the ones wielding power.

She *really* wished she had been sorted into Ravenclaw.

Though, she had to admit, even reluctantly, that Hermione had surprised her, had seemed *so far*, her mind quickly supplied) to transcend the stereotype, had even begun to question her faith in Albus Dumbledore himself. So, perhaps, this feminine member of the 'Golden Trio' did not trot along faithfully behind the other members of her pride. Maybe, in fact, she could see the farce for what it was, even if in retrospect, and was able to stand up as an individual. And maybe, just maybe, she could see through the role Pansy had been forced to play, was still forced to play, and could become a strong ally in the near future.

Pansy dearly hoped so.

Until then, Pansy quickly cleaned up the bed and replaced the cardboard box in its cubbyhole in the worn wardrobe, pausing only to give one final glance around the room to assure herself that no remnant of her impending subterfuge was left carelessly behind. She then strolled through the thick door, her feet almost subconsciously leading her to the Owlery.

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Dead, yellow grass crunched under the weight of her footfalls as she made her way across a small lawn toward the little house she had hoped to never again see in her lifetime.

Unexpectedly finding herself on the eroding porch, she straightened her robes before beginning a brusque knock, praying to the gods that be that she would not find him here.

*Here.* Surely he wouldn't still live here? What obscene level of self-hatred and self-disgust would drive a man to live *here*, after all these years?

There was no response.

A heavy burden shifted its weight on her shoulders, feeling a bit lighter. No, he wouldn't live here, of course not.

But she knocked again, just to be certain.

And closed her eyes.

Because she *knew* he was here.

Because she *knew* he'd come back here.

Because she *knew* he'd live here, of all places.

Because she *knew* she couldn't look him in the eye, not even when she heard the obnoxiously slow creaking noise that signalled the opening of *this* door. This daunting, unforgiving door; this thick piece of wood that mocked her, judged her, reflected back to her all the past monumental mistakes made when she stood before it those handful of times, so long ago. She had nothing new to present to it, could reveal no fresh evidence to exonerate her for her past crimes, and deep inside she felt she deserved its harsh judgement, deserved *his* harsh judgement...

But she couldn't face it.

And when his voice finally penetrated her thoughts, she heard not the gruff tone simmering with rage, but only a shaky, plaintive pleading as he said, "McGonagall?"

She shook her head, and though her eyes were squeezed as tightly shut as possible, she covered them with her left hand, as though it were an additional layer of protection. "No," she whispered to no one in particular. Both hands now shielded her face as her body began to tremble.

His caustic tone was now laced with concern when he repeated her name, but to her ears she only heard a small boy's voice, high-pitched and taut like a wire, calling out for her, *begging* her. She was oblivious to the fact that she was physically sinking, slumping.

But she felt his arms, the twin powerful forearms that hooked underneath her shoulders and held her even as her body seemed to become liquid, lacking any strength to become anything but a limp mass of useless muscles.

She struggled, slightly, while within his grasp as he delicately pulled her inside.

Silent sobs wracked her slender frame as he helped her to sit upright on the deteriorating settee. Tears fell at an increasing pace, littering her robes with splotchy wetness, as he slowly backed away, his hands still stretched out as if to catch her if she abruptly fell.

Still, she did not open her eyes.

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Deeply human sounds were wrenched from her pursed lips, intent on escaping. He didn't know what to do, so he only stared at her, wishing to feel as he usually did in such a scene removed, distant, aloof. Instead he felt overwhelming waves of concern, of fear, and a strange pain deep within his chest and abdomen that grew each time she made those odd noises. Like tiny screams of pain and grief that were muffled, swallowed, and then regurgitated; sounds that were too powerful to be silenced.

He sunk to his knees on the worn carpet, his hands resting on either side of her atop the cushions of the settee. He navigated his way closer to her, his head turned up as he attempted to catch a glimpse of her eyes, her nose, her mouth, her face, anything.

Her own head slowly descended, until, forehead against forehead, she let her hands drop onto her lap and then...

...weary, waterlogged, russet-colored eyes locked with his own.

Streams of warm tears forged a new trail as they trickled from her cheek onto his own; though neither noticed.

Her cracked, pale lips mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

Their mutual gaze did not waver.

She repeated the words, this time with sound.

Neither blinked.

He didn't respond. He had no inkling of what to say, what to do, or if he even could say or do anything in that span of timeless moments that strung together, stretching out between them in silence.

Some time later, though it could have been seconds or hours for all they knew, she said, brokenly, "I'm so sorry, Severus." She drew in a shuddering breath, but did not break eye contact. "I was blind. And, and I think...no, I *know* that I *chose* to be blind."

He swallowed. Loudly.

"It's, it's probably of no real significance to you now, but I want you to..." another deep, gulping breath, "...to see ~~that~~ can see now. I can, I *do* truly see." Her bottom lip quivered. "This is not about pity!" she cried out in terror as she watched his eyelids slowly descend. Closing her out.

In a much calmer tone, she pressed on. "It's about my mistakes. It's about me, begging you, if not for forgiveness then for you to know that, that I, that I..." She stuttered before cutting herself off momentarily. She desperately wanted to look away, to pull away, to run away, but she fought against these instincts, feeling as though he at the very, very least deserved to watch her suffer through this. She owed him that, and so much more.

Pressing her palms gently against his cold cheeks, she flashed him a weak smile as his eyelids once again raised, and those dark eyes were once again locked with her own. "I need you to look at me when I say this, Severus," she whispered softly.

"It's too late for this," he hissed, though his tone lacked any venom. He tried to pull away but she held him firmly, unrelenting.

"No," she replied, her voice strengthening, yet her tone still consoling. "I wasn't there for you..." She stopped abruptly at the sight of his upper lip curling into a warning sneer, but then pushed on, "I deserve whatever you want to say, whatever you want to do, because although I always thought of you as the son I never had, I behaved like the most atrocious mother. I pushed you away, I looked the other way, I, I *abandoned* you, Severus." Fresh tears spilled from her eyes as her face grotesquely contorted in the universal shape of one trying desperately not to cry.

His nose and brow scrunched up in disdain. "What do you want from me, then? Acknowledgement of your disgusting display of self-pity? Or for me to just forgive you? Why would I forgive you..."

"Severus," she pleaded.

"Let me finish," he hissed. "Why would I forgive you? For what reason do you need forgiveness?"

Minerva's eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "For, for aband..."

"Oh, right, for 'abandoning' me," he spat out in derision. "How do you abandon someone who never sought your help in the first place?"

Her lips parted as though about to speak, but he continued, effectively cutting her off. "How do you abandon someone who never needed you? Never wanted you? Never asked you for help? Never believed you capable enough to help?"

"What are you saying?" she whispered in a fragile, beseeching tone.

Now it was his hands snaking up around her, gripping her face tightly, pulling her head forward even more, until they were touching nose to nose. His voice was even, steady, and viciously cold and mocking as he stated, "What I'm saying, *Professor McGonagall*, is this: I never needed you. I never wanted your help. I never saw you as anything other than what you are: a weak, easily manipulated, emotionally-driven whore of Dumbledore." His breath felt like ice on her face.

He broke away from her then, roughly.

She shook her head again, sadly, and when she spoke next, it was with tenderness so sincere, concern so authentic, that her words penetrated Severus' emotional armor with ease. "Young man, I know this game, this skillful evasion tactic of yours, far better than you give me credit for. You think by hurling obscene words at me, I will give

up? No, look at me, Severus. You can't force me to hate you."

He interrupted, petulantly, with: "No? You seemed to have no qualms hating me for murdering..."

She winced at the memory, but quickly recovered. "Let me finish?" she asked with a smile, easily parroting his words from earlier. When he made no reply, she continued, "I never hated you, Severus, though I will never doubt that it may have seemed that way. When I looked at you, during that year and the dark year yet ahead, I hated myself, for the exact reasons I've already outlined."

He laughed bitterly. "You think you were such an important factor in my life that you alone shaped the man you believed I had become?"

"No," McGonagall said solemnly, her fiercely bright eyes watching him intently. "No, I did not hate myself because I thought I was so important to you that I caused you to take that Mark. I hated myself because I *wasn't* important to you, because I never attempted to have any major role in your life, though I wanted to. It was only my own selfishness and pride that kept me just in the peripheral of your life. And I hate myself for doubting you, because I did. I doubted you as a boy, as just a child, pleading your case before myself and Albus when you were assigned to detentions for crimes I now know you were not a part of. Every time I doubted you, every single time, I came face to face with the consequences of which I deserved of not believing in you. But I didn't learn from that, I ignored it, and found reason to doubt you again.

"From your first day in school when I doubted your intelligence in my class and believed false accusations claiming you cheated, to the year after Albus' death, when I doubted that you were capable of love, of caring, of justice. When I doubted you could ever have been on our side. And even the in the aftermath of the war, when I doubted your strength and power of will to ever survive. But you did. And every time you proved your intense loyalty, your passionate veracity, your inherent Light that shines so blindingly bright, it casts pale shadows over all the others I had ever perceived as heroes every time, Severus, I would stand in awe, as though it surprised me. And every time, I would look at you and simultaneously feel a love and respect for you that surpassed far beyond anything I had ever felt before, and a deep, biting hatred for myself, that I should ever allow myself to be surprised at your bravery, your loyalty, your honesty. It was always there, for me to see, but I refused to look. Time and again, I refused. So, let me tell you once more, young man, I never detested you. Even when I doubted you the most, I couldn't find it within me to hate you. All that abhorrence, all of that revulsion is, and has always been, reserved only for myself."

He stared at her, and for a single moment, his expression was open and registering both shock and disbelief at her words. But in a blink of an eye, his features returned to the familiar blank, inscrutable mask that revealed no thought or emotion.

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McGonagall, however, did not fail to notice the subtle clues that had flashed across his face, indicating his reaction to her words. "Severus, I cannot change the past, I can only show to you my overwhelming remorse that I will always feel, will always live with, and it is a burden that I have and will carry without complaint. Please understand that I know nothing I do now will ever, ever change or make up for what I have done. I will never attempt to 'make it right' and think that somehow it would erase the damage that has already been done. I can't ignore or forget my past actions, and I would never expect you to." She slowly rose to her feet and closed the distance between herself and Snape, carefully and with measured, gradual movements, so as not to startle him, she wrapped her arms around him, feeling his body stiffen and tense under her embrace.

"I'm not really asking for forgiveness," Minerva whispered into his ear, "I don't think I can ask for that as I'm not even willing to forgive myself, but I am trying to tell you that I am deeply regretful, and that I've always loved you. A love that has only grown deeper over the years, despite how I've behaved." She felt the familiar sting of oncoming tears but refused to allow them to stop her. "I love you, Severus Snape, and nothing will ever change that, least of all you."

She stood on her tiptoes and pulled him downward to allow her access to his forehead, where she placed a motherly kiss. She reluctantly released him, looking up into his eyes for the slightest hint of emotion, but he revealed nothing.

Undeterred, she smiled weakly and started off toward the door, pausing only once she reached her destination to turn to face him. He was still in the same position, the same location, as she left him, staring into the space she had recently occupied. "Severus?" she asked.

His head slowly turned in her direction, his expression still unreadable.

"I'm going to be checking on you during this time of forced holiday, and before you start debating me on that point, it's not negotiable, and I'll be checking on Remus as well. If I am unable to pull away from Hogwarts, I will send one of your apprentices here in my stead. I assume that by the appearance of several cauldrons currently weighing down your kitchen table, you are refusing to rest as I requested. So, should you need any supplies from your lab at the school, feel free to ask and I mean *ask* your apprentices to retrieve the items for you." She shot him a look that openly dared him to refute her. When his only response was a petulant mumbling under his breath, she couldn't hide her approving smile. "And should you need anything else, *anything*, Severus, please contact me."

And then she was out the door, leaving him feeling slightly violated, a bit angry, a small part vindicated, and completely, utterly confused.

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**Author's Note** Huge, huge thank yous to two outstanding betas that stepped up to help me with this: sbrande and shellsnapelover! Without you two, this chapter would still be a lumpy, icky mess of bad grammar and punctuation, topped with a big, stinky pile of "suddenly's". I cannot thank you enough!

And to the readers thank you so, so much for sticking with this story! Chapter twenty is being written now, so it should be updated within the next few weeks... \*and\*... there will finally be some *real* lemons! I promise it will be worth the wait!