

Guard... Check... Mate

by Bambu

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The Board is Revealed

Chapter 1 of 7

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All standard disclaimers apply herein. The source work is not mine, belonging to JK Rowling, her publishers and assignees instead. I've additionally relied upon the Harry Potter Lexicon (<http://www.hp-lexicon.org/>), the Notre Dame University Latin Dictionary and Grammar Guide (<http://www.nd.edu/~archives/latgramm.htm>), and a remarkable compilation of terminology for which I thank Larilee for her recommendation, Mrs. Muggle's list of Potterwords (http://www.livejournal.com/users/mrs_muggle/8435.html#cutid1).

I'd like to thank Melisande88 for letting me know that Doomspark is the author of "Future Perfect," in which the Mirror of Erised has siblings. Additionally, Simply Scribbling uses a variation of the sibling theme in "An Ever-Fixed Mark," in which she uses a cousin to the Mirror of Erised. It seems that a good idea doesn't seem to care who has it, and I've skip-jumped with the idea of a sibling mirror to create a different sibling for this little story; nonetheless, I'd like to acknowledge that I owe a debt to these clever gimmicks.

Please additionally note that there will be some graphic descriptions of curses and their effects and results sprinkled throughout, but hopefully not enough to completely squick you.

And finally, but not least, my thanks to SnarkyWench for her consistent support and encouragement, and even if she did crack the whip because I've taken a little detour from Summoning, she was still patient because this story -- all six chapters -- has been taunting me for several months, refusing to go away until I finally let it out. I'm back hard at work on the next chapter of my elephantine epfic.

~o0o~

Chapter One: The Board is Revealed

The stealthy 'black bat of the dungeons' of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was earning his reputation late one Friday evening toward the end of Summer Term. As was his custom when insomnia struck an increasingly frequent side-effect of his role as a double agent in what would be the wizarding world's most cataclysmic war the Potions master was stalking those foolhardy students tempting fate, Snape's non-existent patience and his liberal hand with detentions and loss of house points. Thus far into the night, Hufflepuff had already aided Slytherin's chances for the House Cup by seventy-five points, Ravenclaw by ten, and the Head of Slytherin was feeling rather smug about the humiliation he'd heaped on more than one copulating set of rampaging hormones.

None of the sixth years had thought to cast a Silencio on their activities. Teenagers didn't seem to realize that sex was loud. Slick-skin-slapping-on-slick-skin made distinctive noises which served as directional indicators to one who had walked the ancient and enigmatic stone halls of the castle for nigh on two decades. The seventh years were more devious. The brightest of the Ravenclaws escaped detection for the most part, being clever enough to cast more than a silencing charm on their trysts. Those eager to pursue lustful engagements searched for out-of-the-way locations, unused classrooms and study nooks, and had enough presence of mind to cast disillusionment spells on the doors. The brightest, or the craftiest, whichever way one looked at it, chose classrooms with secondary exits, and placed telltale warning hexes on the doorknobs. Those few couples he left alone. The forethought and care it took for the students to plan an assignation were skills that would serve them well in the coming conflagration, and Snape was rather pleased to think that he'd taught more than Potions to the dunderheads in his care. His methods might be harsh and demanding, but his results were demonstrable.

His thoughts turned to his Slytherins. For the most part they were perceptive enough to choose among the three dungeons he tacitly allowed for their extra-curricular activities. One of those dungeons had been practically turned into a bed-and-breakfast by the soon-to-graduate Draco Malfoy. How Snape loathed the arrogant, spoiled brat of Lucius'. The son wasn't nearly as bright or as malevolent as his father, and the teenager assumed that his birthright was sufficient for his eventual placement in wizarding society. If the Dark Lord was victorious, Draco would be correct, Snape thought acridly. It chafed that the cocky, pureblooded brat had never had to earn his marks in Potions, that his position as a ranking Death Eater's son had earned him high marks. Even Vincent Crabbe and Greg Goyle had passed Snape's classes, and they were arguably on a par with a Blast-ended Skrewt for talent, imagination and intelligence.

Snape would be only too happy to see the backs of the graduating Class of 1998. He was marking the days off in his calendar, the lurid carnelian ink in honor of Gryffindor, only seven more days until he would be free of the Potter spawn and his out-riggers. Snape had purchased a decent bottle of brandy to celebrate. He planned to get quietly drunk the day that the Brat Who Lived exited through the castle gates.

He would have to withstand the smug, bespectacled teen hero at Order of the Phoenix meetings, but they were weekly, and that was bearable. Snape had managed to interact with a league of red-headed Weasleys on a weekly basis for a number of years without resorting to hexing or jinxing any of their number, though his patience was sorely tried by the eldest son and the twins. His lips twisted in a sneer as he thought of the twin red-headed heathens... brilliant... but functionally illiterate. It was galling to think that their business had been such a resounding success when they'd spurned their last year of school. However, if he'd managed to contain his disdain for them, then he could certainly stand the addition of a messy-haired wizard, his copper-haired sidekick, and his swotty friend, one night a week. It would be a distinct improvement over their daily interaction which, by mutual consent, was carried out with cold civility at best, and open rancor being the norm.

Just thinking of those Gryffindors he liked least, and one of whom he refused to allow his thoughts to dwell upon, turned Snape's footsteps toward the Astronomy Tower, the favored haunt of the red-and-gold brigade. The Tower was good for a fifty-point deduction from the lion's house on any given night, and, on this Friday, with the culmination of NEWTs and the end of class instruction, he should be able to reduce the number of gems glittering in Gryffindor's tallying hourglass significantly. Perhaps he could deduct enough points to give Slytherin an advantage toward the House Cup going into the final week of the year. Snape would dearly like his Slytherins to win it once while Harry Potter was a student at the school. Albus I'm-as-biased-as-any-Slytherin Dumbledore invariably granted enough points at the Leaving Feast to award the annual honor to his Dream Team.

Snape hadn't forgotten the bitter disappointment and the crushed faces of his students the first year Potter had been a student, when victory had been snatched from the rightful Slytherins. Dumbledore had rewarded Potter's bravado and his compatriots' rash rule-breaking. Snape had often wondered over the years if Draco Malfoy's commitment to the Dark Lord hadn't been determined in that very first year. Sourly, he acknowledged that the aristocratic blond had most likely never been made of stern enough material to break free of the bonds of his father's rhetoric or daily dose of *'dark magic is good for the soul and subjugation of our inferiors'*. The degree to which he'd been unable to affect the outlook of a generation of witches and wizards, doomed by birth and blind ambition to a life of servitude at the feet of a megalomaniac depressed Snape further. The melancholy wizard had hoped to save some of his students from the fate that awaited him... even one who had wavered would have been enough to bolster his waning faith... but it seemed that his wishes were futile. As far as he knew, with the exception of two of the current seventh year Slytherins, the rest were planning on pledging to the Dark Lord's service upon graduation.

His stride lengthened and his customary, tailored robes flared in a swell of black as he reached the dimly lit corridor leading to the Astronomy Tower. There. A sound that brought a lift to one side of his thin-lipped mouth. Gryffindors, unlike their more circumspect peers, felt they had no need for subterfuge or prudence. They never cast keep-aways.

Tonight's harvest would be promisingly bountiful. For illuminated in the torchlight was the burnished copper head of the youngest Weasley, Ginevra, and her newest friend-with-benefits. The young witch had her entire family wrapped around her pinky, and they were none the wiser to the fact that Ginny Weasley was shaping up to be as slatternly as his own house's reigning slag, Pansy Parkinson. So far this Term, Snape had caught the sixth year Gryffindor with five different young men. If the Potions master had given it the second or third thought, which he assiduously avoided, he could easily see that the young witch was seeking a substitute for her long-unrequited desire for the boy savior. But he wasn't that charitable. He was certain that one day she would land the clueless wizard to whom she'd taken a fancy as a child, and then Potter would be endlessly tormented by being tied to a witch with whom the majority of his friends had carnal knowledge. The thought actually brought a cold smile to Snape's lips, shifting the planes of the normally hawk-faced wizard into one of malicious glee. He still despised the privileged brat of James Potter's.

"Fifty points from Gryffindor, Miss Weasley," Snape snapped, his air of triumph carefully concealed. Ginny squeaked in unpleasant surprise and whipped around to face her professor. Her face was as flushed as her hair was red. Her companion, seventh year Ernie Macmillan, hung his head in embarrassment. "And ten points from Hufflepuff, Mr. Macmillan."

At this obviously unbalanced deduction, the young wizard's head shot up, he stood almost at eye-level with his professor, and, as he opened his mouth to protest, the young witch interrupted, "Yes, Professor Snape, we'll return to our common rooms now."

Snape watched, eyebrow raised, as Ginny dragged the young wizard down the corridor. He fought a battle with himself. One faction wanted to follow the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff to see how she explained the inequity in the loss of points to her 'date.' The other side of his brain urged him to continue to the top of the Tower for a larger harvest. His self-imposed quota of Gryffindor points hadn't been met yet.

The Head of Slytherin was to be disappointed in his quest. For the next two hours, he traversed the ancient halls of Hogwarts, ascending and descending fully a third of the one-hundred-forty-two staircases in the castle. Snape passed the newest trysting place, Sybil Trelawney's tufted classroom, and each of the House Towers. His dungeons would be last. Nary a Gryffindor was within range.

When his wayward staircase connected with one leading directly to the Gryffindor landing, Snape was highly amused to see Minerva McGonagall, Transfigurations mistress, Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor comfortably ensconced in a large, squashy armchair that she'd obviously conjured directly outside the entry leading to her House's dorms. She was engaged in a spirited conversation with the resident of the large portrait hiding the entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

The snort of amusement that escaped Snape's lips alerted the spinsterish witch to his presence, and McGonagall interrupted her conversation regarding the advantages of permanent sticking spells with the Fat Lady. Eyeing the wizard knowingly, she said in her prunes and prisms voice, "Trolling for points, Severus?"

"It is the duty of all heads of house to patrol the halls. I am merely diligent in fulfilling my obligations." He waited for her to react to his implied taunt. How he loved to bait the elder witch. She rose to the occasion like none other except perhaps one seventh year he refused to consider.

"Why, you slippery sod! What do you think I'm doing?" she spluttered indignantly.

"I think, Minerva, that you are protecting your chances for the House Cup" he sneered at his colleague. "My only question is whether you took your position *before* or *after* Miss Weasley was wandering the halls with her most recently chosen lothario."

"Why, you... you..." She stiffened in her chair, fairly bristling on behalf of her student. Regrettably, she couldn't really come to Ginny's defense because Snape had a valid point. The younger witch was quite egalitarian when it came to granting the favor of her body.

"Bat? Greasy git? Vampire? Foul... evil...loathsome... believe me, Professor, I have heard them all."

"Severus! I have never *once* called you *any* of those hideous names and you know it." McGonagall's shock pulled her from her chair as if she'd been hexed. She was a tall, thin woman and faced him squarely, anger masking an inner distress that was very clear in her deep blue eyes.

Grudgingly, Snape had to admit that what she said was true. She had been a surprisingly good friend to him over the years, even if the precariousness of his situation kept him from returning her genuine overtures. He couldn't acknowledge it verbally, but he ceased his baiting.

"Since it appears that my opportunity for evening the score has just dropped to nil, I believe I shall retire to my chambers. Good night, Minerva."

"You, too, you annoying man." McGonagall resealed herself, tucking her long legs under her in the posture of a much younger woman, then gave him one exasperated, affectionate look and returned to her interrupted conversation.

Snape made his way down the moveable staircases, his black robes sweeping the stone risers, and stepped into the small broom closet off the entrance hall. Once inside, he closed the door, leaving him in darkness, and muttered, "*Serpensortia*." He then re-opened the door which had magically connected directly to his office. The castle was endlessly accommodating, and the coat closet was an access point from which professors were able to reach multiple destinations within the castle without having to traverse long distances. It was a carefully guarded secret, one which the faculty used shamelessly to keep students in awe.

Settling into the hand-carved, much-used desk chair, Snape retrieved a scrolled parchment from a Disillusioned, hidden compartment in the scarred and aged desktop. His hands smoothed over the surface of the well-oiled wooden surface of the wood, fingering the divots and scratches that he'd lovingly cared for year after year. He unrolled the parchment. Following Dumbledore's confiscation of the Marauder's Map in Potter's sixth year, Snape had spent the better part of two months, in collaboration with Filius Flitwick, to uncover the secrets of the map. Very privately he'd had to admit that Remus Lupin and his deceased friends had been a festering cauldron of intelligence endlessly Gryffindorish but brilliant.

Citing his double duty as a reason, Snape had copied his teenaged adversaries' methods and created a map of his own. Dumbledore's restrictions had sorely lessened his triumph as the Headmaster had refused to let Snape include any students other than Slytherins on the map. With a few, judicious, modifications Snape had followed the rules. It had become his custom to check the map nightly before retiring, verifying that his clutch of serpents were indeed coiled within their nest.

Placing his wand tip to the center of the unrolled parchment, Snape intoned, "*Show me*."

As if by magic, the manila sheet of parchment began to ooze a small puddle of verdant, green ink. After a few seconds, the puddle seemed to extrude filaments which slithered and snaked their way to the four corners of the scroll, forming a clear diagram of Hogwarts in general, and Slytherin territory in specific. Small hovering names floated above the parchment, the names of his students. Young Malfoy was entertaining Daphne Greengrass... again. The young witch was expecting a betrothal announcement after graduation. She was a raven-haired replica of Narcissa Malfoy: slender and patrician, and eminently suitable as a bride for the Malfoy heir. The only hitch to her plan was Draco's reticence. He wasn't willing to settle down yet; he was far too agreeably engaged in seeking out and testing the other available options. Pansy Parkinson, Tracey Davis, and even Marietta Edgecomb had all been visitors to the bed-and-breakfast dungeon, none had been invited to return. Otherwise, his Slytherins were firmly tucked in their beds, or, in a few cases, were sharing sheets. Snape shuddered as he realized that Crabbe and Goyle were sharing a bed. How they fit their bulk into the narrow confines of a student-sized four-poster he didn't want to know or consider.

His predatory gaze sharpened as he noticed an unidentified body in one of the dungeons. His ability to see the intruder was one of the modifications he'd made to his own map. Any who wandered into his domain would appear on the map... without distinguishing identifiers other than the essentials. In this case, it wasn't a Slytherin, and it was a student.

Snape's black eyes gleamed with the thrill of the hunt, and he grabbed his wand. Perhaps his quota would be met after all. He didn't worry about Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws, their presence would most likely indicate the completion of an end-of-term dare, rather than any more serious mischief. The end of the year always elicited a flurry of revoltingly juvenile displays of bravado, and every year he caught more than one member of the other houses attempting to find the entry to the Slytherin common room. He'd deduct points and send them on their way. However, if his trespasser was a Gryffindor who'd escaped McGonagall's notice, then the rewards would be doubly satisfying. He could take the opportunity to see to it that Slytherin took the lead in the House Cup stakes, and the Deputy Headmistress would be so peeved by the fact that one of her cubs had snuck past her that, at the very least, a detention would be in order.

Before opportunity turned to regret, Snape strode from his office while casting a cushioning charm on his shoes, in search of the wayward student who had dared to invade his dungeons. He descended deeper into the sub-levels. Hogwarts was like an aged oak, a massive branch structure above ground balanced and held in place by the breadth and depth of its root system underneath. The castle had many lower levels, but the room he was seeking was only four narrow, darkened flights below his classroom, and, oddly enough, adjacent to the chamber where Potter had encountered the manifestation of Lord Voldemort at the end of his first year.

He remembered that year well, he'd been livid when he'd learned that Harry Potter had passed the series of barriers he and his colleagues had erected to keep the Philosopher's Stone hidden. His initial understanding that James Potter's son had bested him had been intolerable, but the reality had been worse. An eleven-year old Muggleborn had solved his conundrum, and that mere fact had served to fuel his initial dislike of the young girl. Had he been a teenager, he would have assumed she'd had help. Had the prejudice he'd been raised to believe matured, he would not have believed her capable. Had he still been a Death Eater, he would have killed her for her presumption.

Resolutely, shunting aside his thoughts about the tenacious and exasperating young witch, Snape descended the stairs and became aware of the first mind-fogging motes of a well-cast, keep-away spell and the lack of torches lighting his way. The cleverness ruled out the Gryffindors who were, as far as he was concerned, too arrogant to think they needed stealth. He didn't banish the charm. If it had been cast by a Ravenclaw, then there would be a tell-tale tag embedded within the spell to notify the culprit of Snape's presence, and there were a number of exits from the sub-levels which could be used to escape discovery. The Potions master had been thwarted enough this evening to allow a student to best his skills in deception. He cast a quiet *Lumos* for light, and continued to stalk his increasingly intriguing prey.

Upon descending further, down to third level, a Distraction charm had been put into use. He felt strongly inclined to use the passageway leading to the old wine cellars rather than continue in the direction he had chosen. Snape knew that his prey wasn't in the direction of the wine cellars. The best of the Hufflepuff students never cast a secondary layer of protection, and he ruled out any student from the badger's lair. Only Ravenclaw was left to consider. The subtleties of the charms he'd encountered lent credence to the idea that the trespasser was a seventh year student. As far as Snape knew there wasn't a sixth year capable of casting the tell-tale.

Mentally cataloguing the list of seventh year Ravenclaws, Snape dismissed the idea of any of the graduating witches. They were all too afraid of him set foot in the dungeons after classes, let alone after curfew. As he continued to take the darkened staircase deeper into the sub-levels of the castle, the dank chill of unused and neglected passages and chambers assailed his sensitive nose and his nostrils flared at the rank odor. He silently followed the small glow that blossomed at the end of his ebony wand, and considered the brighter of Ravenclaw graduating wizards: Terry Boot, Michael Corner. Snape snorted at that thought and relegated Corner to the list of highly improbable. Stephen Cornfoot, Kevin Entwhistle, and Anthony Goldstein.

Of the four possibilities, Snape eliminated Cornfoot and Entwhistle out of hand; he'd already deducted House points from them this evening. He doubted either of the young wizards would brook his displeasure after he'd already borne the sight of their naked arses in *coitus interruptus*. That left Terry Boot and Anthony Goldstein as the most likely candidate for the identity of the intruder. Both wizards were capable of the level of competence he'd encountered thus far, and they were members of Dumbledore's Army, or the Defense Association. Snape would deduct fewer points for cleverness. Of course, he wouldn't mention it to the young wizards.

Turning into the corridor where his prey was pursuing some nefarious plan, Snape had to fight the increasingly cloying suggestion that he really should be somewhere else, that perhaps he'd forgotten a cauldron in mid-brew. His assessment of the student rose with each successive layer of distraction he encountered. These were extremely competent charms that he was broaching, and only the certainty of his prey's whereabouts let him persevere.

When he approached the doorway leading to the chamber in which he was certain one of the Ravenclaw wizards was lurking, there wasn't a door in sight. A well-constructed Disillusionment charm had been warded into the thick wooden door. It would have fooled many a witch or wizard, perhaps even a number of the faculty. Snape derisively listed Rolanda Hooch and Hagrid among those, and most likely Pomona Sprout as well. He had no particular negative opinion of the Head of Hufflepuff, however, she would have no way of knowing what chambers existed at this sub-level so wouldn't look beyond the superficial illusion of solid wall.

Snape's assessment of the young wizard he sought was rising with each layer of privacy he detected. The most trusted spy for the Order of the Phoenix stepped up to the door he knew existed and cast a hushed illuminating charm. Immediately, three shimmering layers identifying the spells on the door were revealed. There was a tell-tale jinx affixed to the door handle's surface, one which he didn't recognize, and he could deduce a strong Imperturbable. Additionally, he recognized the cerulean glow of a soundproofing charm. Distraction, camouflage, warding, silencing. Perhaps this young wizard would be worth cultivating for membership in the Order of the Phoenix, if his loyalties were easy to ascertain. Snape was seriously considering awarding points to Ravenclaw for the competence and subtlety of the spells.

Resorting to the faculty override, Snape did not dismantle the soundproofing but used the faculty's prerogative, *"Praeceptor Alohomora,"* to unlock the door. The musty stench of the vaulted chamber was subtly sweetened, and he silently stepped into the dark room. It was lit only by the light of a single, suspended bluebell flame, and what he saw stopped him in his tracks.

It wasn't a Ravenclaw.

In fact it wasn't a wizard at all.

It was the one student who was guaranteed to get under his skin, and the one witch he refused to contemplate beyond superficialities. It was Gryffindor's Golden Princess, the brains behind Harry Potter's success, the young lioness herself: Hermione Granger.

Snape's eyes narrowed, his heartbeat sped up and his stomach clenched uncomfortably. The lank-haired wizard told himself it was because she was at his mercy. Gryffindor's chances to win the House Cup had just been lost. The tall, saturnine wizard fully entered the large, vaulted chamber and shut the door behind him, warding it with three flicks and a swish of his wand. That he was surprised by her presence in the dungeons was an understatement. That she was alone was almost as startling. Since her return to Hogwarts for the Summer Term, the witch had gone nowhere alone. He'd sneered at her for seemingly dangling her two 'friends' on a string, she had been accompanied by either Potter or Weasley everywhere she went for the past two months.

Stealthily, Snape stepped forward to give her a good scare when he realized what she was doing. She was looking into a large, ornate, gilt-framed mirror, her free hand tracing her reflection on the mirror's smooth surface. The blue light of the flame hovering above her head cast a surreal tint to her features. Hermione's slender frame was devoid of student robes and she was wearing Muggle jeans and a rather old-fashioned, fuchsia-colored cardigan which appeared almost lavender in the blue light. Her shoulders were slumped and the unruly mass of chestnut hair she was known for hung in a great tangle of curls between her shoulder blades.

The golden girl of Gryffindor was speaking in a low, choked voice, "Know-it-all... swot... silly little girl... presume to be a witch... Muggleborns aren't real witches..." And then in a voice so filled with derision that Snape recoiled, she snarled, "Mudblood!"

The level of contempt was familiar to him. He'd lived with such self-loathing for many a long year, and despite his determination to keep this witch at bay, he was drawn by a force greater than he wanted to acknowledge to step behind her. Before he was close enough for her to see him in the mirror's reflection, he recognized the gilt frame. It was a sibling of the Mirror of Erised. He'd forgotten it was in this chamber. There was an inscription in raised letters framing the top arch of the reflective surface: TNEM TNAH CNELLAH TAEN EBENOEH TUBECAF ILBUP RUOYT ONWO HSI. Snape had long ago translated it, *'I show not your public face but the one beneath all enchantment'*. The trick of this particular mirror was that it dispelled glamours, and it had once been owned by Rowena Ravenclaw. She'd kept it in the foyer of her chambers. It had been the forerunner of Foe-Glass, and had kept her safe from harm for decades.

Snape had no idea why Hermione Granger would be looking at herself to see beyond an enchantment, but when he took one step closer, careful to keep his breathing shallow and silent, he caught a glimpse of the witch's reflection in the bluebell flame-lit mirror. He was shocked speechless by the sight of a lurid, crimson gash of thick scar tissue slicing across her throat, and sharply sucked in a lungful of air.

Hermione's response was immediate, she whipped around to face her foe simultaneously casting, *"Nox,"* and, in a fluid movement, one which the Professor could no longer see she shouted, *"Protego!"* The golden glow of her shielding spell, in full force and effect, gave away her position which was now several feet from where she'd been.

She had learned well, this student of theirs, and Snape was more impressed than he wanted to admit. But she was now at his mercy, and he had a number of questions that required answers.

The glow from her shielding charm abruptly winked out and the great room was cast into darkness... and silence. His glee at finding her in the dungeons after curfew was diminished by the suspicions that had erupted like smoke from a Longbottom cauldron, after the brief glance at her reflection. She obviously had knowledge that was being withheld from him, and he couldn't take the chance that she would find an escape route. He needed to stop her even as he was certain she was seeking an alternate exit while he wasted his time processing the scant information in his possession. Part of him catalogued and weighed the grim reality staring him literally in the face: she'd been different since the Easter holidays, and he'd been kept ignorant of whatever events had included Hermione Granger's participation.

Before she could cast what would undoubtedly be an effective and defensive hex, and considering events, one for which he couldn't reasonably chastise her, Snape wandlessly ignited the distant wall sconces in the chamber. They flared to life and the seventh year Gryffindor, veteran of annual and increasingly lethal brushes with the Dark Lord, had already taken shelter behind one of the numerous columns holding up the vaulted ceiling of the chamber.

"Show yourself, Miss Granger, and explain why you are not only out after curfew, but alone in the dungeons. Surely a witch of your *self-acclaimed* intellect knows that you are not welcome."

Hermione stepped from behind a pillar not the one he'd expected -- her wand still held in her hand, in the balanced grip that indicated she duelled often. Evidence that she trusted him, but only so far. His heart clenched, and his eyes narrowed, he could see no evidence of a blemish upon her skin... her throat..

Snape realized that she'd changed remarkably in a short few months. Over the winter break he'd heard her loudly proclaim his trustworthiness to her friends at Grimmauld Place. He hadn't been meant to hear it, but her words had sustained him during more than one life-threatening occasion since that moment.

"I'm sorry Professor Snape, I didn't realize that it was you. If you will assign me detention and deduct points, I'll leave."

Her audacity was astounding; her voice didn't hold a trace of the self-mockery from moments earlier and her posture was erect, her shoulders easy. She'd been drilled well, he thought, complimenting James Potter's son in spite of himself. He knew that she'd been an active member of Dumbledore's Army, if not the instigator. For three years, the select group of students, which had grown to include members of all four Houses although Blaise Zabini and Malcolm Baddock kept their membership strictly secret from the rest of Slytherin had met twice weekly to train in the practical application of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Snape had never discussed the club openly because, in all actuality, if he'd ever had the opportunity to teach the subject he would have insisted on something similar. It served no purpose to teach the abstract application of defensive skills if you couldn't practice them.

Snape's umbral stare searched the young witch's face in the low light for evidence of what he'd seen revealed by the mirror. He beheld the same, rather pretty, recently mature young witch he'd been laying eyes on three times a week in his class and daily at meals for the past seven years. But he'd been a spy for too long not to ignore his instincts, or even the partially seen evidence of his own eyes.

"Not quite yet, Miss Granger. We have unfinished business. I have some questions to ask you," he drawled. He watched her spine stiffen and her hand twitch spasmodically, as if she were weighing the advantages of *Stupefying* him. He forestalled the moment she would put thought into action. "I would not take that chance if I were you. You can only get the draw on me once, and, if memory serves me correctly, you have already used your quota. Even then, it was under extenuating circumstances. I assure you, I am fully cognizant of my surroundings now, and you... are... alone."

There. She'd twitched again. She was increasingly tense, and Snape thought that she just might chance the spell if she thought she could succeed against him. His instincts, honed by almost two decades of espionage and frequent deadly peril, were reacting as a Sneakoscope gyrates and whistles in the presence of someone not to be trusted. Hermione Granger was not leaving the room until he had some answers. Absently, he raked his long fingers through his limp hair, while formulating the

appropriate questions to ask her. He believed he was entitled to the information she was obviously concealing, such as what had happened to her. Snape's continued existence hinged on information. The more accurate his information, the more likely he was to survive, at least until his next summons from the Dark Lord.

He noticed that her stance was perfectly balanced and she looked ready to take flight. The window of opportunity was rapidly thinning, and it was time for Hermione to be forthcoming, even if he would have to coerce her in a less-than-conventional manner. In an instant, he flicked his wand toward her and shouted, "*Expelliarmus!*"

Her "*Protego*," was a fraction of a second too late, and Hermione's wand flew from her hand, clattering on the stone floor.

She didn't hesitate, "*Accio wand!*"

Jumping lightly to the right, Hermione reached for the hurtling, slender rod. Snape had anticipated her movement correctly and fired a binding spell at the witch. Thin, lashes wrapped around her arms and legs preventing her from catching her wand as she toppled, backward onto the cold, stone floor. A puff of dust rose with the impact of her body, and Snape strode to her side. He looked down at her, the light in the room cast his face into a harsh, hawk-like mask, and, leaning down, he retrieved and pocketed her wand.

Hermione's eyes glittered as she followed his movements. She was livid. "You sod!" she seethed, but didn't attempt to break free of the bindings.

She was a clever witch indeed. She'd obviously realized that the more she struggled, the tighter the bindings would become.

"Tut-tut, Miss Granger. Ten points from Gryffindor for insubordination." His voice was as cold as he could make it. He'd been known to terrify adult wizards with that voice. Quickly levitating her body, he ignored her accusatory glare, and towed her in the direction of the mirror.

As they neared the gilt-frame, Snape knew the second that Hermione realized what he was doing. She began to struggle, her curly hair swaying in jerky movements as she attempted to free herself despite the fact that it was clear she'd recognized the constricting element to his spell. She seemed not to notice the tightening of the cords on her body, and cried, "No! You can't. Don't do this, Professor. Stop! Please, please, don't do this."

Snape halted their forward progress. In truth, he had no desire to hurt her or to humiliate her; he'd done that more times than he could count. But those were times during which he was on public display. *This* was out of the public's eye, and he'd simply wanted to scare her into answering his questions. "Then we have a deal. You will tell me what I wish to know."

"It depends on what you want to know."

Gone was the respectful witch she'd been for seven years. In that eager-to-please witch's place was a furious young woman whose huge, brown eyes were sparking in anger... and fear.

"You are not in a position to negotiate, Miss Granger. I suggest you capitulate."

"I'm afraid you do not know me at all, Professor Snape."

"That might be. However, *I* have the wand hand." He levitated her once again. "It seems that you were not in earnest when you asked me to stop. Shall we see what the mirror holds in store?"

He confidently expected her to beg and plead with him. But she didn't. Nor did she pull the standard, bold Gryffindor face and act as if it didn't matter.

Instead she countered with, "I'm certain it will give you great pleasure, Professor." Hermione's voice took on the scathing tone he'd heard earlier, and it twisted her words into something tangible and painful. "See the Gryffindor *know-it-all* taken down a few pegs. Show the *Mudblood* she doesn't belong in the wizarding world. The great irony is that if I had anywhere else to go now, I might just give you what you've wanted all along. Go right ahead, Professor Snape, make me look in the mirror. Remember to look, too, I'm sure you'll enjoy the entertainment."

Snape was so taken aback by the tone of her attack that he lost the focus of his spell, and allowed her to drop to the floor. "I do not understand you. Of what are speaking?"

She was silent, her eyes were shining with unshed tears and she appeared determined to ignore him. Her gaze was unfixed at a point beyond his shoulder, somewhere above him on the vaulted ceiling.

"Bloody hell! I want to know what happened to you! When... how did you get the scar?"

She ignored him, but he could tell that she was crying. Remarkably, her face bore no trace of her tears. The glamour was excellent, and had obviously been cast by someone with great power. None of her friends had the ability to cast such a spell. The Boy Savior might have the raw power, but not the finesse. It had to have been cast by Dumbledore.

Anger like Snape hadn't known in several years -- since before Harry Potter had delved into his Pensieve -- consumed him. His hands shook and his shouting could've been heard in the Slytherin dorms had it not been for the Imperturbable and soundproofing charms on the room. "What happened? When did it happen? Tell me!" Spittle flew from his mouth and his face was contorted with rage.

In a voice as dry and lifeless as the powdered bicorn in his potions storeroom, Hermione gave him his answer. "Do you really want to hear this, Professor? After all, what do the deaths of two Muggles really matter? It might've been the entire family, but I was too slow, just as I was too slow tonight. It won't happen again. Trust me when I tell you that Harry is not the only one of the Dream Team who's been orphaned by Tom Riddle." Her eyes sought his, and the condemnation in them was crushing.

Snape felt as if he'd been hit in the chest by a bludger.

Her meaning was obvious. If she was correct, which, knowing her, she was, then it didn't take a genius to realize that action had been taken against one of the Gryffindor Dream Team and he'd been kept completely ignorant of that fact... by both sides. Snape couldn't breathe. Pops of white light flickered in his vision. There was only one, inescapable, conclusion to draw from this information. His life was forfeit.

The final blow was delivered in a choked whisper, "I thought you would know... that you would warn us in time."

Snape sought the support of a nearby pillar.

Her look had carried the weight of judgment.

He sank to the cold ground and buried his head in his hands. He hadn't known. If he had, he realized, with a certainty that was a little frightening in its intensity, that he would have prevented the attack on her family, even if it had cost him his life. A life that had been rendered insignificant by her confession. His voice lacked his customary control and he couldn't feign it. He couldn't meet her eyes. "I... I... had no idea."

In a voice rigidly under control, even if a little shrill, Hermione told him what he wanted to know. "I'd gotten home the day before from school. I'd had to talk the Headmaster into letting me go. It took a week before he agreed. We'd planned to go to St. Tropez for the hols. Our last trip before I graduated and we went into hiding. Mum and Dad..." her voice broke, and he waited for her to continue, "had sold their dental practice and were waiting for a safe house. We never went on holiday as everyone thought. Instead, my parents died... and I lived."

Choosing Sides, Black or White

Chapter 2 of 7

In which Hermione and Severus exchange confidences and Hermone exposes her disfigurement.

Guard... Check... Mate

By Bambu

~o0o~

Chapter Two: Choosing Sides, Black or White

A pregnant pause filled the room with a bubble of silence, save for the breathing of two people. It bulged into nooks and crannies and pressed against the living man and woman who at once were well-acquainted and, yet, knew very little about one another. Hermione stopped speaking for so long that Snape raised his head to look at her, to look at her glamourized, unblemished face. So innocent, so sweet... so completely at odds with the heartbreak she'd so recently suffered and which soaked into each pain-etched word she'd spoken. Hermione struggled to take a deep breath, the binding cords slipping tighter around her breasts, and Snape instantly banished them. He doubted that she noticed, so still did she lie.

He was in shock, possibly denial of the shift of reality that had just altered the foundations of his existence. He cast his eyes around the cavernous, vaulted chamber. The stone had been hewn from the granite outcropping upon which Hogwarts castle had been built. The room was massive, and impervious to the gamut of human experience that had passed through its structure. The expression on Snape's pale face was anything but stone-like. His grimace was tormented and angry, and his eyes glittered with a furious, wounded expression that would have been difficult to describe, but would have left an indelible impression had it been witnessed.

As both a Death Eater and an Order of the Phoenix member, Snape had been privy to any number of the Dark Order's attacks over the years, and, in the manner of a coroner in the face of death, he had become inured against the ravages that depravity waged on one's psyche. On rare occasions, a death would touch him personally, but, by and large, they left him unaffected. Hermione's dry encapsulation of the events that altered her life permanently had left him anything but indifferent. Each word she'd spoken had cut Snape as if tiny shards of glass were piercing his heart. It had been more painful than Cruciatus. Fortunately he was intelligent enough not to stone the messenger. In any event, he would never have stoned this messenger. Not now... not ever again.

The bubble of silence expanded until the pressure to speak was unbearable. When Hermione finally shattered the artificial peace, Snape thought he'd never heard her voice before, because it seemed to encompass the entire spectrum of life's experiences, and was as brittle as spring ice on the giant squid's lake. A spark of compassion in his chest ached for her loss and reminded him of his humanity.

"The wards on the house were broken during the night. I suppose I should be honored that I was interesting enough that Voldemort came himself. My Dad was no match for him, nor was my Mum a match for Lucius Malfoy. I heard Mum scream and I don't think I've ever moved so fast. I grabbed my wand and scrambled to reach their room. It didn't matter. I saw the green light shine from under the door. Do you know what Mad-Eye Moody said to me, afterwards? He told me that I should have run."

Hermione turned her head to meet Snape's black eyes. "How could I? I could still hear Mum screaming. I couldn't just leave her if there was something I could do. But I was no match for them. I might have been lucky with Malfoy..." her voice became cold and hard when she spoke Lucius' name. "But not with them both. Voldemort made me watch while he killed Mum, and Lucius didn't cast the *Avada* on me, he said that if I'd been a real witch he'd have given me mercy. But a jumped-up Mudblood didn't deserve it." She lapsed into silence.

Snape's breath became ragged as he gulped in air. There was more. He knew there was more. The silk of his voice was gone; instead, he was just utterly weary and sounded it. "What did he do to you?"

"He cast a *Diffindo* and *Petrificus Totalus*, and left me to choke on my own blood. Oh, he was thoughtful enough to roll me over so that I could see the bodies of my parents. I lay on the floor of their bedroom... soaking in a puddle of blood... watching my Mum and Dad stiffen... waiting for my turn to die." She was silent for a long moment. "The bastard kissed me on the forehead before he left and said, 'Sweet dreams, Mudblood.' I still hear that voice in my dreams... They've been anything but sweet."

Again, silence: pressurized, isolating, devastating.

Snape waited for several minutes, wanting her to finish the tale. He marveled at the comprehensiveness of the glamour she wore, her face had remained chillingly expressionless during the course of her tale. Regardless of how traumatic the experience had been for Hermione, Snape had more immediate concerns, such as why he'd never been told. What purpose had it served to keep him swathed in a blanket of ignorance? When it was obvious that she wasn't going to speak further, he waited for her ragged breathing to even out, and asked, "How did you survive?"

"Mad-Eye Moody found me. The wards had been broken on the house and it alerted him. He summoned Professor Dumbledore, and Madam Pomfrey healed me. The Headmaster modified Madam Pomfrey's memory and removed the wards on my house. He called the Muggle authorities, as an anonymous tip." Another minute passed in silence, he could see her dark eyes shining, staring at him, her emotions completely masked by the smoothness of her façade. "I... I was very angry with you, Professor. The Headmaster said that I couldn't tell anyone, not Harry and Ron, and most especially I wasn't to speak to you. He said that it was safer for you if you didn't know, it would be one less thing for you to conceal. He said that you didn't need another burden placed on your shoulders, and I didn't... don't want that either." She closed her eyes.

Snape hung his head between his hands. He was angry with Moody and livid with Dumbledore. He'd thought that they knew better. The bitter truth was that they *did* know better and still hadn't informed him. What else was being kept from him? The chill of death dripped down his spine sending shuddering ripples of fear throughout his limbs. Why wasn't he dead yet?

He would be having a little discussion his mental tone was scathing -- with Albus-bloody-Dumbledore as soon as Hermione was tucked into her dorm. House points had suddenly become immaterial and insignificant. In fact, he was having an absurdly difficult time containing his desire to protect the young witch. It was as if, knowing that he could no longer hope to protect himself, he wanted to protect someone else... to prove that the sacrifices he'd made for years... decades had been worthwhile.

Her voice interrupted his grim thoughts and the chilling weight of the truth behind her statements erased any further thought of her as a child.

"I didn't understand why you weren't there... why you didn't know. You'd saved us so many times in the past that I expected you to be there. And then I realized why. I wasn't Harry. My parents were Muggles, and I was just a Mudblood."

Snape's head snapped up. "Do not denigrate yourself, Miss Granger. You are a witch, no matter your parentage."

She snorted in patent, bitter disbelief, "If you believe that, Professor, then why did you ever become a Death Eater?"

He sucked in his breath at her impudence. "How dare you! You haven't..."

Her eyes blazed behind that perfect mask. "The right to know? The right to ask? Why don't I have the right to know? I believed in you... *You!* Not Professor Dumbledore... not after fifth year. But you let me down... you weren't there to save them... or me."

Snape's anger at Dumbledore was overwhelmed by guilt curdling in his stomach and the icy spike of fear shriveling his intestines. Was there really a point in confronting Dumbledore? The old wizard had been blinded by his own prejudices before when it had come to giving Snape a fair hearing. Why would now be any different? Snape knew that his freedom was precarious. The truth had rested with only one man whom Snape had trusted... and was now confronted with the unforgiving truth that his trust had been misplaced.

Dumbledore was the only wizard alive who knew why he'd become a Death Eater. Legally he was protected by the earlier ruling of the Wizengamot, which had been dependent upon Dumbledore's testimony, but there was no one else who knew the story from his perspective. It had never mattered before, even during those long years waiting for the Dark Lord's return, because he'd had a secure home and Dumbledore had protected him... almost like the father he'd wished had been his.

However, in the span of a short few minutes, Snape's chances of survival had lessened considerably. His odds were now even slimmer than those of a vampire basking in the sun. The Granger murders were something he should have known... needed to know. He ignored the sense of betrayal he felt. This was the second time Albus Dumbledore had let him down. Once as a student and now as an adult. His incisive conscience insisted on pointing out that he now had something in common with the powerful, old wizard. In this case, he had been the one to let his student someone under his care -- down, not Dumbledore.

He let his head drop back against the column, cracks and missing chunks of stone making it an uncomfortable resting place, but he needed to think, and he couldn't look at Hermione's prone body and ersatz face without being assaulted by the images he could easily conjure of her experience. Snape knew what some of the Death Eaters did during attacks on Muggles. He knew how vindictive Voldemort could be, and if the Dark Lord had taken a personal interest in the death of the Grangers, then Snape could easily fill in the details that Hermione had carefully left unspoken.

Drawing a deep, lung-expanding breath, the warring scents of dust, mildew and witch embedding themselves into the memory that was being created between Hermione and him. Firmly bringing intellect to bear, and pushing more frivolous thoughts to the side, Snape examined the information she'd told him, the dilemma she suddenly represented. Aside from the issue of his longevity, if he was correct in his assessment, then Hermione had already begun to be isolated from those who would miss her.

The situation reminded Snape painfully of his own segregation during his school years. The glaring difference between Hermione and him was that he'd never had a close-knit group of friends whose loyalty had to be overcome. Snape had been an introverted, highly intelligent and poor Slytherin... not to mention ungainly and unattractive. He'd attempted to compensate for his lack of prestige with knowledge and power, but his adversarial status with the school's and Dumbledore's -- favorites had kept him essentially friendless. After Potter had saved his life in fifth year, and Snape had been muzzled as a result of Dumbledore's directives, he'd had no one to turn to. His lips twisted into a bitter sneer. He'd been ripe for the plucking.

The similarity of circumstances between his past and Hermione's present were sounding alarm bells in his head. It was obvious to the spy within him that Dumbledore was setting her apart, separating her from her friends through coercions of silence. And it was just as obvious to Snape that Dumbledore had decided her fate... just as Dumbledore had decided his. However, in this scenario, Snape could detect a different ending. Hermione wouldn't be put to further use as he had been. Instead, she had been categorized as a liability, and was being cast on the winds of fate, abandoned by those who should fight for her life.

Fury blazed within Snape, burning to steam the icy fear that had gripped him. His teeth clenched in his jaw and he made a decision... a leap of faith which might seem utterly illogical, but was one that his heart recognized as the right choice for him. It would be the first of many steps that would alter his path from the one pre-determined by the aged wizard who had manipulated, in one form or another, the course of Snape's life since he'd been fifteen. Snape's breath quickened with the realization that he was going to share the truth with this witch. He wanted someone to *know*. He wanted *Hermione* to know. Her earlier faith in him had been an unintentional source of hope when he had so little of that quality remaining. He wanted... needed to restore her opinion... it had catalytically become vital to him.

Slicing the air with his wand, he cast two, highly modified charms on the room, a perquisite of two decades engagement in espionage. Layered upon Hermione's existing spells, they were virtually undetectable. When he'd first spoken, Hermione's eyes opened and watched his hand movements closely. He nodded at her perennial need to acquire knowledge, even in her despondency. It was a trait he recognized, and shared.

Despite the layers of protections, he still spoke quietly, his eyes meeting... holding her gaze. Snape wanted her to believe. "I know that Potter's told you about the events during my fifth year, when Black tried to kill me and destroy his friend, Lupin, in the process."

Hermione stiffened and her eyes grew round in surprise. Snape stifled the urge to laugh. He certainly wasn't known for his small talk, and having never attempted to converse with her before, she must be startled by his willingness to answer her question, and intensely curious as to what had motivated his sudden 'confessional.' He would have been suspicious if their positions had been reversed. His instinctive sense of self-preservation *Leviosa'd* a thought to the forefront of his mind -- if it didn't go well he could always *Oblivate* her.

"James Potter may have saved my life, but he sided with his friend when I reported them to the Headmaster. Lupin was in the forest for two days and nights before he returned to school, and he had no memory of what had happened in the tunnel below the Shrieking Shack. I had few friends as it was and none loyal enough to stand with me in the face of persistent persecution by the Marauders. My father owned a shop in Knockturn Alley and was notorious for supplying Dark wizards with less-than-legal substances and artifacts. I was reclusive and painfully shy, and my education before coming to Hogwarts had consisted of magic bordering on the Dark Arts... more than bordering, Miss Granger. My father had taught me thoroughly -- twisted bastard that he was. Potter and Black made my life a living hell for five years, humiliating me at every opportunity."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, and Snape forestalled her almost automatic rebuttal. "Spare me your defense of them, Miss Granger. I gave as good as I got, and there was no love lost between Black, Potter, Lupin and I. However, before our fifth year, the rivalry had never denigrated to attempted murder."

Acutely uncomfortable with revealing so much about himself, but somehow compelled to continue, Snape rose to his feet to pace for several moments. He felt the heat of Hermione's eyes watching him. With each turn, his robes fluttered behind him, arcing outward, as graceful as an ebony tail. When his unease settled, he resumed a position on the stone floor, this time nearer to Hermione.

He kept his voice low, almost a caress and distinctly at odds with the harshness of his story. "To curtail this nauseating retelling of my life, the Headmaster did not believe my story, and I was the one to receive detention for the prank. Potter was a prefect pro tem when Lupin was 'otherwise engaged' each month, and I was only a lowly Slytherin who was out on the grounds after curfew." He snorted, derisively. "Even though I had discovered one of the Headmaster's secrets that he was protecting a werewolf -- it didn't matter. The golden boy of Gryffindor escaped unscathed and I was as friendless as ever. My final years at school were almost entirely bereft of companionship, but I'd found something that made up for it. I'd found a love of potions after the old master had been replaced during my sixth year. I spent every spare moment in the dungeons, studying with Professor Brewer. He was patient and meticulous, and I believe he gave me detention once for turning in an assignment that was three feet longer than required." Snape quirked a half-smile in Hermione's direction and was startled to receive a gentle smile in return.

"After school, I had no real prospects. My father's reputation had sullied my own, and I was unable to find suitable employment in an apothecary, which is what I'd thought to do after I'd graduated. Public paranoia was on the rise, and it was difficult to find work even with a stellar family reputation. The only viable option left for me was to work for my father. It was a miserable existence. I met Lucius Malfoy one day... and, no, you may not have the details of where or why... and he seemed oddly taken with me.... I was later to learn that he was recruiting for the Dark Lord whose power was reaching its zenith."

Snape's tone became bitter. "I was flattered that a wizard of Malfoy's lineage and breeding would consort with someone like me, and I attributed him with more nobility and liberality than he deserved. Something I later learned to my further disillusionment." Now that he'd begun to open up, Snape didn't think he could stop. It was akin to picking an old scab, thickened and cracked as the wound beneath its hard carapace healed to tender, pink, new flesh. He shifted positions -- seeking comfort where none was to

be found, the filthy stone unyielding as he proceeded to reveal the new flesh of his soul.

Hermione's eyes followed his every movement -- she still hadn't budged from her prone position on the cold floor -- and Snape snapped at her. "I am not going to hex you again, Miss Granger." He didn't give her a chance to speak and his tone softened. "Do sit up. I do not... I do not share confidences easily."

As Hermione propped herself against the nearest column, her luminous eyes danced in the torchlight. "I am fully aware of the honor, Professor."

He gave her an intense, searching look, uncharacteristically scrubbed his face with his hands, feeling the abrasive stubble that told him it was growing very late, and continued his narrative. He'd always heard that confession was good for the soul, but until this moment, he'd not really felt that it was true. He'd unburdened his conscience to Dumbledore every time he'd reported in, but he'd never felt... cleansed... by the experience. But now, sharing his history with this young witch who'd experienced similar isolation from her peers due to her differences... not that they were the same as his, but enough similarities existed for him to draw the parallels and be comforted by the fact that she could... and perhaps would understand.

"I began to attend parties at Malfoy Manor. I sold most of my potions kit in order to afford appropriate clothing, as no one would hire me and I hoped that with Lucius' patronage, I could find a placement. I had no idea that he meant for me to join the Death Eaters until I received an owl from Dumbledore. He asked me to meet him secretly. Lucius' movements, even then, were watched by the Aurors, and the Order of the Phoenix had been keeping tabs on his guest lists. My name had come up and, for a short time, I was courted by both sides. It was a heady experience for someone who had been a social pariah for his entire life, and I relished the feeling of being wanted." He slanted a raven-dark glance at the young witch with the perfect countenance, his hair screening his perusal of her. Only Hermione's eyes gave away her real feelings, they were alight with interest. Snape hadn't seen that look for months, and only now noticed the difference. He berated himself for not having paid closer attention. He'd been so certain that the added layer of attention being paid to her by Potter and Weasley had been direct results of over-active hormones. He couldn't afford to make such assumptions.

"I did not make it easy for Dumbledore. I felt that he had betrayed me as a student, and I was not certain that I wanted to throw my lot in with anyone who had befriended Black and Potter. They still hated me as much as ever, and Lucius was more generous than I could have wished. It was in his generosity that he over-played his hand. A Slytherin is never generous without a purpose. I grew more reserved with Lucius' friends, realizing finally that they were all in some form or another either aligned directly with the Dark Lord or were being manipulated by the Death Eaters. I did not want to become a puppet."

A bitter sneer twisted his features for a moment. He had become exactly what he'd wished to avoid by making the choices that he had. Snape almost didn't hear her voice whisper, "I understand, Professor. Dangling at the end of someone else's strings is very... painful."

Once more their eyes locked and a wordless conversation passed between them.

"Remus Lupin was the catalytic agent causing my eventual choice. He had found out that Dumbledore was attempting to sway me in my decision, and Lupin told the Headmaster the truth about the night in the Shrieking Shack. He'd had it from Black and Potter but had never spoken. In any event, Dumbledore approached me once again, asking my forgiveness... I... it unmanned me completely. He offered me a job, teaching. I never wanted the Dark Arts position. It was a joke that Potter and Black made when they heard I had accepted Dumbledore's offer. Old Professor Brewer was retiring, and I took his place. I was young, untried, and loved the subtle craft of potions."

"But that doesn't explain..."

A trace of impatience had crept into her words, and Snape cut her off. "Be grateful this is the encapsulated version, Miss Granger. Lucius Malfoy was furious that I had chosen to take the job at Hogwarts, and, in those days, he did not rein in his temper as well as he does now," a sardonic eyebrow was raised at that comment, "and he attacked me in the castle. We had a very loud and very lengthy duel in the entrance hall. I was sure that I would be sacked, but Dumbledore had another idea. I was so grateful for the support and his affection that I accepted."

There was no question in her comment, "You became a spy."

"Yes."

He was silent. She was silent. As before, the only sound to be heard was their inhalations and exhalations as lungs efficiently exchanged oxygen and carbon dioxide.

Snape looked at Hermione, the unlikely Pensieve for his excruciating descent into Dante's Inferno. Her knees were bent and her arms wrapped around them, her hair was an untidy mess and her hands were filthy from the layers of dirt where she'd lain on the floor. Her face bore no evidence of the emotional evening, and was the color and texture of the polished Erumpent ivory he acquired for his private potions research. It was unsettling to see such an unperturbed countenance, but when he looked into her dark eyes he knew without understanding why he was so certain that he could finish what he wanted to say.

"... in the process, I lost part of my soul and any chance for making true friends in this life. I have been isolated and alone for the better part of the last eighteen years. Dumbledore is as much my master as is the Dark Lord. There is no one to share the burden with, no one to listen when I am bleeding... or broken... or even lonely."

He heard the unevenness of her breathing and knew that she'd been affected by his story. Suddenly it was too much. His confession had been too dear, too costly. He vaulted to his feet to pace in front of the gilt-framed mirror. There was no distortion or alteration in his reflection as he passed in front of the glass.

After several minutes, punctuated by the sharp staccato of his boot-heels clicking on stone, Hermione spoke. "I don't understand... No... I understand, but why tell me?"

Why?

That was indeed the question. Silence again pressed upon him. One minute... two. "Because you were honest with me, because you have almost always given me the benefit of the doubt, and, after what you have told me tonight, I can see that you are being deliberately segregated from your friends, your support group. I do not want you to be used as a pawn." He whispered, low, velvety, "I do not want you to suffer my fate. If you do, and you survive, you will never be untainted... never clean."

"Oh!"

Snape continued to pace as she assimilated his words.

"Thank you for telling me, Professor. I won't tell anyone and I'll be careful. I won't lose Harry and Ron, they already know about my Mum and Dad. They're the only ones who know, and we keep each other's secrets. That's why they've been so protective since the hols, but they don't know that I was hurt as well. Professor Dumbledore was right that Harry would be livid, it would distract him, and I won't be the cause of his losing focus. I snuck out of the common room tonight. The boys have been wonderful, but sometimes it's too much to sit in the common room or the library and pretend that I wasn't the cause of my parents' deaths. There's not a sign on me, nothing to show that I fought to save them as useless as it was. But, I... I just had to see what Malfoy did to me. I can feel it but I can't see it."

"It is an understandable desire."

"... and after graduation, I'm going to room with Ron and Harry and I won't be able to show my real face until after Harry defeats Voldemort."

Snape flinched at her use of the name of the Dark Lord and her innocent belief that things would go according to their plan. "I hate to disabuse you of the idea that you will be able to stay with Potter and Weasley. Do you not know that you are being separated from your friends after you graduate?"

"What? No! I'm going to live with Harry at Grimmauld Place. We've already made the plans." Her pronouncement was adamant... and wholly inaccurate.

"No, Miss Granger, you are not. The Headmaster has made alternate arrangements for you." Until that moment, Snape had not realized that Hermione had been marked for sacrifice... isolation, certainly, but not sacrificial bait, like a bleating lamb staked in front of Aragog's lair. However, with her obvious ignorance of Dumbledore's already

enacted plans to physically separate her from Potter and his other anchor, the Weasley family, the ink was on the parchment. Dumbledore had already decided that she was expendable.

Snape said nothing further, his heart so painfully constricted that it physically hurt. He waited. She was bright enough to hear the penny drop.

She did.

"Oh, Circe! You're right, he's... Oh, my gods! He's manipulating me. He's already decided, hasn't he? He's decided that I'm an acceptable loss." As the last illusion of her childhood was stripped away, Hermione buried her unmarred face in her hands and sobbed.

Snape watched her cry, wanting to offer comfort, not having the first idea how, and furious at having been the messenger of this particular bit of information.

Her bitter voice broke his self-recriminations. "That's why he didn't let Madam Pomfrey heal me properly. I wondered why. She said it would take weeks of therapy for it to heal. But he said there wasn't time, that it would deal a blow to Voldemort if I appeared to be unscathed when I returned to school." In a spectacular display of her intuition, Snape followed her logic, until she came to the inevitable conclusion. "That bloody bastard! That's why it took him a week to decide that I could go home for the break. That's why there were only wards on the house and no Aurors like at Christmas. He'd already set things in motion since I'd argued with him about seeing my parents and wasn't willing to let him make my decisions for me. Hadn't he?"

Hermione rose to her feet, a little unsteady but turned to face Snape. He felt a bubble of pride in the quickness of her mind and the stark courage it took her to voice her suspicions and recognize them for the truth. He wished, fiercely, that he'd been as savvy when he'd been her age. It appeared that her adventures with Potter and Weasley had been of some value. "So it would seem."

"Do you know what his *alternate arrangements* for me are? Or am I to be cast out of the gates on my bum come graduation?" She answered her own question, her hands clenched at her sides, her voice twisted with anger and bitterness. "No. *He* wouldn't do that, would he? It would reflect badly on him and Harry would never forgive him. No, it has to appear that I'm going to be protected, so that when I'm killed, Harry will be assured of the Headmaster's best efforts to keep me safe. Harry will be shackled even more tightly then..." Her hand flew to her mouth, and her quick intake of breath indicated that she'd just had an epiphany. "Ron! What about Ron?"

"I would imagine that Mr. Weasley is quite safe. His family is tied to the Order and if I am not mistaken, Dumbledore intends to give Miss Weasley every opportunity to 'land' Mr. Potter's affections." Snape marveled at the intricacy of the Headmaster's manipulations and the young witch's quick grasp of the situation and her certain fate.

"That makes sense. The Weasleys are pureblooded, and fairly well connected. Bill's at Gringott's, and Percy and Mr. Weasley are at the Ministry. They're too well-known for them to be discarded... like... like me. And Ginny wouldn't even realize that she's being manipulated. She's loved Harry a long time and would do anything to 'land him,' as you put it. If I'm dead, there will be ample opportunity for her to comfort Harry, won't there?"

Snape said nothing, but dipped his head in acquiescence.

"If I'm dead, Harry will have more reason to fight on Dumbledore's side, won't he?"

Again Snape bowed his head, proud of her ability to speak so easily of her own death. Hermione Granger was a witch to be counted, and he was angered anew that Dumbledore would so easily dispose of her. It served to remind him that Dumbledore had also taken steps to leave him to Voldemort's mercies. He began to pace in a counter-measure to her quick steps.

Snape could see that the old wizard had obviously calculated that Hermione's death would more firmly tie Potter to the Weasley family and the fate Dumbledore believed in. There was nothing really to say. There were no words of comfort to be offered to one who'd just had their suspicions confirmed about how worthless their life was to those she had trusted. Instead Snape, as their paths met, offered Hermione her wand. She accepted it from him, her slender fingertips grazing his palm as she wrapped her hand around the familiar length of magically imbued wood.

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry that I doubted you." She swallowed a few times, striving for calm. "It seems that we have more in common than I ever suspected. If you would be so kind as to let me have a few minutes of privacy, I will be going."

Snape noticed that her eyes glittered with unshed tears. He didn't blame her really, he felt as dry as the dust in the chamber and ready to be swept casually into the wind. "I will see you to your common room, Miss Granger."

"No, sir. I would like a few moments here. Please."

He didn't understand and stepped closer to her, letting the differences in their heights intimidate her into consenting to his escort from the chamber. Snape's patience was at its lowest ebb. He'd discovered that his bastion of security had crumbled under the weight of destiny, leaving him exposed, and he'd bared his soul to an eighteen-year-old witch from whom he had struggled to remain unaffected. He'd been powerfully drawn to her over the years. Never as unattractive as he'd been as a child, she had nevertheless been ostracized by her peers and been the recipient of prejudice, hatred and jealousy for her entire school career. Her friends were few—three or four—and she strongly reminded him of himself.

"Come along, it is late." He badly needed some distance and some privacy to assimilate all that he'd learned and to find some understanding as to why Dumbledore had evidently decided to give him up. He no longer thought to beard the old wizard in his den; instead, the spy's thoughts were entirely centered upon the slender thread of his own longevity and the imminently terminal future Hermione had to look forward to.

"Please, Professor. I promise I won't ever come back, but I've never really seen what Malfoy did to me... you interrupted me before I had a chance to really look, and I have to know. The last time I saw any part of my body without the glamour, I was sliced open and spilling my blood onto the carpet of my parents' bedroom. Please let me see what it looks like. I can only feel it." Her voice dropped to a whisper, a supplication. "Please."

He relented even as he mentally castigated himself for his susceptibility, and he took her elbow, the first time he'd ever touched her physically, to lead her to the Mirror of Disenchantment.

Severus Snape, Potions Master of Hogwarts, Death Eater and spy stood behind the young witch who was at once his soon-to-graduate student as well as a witch holding an undefined place in his life, and raked his eyes across her disenchanted features in the gilt-framed mirror.

Hermione's jaw was clenched, the muscles rippling beneath her skin, smooth on one side, puckered on the other. Her lower lip trembled as she angled her head to stare fixedly at her mirrored image. She pulled her wild hair atop her head as her eyes traced the ropy, angry red scar that began at the hairline behind her right ear and slashed across her tendon, her jaw, her throat, and down her chest to disappear into the collar of the cardigan she wore. Oddly, the thick, ridged scar tissue contrasted with the pale pink of the buttons on the fuchsia sweater.

Snape could finally see how much damage had been wrought as a result of Voldemort's murder of her parents and Malfoy's assault. There were bruised smudges under her reddened eyes, and tears threatened to spill onto her recently hollowed cheeks. Unwilling to admit it, her tears distressed him, leaching their way through the cracks in the shielding around his heart. Most people considered him reserved, even sullen. But he'd found it safest to remain aloof from personal interactions, and those few to whom he was most susceptible, he kept at an even greater distance. He'd been keeping his nascent feelings for Hermione Granger as *Silencio'd* as possible. The dark-haired wizard took a step back from her, as if physical separation could repair the breach that the night's revelations had caused.

Unaware of his withdrawal, Hermione's lips thinned, stilling the quivering of her chin. She didn't look at him. Indeed, she seemed entirely unaware of his presence. Instead, Hermione stepped closer to the mirror, her attention entirely on the barely healed scar bisecting her torso.

The slight physical distance hadn't worked. As Snape followed the path of her scar in the mirror, his eyes were opaque and his rising fury at Dumbledore rivaled his hatred

for Lucius Malfoy which had matured abruptly into a visceral, living entity. He began to think of ways to seek retribution for the casual cruelty the Malfoy patriarch had wrought on Hermione, when her whisper assailed his ears.

"...never... no one will ever want me now... bushy-haired... beaver-toothed... Even if I survive, who would want this?"

The agony in her words matched the pain in his heart and the derisive, taunting voices of his youth. He knew, better than any, just how it felt to be unwanted... reviled... ridiculed. Stepping up behind her, within touching distance of the mirror, the raven-haired wizard unbuttoned the top buttons on his frock coat, his fingers moving with practiced ease to the flash of linen underneath, revealing the porcelain skin of his neck.

His movements drew her eyes to his, and then to the whiteness of his hands as they bared his skin.

"Look," he husked, directing her attention to the shiny, stretched length of scar tissue that lay nestled in the hollow of his throat. Hermione's eyes flew wide and she watched in the mirror as he traced the scar on his skin. The hawk-faced Potions master knew that the mirror dispelled any attempt at concealment, and it would be obvious to Hermione that he wasn't casting an illusion to ease her distress.

"Oh, Professor... I'm so sorry that you've been hurt. But you don't understand, it's not the same. Your scar is so small, and so white. Not that I don't appreciate the kindness, but look at this..." Hermione trailed one finger along the thick ridge of her scar tissue... two... three... five inches in length... right to the edge of her sweater. Her voice was tight, "This isn't where it ends either." She unbuttoned the first two buttons on her cardigan, revealing a wider cut, where the skin had been folded over itself in order to close the gaping wound. "Who would want to look at this? To feel this?"

The folded vee of her slightly unbuttoned sweater revealed the rise of her breasts, and Snape's gaze lingered on the smooth expanse of skin and then the ridge of folded tissue which marred its beauty. His lips pursed in thought, and he ignored the tightening in his lower abdomen. He could easily extrapolate that the slicing hex Malfoy had used on her had come perilously close to, if it hadn't cut directly across, the nipple of her left breast. He wondered if she would be able to nurse her children, then grimaced at his unrealistic whimsy. She hadn't been intended to live.

Snape searched for a way to reassure her, musing at the unconventional methods he'd used thus far. He realized that he'd already exposed his most precious guarded secrets to this young woman who was in such precarious circumstances. What was one more confidence? "Miss Granger, I have more scars than I think you realize. Each of them has been earned fighting a war, just as yours has been. Your scar was honestly received. It should be honored and not vilified."

He was shocked to see her smile in the reflection.

"Professor, you're very naïve. It's different for women. We're not supposed to have dueling scars, it's 'too bloody masculine,'" she quoted.

The Potions master almost laughed as she called him naïve, and wondered who had been so cruel as to tell her that she was masculine, and, even more, he wanted to know who and how they'd seen this scar. She seemed to realize what he was thinking and answered his unasked query.

"I'm not talking about this scar, but the one from Dolohov's curse. You know, from the Department of Mysteries. It's long enough, but it's not half as bad." She moved her fingers to the hem of her cardigan and unhooked the bottom three buttons, prying the knitted panels apart, revealing her slender waist and the dip of her stomach to his increasingly interested eyes. Her satin skin was marred by the tail end of a thin, white, zigzagged curse scar. He could see that it continued up her chest, between the valley of her breasts, hidden from his sight. Her finger drew along the fine line, "If this scar caused... someone... to flinch, I can't imagine the reaction to *this*..." She pointed at Malfoy's handiwork.

He hadn't known the severity of her injuries from the Department of Mysteries, but Snape remembered that she'd had to take a series of potions to heal the damage of Dolohov's creativity for several months. However, she still had much to learn.

"I do not think you quite appreciate what I am referring to, Miss Granger. There is not a witch alive who would not be repelled by the scars I bear." His voice carried a curious sort of wistfulness that stronger witches than Hermione wouldn't have been able to withstand.

Hermione turned to face him, brushing back the unfettered curls that had fallen into her face. His eyes automatically followed the spill of her hair as it rebounded from the offense of her impatience. She didn't speak until his eyes returned to hers, and then Hermione whispered, "Show me."

With shaking fingers, Snape released the remaining jet buttons on his frock coat and deftly eased the mother of pearl buttons from the loops of his linen shirt. He was conscious of having crossed the line of propriety some time before, but consoled himself that, from the very moment that he'd discovered the depth of Dumbledore's machinations, he'd changed the entire course of his life, whatever future was left to him. The Potions master was thirty-eight-years old and hadn't had an honest, intimate relationship in his life. Scattered lovers, to be sure, but what was evolving between Hermione and him, while fraught with an awareness of one another, was far more intimate than the baring of skin for sexual release.

"Here." He shed his coat and shirt, dropping them to his feet, the white linen a dusting of pristine snow blanketing the mountain of black cloth rising from the stone floor. His chest was naked to her sight. Scars crisscrossed and snaked around his torso leaving his pale skin marked, puckered and disfigured. Some of his scars were old and faded while others were newer, raw in appearance. All had been excruciating.

Hermione's eyes flew to meet his and her fingers covered her mouth, "Oh, Professor. I never knew..." She whipped around to look at the mirror, her eyes rapidly shunting from scar-to-scar on the reflection of his body, ascertaining that all of the blemishes were real.

He swallowed hard. Poppy Pomfrey was the only person who'd seen so much of his skin in a number of years, and even the Matron flinched when she had to heal him.

Hermione's voice was low and thick with emotion, "How much you have suffered for us... for me." She took a deep, fortifying breath and her fingers loosened the final three buttons of her cardigan. She dropped the knitted garment to the floor. One of its arms fell across Snape's shirt, a pink slash across a white vista. The graphic parallel between the cloth and their bodies went unnoticed as her eyes sought his in the mirror. They were blazing with undefined and unspoken emotion.

Snape's breath left his lungs. He hadn't expected her to be as forthcoming obviously a sign of her Sorting -- and his eyes softened, dropping to trace the scar, even where the smooth contour of her brassiere was distended by the badly healed tissue that crossed her areola. He followed the raised, red skin down, below the swell of breast to her torso where the cut-line crossed her ribcage to disappear at her hip into the waistband of her denims. Just above the cup of her bra, the shiny slim trace of Dolohov's curse scar crossed the thick red ridge of Malfoy's *Diffindo*, leaving an 'x' on her skin, directly over her heart. "Miss Granger..." he choked out.

She turned to face him, her back, smooth and unblemished and clearly reflected in the mirror where her hair didn't interfere with his line of sight.

Her low voice stirred something in him, viscerally, emotionally. "So many scars. So much to bear. Such a burden to carry. I can't... how anyone could look at you and not see your sacrifice... not be moved by it."

Snape dropped his eyes to Hermione's unblemished chest, to her outstretched hand reaching for him. The glamour Dumbledore had cast was powerful. There was no discernable evidence of her injury, of the enduring souvenir she would have from Malfoy's attentions. Her words filtered through his brain, which was being overcome with the emotional purging of their conversation and her nearness. He responded, "In the same way that those who do not possess any true understanding have lessened you by their callous indifference to your suffering, to your bravery."

Her fingers lightly touched his chest, her dark eyes casting a glance through her lashes to see if he would prevent the intimacy. He was undone by the gentleness of her caress. Her fingers traced first one scar, the one at his throat, then another over his left pectoral... then another, until she'd traced all of the scars on his battered chest and abdomen. Her whisper brushed his ears.

"I don't have the words to tell you... I... I can't express what I'm feeling."

"Revulsion... pity... loathing..." His voice hurled the words at her, echoes from others who'd spurned him through the years.

"No! Never!" Laying her hand against his pectorals, between the flat discs of his nipples, her index finger rubbing the sparse black hair, she angled her face to look up at him. "Honor... respect. I'm humbled by your dedication and your sacrifice."

Snape raised his hands to her shoulders, his breath catching at the silken texture of her skin, and he spun her to look into the mirror once again. "No more than I feel for your honorably won scars.... You received these fighting for what you believed in... for those you love. There is no dishonor or revulsion in that."

"But I'm not... no one will ever see that... they'll just see...*this*..." With a deft twist of her fingers between her breasts, she released the catch of her bra and the wire-cupped material sprang open, to reveal Hermione's naked breasts to her Professor's gaze. Instead of touching her skin, Hermione was tracing the line of scar on the mirror, across her nipple, which was puckered and misshapen by the thick scar tissue. "What wizard... what man... would want to touch me now... ever?"

In what he'd later decide was insanity, Snape stepped behind Hermione, his naked chest meeting the satin of her back, and he wrapped an arm around her, encircling her torso. One long finger found the beginning of her scar, up in her hairline, and then began to gently feel the puckered, uneven tissue, the faint heat that remained two months after the initial healing process had taken place. He trailed his finger across the tendon in her neck, and down her throat, between her collarbones, and up the gentle swell of her breast. His finger dipped to one side and the other, the ridge wasn't smooth, but he traced it, even as he watched her un-glamourized expression in the mirror. She was mesmerized, her eyes fastened on his movements.

His finger stopped at the peak of her breast, and then one finger was joined by a second, and then a third, until her entire breast was cupped in his hand. The puckered scar tissue almost tickled his sensitive palm, and his voice was deep and gravelly in her ear. "I would... Hermione."

Their eyes met in the mirror and with a sudden shift in awareness and unable to hide their true feelings in this mirror, much more than simple trust, understanding and perhaps desire was revealed to each other. Vulnerability, loneliness, fear, the betrayal of those they'd trusted, and the inevitable understanding that neither had a future to look forward to was painfully clear to each. The Manticore had been released and they had been thrown wandless into its forest.

Hermione spun in his arms, her hands snaking around his body to pull him to her. Her breasts pressed against his chest. She was shaking, and so was the hand that Snape raised to stroke her hair. He tucked her head under his chin, and together, they stood in one another's arms for a very long time.

Finally, she broke the quietude of their unusual embrace. "What are we going to do?"

Snape had been thinking feverishly while he'd held her. He'd made a decision. It was a leap of faith and not something he'd had much luck with before now, but he was not going to let her thread be cut in the tapestry of Dumbledore's weaving. "Will you trust me?"

She didn't hesitate for a second. "Yes."

His heart expanded with her answer, the leap hadn't yet been into a bottomless chasm. Snape's long-fingered hand smoothed over her back and he mused aloud. "There is a week left of the term. I will make some private arrangements. Will you let me be your Secret Keeper?"

"Do you mean it?" Her head tilted and her eyes met his, unwavering, undaunted by what seemed to have sprouted and grown between them. She was still young to trust so easily, but a tiny voice in his mind reminded him that he had proven himself trustworthy to her.

"Yes. I will set some things in motion to keep you safe."

"I have my... my inheritance. It's all been deposited into my Gringott's vault. I'll give you access. Use whatever you need."

He sucked in his breath at the degree of trust she was showing. For some odd reason, the fact that she was giving him access to her bank vault was more significant than the fact that she trusted him with her life. Perhaps it was because she'd trusted him with her life before. He bent his head to press his lips to her forehead. "Thank you, Hermione. I will not use much and it will ensure your safety..."

"And yours. You must stay safe, too, Professor..." she blushed, and Snape cocked an eyebrow. "S...Severus."

His heart was beating like a Snitch in flight, and his throat was tight. What had he done? He'd taken that first, irrevocable step away from the path Dumbledore had charted for him. But something about this encounter resonated deep within his soul, and the expression in her eyes was verification that he'd made the right decision... perhaps the last one he'd ever make. "If you wish."

"I do."

They remained locked in each other's arms for another long embrace, and then, reluctantly, they parted. Hermione's hand cupped his cheek, "Thank you."

He leaned into her hand, "And you."

After a long moment, Snape straightened up. His life... their lives... had just become exponentially more complicated and he only had one week within which to prepare for her security while maintaining his façade of indifference. He'd been a spy for eighteen years. He could do it. But could she? Then he realized that in this one instance, Dumbledore had aided his pawns. The glamour the old Machiavellian had cast on Hermione would work in their favor. She could be a nervous, twitching wreck and no one could tell.

~o0o~

Kings, Knights and Bishops

Chapter 3 of 7

In which some time passes, graduations comes to Hogwarts and Snape makes plans.

Guard... Check... Mate

By Bambu

~o0o~

Chapter Three: Kings, Knights and Bishops

The Great Hall was decorated in a clash of house colors, red, blue, yellow and green, with silver and gold accents, and the domed ceiling had been charmed to reflect that most halcyon of days, sky blue with clouds of cotton fluff. The house tables had been banished and in their place were small, round tables, appropriately draped with colored linens. The Headmaster was in his most convivial mood... Harry Potter was graduating.

The seventh-year students were seated according to House, awaiting the awarding of their Wizarding Certificates. The high table had likewise been removed, and the faculty was seated upon imposing, ornately carved wooden chairs, reminiscent of earlier years and earlier ceremonies. As if ordered the sun shone in radiant shafts of light through the high windows nestled in the ancient wall behind the faculty dais, and the air sparkled with anticipation... both giddy and apprehensive.

In age-old tradition, the Heads of each of Hogwarts' four houses summoned their candidates, one-by-one, to the elevated stage whereupon they would announce the student's individual accomplishments and present them to the faculty. Each graduate would make their way to the Headmaster, shaking the hands of each member of the faculty as they traversed the dais. Finally, Dumbledore, in all his grandstanding glory, awarded the witch or wizard with their Certificate and, in the manner of a benevolent despot, would present the new graduate to their peers.

Snape sat at one end of the dais, immediately adjacent to the Headmaster. The hall was saturated with effusive good humor, and he thought that the ceremony had already taken two hours too long, prolonged by the extolling of -- for the most part -- superficial accomplishments of young adults who exhibited the mental capacities of a Billwig during the mating season. He'd handled his graduates with typical Slytherin dispatch and diplomacy, and had suffered through the intermediate two houses, while waiting anxiously for the opportunity to put his plans into action. Gryffindor was the last House to present its candidates, giving the pride of place to the young Savior as the final graduate of the day. Snape was tense, but couldn't allow it to be seen, and he assumed an air of studied indifference, ignoring Minerva's clipped delivery while she extolled Lavender Brown's prowess in Divination.

As his elder colleague droned on in her clipped Scottish brogue, he let his eyes rove across the seated students. He noted that Daphne Greengrass had assumed her rightful place next to Draco, her left hand carefully placed on the table to collect and reflect the sparkle of sunlight. The ostentatious emerald engagement ring which now graced her ring finger proclaimed her possession by the Malfoy heir for all to see. Draco preened in the attention of his housemates' envy. Daphne was an ideal choice for his wife, even if the blond hadn't planned to settle quite so quickly. Snape further noticed that Crabbe and Goyle were deployed just beyond the happy couple, their guard-dog duty a reflection of their future.

Beyond the Slytherin table, he observed the Ravenclaws, polite but bored as they listened to McGonagall finish her speech. They'd been the second of the Houses to receive their Certificates and Awards. His eyes paused for a moment on Terry Boot, the strapping, highly intelligent Ravenclaw. Snape had recommended that Dumbledore talk to the young wizard about honing his skills in a direction that might benefit the Order. Dumbledore had beamed at him, as if he was a prize pupil, and Snape had wondered if he had just led Terry to his eventual death. It was an extremely uncomfortable idea, and Snape, once again, had found himself questioning his own loyalty to the elder wizard. It was a concept he'd contemplated at length in the past extremely hectic week. Snape had concluded that the Headmaster's ultimate goal still coincided with his own, and as long as he wasn't compromising Hermione's safety he would willingly bind himself to the older wizard's agenda.

He hadn't confronted Dumbledore about his discovery of the Headmaster's duplicity. It would have betrayed Hermione's confidence in him, and the gift of her trust still had the power to steal his breath. Although he hadn't spoken with Dumbledore directly about what he'd learned, Snape had given his most manipulative master ample opportunity -- leading the conversation titillatingly in the right direction more than once -- to divulge the information about her on numerous occasions in the past several days. He had been bitterly disappointed with each fruitless attempt, and had retreated each time to his chambers to brood, and solidify his plans for Hermione's protection. Since her revelation, the spy had been looking for the signs of Dumbledore's manipulation, and his surreptitious excursions had borne the sour fruit that his other attempts had not.

Seated next to the wizard whose strategy had determined his fate, Snape's stomach roiled and churned with the bitter taste of exploitation. The insidious question that had plagued him since he'd seen Hermione's reflection in the Mirror of Disenchantment was never far from his mind: how much necessary information had been withheld from him, and for how long had it been happening?

Among the advantages to decades of successful espionage was the recourse to subtle methods of gleaning information. One of the first things Snape had done after escorting Hermione to her rooms the previous week, despite the urge to panic or hex Dumbledore, had been to modify his version of the Marauders Map. He now knew who, when and how frequently the Headmaster had visitors to his office and his private chambers. Mad-Eye Moody was there daily, and on two occasions Remus Lupin had snuck into the castle in the middle of the night. It wasn't unusual for Order members to have individual assignments; however, this had been the first time Snape had ever questioned Dumbledore's motives and whether they were just and honorable.

The acid taste of bile had almost choked Snape during the first Order of Phoenix meeting after he'd made the decision to shelter Hermione, when he'd listened to Dumbledore and Moody confirming their plans to separate the witch from her support group after graduation. They'd claimed her safety as the guiding reason for the separation. Her parents had never been mentioned -- alive or dead. Snape had carefully scrutinized the faces of those witches and wizards seated around the dingy kitchen in Grimmauld Place, looking for any indication that someone else in the Order of the Phoenix thought Dumbledore's plan too callous. McGonagall's face had been pinched with concern and Molly Weasley had mumbled, "Keep her safe, Albus."

Snape had sneered, thankful that he could hide behind his reputation as surly and uncommunicative, as none protested... all too used to doing the old wizard's bidding, assuming that Dumbledore knew best. Snape had ignored his mental accusation that a month previously, he'd been one of the sheep sitting around the table staring at their shepherd... blindly, unquestioningly waiting for shearing or slaughter.

Ironically, Snape had found himself missing the mangy mongrel, Sirius Black, who had been known to loudly and passionately state his opinion on any occasion. Black would surely have fought for Hermione to remain in close proximity to Harry -- if only for Harry's peace of mind. But no demurrals had been forthcoming from other Order members, and so Snape had kept his own counsel, knowing the precarious position he was in, and recognizing just how easily he'd been placed in the acceptable loss column.

Snape's grim thoughts were truncated as Minerva McGonagall announced, "Professors, I give you Miss Lavender Brown." As one unit, the faculty rose, and the hall erupted into polite applause, intermittent bursts of greater enthusiasm than others. Then the newly graduated witch proceeded down the line, a newly minted copy of her mentor, shaking hands and murmuring pleasantries with her teachers. Sybil Trelawney wailed and clutched the graduating blonde to her chest. In each class, the bottle-lensed Divination instructor inspired one or two sycophants, and Lavender Brown had been one of the most vocal and passionate. Snape shuddered internally and his eyes passed the advancing witch to meet, briefly, the honeyed-brown eyes of Hermione Granger as she sat between her formidable bodyguards.

The visceral impact of meeting her eyes was unexpected and he shifted slightly, careful to give the appearance of flicking nonexistent lint from his robes. Yet still he assessed Hermione's appearance almost greedily, like a boy tasting his first Chocolate Frog. Her hair was sleek and contained in an intricate arrangement of braiding at the back of her head, her robes were pristine and not a single flicker of emotion crossed her face. Harry sat on one side of her, his hair still as unruly as it had been when he'd been twelve, except he'd grown into a slender, well-proportioned man, with serious and level green eyes. He and Harry would never like one another, but Snape admired the younger wizard's power and loyalty. Ron flanked Hermione on the opposite side, and his frame practically towered over hers. The redheaded wizard had grown taller than any of his brothers and he'd broadened into a competent, rangy athlete with an easy manner, although his temper flared at any potential threat to those he cared for.

Ignoring the spark of feeling that ignited in his chest when their eyes had met, the Head of Slytherin immediately looked beyond her glamorized, perfect face to the Hufflepuff table and Ernie Macmillan. In the past week, the young wizard had blushed every time he'd met Snape's eyes, and the Potions master despaired of the young wizard's survival if Dumbledore ever allowed him entry into the Order of the Phoenix. He was far too easily intimidated. Narrowing his eyes at the young man, Snape almost smiled when Macmillan startled in his seat, his eyes growing wide, their whites showing. A snort built in Snape's chest as he thought that Macmillan would have run from the Great Hall if they weren't at graduation.

His attention was brought back to the dais by the bejeweled and overly perfumed hand being thrust at him, and Snape automatically took Lavender's hand in a perfunctory shake, before she'd moved on to the Headmaster and the older wizard's genial well-wishes.

Subtly Snape snaked his hand into the pocket of his robes, and palmed the slender, parchment-wrapped key he'd carefully placed there before coming to the ceremony. As the faculty reseated themselves and the next Gryffindor was called, Snape carefully fingered the plain bow, sturdy shank, and intricately warded bit of the key to the cottage where Hermione would live in obscure safety. He'd added wards, layered unplottable charms and otherwise stocked the cottage for her residence during the past week. He had shelved his worries over his tenuous existence to focus on protecting Hermione, to giving her the chance he no longer believed he might have.

As far as Dumbledore and the castle had been concerned, the Head of Slytherin had been hiding in his chambers, sulking over his house's loss of the Inter-House Championship... to Ravenclaw. In a series of spectacularly juvenile displays of hormones and bluster, Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter, kept company by their red-headed and thick-necked sidekicks, had elected the final week before their graduation as the ideal time to determine which was the better, more powerful wizard.

Daphne Greengrass would be ever grateful to Harry for sending his blond nemesis to the infirmary for three days straight. It had given her ample opportunity to cement her place at Draco's side, and, in his weakened state, Draco had proposed to her. The morning after his release from the infirmary, Draco had joined his housemates at breakfast, and he'd visibly paled when the Malfoy eagle owl swooped into the Great Hall carrying a small, green velvet box. Malfoy had risen to the occasion, and his patrician tones carried to the high table even as he'd turned a little green. He'd been well-drilled in pomp and ceremony, and there, before the entire student body, Daphne Greengrass had irrevocably become the future Mrs. Draco Malfoy.

However, instead of sulking in his dungeons, instead of berating Albus Dumbledore or confiding in Minerva McGonagall -- who might have risen to the occasion to defend the cub of her house while destroying any collegial relationship she had with her employer -- Snape had been fighting his cynically tinted fatalism by very carefully preparing a small, rarely used cottage in Wales, near the small town of North Cornelli in the south. The weather was mild and the cottage had been owned by Perenelle Flamel before her marriage, four hundred years before. As Snape had investigated the small thatched cottage on the outskirts of the Muggle town, he'd marveled, as he did every year, at how tidy it had been kept since he'd last seen it, and the remarkable chain of events that had given him custody of the keys. Perenelle had kept the seven-room house after her marriage, using it on occasion for a change of scenery or a weekend getaway. Snape had been humbled by her generosity and was now immeasurably grateful for its existence. It had provided him with the ideal opportunity to secret Hermione away from the eyes of their world.

Snape had met the perennial Flamels when he'd been set to guard the Philosopher's Stone. He had begun a tentative friendship with the elder couple, conducted entirely by owl-post, but it proved remarkably rewarding nonetheless. They'd lived for such a long time that nothing shocked them, and they were understanding and compassionate. Had they lived, Snape thought he might have had one or two more people he could turn to during a time of need, and perhaps Dumbledore might have had another long-sighted mind to rely upon one which could temper his more callous strategies.

With sharp regret for lost opportunities, Snape remembered how he'd come into possession of the key, and title to the cottage. After Perenelle and Nicholas had drunk the final doses of the Elixir of Life, the couple had set their affairs in order and had peacefully died a short few weeks later. Their extreme age had hastened the process. Snape had received the key in the last letter he'd received from Perenelle, delivered the day of her death. He'd opened it in his office, as was his custom, and the ornate key had tumbled into his hands. There had been a flash of bright blue light and the metal had heated in his palm. Perenelle's letter had been a farewell and had bequeathed the cottage to him, *"...for times of rejuvenation, recuperation and solace... it has been my escape from the world for the better part of four centuries. I trust, my young friend, that you will avail yourself of this gift when you most need it. Until we meet again, I remain, affectionately yours...."*

It had been one of the few times in Snape's life that he'd cried. And he'd silently thanked her and had taken her advice. For one week each summer, Snape had occupied the cottage. It was unplottable, and highly warded. Over the centuries, Perenelle had layered protections on the cozy dwelling and walled garden such that it was impregnable. The only way in was with the key, or being escorted by the rightful owner. It didn't make for many guests, he'd never had any, but that wasn't the cottage's purpose. He had planned to retire to his small home, and none knew of its existence aside from him and the solicitor, who was bound to silence by magic. Snape had never before shared his hideaway with anyone.

Again and again the necessities of his position pulled him from his chair, and the Potions master rose, shaking hands with a continuing procession of Gryffindors. The only one who drew him from his reverie was Neville Longbottom, whose grip was clammy and his hand was trembling. Snape was kinder than he'd meant to be, merely saying the young wizard's name and curtly nodding his head, and Longbottom had moved on to the Headmaster with a huge grin on his face. He'd escaped his childhood nemesis with his dangly bits intact. His friends applauded him and Ron had pounded him on the back when he resumed his seat. Snape had given the young wizards a withering look for their frivolity.

The Potions master's responses on the dais were automatic, almost as if he was under an Imperius, so removed was he from the succession of Gryffindors crossing the stage. He was instead ruminating about how quickly he'd been able to discard the yoke of bondage and enter into the deception necessary to save Hermione. It had given him a purpose, a goal to achieve rather than focusing on the painful personal implications of Dumbledore's machinations. His need to protect her was overwhelming, as if by doing so, he was protecting the one living reminder of his own humanity. He firmly believed that it was his last and only opportunity to leave the world a better place than he'd found it.

He had no doubt that she was worth the sacrifice.

Snape remembered the clever manner in which Hermione had provided him with the information detailing the Headmaster's plans for her following graduation. She'd arrived in his office five days before, accompanied by her smothering layer of protection, Harry and Ron. He'd actually spared the young wizards a nod of acknowledgement, noticing their breadth and height, for they had proved to be staunchly protective of their dainty friend, and Snape had thought that Dumbledore had miscalculated in his handling of the young savior. As little as he liked the Potter spawn, Snape had to admit that the young wizard was powerful, stubborn and loyal. Ginny Weasley might catch her wizard, but Harry wouldn't easily, if ever, accept the loss of his know-it-all friend.

Hermione had entered his office with an air of hesitation, but he could tell from her steady hands that she wasn't afraid of him. Leaving his head bent, his lank hair curtaining his face, he had searched her features for any sign of her true feelings. He had been unable to detect anything other than her smooth, unaffected countenance. Keeping in line with appearances, he'd sneered at her, holding her gaze to make certain that she'd understood the stratagem. Her features revealed nothing other than polite interest, and he had been relieved and disappointed.

He kept his voice clipped, curt, ostensibly ignoring her red and black-haired ballast. "Miss Granger, to what do I owe the *honor* of your presence? Classes have ended. You are no longer my student. I can see no reason for you to be here."

"We... er... that is to say, I've come to return one of your books, Professor Snape. I hadn't realized that it was yours until I attempted to return it to the library. Please accept my apologies."

Snape had risen, thinking rapidly; none of the books from his private collection were missing. He'd charmed them all to keep track of their whereabouts. When they were borrowed or he left them somewhere other than his bookshelves, their location was printed on a scroll he kept on his desk. None were marked on the scroll, which had meant that she'd used one of her own books as a plausible ruse to see him and convey something. *Clever, clever witch.*

"Give it here, then, and ten points from Gryffindor for forgetting to return things in a timely fashion. I shall be happy to have your annoying habit of extra-curricular study out of my hands and out of this school."

She had placed the small, leather bound volume in his hands, and he'd felt a frisson of magic course up his arm. A recognition charm. She hadn't taken chances, and he had found it difficult to refrain from smiling at her skillful ploy. She would indeed have been an excellent spy. It was Dumbledore's loss that he'd decided she should be sacrificed.

"Yes, Sir. Goodbye, Professor."

"Get out, Miss Granger, and take Junior and Red with you." He hadn't been able to imbue the tone with vitriol, instead it had come out as a resigned sigh, and something personal had glimmered in her eyes. An odd twisting in Snape's gut had recognized it.

After the Gryffindor trio had departed, he'd warded his office and opened the book to discover that the pages were blank... until he touched them. He hadn't known what

charm she'd used, but he'd been impressed with the breadth of her tuition. He'd noticed that unusual fibers were meshed with the vellum of the book, and had hypothesized that she'd bound bleached Demiguise hair to the pages. For one so young, she had used her time in the wizarding world to great advantage, and had acquired a good deal of knowledge. She seemed to have that rare talent of suiting abstract information to practical application.

Still marveling at her ingenuity, Snape had gained the information he'd needed, his heart beating rapidly as he'd read her thanks and her appreciation for his help, especially given the precariousness of his own situation. As he'd read further, he'd been deeply touched by the underlying meaning of her words, the fact that she'd placed him in the rarified company of her closest friends, the boys she'd faced death with and would willingly give her life for. The universally reviled Potions master had sat in his office for hours after reading her notes and Dumbledore's plans, the once-again blank book held reverently in his hands.

Dumbledore's plans for the Dream Team were straightforward. He would escort them and Ginny Weasley to Grimmauld Place the morning after graduation. Dumbledore had told the threesome to be ready to depart the castle at eight o'clock, and Hermione had made it clear in her notes to Snape that Harry and Ron remained unaware of Dumbledore's plans to separate the three. Her only source of information had been Snape and she hadn't sought a secondary opinion. The Potions master's breath had caught when he'd read that sentence - the impact of just how very deeply she trusted him affected him profoundly.

She'd speculated that Harry and Ron would remain ignorant of the plan to separate her from them, if Dumbledore had his way, until after she'd been spirited away from their side. Her conclusion had been that whatever plans Snape had made would need to be implemented prior to her Dumbledore-scheduled departure from the school's grounds. Once beyond the security of Hogwarts, Hermione hadn't known where or when she would be separated from Harry and Ron. She hadn't wanted to reveal her suspicions by asking.

Finally, Hermione had informed Snape that she planned to tell Harry and Ron about her alternate plans - refraining from mentioning Snape's part and her injury - the night of graduation, when the seventh years would be celebrating. No one would think it odd that the trio wanted some private time to themselves. Hermione had decided to exploit the rumors that had circulated over the years about Harry, Ron and her, and she had been fostering the most salacious of those during the past several days. New gossip about the trio had begun to take the castle by storm, and the majority of the school believed that the three Gryffindors were going to celebrate their graduation in the most hedonistic of ways possible.

Snape had read her message carefully and smiled at her guile. He'd found the carefully concealed, additional page with her official authorization for him to use her Gringott's vault, a numbered vault only, as there were no names used at the Goblin bank, ensuring the privacy of its customers. He had added the details Hermione had written as if they were aconite being added to an extraordinarily complex Wolfsbane potion. Without the addition of that final ingredient, the potion would be rendered inert. However, adding the aconite of her detailed information, the elixir they were brewing would be potent. Snape had simply adjusted his timetable so that Hermione would depart before the Headmaster expected her and after she spoke with her friends.

During the intervening five days, between her delivery of the book and graduation, the Potions master had assiduously kept out of the Gryffindors' paths. Part of him had been disturbed by the salacious gossip which had reached even his ears. He ruthlessly crushed his reaction and focused on his goal, spiriting her away as if *Evanescio*. He'd also noticed that Hermione had been more physically affectionate with her two confederates, and she'd garnered suspicious and speculating looks from Ginny Weasley and Albus Dumbledore, neither of whom wanted their plans for the scar-headed wizard to go awry.

Snape's reminiscences ended as McGonagall called Hermione's name, and he watched the witch who'd placed her future in his hands ascend the steps to gracefully accept the accolades that were so rightfully hers. In some ways, he realized that his faith in her was as deeply embedded as hers in him. He trusted that she was worth jeopardizing his position and future for, knowing with some degree of certainty that there was no other human for whom he would have risked as much. That line of thought wouldn't bear much scrutiny, and he scowled as he listened to McGonagall list Hermione's achievements. Unlike so many of her peers, Hermione had earned each and every honor she was awarded.

This witch was well worth the risks he was taking. After dismissing her value for the past seven years, he made reparation by questioning, for the thousandth time in a week, how Dumbledore could have been so willing to consider her expendable. With a sudden clarity, he realized that the fact that Dumbledore had shown his ruthlessness in his willingness to sacrifice Hermione - the veracity of which he'd never doubted -- was the most significant reason he hadn't bearded Dumbledore in his ivory tower. It had been a fatal mistake on the old wizard's part. That, and his lack of faith in Snape.

Narrowing his glittering black eyes speculatively, Snape watched Hermione smile at her Head of House. She epitomized the ideal witch: dedicated, talented and creative. Her NEWT scores were the highest in three generations, and Snape hadn't realized that she'd earned additional honors in Transfiguration and Charms. Transfiguration was expected, McGonagall had fairly glowed about her student's prowess for years, but Charms was a surprise. Flitwick was a demanding and finicky taskmaster, and only worked with the most talented students. Snape had never heard about Hermione working privately with his diminutive colleague. His brow furrowed and his mouth twisted in a bitter line as he jealously watched Hermione shake the small Professor's hand and accept Flitwick's rather awkward hug.

A rumbling chuckle on his left distracted him, and Dumbledore spoke quietly. "You only have to shake hands with Miss Granger, Severus. After today, she will no longer be your concern, and you need not acknowledge her in the future, if you do not wish to."

Carefully masking his triumph at having successfully duped Dumbledore, years of espionage had bred valuable skills, Snape, replied, "It is not her hand that bothers me, Headmaster. It is the one following her for which I wish to use disinfectant."

Dumbledore glanced at him admonishingly, his lips pursed in disapproval. "Severus... Harry is not... well, I shan't be able to convince you, so just be polite."

Snape nodded, and prepared to greet Hermione, key in hand. She reached him, her hand extended. He quickly wrapped his fingers around her outstretched hand and pressed the key into her small palm. Her face, her perfectly glamorized face, betrayed no hint of astonishment even though he felt her muscles stiffen through their physical connection. He held her hand until he felt her take control of the parchment-wrapped metal, and then inclined his head. "Miss Granger."

He released his hold immediately, and she spoke to give herself time to put her hand in her robes, looking for all the audience to see as if she were wiping her hand inside her pocket. As subterfuge, it was brilliant. None would realize that she had accepted something from him. None would fault her wanting to wipe the greasy git's touch from her body. None would question their mutual dislike... he'd been cruel and unfair to her for seven years, and none would know that there was so much more to their interaction than met the eye.

Hermione tilted her chin, her bland features belying her emotional reaction. "Professor Snape, I'd like to thank you for your interesting classes. They were most informative. Good-bye, sir."

Completely in character, he didn't even acknowledge her final words, looking over her shoulder to his Slytherins as Hermione passed on to Dumbledore and endured the elder wizard's hug and the applause of the other students. Silently he applauded her ability to dissemble in front of the wizard who'd relegated her to the status of prey. She gracefully took her leave of Dumbledore, not a hair out of place, nor a grimace to be seen. If there was a danger to Hermione now, the students... no... graduates of Snape's House were its source, and while he took his seat in unison with the rest of the faculty, Snape noticed the lewd manner that Greg Goyle eyed the young witch. Snape's hand clenched in a fist on his lap, and no one thought it was anything other than the fact that he was going to have to shake Potter's hand.

He watched Goyle's piggy little eyes follow Hermione back to her seat and a strong desire to curse the bulky wizard took root in his brain. Considering what Snape knew of Goyle's sexual proclivities and that he was going to pledge to the Death Eaters within the week, it was providential that Hermione would be securely beyond the massive wizard's reach. Goyle's father had never been able to refrain from sampling his Muggle victims.

And then, Snape rose for the final student of the year, watching as each faculty member greeted Potter as if he were their own. It was almost sickening the fawning that Hagrid dispensed, the half-giant almost knocking the smaller wizard to his knees with his gruff affection.

When Potter approached him, they touched for the briefest amount of time possible and still call what they'd done a handshake, and then Dumbledore had embraced his young hero in a show of favoritism that none could mistake. Snape's lips thinned and he flicked his eyes to Hermione's seat, only to be startled when he realized that she was looking directly at him, and not watching Potter as he'd assumed.

It wasn't a long look, but it was meaningful, and Snape's breath hitched in his lungs. For once in his life, he had absolutely no doubt that he had chosen the right path. All that remained was for her to use the Portkey at midnight and he would be assured of her safety. He wouldn't know until the morning, but he could wait. He had learned how to be patient over the years, even if it was sometimes difficult.

The ceremonial aspect of graduation was complete and it was time to mingle. It was Snape's least favorite part of the festivities, but he spoke quietly with each of his Slytherins and several of the Ravenclaws. He ignored the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs, with the exception of noting that Hermione kept within three feet of either Potter or Weasley as if she was tied to them. He clenched his jaw when he saw her touch Potter's arm and Potter threw his arm casually around her shoulders.

After a sufficient time had passed, he could make his escape, relieved that Hooch, Vector and Sinistra had already left. As Head of House, his duties were more onerous, and as he made his way toward the double doors, he saw that Hagrid was surrounded by his favorite students, a huge tear tracking down his cheek which Hermione brushed away with great affection.

Suddenly, fiercely, Snape thought that if he was able to save just one who deserved a better life... or a life at all... then his years of sacrifice and misery would be worth it. His personal salvation seemed to have been embodied in the slender frame of a curly-haired witch of eighteen.

He was just in time to hear Dumbledore reach the small cluster of friends and remind Harry, Ron and Hermione to meet him in the entrance hall at eight o'clock the next morning, and to bring Miss Weasley as well. Snape pushed open the massive door, the influx of light casting his shadow into the Great Hall, a slicing, dark finger pointing across the stone floor toward the honeyed-lashed Gryffindor lioness he had sworn to protect. His black robes flared as he strode from the room. Dumbledore's voice could be heard admonishing Hermione to pack all her books, and he smirked to himself... by eight o'clock the next morning Hermione would already be gone.

~o0o~

Dear Hermione:

I wish I could say that I write this from an unknown location like you'll been doing... but I can't because you know exactly where they're keeping me and Ron. Where are you? No. Don't tell me.

Me either, although it's rather small of you keep it from us, 'Mione!

Ignore that... Ron's peeking over my shoulder as I write to you.

I don't want to know where you are... all that matters is that you're safe. I understand why you left, even if I don't like it. You know I would never reveal your hideaway...

Prat! As if I would! Not even if I was under Crucio from, well, you know who.

Anyway, Hermione, I'm we're (see, Ron, I'm including you) -- very glad that you're safe, and it's probably for the best that no one knows where you are except your Secret Keeper... whoever that is. I've never seen Dumbledore so angry as when he realized that you were gone. He roused all the faculty members to search for you, even Snape who looked like he didn't want to emerge from the bat cave to join the light of day. I know, I know. He's a teacher and deserves respect, but he's not our teacher any longer, and I don't have to automatically respect him. Actually he's not half bad now that I don't have to take classes from him...

Yeah, right... he's still a git!

*We've been waiting for the past three weeks for a letter from you, and then I realized that you don't have an owl, just Crookshank. **Manky ol' kneazle!** So I'm sending Hedwig to you with our letter and she'll wait for a return. I know we discussed the whole purpose behind separating you from us. I still don't like it, but I understand.*

I don't want to lose you, and I don't want you to lose anything more by being friends with me. We promised not to mention your parents again, but you're not here to hex me, so I'll say that I'm sorry about your Mum and Dad and I wish I could've done something to stop what happened. {a smudge of ink blurred and squiggled across the parchment} Ron just smacked me and told me not to be a 'tossler' for feeling guilty. You trained him a little too well, Hermione, he sounded just like you!

Did not!

You should have seen Dumbledore's face when he realized that he couldn't be blamed for your death if it happened because you'd 'elected to take matters into your own hands.' I've learned to read him in the last couple of years. Occlumency lessons taught me something, even if it happened because I was staring at him for two hours a night, three days a week for a year. But I can read Dumbledore as well as anyone... I think McGonagall and Snape can read him as well, because McGonagall shrieked at him when he said that he could no longer be counted on to protect you and Snape just smirked and returned to the dungeons.

*To give the old man credit, he spoke with such emotion it was almost convincing. But you know what I think about him after Sirius' death. And he hasn't mentioned you since. Remember that old Muggle phrase, 'out of sight, out of mind.' I think he's hoping that we'll forget about you since you're not here. **Not bloody likely!***

He's still the best hope we have I have of seeing the other side of this mess alive. Even with his plans. I won't go into details in case someone reads this, but I almost wish you had room in your safe house for Ron and Me. I've always done better with you at my side, even if you weren't always there at the end. You've always done everything you could to prepare me for any eventuality. I wish I had the benefit of your 'books and cleverness' now.

What Harry's trying to say is that we miss you, 'Mione. And we can't wait for this stupid war to be over. We're going barmy cooped up in this house, just waiting.

Yes, Ron's staying put... no, I'm not letting Ron wander the streets alone. Apparently, we're waiting for some sort of sign before we go on the offensive. I can't wait. Ron's right. I hate waiting.

Anyway, let us know how you are and if you need anything. We worry about you, and we'll meet again after everything is over... one way or another.

Oh, Ginny sends her best. She's been really great these past few weeks, and she even managed to get the portrait of Mrs. Black to shut it. I could have kissed her for it.

Eeeew! That's my sister you're blathering on about, Harry! Hermione, let us know if you want us to come get you and we will... any time.

Hedwig's waiting to deliver this, she really learned how to make her way around wards and unplottables when she delivered to Sirius, I'm sure she'll find you this time.

Take care of yourself, Hermione. It means a lot to me to know that you're safe.

Harry and

Ron... I'm not going to write you a letter because Harry pretty much said it all.

Snape eyed the half-crumpled piece of parchment lying on the small writing table at which the wizarding world's hope for the future had fallen asleep. His lip curled as he finished reading the boys' letter to Hermione. When Hedwig had returned to Grimmauld Place with the letter undelivered, days after she'd been sent, Harry had retreated to the library and warded the door behind him. It had been thirty-six hours before he'd opened the door to let a red-eyed Ron enter.

No one else had crossed the threshold of the room until Snape had broken the wards early this morning following the emergency meeting of the Order of the Phoenix held in the kitchen, at which Dumbledore had announced his opinion that Hermione was beyond their assistance. Snape's heart had contracted painfully at the old wizard's initial pronouncement, but as the details had been introduced, his roiling emotions had settled. During the three weeks since the school year had ended, Snape had remained at his masters' beck-and-call, layering his deception with plausible visibility. He'd wanted to Apparate to the cottage to assure himself that Hermione was in residence, but had known better. Skillful deception required patience, a virtue that he had learned painfully over the years of dual-service to demanding task masters.

Following the Order meeting, at which Molly Weasley had broken into hysterics and Minerva McGonagall had looked every second of her eighty-odd years, Snape had left the house in his customary manner. He'd returned three hours later, in the still, cool hours of early morning. No one had been awake, including the balled-up form of Ginny Weasley, propped up outside the library door. She'd sat vigil for her brother and the boy she loved. A sneer had crossed Snape's features. He'd seen the leap in her eyes when she'd first heard Dumbledore's announcement. Instinctively, she'd realized this would be her best chance at capturing Potter's attentions, when his heart was breaking over the supposed loss of his best friend.

Efficiently and quietly Snape had broken the *Colloportus* on the door and crept past the sleeping young witch, entering the library warily. Ron had been snoring loudly on the couch. His eyes had been puffy with grief and Snape had known that the sounds he'd been making were due to congested nasal passages.

Silently, Snape had crossed the library to the small desk and had carefully removed the letter from the clutching grasp of the young messy-haired wizard he'd alternately loathed and tolerated for the better part of seven years. He'd thought that Dumbledore had coddled James Potter's son, but since his life-altering epiphany where Hermione was concerned, he had gleaned bits of information that had painted a very different picture of this very powerful, albeit young, wizard.

His gut had twisted while he read the letter. Each expression of affection had felt as if Bubotuber pus had been sprayed directly on his heart. He'd never, in all his life, experienced the type of friendship that the Dream Team had. Snape had been envious and a little jealous that his own relationship with Hermione, which was in such a state of flux, was so new, so untried that it didn't yield such familiarity. He hadn't allowed himself to hope for a chance to build on the foundation of those incredibly intimate moments he and Hermione had experienced in the dungeon.

Survival had been his focus for the past three weeks, and he'd lived off adrenaline, fear and the Dark Lord's orders to locate Harry Potter. His thread of sanity had been the idealized image of Hermione safely ensconced in his Welsh cottage. It was an image he'd clung to in the face of his masters' discontent... each of whom had expressed their displeasure at their lack of cogent information. Dumbledore had initially been furious that Hermione had evaded his plans, but had accepted her assumed fate with a faux remorse that hadn't fooled Snape, nor would it fool the young heroes when they emerged from their mourning. Voldemort had been incandescent with fury that Potter had departed the school by Portkey and gone directly into hiding. That night, Snape had truly thought his time on the planet had ended. He'd returned to Hogwarts -- staggering, twitching, bleeding -- suffering the aftereffects of several maliciously applied curses. It was indeed magic that Snape had retained his ability to think after the *loving* application of incentive.

A shifting log in the dying fire snapped his attention back to the present, and Snape glanced around the stuffy room, the half-filled book cases, the old and faded furniture and the threadbare carpet. He realized that there wasn't a thing out of place. Nor was there evidence of the mayhem he'd expected to find as a manifestation of Harry's suffering. This was not the behavior of the boy who had raged at his friends and threw tantrums after the events of the Triwizard Tournament. This was not the behavior of the boy who'd withdrawn into icy disdain and verbally expressed loathing when his godfather had fallen beyond the veil in the Department of Mysteries. This was a different wizard, an adult wizard, and Snape thought he needed to revise his assessment of Harry. A tendril of thought began to unfurl in his brain. Perhaps Hermione's faith in her friend wasn't misguided as her faith in Dumbledore had been.

After several minutes, Snape was still standing over the desk looking at the wrinkled letter. He needed to make a decision whether to let Harry know that she was alive, which would give away his part in her safety, or allow Harry to wallow in grief and possibly have his stable ground crumble further.

Snape concluded that he couldn't make a unilateral decision. He would have to ask Hermione what she wished. It was her secret after all, even though he knew that she trusted him to protect her. He determined to copy the letter, deliver it to Hermione and then let her make the choice.

Gently, Snape smoothed the crumpled parchment on the desk, lying next to Harry's clenched fist, and he pulled a piece of fresh foolscap from the stack kept for writing purposes. Laying the blank paper atop the original letter, Snape placed his wand in the center of the parchment and intoned, very quietly, "*Replicato*." Instantly the blank sheet was covered with an identical copy of the letter written by Harry and Ron.

At the same moment Snape reached for the parchment, Harry's hand wrapped around his wrist, as triumphantly as if he'd just caught a struggling Golden Snitch. Shocked by his carelessness, Snape flicked his eyes at Harry. The hard glint of emerald in the firelight told him that Harry could indeed be as dangerous as the Dark Lord dreaded, and twining with the spike of alarm in his intestines was a hint of smug satisfaction that just perhaps the Dark Lord was right to fear this young man.

Grimly, Snape realized that the wizard who gripped his wrist was one who'd been carefully groomed over the years by neglect, abuse, terror and the loss of loved ones in order to be formed into a lethal instrument capable of meeting Voldemort on equal footing. Seeing the implacable strength of purpose behind Lily Evans' eyes in this young man's face was unnerving, and there was no doubt in Snape's mind that when Harry Potter faced Tom Riddle in battle and cast the *Avada Kedavra*, he would **mean** it.

"What are you doing, Snape?" Harry growled. His voice was hoarse from the crying he'd done for the past two days.

The quiet question roused Ron who was on his feet, wand in hand, as soon as he saw the confrontation across the room. Snape snarled at his own negligence. He'd grown soft over one Gryffindor and look where it had gotten him... placating the Boy Who Lived and his Sidekick.

He was in a position to ease their certainty of Hermione's death. He found himself internally debating his options, and then realized that if he withheld the information adding a layer of protection over Hermione he would be following in his masters' footsteps. Both wizards, Dark and Light, would have used the information to benefit their causes. It would have been so easy to do, like breathing. But Snape was ambivalent. He looked between the two men, at their grief-ravaged faces, and was uncharacteristically moved by sympathy for these two who'd loved Hermione for far longer than he. The jolt in his psyche as the depths of his feelings for the young witch spiked through his brain was staggering, and demanded his attention... Was it true? Was it possible?

Harry's free hand clenched in a fist and he rose from his chair, the embers from the fire reflecting a red glow off his glasses. Ron shifted on the opposite side of the library. Unspoken tension writhed in the air between the three and communicated itself clearly in Harry's tight grasp around Snape's wrist.

The current predicament took precedence over Snape's flight of fancy. He couldn't afford for either of these two to spread the news that he knew where Hermione was. Thinking rapidly, not wanting to travel down either of the two paths he loathed with passion and which had damaged him so irrevocably, he tamped down the desire to wrench his arm from Harry's grasp, and neutrally asked, "Will you trust me, Potter?"

Ron's snort of incredulity drew Snape's attention for a moment, but the threat from that quarter was negligible unless Harry decided otherwise. At least years of training had hammered some form of control into the often-impetuous, headstrong Weasley.

"Why?" Harry asked, and Snape met his intense stare with one of his own. To his surprise their eyes were at a level. This was an adult wizard that Snape was facing.

"I am not at liberty to say." Snape would give them no more information, indeed he could not. Besides he'd said more than enough. His statement would have been an open declaration to someone like Lucius Malfoy or Albus Dumbledore, but these Gryffindors were blunt to the point of being painfully obvious, and were unseasoned in the finer forms of fugue. Even as he despaired of this situation working in his favor, Harry seemed to come to a decision and released Snape's wrist.

"All right. But when will you be *'at liberty to say?'*"

It was more of a concession than Snape expected, but still pinned him down. He glared at Harry, their eyes the glittering reflection of facets from the earth's crucible, emerald and obsidian. "Do you understand the concept of discretion, Potter?"

The younger wizard's fist clenched spasmodically and his jaw worked as Harry controlled his temper. Snape raised an eyebrow and he noticed Ron shift into a ready stance. Unexpectedly, Snape's lips twisted in a smile. Perhaps there was hope yet.

Harry's suspicion changed into something more like comprehension. "Yes. I will give you a week. After that, I will go to Dumbledore."

Harry then offered Snape the original letter. It seemed that Harry Potter was indeed more than the brawn of James Potter's genes; he appeared to have inherited some of the Evans' intelligence as well. It was about time for it to show up.

Snape nodded his head, and then, with a fierce look at Ron, he crossed the room. "I am certain that your grief will continue to be unabated and that nightmares must have plagued you for the past couple of nights. There is no telling what you might have seen."

Ron and Harry shared a glance and then nodded at him. He almost sighed in relief. They would play along, and he hadn't compromised his ethics. How odd, he thought, that in the last days of his life, Snape had found principals he was unwilling to tarnish. Quietly, he slipped from the room, re-warding the door, and as he passed down the hall, avoiding the hideous troll's leg umbrella stand, he noticed that Miss Weasley hadn't moved in the five minutes it had taken for him to have formed a new alliance. Perhaps this one would keep him and Hermione alive.

Sweeping stealthily through the Ancient and Most Noble House of Black, Snape thought it was ironic that his fate now rested in the hands of two partially tried-and-tested wizards, and that he had truly lost his mind. The next moment, he acknowledged that what he was resting his most precious secret upon was the solid foundation of the friendship that existed between the three Gryffindors. Their oft-tried bonds of loyalty had been tested in the seething molten crucible of the Dark Lord's malevolence and single-minded purpose: to kill Harry Potter, his friends and Albus Dumbledore... in that order.

Harry Potter's defeat... time and again... of Voldemort had been an unspoken, unmentioned elephant in the room since the Dark Lord's return. It didn't matter that each and every time the two wizards the flat-faced, red-eyed thing and the messy-haired, scar-headed boy met in a fight to the death, some agency came to the younger wizard's assistance: the residue of a mother's love, the sword of a long dead wizard, the shades of Voldemort's most recent murders, Albus Dumbledore and other Order of the Phoenix members, the Giant Grawp and his seemingly tame Acromantula. In each case, Harry had escaped with his life and the lives of most of his friends, while Lord Voldemort had retired from the field of battle with fewer of his minions lost either by incarceration or incapacitation.

It had become imperative that Voldemort defeat Harry once and for all in order to prove to his Death Eaters that he, Lord Voldemort, was the most powerful wizard in their world and worthy of the title 'The Dark Lord.' Without this single triumph, Voldemort's Dark Order would never prevail, wouldn't entice new recruits to his vision and his cause. Even with family coercion, there were few enough new Death Eaters, as several of the younger generation had refused to take the Dark Mark, earning disownment as a result. But these children had fought back. They'd openly revealed their family's association to the Death Eaters and given as much information to the Aurors as possible. The Ministry had seized family assets and imprisoned three of the Inner Circle: Dolohov, Parkinson and Bulstrode. Malfoy had retained his freedom simply because his family vaults were seemingly endless and he kept Fudge's pockets lined with gold.

Yes, the Dark Lord's plans had become focused entirely on the life of Harry Potter, and as an adjunct, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, which was undoubtedly why he and Lucius had descended upon the Grangers during the Easter holidays. Snape could only imagine the punishment Voldemort had heaped upon Malfoy for having failed to actually kill Hermione, and Snape's heart swelled at the idea of how indomitable she'd proved after her return from such a devastating attack.

No one, other than her closest friends, had known of her parents' deaths. She'd maintained her marks, her extra-curricular activities and her staunch loyalty to her friends, and still graduated at the top of her year. Until that fateful night in front of the Mirror of Disenchantment, Snape would never have known about the attack and have the final proof that he did indeed have pawn-like status in the service of Albus Dumbledore.

Pausing at the entrance to the aged house, his hand wrapped around the brass door handle, the spy turned to look back up the dark, narrow stairs. Standing on the landing, silently watching him, were two staunch friends who had entrusted him with the survival of the third member of their triad. Snape's course had already been decided... had been decided that night a month before, and was now verified. With a tug of his lips into what might have been recognized as a smile, Snape left the house and Apparated into the dark.

~o0o~

In Defense of the White Queen

Chapter 4 of 7

In which Snape sees Hermione for the first time since graduation, and her glamour is removed.

Guard... Check... Mate

By Bambu

~o0o~

Chapter Four: In Defense of the White Queen

With a *crack* that heralded an Apparition, Severus Snape arrived in the small foyer of his cottage in Wales, the sound loud in the stillness of the early morning. He bit off a curse... the noise would no doubt awaken Hermione and he hadn't intended to scare her. He quickly flicked his wand and lit the old-fashioned oil lamp sitting on the reception table in the entry, only to hear what could have been mistaken for a sigh of wind, but was instead the sigh of relief from a Disillusioned resident of the house.

"I told you no one other than me or someone with the key could enter. *You* have the key, and *I* am alone." He might have gained her trust, but Snape was pleased to see that she was being cautious nonetheless. He turned to face her, barely registering the fragrance of the fresh cut blooms in the earthenware pitcher on the small table, and realized that she wasn't dressed for sleep. Instead, Hermione was wearing a pale blue jersey pullover and casual Muggle jeans, both considerably rumpled, and her wand was held, duel-fashioned, in her hand. She was also bare-footed. His brow furrowed in what could be called concern, but he wouldn't label it. "Why were you not sleeping?"

"I was. I fell asleep in the sitting room. I didn't know you were coming. Are you... Is everything all right?"

Hermione's eyes had been huge when she'd dispelled the Disillusionment, and he watched her overall posture ease from its state of readiness. This was the first time he'd seen her since her graduation ceremony, and Snape couldn't help that his eyes were riveted to her face, physical proof of her presence in his home. The mere fact that she was here and had used the Portkey, was solid, tangible, irrefutable proof that Hermione trusted him... with everything.

Snape refused to admit that he'd missed her, thought about her, dreamed about her. But he did, he had. A rootlet of satisfaction twined deep within his soul and he ignored it. His gaze traced the sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose and the pouting full bottom lip which was held between her small, pearly white teeth. Her eyes were tired but alert, and he searched her face for the telltale ridge of scar tissue near her jawline... and then he remembered the glamour. It was still in place. He scowled. She hadn't removed it as yet.

"/seem to be playing post-owl for your friends. It appears that they were convinced of your demise. I did not tell them the truth, but they let me take this." He hadn't missed her quick gasp or the widening of her eyes at his comment about her perceived death. As he handed her the letter from Harry and Ron, her fingers brushed his... in ever so light a touch. He shuddered in reaction, the feel electric.

He looked around the small entry of his home. The planks of the old wooden floor were gleaming in the soft light, and the wainscoting had obviously been attended to, as well. Hermione had obviously spent some of her time caring for the cottage. It had an uncluttered but welcoming feel. It made him uncomfortable and content.

"Thank you. Are Harry and Ron all right? Of course they're not. Sorry. What did *he* have say? I imagine..." She broke off, her voice a flustered rush of worry, and she bit into her lower lip so that it plumped between the rows of her teeth. "Sorry. Will you tell me what happened?"

It irked him that he couldn't see her real face, and he responded more harshly than intended. "In a minute. Why have you not removed the glamour?"

"I've been *trying* to for the past three weeks. I can't remove it. It seems that *he* didn't believe me when I told him I wouldn't show Harry or Ron. Please tell me if they're all right. I told them not to blindly believe... to question *his* authority. But this situation gives *him* the perfect opportunity to manipulate Harry. What are we to do?" Her tone was filled with distress and repressed anger. Then she took a deep breath, he could hear the exchange of air, calming herself. "Please forgive me. I haven't ever been alone for so long before. I think all the stress of the last few months has finally caught up with me and erupted..." Hermione slanted her eyes at him, and slyly said, "like a Longbottom potion gone wrong."

Snape almost laughed aloud at the image she'd conjured in spite of her concern for her two friends. Instead, he quirked the corner of his mouth -- a full smile on anyone else. It seemed it was enough for her to continue.

"Really... forgive me? I would like to hear what you suggest we do. In the meantime, I *have* tried to remove this wretched glamour since the day I arrived. I've gone through every book I own and most of those in the cottage looking for anything that would help. Honestly, it's what I was doing when I fell asleep in the sitting room. Trust me, I don't want any more tangible reminders of Dumbledore than those I already carry in my memory." Her voice grew flat when she spoke the Headmaster's name.

Snape thought he remembered the tone she'd used; it was the same one she'd used to say Malfoy's name. "Perfectly understandable under the circumstances."

Now that he appeared to have the leisure to give her condition more thought than merely to ensure her survival, it made sense that she couldn't remove the glamour easily. Dumbledore had been protecting his investment in Harry and wouldn't have taken the chance that she would figure out how to end his spell. Any additional indication of manipulation or trickery on Dumbledore's part, something the Headmaster professed to loathe... *'the truth is generally preferable to lies'*... would serve to alienate Harry, perhaps completely.

After what Hermione had told him, Snape was certain that none of the standard variations of *Finite Incantatem* would be successful in removing the concealing mask that had become her face and body. He knew that they needed to discuss their course of action regarding the 'mail,' and what to conceal from or reveal to her friends, but he was loathe to until after the glamour was dismantled. It angered him to see the placid, unblemished mask which hid her animated face. "Will you allow me to try?"

"Please," was her only response and she stepped closer to him.

He pointed his wand at her, and though Hermione watched his wand movements avidly, she didn't flinch. Snape's breath caught in his throat with each additional piece of evidence which proved that she sincerely placed her trust in him. The elation and responsibility crashed with equal force in his breast and suffused him with an entirely unusual feeling.

Pinching his lips together to get a firmer grip on his wayward emotional response to Hermione, Snape cast *Revelato*.

The effect of his spell was instantaneous and encased Hermione's entire body in an aura of shimmering gold. It was apparent that the glamour had been secured to Hermione rather than cast in the manner of a filter, which was a more common method. It was clever and parasitical. Unless one knew the actual point of origin, the glamour would remain in place, self-sustaining and drawing magical energy directly from the host to maintain the façade. It would render the bearer marginally weaker, and continued use would drain the witch or wizard over time without the glamour's removal. Snape clenched his teeth. It was expedient, and efficient... and reprehensible.

Dumbledore's blatant disregard of Hermione's well-being was a further reason for Snape to be glad that he'd chosen to come to her aid. Dumbledore may have planned to remove the glamour as soon as the school year had ended, but he'd nevertheless weakened Hermione in the meantime, and she would need to recuperate from the months' long power drain. With a clarity that had struck him infrequently over the years and incessantly in the past eight weeks, Snape saw just how ruthless the older wizard was willing to be in order to hone his hero.

To the task at hand, Snape thought grimly. It was no wonder that Hermione had looked so haggard in the mirror a month before. She'd been still reeling from the loss of her parents and her own near-lethal wounding, and then the persistent, insidious drain of her magical energy had been added to the pre-existing trauma.

"I cannot remove this glamour without knowing exactly which portion of your anatomy the glamour has been attached to. It will take some time, Miss... Hermione. I suggest we return to the sitting room, which is where I assume you were when I arrived."

"It was." Hermione immediately turned to her left and Severus followed her, ducking his head under the low-lying lintel. She was easy to track, a glowing human-shaped orb, as she walked into the sitting room. She'd made it feel like a home in the three weeks she'd been in residence... a surreal juxtaposition to the certain death that awaited her beyond the borders of the cottage and garden. Snape noted that the floor was freshly cleaned, the furniture waxed and cushions refurbished, and a small fire burned cozily in the grate casting its elemental magic into the room. Hermione immediately crossed to the settee and sank into its comfortable cushions, nearly upsetting an open book that was perched atop a small tower of references she'd obviously been studying when she'd fallen asleep. Snape absently noted the evidence of her diligence even as his mind was engaged in excogitating a Dumbledorian puzzle.

The lithe Potions master paced in front of the hearth while logically reconstructing Dumbledore's actions the night the old wizard had cast the concealing glamour on Hermione. After some time, Snape barked a mirthless laugh. He knew what Dumbledore had done. It was darkly humorous and Snape doubted that it would have occurred to Hermione. Only the benefit of his years of exposure to the elder wizard's thought processes had given him the clue.

"I believe I may know where the glamour originates. Did Dumbledore touch you with his wand?"

Hermione's eyes flicked and her teeth nibbled on her lower lip; otherwise no betraying evidence of anger or confusion or frustration marred her perfect countenance. "I don't remember. Things happened very fast, and I was sort of in and out of conscious for most of that night. I don't even remember Mad-Eye arriving... too late to do anything for my parents and almost too late to save me."

"We shall strive to make Moody's timely arrival worthwhile. However, I suggest that our first step is to check your body. I suspect we will find what we seek on your torso. If you will remove to your room and disrobe, then..."

"Wait! I do remember Dumbledore leaning over me at one point. He startled me because he was so close when I woke up. My chest felt warm and then like ice. I thought it was part of the healing process. Is that what you're referring to?"

"Possibly. Your heart would be an excellent place to secure the glamour. I have left the revealing spell in place because I hope that density will be an identifying factor in

determining the point of origin." Snape turned to look into the fire, presenting her with the smooth contours of his back. "If you would remove your jersey to confirm."

He heard the rustle of fabric and a soft exclamation. His initial inclination was to turn, but he stifled it. "And...?"

"I can't tell the exact location, but I believe you're correct. From my perspective, it seems that my chest does glow more brightly than the rest of my body. I think you'll need to look," Her voice became rather wry, "and you've seen me before, Prof... Severus."

He shut his eyes against the thought that this time was different than the last. Now Hermione and he were like volatile ingredients and he was uncertain of their interactive properties. More than anything else, he didn't want to find an adverse reaction exploding in his face, and knew that he would settle for them remaining inert if a positive reaction weren't to result in the end product he wouldn't allow himself to desire. With a mental grimace for his choice of occupational metaphors, Snape turned to face Hermione. Her chest did indeed glow more brightly than the rest of her body. The golden aura seemed to pulse in a dense, palm-sized patch over her heart.

Hermione's face reflected none of her inner turmoil or residual anger at Dumbledore or even embarrassment, if that was indeed what she was feeling. She merely looked into his face, her brown eyes wide, and Snape realized that she was afraid. With a moment's intuition born of real empathy, he knew that she didn't fear him... but his reaction to her scars.

Their encounter in the dungeons had irrevocably altered their relationship, but neither had been in the other's presence privately since those powerful, connective hours in front of the mirror. And suddenly, the need to discuss other matters assumed a secondary position to the shifting dynamics between them. If he was feeling off-kilter in Hermione's presence, then she must be at least as uncertain. Nonetheless, she met his gaze levelly, and he felt a ripple of pleasure that she didn't shrink from him. Until he could see her entire, expressive face, he had significant doubts about her other reactions to him.

He took three measured steps, almost as if he was calming a wild creature, and reached her side. The only relief to his austere attire was the hint of white at his wrists, and the sallow paleness of his skin in contrast to the black of his clothing. Otherwise, he was fully dressed and Hermione was... nude from the waist up, her hair in wild disarray. She'd removed her bra along with her jumper. Her torso was smooth, unblemished and beautiful.

A jittery nervousness settled deep in the pit of Snape's stomach and his groin reacted instinctively to the sight of her. His physical response was more insistent than at any time in the past month, even in the privacy of his own bed. Those few irresistible moments of manipulated gratification had been relieving but unsatisfying. They'd been built on a memory and not on the reality. But now... here... she was half-naked and glorious, enshrouded in a glowing golden nimbus of light which pulsed slightly over her heart.

When he reached her, Snape stared into Hermione's sparkling eyes. They were brimming with emotion: hope, trust, and other unnamed, unrealized feelings swirling within the amber reflections from the firelight. Softly, so as not to spook her, he murmured, "'X' marks the spot."

Her eyelids fluttered. "Sorry?"

A slight smile tugged at his lips. "It is Dumbledore's habit to find humor in the most inappropriate of times and events, and, forgive me, but I do not think that he would have been able to resist in your case. I believe the origin of the glamour is secured to the intersecting point of your scars, Dolohov's curse scar and Malfoy's. I remember that they form an 'X' over your left breast."

"Oh! That's... that's rather cruel, don't you think?"

"I think it is rather like Gallows humor, Hermione." Snape watched her eyelids flutter at his nearness, and her chin tilted upward. Her eyes met his, and he felt could get lost in her regard.

"All right. What do you need to do?"

"The beauty of the glamour in this case is that, if I cannot find the exact locus of the glamour's origin, then I cannot dismantle the charm. It is reasonable to hypothesize that the intersection of the two scars hidden by the glamour is a shrewd choice, camouflaged as it is..."

He broke off when Hermione grabbed his hand and brought it to her breast. His fingers met the smooth texture of her other hand as it mapped her scars, locating the confluence of damaged tissue, smooth to rough. Snape had touched her intimately once before, and the silken texture of her skin had lingered in his senses, a delicious reminder of something he wanted... had begun to yearn for. Her hand drew his along the jutting ridge of tortured flesh until it met the conjunction of scars, and then she dropped both of her hands, leaving his hand pressed flat to her breast.

He could feel, but couldn't see, the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Her breathing was a little uneven, and her heart fluttered under his fingertips. For a long moment he didn't move, didn't explore, but then as if of its own volition, Snape withdrew his hand until only his dexterous fingers, slightly calloused from years of chopping, cutting and manipulating raw potions ingredients, remained to lightly dance across Hermione's skin.

The dichotomy of visual to visceral input was incongruous and disconcerting, but he traced the ragged, jutting skin until he'd found the remains of Dolohov's attentions. That scar tissue had an almost slick feel to it, and it met the nubby peak of Malfoy's partially healed curse.

Hermione whispered, "'X' marks the spot."

Snape flicked his eyes to meet hers, and he growled, "Yes."

She closed her eyes and breathed, her voice mingled with the exhalation. He felt her words on his face, little puffs of air at this proximity. "I trust you."

The urge to kiss her was almost irresistible. Her head was arched, her neck tilted as if in an offering. But he wouldn't kiss her now. Not until the glamour was removed and he knew that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Not until he could really see her face and read her expression. Perhaps not until another time, if there was another time. They had so much else to discuss, to live through.

With his other hand, Snape raised his wand and carefully placed the tip of the slender rod on the uneven section of half-healed and long-healed skin. He allowed his magical energy to build in resonance with the magical core of his gleaming ebony wand. Hermione watched him intently, her eyes never wavering from his face. Snape closed his eyes, not to be distracted. He felt the magic peaking, ready to be tapped for his use. "*Dearmo!*"

Nausea punched through his gut, the magical backlash unwelcome, but not altogether unexpected. He heard Hermione cry out and his eyes snapped open. She was gulping in air in great, ragged gasps, and she remained surrounded by the shimmering gold aura of the revealing charm, but her features had altered into those of a real woman, not the porcelain mannequin he'd been seeing in class and in the Great Hall for months.

He dropped his hands from her body. It was too intimate, too assumptive a gesture. A quick '*Finite*' later and Hermione stood before him in all her woebegone glory.

Her features were softened by the glow of the fire, but he could still see the dark circles under her eyes and the hollow of her cheeks from the glamour's parasitical leeching of nourishment from her body. Snape's eyes were fastened on the ugly, ragged scar that bisected her torso, tracking its course from below and behind her ear, across her throat and spiraling down her chest, cresting her breast and wrapping around her too-prominent ribs. It was blood red, a harsh reminder of all that she'd lost in this war not of her making.

He'd seen her once before like this, but it had been a reflection. He had only felt the real, warm, living woman. She was as breathtaking as he'd remembered. Snape didn't realize how long he'd stared at her, when her choked voice broke into his reverie, his building need to touch her more intimately, to protect her, to possess her... to claim her.

"I'm hideous, aren't I?"

"No!" Instantly Snape raised a hand to cup her cheek, her unblemished, but tired little face. Her eyes were filled with tears and it occurred to him that his respectful distancing had sent the wrong message. "No, *you* aren't hideous. *You* are battle-scarred... as am I. It is not something to be ashamed of, Hermione. You are... you are a courageous and intrepid young woman, and I have long found you lovely."

Her breath hitched and she stepped toward him, her head tilted further. "Truthfully?"

"Yes."

She leaned into him, her breasts brushing the roughened texture of his frock coat, her eyes were wide and vulnerable, her lips pursed and inviting. "Severus..."

He was completely undone.

Instinctively, without plan or thought, he pulled her to him and tasted the sweetness of her mouth... her entirely willing, eager lips. His left hand threaded between her arm and her body, encircling her, his right arm wrapping around her shoulders. His hands became entangled in her long, unruly curls, brushing the soft skin of her back beneath the thick strands of her hair. His left hand found the waistband of her jeans, and the rough ridge of scar tissue which disappeared beneath the denim. His fingers stroked the scar as she arched into his kiss, opening her mouth to his implicit request. Their tongues tentatively met, flicking to taste, then twining to mate. She tasted of peppermint and sleep, and he wanted her fiercely.

With a breath of a moan, Hermione was tugging him closer, enthralled, and enchanted. Other considerations, other priorities were irrelevant in the tender eroticism of the moment. Snape had never been so bewitched by a kiss, and he had never seen her so pliable, so completely amenable to his caprice.

His erection throbbed in a reminder of what his baser desires were, and his mind conjured images of what he wanted to do with Hermione. *Now*, his body demanded. It was insistent. *Now*. The rising, urgent need broke Snape from participating fully in the kiss... reining in his need before it could escalate into something he didn't want to contain. His insecurities surfaced, intruding the thought that perhaps Hermione was reacting out of sheer gratitude for his assistance. He didn't want her if her desire stemmed from a sense of obligation, even as he repelled the urge to take her in any way that she offered.

That dose of reality chilled Snape's ardor more quickly than a summons from the Dark Lord. But if this was to be the only willing kiss he ever received from Hermione, then he would savor every last second. Languorously he ended the kiss and, with a chaste brush of lips across hers, he pulled back slightly. The weight of Hermione's torso told him that she had relaxed into his embrace. She was arched back over his arms like an offering, her throat bared to his gaze, his need. Her arms dangled at her sides as if she'd forgotten what they were for, and the rapid rise and fall of her breasts showed how affected she'd been by the intensity of the moment. He rejoiced with the evidence of her desire. This was no grudging affection on her part; instead, she was an altogether willing and supple woman waiting for his... their mutual pleasure.

With a groan that seemed to originate in his groin, Snape buried his face into the base of her throat, kissing, nibbling, suckling the roughened texture of her scar. She'd been damaged in the face of her loyalty and sacrifice, and it made her more desirable to Snape... more like him.

At last Hermione raised her arms, and the tall wizard felt the caress of her hands, one flat against his shoulder blade, pressing him closer, the other threading through the slick hanks of his hair, and he cursed the ancestors who'd contributed their genes to his unlovely looks. He leaned back only to find her brown eyes staring at him.

Hermione's hand, which had threaded through his hair, now cupped his cheek, and tentatively her slender fingers traced his mouth, his thin lips... a bequeathment of another awkwardly designed ancestor.

A log shifted in the fireplace and it brought reality crashing back to the forefront of their minds. He stiffened, fearing that she might realize what she'd just done and regret it. He almost expected her to run from the room, or to turn like a wounded animal, snarling and snapping.

She did neither.

Instead, Hermione straightened, her hands dropping from his face and back to rest on his forearms, where his hands were resting lightly on her hips. His eyes widened slightly as he realized that her right hand was resting above the Dark Mark, the stain on his character and soul. The actual tattoo was covered by cloth, but they both knew it was there. She had known since the end of her fourth year, and yet she showed no trace of consciousness to its existence. A little, persistent ember of hope refused to die in Snape's heart.

Before he could speak, however, Hermione said in a slightly breathless, low voice. "I should be thanking you for all of your help: for finding me that night, for listening to me grieve for my parents, for sharing your private safe house, for protecting me, for... for letting me believe that I'm not grotesque, for helping my friends. And I do thank you... it's difficult to express what exactly... how much I feel. But honestly, in spite of everything we need to talk about, the only thing I can think to say at this moment is that I've missed you."

He started at her admission. Initially, he thought that her words exemplified her underlying response to him as gratitude and his hope had begun to wither. But then she'd said three magical words: *I've missed you*. He'd never before had those words spoken to him with sincerity. Yet still he doubted. After all, Hermione had been alone for three weeks. Her solitude would have been more than enough for her to have grown lonely and missed anyone. It was difficult to believe that she'd missed *him* in particular.

"Missed me? It is loneliness. You miss your friends." Gods, he sounded like a first year Hufflepuff, whining because he hadn't gotten his way. Nevertheless, he couldn't tamp down the spurt of pleasure that her words had caused.

"Of course I miss Harry and Ron and I'm worried about them... about what to do and how to help them considering that I'm so isolated. We can talk about them in a minute. This is more important right now. Is it so strange that I would miss you?"

He stared at her. Of course it was strange that she'd miss him -- that she wanted to talk about him instead of instantly strategizing to the benefit of the Boy Wonder. It was an almost unbelievable sentiment. Years of persecution and distrust rose within him, laying waste to the intimate moment they'd just shared. He scowled at her.

Some providential twist of fate seemed to reign, and Hermione interpreted his look correctly. Perhaps it was the greater understanding she'd gained from Snape's confession a month before, perhaps it was the recognition of a kindred, wounded soul. Snape would never know, but what she said to him startled him.

"I don't mean that I've missed seeing you in class or in the Great Hall or at Order meetings those few that we were allowed to attend. I've missed *you*, the man I met that night in the dungeons, standing before the Mirror of Disenchantment. The man who shared confidences with me. I think the mirror revealed more than this..." her hand traced the roughened skin of her scar, and Snape was astounded to realize that she was still almost naked in front of him... that she hadn't scrambled to find her clothing. His eyes instantly moved to her chest, to the knotted, disfigured nipple of her left breast. His erection pulsed in primal reaction, reminding him that it hadn't forgotten her semi-nude state, and Snape's eyes snapped back to Hermione's, his cheeks flushed.

"You feel gratitude."

Her eyes flashed, her lips tightened and her chin tilted in that belligerent manner she reserved for lecturing her friends and Longbottom. If his emotions weren't wound in such a state of tension, and fearful hopefulness, he would have laughed. He'd never thought to be the recipient of the bossy side of her nature.

"You are so exasperating! Yes, I'm grateful. Who wouldn't be? You listened to me and you confided in me. I have no doubt that you've saved my life by letting me live here... in your private home. But that's not what I mean. I have missed *you*, Severus Snape, the meticulously demanding taskmaster, harsh critic, and self-sacrificing spy; the man who has saved my life on more than one occasion; the man who has saved my best friend even though sorely tried. I've missed the man who allowed me to believe that, although I was damaged and disfigured, I was desirable and precious. The man who, even now, causes my heart to race and my stomach to do flip-flops. I've missed *you*, Severus."

She stepped into him once more, this time without any outward sign of sexual intimacy, and wrapped her arms around his chest, nestling her face against the placket of his coat. Tentatively, with the understanding that something between them was synthesizing, he encircled her in his arms, hugging her as fiercely as she embraced him, feeling her bare skin under his hands. The deep, silky admission was wrenched from the depths of his soul, "I have missed you as well, Hermione."

Her contented sigh blew through him as a spring breeze gusts across a meadow, every strand of grass bending to the greater strength of the more powerful element. In such a way did his own body react to the witch in his arms, as if every filament of his being bent in acknowledgment of the truth of her words and her affection.

They stood embraced for long moments, the fire dying to embers and the room turning chill. The rising gooseflesh Snape could feel under his fingertips sent the message that Hermione was growing cold, and he remembered that she was half-nude. Tucking her head under his chin, strands of her wayward curls tickling his neck, he spoke, "I think you should dress and read your letter. I shall tend to the fire and we can speak when you have finished reading. I would like to discuss the situation with you."

Reluctantly, Snape released Hermione, ignoring the fact that his arms felt empty. He'd liked the feel of holding her against him.

For the next several minutes Snape rebuilt the fire, Hermione re-dressed and read by the light of the gas lamp and the house was quiet. Snape chose the most comfortable of the armchairs and propped his long legs on the low-lying table in front of him, adjacent to the settee where Hermione was curled up. She had a thoughtful expression on her face, and his heart leapt at the realization that he could see her... the mask was off, and he could really look at her again. Hungrily, he watched the thoughts pass across her features. Even though he had been appalled by Dumbledore's deception, intellectually he understood why the old wizard had cast the glamour on Hermione. She was too open, too honest for sustained trickery.

Her voice interrupted the dark line his thoughts were following. "What does Harry mean, '*Apparently, we're waiting for some sort of sign before we go on the offensive?*' What sign is Dumbledore waiting for?"

Snape knew the answer to her question, but hesitated before telling her the truth. However, in this place, after such a momentous shift in his relationship with Hermione, he would not prevaricate. Perenelle's cottage was the only place in the world in which he was himself, and he refused to betray his private soul even to offer Hermione platitudes for comfort... he doubted they would work in any event. "I believe that Dumbledore is waiting for the Dark Lord to break me."

Hermione's gasp was a balm for his inner, carefully *Colloportus'd*, despair, her face utterly stricken by his admission. She quickly rose from her seat and knelt in front of him, her hands resting on the length of his legs. Her huge eyes glittered with emotion, "No... please not that."

Snape leaned forward slightly, warmed by her evident distress, to touch her hand, lightly, delicately. "We know that Albus will sacrifice any except those he deems most beneficial to Potter's survival. The Dark Lord is growing... all right, all right... has grown impatient with my inability to deliver Potter to him. I do not think that I have much longer. Until the start of the new school term perhaps, but no more than that. If I have not delivered Potter by then, my usefulness will have ended for both sides."

"No! You can run. You can hide... here with me. There has to be another way. A way that spares your life... and Harry's."

Touched beyond measure at this indication that she did feel more for him than mere gratitude as she'd professed earlier, and even if it was coupled with her concern for her friend, he was, all the same, a pragmatist. "Hermione, we both know that the probability of our surviving to the end is unlikely. The day the Dark Lord breaks into my mind, he will know where to find Potter. I have a Portkey charmed into one of the buttons of my robes, and I have spent years conditioning my reflexes to react in that life threatening instant... when the Dark Lord's attentions are too much. It will be the last thing I do... using the Portkey to reach Dumbledore. He will know that the attack is imminent, and will gather the Order. Using that Portkey, they can reach the Death Eaters within minutes. Can you really see Dumbledore wasting time attending to me when he needs to prepare Potter for the final fight?"

She said nothing; her face, *sans* glamour, was more than capable of expressing her horror and her sorrow

"I cannot see it either, no matter how much we might wish it were so," he said wryly. A palpable silence descended between them, unbroken save for the breathing of the witch, the wizard and the fire.

He could tell by watching her expression that Hermione understood the realities facing them... him.... He wished fervently, passionately, that their timing had been different. That he'd discovered her sooner, or she'd been older, or that the Dark Lord had endless patience, or that Harry had already obliterated the malignant taint that threatened the wizarding world like a cancer. But wishes were futile, and rarely... never before... had his come true.

That Hermione was in his home and trusted him with her well-being was more than a wish come true. She was a wish he'd never made... there had been too many obstacles in their path: age, inequitable position, loyalties. Those at least no longer seemed to matter, ironically due to the circumstances that had brought them together. Hermione was no longer a child by any stretch of the imagination... that had been wrested from her beginning at age twelve when, encountering true evil, she showed a maturity beyond her chronological age. They were no longer student and teacher, and with Dumbledore's judgment weighing against her, Hermione had been able to show her personal loyalties: Harry, Ron, and, most surprisingly, him.

After a time, he spoke, "If you wish to reply to Potter's letter, I will see to it that it is delivered without being traced."

"Are you staying the night? I'll make up the bed for you."

"There is no need, Hermione, I am quite comfortable here."

"Severus... sleep with me." What was in her heart was plain on her face, the flush of her cheeks, and tremulous quiver of her mouth, and he knew that sleep was not the only thing that would happen between them if he accepted her offer.

"I cannot." He watched her recoil, but he pressed on, "I would dearly love to sleep in my bed with you, but I will not take advantage of you this way, Hermione. *Later...* if I survive and you still want me, then..."

"Please, Severus, there is so little I can do to help you from here. At least let me hold you while you sleep." Her face was an odd mixture of youth and wisdom, yearning and comprehension.

Snape felt the emotion tightening his chest, constricting his lungs. "You have helped me more than you know. You have trusted me to see to your safety, and entrusted your livelihood to my honesty. No one else has ever done as much, willingly. Hermione, there is one last thing you should know. If I am..." He paused for a long beat; time ticked past and he found the words. "If all is lost, then you will not be in danger. I have made arrangements with my solicitors, and the cottage is yours in the event of my death. The magical wards and charms on the house and grounds will safeguard you. They are keyed to ownership. I have altered the *Fidelius Charm* in such a manner that, the moment my brain is no longer capable of keeping your secret, the knowledge of your whereabouts will be expunged from my memory and the ownership clause of the contract will be enforced. You will be safe, I promise you."

Her eyes were like warm beacons in the low light of the room, and her whisper was loud in the quiet room. "I don't know what to say."

"You do not need to say anything. The fact that I have been able to protect you when others would not has been more reward than you can imagine."

"Thank you. It seems so insignificant. Please, please be safe and come back. I will be here..." She didn't say the final word, but his heart heard it anyway. She would be waiting for him... *later*.

A wealth of understanding passed between them wordlessly, and Snape marveled that in such a short period of time he'd come to care for this young witch above all things, even his own life. In a miracle worthy of an epic tale of heroism and sacrifice, it seemed possible that she truly cared for him as well. Snape's lips thinned against the temptation that was almost more than he could control. "Write your letter, and let me get some sleep. I must be at Hogwarts for breakfast, even during the summer."

In the light of the fire and the rapidly approaching dawn, Snape was able to see snatches of the letter she wrote to her friends. Her eyebrows were drawn together in deep thought, her teeth nibbled on the end of her quill as she paused between paragraphs.

Dear Harry and Ron,

I'm dreadfully sorry that Hedwig was unable to deliver your letter and you were worried about me. I'm safe and well. My Secret Keeper is someone I know and trust, and maybe the fact that Hedwig couldn't find me will ease your fears. If she couldn't find me... no one could. Please don't worry...

Snape found his eyes growing heavy as he listened to the sounds of Hermione breathing and the scratch of her quill as she wrote to her friends.

The library here is very good and I've been reading some interesting books... don't laugh, Ronald.... I know that I can't be with you in person, Harry, but I can still help you...

Hermione *Leviosa'd* a fresh log onto the grate, and Snape drowsily watched the flames leap and cavort with the fresh tinder. Rarely had he felt so content. When the idyll ended, he would be thrust once more onto the spine-chilling, narrow path of the double agent. But for the time being, brief as it might be, he could rest and watch Hermione and read snippets of her lengthy missive, and pretend.

*Use Bill, Ron, tell him it's for chess... but get these four books: **The Art of War**, by Sun Tzu, **The Book of Five Rings**, by Musashi Miyamoto, **The Prince**, by Niccolò Machiavelli, and **Lessons of History**, by Will and Ariel Durant. READ THEM. I know they're written by Muggles, but they're worth it. They will help. I'll have some more suggestions the next time I write. In the meantime, pretend this is NEWT revision and let me paraphrase...*

The aroma and warmth of the fire and the rhythmic scritch of the ostrich quill lulled an exhausted Snape to sleep in due time. He was no longer awake when Hermione finished her letter as the sky pinked with the distinctive shade that heralded a new dawn. He didn't know when she sealed the envelope and placed it on the arm of his chair, under his hand. And he didn't stir when she curled up on the floor at his feet, resting her head against his knees, but when he awoke his internal clock rousing him at six she was sound asleep, her head almost in his lap, one of his hands resting in her unruly hair. His heart pounded as he extracted his entwined fingers from her curls, and ever so lightly stroked the surprisingly soft strands of mahogany.

In what was to become a weekly ritual, Snape carefully levitated Hermione to the couch, draped a blanket across her, and kissed her forehead before he left.

They never again spoke of the precariousness of his position or the fact that each week might be his last, nor did she ask him again to sleep with her. But they spent one night a week in each other's company, devoid of the trappings of their public personas, for, in truth, the Mirror of Disenchantment had catapulted them beyond superficialities. In the cottage, Snape was able to be the man he wished to be, free of misconceptions and distrust. During these nights, Hermione read and answered her letters from Harry and Ron, sneaking glances at Snape whenever she thought he wasn't looking. Snape, in his turn, watched her almost incessantly from the moment he crossed the threshold of the cottage and during their discussions of Dumbledore's strategies and frustration over the fact that Harry was no longer the pliable tool the old wizard had expected or intended.

Snape and Hermione never ventured beyond the foyer or the sitting room. That was to be saved for later... if they had a later. After his second visit, Hermione always had a meal laid out on the coffee table, waiting for his arrival. After the third week, she included a small tray of healing potions and unguents to ease his residual Cruciatus symptoms. He never arrived at the same time as the previous week -- it wouldn't do to be too predictable in case anyone was keeping track of his whereabouts.

It was Elysium, and Snape knew it, but it kept him sane.

Hermione recuperated slowly. Her intrinsic magic had been drained almost to the point of burn-out by the parasitic glamour and the incomplete healing of Malfoy's curse scar. Snape charted the slow process; the deep circles under her eyes faded and the hollows of her cheeks filled in. As time passed, her grieving process seemed to reach a new level. She missed her parents, but the shock and trauma were no longer acute. She read voraciously, assessing strategies and arcane bits of magical lore from her own books, the books Snape brought her, and the eclectic library that Perenelle Flamel had bequeathed Snape along with the cottage. Hermione's letters to Harry and Ron were lengthy and filled with the abstracted information that she'd gleaned from her various resources, applying her 'books and cleverness' to the practical application of keeping her friend alive.

Snape basked in the pleasure of her company, and her bitterness seemed to leach from her with each passing week of continued safety and a return to health. The hours they spent together represented an existence he had never aspired to, yet wished was possible, and he clung to the façade of normalcy with a fierce longing that never left his heart. After her letters were written, Snape and Hermione spent hours talking about what *later* could mean. She talked of coming out of hiding and finding work in Transmogrification Charms. He talked of retirement, solitude and independent potions research. Snape marveled at her maturity. She was like a sharply honed blade that had been annealed through the forge of lethal experience and through being the only child of well-educated parents. Their intellectual wrangles were invigorating, and their fanciful plans to redesign the grounds, including room for a potions garden and a kitchen garden, were soothing. Flowers were something upon which Hermione refused to compromise, insisting that it wasn't a real garden without daffodils, roses, and irises.

This halcyon time was the most precious of any in his life. He vacillated between longing for the summer to never end, relieved that he had no teaching duties to interfere with his weekly visits to the cottage and Hermione, and a need for the terrible waiting to be over. He continued to be summoned by the Dark Lord each week, and, for his pains, each time he was punitively inspired with varying degrees of intensity. Dumbledore's extensive Legilimency sessions following Snape's summonses and prostrations before the Dark Lord were almost as debilitating as any caress of Voldemort's curses.

Snape attended every Order meeting, careful to maintain his churlish manner and sharply sarcastic tongue and adamant in his resolve to never remain afterwards for a meal. He never spoke to Hermione's friends about what had happened between them in the library, neither confirming nor denying that he was Hermione's Secret Keeper. The Order members in general still believed Hermione to be dead, and none of the three who knew better disabused them of the notion. But Ron's and Harry's attitude toward their former teacher softened slightly, imperceptibly, and he recognized their efforts to keep up the façade of the caustic relationship that seemed to be theirs. The lank-haired spy noticed, if no one else did, that Harry's and Ron's verbal jousting no longer had the bite of distrust and loathing.

Harry especially seemed to grow more pensive and quiet as the summer progressed. He retained some of his boyish mannerisms, dragging his hands through his unruly hair, but in other respects he'd become a man. The wizarding world's hope for the future no longer shouted Dumbledore or the older members of the Order down when he was frustrated, and he kept Ron's temper in check, as well. Instead, Harry and Ron would determinedly challenge certain strategies as unsound and question many of Dumbledore and Moody's recommendations. Dumbledore was finding that the weapon he'd forged had become a double-bladed sword. It cut sharply in both directions, but the aged thaumaturge began, with feigned grace, to allow Harry to have some input into the decisions that would decide his own fate.

As far as Snape could tell, neither Harry nor Ron had succumbed to the combined efforts of Ginny and Mrs. Weasley, and it was obvious that the youngest Weasley had been kept ignorant by her brother and her would-be lover about Hermione's being alive. Snape was surprised by this exclusion.

Hermione's supposed death had been handled over the course of the summer by the various members of the Order with myriad reactions, and he'd been relieved that his participation in her safety was so readily concealed. Next to Harry and Ron, Molly Weasley's and Minerva McGonagall's reactions had been the most aggrieved. Snape had found it exceedingly difficult to maintain his secrecy in light of Minerva's lined and tired face. She'd seemed to lose heart after Dumbledore's pronouncement of Hermione's 'loss', and Snape had been hard pressed not to reassure her, but he wouldn't erode either Hermione's or McGonagall's safety. If he survived, Snape would willingly let his colleague hex him into the following week. Until then, he maintained his silence and earned McGonagall's censure when he'd sneered, "How fortunate for us not to have to endure the sophomoric pronouncements of a precocious witch."

Remus Lupin's reaction had been profound. The werewolf had blanched at the news of Hermione's presumed loss and he'd retreated to his room after the meeting, in a similar but quieter manner than Harry. The next time Snape had seen Lupin, Snape thought the man had aged a decade. Tonks had smothered Lupin with her attentions until he'd snarled at her, "Leave off, Nymphadora!" She had left him alone until he'd apologized.

Molly continued to express her sorrow by mothering Harry more than ever, which had only served to annoy her son and daughter. But Albus Dumbledore, who had professed his great distress, and had initiated a couple of desultory 'searches' and mentioned that he was certain Hermione needed time 'away from the wizarding world

now if she has survived,' turned his speculative gaze upon Ginny Weasley and suggested that she might want to 'be there for young Harry, he'll need his friends now more than ever.' Ginny had taken the Headmaster's words to heart, and while Snape didn't doubt the sincerity of her care for the young savior, there was a calculating... something to her manner that bothered him. Snape hoped, perversely, that she wouldn't be successful in her bid for Harry's affections. Each time he'd had that thought, he derisively decided that he was growing soft when he most needed his wits.

Arthur Weasley's reaction to Hermione's 'death' had been the only one which had truly taken Snape by surprise. The Weasley patriarch had shown the intelligence that most discounted by immediately turning to give Snape a measuring look when Albus had voiced his opinion that Hermione was beyond their assistance. Thereafter, Snape found himself under the ginger-haired wizard's scrutiny on more occasions than he was comfortable with. That Arthur turned that same speculative look on Albus Dumbledore elevated him in Snape's eyes. Snape assiduously avoided any direct conversation with the perceptive Muggle enthusiast at the Order meetings. And every week, after those meetings, two letters would be left for Hermione in the library, hidden under Harry's copy of 'Hogwarts, A History' which he'd received from Hermione as a graduation gift. The letters were not to be found the following day, but in their stead was a response, written in elegant, copperplate handwriting.

In this fashion their lives continued until the very last week of August when Lord Voldemort's patience had indeed run out.

~o0o~

Check Mate, the Black King Advances

Chapter 5 of 7

In which Voldemort coerces Severus

Guard... Check... Mate

By Bambu

~o0o~

Author's Note: Be advised that the beginning of this chapter is filled with graphic depictions of the effects of a curse.

~o0o~

Chapter Five: Check Mate, the Black King Advances

Writhing on the highly polished, wooden floor, Snape shouted as he was wracked with the unbearable agony that was the Cruciatus curse, thousands of knives piercing his skin, his muscles... his mind. As his body spasmed and his eyes rolled in his head, Snape could make out the circle of Death Eaters surrounding their overlord. Some were watching his jerking movements avidly, others were avoiding the pitiful sight of one of their number rolling in pain, and all were wholeheartedly relieved that it wasn't them in his place, suffering the caress of their master's displeasure.

Lord Voldemort's agonizing incentives had grown more frequent over the past few weeks, as Snape had been seemingly unable to give up Harry. The bottle-spectacled wizard was training daily with Dumbledore and Moody, and studying late into the night, following Hermione's surreptitious and secret study-guide. However, the more time the young wizard had to hone his skills, the better chance he would have to be victorious. So, Snape kept his mouth and his mind closed, and suffered the continuing negative reinforcement that the Dark Lord specialized in.

Only this time, Snape knew that the end was at hand. There remained five days before September first and tempers were frayed, tolerance was at its perogee, and Snape was the sacrificial victim.

Snape had been afflicted with the agonizing curse for varying lengths of time since he'd arrived at the Dark Order's new location and hadn't given Voldemort the answer he wanted. His punishment had been swift and merciless, as it had been for the past eight weeks. Voldemort's chastisement of Snape's failure had dragged on for three hours, and Snape's well-honed ability to distance himself from the pain was weakened to the point of non-existence... he was close to giving up hope.

Abruptly the curse broke off and the high, cold voice of Lord Voldemort hissed, "Look at me, Severus!"

Snape rolled onto his back, gulping in huge mouthfuls of air, his limbs twitching. He looked up to the skeletally thin frame of the Dark Lord, his vision obscured by sweat-soaked strands of his black hair. He was incapable of pushing the hair from his face. The flat face, slitted-nostrils, lipless mouth, lidless crimson eyes stared back at him, unblinking. The foul stench of decay and rancid blood emanating from Voldemort's robes wafted in Snape's direction as the Dark wizard moved toward his recalcitrant Death Eater. Snape fought the nausea that would set off muscle spasms anew.

The Dark Lord pointed his wand at Snape, and the Potions master flinched, the muscles in his back knotting, one hand spasming, itching to grab the Portkey... but it was too soon.

Not yet, not yet.

The cold voice shripped, "*Legilimens!*"

Snape felt his mind's barricades holding against the assault on his defenses. He concentrated on mundanities while the Dark Lord accessed, painfully, forcefully, Snape's most recent public images. The minutia of teaching duties flooded his mind: compiling student lists, purchasing annual potions ingredients at the Apothecary, sitting in on staff meetings, Dumbledore's mention of seeing Harry in a few weeks time. Nothing revealing, nothing to merit the agony he was currently experiencing.

Snape hoped to live through the night.

By the time Voldemort withdrew his attack, Snape's feet were curling with cramps, the large muscles in his legs shook and trembled with strain and residual hex marks. He couldn't allow himself to think of the one place he wished he was: a small, quiet sitting room with a curly-haired witch writing letters. Just blocking the thought soothed him somewhat.

"Tell me, Severus. Where is Potter?" Voldemort's skeletal hand, scaly fingers wrapped around his wand, pointed directly above Snape's heart.

Snape's voice was hoarse and soaked with pain. "I do not know, my Lord. I keep as close to Dumbledore as possible. Surely I will find him in time."

"Not good enough, my servant. Not nearly good enough." Once again, Voldemort opened his mouth to curse Snape, and the despairing wizard prepared for the Cruciatus, praying to whatever gods might actually exist that he didn't end up like Frank and Alice Longbottom, vacant and drooling into their laps. But he was to be surprised... unpleasantly.

Two words spoken in that thin, shrill, cold voice. It was the last time the word 'cold' would enter Snape's mind.

"Inflamare venis!"

Snape's blood began to boil... literally.

He screamed, his skin rippled, and Snape knew that he was going to die. Searing, burning agony unlike anything he'd ever known pulsed through his body, in time with his heartbeat, flushing through his veins.

With all his remaining will, Snape fought against grabbing the Portkey... he couldn't do that until the Dark Lord had seen into his mind *Hurry up, you Bastard!* The fire in his body was cooking everything in its path. Even if Snape lived through the next ten minutes, he would never survive. Scorching heat from within evaporated any sweat that he might have produced to cool the boiling of his blood.

Not yet, not yet.

Snape clawed at himself in an instinctive attempt to purge the offending flames from his body. His fingernails raked his cheeks, shredding the pale skin. The blood that oozed from his veins was boiling, steaming, and as it dripped across his face it left second degree burns.

As one, the circle of his brethren stepped back.

Snape thought he might die right there, right then. He barely registered the icy scream, *"Legilimens!"*

But Snape knew immediately when the Dark Lord had breached his mental wards. As if a chunk of grey matter had been hewn from his brain, Snape felt the protective aspect of the *Fidelius Charm* being tripped. The location of the cottage had been severed from his mind. Hermione was safe. He had saved her. That knowledge was his only comfort as he thrashed on the ground, screaming in agony, tearing his clothing, rending his flesh, reaching for the blessed relief of unconsciousness.

Snape had been a spy for so many years that even his private mind had created barriers within barriers, and the Dark Lord had not as yet discovered the damning evidence of the spy's true loyalties... and Snape's body was burning. Soon the layers of protective tissue would give way and his veins would burst.

Not yet, not yet.

The smell of burnt flesh and the copper tang of blood filled Snape's senses. The fact that it was his own blood, his own flesh, didn't even register. He was focused inward, riding along with the vicious bastard who was raping his mind...

Boil... boil... toil and trouble...

fire burn and blood bubble.

Snape was a cauldron, made of bone and muscle and tendon... and blood. He was made of blood... blood that boiled and sluiced through his entire venal system, reaching every extremity, every organ in his body. He tore at his hair and his face... ripping at his clothing, attempting to find some way to cool off his limbs, his body, his intestines.

How long could a heart function with magma for blood?

His brain was heating up and Snape feared that he would be dead in short order. As he retched and flailed at Voldemort's feet, seeking any chill in the gleaming hardwood floor, he forced his spasming, clawing hand to find the Portkey, his most urgent duty.

His lungs felt on fire, each breath turning to steam as it left his lungs. He gulped fresh air in a frantic effort to cool his internal organs, long enough to fulfill his obligations. Even as he found the top button of his robes, and began to feel his way down the placket of his robes, Voldemort was riffling through his mind, memories of Order of the Phoenix meetings, the times he'd met with Dumbledore privately.

Snape's fingers found the second button... the third. He breathed flames and shouted hoarse, unintelligible words as agony ripped through him. He no longer saw the circle of Death Eaters or the red eyes of the Dark Lord. He was blinded by his own crimson eyes, blood vessels ruptured and light obliterated from his sight.

Images flashed through his mind, in time with Voldemort's perusal: Harry Potter and the Weasleys seated around the kitchen table at Grimmauld Place, Hermione's face illuminated in the soft light of the sitting room they shared in what were the only peaceful and contented moments of his life. *She is safe.*

"Traitor! Spy!" The Dark Lord shrieked at his formerly trusted Death Eater.

Snape's fingers fumbled on his frock coat, losing count. The stench of decay and blood filled his nostrils. He was panting and screaming, his blood bubbling, each breath was unrelieved pain.

Top button... *it burns... it burns...*

Second button... *it is over... I will never find the cottage...*

Third button... *I will never go home...*

Searing agony, lungs on fire.

Fourth button... *kill him, Potter...*

"Aha! I have it!" The cold voice crowed in triumph. **"The Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix may be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, London** My faithful, we have the location, we have the element of surprise. Wormtail, your arm. It is time to summon the remaining members of our flock. We will take Dumbledore and his sycophants in their sleep!"

Voldemort kicked Snape in the ribs. The splintering of bones couldn't be heard over Snape's cries. "I have no need of you!"

Fifth button.... *Breathe...*

Just two more minutes... *I will miss you, Hermione... I have saved something precious.*

Sixth button... *It was worth my life.*

The shrill, cold voice began the final incantation that would end Snape's agony... *"Avada Ked..."*

Snape's fingers found the seventh button and, amidst the fiery torture his internal organs were suffering, verging at the point where the proteins which formed his cellular structure were denatured, he felt the tug behind his navel, and then darkness consumed him.

~o0o~

...please go directly to the next chapter...

Check Mate, The Black King Advances II

Chapter 6 of 7

In which Severus' fate is decided

Guard... Check... Mate

By Bambu

~o0o~

Chapter Five: Check Mate, the Black King Advances

The next thing Snape felt was a thud as he collided with a hard tiled floor. He hoped it was the kitchen of Grimmauld Place and right at Albus Dumbledore's feet. He couldn't see where he was. He could only feel and smell... scorched sinew and flesh. The burning hex was still active and he screamed and whimpered in pain as he pressed his singed, bloodied face into the cool floor.

"Merlin! Severus, what's happened?" Molly Weasley's voice was terrified, almost as high pitched at Voldemort's, and as welcome as an ice-bath.

Snape faded in and out of awareness, and he longed for the oblivion of darkness... insensate darkness.

He felt Dumbledore's gnarled hands rip the Portkey from his clothing, and heard the old wizard shout for Harry and Ron and Lupin. Dumbledore was summoning the Order of the Phoenix, and his voice receded from the kitchen. This was it, the showdown.

Snape had made it. He had fulfilled his duty. Hermione was safe and he'd been unerringly correct in his prediction: Dumbledore hadn't spared him the time to remove the Inflamare Curse, which was even now about to consume him. Snape forced his mind to think of Hermione, he wanted his last thoughts to be of the peace and companionship he'd found with her for these short few weeks.

He burned and writhed on the tile floor. Forgotten... *dying*.

He vaguely heard running footsteps and then Arthur Weasley's voice, surprisingly steady, say *'Finite Incantatem!'*

The searing, burning, boiling in his veins ceased, his lungs sucked in pure, cold air, and, Snape screamed in relief, tears of blood tracked down his ruined cheeks.

Just as the waiting arms of darkness enveloped him in her embrace, he felt an oddly shaped object thrust into his cramped, clenched fists, and, of all people, Harry Potter's strained voice, say, "Thank you, Professor... for everything. Live. Live for Hermione."

Blackness descended and Snape felt the familiar tug behind his navel as he was whisked away from Grimmauld Place.

Snape slipped into and out of consciousness and lucidity for an indeterminate period of time. He couldn't see anything, and once or twice feared for his eyesight, then laughed, an unrecognizable sound, gurgling and choked, at worrying about so trivial a thing when death was dancing with him in the darkness.

Pain wracked his body, the fierce blaze of tissue and nerves damaged by Cruciatus and Voldemort's last hex. Snape's body was a mass of raw, bloodied welts and muscle spasms. He was unsure whether he was alive or in some extremely bizarre ante-chamber of hell.

Interspersed between blissful periods of nothingness, the sounds of scurrying footsteps, multiple stasis and healing spells intruded into his screaming mind. A noxious and foul mixture was forced between his clenched jaws, and he gulped the liquid, uncaring whether it was poison or cure. It cooled everything it touched as it made its way down his throat, through his esophagus and into his stomach. The welcome relief caused him to sigh and shed more bloodied tears, and he barely felt his body transferred to a bed. The effects of the potion began to spread, to counter the torturous inroads blazed by the Inflamare Curse.

Snape sobbed at the respite from his agony and at the fleeting, semi-formed thought that he might still be alive.

After some time had passed... days... weeks... he had no concept, the faint smell of an astringent assailed his nostrils and distant sounds of feet made him draw the conclusion, his last for some time, that he was in a large room and that there were healers present. Where he was exactly he didn't know, and didn't care. Rational thought was far too taxing for his violated body and mind to deal with.

Sounds, snippets of conversations, flickered through his semi-conscious state. He thought perhaps, but dismissed it as wish fulfillment, that he heard Hermione's voice raised in panic, and later that she was arguing heatedly with someone.

Am I alive?

Darkness remained his friend, for wakefulness was confusing and painful. His eyes were bandaged; in one moment, he remembered a Senior Healer saying something about ruptured blood vessels in his eyes. He had no idea if they would heal. He'd been unable to remain awake for the rest of the conversation.

I must be alive.

Someone at his bedside murmured responses to questions. He couldn't make out the voice, it was indistinct but female, and he hoped it was Hermione, even if it couldn't be. She was waiting at the cottage for him. Waiting at a cottage he no longer knew how to find. Tears tracked from beneath his bandaged eyes and across his wounded cheeks, and the muscle spasms took him again.

Maybe I'm in hell.

His face itched as did his forearms. Every time he moved to scratch, some group of muscles seized in uncontrollable spasm and he'd whimper in pain. When they would cease, he was left shaking and with absolutely no muscle control whatever. His brain, marginally coherent, supplied an answer: after-effects of the Cruciatus. Soothing fingers would massage the spasms, and more noxious liquid would be poured down his throat. But the burning had ceased, and he wondered if his brain was intact.

I'm alive.

The exultant thought roused him. His throat was parched and he was intensely thirsty. He tried to ask for water but his voice was unrecognizable. He would later find out that his vocal chords had been seared as a result of the Inflamare. It wasn't an Unforgivable... only by virtue of being so new a curse that it hadn't been classified. As he croaked again, urgently needing some water to soothe his throat, he heard a stifled sob, then liquid was poured into his mouth. It wasn't water, but it was soothing and his raw vocal chords soaked up the curative. A scent that he thought he recognized filtered through the odors of healing wounds and seared nasal membranes.

He slept.

Finally, after an indefinite number of days, Snape woke feeling as if he knew who he was and that his body was under his control. His throat was once again dry and he was terribly thirsty. Again there was a faint, recognizable scent in the room. The gauze wrapped around his eyes was thin enough that, if he squinted, he was able to make out the shape of a window in whatever room he was being kept, and that there was enough light to assume it was day.

Snape turned his head stiffly, careful not to set the muscles into spasm. Squinting through the filmy layer impeding his sight, he could vaguely make out the figure of someone at his bedside. He knew who he wanted it to be, but had no reasonable right to expect it. She'd said that she'd wait for him at the cottage. He couldn't bear it if he'd lived and couldn't find out whether Hermione had waited for him to return. Did she even know that he'd survived? Did she even know that the final... *Gods*. He didn't even know what happened. Had the confrontation occurred, had Potter won? Had his personal sacrifice been in vain or had it been a success?

Impatiently, Snape shifted, and a startled noise at his bedside drew his attention. It was a half-choked sob. Gentle fingers touched his face. His cheeks were no longer bandaged and he could feel fingers gently tracing what would be thin scars inflicted by his own hands seeking to ease the pain of that final hex. He was so entranced by the touch that he failed to notice the repetitive whisper of her voice or that familiar scent intensify.

"...forgive me, forgive me. I couldn't just sit and wait... not knowing. I had to help."

It was Hermione. Against all his expectations, she was at his side, she was here. SHE WAS HERE!

"What are you doing here?" It was a croak. Snape's voice bore no resemblance to his normal, controlled tone.

"Severus?" She stood in a rush, almost leaping on him in her eagerness, and the sudden blockage of light through the gauze blocking his vision caused him to flinch and Hermione to cry out. "Oh!"

"Damn it, woman! What are you doing here? Why are you not at the cottage?" Anger rose to the surface of his relief, evidence of his fear for her. But nothing intelligible emerged from his mouth, only a guttural cough. He certainly couldn't speak with her like this.

"What do you need, Severus? The Healer?" She took a step away from the bed, and his hand, finally acting upon directions from his functioning brain, reached out to stay her departure. Hermione caught his flailing hand, gently sandwiching it between her smaller hands. "I won't leave. What do you need?"

You! I need you!

He couldn't say it yet. He croaked, "Water."

This time she understood and he was elevated by invisible hands and Hermione put a cup to his lips, tilting it enough for him to slake his thirst. The invisible hands retreated and he breathed deeply, just those few moments had exhausted him.

He closed his eyes. She was there. Hermione was at his side. "Stay," he croaked.

"Of course," she responded, her fingers tracing patterns on the back of his hand.

Snape slept.

When next he awoke, the gauze around his head was gone and he hesitantly opened his eyes. It was dark. The room was illuminated only by moonlight streaming in through the curtainless window. His vision wasn't impaired, and a sigh of relief escaped his lips.

Snape turned his head, wondering whether Hermione had been a figment of his imagination or not. Not. She was there, and his heart lurched. She was asleep, curled up in a chair at his bedside. He didn't need light to see her clearly or to recognize the outline of her unruly hair. He'd seen her sleeping face so often that he knew what she looked like. Nonetheless, Snape's greedy eyes peered at her in the dark, seeking out her familiar, beloved features. He strained to make out her face, her determined little chin, the full mouth, slightly pert nose, and her luminous dark eyes... which were even now staring back at him in the dark. Hermione was awake.

This time when he spoke the words were intelligible. "Why did you not wait?"

Her voice trembled. "I knew you would be angry with me for being here, but I was so worried."

"That is not an answer. You said you would wait for me."

"I did wait. I waited for six days after the Order meeting. Six long, agonizing days when you didn't come, you didn't arrive. I could only think of you, and, finally, I had to know if you were... alive."

His mind was waking up, was working through what she'd said. Snape rejoiced that his mental faculties didn't seem diminished. He didn't know about the rest of his body, but he could think and he could see and his limbs seemed intact. "How did you know where to find me?" And then he answered his own question. "Potter! Potter sent me here."

Snape scowled at Hermione in the dark. Somehow he owed another generation of Potters a life-debt.

Her voice was quiet, hardly carrying to his bed. "It was a contingency plan I worked out with Harry earlier this summer... in my first letter to the boys. If he thought it necessary... he promised... if you needed help, he agreed to have you brought here."

"Hermione! You should not... you did not..." He stopped babbling to gather his wits, perhaps the lack of control was a side effect of Voldemort's curse. "He did. Potter put a Portkey in my hands..." He looked at her again, the moonlight giving him insufficient light to see her clearly. "How could you risk yourself like this?"

His fear for her, his anger that she'd broken the Fidelius charm practically rendered his sacrifice immaterial. More coldly than he meant, he demanded, "Tell me what happened?"

Her breath hitched but strengthened as she spoke, "Harry won. We lost too many, but it's over. Voldemort is dead and the Death Eaters... most of them are either in hell with him or languishing in Azkaban for the rest of their natural lives. Malfoy is one of them."

Relief flooded Snape. He was alive. Hermione was alive. Potter had won and the Dark Lord was dead. It was inconceivable... unbelievable... apparently true. His mind attempted to assimilate the concept of his new... incredible... circumstances, and he hardly heard what Hermione was saying.

"I know that you have every right to be angry with me. But please understand. The day after the meeting, when you hadn't come all night and I'd kept from panicking by rationalizing that something important had happened, I felt the wards waiver and reset. Severus, the key in my pocket changed, the bit shifted into a new pattern."

She rose from the chair and he was lured from the mental distraction by her movement. He could see the tension in her body, and the familiar scent that was one part floral shampoo and one part Hermione wafted to him, borne on the currents of air she was creating by her anxious pacing. He inhaled deeply, the fragrance filling his senses as listened to her explanation.

"I knew that you were either mortally injured... or were... were.... And still I waited. I didn't sleep for two days. Then it was the next day, and then the next. I argued with myself, but I worried constantly. And I waited. What little sleep I got was riddled with nightmares."

She stopped pacing and stood at the foot of his bed, a slender shadow cloaked in darkness. Only her eyes gleamed in the dim moonlight filtering in through the window. Her voice was steady but strained, and he remembered how they'd talked when a glamour had covered her face. He'd relied then upon reading her eyes and her voice. From the tone of her voice now, he knew that she was utterly sincere.

"My promise to you was so important, that I couldn't cavalierly toss aside your sacrifice for my safety, but after almost a week with no word, I couldn't continue one more minute without knowing if you were alive or... or... dead. I knew that if you were alive, you would be here. Harry had promised me. I thought that I could safely risk one Apparition... I'm sorry if I've abused your trust. I understand if you can't forgive me." Her voice ended on a whisper, and she was perfectly still.

Snape thought that his heart might burst, it was so full of her confession and her distress. She'd worried herself sick for him. Not for Harry, nor Ron nor anyone else... but for him. A tiny shard spiked through his brain... perhaps there was a *later* for them, after all.

"Hermione..." There was no question of forgiveness and he wasn't angry with her, he was too damned happy to see her. He should have known that she wouldn't stay put. When had she ever let her friends down when they were in need? Snape's mind supplied his answer. Never. His breath caught in his throat. She'd done as he asked until her nature... her Gryffindor nature... had asserted itself and she'd come to find him. She had found him and remained by his side. His chest swelled with emotion and his throat was tight.

"Hermione, my only concern has been for you... that you stay safe. I should have expected that the *Gryffindor* in you wouldn't wait quietly while others fought your battles." There. Some of the flexibility had returned to his vocal chords, and he'd sounded more like himself.

Hermione remained at the foot of his bed, her hair a corona of inky, shadowy curls. "You forgive me?"

He held out his hand, and even in the dark she reached it in two quick steps. She leaned forward and scalding tears dripped onto his face as she lowered her mouth to brush his cheeks with her lips. Her hair cascaded around them, tickling, and her tears irritated his newly healed skin, but when her lips found his, Snape forgot the slight annoyances. She tasted sweet and a little salty, and he wanted the kiss as much as he wanted his next breath of air.

It was tender, it was passionate, and Snape deepened the embrace, sucking her lower lip between his, then flicking his tongue against her lips. When she responded with equal fervor, he caressed her tongue with long, slow strokes, teasing, tasting... pouring his relief, his understanding, and his desire into his kiss. His unclasped hand snaked around the nape of Hermione's neck, and his fingers splayed to cup her head.

Time stretched, pulled taut and snapped as Snape felt and heard Hermione utter a tiny, whimpering sigh. He moved his free hand to cup her face and then, as they broke their kiss, to trace her kiss-plumped mouth, feeling her lips move as she smiled.

One-handedly, Hermione retrieved her wand and, with a flick of her wrist, summoned her chair closer to his bedside. She never relinquished her grip on him, clasping his hand tightly in hers, remapping the veins, tendons and epidermis. Snape turned his wrist to entwine his fingers with hers, a pleasure he'd never felt before flooding his soul. It was far closer to true contentment than those weeks he'd spent sitting in a chair watching her, even with all the hours of stimulating conversation. It was different simply because he was touching her.

"You do not need my forgiveness, Hermione. Instead, I shall say the words you once said to me. *I missed you.*"

"Oh, Severus," she choked, "you have no idea... I had no right to expect that we would both survive, but we have, and I don't have the words... I missed you... so much."

For a time, longer even than the kiss, they lapsed into companionable silence. Although he'd only spent one night a week in her company, their time together had been of such a quality -- especially after the epiphany that had launched their unique relationship -- that sitting quietly in the dark seemed, to him, entirely appropriate for two such as they.

After a time, Snape asked, "Tell me everything that you know about what's happened, Hermione. Where's Potter?"

"He's here, but there's one thing you need to know first... they wouldn't let me in here to begin with, so I..."

They were interrupted by the arrival of a Senior Healer who entered the room, and the lights came up. His voice dripped disapproval. "He's conscious? Why didn't you alert me, Mrs. Snape? You agreed to inform us immediately."

Snape stared at Hermione in startled disbelief. *Mrs. Snape?! She met his stare and actually had the audacity to grin at him. Snape couldn't quite wrap his mind around the concept of Hermione Granger telling people that she was his wife. His wife!*

The Senior Healer unceremoniously pushed her aside in his need to check Snape's recovery. Their hands separated, and Snape growled at the other wizard's rudeness.

"Do not presume to treat Her... *my wife*... in such a manner."

The Senior Healer paused in his examination, and muttered an apology.

Snape arched an eyebrow at Hermione as her delight at his return to consciousness shone clearly on her face. He thought his heart would leap from his chest. As the Senior Healer, who hadn't bothered to introduce himself, poked and prodded and cast several diagnostic spells on his patient's body, the former spy categorized every piece of evidence that proved Hermione cared for him. He knew that she was grateful, and thought of him as a friend. He could easily have dismissed the signs of the affection she'd shown at the cottage as some sort of subconscious, traumatic sympathy transference due to the circumstances surrounding the deaths of her parents and the betrayal of Dumbledore. Except that she'd seen to *his* safety, making arrangements with Harry for *his* medical care, just as she would have done for her friends. But she'd remained at *his* bedside since he'd regained consciousness, day-in-and-day-out, and she'd kissed him... not an affectionate buss between friends or acquaintances, but a real, honest-to-Merlin tongue-twining kiss.

Unbidden, certainty began to snake its way through his mind, and he turned to look at Hermione, assessing her in the now well-lit room. There were dark smudges under her eyes, and her cheeks were gaunt, her lower lip had small darkened reddish sores where she'd peeled off layers of skin in her anxiety. He noticed the tension in her jaw... the jagged, red scar running along the right side of her neck, wrapping around her throat and into the collar of her rumpled, over-worn, Slytherin-green jumper. He hadn't noticed it in the dark, hadn't felt it during their kiss.

He quickly appraised the rest of her appearance, even as he was forced to roll to his side for the rest of his examination. Her hair was wild and needed a good grooming, her clothing bore the evidence of having been worn for too long, and held the slight sheen that indicated a cleaning charm applied too often.

*How long **has** she been here?*

Hermione looked exhausted and too thin, almost as she'd looked when they'd dismantled Dumbledore's glamour. Her scar was visible... and uncovered. She wore no glamour, no scarf, nothing to hide the evidence of Lucius Malfoy's curse. Snape knew that she was uncomfortable with the idea of strangers seeing it. They'd discussed it on several occasions. It was, therefore, astounding that Hermione had been distracted enough she'd been frantic, the undulating hint of belief whispered -- to ignore its presence simply to be by his side. He wracked his hazy memory. If it could be relied upon, she'd been at his bedside since almost the beginning. For weeks she'd obviously worn the same clothing, hadn't gotten adequate rest and food, and had allowed the staff to think that they were married. Those details, coupled with the fact that she seemed unaware of the scar, led Snape to an inescapable conclusion. Hermione cared for him... beyond gratitude, beyond friendship... perhaps deeply.

Snape's heart beat hard enough that the Senior Healer checked his vital signs again. He was suffused with a strangely ebullient emotion, and decided that he could even forgive her for coercing Potter into her plans. That thought served to remind him. "Potter, what happened to Potter?"

Hermione's smile dimmed and Snape was afraid that the young wizard hero's wounds were terminal and would yet consign him to an eternity with the Dark Lord. It was only a fate he would wish upon Lucius Malfoy, Bellatrix Lestrange and an especial few who'd earned their rightful place at Tom Riddle's side in perpetuity.

The insufferably interfering Healer handed him a vial and ordered him to drink it. The Potions master sniffed, ascertaining the quality of the elixir, and then impatiently tossed it down, anything to be rid of the distraction. He scowled at the wizard who had moved across the room to quill several notes on a parchment chart.

"Harry's still unconscious, but he's lucky to be alive and he's lost an eye. His room is next to yours, and I've been checking on him daily, whenever I can pry Ginny from his side. That girl's like a niffler with a galleon. She wasn't terribly happy to see that I survived my '*ordeale*!'"

Snape snorted in amusement. Hermione had no idea how tenacious the youngest Weasley could be. But her next words corrected his misconception.

"I'd thought that we were friends, but I realize now that I was merely a means to an end. But I don't think Ginny's going to find Harry as malleable as she believes, nor is she likely to find the support she expects from Ron. As much as she loves him, she'll never be Mrs. Harry Potter. He's given his heart elsewhere."

Snape froze and the Senior Healer left the room with a fierce, non-verbal berating of Hermione. She bowed her head in the face of the censure and the Healer patted her shoulder in understanding.

Ignoring the exchange between Hermione and the departing Healer, the dark-eyed wizard remembered that Potter had retreated for days after he'd believed Hermione to be dead... holed up in the library at Grimmauld Place, his faced streaked with tears and his eyes reddened and puffed. Was it possible that Potter had feelings for Hermione? Was it possible that when he'd just convinced himself otherwise -- his fantasy utopia was as rotten as Thomas More's imagined paradise?

Once again, Hermione seemed to read him like one of her beloved books. "No! It's not me. That's just wrong on so many levels, besides our interests lie elsewhere... as you should already know." She stepped to his side and reached for his hand, snugly fitting her fingers between his, bringing their conjoined hands to her mouth, and pressing her lips against his knuckles. "Harry's in love with Luna Lovegood. Has been ever since they realized how much they had in common at the end of fifth year. Ron and I are the only ones who know. It was the only way Harry could protect her."

Hermione's eyes blazed with intensity and she seemed to be communicating something to him. Snape's brain didn't understand, but his body had no difficulty receiving the message. His stomach coiled with anticipation, and she leaned over him, her hair tumbling around them, blocking the light. But he found that he couldn't muster the energy to decode the message as she pressed her lips against his, demanding entrance. He was an intelligent man and welcomed her, once again suckling on her lower lip before opening to her tongue's exploration. A frivolous thought spiraled through his brain. She appeared to be as inquisitive in the physical manifestation of her passion as she was tenacious in her research. He might have smirked if his mouth hadn't been otherwise more pleasurably engaged.

When Hermione ended the kiss, she settled on the edge of his steel-framed, narrow bed and traced the veins on the back of his hand once again. He drifted off to sleep, coaxed by the hypnotic caressing of her fingers on his skin.

The next three weeks passed in an increasingly frustrating round of potions, examinations, and something the Healers had adapted from the Muggle world, physical therapy. As far as Snape was concerned, he would have called it 'Silly Wand Waving for Morons.' He hadn't been able to convince the Junior Healer that his wandmanship was perfectly fine and had submitted to exactly two painstaking, excruciatingly fundamental sessions before he'd sent the blond Beauxbatons graduate packing.

Hermione would smirk from her position in the squashy armchair she'd commandeered as her own, and every night they'd recreate their moments from the cottage. She would read or write letters, he would watch her obsessively and they would talk about the cottage garden, going so far as to draw up diagrams for a formal herb garden, and a structured potions garden. The flowers, Hermione insisted, would grow everywhere.

The best part of the recuperating wizard's day was when Hermione would kiss him. She rationed her kisses: the good morning kiss, the after breakfast kiss, the mid-day kiss, the awakening kiss, the dinner time kiss, the dessert kiss, and his personal favorite, the bedtime kiss. He named them all, hoarding their memories for a time when he might be bereft of them... or her. For all his seeming good fortune, Snape had never before been the beneficiary of sustained affectionate interest. He kept waiting for the penny to drop and Hermione to realize that she was now unfettered in her choice of futures.

Hermione stayed in the room during his *therapy* with marginally competent Junior Healers; 'dunderhealers' she called them, but only after they'd left the room. He was never so circumspect as to hold his stinging wit, and it was a source of inner amusement to Snape that he never had the same 'therapist' twice. His reputation had spread rapidly. Snape waffled between eagerness to leave St. Mungo's and reluctance that it might signal the end of his time with Hermione.

Finally, after three weeks, Snape's patience had snapped. He snarled at everything and everyone, including Hermione, who remained at his side despite increasing suggestions from the St. Mungo's staff that she spend time elsewhere. She did... for three hours a day when she returned to the cottage to bathe and change her clothes, and then went to sit with the recovering Harry for an hour.

During one of the first evenings after he'd regained lucidity, Hermione had told Snape the list of those who had died the night of the last encounter. Hermione refused to call it the final battle because she'd learned from her intensive and protracted course of study during the summer that the inequities of power within civilizations erupted into conflict on a frighteningly regular basis. There would never be a 'final battle' between those who sought equity for all and those who wished to subjugate others. As she'd vocalized her conclusions, Snape had realized that she was truly no longer an idealist... just as he was no longer a pessimist. Indeed, it would be difficult to sustain pessimism when faced with the fact that he was alive when he shouldn't have been. Finally, she'd gotten around to telling him the names of those they knew who'd died. She'd cried as she'd spoken: Minerva McGonagall, Neville Longbottom, Draco Malfoy-- who'd died at the hands of Ginny Weasley when he'd killed her brothers, Fred and George. Nott, Goyle and Crabbe, fathers and sons had perished together. Avery, Macnair, the Lestranges. Killing Bellatrix Lestrange had been Neville's last stand. Shackelbolt, Tonks, Fletcher. So many lives truncated, so many lives wasted.

The air had left Snape's lungs and his eyes had grown wet when he'd realized that he'd never have the opportunity to make things right with McGonagall. She'd been a good friend to him in her brisk and practical manner, and he would miss her. He'd ached at the thought that his and Hermione's deception might have added to his colleague's burden in the end. Her death was a pain that he would carry for a very long time, even as he'd known objectively that his decision to keep Hermione's secret had been the correct one to make. Regardless, it hadn't eased his heartache or blunted his regret. Hermione had quietly let him brood for the better part of two days after she'd given him the full accounting of the dead. He'd appreciated her compassion.

He had been surprised to feel pleasure that Remus Lupin had survived. The werewolf had visited twice on his way to see Harry, once while the young wizard had been comatose and once after he'd regained consciousness. The werewolf had entered Snape's room leaning heavily on a cane, his robes still worn and tatty, and they'd had stilted but anger-free conversations. Remus had forgiven him for not revealing that Hermione had been alive, bitterly remarking that he'd wished Peter Pettigrew had been as loyal a Secret Keeper. Snape had later learned that Remus had refused to speak with Dumbledore since the first day Remus had seen Hermione in Harry's room watching over her friend. Hermione hadn't told Snape what had been said between Remus and her beyond the fact that he was incredibly relieved she was alive, and that he hadn't wanted Harry to suffer the same, lingering sense of loss and guilt that had plagued him following the deaths of James and Lily... and Sirius.

Molly and Arthur Weasley had stopped by to see him. They'd been very subdued. Three sons lost to the predations of Voldemort, on both sides of the battle had dampened even Molly's ability to find a silver lining. Percy Weasley had been exposed as a Death Eater after the final confrontation, when his eldest brother had unmasked his body lying among the protective phalanx at Voldemort's feet. Molly hadn't even chastised him for hiding Hermione and worrying those who loved her. Her only comments had been whether the healers could do something about *'that awful scar... such a shame... such a pretty girl'*.

Arthur had exchanged a wordless look of complete comprehension with Snape, and the former spy's estimation of the seemingly hen-pecked wizard had risen considerably. Apparently, the Weasley patriarch had accurately surmised that Hermione was alive and had managed to keep his own counsel, in spite of Molly's distress.

Harry's sidekick had even stopped in to speak to Hermione, his left arm in a sling, his hand swathed in bandages, two fingers severed neatly at mid-knuckle. Snape and Ron Weasley hadn't spoken, but they'd eyed one another as men. The youngest Weasley son had been as changed as war could make a man. Gone was the slightly frivolous teenager, and in his place had stood a resolute, staid, courageous man. Snape and the blue-eyed scion of the Weasley's had nodded at one another, and then Hermione had accompanied her friend to visit his nearest neighbor.

Adoring fans had apparently flooded the hospital, requiring Auror intervention for the hero, Snape had thought scathingly, until he'd discovered that he, too, rated a guard. The first time he'd attempted to leave his room, he'd been shocked to find his passage blocked by a young Auror. One of his ex-students, Gus Finch-Fletchley, who was the remaining son of his family. His younger brother, Justin, had been struck down in the final round of the furious battle. Snape had retreated to his room in something like horror after listening to the stammering, profuse thanks of his ex-student.

Now he was waiting for Hermione to return from her daily trip to the cottage. Snape paced in front of his windows, missing the comforting weight and sway of his teaching robes. He looked down on the dingy London street where small clusters of magical folk gathered, an occasional sign waved upward. *"Harry Potter is our Savior!"*

For weeks, the sidewalk had been filled with posies and other floral offerings in tribute of the final victory over the Dark Lord and those soldiers who had paid the ultimate sacrifice in defense of their world. Snape had been speechless when, one day, he'd seen a placard with his own name on it, *"Professor Snape is a Hero!"*

He'd been more cautious looking out the window after that. His tolerance, what little of it he was blessed with, had finally reached its limits a week ago, the day that Albus Dumbledore had come to see him. Snape had been in St. Mungo's for seven weeks at that point, and it had been the first time that he'd seen or heard from the leader of the Order of the Phoenix. He'd known that Dumbledore had visited Harry several times while the young hero had lain in a coma and none following the first visit after Harry had awakened. By all accounts, including the muffled shouting that he'd heard through the shared common wall between his room and Harry's, it had been a fairly explosive conversation, and Dumbledore had been refused entry since. He remembered having heard Hermione's name more than once during the heated confrontation, and Snape had smiled grimly and thought that sometimes justice does indeed balance the scales.

Later, after Dumbledore's visit to him, Snape realized that the old wizard had carefully timed his arrival to coincide with Hermione's daily departure. The Potions master still remembered the whitened head of his one-time mentor peeking around the door of his room, cautiously. Snape had thought that Hermione had forgotten something and had looked up with anticipation, but frowned when he'd recognized Dumbledore. The former spy's shoulders had tensed, his gut had clenched and he'd been on his guard. It had been the first time he'd seen one of his *masters* since the moment he'd Portkeyed into the kitchen of Grimmauld Place.

Their conversation had been awkward and stilted. Too much needed to be said to explain or eradicate the bitterness that now flavored the relationship. Dumbledore had been ill-at-ease, and Snape had been unable to forgive.

In Snape's mind, the final betrayal had been the second Dumbledore had left him -- after having torn the Portkey from his clothing -- lying on the kitchen floor, wrapped in his own pain and blood, the Inflamare Curse still boiling in his veins.

Dumbledore had apologized, and for a fleeting stretch of time Snape had believed in the elder wizard's sincerity, but then, in the next breath, Dumbledore had spoiled the moment. He'd offered Snape the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, exposing his true lack of understanding of his spy. To his credit, Snape didn't hex the old wizard. Instead, he'd said, *"Et tu, Brute?"*

The old Headmaster had recoiled as if struck, and Snape had unbent enough to explain. "I never *wanted* the Dark Arts position, Albus. I just wanted the children to be taught by someone competent."

He'd seen the hopeful look in Dumbledore's rheumy blue eyes, which seemed to have lost their twinkle, and the slight tremble in Dumbledore's fingers. Snape had irrevocably lost the ability to feel sorry for Dumbledore, but if he'd still had the capacity, he would have at that moment.

Dumbledore had assured him that his post as Potions master was waiting for his return, and then the old wizard had launched into a slightly abstracted retelling of Harry's last stand against Voldemort. As much as Snape hadn't wanted to hear the details, he hadn't minded the confirmation that Dumbledore was positive Voldemort was gone permanently.

Their conversation had been interrupted by Hermione's arrival. She'd been freshly changed into a short summer skirt and jumper, the red ridge of her scar a contrast to the pale ivory of her pullover, and her entry into the room had been halted abruptly by her sighting of Albus Dumbledore seated in 'her' chair.

The leader of the Order of the Phoenix had immediately focused on the angry red scar on Hermione's neck and torso, and Snape had seen something he'd never seen before. The old wizard had flushed in mortification.

Hermione's jaw had been clenched, and she'd nodded her head, her eyes flashing.

Her words had been civil, but the underlying anger in her voice had made it clear that there had been other words spoken between them before that moment. "Professor Dumbledore, how kind of you to visit Severus *at last*."

"I was just leaving, Miss Granger. Severus, I'm glad you're recovering so well, and I look forward to your answer. The term has started and I must return to Hogwarts."

That had been a week ago, and Snape had yet to learn what had been said between Dumbledore and Hermione before he'd regained consciousness, or where the confrontation had taken place. It was just as well, as he still didn't know what he was going to do when he was released.

He and Hermione hadn't discussed future plans beyond the fanciful planting of standard garden herbs and potions flora, and Snape was insecure about what would happen when he left St. Mungo's. He didn't know whether to return to Hogwarts or even where Hermione planned to stay. As far as he knew, Perennelle's cottage no longer belonged to him, and without the key or Hermione to escort him, he was banned from his retreat. The speed of his pacing increased and his mouth turned down into a scowl, his cheeks furrowed, and he firmly decided to hex the next person to enter the room if they weren't bearing release papers. His willingness to remain in limbo when the rest of his life was undecided had reached the breaking point.

Snape was as well as he was going to get in hospital. His muscles no longer locked in spasm daily, and even the residual muscle weakness would decrease over the course of time. Thin, parallel sets of white scars marred his cheeks, evidence of his own feral attempt to rid himself of the pain of Voldemort's final hex. Otherwise, his body bore no outward signs of his final moments as a Death Eater. The Dark Mark had vanished with the death of the Dark Lord, and though his skin still bore the shiny remnants of the Dark Mark, the inky brand had been lifted.

True to his mental word, when the door squeaked to reveal a Healer's aid, he sneered at the young witch until she'd run from the room in tears. Unaccountably cheered by his ability to still render incompetents to a state of jelly, Snape smirked as he looked out the window.

He spun at the sound of the door opening again, ready to engage the newcomer, when he realized that it was Hermione. She was smiling at him and Snape's heart did an odd sort of flip-flop as he took in the dress she wore. It was a summer dress, with a hemline reaching mid-thigh, its skirt swirling about her legs as she crossed the room to stand in front of him. Her eyes were alight with good humor and her hair was its full, unmanageable mane. It suited her.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" he growled.

She almost laughed at his petulance and it annoyed him. "Miss Granger..."

She did laugh at that. "Oh, Severus." She even had the impudence to pat his cheek gently.

He thought about biting her hand. And then he thought he might hex her instead, even though he didn't want her to leave.

He was frustrated and irritated beyond his ability to contain his temper. Since the moment three days ago when the Senior Healer had pronounced him capable of any activity, his mind had continually conjured images of exactly what he wanted to be capable of doing... to Hermione... with Hermione. If she still wanted him... if this was their later.

Now she was here and was... tormenting... teasing him. "What?" he snapped. "Are you here to gloat? I hate this place." He scowled at her.

It didn't scare her away. In fact, none of his bad moods or abrasive words had managed to daunt her recovered optimism. He usually found her soothing and restful company but every now and then her ebullience grated on him... now being a prime example. From the sparkle in her eyes, the tall wizard could tell that she knew something he didn't. He loathed having information withheld from him... as she well knew... it was what had led to their relationship. It only made his mood more sour. "Are you going to tell me or just stand there and simmer?"

"I'm weighing my options..." and then he saw her realize the deeper implications of her lighthearted teasing. She'd always been fairly quick. Hermione's eyes widened and her face drained of color. No verbal chastisement would have been as effective as her own intellect and conscience. "My god, Severus, I would never... You know I would never..." Her eyes grew glossy with tears and she hurried to his side, holding his gaze until he allowed her to brush a chaste kiss across his lips, and his eyelids fluttered, half-shut. Her voice was void of a tease when she asked quietly, "Shall we go?"

"Shall we go?" He sounded like a bloody parrot. "Go? Go where?"

"Home, Severus. Let's go home."

The sudden rush of emotion threatened to choke him, overriding his momentary annoyance for her thoughtlessness. Hermione wanted to take him *home*, to his *home*, to her *home*... to what he fervently hoped would be *their* home. He grabbed her and devoured her lips. Instantly, her arms wrapped around his neck, fingers threading his shiny, stringy hair as she responded. She almost melted against him.

"Hey, 'Mione!" Ron Weasley's voice interrupted them. By the time his copper-haired head craned around the opened door, Severus and Hermione were no longer kissing, but they were still in each other's arms. Ron's eyes almost bugged out of their sockets and he stammered a little, struggling to appear unfazed by their embrace, "Er... Harry... er... Harry's asking if you want to chat for a few minutes. They're releasing him on Monday and he wants to tell you his plans."

Snape hardened his heart against the fact that his freedom would be delayed. Of course Hermione would go speak with her friend. After all, they'd been friends for much longer than he and Hermione had been... whatever it was that they were. He resigned himself to wait, but Hermione's response was gratifying and unexpected.

"Ron, will you tell Harry I'll come by tomorrow? I'm taking Severus home today."

Ron had said easily enough, "Sure thing, Hermione. See you tomorrow." But he'd given Snape one sharp look, the muscles of his jaw working under the freckled skin. The younger wizard's message was clear. It was obvious that Ron didn't really approve of the relationship, but he'd matured and knew that Snape had protected Hermione, at great personal risk, when others wouldn't and hadn't. He would not interfere unless necessary. "Snape."

The door had shut behind Ron, and Hermione turned in Snape's arms, her face inches from his. Snape could read every line of her face, every nuance of her expression. There was no hesitation, no artifice, no indication that she would rather be elsewhere. His heart pounded hard in his chest as he realized that he might just get the dream he'd never allowed himself to believe in. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Yes." She answered, and together they swept from the room.

They were going home.

~oOo~

Author's Note: After I'd written this chapter, it occurred to me that the initial hospital sequence could be reminiscent of KazVL's story, 'Who By Fire,' but any similarity was unintentional and simply the result of logical consequences of Severus' being at the brink of death. This shouldn't dissuade anyone from reading any of her wonderful work.

Retiring from the Board

Chapter 7 of 7

In which Severus and Hermione go home.

Guard... Check... Mate

By Bambu

~oOo~

Chapter Six: Retiring from the Board

The *CRACK* of a double Apparition echoed in the foyer of what had once been Perenelle Flame's cottage and whose current ownership was the subject of much roundabout mental perambulation but with no resolve. It was as undecided as the course of the undefined relationship between the Potions master of Hogwarts and his former student. Indeed, as far as Snape was concerned, deciding which of them held the title to the cottage was immaterial in the face of Hermione's referring to it as *home*. He was still reeling from the ease with which she'd told her best friend that she was '*taking Severus home*,' as if it was an everyday occurrence or something that she'd discussed with her friends. It had never before occurred to him that she'd talked about him with her two closest compatriots. It should have, especially after she'd admitted to having made the arrangements for his medical care with Harry, but it hadn't. He continued to have difficulty imagining himself as an integral part of her life.

Considering his trepidation, Hermione's straightforward declaration had been a trifle unnerving and yet had been ripe with such promise that Snape had been filled with a bubbling wellspring of unnamed anticipation. It was the same unidentified emotion he'd felt on more than one occasion, and all in relation to Hermione. It was more than the peace, contentment and underlying sexual tension that had radiated between them for the several weeks before his hospitalization. And it was more than the eager, twining hope that had burrowed into his conscious mind and refused to be banished in the face of every pejorative he threw at himself: *old, battered, antisocial, poor, ugly, unlovable, undeserving*.

The feeling persisted, given weight and density by the irrefutable evidence that every time he'd awakened these past few weeks, Hermione had been curled up in her transfigured, squashy chair at his bedside. He feared that the unnamable emotion could be called happiness or love.

The tall, former spy stood in the entry of the cottage, Hermione at his side, and looked round the clean room, taking in the fresh flowers on the table, the aroma of lemon polish, and Hermione's unique fragrance blending and harmonizing into the perfume he now thought of as home. He closed his eyes and inhaled the fragrance, marking the distinct aromatic scents and the fact that the polish had an underlying hint of beeswax.

Snape had grown so accustomed to her slightly bossy, determined and fierce protection of him during his hospitalization that he missed the cue of her nervousness. When she dropped his hand and avoided his questioning eyes, the anticipatory bubble in his chest began to deflate.

"Do you need a lie-down? A bite of something with more taste than institutionalized food? To rest in the sitting room?" Her voice was a bit strained as she rattled off a series of other options available, including sitting in the garden.

Snape narrowed his eyes and watched her expressive face for a hint of what had altered her from the enthusiastic woman in his hospital room to the one now babbling inanities at him. After several weeks of essentially cohabitating with her, following a short few months of powerfully intimate interaction, added to the number of years of her passing through his life in more than the normal, impersonal student/teacher interaction, he had come to know her quite well. The corner of her lower lip was caught between her incisors, and the parity of color between teeth and bloodless flesh gave him the last bit of evidence he needed to understand.

His heart pounded and the bubble re-inflated to its former size.

It wasn't that he was particularly obtuse when it came to accepting Hermione's affection, rather it was a circumstance beyond his knowledge. Never in his life had he engaged in a liaison of any enduring affection and intimacy. What he'd shared with Hermione in the past, short four months had been more profound than any other relationship in his life. He'd needed the continuing, unexpected, illustrations of her affection in order for *it* to sink into his conscious understanding. *It* was the fact that what was happening between Hermione and him mattered to her... greatly.

Almost triumphantly, Snape processed the information that his subconscious mind was dragging into the forefront of his brain, and he recognized with sudden clarity that Hermione was as uncertain as he.

Snape stepped in front of Hermione, her head jerking up, their eyes met... and locked. He dropped his voice to a growly purr, "And what would *you* like to do first?"

Eyelashes flickering, Hermione took a breath, "I want to make sure that you are all right. Please tell me what you want?"

He watched her carefully, the slight trembling in her arms, the rapid, panting breaths, the dilation of her pupils until her eyes were almost as black as his own. He gathered the gossamer strands of his dreams, and uttered his heart's wish, "I want to lie down..."

He raised a large hand to cup her face, and his hope took flight as she leaned into his touch, "...with you..."

Her breath caught and held as he delicately fingered the jagged scar at her jaw. The flower of his desire was an unfurling bud. "...upstairs in *our* bed."

"Oh." It was whispered on a puff of air, Hermione's eyes drooping closed as she leaned further into his touch. "I wasn't sure you still meant it."

"I have meant everything I have said to you since the night we met in front of the Mirror of Disenchantment." Snape leaned toward her, his forehead resting against hers. He felt the flutter of her lashes against his face, and, here, in this sanctuary that had been his, and then hers, and now, he hoped with every recuperated part of his body, theirs, he dipped his head for a taste of her. A brief, chaste, caress of his lips against her petal-soft skin.

He felt her sigh, and her answer was illuminating.

"Me, too. I've been so afraid that there wouldn't be a *later*... or that you wouldn't want me."

The wizard who'd been called 'greasy git,' and 'bat of the dungeons,' among many other pejorative terms, started at her voiced insecurity, and understood that it matched his own. They truly were well-suited to one another. "As have I, Hermione. You will have other opportunities. You are young to be shackled to a man such as me."

The flash of anger in her eyes was instantly gratifying to his hopes, and ignited his physical desire to consummate their union.

Hermione's chin tilted upward, out of his fingers. "Don't you know that I'm not interested in other '*opportunities*,' Severus? I want only you."

He almost growled as he kissed her again, their passion spreading to a full, lush blossom of yearning, need, and impending fruition. This time, their kiss was demanding. Snape's tongue swept across her teeth and upper palate, the sensations so stimulating that Hermione shuddered in his arms, and he felt the instant tightening in her breasts through the thin material of her summer dress.

In the most primitive of drives, survival and perpetuation of the species, promise and invitation had been accepted. Snape broke their kiss, and led her upstairs, the contact between the palms and fingers of their hands humming with arousal and awareness. It was magical.

They entered the larger of the two upper rooms, the one that had been his bedroom, and where she'd slept during the few months she'd lived in the cottage. The broad bed had been freshly made and flower petals were scattered on the coverlet. Candelabras flared to life the moment they crossed the threshold, perched on small bedside tables, and a tray of mineral water and two glasses graced the small table under the window overlooking the back garden. It was unabashedly romantic and the intent unmistakable.

Snape's thin lips stretched into a smile and his heart hammered in his chest. He began to burn with a fierce need... the sun to her bloom. This was nothing like the hex of the Dark Lord's. That burning had been with malicious, malevolent intent to kill. This fire in his veins was an entirely welcome heat, and Snape's nostrils flared as he inhaled the rich, heady aroma of the petals and Hermione's own enticing musk.

Her voice caressed him, "You said if there was a *later* and if I still wanted you that you would sleep with me. It's '*later*,' and by some lucky twist of fate we have both survived, and I still want you. In fact, I... I want you more now than I did before." She left him at the threshold and crossed to the left side of the bed, and turned to look at him.

He stared at her, at the unbelievable gift she was offering him... herself. Her hair fell below her shoulders in a thick, lush tumble of curls, and he irrelevantly thought that Titian would have luxuriated in painting the rich hues highlighted by the sunlight arcing through the leaded window panes. Hermione couldn't have chosen a more unintentionally seductive dress than the one she was wearing. The buttercream color complimented her skin and the sunlight was obviously conspiring with her. The golden rays of afternoon backlit the thin cotton material, revealing that she wasn't wearing a petticoat and that her legs were slender and slightly spread.

Need blazed through Snape with a ferocity he was unaccustomed to, igniting sparks between every synapse in his body. He crossed the bedroom in three long strides to pull Hermione tightly against him, one hand threading through her thick mane of hair to cradle her head in his palm. Desire kindled in his groin and he was growing erect

with each thudding heartbeat. Hermione was completely pliable in his arms, the unfurling bloom, ripening, opening to her lover, the sun, and he tilted her head to one side, revealing her throat and the red ridge of scar tissue that she'd been so unselfconscious about showing at St. Mungo's.

As he lowered his head to savor her, he murmured, "Do not be mistaken, Hermione. I want you... today, tomorrow, and later... much later."

His lips found her roughened skin and he traced the scar that had brought them together. He followed its path, leaving a molten trail from her ear -- inhaling her aromatic fragrance across the ridge of tendon, feeling the rapid throb of her pulse, circling her throat to the scooped neckline of her summer dress.

She moaned as he demonstrated that she was not grotesque in his eyes. Her hips tilted against his, her desire naked upon her face and in her whimpering moans.

Snape's blood was thrumming with the heat of his ardor, and he was harder than he ever remembered being. He was tired of the months-long foreplay and wanted Hermione badly. And he wanted her now. When he stopped leaving her scar, Snape leaned his head back, and asked, "Have you..."

She blushed and nodded her head. "Yes."

Relieved that virginity wasn't an issue, Snape was pleased that their first time wouldn't be fraught with the fumbling and pain associated with breaching her maidenhead. He wanted to be inside of her... as quickly as possible. His erection twitched as he thought about burying himself deep within her... in one swift stroke. "Recently?"

"This morning," was her breathless reply.

Snape stiffened in her arms, and his voice was harsh. "This morning?"

Hermione tilted her head to look at him, her puzzlement obvious, and then she blushed. "I purchased the potion from the Apothecary at St. Mungo's. Are you angry that I planned this?" She began to pull away from him, but he held on.

"I am not angry. I am a bit perplexed. What potion did you purchase at St. Mungo's?"

Hermione's honeyed eyes latched onto his and she stood straighter in his arms, but didn't pull away, the blush deepened across her cheeks and in some recess of his mind he was amused to note that her ears flushed when she was embarrassed. He'd never noticed before. He drew his attention back to her words, "It was a monthly contraceptive potion. I realize that it could have been wishful thinking, but I really hoped that it wouldn't be."

His audible sigh of relief triggered a cocking of her head, and her intelligent mind correctly put the clues together. Her voice rose a couple of octaves, "What exactly were you asking me? Have I had sex before? Am I a virgin?"

His abashed look was all she needed to draw the final conclusion, and Snape, almost exultantly, realized that she had learned to read him very, very well.

"Is it a requirement, Severus? Are you?" The irritation in her voice was suddenly replaced by dawning comprehension. "You thought I shagged someone else this morning? You utter pillock!"

His head snapped up and his lips thinned. "Pillock?"

She rolled her eyes, "Yes, pillock. You insinuated that I'm a slag, and I should probably hex you for that... or for giving yourself so little credit. Severus, why would I want to shag anyone else when the only man I have thought about, dreamed about, fantasized about for months is you?"

Her declaration was as effective at rendering him inert as removing boomslang skin from Polyjuice Potion rendered it ineffectual, and left him speechless.

Hermione smiled at him, her anger seemed to have evaporated. "No, I'm not a virgin. I haven't been since the holidays during fifth year." She interpreted his grimace, "No, it's not someone you know, and it hasn't happened since. I... I liked it at the time, but my last invitation was... erm... rescinded when he saw the scar on my chest."

Snape narrowed his eyes at this revelation. He remembered what she'd said in front of the Mirror of Disenchantment that night, months ago, and his anger toward whichever young wizard had been so cruel wanted an outlet. He knew many subtle and creative hexes which would have a rather deflating effect on a young wizard. "Who was it?"

Hermione leaned in and brushed his lips with hers. A spark of heat from the contact reignited Snape's need, his protective ire dissipated, and his erection strained against its cloth prison.

"It's no one important. I hadn't wanted to try again for a long time, but I do now... so very much."

He kissed her.

The brief diversion hadn't deadheaded the bloom of their mutual desire, and their tongues met without preliminaries of chaste, closed mouthed kisses leading to a tracing of lips requesting entry. This was a hungry, feral twining of tongues in an effort to get as close to one another as possible... inside one another would be preferable. The kiss intensified until they needed to breathe and Snape's recuperated body was trembling from exertion.

Hermione stepped back from him and pushed him onto the side of the bed. "As much as I want you and want this, I will *not* jeopardize your recovery."

"Are you always this bossy?" he asked with a bite to his tone. He was frustrated. She was right, and his stamina wasn't quite what he'd thought.

Hermione's lips curved into a smirk that was almost worthy of a Slytherin. "Only with those I love, Severus."

He sucked in air, blood pounded in his ears. *She loved him.* He growled and grabbed her waist, pulling her roughly between his spread thighs.

"Do you mean that?" he demanded fiercely, as if nothing else in his life had ever mattered as much to him... except surviving to hear what she'd just said.

"Of course ."

Her eyes shone and her sincerity was obvious. Snape's heart lurched, and when she said yes, a great smile broke across his features, stretching muscles that had been unused for years.

"Well?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered and leaned forward to nuzzle the valley between the peaks of her full breasts. They were far too enticing to ignore.

Hermione raked her fingers through his long hair, as she'd done frequently during his stay at St. Mungo's. "Yes what, Severus? Yes, you're a virgin? Yes, you love me? Yes, you want me to continue being bossy?"

The banked heat in his limbs flickered to life, and her teasing only fueled his increasing arousal. "No, I'm not a virgin. Yes, I love you," his black eyes flicked up to hers, and held her gaze, even as his fingers began to unfasten her dress, "and, yes, I want you to continue being bossy with me... in private."

"I love you, Severus." Her dress fell from her shoulders, slipped down her arms and caught at her hips. She was a partially opened blossom, petals stretching outward on the edge of full display: lush and vibrant. Hermione ignored the gathered material at her hips in favor of wrapping her arms around Snape, and he felt himself muzzled by the soft skin of her torso and the silken feel of her shimmering, diaphanous Muggle bra.

He inhaled her scent and groaned into her skin, and, in one swift move, he leaned forward, forcing her body to step back. He stood up, a limber, tall man who'd, at long last, and entirely unexpectedly, found his heart's desire wrapped in wild hair, a brilliant mind, and a loving heart. "I love you, Hermione."

Her answering smile rivaled the incandescence of the sun, and she halted his movements as he worked his way through the fabric of her dress, searching for the remaining buttons. "Let me."

He desisted, his throat dry. He'd never expected her to be so forward, but it stood to reason. She was a Gryffindor and it was in her character.

Bottom lip plumped to either side of even white teeth, enormous eyes latched onto his, Hermione deftly released the remaining buttons, dropping her dress in a puddle on the dark planks of the floor. Snape had seen her in various states of undress before, but the intimacy of those moments was far different than the fiery tension that was building between them now.

As the peony blossoms, layers and layers of petals unfurling to reach out to the warmth of its lover, offering itself in a magnificent presentation of color and fragrance, so, too, did Hermione display her most private self as she removed her sheer underthings and lay down upon the petal-strewn duvet, unfolding before the heat of Snape's gaze in a magnificent offering of herself.

Fantasy verged on the cusp of reality, and Snape accepted Hermione's offering. Indeed, he could do nothing else... he was entirely captivated by her. His eyes traced the livid, ragged line of Malfoy's curse scar as it wrapped around her body, bisected by the silver white line of Dolohov's properly healed attentions. She lay open to Snape's sight, unflinching, although a hint of insecurity lurked deep in her eyes. His heart pounded in his chest, and in one fluid movement, he was lying atop Hermione, rolling them over, his mouth fused with hers, and the fragrance of the bruised flower petals underneath them assailed his senses.

His only coherent thought was that she was naked in his arms... and she was his. *Gods, she was his*

When the kiss broke, Hermione leaned up, and Snape stared at her greedily, his eyes once more tracing the scar tissue on her chest, thanking Lucius Malfoy and Voldemort for their prejudice and avarice which, in turn, had led to the fateful alteration of his life's course.

Suddenly Hermione blushed and turned her head, and Snape remembered her fears. He brought one hand to her damaged breast, cupping its full weight, his forefinger and thumb met in a circle, to clasp her ragged, ruined nipple between them. Her head turned sharply and she met his eyes with wonderment and hope. There were tears sparkling in her eyes and Snape knew that it would be a long time before she believed that he found her beautiful. But he would make it a priority... starting now.

Snape leaned upward, bracing himself with one arm, his mouth found her nipple, and he laved, suckled and rolled the distended, distorted tissue until it reacted and Hermione arched into his attentions. He continued to suckle, while his right hand traced the ragged scar, from beneath her breast, across her ribs wrapping around her waist and hip, to where it ended, in the dimple of the small of her back. He realized that when Lucius cursed her, she must have rolled on the floor in an effort to get away from the impact. The result had been a spiraling slice, and it had been a miracle of timing that had kept her alive.

At the realization of how close he had come to not knowing the wonderful woman she'd become, to not surviving to have this willing, loving witch wriggling and moaning on his lap now... he tightened his hold. He released her sluggishly responsive nipple and looked into her eyes. They were black and her lips were full and inviting.

"I need you, Hermione." In some ways the admission was more profound than expressing his love for her. Snape needed her at the most primal of levels and with the most noble of intentions. He threaded his hand through her wild hair, cupping her face with one, trembling hand.

Hermione's reaction was immediate. Her fingers flew to the buttons of his black linen shirt, shaking as they unbuttoned it while she muttered, "...So long... it's been so long." The fabric slid to the side, and Hermione took small detours, mapping each of his scars, new and old.

She leaned forward, her hips sliding backwards, the friction causing Snape's erection to throb insistently. He growled with impatience as Hermione began to trace his scars with her tongue, flicking, laving and leaving moist trails between the remnants of his career as a spy. Her fingers fumbled with the last few buttons of his shirt, sight unseen.

Snape reveled in the sight of Hermione's wild hair cascading across his pale chest, her delicate face, the spray of freckles dark against the porcelain of her skin and the pink tongue licking his own tortured flesh.

He plucked a stray, crimson petal from her hair, fingering its supple texture. When her fingers began to unfasten his trousers, Snape released the flower petal to help Hermione. The bruised petal spiraled from his fingers, to land neatly atop the mound of Hermione's pale cotton dress, an areola flushed crimson with arousal and desire.

Seconds later, Snape's trousers and pants fell to the floor in a discarded, careless heap. The time for foreplay was past and when Snape pulled Hermione atop him once more, it was as naked lovers, skin-to-skin and soul-to-soul. A soft sigh escaped Hermione's mouth as she straddled him, his tensile strength stroked by the damp curls of her pubis. She delicately traced the scars on his chest with one hand and her scars with the other. Their eyes met, brown-to-black: open, vulnerable, loving.

Snape shuddered at the significance of the moment. If he had his way, neither would ever have another lover. The yearning to possess, mark, and claim her was stronger than he'd ever felt it.

As their eyes locked onto one another's, Hermione wrapped a hand around his erection and, with a subtle shift of her weight and hips, she guided him to exactly where he longed to be.

In the one swift stroke he'd imagined, Snape sheathed himself deep within Hermione's tight, wet, birth canal. As she moaned and began to rock and rotate her hips, Snape realized that birth canal was exactly the right appellation for her fist-tight depths, because he and Hermione were participating in a ritual that was the birth their union. When she dragged her fingernails across his nipple, leaving the linear marks of a claw, he forgot about the philosophical or metaphorical significance of euphemisms and let his senses overtake rational thought.

She was a glorious sight, her hair a wild corona of mahogany and bronze, her slender limbs learning his body, hands teasing, hips rocking with him deeply embedded within her. They were one, just as he'd hoped in the inner recesses of his mind. Merged... unified... One. Snape watched, fascinated by the physical mechanics of their coupling, and he bucked into Hermione, causing her to moan.

She arched her back in such a manner that he sank deeper into her than before. His right hand wrapped around her hip, the rippled, red scar tissue a ridge under his palm, and he guided her rocking movements in time with his thrusts. She bent her head to capture his lips in a ragged, panting kiss.

With his left hand, Snape reached for the conjunction of their dovetailed bodies. He was on the verge of culminating his most cherished wish, and Snape would use every scintilla of cunning he'd garnered throughout his life to make and keep her happy. His dexterous fingers, slightly calloused but capable of great delicacy, sought the pulsing nexus of Hermione's pleasure, threading through the interwoven brown and black curls to seek their goal. When found, the small nodule of flesh was damp and slick with the effluvia of their combined, imminent release. Snape rolled and tweaked the tiny protrusion of flesh, and Hermione began to whimper. He mentally smirked, feeling ridiculously proud of himself for having such an effect on her, but his mouth was far too occupied with Hermione's tongue to form the expression.

Hermione began to tremble, internal muscles fluttering around his hard shaft as he thrust into her. She was close to orgasm, and the tightening in his groin signaled his own impending climax. Snape would do his damndest to see that they came together this first time. He would never give her cause to leave him. He stopped the teasing of his fingers and his movements became more purposeful. With his other hand, he pulled on her hip, almost slamming her onto him, and he heard her breath hitch. He was seconds from orgasm when he flicked her hooded pulse point.

Hermione convulsed, her back arching, her voice crying out his name. The force of her release spasmed around his erection and triggered his own release. He gasped her name and flexed his hips, shuddering with the power of his climax. The blossom had been spent in the fiery heat of a sirocco, the petals blown into the wind.

A bundle of warm witch collapsed against Snape's chest, her hair tickling his nostrils and his lips as she buried her face in his neck, her chest heaving. His breathing was

rather ragged, and together they caught their breath. Their skin glowed with the sheen of sweat and the aromatic fragrance of sex, mingling with the floral scents of roses and Hermione's personal fragrance.

After several moments, in which lassitude began to spread throughout Snape's body, Hermione lifted herself from his prone form, and she reached for her wand. It was discreetly placed at the foot of the candelabra on her bedside table, the wooden length snuggled next to his ebony wand (it had been pocketed in the tattered, bloodied remains of his Death Eater cloak for weeks until Hermione had retrieved it for him). She cast a cleansing spell on each of them, and banished the remaining, bruised flower petals before wrapping herself around Snape. She nestled her head in the crook of his shoulder and sighed. Within moments, Hermione was asleep.

As exhaustion overtook him, Snape couldn't remember ever having felt so content. Not even the shared moments in the sitting room, or the entwining of their hands in hospital, or even her rationed kisses were comparable. Now, in this moment, Severus Snape was at peace.

When he awoke several hours later, Hermione was spooned against him, still deeply asleep. He wondered how long it had been since she'd slept in a bed. As far as he knew, she'd remained at the hospital every night since he'd been conscious enough to realize that she was at his side. From the attitude of the hospital staff, she'd been there long enough before that point to have made an impression. He smiled... an easy, indulgent smile. Hermione had told the hospital administration that she was his wife in order to stay by his side. They'd bent the rules and bowed to her demands.

He nuzzled her hair and wrapped his arm more firmly around her. His long fingers explored the puckered scar that swirled around her body. Inexplicably, he was fond of the scar; it was the reason he'd found her that night in the dungeons, the reason he'd changed his strategy, altered his alliances, and, in all probability, the reason that he was now alive to reap the bounty of his compassion and Dumbledore's betrayal. He snorted soundlessly. In a very twisted way, Albus Dumbledore had been the matchmaker that had led to Snape's greatest source of joy. He sobered as his fingers found the bisecting junction between curse scars, just above the swell of her left breast. He traced the spot, lightly, mentally comparing the differences between a scar that had been allowed to heal properly and one that had illustrated how disposable Hermione had been to Dumbledore.

"X' marks the spot."

Her whisper startled Snape, and he tightened his hold, drawing her close. She wriggled her bum up against him, and his desire flared to life, stirring in his groin.

"Yes," his voice was a velvet purr, long fingers traced the cross. "This is *my* spot."

"Yes, it's *your* spot, right above my heart."

She started to turn in his arms, but he held her in place, rocking his hips against her bum, shifting his position, so that his right arm, which had been trapped beneath her, had more freedom of movement. He bent his right elbow and his right hand was able to cup her breast, his fingers tugging on the thickened dark cap of her areola. The scar tissue was denser than her unblemished skin, but it yielded to his fingers' lovemaking.

Hermione arched, her head thrown back and he suckled on her earlobe. Her hips began to rotate in an enticing, bewitching manner. His erection slid effortlessly in the valley between the cheeks of her bum, and his left hand slid across the satin of her skin, up over the ridge of bisecting scar, and down to the dampening curls at the apex of her thighs.

Almost without thought, Hermione separated her thighs, and Snape pulled her left leg up and over his legs, opening her to him. He bent his left leg to hold her in position.

Her guttural moan went straight to his erection and it twitched... hard, aching, ready.

She tried to turn again, and he growled, "Stay."

Her voice trembled and he heard the longing and the uncertainty. "I don't know... Severus, I've never done it this way."

"Then you will learn and enjoy it, Hermione." And he bit her neck, leaving a small, open cloud pattern of his uneven teeth behind. She gasped and writhed in his arms. He smirked where she couldn't see him, and his fingers continued their dual assault. She began her deliciously titillating whimper once again.

Snape was throbbing with the urge to drive into her. The next time Hermione wriggled, he rocked his hips and his erection nestled between her spread thighs, her curly pubic hair tickling his sensitized shaft.

Lifting his left hand from Hermione's damp curls, Snape spread his fingers, "Accio wand!" The fourteen-inch ebony length flew obligingly into his hand and he muttered a quick charm over Hermione. Her weight was halved, and he dropped the wand to the floor, shifting their positions. With her weight lessened, he had more freedom of movement with his right hand, and it explored the smooth skin of her labia before rolling her pulsing bundle of nerves dexterously between his fingers.

"Aaaahhh, Severus, I'm close," she panted, and instinctively reached for him, her fingers wrapping around the head of his leaking shaft.

Her lighter weight was easier to manipulate, and Snape was able to position her without removing his right hand from its task. She was moaning and whimpering, and with each sound, Snape's erection twitched. He was so engorged, so ready that he knew release was imminent, and he guided the angle of her hips, plunging deep inside her. Hermione was wetter than the first time, and he groaned as they found their rhythm within a few strokes.

His hand returned to her damp mons, circling, pressing and tweaking. She moaned and writhed, and her fingers remained between her legs, above the nimble workings of his fingers, stroking his erection as he sheathed and unsheathed from her core. It was an extra stimulation he'd never experienced before, and it heightened the sensations of his building orgasm.

"Gods, Hermione... I... you... this is..."

"Perfect," she purred.

Hermione's voice was deep and dark and Snape reacted instantly, increasing the pace of his hips, thrusting, pistoning into his willing witch. Blood pounded in his ears, a rapid beat in time with his heart, and then he was there, at the pinnacle, the second before shuddering bliss. He thrust one last time, rigid in his release and he gasped her name.

He was almost so consumed by the elation of his climax that he missed the telltale quiver signaling the prelude to her orgasm. He remembered her previous reaction to a bit of direct, forceful stimulation, and pinched her hooded nodule of flesh. Hermione shrieked and spasmed around him. "Sev...rus!"

This time, they didn't fall asleep. This time, they lay in post-coital languor and spoke in hushed voices.

Snape put all his hope, his dreams for a future, into one rather halting question. "Hermione... will you..." He cleared his throat, "I take it that you will stay... here... with me?"

Hermione turned in Snape's arms and he felt the gentle touch of her fingertips as she delicately traced the parallel lines of the scars on his face. She interspersed speech with kisses, "Yes..."

Kiss... Breathe... Snape's lungs filled with air. His fear had been for naught.

"I will..."

Kiss... Smile... Snape's heart pounded beneath his breastbone. It appeared that he might get his dream after all. Her leg wrapped around his.

"Stay here..."

Kiss... Snape's throat tightened. She was everything he wanted, in the home he loved. Her arm reached around him, stroking up and down his spine.

"With you."

A more lingering kiss... It looked like later was going to be now. She pulled him as close to her as possible, their cooled skin flush against each other, her uneven scar tissue pressed into him.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

With a breathless groan, Snape covered her mouth and swallowed anything else Hermione intended to say. He didn't need to hear another word, and he reveled in the blatant expression of her affection... no... of her love and intent.

After they broke their kiss, Snape realized that his eyes were full of moisture... of unshed tears. He hadn't cried in years... not since Perenelle Flamel had given him a home.

Hermione cupped his cheek tenderly, her own eyes brimming with liquid saline. Then her fingers once again traced the newly healed, parallel scars on his cheek.

"I love you, Severus. I don't ever want to leave."

His voice was choked with the intensity of the moment. He was no longer the greasy git of the dungeons. Instead, he was the wizard who'd survived a brutal crucible and had come out the victor. "As do I you, Hermione. I don't ever want you to leave."

"Nor I, you. I don't want you to go back to Hogwarts. Must you?"

"I think, my love," and he nuzzled her neck, a thrill at using the endearment tickling its way up his spine. He was feeling rather fatuous, an emotion he'd never expected to feel or enjoy. He placed lazy kisses along the scar that had brought him his greatest treasure... her. "...that we shall have the opportunity to enact the plans we have so tentatively made over the past two months. I will plant my potions garden, and you shall have your roses, irises and daffodils."

She smiled radiantly at him. Then Hermione pulled Snape from the bed for a bath, claiming that she had to oversee his efforts since this was his first day home from hospital. He smiled at his beloved and thought that he had been luckier than he'd ever imagined, and that disenchantment didn't always lead to despair.

Sometimes it brought delight.

~o0o~

Finite

Los Angeles, May 2005