

The Enchanted Tower Room

by beawesley2

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Enchanted Discovery

Chapter 1 of 25

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I simply cannot forget to say thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

Disclaimer: I was crazy one day and decided to borrow a few characters for a romp. I hope JK doesn't mind.

~Spring 1997~

Hermione remembered this room from her first year. So much had happened that day that actually, at the time, she'd paid little attention to the room itself other than to try and find a way out. What she did remember was the high arched ceiling and the rock walls that looked as if they had been sandblasted smooth. *The room had seemed remarkably bright and well lit even though there were no windows and no torches for illumination. True, it's usually Harry and Ron, or when they had been here, Fred and George, who were the curious explorers of the castle, but some of their curiosity was bound to have rubbed off on me, right?* Actually, she wanted to see the flying keys, and since Fluffy had been let loose in the Forbidden Forest at the end of her first year, entrance to the room would be safe. *Well, safer at least... except possibly the drop from the trap door in the floor.* She fingered the Fizzing Whizbee wrapper in her pocket, pleased that the sweet had eased her descent from the trap door.

What escaped her notice was the fact that the lure of the room had begun to plague her shortly after her seventeenth birthday. The room was as she remembered it, the keys still floating in the air like hundreds of tiny, golden birds. However, the brooms were gone. *Beyond the door into the next room of the maze she assumed. Right where Harry, Ron and I left them.* She doubted it, but it was a nice thought.

There was a staircase that began halfway up the wall. It simply came out of the wall, curving along the walls of the room, spiraling up to disappear up into the high-arched ceiling. It was an odd place to begin a stairwell, even odder that it ended going nowhere. Hermione stared at the staircase, her desire to climb it growing, just to see where it would lead. It was as if it had intrigued her for years.

Hermione walked around the curve of the wall, running her fingers along the smooth stone, passing the familiar heavy wooden door, looking up and trying to discern where the stairwell went. Her eyes followed the curve of the stone steps, tracing them as they curled around and up the wall disappearing into the ceiling above. "Somewhere up there," she sighed. *It begins halfway up and ends just under the topmost arch with no apparent reason.* It beguiled her curiosity, taunted her need to know, her desire to find out. Suddenly, her hand disappeared into the stone as a magically obscured opening gave way. Although she couldn't see it, she knew it was the passageway, and she eagerly entered, feeling the cold, sandy texture of the rock as she slipped through, finding herself standing on the stairs.

Quickly, she climbed up to see where it went, going round and round up the tower. The stairs ended at an arched doorway, which was in fact tucked between the juncture of the topmost curves of the arches that created the ceiling of the vaulted room below her. The door opened easily with the slightest touch of Hermione's hand, revealing a room, obviously the very top of the tower. The room was round with a steeply slanted, conical shape ceiling and very little adornment except for a few corbels spaced along the wall and one large window inset in the stone. The three-paned glass, two thin panes beside one large pane, was pristine and clear, beveled slightly on the edges. The view from the window took her breath away. She could see the forest from here, the vast stretch of treetops, and the rise of the mountains creating the horizon. It was beautiful and peaceful, quiet and serene.

Watching the sunrise from here would be amazing she thought, crossing her arms. *If only there was a way here that didn't rely on falling through Fluffy's trap door. Although, thankfully, someone probably Professor Sprout had kindly removed the Devil's Snare from under the door. If it weren't for the Fizzing Whizbee, that drop would've broken my legs.*

Back in the room at the base of the tower, Hermione slid her hand on the smooth stone again. "If only there was another way out," she said with a sigh. A door shimmered slightly and faded. She quickly walked to where the door had vanished, examining the wall again. "A way out," she tried saying, then added, "another way out." Nothing. "Please let me out," she said, and the door quickly reappeared and vanished again. "Please let me out," she repeated, grabbing the door latch before the door vanished. It opened and Hermione passed through. She was standing on the third floor corridor, several paces past the door to Fluffy's room. She turned around, and only a fragmented, sliver of a line could be seen of the door, a barely discernable outline in the rock. "Please let me in," she tried asking the corridor, and the latch appeared momentarily, then vanished again. Hermione smiled. She knew the way in. She counted her steps until she stood in front of Fluffy's door. *Eleven. I'll be back at dawn.*

~Spring 1977~

"I want to show you something!" Lily said, running ahead of him.

"What is it?" he asked, although he would have followed her anywhere in the castle just to be alone with her.

"It's right... wait..." She slowed down, running her delicate hand along the stone. "Please let me in," she asked.

"Sure, just tell me where?" he asked, breathing slightly heavier from the run.

Her fingers had caught on a latch, pushing open a stone door. "No, silly, in here." They entered a tower. The room was large and the walls smooth. Lily lit her wand and gazed up the walls. "Isn't this great? That door leads to a steep tunnel that goes for kilometers, and... ah... this one ends just under a trap door on the ceiling; however, it's really rusted and locked. But this is what I wanted to show you! Look, stairs, halfway up on the wall... How are you supposed to reach them?"

"Fly," he said, lighting his wand.

"We don't have a broom," she said cheekily. "I wonder where they go."

"Somewhere up there," he said offhandedly, and his hand sunk into the rock. He quickly grabbed her wrist, pulling her through the rock space with him, feeling the gritty stone slide over his skin, but not snagging on his clothes. *A magical obscured passage... interesting*

They landed on the stairs. Severus stubbed his toe and warned Lily as he proceeded up the staircase. The stairs ended at an arched doorway, recessed between the conjectures of two of the arches in the ceiling. The door opened easily with the slightest touch of his hand, and he gallantly opened the door to let Lily pass. The room was small, obviously very high up in the castle with one sizable window. The glass was clear and pristine, beveled slightly at the edges, with a wide windowsill, just deep enough to sit upon and wood that framed the window in the thick stone walls. You could see across the tops of the trees from the window and the crests of the mountains beyond.

Lily walked straight for the window, placing both hands on the windowsill and leaned forward slightly. "Oh, this is breathtaking!" she said in awe of the view.

Yes, great view. "Yes, it is," he admitted, watching her eyes alight with happiness.

After staring out the window, Lily turned to leave. "The door, it won't open!" she exclaimed.

"There's Dark Magic on the door, I think," he said, examining the wood and doorframe. He could detect a nearly imperceptible shiver of magic.

Lily's eyes grew large. "Dark Magic? Are you sure?"

The words *Arcanum Donec Amas subst Osculari* were carved in the arch over the door. "We can't leave without kissing."

She turned to face him, her hand still on the wall beside the door. "You're kidding!" she exclaimed, looking at him first in shock, then in mild indignation. "You just want to kiss me!"

"Yes, I do," he said, stepping over to her and gently curling a strand of her hair around his finger. "But you know Latin as well as I do, and it translates into 'sealed until a lover's kiss.'"

Lily backed up until her heels hit the stone wall behind her. "This is a trick! It's just you did this somehow to so you could kiss me, didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. I don't know this magic," he said, letting his voice curl seductively around each word. "You'd like to think I would or that I did this to trap you, but it's just happy coincidence." He placed his hands on the wall on either side of her and leaned into her slightly until he could just barely brush her lips with his own. "So, Lily, now that you have me here, what are you going to do?"

"I didn't bring you here," she replied, her voice edged with a slight tremor. "I..."

He leaned in and kissed her lips, savoring the silky soft feel of them and the scent of her perfume. The door latch clicked after several heartbeats, and he swore softly as the door opened.

Lily was staring at him, her face flushed and her eyes wide.

~Spring 1997~

Hermione ran up the stairs in the key room, hoping she wasn't too late to watch the sun rise over the mountains. She'd been eagerly anticipating returning to the room again, really looking forward to spending the predawn hours to watch the change of light on the landscape from the window. She slipped into the room quickly and closed the door just as Professor Severus Snape turned around. *Damn.* "Ah... Good morning, sir."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, his tone icy.

"I um... wanted to see the room ah view," she stammered, uncertain as to why she was there suddenly. "Because I wanted to..."

He stood aside, his face hard. "By all means, look," he said with a sweep of his hand.

Cautiously, Hermione approached the window and set both hands on the windowsill as she looked out the pristine glass at the view of the forest and rugged mountains, all the while extremely aware of the presence of Professor Snape looming behind her, just a little to her left. He was quiet, making no movement or sound as he stood there. Hermione kept her eyes on the window, her breathing becoming forced and even as she waited. As if on cue, the colors changed, the subtle variations of morning broke as she watched, acutely aware of the man behind her. He shifted and stepped up to the window silently, leaning against the side of the window frame next to her.

They didn't speak until the colors faded as the sun appeared over the mountains and the sky turned a bright sky blue.

Hermione turned and faced him finally. "Um, thank you. I it's time I go, I suppose."

"Indeed," he said, his expression unfathomable to her. "By all means, go."

She walked to the door and tried the latch. It wouldn't open. She drew her wand and said, *Alohomora*." Nothing happened.

He chuckled softly, standing closely beside her. "Your magic won't open the door, Miss Granger." He pointed above the door and Hermione's eyes followed his finger.

The words *Arcanum Donec Amas subst Osculari* appeared as if carved into the stone arch over the door. "But that means," she gasped.

"Yes, Miss Granger, as inappropriate as it is," he said as his hand slid into her hair and cupped the back of her head, drawing her closer to him until his face was barely an inch from hers. "Yes, I'm going to kiss you so that I can leave and have breakfast." His lips landed on hers in a soft, sensual kiss, his lips caressing hers, catching her lower lip briefly, then covering her mouth again, sending shivers down her spine and curling her toes. Hermione sucked in her breath, bringing with it his scent, which only affected her baffled mind further. His kiss ended as quickly as it had started when the door opened. "Thank you, Miss Granger, thirty-five points from Gryffindor *if* you mention this to anyone."

He left the room in a swirl of black robes that billowed behind him as he descended the stairs.

Oh, bloody Merlin! I just kissed Professor Snape!

~Spring 1977~

Lily was crying as she ran down the corridor, and he followed, his soft worn trainers making little sound on the hard stone floor. Avery and Mulciber had cornered her, taunting and threatening her, calling her a Mudblood, and then coated her new jumper and jeans with mud and quagmire from their wands, drenching her shoulder to knees in front of everyone. Some of the Slytherins surrounding her had started laughing and taunting her while some stood aside looking surly, but doing nothing. The few Ravenclaws and Gryffindors who stood watching were too stunned and bewildered to take immediate retaliation against the crowd of Slytherins.

Severus gave all outward appearances of being like one of his Slytherin housemates, standing aside as if doing nothing but scowling. His scowl was not at Lily, although his eyes were on her. Nevertheless, after years of dealing with Black and Potter, he'd learned the deception of covert movements while appearing disinterested and indifferent and honed his ability to utilize his peripheral vision. And it was Severus who quickly cast the three curses at Avery and Mulciber with enviable speed, watching his laughing dorm mates collapse on the floor with swelling, oozing tentacles and pustular boils, erupting everywhere on their bodies. *Serves you right.*

Lily had turned, shoving some of his snickering housemates aside as she'd pushed her way past them angrily, just before his curses had struck and both Avery and Mulciber fell to the floor. She obviously hadn't seen what he'd done since she'd fled, running up the stairs and down the third floor corridor. He quickly followed her, still scowling.

Her hand stopped on the wall, which would lead her to the hidden room high above the castle. "Please let me in," she said, nearly falling though the doorway into the room with the partially appearing staircase in her haste. Severus followed quickly and saw her cross the room swiftly, finding the hidden entry, disappearing, then reappearing as she ran up the stairs and up into their room. He found the entry for the stairs and ran after her quickly.

"Lily?" he asked, deeply concerned when he entered their private hideaway.

She was leaning against the window, her forehead on the cool pane of the pristine glass with one hand on either side of her head. "Go away," she mumbled against the window, crying angry, humiliated tears.

He walked over to her. "No," he said simply, his hand grasping her shoulder to turn her around and face him.

Tears streaked down her face. "I'm a mess," she said with a sniff.

He flicked his wand, cleaning her up the best he could and pulled her to him. "No, you're not." He kissed the side of her head before she leaned away from him.

"I'm covered in mud from your friends and and you just stood there! Scowling at me!" she stammered, her green eyes accusing him.

"I most certainly did not. I'm afraid you missed the show, running away like that," he said, caressing her soft hair as he looked into her beautiful green eyes, which were filled with tears. "It will take someone quite a while to reverse the curses I used on them."

"You didn't?"

"I surely did."

She hugged, him and Severus held her securely in his arms, a smile on his face as he breathed in her scent from her hair.

"Severus?"

He felt her shift and wiggle. "Yes, Lily?"

She leaned away from him, looking into his eyes. "Thank you," she said softly.

He leaned down and kissed her. "You're welcome," he murmured against her mouth. She returned his kisses, her hands pressing on his back as he tasted her lips, deepening their kiss. He felt euphoric kissing her, holding her against him, savoring her lips. Her hands moved first, gliding over him, so he reciprocated gladly. At first, he mimicked her and then became bolder. One hand gently slid up her side, his fingertips brushing the side of her breast, and he laughed in pleasure.

She stumbled a moment, and he tightened his embrace to keep her from falling, wondering if it was his kisses that had made her knees give like that. He hoped so.

Neither heard the latch of the door click, nor did they care.

When she finally pulled away, breathless and slightly disheveled, he couldn't contain the smug smirk on his face.

She saw the open door next to him, her green eyes jumping from his smug expression to the door and back. "Severus Snape! How wipe that smirk off," she scolded at him teasingly as she adjusted her jumper.

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Author's notes:

I know I shortchanged the scenes with Lily, but that is the difference between a man and a boy. As a man, Severus would know more and have more control than his seventeen-year-old self.

Latin words used are:

Arcanum, which means closed

Donec, which means until

Amas subst, which means lover

Osculari, which means kiss

The Potter Place Post DH Prompt Challenge Prompts used are:

#34. Teenage Severus Snape and Lily find a hidden part of the castle that even the Marauders don't know. What happens, if anything?

# 37. Teenage Severus is really distraught over the incident after O.W.L. exams. He and Lily have one encounter that we know about from the memories Severus gave Lily. What if there were other attempts to win her back. What were they?

Then nearly twenty (more or less) years later, Severus, who considered this place to be his own private little nook, finds (fill in the witch/wizard) in the room. Who is it? What did he find her/him doing? And what does Severus do? Or not do?

## Back to the Tower Room

*Chapter 2 of 25*

Severus is intrigued by the Tower room and finds himself returning unable to resist its allure, especially when Lily is with him.

Hermione returns and is confronted once again by Professor Snape, and once again things get a little heated.

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Back to the Tower Room

~Spring 1997~

Hermione woke up early, stretching, and realized it was still dark outside. She was a morning person, and no amount of staying up late to study was ever going to change that. Parvati snorted and rolled over in her bed, and Lavender mumbled in her sleep, obviously snogging or shagging some guy in her dreams. Hermione chuckled softly, dressing quickly in her blouse and skirt and slipped from her room down to the common room, wishing out loud that she could have a cup of Orange Pekoe tea.

A house-elf said, popped up from behind a chair, startling her. "I has Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe and Broken Orange Pekoe, miss," he said. "I just made a pot of Broken Orange Pekoe this morning."

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, catching her breath. "I'd love a large cup if it's..." The elf vanished with a pop and reappeared again before she'd said, "...no trouble." Surprised, she added, "Wow! That was fast!"

The elf's face broke into a beaming smile, bowing. "Is miss need anything else?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, please, and I'm sorry for interrupting your work."

"Is it okay if I finish, miss?" the elf asked, looking antsy.

Hermione nodded, sipping on her tea. *This is delicious.* "No, please, finish. I'd feel bad if I kept you from your work." The elf smiled and scooted across the room to finish cleaning up the common room.

Hermione looked around and considered her options. She didn't want to stay here and bother the house-elf as he cleaned, and the library wouldn't open until six-thirty! *could go up to the tower room and watch the sunrise again... That would be nice.*

She walked down the quiet corridors quickly and easily found the hidden door to the key room. "Please let me in," she said softly. The handle appeared and she opened the

door. She sipped her tea as she walked across the room, her hand gliding until it slipped in through the rock and she pushed herself through. She quickly climbed the steps, opening the door quickly and was halfway across the room when she heard him swear softly.

Hermione turned around to find herself facing Professor Snape again. "So you are back?" he asked, annoyed, watching her with an oddly contemplative look as he leaned against the wall. From where he was standing, the door would have opened toward him, which was why she hadn't seen him upon entering.

"Yes, I just wanted to... come," Hermione answered, disconcerted by his stare. "I, um... didn't know you'd be here."

"Really?" he asked, his low silky drawl, making that one word seem like a complete sentence.

"No, sir, I'm sorry if I am disturbing you..." she said as he pushed away from the wall with his heel, standing a few steps away from her. "I just wanted to watch the sunrise again, and..." He walked right up to her side, standing so close his robes brushed her shoe.

"By all means, Miss Granger," he said slowly in his soft velvety voice. "Please, enjoy the view."

His manner and voice were having chilling effects on her composure. He was cool and confident, yet almost predatory in his manner, and Hermione felt her cheeks burn. She stepped back from him, edging toward the window and leaned against the frame. He followed her, placing one hand on the stone by her head. "Why are you here, Miss Granger?"

She crinkled her brow in confusion. "I go to school here, Professor, to learn magic."

He shook his head, his dark eyes never leaving her own. "No, I mean here, as in this room, right now. Why did you come back here?"

"I don't know? I just wanted to... Because I wanted to," she said, unable to express in words what had drawn her to the room *again* and *again*. "I just felt like it... I had this urge to come here." He closed his eyes as if what she'd said hurt him somehow. "I thought, well... I suppose wanted to come up and... see the sunrise from the window again." His eyes opened slowly, and he looked directly into hers as if reading her or seeing inside her, into her soul. Her breath caught in her chest as she looked back at him, suddenly physically aware of his power and strength.

"You are missing the sunrise, Miss Granger," he said slowly and deliberately.

Her mouth opened slightly, and her lip quivered, the tone of his silky voice sending shivers down her spine again. She turned away from him, completely aware of his presence as he leaned against the stone, still standing just off to her left and behind her. His nearness was disconcerting and yet dangerously thrilling. He didn't shift or move, standing over her as if protecting her. The silence in the room was broken only by the sound of his exhaled breath. She found herself matching his breathing, her heart pounding in her chest. She placed her hands on the windowsill to keep from swaying as she stared outside. The slow gradual change of color was extraordinary this morning.

He finally stepped back slightly when the sun broke over the mountain ridge, rays of light flooding the sky brilliantly. Hermione turned around slowly and faced him before pushing off the windowsill, walking around him slowly and toward the door. His eyes followed her every move, and she knew without turning that he was watching her from behind.

She wondered what he was waiting for as she reached out, grasped the latch and tried to open the door. The door wouldn't budge, remaining closed as if magically sealed. She turned around to ask him and noticed his smug, appraising stare.

"Yes, Miss Granger," he said softly in his smooth drawl.

Her name stretched out by his velvety tone made her heart beat faster. She could only stare at him as he stepped up to her, her heart pounding in her chest. "You mean?" she turned around, her body tense in anticipation as she tried the door again. Hermione looked up, her hand still on the latch as the words *Arcanum Donec Amas subst Osculari* appeared again in the arch over the door. She turned around to look at him quizzically.

"Yes, Miss Granger, apparently we have to kiss *again* in order to leave," he said as he gripped her shoulder pulling her roughly into an embrace.

"You mean you want to? Kiss me? Again?" she asked, apprehensively, every nerve in her body very much attuned to him.

"Yes, I shall kiss you, *again*, so that we can leave." Hermione held her breath as his mouth brushed against hers, his gentle kiss making her oddly heady. His lips caressed and swept across hers seductively, teasing her lower lip. She couldn't help but respond to him, and she kissed him back, trying to match what he was doing to her. He pulled away from her, and she slowly opened her eyes, staring into Snape's dark ones as he stared at her face in return. Hermione felt her cheeks burn, and she averted her eyes, turning her head slightly. "Look at me."

She turned her head back to face him boldly, and his mouth lowered over hers in a strong, passionate kiss that once again curled her toes. Her arms jerked out to grasp onto him, to steady the swaying feeling he was causing, clinging to him for support. His hands slid down her body as they kissed, and he grasped her waist, pulling her against him, then slowly glided his hands up her sides until he nearly reached her armpits. She boldly rose up on her toes and slid her arms around his neck, wanting nothing more than to draw him down to her. His thumbs brushed along the edge of her breasts and she moaned.

The faintly audible click of the latch had caught his attention, completely missed by Hermione. She nearly stumbled, her knees weak, and he reached out to steady her, holding her firmly until she was able to stand. When she looked at him, he had a knowing, smug smirk on his face. "We've opened the door, Miss Granger."

Hermione was still struggling to control her breathing, her heart pounding erratically in her chest as she gazed at him, first bewildered, then becoming indignant at his cocky smirk. "The very least you could do is not look so smug!"

"I have every reason to feel quite smug," he said, his silky voice teasing her senses as he let go of her. "I never thought a simple kiss would unsettle you so." He turned in his heel and strode toward the door, leaving her in complete shock. "Thank you, Miss Granger; nevertheless, I'll take forty-five points from Gryffindor *if* you mention *this* to anyone."

Hermione stood shocked stone still as if rooted to the flagstone floor. *A simple kiss! He nearly we nearly he was all over me! And HE calls this a simple kiss? What in blazes would be a big kiss or a mind-blowing kiss?* She started for the door, quickly checking her blouse, then scooting back in the room to re-tuck and adjust her clothes. *Oh, Bloody Merlin! What have I done? I just snogged Professor Snape! I've kissed him again and liked it!* Hermione staggered from the room, her head spinning with the memory of his kiss. *Ron's never kissed me like that!* Feeling like she'd swallowed Befuddlement, Confounding, and Delusional Potions all at once, Hermione hurried back to her common room to put on her robes before breakfast.

~Spring 1977~

Severus had been back up to the room several times over the last few weeks. The view from the window was beautiful, but the memories were better. It was a place he could escape from Black and Potter because they often mistook the door he entered for the one not too far away down the corridor. That one led to a big room with a trap door in the floor, which opened up to a long drop down. Severus had added the Depth-Disillusion, Repelling, and Confundus Charms on the opening of the trap door so that neither Potter nor Black would try and make the drop, thus still giving him an escape they knew nothing about.

The room intrigued him. When he was here alone, the room was warm and inviting, but he could easily leave. The door opened for him with no problems. However, when he'd been up here with Lily, all six times now, the door hadn't open until they'd kissed. This didn't bother Severus in the least, but Lily teased him about it, claiming that he'd

fixed the door on purpose. Not only that, but each time he'd gotten a little further with her. *Which is a good thing, right?*

It was on a rainy day when Lily took his hand and guided Severus, running down the corridors to avoid any Slytherins or Potter and Black, back to the wall that held their secret door. "Please let me in," she said with a giggle, grabbing the latch when it appeared. She practically pulled him inside the room with her and then turned, facing him as she backed across the floor, smiling. "Come on," she teased, turning away from him when he tried to grab her hand again.

"Lily, are you sure about this?" he asked, following her with a cautious grin that belied the predatory feeling he had inside.

"Why? Don't you want to see the rain falling on the trees?" she asked, sliding her fingers on the stone wall, trying to find the entrance to the stairs as she watched him. She was smiling happily, her green eyes sparkling, never leaving his as he stalked after her. "Or we can see if there'll be a rainbow when the rain stops?" She halted a moment, then quickly disappeared into the stone wall, and Severus ran in after her, chasing her all the way up into their room. She turned and faced him as the door closed, and Severus smiled, his eager anticipation evident in his eyes. "Oh, don't look at me like that!"

"Like what?" he asked, reaching for her only to have her duck out from under his grasp.

She laughed, and he chased her as she dodged his advances, but he finally cornered her against the wall. She laughed as he advanced on her, trapping her against the wall with his arms. He leaned down and kissed her. "Is this what you wanted, Lily?" he asked as he caressed his lips against her mouth and nibbled her lips.

She shook her head, shrugged, and said, "Ah, uh," all at once, confusing him.

He leaned on one arm, his free hand toying with a strand of her hair as his looked at her. "Why are we here, Lily?"

"I don't know? I felt like it..." She looked at the window longingly. "I just wanted to... Because I wanted to," she said as if she was finding it hard to explain. "I thought, well... I had this urge to come here." She bit her lip and looked up at him through her lashes. "I just wanted to..."

"Why?" he asked, not used to seeing her act like this. She was usually quite decisive.

"I dunno. I felt like it. I suppose to be here with you," she said, gliding a finger on his chest. "I just felt like coming up here."

He fought the urge to grasp that finger and suckle it.

"You come up here nearly every morning, don't you?" she asked, drawing his attention abruptly back to her face.

"Yes," he said, using the slow deep drawl that she liked so much. She swallowed and her eyes glazed hungrily the way they always did when he modulated his voice into a silky drawl.

"Why?" she asked innocently, her one hand now resting on his waist as the hand on his chest slid slightly, passing across his nipple.

He liked the feel of her touching him, even through his shirt and robes. "Because I like the view," he said, pulling her to him. He kissed her ardently, his mouth claiming hers as his, his right.

Her hand on his waist glided slowly up his back, and the other became trapped between them. Slowly, her hand slipped free and wrapped around his shoulder, and he hummed in appreciation against her lips. She opened her mouth to him, and his tongue teased around her lips before plunging inside to deepen his kiss. He pressed her against the stone wall, his free hand sliding slowly up her side, and his thumb stroked against the side of her breast. He smiled as his hand came forward while he kissed and teased her mouth and her lips. She moaned briefly, and he angled his head so that he could nip her jaw, trailing feather light kisses to her ear with tiny licks of his tongue. He reached up to move her hair so that he could kiss her neck, returning his hand to cup her breast. She squirmed under him, her hands roaming on him freely. With nimble fingers, he opened her robes and undid the buttons of her blouse as he assaulted her neck. She gasped, so he leaned into her and gave her a love mark, suckling her skin just under her ear, under her hair.

"Severus, oh, gods..." she panted.

"Lily," he breathed as he pulled away from her neck and crushed her lips under his, kissing her savagely. Her hands fisted on his robes, and he smiled.

Somehow, he managed to open her blouse completely, his hand touched skin, warm, glorious skin, and she gasped in shock again. "Severus!"

He pulled back so that he could see her, see her breasts, a frown flashing for the shortest second before he smiled at the lacy bra, supporting her lush breasts. "Merlin, you are so beautiful," he gasped, wanting to lick and suckle them.

He tried to lean down and at least kiss a breast, but she tried to push him away. "Sev, no...please."

His hand cupped one breast, and she inhaled sharply as his fingers found a nipple, stroking it and feeling it harden. "But you are ~~so~~ Lily, I just want to touch you, please. I won't go further," he said, making sure to use his low, silky drawl as his fingers caressed her skin under the bra. He wanted desperately to remove it. He opted for kissing her neck again as he tried to free at least one of her perfect breasts.

Lily sighed as his tongue flicked her skin, and he moved lower, kissing, nibbling and flicking his tongue on her skin as he slowly worked his way down. She leaned against the stone wall as his mouth trailed across her collarbone. *Sixteen more centimeters to go* he thought lustfully.

He never got the full sixteen centimeters. He only managed nine possibly eleven before Lily began to push him away again, trying to close her blouse and end the kissing. Severus was deeply disappointed but smiled inwardly. *There will be another day*, he thought undauntedly.

Neither Lily nor Severus had noticed when the latch had clicked and the door opened.

~Spring 1997~

She had no idea why she was returning again to the tower room, praying that he wouldn't be there, hoping that he would, silently berating herself when she entered the room with the stairs and glided her hand along the wall until she found the hidden opening for the stairs. She paused before pushing through the rock, remembering the last three times she'd come and found him in the room. *Three times out of five actually, but who's keeping track? Well to be fair, that one time I was there before he was*

They had kissed, sure, and his hands had roamed a bit like the time before, *but it was he had actually caressed my breasts that time...*

"Interesting," he said softly as his fingers brushed along her breasts. She knew that he could feel the lace of her balconet bra through her thin cotton shirt. "You hardly need the padding, Miss Granger."

"It isn't padded... It's... oh," she said, tipping her head back against the wall as his lips curled into a smile. Her mouth quivered just before his covered hers again. He nipped at her lip, then her chin and stopped, setting her back on her feet and holding her steady until she found her balance, with a satisfied smug grin on his face.

Oh, I wanted to wipe that smug look off him! The time after that one, she'd been alone, but the next visit, he had entered after she was there, standing at the window holding a cup of Kippy's Broken Orange Pekoe. He had stood there, stunned, his eyes narrowing as she turned her back to him to watch the sunrise and sip her tea. He silently waited, leaning over her with one hand on the stone next to the window as he watched the sunrise behind her, over her shoulder.

Of course, the door wouldn't open until she allowed him to kiss her. His kiss had been firmer, more demanding than before, practically devouring her. His hands had cupped her breasts through her shirt, kneading them, and the time after that, he'd had the audacity to open her blouse and fondle and kiss her breasts before the door opened. Each time she'd been with him he'd stopped, leaving her breathless and weak against the wall when the latch clicked and the door opened.

Each time it seemed that he was pushing her further, demanding more from her, and she willingly gave in to him, submitting to his advances. However, in class or when she passed him the corridors, he was his usual sneering self; although, on occasion, she did see something flicker across his face, a subtle change of his expression that lasted merely seconds and vanished. He also kept staring at her during meals. *Well much more frequently than before, although, Harry thinks that Professor Snape is staring at him. Not that I'm going to dispel that impression. I'm not ever going to tell anyone about what I've done! Well, this time he's not going to be opening my blouse again. I can assure you that one, Professor,* she thought as she pushed through the opening of the stairs. *But, oh, Merlin, that man can kiss, what he does with his fingers, his hands and his mouth on my breast...* She was nearly breathless just thinking about it.

She opened the door, casually looking around and entered the room.

"Back again, Miss Granger?" His silky smooth voice nearly made Hermione jump out of her skin and sent tremor down her spine.

"I could ask you the same thing," she replied, turning to see him leaning against the wall, holding a large cup of something steamy in his hand.

"I come up here every morning," he replied casually.

She stood frozen, staring at him. Today he wore only his shirt and trousers under his robes, instead of his frockcoat, making his lean frame more visible to her. The stark white shirt stood out in contrast to his dark hair, robes and trousers and heavy black boots. "No, you don't. You were not here yesterday," she replied, her breath catching when she looked back at him and realized he had been watching her as she'd been openly checking him out, ogling at him from head to toe.

"No, I was not in the castle yesterday morning," he replied, sipping on his hot drink. "Do you like what you see, Miss Granger?" His silky, rich drawl was both predatory and smooth as he pushed off the wall and walked over to her, stepping around behind her and leaning down close to her ear. "One would think you come here simply to see me. Is that it, Miss Granger, some school girl infatuation a fancy perhaps?"

"What? No, of course not..." She turned around not realizing how close he was actually standing next to her. "I don't know? Because I wanted to... I thought, well... I had this urge to come here and... Why did you come here?"

"I told you. I come up here every morning I'm in the castle." He finished his drink, shrinking the cup before putting it into his pocket. "I've been coming up here every morning for years."

She took a step away from him, but he stood still, watching her as she backed away and walked up to the window. "What I want to know is why are you here? Why do you come back?" she heard him ask. He was apparently standing right behind her.

"I ah, don't know... I like the view," she stammered incoherently when she felt that sensual, tingly sensation of someone *him* gently stroking her hair. "I felt like it... I just wanted to... I wanted to see the sunrise... I thought, well... I had this urge to come here and watch the sun come up this morning that's all." *Why am I babbling like an incoherent prat?* She didn't turn to look at him, but didn't tell him to not touch her hair either.

He stood silently behind her, his presence palatable in the small room as she gazed out of the window. Just as the first sliver of the sun peeked above the now familiar mountain ridge, he shifted, his boots alerting her to exactly how close he'd been standing this whole time. His hand landed on the stone to her right and Hermione turned to the right and slowly backed up until she was leaning against the ridge of stone on the opposite side of the window, looking back at him, knowing what would happen next. *He's going to kiss me so that he can leave,* she thought, her heart already racing in anticipation.

He stood watching her, his eyes sweeping over her as she tried to stop herself from doing the same and failing. When he closed the gap between them, it was quick, his one arm reached for her waist as his left hand landed on the wall beside her, preventing her escape. He pressed into her, pinning her back against the window frame, the cool glass on the left side of her back and the hard stone on her right. Instead of the hard demanding kiss he'd given her the last time, this time his lips were soft, gentle, his tongue exploratory. Her hands had automatically reached out when he'd approached her, landing on his body, finding solid muscle on his firm abdomen. He chuckled against her lips as she opened her fingers wide and her hands slid slowly down his body, stopping at his belt.

He took his hand and grasped one of hers, and keeping her fingers firmly in his, he began nimbly unbuttoning his shirt as he kissed the side of her face and breathed heavily against her hair, near her ear. "Do you want to touch me, Miss Granger?" he asked seductively in her ear as he released her hand down by his belt again and pulled the front of his shirt free. "Be my guest."

She looked up at him in aghast, held briefly in his dark fathomless eyes. His head lowered, his nose sweeping her hair aside to allow his lips to kiss her neck, and she inhaled sharply. His hand once again moved, gliding up her front, parting her blouse. Her body shivered, and she felt his fingers work their way up her skin and finger her bra. She wished fervently that she'd worn her old white one instead of the lacy, emerald green when he opened up her top and leaned back to have better look. The slow curl of his lips into an appreciative smile made her cheeks burn uncomfortably.

"Are you a closet Slytherin, Miss Granger, or did you wear this for my benefit?" he said as he opened her blouse wider and pushed it and her cloak down off her shoulders. She wanted to protest, but his mouth claimed hers, and his tongue delved into her mouth as he ravaged her with a hungry kiss. His fingers glided along her bra, teasing her breasts under the fabric. She felt a pulse hit her back from a spell, and her bra hung loosely. Once again, her breasts were available for him to fondle. He pushed her back against the window frame and bent down to suckle her, sucking first one breast, then another.

Fair is fair, she thought as her hands slid under his shirt, and she opened it to see his body as well. He stood up, pulling his robe and shirt off, standing before her bare chested. He stayed that way for a few seconds, allowing her to look at him, her gaze traveling down his firm, flat pectorals, sprinkled with dark curly hairs that trailed down his front between rippled stomach muscles and vanished into his belt. When she looked up at him again, he moved forward, crushing her body with his in a strong embrace, his warm, hard flesh pressed against her chilled skin. Her arms wrapped around him as his mouth claimed hers for a searing kiss.

Very shortly after, he stopped and pulled away. "What?" she breathed heavily, still clinging to him.

"Thank you, Miss Granger, the door has opened," he said silkily, trailing his hands from her shoulders to her breasts, his thumbs rubbing on her nipples. "So, unless you still wish to continue, we may go."

She stepped back, stunned by his pronouncement, appalled by his callous words. *After all he'd just done, all he'd just made me feel* and she tripped on her robes, landing on the windowsill.

"I suggest you dress and return to your dormitory to put on appropriate school attire, Miss Granger. Five points from Gryffindor for being so out of uniform," he said with a smirk, adjusting his robe and buttoning his shirt, "and I'll deduct another one hundred fifty points from Gryffindor *if* you mention *this* to anyone. I would suggest that you do not come back here."

"*One-fifty!* But you only raised it by twenty points each time before!" she exclaimed loudly as she clutched her disheveled clothes to her chest.

"Yes, and you keep coming back don't you?" He turned and faced her. "Still, Miss Granger, I have to wonder why you do? Or ~~an~~ the reason why?" he asked with is deliberate drawl, and his mouth curled up in reaction to the emotions that warred on her face between the effect of his words and the effect of his voice. "Wear a skirt next time, Miss Granger, and that lovely bra of yours, and I'll award Gryffindor *fifty* points for wearing *proper* attire," he said smoothly as he turned for the door.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's notes:

I know I shortchanged the scenes with Lily, but that is the difference between a man and a boy. As a man, Severus would know more and have more control than his seventeen-year-old self.

Orange Pekoe is a type familiar to most tea drinkers, and those who have tasted it are aware that it is neither flavored with oranges nor especially orange-colored. In this case, "Orange" probably comes from the Dutch royal family, the House of Orange. Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe, for example, is made with the very tips of the branches, the leaf buds, which turn golden during fermenting. Broken Pekoe is made with fewer leaf tips, more stems, and the leaves are no longer whole and makes a stronger cup of tea.

<http://www.cuisinenet.com/digest/ingred/tea/index.shtml>

## The Enticement of the Tower Room

Chapter 3 of 25

Young Severus, enamored by Lily's attentions, hasn't really minded the times they've spent in the tower, but he's noticed that things are not exactly right. For one, Lily's quite different when she's in the tower.

Twenty years later, Hermione, on the other hand, is becoming more and more confused by the driving need to return to the tower and by her submission to her professor, Severus Snape, no matter how incredible each visit has become. Even more baffling are his actions towards her. Why is she so drawn to the tower room and to him?

I owe a huge thank you to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

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The Enticement of the Tower Room

~~~~~o 3 o~~~~~

~Spring 1977~

Severus was now confused. He and Lily had managed to find time alone together, and Severus had of course managed to, on occasion, find a quiet corner so he could pull Lily in for a kiss, but usually, she stopped him just before he'd been able to open her blouse or just after he'd managed to get it open again. He didn't understand it. *Each time me and Lily have gone up to our secret room in the tower, we've kissed and stuff, but we've gone a little further okay, a lot further. Lily isn't as shy then. However, when I've had her alone in a secluded corner of the dungeons or in an unused alcove in an unused corridor, she isn't as well, not as easy, as willing.*

*The last time I'd been in here with her I'd even managed to place kisses on her breasts above her bra, and she'd liked that. She was moaning and sucking in her breath in what sounded like she liked it. She hadn't pushed me away then! So what is it about this room that makes her so willing? Is it because only she and I know about this room? There is no evidence that anyone else comes up here.*

Nevertheless, he was standing at the window in the tower, watching the sunrise when Lily slipped in, carrying two large cups of steaming hot chocolate. "Good morning," she said cheerfully. "I thought I'd find you up here. Jinni, our common room house-elf, couldn't find you this morning. So I thought I'd try here."

"I told you I get up every day before dawn," he said, accepting the large cup and noticing that the door had closed. He smiled knowingly and Lily smiled too.

"So you forgive me for last Thursday?" she asked, sipping her chocolate.

His mind was not on last Thursday. *Thursday... in the library? Potions class? The incident before lunch with Black? When I hexed Potter and Black after Transfiguration in self-defense?* "Yes, forgotten," he said nonchalantly, not sure what she was referring to. The options were endless.

Lily smiled her 'oh no you didn't say that' smile. "Liar, you never forget anything. But I'll accept that as a yes, *I forgive you*" she chided him. "So, what are you doing up here? Potter and Black are never up this early."

*No, they don't get up until at least eight or nine on weekends unless Potter has a morning practice* "I've been coming here to watch the sunrise. It's quiet." He eyed her slyly as he drank her peace offering, attentively watching her with an appraising stare. "Why are you up at this hour?"

"I was going to go to the library before breakfast but it won't open until eight today," she replied, finishing drink.

*She still has a bit of chocolate just on the line of her upper lip and in the corners as well* He smirked at her, and she looked up at him perplexed.

"What?"

"You've got chocolate on your face," he said, pointing at her mouth. *Convenient...*

She, of course, tried wiping her mouth with her thumb, tracing her lips from right to left, still missing some of the chocolate. Severus shook his head, and she licked her lips, looking up at him expectantly. He shook his head again, smiling at her. He took her cup and placed it on the windowsill with his.



*Never pass up an opportunity* Severus tilted her chin up to examine her face, more for the enjoyment of doing so than to look for chocolate. He cupped her face, as if to wipe the offending drink residue with his thumbs and leaned in toward her, gently licking the corner of her mouth to remove the bit of chocolate, turning her head to repeat the move on the other corner. He looked at her intently before sweeping his tongue across her upper lip, kissing her, enjoying the feel of her lips even if they were still chocolate flavored.

She didn't resist, kissing him back tenderly, and wrapped her arms around his waist.

He pulled her to him, holding her close, as he kissed her lips slowly, enjoying the softness, making tiny sweeps with his lips across her lower lip, then claiming her mouth in a rough, demanding kiss. She moaned against him, matching his kiss, submitting to him. After a while, he glided his hand to her waist, slowly easing his way up to cup her breast as they kissed. With nimble fingers, he opened her robes, trailing kisses to her neck as he undid her blouse and exposing a pink bra.

"Sev?" she asked breathlessly.

He mentally swore. "Yes, Lily love," he replied, saying each word slowly and deliberately against the skin just below her ear, and sucked on her earlobe.

She sucked in her breath. "Please," she pleaded.

He slid his hands over her ribs under her blouse. "Anything you want. I just want to touch you. You are soo soft," he said, using his silky voice. "Do you have any idea how good you feel?" His other hand managed to pull her robe off her shoulders, and he pressed her hips against the windowsill. "Your skin is so soft... Just touching it makes me want you."

She arched her head back as he slowly worked his way down her neck to her shoulders, flicking her skin with his tongue between kisses. "Yes...! Oh, that feels good... but I I can't," she stammered.

"Please, Lily, I just want to touch you. You know how much I care for you," he said in what she called his velvet voice, nipping her collarbone and lowering his mouth to the top of her perfect breast.

"Severus," she gasped and sucked in her breath as he trailed his tongue along her bra. "I can't go this far."

"Not any further than you want me to. I promise." He set her up on the windowsill and parted her knees as he moved closer to her, her skirts hitched up a bit, and he smiled inwardly. He pushed gently to have her lean against the glass and glided his fingers on her skin as he continued to kiss her chest and neck. He cursed silently as he fingered the closure of her bra, not sure what means of Muggle stupidity held it together. Figuring he could always repair it, he slipped his wand out and tried a few unlocking spells and an opening spell, then finally an unlatching spell. The bra gave. *Unlatching works! Great, good to know.*

"Hey!" She opened her eyes, startled as her bra gave, and Severus pushed the fabric aside to suckle her nipple. "But you said... Ohhh!" She gasped and moaned in pleasure, grabbing his head and raking her fingers in his hair. "Oh my, Severus...!"

His laugh was muffled by her soft flesh as he fondled her other breast, flicking her nipples, one with his tongue and the other with his fingers. She arched her back, her hand stroking his hair and the other grabbing his shoulder. He placed his free hand down on her knee, gliding his hand on her skirt, slowly edging it up with each stroke until his fingers trailed along skin.

She reached down and grabbed his hand just as he was about to touch her knickers. "What are you doing?!"

"Touching you," he said, confused. *What does it feel like I'm doing?* "I just want to touch you."

"Not there!" she shrieked, trying to sit up.

He held his hand firmly on her thigh, just centimeters from her knickers, and cupped her neck with his other, pressing into her as he leaned against her, kissing her lips to silencing her. His kiss was firm and a bit more demanding than he'd used before, but his pent-up emotions poured from him in that kiss. She relaxed into him, collapsing back against the windows, and he slid his hand closer to his goal. Her knickers were damp and hot to his touch, and she inhaled sharply. *That's the 'I like it inhale!'* He stroked her a few times, hearing her breathing hitch. *Oh, this is good! This is real good.* He pulled his hand away and picked up his wand, engorging her knickers so that they gaped open, and slid his hand back to her hot core slowly as he kissed her. She groaned, squirmed a bit, but he had her pinned. Slowly, he slipped his fingers into her knickers and began to fondle her. *Merlin's beard! She's wet down there!*

Her breath caught each time his finger passed a certain spot, and she cried out his name, stunned, but obviously liking it, so he tried to find the spot, to figure out what part of her made her gasp so. Her body jerked a few times before he figured it out. After a while, she stopped kissing him, gasping for air as if she were running really hard, and grabbed onto his shoulders painfully. He leaned back, watching her. Her eyes were closed, her body was tense and her mouth open, her breathing so hard her breasts rose and collapsed with each quick heavy breath. *And I'm doing this to her.* Suddenly, her back arched, her legs straightened, her fists clenched, and she was crying, gasping out his name, god's, Merlin's and pleading for him, begging for him. His mouth curled into a wicked smile. *So girls come like we do only without shooting stuff out. Cool.*

~Spring 1997~

Hermione walked swiftly down the stairs, carrying a large cup of Pekoe tea from Kippy, the house-elf who was once again cleaning the common room. She wore a green lace bra under her white cotton blouse, robes and, as requested, a skirt. *Fifty points is fifty points and the house needs them. Neville had dropped a bucket of water aven pods on the floor right at Snape's feet when they'd nearly collided in the corridor. And although Professor Spout had given Neville twenty points for delivering the pods to Professor Slughorn for her, Snape had taken sixty points from Gryffindor for dropping them on his robes and boots! No, fifty points is fifty points.* She'd also Transfigured a pair of her knickers to match her bra. *Not that he's going to see them! All he wanted was for me to wear the green bra and a skirt right?* She knew she was kidding herself.

She had no idea why she was going back there. *There's nothing wrong with enjoying a quiet vigil, watching the sunrise, even with Snape's company* she thought as she walked swiftly down the corridor. She nearly turned back as she passed Fluffy's door, pausing for a moment. *Okay. Just to watch the sunrise nothing else* "Please let me in," she said and placed her hand on the latch, walking in before she changed her mind again. *This is bloody ridiculous! Why am I coming down here and he expects me to! Oh, bloody Horntails, why am I doing this?* she asked herself, half way across the room. She again debated leaving before walking over and sliding her hand on the wall to find the concealed entry to the stairs. *Why is he doing this? Why does he want to?* Her hand slipped into the stone, and she pushed her way through the barrier. *The way he makes me feel like I I'm irresistible, desirable... His eyes the way he looks at me, it's as if he knows, wants me. It's almost possessive, predatory...* The thought sent shivers down her spine. *And his hands! Gods, his hands his fingers... the way he kisses..* Her skin shivered again in anticipation as she reached the door.

She opened the door slowly, carefully checking as she stepped inside.

The room was empty. He wasn't there. She crossed to the window and removed the Anti-Spilling Charm from her cup of tea.

\*

She had no idea why she was so angry. She should have been grateful to have had the room in the tower to herself without being accosted by her professor. Instead, she'd been restless and antsy. Still, there was nothing to do for it now. She'd have to wait a week before going back. Hermione berated herself. *So you've got your period. Big deal! There's no reason you can't go and just enjoy your tea and watch the sunrise. He's not likely to be there anyway. He wasn't the last two times you went up*

*there.... No, he'll be there, could be there I shouldn't. And what if he wants to go further? We haven't gone that far yet. I doubt he'd want to. But what if he does?*

Frustrated, she picked up one of the twelve books she'd checked out of the library to read up on Dark Arts Charms *There is no reason to think that he wants to do that. That he will take things that far... with me.* She opened the book where she'd left off. *It isn't on Professor Snape's list of subjects, but you never knew when you'd have to face something, and it was best to know how to handle it right? Besides, when I go with Harry to fight Voldemort, we will be dealing with Dark Arts and may run across some of these. It won't hurt to read about them anyway.*

\*

Six days later, Hermione was once again hurrying down the corridor with a steaming hot cup of Kippy's Broken Orange Pekoe, hoping that she'd find the room empty again this morning. Well, that wasn't at all true. She'd worn her green bra and knickers again, dabbed on a tiny touch of J'adore perfume and slipped out well before dawn to watch night sky turn into morning.

Halfway down the corridor on the third floor, Hermione began to have doubts again. *Why am I doing this?* she asked herself. *What is he going to think?* She stopped at the door, reconsidering, and almost turned to go. *Oh! This is crazy!* "Please let me in," she said, grasping the latch before she lost her nerve. *What in blazing Horntails am I doing here? What am I thinking wearing perfume! He's going to think that I expect that I want him to! Why is he doing this to me? If today is anything like last time, she thought just before she pushed into the wall and emerged onto the stairs, then I'm in for it big time* The image of Severus standing in front of her with his shirt off made her catch her breath and smile. *He's so masculine, that voice of his, his lean muscles. I'd never considered that he'd look so good under his robes. He even gave me permission to touch him! Gods, his skin was so warm against mine.* She could feel herself get a bit moist just thinking about him.

Hermione opened the door and found the room empty again. Sighing, she crossed to the window to stare at midnight blue sky and wait until dawn. She sipped on her hot tea, scalding her mouth, and set the hot cup down on the windowsill to let it cool a bit so she could drink it. *At least I'll be able to enjoy the sunrise this morning... No, that's not fair. He's never prevented me from watching it; he usually waits until the sun peeks over the mountain just right over there,* she mentally pointed, her eyes focused on the exact spot of the mountain crest that the sun appeared as she picked up the cup to check the tea's temperature. The tea was still too hot. *He's gracious enough for that before he... um... he approaches me or begins... When he, well, he never asks. It's more along the lines of he just sort of reaches out, pulls me to him, into his embrace, and kisses me... and I let him.* She felt a light headiness just thinking about his actions. *I've never said no or pushed him away not once* She stared at the pattern the tops of the trees made, reflecting on her realization. *I don't push him away. I don't encourage his attentions, and he's never given me any inclination before that he even likes me let alone wanted this to be happening.* She looked at her chest as she set the cup down again. "Yet, I did exactly what he asked. Dressed exactly how he told me to all three times!"

She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't hear the door open or his soft footsteps on the stone floor until he was right behind her. "Did you really, Miss Granger?" he asked silkily.

Hermione felt like she'd jumped out of her skin as she whirled around to face him. "Did I what, Professor?" she asked as her heart thumped wildly in her chest.

The dark, sultrily predatory look in his eyes faded as soon as she'd said 'professor,' and his expression became darkly contemplative. "You're back." It wasn't a question nor did it really sound like a statement, rather a mix of both. His dark eyes continued to hold her gaze as the emotions of suddenly being in front of him jumbled and warred within her. He was once again wearing only his shirt and black trousers, his robes hanging against the wall near the door, most likely from a magically conjured hook.

She stared at him, taking in his appearance, mentally comparing the man standing before her to the man he usually was in the classroom. There was little difference and yet no comparison at all. His eyes were fathomless dark orbs, yet they held a hint of anticipation. His stance was more relaxed, yet every bit as poised as ever. He was calm, cool and composed, as she would expect of him, completely in control of himself and his surroundings.

Finally, after a long pause, he lifted a large cup of something hot and took a slow sip. "It's tea, Miss Granger. Broken Orange Pekoe, my preferred blend," he said languorously. "The house-elves keep it on hand for my pleasure."

Hermione's eyes widened, and she quickly looked at her own cup sitting on the windowsill. "Yes, Miss Granger, I'm very well aware that you have been drinking the same tea. I could taste it on your lips on four occasions."

Hermione felt her cheeks redden, and she turned her head back to the window.

"Your tea is getting cold, Miss Granger," he said smoothly. "Would you like me to warm it for you?"

Actually, when she picked the cup up, the temperature was perfect. "No thank you, sir, it's fine," she said, sipping the tea, now far more aware of the rich flavors of the blend. *His favorite blend... Kippy had said he made a pot every morning. Did he make it for Snape?* She'd set a spell on the cup before coming here to keep the tea hot longer than the large cup normally would have, that way she could sip the tea, unhurriedly as she waited, watching the subtle change of the sunrise.

Nevertheless, just as the sky began to lighten, Snape stepped forward, placed his cup on the windowsill and stepped back, moving to stand just behind her. He placed his hands on her shoulders and pulled her gently against his chest, wrapping his arms around her as if they were longtime lovers. At first Hermione stiffened, but then finally relaxed against his chest. However, as soon as she did, he reached up, moved her hair from her neck and sensually kissed her skin. The cup of tea in her hand fell to the floor.

"Don't worry about it," he said in his silky drawl just behind her ear. "I'll fix it for you later." He continued to kiss her, his hands moving to open her robes and blouse.

Hermione inhaled slowly as she simply stood there and let him as if entranced.

"Relax, Miss Granger, just feel," he said as his hands roamed over her. He pulled her blouse free from her skirt and pulled the fabric off her shoulders, letting the fabric bunch at her elbows, trapping her arms at her sides. His kisses trailed from her neck to her shoulder, and she turned her face toward him. He laughed softly, gripping her chin, and turned her face back toward the window. "No, Miss Granger, watch your sunrise," he said silkily.

Her breathing became heavy, her head spinning as she stood there, allowing him to caress and fondle her. He shifted, moving her hair so that he could kiss the other side of her neck, and she closed her eyes, her head spinning as if drunk on Firewhiskey. Even before the very edge of the sun made its appearance, she turned in his arms and kissed him. He stiffened at her bold move, but recovered control quickly, holding her in front of him.

He looked down at her, his dark eyes raking over her, his lips curling into a smile. "Fifty points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger, for wearing proper attire. I do keep my word," he said as his hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs sliding across her nipples through the lace. He pulled his wand out, aiming the tip to her back, and her bra fell loose as both the back clasp and adjustable straps sprung free.

His flicker of surprise as the bra fell into his hand nearly made Hermione laugh. "It's not exactly the same bra sir, but I know you wanted me to wear green, so I changed the color." He cocked his eyebrow, and his lips curled into a smile again, making her stop speaking as effectively as if he'd interrupted her.

"I approve. Ten more points for Gryffindor, Miss Granger." He dropped the bra and placed a hand on her abdomen, backing her up to sit on the windowsill in front of him, and his cup fell to the floor with a crash. Before she could apologize about knocking it off the windowsill, he leaned in and kissed her. He pulled her knees apart, pushing to stand between her thighs as he pressed her against the glass. She exclaimed under his kiss at the sudden coolness, and one of his arms wrapped around her holding her tightly to him.

With unreasoned boldness, Hermione reached out to touch him, her fingers trailing along his abdomen, opening a few of his buttons.

"Did you want help," he asked, humored by her difficulty with the small buttons. She shook her head as his kisses trailed down her jaw to her ear. "I'd be happy to oblige you." He stood up anyway, quickly undoing the last six and pulled the shirt off, allowing her only a moment's stare before he leaned in to her, pulling to him with one arm.

Hermione became lost in his kiss again, her hands exploring his body, so she failed to notice when his other hand began to move smoothly on her leg. At first it seemed accidental, then as his fingers swept up her leg, slowly pushing her skirt up, she realized what he intended. She stiffened, crying out, "No, wait," and gasped.

"Yes," he said, "relax, Miss Granger. I'm only touching you." His other hand moved to cup her breast, his thumb flicking her nipple as he spoke. His silky, rich voice sent as many shivers through her as his thumb and lips were. His fingers on her leg continued to slither upwards. She felt him slide a finger against the lace, and she inhaled at the implication. He pushed her back against the glass and kissed her neck. "Just say stop and I will," he said as he nipped her skin just below her ear.

Instead of saying no, she moaned, and his fingers slid easily under her knickers. "But... Oh, gods," she said in ragged breaths as a jolt shot through her body from his contact. She instinctively tried closing her legs, but his legs between her own prevented her from doing so. She felt the quick pulse shoot through her a few more times, and she opened her legs wider, enjoying the pleasant sensation and wanting more. "What is...? How are you...?"

"Relax and feel, Miss Granger," he said smoothly. She felt more pulses shoot through her as his fingers rubbed and flicked the soft tissue just above her opening. The sensations were intense and extremely pleasurable and increasing in intensity. He continued to fondle her breast, his kisses moving from her neck to her breast and back to her neck as he fondled her under her knickers.

*Oh, Merlin what he's making me feel..* "Please... Oh, Merlin, please don't stop," she panted, her breathing becoming labored and deep, her heart racing, pounding in her chest and an intense pressure-like sensation was building up within her. She couldn't think, her hands simply splayed against his firm stomach, and her head fell back.

"That's it," she heard him say, "relax and feel it."

*Oh, mother of Merlin! Oh gods!*

"Relax, let it happen."

*I'm going to pee... He's... Oh, bloody hell!*

His rich silky drawl caressed her mind, "Let it go," erasing all other thought but his voice and the feel of his hands on her crotch and her breast. "Don't hold on to it," she heard him say languorously. "Hermione, let it go." At the sound of her name in his rich silky drawl, the pressure, reaching its crescendo, broke.

*"Oh, dear god! Severusss...! Oh my, Severusss...!"* she cried out, her body melting, floating, expanding and sinking all at once. *Oh! Severusss...!"* She fell back against the glass, her hands grasping for the sides of the window, her fingertips barely grasping stone, falling onto the sill on either side of her.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. He was still standing in front of her, his hand still in her knickers, a smug smile on his face as he stared at her intently. His fingers still made small sweeps, causing her body to jerk with shooting pulses with each flick he made. She couldn't move, her breathing was hard and fast, her heart pounding erratically in her chest. Slowly, he withdrew his hand, his eyes locked on her face as he did something that completely gobsmacked her. He licked his fingers, sticking first one, then another, into his mouth, pulling each one out slowly as if it'd been coated in the best tasting thing ever. *But they had been in my knickers! That's it's from me! My wetness... from down there!*

He smiled and chuckled at her reaction. "Yes, Hermione?" he stood up and pulled her to stand, supporting her against his body. Her legs still felt rubbery, unable to hold her own weight as he kissed her, his mouth hungrily devouring hers, the taste of her wetness still on his lips. It thrilled and appalled her. The flavor foreign and yet familiar, mixing with his taste, his sweet, rich taste. She clung to him, stroking his tongue with hers, kissing him with fervor.

Gradually, his kisses softened and became teasing, and he stopped, looking at her as if he was once again seeing into her very soul. His kiss left her utterly breathless, gasping for air and her knees still weak.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," he said, brushing her hair from beside her face. "That was most enjoyable. However, my dear, you cannot speak about this. I don't think I have to explain why. Also, as much as I enjoyed hearing you call out my name, do not, under any circumstances, get in the habit of using it. It would not do well for others to hear you say it again. You will have to control yourself."

Hermione nodded, completely understanding.

He smiled as he let her go. "One hundred ninety-five points from Gryffindor if you mention this to anyone. I would suggest that you do not come back here, Hermione. Please, for both our sakes, do not return."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

So, yes, things are progressing forward, and our Potions professor is manipulating Hermione quite a bit. Still, is it just the spells on the room or something developing here?

Enchanted Discovery

Chapter 4 of 25

Hermione, still reeling from the unexpected liaison with her professor, is confronted by someone, who not only knows what she's doing up in the tower room, but could possibly tell her why she's so compelled to go there and just why she's so unable to resist him.

Twenty years earlier, Severus, plagued by the situation with Lily and confused by her actions, tries to discover the secret of the tower room and gets a little help from an unexpected source.

I owe a huge thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69, her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

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The Spell of the Tower Room

~Spring 1997~

Hermione staggered from the room, her head spinning with the memory of his kiss, completely bewildered by the mind-blowing sensations Severus had given her. She stopped and leaned against the wall to try and catch her breath. *Oh Merlin's balls! The things he did, the things I did! I didn't know I could feel like that or feel those things! Even when I'd kissed Viktor, it wasn't like this. He didn't make me feel like Severus can. He didn't even kiss me like Severus does let alone any of the other things I've done with Severus!* She wanted to close her eyes and savor the memory, remember everything.

"You were in the kissing tower," a soft female voice said beside her as the Grey Lady floated out of the wall, startling Hermione. "The Bloody Baron created those spells on the room to try and trap me," the Grey Lady told her. "The room is cursed. Don't go back."

Cursed! The room is cursed? There isn't any mention of a cursed room in Hogwarts: A History! Why? Hermione asked. *Of course they didn't mention about house-elves in the book either, about the Room of Requirement, or the secret passages to the Shrieking Shack or to Honeydukes. But a cursed tower in the castle?*

"Each time you enter the room, the door requires more from you, from both of you, in order for you to leave the tower room. The curses will affect you make you do things. It's not safe to go up there. You have been warned," she said, floating in the air in front of her. "How far are you willing to go with Professor Snape?"

"You mean no, I mean, I don't," she tried denying. *How could she know? Did she see us?*

"Then why do you return?" she asked as she floated away.

"Wait, tell me," Hermione called out as she followed the ghost, intrigued and alarmed. "What do you mean the room is cursed?"

The Grey Lady paused and looked at Hermione in a rather haughty manner. "There are spells on the room, on the door, spells that ensnare and entrap the unwary," she said. "The room is a trap; it will lure you in and entrap you. If you go to the room, you will fall victim to the enchantments and curses."

"But there can't be!" Hermione said, alarmed. "Professor Snape goes to the tower." *Severus goes up there every day. He said so.*

"And you go there to see him, do you? To be with him?" the ghost asked, and Hermione shook her head, bewildered, as the ghost looked down at her with a smug grin. "Then why do you go back to the tower, huh?" The Grey Lady began to float away, gliding backwards down the corridor.

Hermione hurried to catch up with her again. "I um, I like the view," she said before the Grey Lady could vanish into the wall.

"Ah, uh, sure... The view is nice, but it's the same from the east tower. Don't fall under the tower's spells," she replied, turning, her skirts swirling around her legs. "You've been warned. Stay away." Hermione stood, gaping at the ghost, stunned, as the Grey Lady nodded and floated into the wall.

Hermione wanted to run after the Grey Lady, but she had no idea where the ghost was going. *But Severus goes up there every morning he's been in the castle for years. Why would he go up to a room in a tower to watch the sunrise every day if the tower is cursed? Wouldn't he know?* She turned and quickly ran back to her dormitory to shower and change before breakfast, hoping that none of her four dorm mates were still in the room. *He's the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. Severus knows more about the Dark Arts than anyone I know! Surely if the room was cursed, he'd know.*

His last words echoed in her mind. 'Do not come back here, Hermione. Please, for both our sakes, do not return.' *Oh, bloody Horntails! What if he knows and he's under the curse, too?* She gasped at the thought. *Is that why he keeps begging me to stay away from it because of the curse? But wouldn't Severus have broken it by now himself? What if he can't? What does that mean for us?*

~Spring 1977~

The more he thought about it the more he was convinced that their own secret room was definitely cursed in some way. Not that it has been a bad thing. *It's made her my girl again... Well, at least I think she's my girl now.* Lily still didn't want things to be official between them. *Mostly because of Avery, Wilkes, Mulciber and Rosier. She hates them and they're my friends. I'm certainly never going to be friends with Potter, Black and Lupin! And Pettigrew what a waste of magic!*

After their last visit, Severus had been bothered by Lily's inability to explain why she wanted to come up to the room with him. *I don't know? I felt like it. I just wanted to... because I wanted to. I thought, well... I had this urge to come here,' she'd said. She was unable to explain it to me. Lily has never had a problem telling me what she wanted or how she felt. Nevertheless, she'd found it impossibly hard to explain. 'I just wanted to... I dunno. I suppose to be here with you,' she'd said, twirling her finger on my chest like she used to when she was little. She's never that indecisive she's cheeky, assured and confident. It's just not like her.*

Severus collected as many books on magical entrapment spells as he could. He was in a secluded corner of the common room, Dissuading and Repelling Charms set around his desk as he read any spell he could that matched in some part to the magic of their tower room.

He'd already considered Magical Beguiling Curses, Luring and Seducing Curses, and an Allurement Charm, but none of these matched how Lily acted exactly. *There's an*

Ensnaring Curse, but that was used by hunters in the old days. Enticing and Captivating Curses, too, but they didn't last long on the subjects. He knew that he felt particularly rakish and randy when Lily was with him and somewhat unrestrained, but he could control those feelings with her to some degree. He felt bolder with her, more forceful in the tower room. He pushed her, even when she protested, which he normally wouldn't have done or maybe not as aggressively. *I lose my self-restraint.* However, when he was alone in the room, those feelings were not there. He felt peaceful and serene, at ease.

He concentrated on Lily's reactions. *In the room she submits to me, and even when I push her, she protests a little, but her body reacts as if she doesn't mean it, and then she eventually surrenders to me passionately. She's susceptible, surrendering, yielding... more responsive and encouraging...* He found potions that would affect someone that way for extended lengths of time but not spells. The closest he found included the: Allurement Curse, Beguiling Curse, Enticement Curse, and possibly the Ensnarement Curse... *But each of these curses ends with the death of the one who cast the curse. When they pass on the curse terminates.*

"So, you're trying to trap a young lady, are you?"

Severus looked up and saw the Bloody Baron floating within his table, his ghostly finger tracing a page of one of his books. "Pardon me?" Severus asked, trying to shift his parchment under the book he was reading. "No, I'm just reading up on some charms and curses. It's just some research."

"No? Then, why would you wonder if it can be done unless you intend to try?" the Baron asked as he turned several pages of Severus' book. "Why would you be interested in such enchantments if not pursuing one of the fairer sex, eh?"

Severus closed two of his books and immediately regretted it when the gold gilt letter on *Known Cursed Enchantments and Enticements of the Age* caught the candlelight. "I'm not pursuing anyone I'm reading," he stated coolly.

"Yes, the *Perseverantis Decipere Obscurum Exercitum*, which translated means, *The Persistent and Beguiling Dark Arts*..." the Baron read off another cover, opening the book to the Captive-Allurement Charm and the Attention-Captivating Charm, then turning the page to the Luring-Seduction Charm and Enduring-Seduction Charm. "I see, yes, no doubt delightful reading for you? Might also I suggest you read the Burgeoning-Lust or the Beguilement Charm? I believe you can find them in your copy of *Love Spells Though the Dark Arts*. 'Tis a most useful and beneficial tome, and I particularly favored the Relentless-Surrender, although those spells do fade in time..." he said, pointing to the book in Severus' stack.

Severus gazed up at the ghost, amazed that he knew so many of the Dark Arts Love and Lust Spells. "But can they be made to last?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

The Baron looked up and his opaque eyes became unfocused. "I once thought so, but her heart was not to be met by such assistances."

Severus twirled his quill lazily in his hand. "I've read so far that they are not binding, and the spells, when broken, have devastating consequences?" He glanced slyly at the Baron to gauge the ghost's reaction. "From what it says in these books, the spells are only temporary."

The Baron looked down at Severus and then turned another page in the *Controlling, Manipulating and Beguiling Curses and Charms*. "When one wishes to enchant or ensnare a fair lady..." He looked up as if staring through the stone wall of the common room. "Still, 'tis a practice that has been forbidden for a thousand years."

"Why is that? Wouldn't it be best to know these spells, to know their effects and how to reverse them?" Severus asked, trying to sound as if he were simply seeking an understanding of their principles in theory only. "I heard about them and wanted to know if it can be done," Severus replied, eyeing the Baron speculatively, "and if so, how to break them."

"The fairer sex has within them the strength to defeat your attempts. Their will can be greater than the stone... You would do better with poetry, I think."

"But if one was already entranced, ensnared by such curses can they be broken?" Severus tried to keep his expression curious without looking too interested. "Drawn to relinquish themselves, surrender themselves, submit and yield, to lose her restraint..."

The Baron looked at him, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "You speak of feeling like a randy rake? Your actions are roguish when you're around her? You're persistent and unrestrained, perhaps?"

Now we are getting somewhere. "Yet it is the lady that is beguiled," Severus tried coaxing the ghost, leading the conversation. "I'm merely drawn by her hand to a hidden tower for a tryst and..."

"No! You would bereft it would be most unfortunate," the Baron blurted out, interrupting Severus, and then changed his demeanor. "One should not be so pursuant. 'Tis most unfruitful and unsatisfying... Your lady is deserving of a more gallant..."

"Hideaway, high above the castle; the perfect place to watch the sunrise with a woman you could truly love..." he finished the ghost's speech. As soon as the Bloody Baron had cut Severus off, he'd been watching the ghost closely. *He knows...*

The Bloody Baron's eyes became wide, his mouth pursed into a thin line. "You have been...! The forbidden tower of my youth...? You have... How? 'Tis sealed?"

"An allurement, enticement, a pull, a need, drawn to go, and she can't seem to help herself. She says she just feels like going up there frequently. She wants to. She has this inexplicable urge to go up there and I feel it, too."

The Baron looked at the books. "Yes. I know about this room you speak of. 'Tis cursed do not go back. You must resist this room's magic resist the magic's pull." He pulled the sheet out from Severus' book, sliding it somehow from under the table. His eyes widened at the list Severus had written.

Severus relaxed his face, making his as near expressionless as he could manage. "These are the spells on the room, aren't they?" The Baron nodded, looking at Severus, dropping the sheet into his hand as Severus calculated his next question. "What does the room do exactly? What is its intent?"

"To make the lady susceptible, surrendering, consenting. For he who would be pursuant of her hand, that he may know her love for him," he said, the his expression on his face, far away.

"But it doesn't work like that?"

"No, it does not. The stone has..." he replied, looking down at the books with an expression of remorse. "Thus the spells lie within the very stone. While you are on the stairs and within the room..." The Bloody Baron slipped from the table, floating backwards. "I warn you... Speak not of your affections to your lady love in this room. Leave it well alone, I pray you, while you can. Sorrow 'tis what you shall receive. You would do better unrequited and in sorrow."

Severus stood and followed the ghost as he floated to the wall. "Wait, you haven't told me..."

"Thus your secret room will entrap you and hold your soul until you are connected by your true match until your wand mate comes," the Baron warned. "If she's not to be your lady fair, your true heart's intended, your heart shall be broken and you will waste away in mourning." The Bloody Baron stopped just against the stone wall and turned around slowly. "Pray you, while you can leave this room unattended and seek it no more." And with that he slipped into the solid rock.

~Spring 1997~

Harry was still obsessing over Draco, and Hermione was sick and tired of hearing him bemoan about Draco's activities *Or lack thereof. There is no evidence that Draco is up to anything suspicious.* Besides, she now had other things on her mind, and they kept creeping up on her at the most inopportune times. More than once Hermione felt

the urge to touch herself as Severus had done: in the bath, in the loo or in her bed at night. Still, she just couldn't seem to reach the same heightened feelings, the same exploding climax that he'd given her. It was frustrating. It was like he'd awoken something inside her, some part of her she never knew she had, and wanted again, desperately.

The other concern, one that was taking up way too much of her revision time was the warning the Grey Lady had given to Hermione that day *Each time you enter the room, the door requires more from you to open. How far are you willing to go with Professor Snape?* she'd said. *The room is cursed.* Still, she had gone back, she'd gone to the room, seeking the view from the window and deeply disappointed that Severus hadn't been there. *Like an obsession.* When Hermione closed her eyes, she now saw Severus in her dreams, in her thoughts. She'd made a sleeping draught simply to get enough sleep each night, which made her tired in the mornings.

That and no matter how often she tried, Hermione just couldn't seem to find the Grey Lady. Finally, out of desperation, she sought out Luna. Luna told her that the Grey Lady was spending most of her time in Ravenclaw tower, staring out the windows as if deeply saddened. *She did promise that she would speak to the Grey Lady on my behalf and tell her I needed her counsel, but made me no promises.*

It was after a very trying day with double Transfiguration and Potions and loads of essays to write that Hermione happened upon the Grey Lady in the library. "Please tell me how the room works. What is this curse, or curses," she pleaded as she approached the lovely ghost, "and how I can escape it? I've read everything I could find, and I cannot find any that match what I feel what I think is happening to me."

She looked at Hermione as if considering her request, then crooked a finger to have Hermione follow her deep into the bookshelves, back in a corner near the Restricted Section. "I don't know what I can tell you. I can tell you that it's cursed so that if you are up there with someone you like, you will fall under the trap of the spells."

"But I don't like Severus that way," Hermione said, twisting her fingers together.

The Grey Lady smiled and looked at her contemplatively. "Severus? I think you do you just used his given name."

Hermione's breath caught. *Oops.* "What are the spells on the room? Can you tell me?"

The Grey Lady shook her head. "No, I didn't do them. I'm not sure what spells he used on the room. I wasn't as affected by them myself. Not in the way he'd hoped at least."

"Okay then, can you tell me who did this? Why?" Hermione asked, trying not to sound too disappointed. "And why isn't the room locked? Sealed or protected?"

The Grey Lady regarded her with sad eyes. "There *are* protections on the room. I put them there. However, they can be breached. The Bloody Baron..." She turned and watched a boy walk past their aisle. "The tower was there when I was here as a student. I loved to go up there and watch the sunrise. He, the Baron, found out my love for the room. He'd loved me for a long time. The Baron was always a hot-tempered man, furious that I refuted him and refused to consent to be his bride. My mum always promised me the choice would be mine. He was jealous of my freedom, my desire to learn and my independent nature. It would be my guess, but I suppose there are charms that make you susceptible, surrendering, yielding, pliable to the man you are with if you are intended for each other if you like each other. You sense these, yes?"

Hermione nodded and waited for her to continue.

"If I was to guess which ones he'd use I'd suppose he'd use the Beguiling Curse, the Luring and Seducing Curses and the Allurement Charm. These types of spells would lure the unsuspected up the stairs, affect you the moment you ascend the stairs, drawing you to the room. If I remember correctly, the room itself has charms, enchantments on the door, possibly some type of Entrapment, Controlling, Enticement and Ensnarement Curses and Charms. However, they're twisted together, and unless you know which charm was added to which curse, you cannot break the magic of the room except once you leave, never allow yourself to return," she said. "Only by your own will power and determination can you eventually break the draw of the room."

"You're kid-d... You're not, are you?" Hermione asked, stunned. "But why me and why Severus?"

The Grey Lady smiled sadly. "Did you pass through the wall of your own free will and climb the stairs?" Hermione nodded, and the Grey Lady shook her head. "Then you are under the spells. They did not work on me as he'd hoped. The question is, did they work on you?"

"Yes, I think so... But why? How come?" Hermione asked, now confused. *Why did they work on me and not her? If she was the one intended...*

"I never respected him, admired him or befriended him in any way," the Grey Lady said in a haughty tone. "I never looked up to him, never wanted him to like me or to get to know him. I didn't trust him, even when he showed me his kinder side. So I never returned to the tower room again because I didn't want to be confronted by him in there again."

Hermione covered her mouth. *I've been all those things felt them toward Severus Professor Snape.* "But what if you don't love the person?"

The Grey Lady shook her head. "In my day people did not marry because they loved each other. Marriages were arranged for social standing, political gain or money, and you didn't really have much say in the matter, especially in my social class. The best you could hope for was to be matched with someone you could like, respect and be friendly with and who treated you kindly. It was a long time ago. I don't expect you to understand. Things were quite different for women back then."

Actually, Hermione did understand. "But if that's the case, this room would have caused all kinds of problems with students with different couples over the years."

The Grey Lady smiled. "No, as I said before, I put a protection on the stairs so that wouldn't happen."

"A protection?" Hermione asked, confused. *I hadn't noticed any protection or obstruction to the room. All you had to do was feel for the obscured opening for the stairs and push your way through.*

"You cannot get onto the stairs unless you are with someone with whom you are meant to be together or unless you are soul mates and are destined for each other," the Grey Lady replied. "I placed spells to make the entry resistant, set Dissuading and Repulsing Charms on the barrier so that you would be able to resist the allure, resist the draw of the tower stairs. Therefore, no one else need find and pass the portal. So far, in all my years here I have been able to keep almost all the students away from that room, all except for six other couples. Stay away, miss, unless you want to be forever locked with Professor Snape. Although, I fear that it may be already too late for you to do so."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

*I had two people point out my mistake in using Early Modern English for the Bloody Baron, so I went and changed his speech patterns, although, I did leave a few 'slips' of the old English in. As Ellyn was so kind to point out, the Bloody Baron lived around 1100 AD/CE. Which means that when he was alive, he either spoke a dialect of French known as Anglo-Norman (given that he was a member of the nobility) or he spoke Old English, which is so different from Modern English that it seems like a foreign language to us. (Think of Beowulf in the original or selections from the Anglo-Saxon Reader). The Grey Lady, as a contemporary of the Baron, would likewise have spoken either Anglo-Norman or Old English. I wish to thank her, and apologize for my poor earlier attempt.*

# Seduction of the Tower Room

Chapter 5 of 25

Hermione, unable to resist the draw of the tower room, once again encounters Professor Snape. Only this time her submission to her professor and his actions toward her leave her even more baffled and confused.

Twenty years earlier, young Severus is as happy as he can get. Lily's his girl again, she's opened up to him, and he can finally show her exactly how much he loves her... except he does something so incredibly embarrassing...

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## Seduction of the Tower Room

~Spring 1997~

Hermione awoke that morning, stretched, slid from the bed and dressed. Instead of wearing her green undergarments, she opted for black, a black, lightweight jumper and her denim skirt. Lavender had brushed and braided her hair the night before in a rare girls' night together, and the French braid still looked decent enough to leave it in. As quietly as she could, she slipped from the room without waking the other girls in her dormitory and headed for the stairs. Kippy had just finished cleaning the common room when she entered. He vanished as soon as he saw her, and for a brief minute, Hermione wondered if it was because of her presence, although that hadn't bothered him as much lately. She had just finished the thought when he returned with a steaming hot cup of Pekoe tea for her, grinning broadly as she accepted it and thanked the elf.

Leaving the common room, Hermione strolled through the corridors of the castle, ending up at the stone door. Without thinking about it, she opened the door, crossed the tower, languidly sliding her fingers until she felt the stone give and hurried up the stone steps. Hermione entered the room, heading straight for the window, turning around in surprise when she heard Snape swear softly from behind her. He pushed off the wall, and in three easy steps, he took her into his arms, kissing her soundly. She nearly dumped her hot tea all down his side.

She pushed away, backing for the windowsill, setting her large cup down before he pulled her to him again. His kisses were deeply demanding as he ravaged her mouth. He slowly backed her up against the wall, pulled her jumper over her head and smiled at the lacy, black demi bra. He turned her around, holding her back against his body as his hands explored her, his fingers trailing softly, sending shivers throughout her every nerve. "I thought I told you to stay away," he said smoothly in her ear before his teeth nipped at her earlobe.

Hermione's breath hitched as he kissed her at the base of her neck, and she tilted her head to give him better access. "I just... wanted..."

"I know what you wanted to see the sunrise," he said silkily, removing her bra as his warm lips continued to nip, suckle and caress her neck and shoulder. "Not today, Miss Granger." He unzipped her skirt, his hand sliding in through the waistband and into her knickers. She groaned, rolling her head back, thinking of little else than the feel of his hands and the sensual strokes of his fingers.

She turned to face him, uncertain, breathless, her heart pounding in anticipation. Snape's dark eyes raked over her, staring at her intently, then stepped forward predatorily, pressing her against the wall as he leaned into her, claiming her mouth again in a demanding and sensual kiss. Her mind reeled, her knees weakened, and she clung to him. He held their bodies tightly together, and she could feel him harden through his trousers. Hermione's hands slid down his back, and he made a deep-throated laugh against her throat. He straightened, and she watched as he undid his buttons, dropping his robes and shirt to the floor. Her eyes traveled down his firm stomach, and he grasped her hand pressing it to the bulge in his trousers as he leaned toward her again. "Touch me," he said as he moved her hand up and down over it.

She looked up at him, a flutter in her stomach as she felt him, trying to gauge his length and girth. He moaned softly and closed his eyes briefly, obviously enjoying the feel of her hand even through the soft wool. She stroked him, unsure how hard or if she was stroking him correctly. Snape made a low growl in his throat and kissed her, his one hand gently but firmly cupping her face as his other hand cupped her breast, teasing her nipple with his thumb. Hermione's knees went weak, and she felt his hand press on her shoulder as his hand grasped her wrist, pulling her to the window with him. He gently pushed her to sit and lean against the glass. She paused, looking into his dark eyes as he opened his trousers, letting them fall to the floor at his feet before squatting down in front of her. He moved down her body, trailing kisses along her skin, as he removed her knickers and skirt. He reached out and tipped her face up, placing a soft kiss on her lips.

Snape smiled at her, his fingers firm as he opened up her legs and kneeled down to kiss her knee. His kisses trailed up her thigh as he parted her legs further until his lips touched her pubic hair, and then his tongue licked her, one finger sliding into her depths. She gasped, and he laughed softly, lowering his head back to her groin, his other hand lost somewhere down on his own body.

His finger stroked inside her as his tongue licked her sensitive spot, sending intense shivers through her. She heard him moan and looked down, watching his head between her legs, his body moving in rhythm with his finger inside her. She could hardly believe he wanted to lick her there, but the sensation he was creating was too pleasurable to say anything lest he stop. He pushed in another finger and a third, opening her and it hurt.

"Relax, Hermione," he said, his voice a throaty growl. She could feel his shoulder rubbing against her thigh as his fingers moved within her, stretching her again. It hurt. She sucked in her breath, both from the pleasure his mouth was giving her and the pain his fingers made occasionally as he moved them inside her. She wanted to push him away, make him stop, and hold him tightly against her. She felt the pressure build within her, and she reached out her hand, her fingers curling in his silky hair. She was reaching her peak when she felt him shudder as his fingers pushed deeply into her, feeling as if he'd ripped her in half, his growl making a vibration against her nub. The added sensation pushed her over the edge quickly, almost taking her by surprise with both an intense pain mixing with the rushing sensation of her release.

She felt something wet dribble on her on her calf before he uttered, *Scourgify*," softly.

When Snape stood up, his penis was floppy and soft, although still sticking out at her. Hermione looked at him questioningly, uncomprehending why, and he smirked at her. Snape stood before her nude, unashamed, as she stared at him, her eyes raking over his lithe body, his well-toned muscles and his finally softening penis. She couldn't take her eyes off him, standing transfixed while he pulled up and fastened his pants.

He seemed slightly flushed and shaky. "Get dressed, Miss Granger, and go," he said, his voice thick and rough. Hermione stared at him, disbelieving that he wanted her to leave. "Go, now. Or do you wish to continue this? The door has opened." He walked to the pile of clothes discarded on the floor, Summoning his shirt and robes, then her clothes. He stood, leaning against the wall as he watched her redress with a smug smirk on his face. When she stood up to pull her shirt and knickers on, she felt the discomfort between her legs and saw the stains of blood on the windowsill. With a flick of his wand, the blood disappeared. She looked at him, comprehending suddenly.

"That's but you didn't... We didn't," she stammered.

"Come very close to having sex with you? Yes, I did. However, this will do for today," he said, his dark eyes staring at her, his expression unfathomable to her, his chest expanding and contracting with his controlled breathing. "I thought I asked you to stay away from here? Why have you persisted? What do you want? I will not be able to refrain from copulating with you, shagging, as you students call it. Is that what you want, to shag me? Do not return. Now, please, go."

She quickly pulled on her jumper and ran from the room, leaving her bra behind on the floor.

\*

The following morning Hermione rose early, stretched, and quickly pulled on her clothes, purposely wearing her pink balconet bra, a light jumper and her skirt. Sitting on her bedside table was another large cup of steaming tea. Sighing, Hermione picked up the cup, slipping quietly from the room, hurried out of the common room and out into the school corridors. She cast glances at the paintings as she walked, not really thinking about anything as she sipped her tea. The castle was peaceful in the predawn, and she felt safe and happy within the stone walls. The torches each flared to life as she walked up to them, the flames softening as she passed as if urging her along. She walked down the third floor corridor unhurriedly, entering the room with ease. She looked up, her eyes following the stairs as they seemed to disappear into the ceiling above. *There are spells to make the entry resistant, Dissuading and Repulsing Charms on the barrier so that I or anyone would be able to resist the pull of the spells on the stairs... To resist the draw of the tower room... Maybe the Bloody Baron was stronger than the abilities of the Grey Lady. She said that the Bloody Baron had cursed this tower and the tower room? He's older than she appears to be even in ghost form, maybe that's why the protective spells don't work well?*

The grating of stone on stone broke the silence. Hermione turned, not at all surprised to see Snape enter the room. His eyes swept across the room, then focused intently on her. He swore softly, walked toward her, taking her arm, and pulled her to the side, pressing her against the wall next to the wooden door. "Why did you come?" he asked, looming over her.

"I wanted to... sir," she said, intimidated by his scowl and yet aroused by his closeness. The usual sense of anticipation and heart-pounding alertness was this time mixed with a nervousness she hadn't expected. "I wanted to see the sunrise... you."

"Really, to see me? I have office hours as you well know, Miss Granger." He sneered as he stared at her face. "It would be far more appropriate to seek me out there. Not here in this room alone. I've never taken you as one of those girls who developed an infatuation with her professors, let alone me. Is that what this is, an infatuation?" He leaned closer, his face so close to hers she could feel his breath on her cheeks, recognizing the smell the Broken Pekoe tea with each exhale. "Is this really what you want?"

"I, um... yes no I don't know." She closed her eyes a moment, her head spinning. "I, um... No. I don't have an infatuation with you. I wanted to... I came here because I, um, wanted to be here with you... To see..."

Once again his eyes glazed as if what she'd said had hurt him somehow. "This isn't right and you know that. I shouldn't be allowing you to come here." He closed his eyes, dropping his head and slowly looking back up at her. "If this isn't some silly school girl infatuation you are acting on, why do you come? What do you see in me? How do you see me?"

Hermione looked up into his dark eyes with a sense of curiosity. "Yes, you're my professor, but it's not I respect you. You are a remarkable wizard, strong, capable. Ever since Dumbledore told us you were spying for the Order, I've watched you. No, even before that, since Harry saved the Philosopher's Stone and Harry told me you were trying to save him during our first Quidditch match from Professor Quirrell's curse. In fact, you've always been there for us, haven't you? You've consistently been there for us, trying to protect us. You do so much, consistently putting yourself in harm's way, even endangering your life so that in the end we win this war. You're stoic and brave, and yes, I admire you, respect you. I know that we're not friends, but I trust you."

"You see me as your protector your wizard arrant? You admire me? Respect me? Why?" He snorted in derision. "I'd have thought that my actions toward you would have ended your trust."

"No, it hasn't. I don't not any less," she wavered, swallowing before continuing. "I do look up to you, not like a hero or anything. I think you're an amazing wizard, knowledgeable and... I admit, this us, it surprises me, but I like you."

"That's inappropriate," he snapped, then shook his head. "Look, you're my student. This is wrong. I shouldn't have I should never have let you come. I should have... You have no idea what you've done."

"Yes, I do." Hermione reached out, laying a hand on his chest, and his eyes flicked from her hand at the contact back to her face, his dark eyes regarding her. "Yes, I do. I know what has happened," she said. "In fact I know about the room somewhat, I think..."

"Then why are you coming in here again?" he asked, removing her hand from his chest, but not releasing it.

She automatically curled her fingers in with his. "I don't know? I felt like it... I just wanted to..."

"That is exactly my point, Miss Granger," Severus said and pulled his hand free, bringing it up between them as if he was going to touch her chest. "You don't know..."

"Yes, I do!" she protested. "I came here because I wanted to."

"Not good enough. You're a student I'm your professor. This is wrong." His hand began to twirl a curl of her hair in his fingers.

Hermione fought the desire to take his hand and pull him up the stairs to their room. "Why? I mean I know why... I thought, well... I had this urge to come here." She found it impossible hard to explain with him leaning over her, looking at her in such a way. "I just wanted to..."

Severus' lips curled into a humorous sneer. "You wanted to what exactly? There are enchantments and curses on that room. Your common sense should have kept you away from me after the first time you came here. Unless you think you fancy me in some way. That room," he said with a sweep of his hand, "ensnares people who come here together, traps them, pushes their relationship forward, sexually. Is that what you want, a sexual relationship with me? All I can presume is that you hold some level of attraction for me, although I fail to see why. So, what is it: my searing charm, my cold charisma, my cutting wit or my sarcastic nature? Do you want me to touch you again,



kiss you, run my hands on your body and force myself on you?"

With each statement, Hermione's breath caught, her heart raced, her mouth became dry, and she felt her body shiver*It's exactly what I want shouldn't want but do. I want him... need him.* She couldn't tell him, couldn't answer his question; she wasn't ready to say these things out loud.

There was a torturous look in his dark eyes. "Leave, go back to your common room now." He pushed himself off the wall and crossed his arms, his stance firm and authoritative. "Go, on leave. Or I'll deduct two hundred points from your house for your disobedience."

Her heart skipped a beat and a lump fell in her gut*He doesn't want me, not like that. I'm throwing myself at him* The large cup of tea fell to the floor with a crash, and she turned and fled before he could see her tears.

~Spring 1977~

Lily entered the room with a big grin and two steaming cups of chocolate again. Severus smiled as he accepted his, scalding his tongue on the hot liquid. He never understood her penchant for the beverage, but she gave it to him, so he drank it. *Besides, it's a gift after all.*

Her lips tasted like chocolate when he kissed her. Her arms wrapped around him as he pressed into her, backing her against the window again. She slid eagerly onto the windowsill and wiggled her hips to get more comfortable. He smiled as his hands unbuttoned her blouse while he kissed her neck. She sucked in her breath when he pulled her blouse open and off her shoulders, trailing kisses on her exposed skin. He loved the way she felt, the way she tasted. She giggled when he nipped her shoulder the same time he uttered the Unlatching Charm to undo her bra. He straightened, staring at her.

She smiled shyly, watching him as he undid his shirt, pulling it off and dropping it on the floor with his robes. Her fingers glided on his skin, and he stared at her fingers as she traced his muscles. He leaned forward, pressing against her, tilting her head up so that he could kiss her.

His fingers slid on her leg, sliding into her knickers. She let him touch her again, fondling her, sliding a finger into her as he rubbed her sensitive spot. He was so aroused he nearly hurt with desire. She was warm and soaking wet. He smiled. He pressed his groin against hers, rubbing his swollen penis against her leg, and she gasped. Yes, *this is what you do to me, Lily*, he thought. Her hand on his abdomen slipped down, and he moved his hand from her breast to capture hers and brought it down lower to his trousers. She looked up at him, astounded by his bold move. "It's okay. You can touch if you want," he said, his voice thick with desire. "I want you, too."

Her fingers tentatively stroked him, her eyes watching him as if he'd be offended by her temerity. Her fingers sent shivers though every nerve in his body and made his balls restrict. He smiled at her encouragingly. He reached down and opened his trousers, and she gasped at his size as his trousers fell to the floor off his thin hips. She hesitated so he guided her hand back onto his penis, closing his eyes at the pleasure of her gentle strokes. He nearly exploded just by her delicate caresses. "Merlin, Lily, you'll make me come," he growled, his fingers still stroking her under her knickers.

She made a deep throaty laugh. "The same way you make me come?" He leaned down to kiss her, and her lips met his, hungrily. He wrapped his arm around her hip and pushed his penis against her, rubbing its tip in her wetness. His balls were so tight they nearly hurt.

He swept her into his arms about to pull her to the floor with him onto his cloak, but she grabbed his arms, pushing him back away from her. "I'm not ready for this... not like this, Sev! Please, no, please, not on the floor..." she pleaded.

He groaned, but relented, pressing himself tighter into her groin when she sat back down on the windowsill. He was rubbing his penis against her knickers, the texture was soft, hot and wet. He pulled them aside, his fingers stroking her again, and she pulled his head down to kiss her. Her tongue stroked his in rhythm to the movements of his penis against her skin, and his balls tightened again, his penis spasmed, and he felt himself release, shooting up under her skirt.

He was so embarrassed, completely frustrated that he'd ejaculated, that he'd lost control so easily. He'd come too soon; he'd been too eager. He dropped his head, berating himself, and she stood up, wrapping her arms around him. "Hey, it's okay. You get me to come, it's only fair," she said, trying to kiss his ear.

"I'm sorry, I..."

"Sev, don't," she said, pressing her fingers to his lips, silencing him. "We've opened the door. We can go," she said with uncertainty.

He leaned against the window, watching her quickly adjust her clothes before he leaned down to grab his own *Damn door.*

~Spring 1997~

She had no idea why she'd done it, but Hermione had purposely missed her aim with her Impedimenta Spell, hitting Professor Snape on his side, and landed herself in detention.

He walked around the room as she sat at her desk writing lines. He stopped to stand right behind her chair, his proximity sending familiar shivers down her spine. "You did that on purpose, didn't you?" he asked, his tone firm.

"No, sir," she replied, trying to concentrate on her letters instead of the man standing behind her. It was the third time she'd misspelled a word in her lines of 'I will not deliberately fire curses at my professor during class.' *Damn.*

Snape placed his hand on the back of her chair, sending a quick sense of elation and anticipation surging through her. "Do not *lido me*," he said in his rich silky drawl, adding to the heightened awareness of his proximity.

Hermione swallowed and, with a careful, deliberate motion, dipped her quill into her inkwell. Her hand shook slightly, nearly making the ink blot on her parchment. "I'm not I didn't. My hand slipped, sir, and I fired the spell with poor aim."

"Really, Miss Granger, I know better of you. You do not have such poor aim nor such lack of control," he rolled each word deliberately.

Hermione bristled at his comment and abruptly rose from her chair, boldly turning to face him, their bodies almost colliding, taking Snape by surprise. His arm reached out instinctively to keep from being knocked over as he quickly grabbed her, and she felt him aim his wand toward the door, just before his mouth descended on hers. Automatically, she flung her arms around him, pulling her body up against his, and he moaned. His hand, the wand still clasped in his fingers, grabbed the back of her head, crushing her with a deep demanding kiss as he seemingly took out all his pent-up frustrations on her lips.

When he released her, Hermione staggered back, landing against her desk. He was breathing as hard as she was, and she briefly wondered if his heart was pounding as strongly as hers. He leaned forward, placing his hands on the corners of her desk on each side of her hips as he loomed over her, his face merely inches from her own. "This simply cannot happen." He kissed her again and then swore, standing up abruptly, taking two steps away from her.

"Why?" she asked without thinking, standing up to him, then mentally berated herself. *What am I doing? Of course he kissed me I threw myself at him. He doesn't want this. He's made that apparent. I know why...*

"You know why," he said, echoing her own thoughts exactly. "I am your professor. This is inappropriate."

Brazenly, she stepped forward, and his arms reached out as if to stop her but slid around her waist instead. She rose up on her toes, and with the slightest lift of her chin, Hermione's lips landed back on his, kissing him. He growled, his arms suddenly embracing her in a crushing hug again as he kissed her back.

Letting her go, he stepped back away from her, making her sway slightly. "You do not know what you are doing or why you are doing this. You are under a spell spells..."

"I know," she said, "but I want you to..."

"Do not interrupt me again," he snapped at her angrily, his dark eyes sweeping across her face. "There are curses on that room... You know?"

"Yes, the Grey Lady told me about them," she confessed. "It's why I've been trying to avoid the room..."

"And yet you went there yesterday," he said, his eyes narrowing. "I saw you in the corridor."

*So he didn't want to be there with me?*

"It took every bit of my self-control to turn around and not follow you up to the room." His eyes looked darkly haunted.

Her heart skipped a beat as his words hit her. *He does want me..*

"I know what will happen if *if* you and I return," he said forcefully. After a pause, he looked away and then back at her. "You will come to my office tomorrow morning, first thing. *Do not* go to the tower. If you do not show up, you will be penalized as if you'd failed to show for a detention."

"Sir?" she asked, confused.

"We need to talk. There is something you must know." He swept his hand to indicate the door. "Go."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

I simply cannot forget to say thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

The Distressing Entreaty

Chapter 6 of 25

Severus can hardly believe how good things are with Lily. However, sometimes being a little eager doesn't always make things go smoothly.

Twenty years later, Hermione keeps her promise to go to Severus Snape's office instead of the tower room to meet with him and talk about the spells of the tower. Just why is he so determined to reject her and to push her away?

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The Distressing Entreaty

~Spring 1977~

They were back in the tower room. He and Lily were kissing, their shirts wide open, her bra loose, and he was leaning into her as she sat on the window ledge, her knees straddling his legs. Her hands were roaming over his body, his hands cupping one breast as the other slid under her knickers again. Boldly she tried to remove his shirt, and he smiled, helping her, dropping his shirt on the floor on top of his robes. Her blouse quickly followed. He smiled as he stared at her, gently removing her bra as she kissed his chest. Her tongue flicked at his nipple, and he gasped at the shock-like sensation. *So, that's what she feels. Wow* She did it again, and the second shock made him catch his breath again. He cupped her face, kissed her, their tongues mingling, and he pulled her closer. Her hands glided on his back, down to his hips, and he grinned, his hand slid down her side and between her legs.

His fingers continued down to her knee and slowly moved back up her leg, enjoying the feeling of her squirming from his touch. His fingers found her opening, and his thumb located her sensitive spot. After a while, her breath hitched, and she moaned. He laughed softly, using his deep-throated laugh, and continued rubbing it until she

started digging her nails into his skin. He straightened to watch her face as she came in his hand. He stood, letting her relax as he opened his trousers and let them fall to the floor, freeing his hardened penis. Her eyes swept down him. Severus pressed against her again, cupping her face, kissing her ardently, savoring her mouth as he rubbed himself against her wetness.

"Oh, Sev, wait..." she uttered.

"Touch me. I want to feel your hands on me again," he said in his silky drawl.

"Okay," she said as she slid her hands on his body again, one hand sliding down to touch his penis. It jerked, almost painfully, at her touch. He reached down to touch her sensitive spot, and she exclaimed, "Oh, my! Severus...?"

"Yes, Lily, love," he purred against her lips. He pulled her to her feet and eased her down onto his robes, lying on the floor, positioning himself on top of her. He kissed her again, his one free hand gliding on her skin, back to her wetness. Her hands were on him again, her body responding to his touch. She was pliant, moaning and eager.

"Merlin's balls, I need you," he said silkily, his breathing as ragged as hers. Her hand slid up his back, and he placed his tip at her opening, situated his hips, ecstatic at the wet, warm contact and pushed into her.

She cried out in pain.

He stopped, frozen, not sure what had hurt her so.

She was crying.

He lifted off her, holding himself above her, and wiped her tears away. "What did I do?" He felt like shite.

"It hurt," she said as she looked up at him apologetically and thick tears ran down her face into her hair.

Shite, I know that! "What hurt? What happened?" he asked remorsefully. *At least stop crying... Please, Lily, don't cry...*

Her tears were stopping, but her green eyes were still glistening with her unshed tears.

The door opened with an audible click, and he hung his head in frustration. "Don't cry, please. I'm sorry. I should have I dunno, Lily, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. It's not hurting so much anymore, but I want to stop," she said, sounding as if it were her fault.

It isn't her fault it's mine! I hurt her "Sure, yeah, I understand." *Bugger, bugger.*

~Spring 1997~

Hermione hurried down to his office as soon as she woke up, dressed and brushed her hair and teeth. She'd turned left at the bottom of the stairs and was practically down the third floor corridor before she realized where she was going. Chastising herself, she spun around and sprinted for the dungeons. The door opened as soon as she lifted her hand to knock.

"It's open, Miss Granger, please come inside and close the door," she heard him say from somewhere in his office. She entered the room, noticing that even though he was technically the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, his office still looked like it had when he'd taught Potions. The only difference was the jars of creatures and strange skulls interspaced between the potion ingredients. Snape sat at his desk, wearing his usual teaching robes. His lips curled into a semblance of a smile as he took in her shirt and Muggle jeans. A small cauldron of something sat on his desk and two teacups, one filled with the same silvery liquid as in the cauldron. "Mind-Clarity Potion, so that we may speak unencumbered." He pointed to the chair in front of his desk. "Sit down and drink the potion, please."

Surprised, and knowing that he must have been up all night to brew the potion since she knew that it took six hours to create, Hermione sat down and drank the offered drink. Nevertheless, even as she set her cup down, she knew that the potion wasn't helping. She knew that if he rose from his desk and walked over to her, she would have jumped to her feet and kissed him. Still, it was a bit shocking to her that even though they were away from the tower room, she still wanted to kiss him and more. Just thinking of what he would have done if they had been in the tower and not here in his office sent a tremor of desire down her spine. *Surely if the spells were only on the tower, I shouldn't feel this way about him?*

"You've been going to the tower nearly every morning, haven't you?" he said, watching her as if waiting for some visual sign that the potion had begun to work.

His question was not what she'd expected. "Yes," she admitted, "and you haven't been lately, so there isn't a problem." Even in his familiar frockcoat and waistcoat, Hermione could still visualize the taut, lean muscle of his body.

"I've been spending my time with Dumbledore every morning. Not that this is any concern of yours," he stated, chastising her, then amended his tone. "His hand, it's he's not recovering." He seemed to be scrutinizing her as if still waiting for some reaction or another.

Dumbledore's hand the dead hand? The one Harry said he injured breaking a curse "But surely Madam Pomfrey...?" she asked, stunned.

"No, Miss Granger, this is out of her range of knowledge," he said and then smiled when Hermione's expression must have reflected the surprise she felt at his words. "Madam Pomfrey is very skilled with accidental magic and spell reversal, and all such things inept, imbecilic students can do to one another. When it comes to the Dark Arts or curses, she refers them to me. Katie Bell, for instance, was immediately brought to me, not to the hospital wing. We are off the subject here. I had you come here to talk to you about what has been happening between you and me. There are things about this situation you do not understand."

Hermione had been listening to him, to every syllable of every smoothly spoken word, her eyes focused on his. "The Grey Lady told me the room is cursed. She said she'd set spells on the entrance to the stairs to keep people from entering, but they don't seem to work for me," Hermione said. His eyes narrowed, and he steepled his fingers together in front of him, his elbows on his desk.

Oh, those glorious fingers, she thought, watching him press his index fingers against his lips, making Hermione stare at his lips, remembering his kiss just the other evening. She rubbed her hands on her jeans, then clasped her hands together tightly on her lap.

His eyes followed her every move. "What spells?" he asked, breaking into her daydreaming.

Hermione tilted her head, her gaze not fixed on anything in particular as she tried to recall what the Grey Lady had told her, and licked her upper lip. "She'd said that the room was cursed and that the Bloody Baron had tried to use the room to trap her into marrying him. However, the room's curses didn't work on her as he'd expected. She'd said there were Beguiling, Luring and Seducing Curses that affect you the moment you begin to ascend the stairs, set there to draw you up to the room." She lifted her eyes back up to meet his, biting, then slowly releasing, her lower lip under his intense stare. Plucking up the nerve, she continued. "The room itself has Entrapment, Enticement and Ensnarement Curses and Charms. She'd said that the spells are twisted together somehow, and unless you know which charm was added to which curse, you cannot break the magic of the room except to leave by your own will power and determination," she recited as best she could remember. *Actually, with the Clarifying Potion, I seem to recall her words precisely.*

His gaze left her face for a moment, and he began stroking his lower lip with his fingers. "I see," he said, still staring at her. "I believe the Bloody Baron cursed the room. He told me of the spells when I was a student."

Her eyes flicked from his lips back up to his eyes. "Then why do you go back up there?" she asked, bewildered that he'd return to a room so frequently if he knew it'd been cursed.

His eyes flicked back to her face. "The room holds fond memories for me. It's been a place of solitude and serenity for me for years. I knew of the curses on the room but assumed that they only activated when I was in the room with someone else, someone of the opposite sex." His dark eyes were riveted on her soft brown ones as his index fingers moved across his lower lip, making Hermione's pulse quicken. "Beguiling, Luring and Seducing Curses, that makes sense why..."

Hermione had a hard time keeping her attention on their discussion instead of watching his fingers stroke his lip. "But what I don't understand is *why*?" she asked, confused, forcing herself to look him in the eye again. Hermione felt squirmy, shifting in her chair as she watched him, and licked her lips again. "The Grey Lady put spells on the portal to the stairs to make it resistant when she was alive here at the school. She'd placed Dissuading and Repulsing Charms on the barrier to prevent others from getting in. The spells were are to make people resist being drawn to the tower stairs, to resist the pull of the allure. But they didn't work on me and apparently not on you either." Without realizing it, her eyes had traveled down the buttons of his coat. He cleared his throat, and her eyes darted up to his instantly.

His dark eyes focused intently on hers as he interlaced his fingers, moving his hands under his chin. "I don't recall feeling such spells on the portal to the stairs," he stated.

"I do, I think... I'm not sure, but since you and I since we've you know," she said, blushing, dropping her eyes to the surface of his desk, "been kissing..." She was staring at his mouth again and quickly looked up and saw his eyebrow arch. "Okay, snogging. Well, sometimes I have these doubts reservations, just before I push my way through the wall to get to the stairs." She noticed his head snapped up off his hands, and his eyes momentarily widened. "What? You sense it too?"

"You said 'push through the wall,' correct? As if you are pushing yourself through the stone?" he asked. His eyes darted down to her chest and then slowly rose to her face. "Is that what you feel? Is that the barrier?"

"No maybe. The Grey Lady said that you cannot pass the portal onto the stairs unless you are meant to be together, unless you are soul mates or destined for each other," Hermione recalled. His eyebrow arched again at her words. "Only I wasn't with anyone when I went through the portal."

"I was..." One of his thumbs began stroking his lip as Snape seemed to be contemplating her words. "I passed through the portal with someone. But if the portal only allows you to enter when you are with someone you are destined for, how did you get in? Why didn't the resistance spells work?" His gaze traveled down her front slowly as he spoke, then flicked back up quickly. "That first morning, was this your first time in the tower room?"

"First time, sir?" she asked. "Up in the tower room that day when you were there? No, that was my third actually."

"Were you with anyone your first time?" he asked, rubbing his thumb across his lower lip again.

Hermione was transfixed watching the gentle caress of his lip, remembering the feel of his thumb on her...

"Miss Granger?"

"Huh? Oh! No, sir, I was alone both times," she said, feeling her cheeks growing warm *Pay attention. What's the matter with me? I'm lusting after Snape!*

"Nevertheless, you passed the portal onto the stairs alone. Are you sure you heard the Grey Lady correctly? I have passed the portal many times, unencumbered," he said.

Hermione nodded. "That's what she said: unless you are meant to be together, unless you are soul mates or destined for each other..."

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes scrutinizing her. "So, you're implying that somehow you and I are destined for each other, is that it? Really, that's a stretch. How did you even find the tower in the first place?"

"Well, I'd been in the room at the base of the tower before, my first year, when Harry, Ron and I saved the Philosopher's Stone." He snorted at her comment and her brows furrowed briefly. "I remembered the room. It was the one with all the flying keys, and it intrigued me. I wanted to go back this year and see it again..." Suddenly, she remembered something she'd forgotten. "I had leaned against the wall when we were looking at the keys! My shoulders had sunk in a bit! I think my hand may have, too. I'd immediately stood up, thinking I'd lost my footing... but my mind was on getting the right key for the door, so I must have unknowingly stepped away from the obscured entrance to the stairs. I've been affected by the spells since my first year! Only, Harry and Ron were with me then." She looked up at him, astounded, and his eyes flicked back to her face. "But if I am destined to be with either Harry or Ron, why am I I mean why am I drawn up to the room to be with you? Why is it you and me?"

"That seems to be the question I am trying to resolve: Why this is happening between you and me?" He swore suddenly, rising and turning to the shelves behind him. He returned to the desk, holding a small vial. "Tea, please," he said aloud as if to the walls. Immediately, a house-elf arrived carrying a teapot, leaving the steaming teapot on the desk, and promptly disappeared. Snape poured the tea into the cups on his desk, then added a several drops of the potion from the vial into each cup. "It's a Calming Ascetic to quell libidinousness."

"Libidinousness, sir?" she asked, tearing her eyes away from his hands to look up at his face.

"Yes, Miss Granger, libidinousness: full of sexual lust, lustful, lewdness, lasciviousness... Have you or have you not been staring at me, undressing me with your eyes?" He picked up his cup as her mouth dropped open. "Drink it, please."

How in bloody dragons did he know? Wait. He's drinking Calming Ascetic? He needed a potion because is that why he's been staring at me? Lasciviousness! "Sir, I was wondering," she said, picking up her own cup, "if you knew about the room, the secret entrance, why didn't you use the room when you tried to stop Professor Quirrell from taking the stone?" She sipped the tea, crinkling her nose at how the potion altered the flavor of the Pekoe tea blend.

"Pardon me?" he asked.

"I saw you limping the day before Harry's first Quidditch match. You'd been bitten, or hurt, by Hagrid's three-headed dog, Fluffy. If there was another way in, then why didn't you just go around the dog?"

"The wounds on my leg were from feeding the blasted beast with Hagrid," Snape replied, snarling. "He was concerned that his *precious pet* should have sufficient food and water. I'd had just enough time to pull him away before that beast scratched me."

"But the door the one in the corridor why didn't Professor Quirrell just use that one?" she asked.

"Because he didn't know about it. From what I understand you have to want to go to the tower room to find the door," he replied. "Neither Professor McGonagall nor Dumbledore knew about the door nor could they see it when passing."

"But if you have to want to get in to go to the tower room, you have to know that it's there," she surmised. "I chanced upon it by accident when I wanted an easier way back out from the room at the base of the tower... Oh! I'd already been up to the tower room." She looked up at Snape. The urges she'd been ignoring seemed quite a bit lessened, although not altogether gone. "Sir, I thought that Love Charms and Love Potions were forbidden at school. The books that contain them are in the Restricted Section."

"They are," he said, sounding slightly more relaxed, "and yes, Professor Dumbledore had the books refiled in the Restricted Section when he became Headmaster. Many think it was Dexter Fortescue or Dumbledore that forbade the learning of Love Spells and Potions at Hogwarts. It wasn't. It was Rowena Ravenclaw. Now, I understand why." Hermione tilted her head, confused, and he shook his head. "The Grey Lady attended school during Rowena Ravenclaw's last few years of teaching. If the Grey Lady was in fact the reason the tower room was cursed and if she did place the restraining spells on the entrance to the stairs, then it falls to reason that this secret entrance to the tower was secured as well. Still, none of this tells me how to disable the spells we seem to be affected by."

"We?"

"Yes, Miss Granger, we you and me. I've obviously been under their influence as well. Please, stay away from the tower. Exercise your will power and determination, but do not meet me up there. At least until I can figure out these spells and disband them. Please, stay away."

~ TBC ~>

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Author's Notes:

*I simply cannot forget to say thank you to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.*

## Allure Beyond the Tower Walls

Chapter 7 of 25

Hermione cannot resist the urges to return to the tower room, the constant draw of the spells and the allure of the man she hopes to meet while up there, haunt her thoughts and her dreams. Yet, he's becoming an even bigger enigma; his actions baffle and confuse her, increasing the tension with in her.

Twenty years earlier, Severus tries to comfort Lily after she's hexed in Defense Against the Dark Arts class by his housemates, and he and Lily have a fight of sorts over the differences of being in such apposing houses. Can he convince her to stay with him?

The Enchanted Tower Room

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Allure Beyond the Tower Walls

~Spring 1997~

She tried to stay away. She tried to stop staring at him. Harry thought she'd finally come around and was beginning to suspect Professor Snape of all the horrid things he accused Severus of. That wasn't the reason at all. She couldn't stop thinking about him. She daydreamed about him in the prefect's bathroom and frequently when she was reading or revising. At meals whenever their eyes met, he turned his head, but she knew he'd been watching her. In class, he avoided direct eye contact as much as possible, but she knew that he watched her every move. He would always stop behind her in class when he walked around the room as they practiced defensive spells. He avoided her between classes, making sure that they did not run into each other in the corridors. However, a few times when she did pass him, he walked so close that his robes brushed against her, and the momentary contact made her catch her breath each time. It was torture.

Hermione was still using the mild Sleeping Draught nightly, but Severus haunted her dreams. She envisioned his body, his lean muscled body leaning over her, his deft fingers and artistic mouth creating sensations in her she doubted anyone else could match. In her dreams, she could almost feel him, sense him, and her desire to return to the tower grew. She was feeling as restless and randy as Lavender Brown. In addition, every morning she struggled against her desire to seek him out, to go to their private room in the tower, using all her will power and determination to stay in bed and study until breakfast. Moreover, in the hours when he had his office hours posted, she purposefully went to the library to read. Still, she sought out the tower in the evenings occasionally, greatly disappointed that Severus wasn't with her. The calm serenity of the room did little to quiet her urges to seek him out.

\*

Hermione woke up with a start from a rather vivid dream, gasping. Regardless of how she tried, she couldn't fall back to sleep. She tried reading, but she couldn't concentrate on the words. Restless, antsy, she rolled out of bed, changed her knickers and pulled on her skirt and a light jumper, slipped into her shoes and headed down to the common room. As soon she appeared, Kippy Disappeared, returning seconds later with a large cup of his Pekoe tea. *Severus' preferred blend and now mine, too. Gods, what else do we have in common? I hardly know the man. I know he's brilliant, stoic and brave. I know he risks himself spying on Voldemort. He's clever, strong, capable... but I have no idea of his interests except for the Dark Arts, Potions and... potions.* She laughed as she scrambled through the portrait hole and walked down the

corridor. *I don't know anything about him.*

She tried to recall anything and everything about Severus Snape as she walked. All she could come up with was that she respected him, admired him, wished that she knew him better and wished they were friendlier with each other. She stopped suddenly, realizing where she stood. "The door... Please... No, I shouldn't. I promised." She looked around. The castle was silent, peaceful. "Please let me in," she said softly, reaching for the handle and slipping into the room. She slowly circled the room, attentive for the resistance spells, trying to discern what they might be. The urge to leave was there, feelings of self-doubt and denial of her own feelings toward Severus but also doubt in regards of his desire for her. She felt somewhat repulsed by her wantonness and embarrassed to be seeking out the portal. Nevertheless, they were not as strong as the alluring draw she felt to go up the stairs. *Could the Bloody Baron have been a stronger wizard than the Grey Lady had been? Is that why her spells aren't as effective?* Hermione easily found and pushed her way through the obscured portal.

Once she felt the texture of the sandy stone on her skin, all doubts immediately faded, and she began to crave Severus' touch, his hands on her body, his fingers making her quiver and her heart race. She resisted the urge to run up the stairs, to hurry up and meet him with each step she took. She could almost visualize his dark eyes looking at her lustfully, and her heart started to pound in anticipation as she forced herself to ascend the stairs slowly. When she finally placed her hand on the latch, Hermione knew that if he was in there regardless of how much self-control she usually had, seeing him, one touch of his hand, and she would give into him, completely unrestrained.

The room was empty when she entered. Sighing, Hermione walked over to the window and perched herself on the windowsill, staring out at the dark midnight blue sky. The trees were black, the mountain crest a rugged line on the horizon. She sipped her tea, feeling serene, quiet, and peaceful as she leaned her back against the stone with her shoulder against the glass. Even the dark velvety textures looked beautiful as she gazed at the view. She set her large cup at her feet when she'd finished her tea, noting that the sky was just beginning to lighten slightly.

Hermione sighed heavily when she realized that the predawn colors had faded and he hadn't come. A sense of disappointment and emptiness hit her, and she picked up her cup to leave. She glanced up at the arch above the door and noticed that the stone was smooth. *The words the writing it's not there.* She turned to scan the room, contemplating the reason why. *Severus showed me the words the first time we were here together, and they were there the second time, I know it. He pointed it out to me just before he kissed me.* Her fingers automatically rose to touch her lips, and she closed her eyes as she remembered his first two kisses. *Oh, Merlin, he can kiss, she thought, releasing her breath slowly. So passionate demanding, yes, I'd have guessed that of him but not the skill he has at making me so weak in the knees or my head spin. Who would have thought he could do that?* She reached for the latch and was surprised when the door opened easily. *Is it because I'm alone?* she wondered as she scurried down the stairs and left the tower.

She was just about to ascend the stairs to go up to her common room when Professor Snape came walking down. Hermione stood frozen on the first step, watching his robes billow, framing his lean body in his black frock coat and trousers. Her breathing became deeper the closer he walked until he was literally standing on the step above her. He looked over her shoulder, and a fiercely dark look flashed on his face. "You were in the tower, weren't you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione was caught off guard by his rough manner. "Yes, sir, I was. I thought, well... I had the urge to go there..."

"Regardless of the consequences? Have you no self-control?" he asked waspishly.

"I don't know? I felt like it." Hermione backed up, her step faltered, and she fell, crying out in pain as her bum landed on the floor. Her ankle was throbbing as she tried to move her legs, and she cried out in pain when she touched her right heel to the floor.

Snape was kneeling in front of her in seconds, reaching for her ankle. His eyes darted up her leg, freezing for a second, then shot up to her face, and Hermione suddenly realized her skirt had ridden up her legs because of the position in which she'd landed. She blushed, knowing that he must have seen her green lace knickers and tried, unsuccessfully, to tug her skirt down.

"Relax, I just want to evaluate your ankle," he said a bit curtly. He removed her shoe, slipped off her sock and gently began to palpate her ankle, turning her foot carefully from side to side, up and down, then around. His fingers, however painful his gentle probing was, sent shivers down her leg. His eyes kept darting up to her face as he evaluated her reactions, momentarily flicking occasionally where she was holding the hem of her skirt between her legs.

She couldn't take her eyes off him, either staring at his face and his dark eyes or at his hands, secretly wishing they would slip and move higher up her leg. She bit her lip, thankful he couldn't read her mind.

With what seemed to be a simple flick of his wand, the pain lessened somewhat. "It's only a sprain," he said as he aimed his wand again and uttered healing charm. When he was done, he finally looked up at her with concern. "Try and stand," he said, extending his hand and helping her rise. She stood on her good foot, trying to keep as much pressure off her injured one as much as possible. "Can you walk?"

"I think so," she replied taking a tentative step. It hurt and she nearly stumbled again.

Snape reacted quickly, grabbing her arms to keep her from falling and helped ease her back to the floor. "This may hurt a bit," he said as he conjured a support for her ankle. He took her hands and helped her to her feet again. With an easiness that surprised her, he lifted her into his arms and carried her up the steps. "So, please explain to me why in Merlin's name did you disobey my request and return to the room?" he asked. "Why would you risk going there when you knew that I'd force myself on you?"

Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her and laid her head on his shoulder, inhaling his scent. "Because I wanted to," she said, realizing that every time he asked the same question she found it impossible to explain. "I just wanted to... It's the spells isn't it I keep returning because I'm now cursed."

"Shite." He looked down at her, turned, kicked open a door, and carried her inside an old, unused office. He set her down on one of the chairs and Summoned the other chair from behind the desk and sat. "Yes, it is. I had hoped that since you haven't been going up to the room as long as I have that it would have been easier for you to resist. But I see it in your eyes. You can't, can you?"

She shook her head and he lowered his. "I'm getting nowhere with these spells, and I cannot stress the importance of keeping our distance." He looked at her foot and grimaced. "You'll need ice for that and will need to stay off it for a day. I'll have your friends come to get you," he said abruptly and rose.

"You're going to leave me here?" she asked, offended by his actions.

Snape leaned down, his hands landing on the armrests of her chair, his face merely inches from hers. He opened his mouth to respond and then kissed her. Her arms encircled his neck, and he pulled her from the chair, his tongue thrusting into her mouth as he deepened the kiss. Her mind swirled, and her knees weakened as she clung to him, desperately eager for him.

Suddenly, he pushed her away from him, setting her roughly back into the chair. His breathing was as ragged as hers, his dark eyes staring at her with lust, and he turned his head, the tic in his cheek indicating that he was clenching his jaws. He walked away saying, "Yes, Miss Granger, I have to. I'll send your friends down to assist you."

~Spring 1977~

"But why do you associate with them?" Lily asked, standing with her back to him, looking over the grounds, her hands rubbing her arms as he approached. She turned around, looking up at him, her green eyes still reflecting the hurt and embarrassment from Mulciber's Antlers Hex and Rosier's Hooves Jinx.

*It hadn't taken Lupin and Black very long to reverse the spells, but Lily's favoring her right foot, so it must still bother her. Instead of going to the library as her note had said she would after class, she'd taken the west corridor on the fourth floor and had gone up to the west battlements. Probably to think or fume over it most likely, he'd supposed.*

Severus had followed her, sealing off the stairs that led up to the battlements with a Repelling Charm interwoven with a Forgetfulness Curse before he'd continued after her. *At least we will be alone for a while, until someone or a teacher happens to figure out the spell* she'd thought to himself as he ran up the stairs. He saw the humiliation and hurt in her eyes when she'd turned to look at him, and swore softly to himself, *Shite*. "They're in my house, Lily. I have to get along with them," he replied. "Besides your Patronus is a doe. He was teasing you..."

"About my blood! My heritage! He and Avery and Rosier and that tart Cherine and her friend..." Lily stammered angrily. "They hate me! And for nothing. For no good reason they just hate me."

"They don't hate you, they don't really know you," he said, trying to console her. "Okay, they don't try to know you... but that's not my fault, and I can't change their opinions."

"Do you even try?" she exclaimed, raising her voice at him. "Sev, you never stand up to them. You just stand there and scowl at me?"

*Scowling at her? If I was scowling, it was at Black.* "I was watching Black to see what he'd do, Lily. He was standing right behind to you," Severus tried to explain. "For all I know he and Potter were going to retaliate."

"They didn't," she snapped, obviously still hurt.

"Only because Professor Bullmier saw what Avery and Rosier did and put them in detention." Severus scuffed his shoe on the rough stones *Damn Black*.

Lily swept her hand in the direction of the stairs. "Sev, they are awful, and they have so much animosity towards me, Deborah, and Leanne not to mention anyone else in my house regardless of their heritage."

"And your lot's any better towards Slytherin?" he asked, annoyed.

"You could try and get along better," she retorted.

*Yeah, right! Get along with the Gryffindor four.* "Pettigrew is such a wet weed, and Black is nothing more than a bit of a lad and thinks he's so posh. And Potter don't get me started on Potter," Severus replied defensively. "And what's up with Lupin? Why is he sick the day after every full moon? Or haven't you tried tracking his monthly recurrences. It's always on the day of a full moon, Lily." He hated this argument, but there was no stopping it now.

"Don't don't you dare. It's not the same! They don't hate you simply because of your birth!" Lily admonished him.

"No, they hate me because of let me count: my name, skin tone, my hair, my eye color, my nose, my house, my intelligence, my skill at Potions, my knowledge of hexes, curses and jinxes, and my clothes... I could go on. You're the only one in your house that's *nice!*" he snarled.

"That's not true and you know it," she said defensively.

"Name one Gryffindor that doesn't hate me just for being in Slytherin? Or one that doesn't hate me because I know Dark Arts?" he asked. "You can't can you?"

"Deborah doesn't hate you," she replied beseechingly.

"Yeah, then why does she run away whenever I approach you two or cower from me and slip away if I come anywhere near her in the corridors or library?" he asked, crossing his arms. "She's afraid of me, and I've never done anything to her. The last time all I wanted to do was to return the rubber she'd dropped, but she ran away from me. I'd have done better if I'd simply thrown it at her."

Lily tilted her head. "Wasn't Avery with you then?"

"No, Lily, he wasn't. He was several paces ahead and walking back to our common room. I saw her drop the rubber as she left class *after* Avery and Rosier had left the classroom. They were in front of her I was behind," he explained, frustrated. "Still she reacted as if I was going to curse her."

"Sev, she misunderstood," Lily said, defending her friend.

"Yeah. *'Hey, you dropped this'* is really easy to misunderstand," he said sarcastically. "Lily, I'm sorry, really I am." He placed a hand on her arm, looking at her, hoping that this time she'd understand. "It's hard enough having to be on guard from Potter, Black and groupies. I just can't make enemies in my own house, too. I wouldn't be able to eat, sleep or revise in peace. I can't watch my back round the clock. Besides, aren't you always saying how thin I am?" He lowered his head so they were eye level. "If I ostracized my own housemates, I'd waste away from lack of food and sleep. Or be living in the hospital wing." He pulled her to him in a hug. "Besides, Black had you all right again before I could do it. Please, believe me, *if* I was scowling, it was at him, not you. I wanted to be the one to change you back. Although, you were really cute with antlers and hooves."

"Oh... you..." she uttered, giving a halfhearted pat on his back. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Whatever you like," he replied, tipping her face up so he could kiss her.

~Spring 1997~

Hermione had left Defense Against the Dark Arts class, and as usual, she'd headed for the library. She'd been angry with Snape for giving the class an essay on the Extermination Spells simply because she'd quoted Magical Creatures Great and Small when she'd named the three primary creatures the spell was intended for. He'd made it even harder for her to concentrate on the spell, Erronious Exterminae, used to primarily to defend against Acromantula, and large shelled creatures like Seacumtula, the highland Entomonida, by standing right in front of her desk when he'd allowed her to answer the question. It'd taken all her concentration to not ogle him in class and keep her eyes on his face, instead of roaming her gaze on his body. And he'd done that on purpose! She knew that she'd answered his question correctly, but he'd waspishly given them an essay, warning her as she'd passed by him as she was leaving the classroom, not to plagiarize any of the books that explained the spell or she'd get a detention.

It had been a rough day in Snape's class anyway with Ron and Harry going on about Draco and his supposed plans to destroy the school. Rubbish! She knew he was a bully, but a Death Eater, come on. But she was not going to go traipsing by the Room of Requirement simply on the off chance Draco was using the room.

She had just topped the stairs onto the fourth floor when she saw Neville cornered by Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle. Neville, his arms full of books and parchments, was unable to brandish his wand in defense. Hermione'd fired off a quick Expelliarmus and a Stunning Spell to protect her friend, which, unfortunately, had been seen by Snape.

Hermione entered the dungeons following dinner with a false sense of bravado. She knew that few students, other than the Slytherins would be roaming the corridors down here, but after her attack on Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle, it was better to be safe and walk confidently and quickly than make oneself an easy target. She was glad when she reached the door to his office to serve her detention with Professor Snape unnoticed. She had no idea how Snape would react if she were late due to being hexed, cursed or jinxed, and she didn't want to find out either.

As before, the door opened the moment she raised her hand up to knock. "It's open, Miss Granger, come in," he called out. Hermione briefly wondered how he was so sure it was her and not a Slytherin seeking him during his office hours. *Yeah, right! What could possibly be so traumatic or urgent that a student would seek him out for advice? Can you imagine having to ask him for anything personal? Slytherins must be pretty self-reliant*, she thought as she entered the room and stood by his desk.

The small cauldron, a steaming teapot and a vial all sat on his desk with two teacups. "Sit." He set his quill down, ladled some of the Mind-Clarity Potion into the teacup, and pushed it over to her. "Drink, please."

Suppressing a smile, Hermione drank the beverage. The silvery liquid had hardly any taste at all. She watched him as he continued to grade papers, her eyes focused on the manner in which he held his quill.

"When you are finished, I want you to drink the Calming Ascetic. And please, stop staring at my hand," he said, dipping his quill in his inkwell, not bothering to look up at her.

Hermione finished the cup and poured herself some tea. "How many drops, sir?" she asked.

"Three should be enough," he replied, looking at her without raising his head, "if I'm guessing your weight accurately."

*Well, he should know*, she assumed as she added the clear drops to her tea. Once finished, she sat back and waited, noticing that he was biting on one side of his bottom lip as he wrote, making his soft lip pucker ever so slightly...

"Miss Granger, you're staring at me," he snapped, and her eyes locked with his expectantly. "Now, can you please tell me why you Stunned Mr. Goyle and knocked Mr. Malfoy across the corridor today?"

"Yes, sir," she said, trying to keep from getting lost in his dark eyes. "They were going to cast a curse or something on Neville. Neville had just looked up at Goyle and Malfoy. Malfoy was still laughing at him it's possible that Goyle may have caused Neville to drop his things in the first place but that's speculation because it looked like Neville had just finished collecting his things off the floor. I could tell because he had them all jumbled in his arms, and was still straightening up, when Goyle began to swish his wand and Malfoy pulled his wand out of his pocket. Neville didn't have his wand out or anything; it was still in his left pocket, grip down... Anyway, I simply reacted to protect a friend from unfriendly fire, sir." *Well, at least the Mind-Clarity Potion is working.*

Snape sat back and crossed his arms, his eyes darting from her face to her chest and back, twice as he considered her explanation. "Reasonable... But still no excuse to attack students in the school corridors," he said and held up his hand to stop her from interrupting him, "even if you are correct and they were about to attack Mr. Longbottom without provocation. I assume that as a sixth year you are capable of correcting first years' papers?"

Hermione looked up at him, gobsmacked. "Yes, sir, I could..."

"Fine. Just the corrections, Miss Granger, I will grade them," he said, sliding a stack of parchments to her and handing her a quill.

The detention wasn't too bad. However, every now and again, she'd peek up at Severus, watching him slyly and return to her grading. Several times she'd catch his gaze, and her cheeks warmed each time. "Do you find me particularly fascinating, Miss Granger, or is it my dashing good looks?" he asked sarcastically.

"I don't well, yes, I do find you interesting in a rather appealing way, and you're not an unattractive guy, Professor," she replied truthfully. "I think you have an appealing look..." *Bugger, did he give me Veritaserum, too? I can't lie to him...*

"Ridiculous," he snapped.

"No! Really, I don't! I mean I do!" she exclaimed. "If you'd pull your hair back more, maybe wash it occasionally you'd be rather nice looking..."

"I was being..."

"That's another thing," she continued, undaunted. "I like your face. You've incredible eyes and your lips... If you smiled occasionally, maybe stop scowling so much you're an attractive bloke when you smile, and you carry yourself well, you look good in your clothes..." *And out of them...* "It's just you simply push people away."

"If you're finished with my physical assessment," he said sharply. He sat back looking at her, his eyes roaming her unabashedly. After a while, he bent back over his papers. "You may go, Miss Granger."

"I'd like to finish. I'm more than half way through," she started to say as he looked up at her, his eyes staring at her questioningly. "If it's all right with you, that is."

"Why would you choose to stay?" he asked, dipping his quill in the red ink.

"I'm finding your company to be... comfortable; you intrigue me. I I'm enjoying being here with you," she stammered.

"Infatuation, curiosity or respect," he sneered, his eyes studying her. "Do you expect me to believe that you like being here with me in my office?" he asked with a sweep of his hand. She was just about to answer him when he cut her off. "Why? What possible reason have I ever given you to like me?"

Her mouth closed, and she stared at him as if confounded.

"Yes, I see, very well articulated. You don't know me. I know you far better than you know me, and I can't see this ..." he faltered. "I cannot have you involved with me at this time."

"Sir, what if I wanted to be? I mean, what if I wanted to get to know you?" she asked, but he shook his head.

"You may finish the papers, Miss Granger. After that, you are to go."

Hermione picked up the quill and continued checking over the essays. Nevertheless, every few seconds, and every time she dipped her quill, her eyes strayed over to him, occasionally catching his gaze for a brief few seconds. When she was nearly done with her pile, he stood and walked over to her chair. "Come on, get up," he said as if annoyed. "I cannot concentrate with you staring at me, and the potions are wearing off. Time for you to go," he said as she rose to leave. He escorted her to the door, his hand on the small of her back; however, once there he waited, his hand on the latch. "Come again tomorrow. You can finish then," he said, opening the door.

She looked at him, but his expression was unreadable to her. "Same time then?"

"No. Yes, all right, come here in the morning instead of the tower," he said, opening the door. "It would be preferable."

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Author's Note:

I owe a huge thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69, her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

Captivation Beyond the Tower Room

Chapter 8 of 25

Lily tries to get her friends to see Severus the way that she does; however, Severus knows that it's futile. Nevertheless, to keep Lily in his life, he'd do whatever she asks of him, regardless. Well, almost anything.

Twenty years later, Hermione plucks up the courage to ask Professor Snape for a pass to the Restricted Section in order to look up these spells that have enchanted her and made her so enraptured by him. Moreover, Hermione notices that Severus seems to be just as affected by the tower's spells, although he is able to fight them better than she can.

I owe a huge thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69, her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

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Captivation Beyond the Tower Room

~Spring 1997~

The following morning, Hermione left Snape's office feeling confused and happy. She'd finished the first-years' essays and quite a few of the second years' as well. They had worked in relative silence, although she'd caught him looking at her several times or had been caught staring at him. Even with the Mind-Clarity Potion, the four drops of the Calming Ascetic and a few of the Pacifying Draught, she'd still been unable to keep her mind off snogging him in his presence. Instead of going back to the common room before breakfast, Hermione decided to go to the library. The Mind-Clarity Potion was still working on her, and she wanted to search through the books to see if she could identify the spells the Grey Lady had applied to the portal and any of the spells the Bloody Baron used on the rooms.

One question continually intrigued her; *What I know about Enchantment Spells and Alluring or Enticement Charms is that they fade in time. So why were the spells so strong? Why are the spells the Grey Lady used still active? I thought that when caster died the spells dissipated. That hasn't happened... If the Grey Lady was a student, then the spells would have to be here in the library. But I've read through all the books in the Charms section regarding these spells, and I haven't found anything that explains this. Maybe... If I could just get into the Restricted Section, somehow I just know I'd find the answer in there.*

~Spring 1977~

Lily's note said to meet her by the twin birch trees in the courtyard after Transfiguration. Severus easily ditched Avery and Mulciber by dodging through the tapestry on the second floor that hid a secret passage, which created a short cut from the east wing to the south wing. He'd found the passage quite by accident his second year, ditching Potter and Black. Of course they knew about the passage now, so it was no good to use it on them, but his dormitory mates didn't. Severus ran down the stairs and through the door to the courtyard, stopping short when he saw Deborah and Leanne, Lily's dorm mates, sitting under the trees with her. *Bloody hell. Well, she wants me to be nice I can sure as dragon's balls be nice. Besides, Deborah looks like she's already about to run off anyway.*

"Severus, hi," Lily said enthusiastically. "You got my note?"

"Yeah, I got your note. But you were rather vague," he said, standing in front of the girls with his arms crossed, and watched Deborah out of the corner of his eye slyly, amused as she fidgeted with her hair nervously. "What did you want?"

"I was we were hoping that you'd help us with nonverbals," Lily asked. "You know, show us how you did the spell in class today."

Severus tilted his head and raised an eyebrow. "I thought you'd ask Potter or Black to show you that? They got them first in class, not me." Deborah looked rather uncomfortable when he'd said Black's name. She'd squirmed, flushed slightly, her eyes downcast, and a tic showed on her cheek. *Clenching your teeth?* Curious by her reaction, Severus continued to watch her slyly. "Black is better at nonverbals than I am. Why not ask him? Surely, Deborah, you'd be more comfortable with Black over me?" he asked, emphasizing Black's name, amused when Deborah flinched each time.

She squared her shoulders when she sat up and looked at him. "You managed to conjure a chair nonverbally today," Deborah replied, bravely looking him in the eye.

So little Gryffindor, I'm not your first choice, but I'd bet my fresh cauldron of Felix Felicis that you've been dumped by Black.

"And you can do all the Defense Spells nonverbally, too," Leanne stated, looking up at him boldly, although she had her hands clasped so tightly in her lap, her knuckles were white.

Yeah, right, Lily, if your friends get to know me, they will like me. Preposterous. "All right, what did you want to know?" Severus asked as he walked between the two

benches, turned, leaned against one of the birch trees and looked at the girls.

Lily was at least smiling at him and mouthed, 'thank you,' although, her two friends still looked dubious.

Severus nodded. 'You owe me,' he mouthed back as Leanne rattled on about his skill in conjuring a rickety ladder-back chair in class.

*

"All right, Lily, what was all that about?" he asked as he and Lily were walking back to the library. Both Deborah and Leanne practically ran away when Lily declared the practice session over. As much as each girl wanted to learn how to do nonverbals, Severus doubted that Deborah ever would. "You know Leanne will probably always mumble her nonverbal, and Deborah she'll never get them. They don't have your talent. Still, I don't know how you even talked them into coming to me for help."

Lily blushed. "I just thought they should actually get to know you a little, Sev, that's all," she said, her eyes darting toward him then down to the floor. "I keep telling them you're nice, wicked smart, and that you can do everything we learn in class... and that you don't curse anyone without provocation... Well, you don't," she added quickly when he smirked at her incredulously. "So I just wanted them to, I dunno, see you, talk to you, get to know you."

"Lily, they've known me for six and a half years. Their opinions of me are not going to change." He took her arm and pulled her aside, down a flight of stairs.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Down here," he said cryptically, guiding her halfway down the narrow, cold passageway in the dungeons.

She tried pull on his arm to stop him or to slow him down. "I don't want to see the Slytherin... Severus?"

He continued leading her, smirking, although she couldn't see it. "The Slytherins are all in classes or in the library. Besides, we're not that close to the common room. Relax." He finally stopped and stood her against the wall, placing one hand on the wall by her head, leaning close to her. "Lily, what is the real reason for today's lessons? Your friends are afraid of me. Every time I swished my wand, Leanne stiffened and Deborah flinched." He fingered her robes as he spoke, gently running his fingers down the edge.

"You said that my housemates don't like you, and well, you... may have been right. But only because of what I've heard Potter and Black saying about you ever since our first year." She bit her lip and tilted her head so that she was looking up at him. "So, I thought if my friends could see you like I do, then maybe, they'd like you, too."

He smirked at her. "The real reason you asked me was because you wanted help and couldn't go to Potter and Black."

She looked up at him in surprise. "No! I mean we didn't want to, and... Severus, you're good at nonverbals. I've seen you. Well, actually, I know that half the spells you use against Potter and Black are nonverbals. You just choked in class today."

"Or I got jinxed in class by Black. Potter and Black really like the Langlock Jinx and Tongue-Tying Curse." He picked up a lock of her hair, slowly sliding his fingers down to the ends. *I love her hair...* "I know Deborah's just been dumped by Black," he said as he lifted the end of the lock of hair to his nose and sniffed it before laying it back down on her blouse, the back of his fingers caressing her breast. Lily exhaled in surprise, and his smile became wider. "It's the only reason she agreed to have me in on your practice session, isn't it?"

"How'd you know?" she asked bewildered, then her expression became accusing. "You did that Legilimency thing didn't you?"

"It's Legilimency, and no, I didn't," he said, amused. His eyes followed his fingers as he slid them down and gently cupped her breast. "She squirmed uncomfortably every time I suggested she ask Black. I hardly needed to read her mind."

"Sev, we'll get caught!" she exclaimed as he leaned forward to kiss her.

"No, Lily love, we won't," he replied, deliberately using his smooth drawl while deftly flicking her buttons and opening her blouse. "I told you everyone's either in class or revising in the common room or in the library. Besides this is an indirect and seldom used corridor. Few come this way." He kissed her lips, savoring their softness, and deftly opened another button. "We could always go back to our tower room if you're nervous?" He managed another two buttons.

"I, oh, shouldn't... I have an essay," she tried to say before he silenced her with a kiss. She wrapped her arms around him, kissing him back, and he growled seductively. "I love it when you do that."

"Do what, exactly, Lily love?" he asked in his smooth drawl. He slipped his hand into her open blouse and ran his fingers along inside her bra.

"That." She arched her back as his kisses trailed down her throat. "Just like that," she answered.

Severus moved his fingers of his other hand over the bra's closure and uttered the Unlatching Spell, focusing his intent carefully. The bra clasp gave *Yes! Weeks of practicing on doors latches paid off.* His hand cupped a breast as his thumb rubbed against her nipple, making her inhale sharply. *The 'I like it' inhale.*

Lily slid her hand on his chest, toying with his buttons, and he smiled inwardly. "Do you want help," he purred in her ear.

"I just want to touch you," she replied as he pushed her back against the wall and pressed himself against her.

"Anything you want, Lily love," he drawled the words slowly. "Just tell me what you want. I'll give you whatever you want." He didn't wait for an answer, crushing her lips in a demanding and hungry kiss.

She moaned against him, her fingers toying with his buttons as he loosened her blouse. "But the corridor, we shouldn't."

Severus let go of her breast and pulled his wand out, pointing to the corridor. *Muffliato, Repello, Formidilosus, Salvio Hexia Discedo...* No more worries, Lily. We will be undisturbed. But if it will make you feel better, *Nullus Illusionares,*" he said, adding the Disillusionment Charm. "Now we can't be seen either."

~Spring 1997~

Hermione was leaving her common room to head down to the library when she spotted Malfoy at the other end of the corridor heading for the stairs. She quickly followed him, wondering why Malfoy would be all the way up here instead of down on the dungeons where his house was. She lost him once, and a second time, before she spotted him walking down the fourth-floor corridor and entering the library.

"Following me, Granger?" he asked, stopping her inside the door.

Damn, he spotted me... "Malfoy, I was simply heading for the library like I always do. I could be asking you what you were doing on the seventh floor, but I've other things on my mind, and you wouldn't tell me the truth anyway," she said, brushing him aside as she proceeded toward the bookshelves. She paused at the second bookshelf and tried to look like she was reading the titles, all the while keeping an eye on Malfoy to see which aisle he entered. He entered the Transfiguration section and disappeared from view. Slyly, she walked over to the same aisle and peered down, but he was gone. *Dratted Nogtails!*

Hermione left the aisle and worked her way down the Enchanted Charms section, rejecting one book after another, trying to find one she hadn't already read or any on Enchantment Spells. She began to wish fervently that she had a pass for the Restricted Section when she saw Professor Snape enter the library. She quickly caught up to

him. "Sir, if I may, a moment?"

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he asked, looking down at her in his typical sneer.

She chose to ignore the look and plucked up the courage to ask him for the pass. "I was wondering if well considering everything..."

"Spit it out, I haven't all evening," he snapped irritably.

"I'd like a pass to the Restricted Section to read up on Enchantment Spells..." she said boldly.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her aside. "Hush," he hissed sharply. He looked at her thoughtfully and his anger seemed to subside. "Yes, I will authorize it, but you will bring the books down to my office. Do you understand? If anyone asks, you are researching something for extra credit for Defense. Do not carry these books to your dormitory." He turned and approached Madam Pince's desk.

"Yes, Professor Snape, may I assist you?" she asked, looking up and smiling at him.

"Miss Granger is to be granted permission for the use of the Restricted Section for a research paper on Dark Charms," he said with authority, although he kept his voice low. "I will be supervising her work and will take responsibility for any books she wishes to check out."

Madam Pince pulled out a slip of parchment, handing it to Professor Snape. "Absolutely, professor."

"Miss Granger, collect your books and bring them down to my office." He stood, watching her a moment before adding, "I'll expect to see you in my office in an hour and a half."

Hermione scurried into the Restricted Section as soon as Madam Pince handed her her pass and quickly followed the directions to the Dark Charms section. The shelves were dustier than in the regular sections of the library, but she had no problem finding the section she wanted. There were twelve gaps on the shelves where books had been removed. *Bloody nargles. Okay, I have an hour and a half.* She checked her watch and began pulling down books.

Nearly ten minutes later, Hermione was carrying ten books, three of which were really thick and heavy, down the narrow stairway off the entrance hall that lead right down to the dungeons and Professor Snape's office. As soon as she stopped in front of the doorway, his door opened.

"You are late," he said from his desk. On a side table, a cauldron simmered. She eyed the putrid mustard-colored steam and the sluggishly erupting bubble as it opened in slow motion in the middle of the thick, glutinous potion.

"Sir, I think I'd rather not drink any of that..." she started to say as she set her books down on his desk. Hermione desperately hoped he hadn't made that potion for them to take.

He looked up at her with an amused smile. "No, that is not for you. That potion is for Dumbledore. Sit down. Now, show me what you've found."

"There weren't that many actually." She pulled a sheet of parchment from the book on top of her pile. "I made a list this morning trying to remember what I was feeling whenever I was in the room at the base of the tower and in the tower room itself. I've only begun to match spells from these books to the categories," she said.

"Interesting choice of books," he said, reading the titles from the spines

"There were about twelve missing from the shelves," she said, opening a book to read the spells and incantations.

"Those twelve are already here on my bookshelves behind you," he replied, rising to tend to the potion. "I've already read them." He returned and leaned over her shoulder, scanning the page she was reading.

Hermione closed her eyes and exhaled slowly from the heightened sense of his close proximity, inhaling his scent. He was making it hard to read the old English text of the book. She felt something brush her hair and inhaled sharply as he bent over pointing to a phrase on the text. *"Doth exude in time until thine time is wroth, bereft of him concluded end.* Not what we are looking for."

Hermione looked up at him, and her face nearly brushed his sleeve. "Sir, pardon, but I clearly felt the effects listed in the spell."

Snape rose and went to retrieve a book from his shelves. "Yes. The Beguiling Charm is in this text as well." He set the book down and opened the book to a marker. "And here is the Alluring Charm and Seducing Charm," he said, turning pages. "None of them sustain over long periods of time nor for a thousand years. If in fact the Bloody Baron cast them, that would have been during his lifetime and at least a thousand years ago. Any of these fit in fact all of them do but none are said to last beyond a wizard's lifetime."

Hermione turned the pages, scanning the charms Severus had marked. Each fit what she'd felt in the tower perfectly.

He leaned down over her shoulder again and pulled a dusty tome from her pile. "Where did you find this one?"

The feel of his chest brushing her shoulder momentarily distracted her, and she turned to face him, realizing that his face was actually only inches from her own. "Sir, I had to climb to the top shelf to retrieve the other and... and this was on top, on the..." He turned to look at her and her lips parted slightly under his stare. *Oh, Circe, please just kiss me...* Hermione exhaled slowly, lowered her head and then turned back to the book. "I found what I think to be a pertinent reference to the castle in this one. But the pages are really old, and some of it has faded. If we you had a Restoration Solution, I could possibly clean the pages, and I um... I know the Ink-Rejuvenation Charm...."

"I'll brew you some. You will have it by the end of the week," he said softly in his smooth drawl.

"I'd like that, sir," she replied and turned to look at him again.

He edged closer to her for a second, his mouth nearly to her nose, making her lips quiver in anticipation, before he suddenly stood up and strode over to his potion, his back and his movements tense.

"Excuse me, but the potions you have me take each morning," she said as she turned to face him. "I was reading up on them, and well, you can't take the Mind-Clarity Potion very often..." His back stiffened a bit straighter, and she hoped she hadn't offended him in some way. "Before the potion begins to have side effects of forgetfulness."

"I'm aware of that, Miss Ganger; however, it's necessary." He rotated slowly, walked to his shelves and began collecting jars and bottles. "Continue your reading; inform me if you find anything relevant," he added as he turned to continue working on the potion on the small worktable.

Hermione carefully examined each spell she could find in the books, comparing them to other translations in the books Severus had given her from his shelves. She took meticulous annotations on the ones that seemed even vaguely relevant, but although she was amassing a long list of possible incantations, none of the spells lasted past the life of the wizard or witch who cast it. Severus passed by her chair, frequently pausing to peruse her work, reading over her shoulder. Each time he came over to check her progress, Hermione's breath hitched and her concentration ebbed. She constantly kept looking at him, noting that on several occasions Severus was staring at her, watching her. Nevertheless, they spoke amicably about the spells, the possibilities.

"It would be best if you stopped for now," Snape said, standing close beside her again.

Hermione nodded, placing fragments of parchment to mark her pages and stacked the books.

He indicated the bookshelf in a corner and assisted her in carrying the books to the shelf, preferring that the books be set on a lowest shelf and therefore less noticeable.

When she stood up her body collided with his, and he grasped her waist to keep from being knocked back. She turned, his arm sliding to her back as she faced him. His dark eyes stared at her for a moment, and then he leaned down and kissed her. She eagerly wrapped her arms around him as she ardently returned his kiss, and his other arm wrapped around her shoulders, crushing her body to his. His kiss was hard and demanding, slowly softening until he was gently caressing her lips with his and teasing her with his tongue. She opened her mouth, experimentally caressing his tongue with hers, and he deepened the kiss. Hermione swooned slightly, and she clung to him for support as he pressed her against the shelves. The moment her back hit the shelf, a jar fell, crashing on the office floor, attracting his attention and ending his passionate kiss. Hermione wanted to cry, grab him and continue kissing, but he looked at her, his stare intense as he released her.

"You should go," he finally said, his normally rich voice slightly shaky.

She reached up a hand and brushed his hair from his face, and he captured her wrist and stepped away from the shelves. "Now, Miss Granger, before this gets out of hand and we send the entire contents of my shelves crashing to the floor."

"When should I come back?" she asked as she followed him to the door.

"Never," he replied. "But I shall inform you when I have a break in my schedule. Now, please, go."

Hermione left, stopping to stare at his door, pondering his reaction to their kiss.*It's not just me... he feels it too. But, we are not in the tower. Surely, the spells are not affecting us all the way down here. But, why am I so attracted to him?* She knew the answer, even if she'd never admitted it before.*Mum would've called it chemistry... with Severus. I'm attracted to Severus.* She started walking back to her common room.

'The spells of the tower push your relationship forward, sexually...' But, what relationship do I have with him besides his being my professor? I respect him, admire him and look up to him somewhat, but I've never fantasized about him until that morning in the tower. He's certainly never befriended me in any way or been kind until recently... But the way he stares at me, and his kiss... The memory of his kisses sent shivers down her spine. But if this is just the spells from the tower, how far do I want to take this with him... and could I resist him now, even if I wanted to?

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

I simply cannot forget to say a great big, heartfelt thank you to my beta thank you to my beta, XX\_XX\_XX. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

The Latin used in this chapter:

Formidilosus means: causing dread, fear, terror

Discedo means: to break up, depart, go away to depart from, deviate, leave

Nullus means: not any, no, none

Salvio Hexia I borrowed from Lexicon

Illusionares I just plain made up.

## The Unrestrained Pull

Chapter 9 of 25

Hermione feels despondent about her situation. The guy she assumed would've be her boyfriend all these years is sucking face with her dormitory mate, and the guy she wants clearly doesn't want her, even though he's under the spells of the tower room.

Twenty years earlier, Severus has an encounter with Potter that leads to a much nicer encounter with Lily.

*I wish to give thanks to my beta Southern\_Witch\_69 for all her time and patience with me. All I can do is say thank you, although that doesn't cover the appreciation I have for her help.*

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The Unrestrained Pull

~Spring 1997~

The moment Hermione stood before the door she heard him call out, "Enter." Smiling, she pushed the door open and casually walked over to the bookcase to retrieve her books. It took three trips to carry all the books to the corner of his desk before she sat down in her chair. The familiar cup of tea waited for her, sitting next to the cauldron of Mind-Clarity Potion and a vial, which, undoubtedly, contained his Calming Ascetic. She added the three drops of Calming Ascetic and sipped the tea as she opened up the top book on her pile.

Suddenly, he looked up as if listening to something, then rose. Hermione turned around, trying to discern what he had heard. "Wait here. Do not touch anything until I return. Am I clear?" he snapped, moving rapidly toward the door.

She didn't even have time to respond, as he'd rushed out. She finished the tea, refilled her cup with the Mind-Clarity Potion, and then pulled out some parchment to take notes.

Hermione considered where to begin. She started to write out the spells she thought had been used on the tower in categories. Using her list, she then correlated their effects to the part of the tower where she felt the effects the most: the room at the base of the tower, the portal to the stairs, the stairs and the tower room itself, adding in a note to consider the door as well.

She flipped through each book, writing the spells she and Severus had marked with slips of parchment from each spell book that seemed remotely applicable, even the spells that faded in time. Using the Color-Change Charm with her Color-Change ink, she changed the names of all the spells on her list so they represented categories as well. Those that faded when the caster died became green, and the ones that faded in time, she made in varying shades of blue: the lighter shades for those that dissipated quicker to darker shades for those that lasted longer. The ones that were usually permanent she left black. There were only three spells that remained black, and they were on the Portal to the stairs. *That makes no sense. The spells there seem weaker than the ones on the tower stairs...*

She was bent over his desk, rechecking each spell when Snape entered the room. She had all fourteen books opened and spread out on his desk as she leaned over the books comparing entries, rechecking the noted durations and strengths.

She didn't hear him enter until he was right behind her.

His growl was nearly feral. "What are you doing?"

"Checking the difference on the Allurement Charm in these three books to the Luring Curse in this one," she said, remaining as she was, having just found what she thought she'd been looking for in the book in the far corner. "Did you know that the Dark Allurement Curse's wand movement is simply backward from the Allurement Charm used in 1180, and that it's nearly similar to the version used in the 1600's, which is considered a Dark Arts curse?"

"Yes, the use of certain magic spells come and go, its popularity changing with each generation. What is once in vogue one generation can easily upset the wrong people or was misused and became considered a Dark Arts Curse." He sounded angry.

Hermione pushed herself up and turned her head to look at him. His eyes were riveted on her with a penetrating stare. "Do you mind getting off my desk?" he said darkly. Hermione stood and turned around as he approached her. He leaned around her and picked up the other teacup, downing the liquid in one gulp, his eyes never leaving hers. "Do not do *that* again."

"I'm sorry. I thought if I had them all open to the relevant spells I might see something helpful," she said apologetically.

He moved away from her with an odd stiffness and strode purposefully to his shelves, searched for something. His long fingers moved slowly among the various bottles, occasionally picking up a vial or bottle to examine it, and then either set it back or lowered it magically to a box at his feet with a sweep of his hand. She couldn't tear her eyes off his deliberate movements. "You're staring."

She summoned the book she'd been reading and sat down in her chair, forcing herself to concentrate on the old hand-written calligraphy.

"It's not good for you to be lying across these old texts like that, Miss Granger," he said, returning to his desk carrying a red vial. He poured some of the milky white elixir into his tea.

She looked up at him, watching as he tipped his teacup to his lips, noticing the way he cradled the delicate porcelain in his fingers.

"Please do not stare at me so," he said, and Hermione blushed.

"I used a spell I saw Madam Pince using a few times when she had several books out for a research project. It shields the tomes and protects the pages, and it also prevents any harm to the binders," she replied. "I presumed, since she's so protective of her books and all what?"

"Nothing. Go on," he said smoothly. "What have you discovered so far?"

"Not much. Only..."

"Yes."

She blushed. "If the Bloody Baron put the spells on the castle tower, wouldn't they have to be the old ones? The ones in the oldest books?"

His expression bordered on boredom. "One would presume so. That is why I pulled them from the shelves and brought them here. To study them."

"Yes, but some of these are current well, current by wizarding standards," she tried to point out without offending him.

"Many are reproductions," he said casually. "Madam Pince is capable of reproducing many of the texts, especially the ones the students abuse. She is quite skilled at restoration as well. When a book or magical tome is replicated, the dates change."

Hermione was surprised. "I didn't know that."

"Few do," he replied with a hint of amusement in his vice. "I've the pleasure of being her colleague for several years and have had to endure her rants when a Slytherin is accused of marking, defiling or tearing one of her precious books."

"I can imagine," Hermione said, stifling a giggle, then stopped as he narrowed his eyes at her. "Oh, no, I mean I've seen her upset at students for even writing in their own books. I can imagine as Head of House she'd come to you if any of the Slytherins were out of line in *her* library."

"Exactly," he said smoothly. "It's among the pleasures of the position."

She was not going to ask what the other pleasures were, even though she really wanted to ask, since he'd said it with such languor. She tried to refocus on the book, forcing herself to read each word instead of staring at him. Snape picked up a book from his desk and leaned back, crossing one ankle on his knee and braced the book on his thigh. The pose was so masculine, yet so casual, that for a moment Hermione could only stare at his legs.

"You're staring, Miss Granger."

She looked up and met his dark eyes. "So are you, um, sir." His eyes narrowed, and she quickly thought back to what she had wanted to talk to him about. "I remembered something the Grey Lady said about the spells being cast when she was a student. How long ago was that? Do you have any idea?"

"No, I do not. I'm not at all on familiar terms with the ghost. She tends to avoid me," he answered. His eyes darted away a moment before he continued. "I would first have to know her name to track down that information, although there are at least a thousand attendance registries in the Deputy Headmistress' office. I know that the Bloody Baron was here after Salazar Slytherin's time and that he'd been a student. However, he doesn't claim to have known Salazar. I believe he may have attended Hogwarts after Salazar left the school. I don't think he was on the faculty, ever, although he could have been a school supporter like the Malfoys. Unfortunately, there are few records that go back that far. My only assumption as to when they lived would be by the style of their attire."

Hermione set her book aside. "So we should consider the spells that date to the eleventh or tenth century."

"*Hummpf*. That is what I did. But many of the more common spells were handed down by word of mouth," he said, staring at her as if she should have realized this. "Surely you know your Muggle history as well as wizarding history? Only the socially privileged few could read and write back then. Books were priceless heirlooms—treasures. Students who couldn't read and write had to be taught how. All students created their own spell books, which were magically bound at the end of each school term. Not only that, but the 1100's were known as the era of courtly love for a reason. Love spells, alluring spells, enchanting spells, ensnaring spells, these were all fairly common and widely used, some effectively and many not. Spells as common as Alohomora, Aguamenti, Evanesco, Wingardium Leviosa and Scourgify, and many more, were not written down until later. Students were expected to memorize their spells."

She nodded and turned back to her own book, pondering what he'd said.

After a while, he closed his book. "You should go now, Miss Granger," he said. "I shall see you at breakfast."

Hermione reluctantly nodded and stood, beginning to collect the books off his desk. His chair landed with a thump when she reached with two hands for a large book situated on the desk next to his leg, and she looked up at him just in time to catch him staring at her, his jaw set firmly. "Leave it. Just go," he snarled. "Please, just go."

Hermione gawked at him, his sudden briskness incomprehensible to her, and she shuddered as she rose slowly, her eyes never leaving his face. His eyes flicked from her chest to her face as he watched her stand, and she felt her cheeks blush. "Sir, did I—what did I do?" she asked baffled.

"Nothing," he said, averting his eyes from her. "Breakfast is about to begin, please go."

Stunned, but knowing his stance could mean the loss of house points, she turned and fled, leaving her parchments behind on his desk.

~Spring 1977~

Severus was frustrated for several reasons. One, he had not been able to get Lily alone to have sex with her again. Two, he'd missed Hogsmeade weekend with her because he'd been in the hospital wing, recuperating from another attack by Potter and Black. He'd just been released by Madam Pomfrey and was going to the owlery when Potter and Pettigrew spotted him. Severus fired two hexes at Potter, dodging his return curse, and ducked against the wall next to the thick, ornate frame around the portrait of Bridget Wenlock.

"What are you doing?" she asked, alarmed.

"Trying not to get killed," he answered, firing another Body-Bind Curse at Potter.

"Tap my frame seven times, and enter before he kills *me*!" the portrait hissed, frightened.

Severus did, and the frame opened just enough to admit him into a narrow corridor. He ran the length, coming out behind a tapestry into an empty corridor. Feeling smug, he ran up to the owlery.

"Sev!" Lily was just leaving as he reached the top. "You look like you've been fighting! Who've you been fighting... No—don't tell me—I don't want to know," she said, holding up her hands. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be in the hospital wing, not running around the corridors dueling. I was on my way down to see you."

"I was just released, and I ran into *Potter* on my way to send you an owl," he replied, trying to answer all her questions in one blow. "Although, running into you here does save you the trip down to the hospital wing."

"So?" she asked, looking at him expectantly.

He grinned. "So, what?"

"My letter!" she said, holding out her hand. "Sev, I want it."

"Here rather than in your room as I intended?" he teased her.

"Or we can go to *our* room, and you can give it to me there," she said cheekily, looking over her shoulder as she walked down the stairs.

"Vixen," he said, following her. "Whichever you want, Lily love."

They hurried down the corridors and through the secret door. Severus watched as she slid her fingers on the wall, following her as she disappeared through the stone. He slipped his hands under her skirts, making her squeal as he chased her up the stairs and into the tower room. She turned, pulling off her robes, tossing them to the floor, and he copied her, eagerly. "Lily," he practically growled with desire, crossing the room to take her in his arms.

"Yes, Sevie..." she teased and pulled his shirt open, popping several buttons. "Oops."

"You'll pay for that, witch," he growled, pulling her close. He turned her, holding her back against him as he opened her blouse, and unzipped her skirt while nuzzling her neck.

"Sev, what did you write me?" she asked as her skirt fell around her ankles.

He turned her around, bunched her blouse about her wrists, magically tightening it in place. "I created some potions for you: a shampoo for your hair, a soap and a cream for your skin. So, you don't need that Muggle stuff anymore."

"But I like BadeDas foam bath, shampoo and bath gel!" she exclaimed, grinning. "My mum sends me the stuff. It has horse chestnut extract in it and smells absolutely divine."

"I matched its scent, well, fairly close anyway. You can increase the horse chestnut extract..." He popped her bra open. "But if you don't want it, that's fine." He slowly removed his shirt. "It's just all natural and you can make it yourself..." He let his trousers fall, standing before her nude to the ankles.

She squirmed against the blouse binding her wrists. "Sev, I can't free my hands."

"That's the whole point," he said, approaching her. She backed up, and he stalked her, his fingers fondling her nipples. He leaned forward and kissed her, gently, savoring her lips.

She leaned against the wall, her arms pinned behind her. "But then I can't touch you," she moaned.

"I know I did this on purpose," he said, gliding his fingertips across her collarbones, down her chest, cupping each breast.

"Sev, the way you look at me..." she purred, her eyes closing as he caressed her.

"You're beautiful," he said. His fingers glided over her skin, and as his fingers trailed lower, his mouth covered one of her breasts, teasing the nipple with his tongue. She cried out in pleasure from both his tongue on her nipple and his stroking her between her legs. He put a slight hovering charm on her and pressed their bodies together. "Straddle me," he urged her as he lifted her legs. She did, and his penis poked at her entrance a few times and easily penetrated her.

She gasped in pain, her eyes opening wide.

"Lily?" he asked worriedly.

"It's not as bad this time," she reassured him, smiling shyly. "Just the go slow?"

"Okay," he said, withdrawing slowly.

Her face scrunched, almost a frown, which worried him. "I'm hurting you, aren't I?"

"A little. Hold still a moment," she begged, and he pushed in and held her, waiting.

His penis jerked, and he felt the tension in his shaft lessen as he waited. *I'm going to go soft...*

Slowly she began to relax. "It's okay now," she replied.

Great! He wasn't as stiff, so he didn't want to pull back too far, and it was a little harder sliding back into her. After a few strokes though, his penis engorged again, making things much easier, but he still thought he was hurting her. Her lip quivered, and her eyes closed as he slowly pushed back in and withdrew, moving as slow as he could hoping it wouldn't hurt as much. She moaned in pleasure, and he grinned. "You like this?"

"Oh, gods, yes, this feels *sooo* good, Sevie," she said in a slow drawl.

"Put it like that and I'll even *let* you call me, Sevie!" he replied, continuing to move as slowly as he could manage, pulling out as far as he could without popping out, then sliding into her deeply.

"Sevie," she moaned, probably meaning to be cheeky with him, but it sounded so good to hear her say it like that. She struggled against her binds. "Undo my hands."

"No, I rather like watching you like this," he said, grinding himself against her groin.

She gasped and her eyes flew open. "Oh, my do that again!"

"Sure!" he said, rubbing himself against her. After a few tries, he finally found a rhythm of rubbing his groin against hers with every inward thrust. She writhed in front of him, pleading to have her hands free, and very soon she was panting and begging him to go faster. His own body was reacting to her cries, and he was so close he was worried that he'd come before her. With a loud cry, she stiffened, cried out his name, and he slammed into her, reacting to his own driving need as his own release came.

When he looked up at her finally, he realized that he was literally crushing her against the wall. "Lily, I'm sorry... I didn't mean to... Did I hurt you?"

"No, not bad," she said, still slightly breathless. "Will you release my hands now? My shoulders hurt."

He moved back to allow her to put her feet down, and his penis fell out of her. He leaned forward to undo her hands and say the counter-charm that held her blouse in place. The moment her hands were free, she embraced him and kissed him passionately. Severus smiled. *Mine. My Lily.*

~Spring 1997~

It was late at night. Hermione had fled the common room when Ron and Lavender started sucking face again, and her feet automatically carried her to the secret door and up to the tower room. *I'm a better kisser than she is... And I don't slobber, smack and slurp either...* She'd been crying so hard she hadn't even cared where she went as long as she didn't have to see Ron and Lavender suctioned together or hear Lavender brag about it later in her dormitory. *But, still it hurts to see her him stuck in a lip-lock like a leech. I wouldn't call that slobbering, groping, mauling display as kissing anyway. Not when I now know what real toe-curling, leave-you-breathless and make-you-swoon kissing is like. In all the time I've known him he hasn't even tried once not once! But he's with Lavender one night and they are lip-locked at every opportunity. Why?* She knew it really shouldn't bother her, but Ron had been, well, she thought that he was going to be her boyfriend, only he'd never even tried to kiss *heft's not only Ron, though. Not one of the guys has ever tried to kiss me ever! Why don't guys see me as a girl worth kissing? I am kissable, I am girlfriend material...* She wiped angry tears from her face again. Her sleeve was damp with her tears, but there wasn't anyone up here to see her. She could cry all she wanted, and no one was going to come and ask her what was wrong. No one.

She sat curled up on the windowsill, her arms around her knees, as she stared out at the dark window, unable to make out much except the stars in the sky and a vague outline of the mountains. *Parvati has got someone... When doesn't she? Even Nancy and Deborah have gotten someone... The guys all want to kiss them. And Ginny half the guys in the house like her! Including the guys from my year! So why am I ignored? Passed over?*

The click of the door latch echoed in the room, startling her. She dropped one leg off the windowsill, turning slightly as Snape opened the door. He stood in the doorway, staring at her, his eyes consuming her, yet his face was stone mask of indifference as he backed up a step as if to leave before the door closed and locked him in with her. *Great! Even he doesn't want me... I crave him, dream about him, fantasize about him and even he doesn't even want me.* Snape stood there, never letting go of the door latch, then took a tentative step forward again and stopped. *He doesn't want to come in because he'd have to kiss me to leave... I'm so terrible, so undesirable, even he doesn't want to kiss me.* His dark eyes never left hers, his gaze held hers as if captivated. *The one guy I really do want to kiss, the one guy in this whole bloody castle that makes my heart race, and fairies flutter in my stomach, and he doesn't want to kiss me either....* She wiped a pair of new tears off on her sleeve. *I'm not desired by anyone... I'm not even remotely kissable...* The memories of what drove her to come up to the room flashed unwillingly in her mind, and all the feelings and thoughts she'd had as she'd ran up here all came back to her.

His eyes widened in surprise, and he stepped forward, crossing the room and pulled her from the windowsill and into his arms. "I'd say you are very kissable, Miss Granger," he said as his mouth lowered down over hers. She expected a fierce demanding kiss by the look on his face. Instead, his lips barely caressed hers, sensually. Hermione wrapped her arms around him, craving him, but his kiss remained teasingly gentle. She tried rising up on her toes to kiss him ardently, but he moved with her somehow, keeping his kisses feather light. She opened her mouth to protest, and his tongue slipped into her mouth, deepening the kiss luxuriously but maddeningly tender. His hand cupped her face, his thumb stroked her cheek, the languid kiss continued unhurriedly. Before she knew it, he was pulling her top up and off, and her bra was landing on the floor.

"I never said that I don't desire you," Snape said as his fingers glided down her body. She tried to undo the buttons of his frockcoat, but he bent down, his mouth suckling on her breast. Her one hand gripped his shoulder and she ran her fingers through his hair with the other. She felt him open her jeans, gently pulling them off her and she lifted each foot to assist him. He continued to kiss her body, making little nibbles and licks as he very slowly moved back to her breast. When he stood up again to kiss her, he pulled off his clothes, standing before her as naked as she was, his wand in his hand.

He guided her backwards to sit on the windowsill, looking down at her carnally, and knelt before her. Hermione tried to squirm as he separated her legs, lifting them up to his shoulders. He pulled her hips forward slightly so that her bum was precariously perched on the very edge of the windowsill, his mouth merely inches from her center. Suddenly, his tongue licked her, making her gasp out in shock. She tried to close her legs, but he opened her easily, and he licked her again.

Hermione tried clutching onto the wall, gasping, his actions inconceivable to her. Snape growled in pleasure, sending shock waves rippling through her. His mouth and tongue were infinitely more arousing and alarming than his fingers had been. Within minutes, she was squirming. A few minutes more and she was crying out his name. As the sensations ebbed somewhat, however, he didn't stop, her highly sensitized nub throbbed as the building sensation grew again, this time far more intense. She cried out, her head on the glass, her fists pounding on the stone as her body gave in to the draining release. He pulled back, and she sat up, only to be pulled easily into his arms and onto his lap.

"I'd say you are very delectable," he practically purred against her lips. She realized that he was sitting on a very large cushion that he must have conjured for his knees.

"Is it the same for you?" she asked in post climatic bliss, wrapped in his embrace. She smiled as she felt his penis jerk against her leg.

"No, and yes," he replied cryptically, looking down at her speculatively. "Why?"

She slid her hand down to curl her fingers around his penis, and he inhaled sharply, his body stiffened a little. The skin was surprisingly different than she thought it would be, so different than the rest of him. "It's so soft," she said, barely a murmur but quite audible in the quiet room.

"Hardly..." he started to reply, then growled softly, deep in his throat as she shifted her hips so she'd have better access to glide her fingers down his penis.

She was enjoying stroking the soft, silky skin, and watching the reaction her touch had on his voice and expression.

He inhaled and practically purred. "Miss Hermione, you shouldn't..."

"Let me touch you?" she asked, finishing his sentence. His eyes widened slightly. She pulled her wand from her jeans, did her best to conjure a thick blanket behind him, and scooted around on his lap so that she straddled his legs. She moved her fingers down his length, slightly grazing the fleshy sac behind it and curled her fingers as she pulled up. "I don't know if I'm doing this right?" she asked while continuing to stroke him.

"Believe me you're doing fine. If I could give Gryffindor points for this, I'd give you sixty."

Emboldened, Hermione gently pushed him to lean back more and slipped down lick him like he'd done to her, then tried to take him in her mouth. His eyes widened, and he inhaled deeply as he watched her. His hand reached out to grasp her hair, his long fingers gently caressing her. She kept stroking him, her fingers curling around his sac and sliding up to meet her lips each time she lowered down on him.

"Merlin, girl, I'll make that a hundred," he gasped. Suddenly he stopped her, his eyes blazing with desire, and he pulled her up to him, kissing her passionately. He rolled her swiftly onto her back, positioned himself, and then thrust into her.

It hurt and she inhaled sharply.

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to notice. After a few swift, fierce thrusts, he froze deep within her, growled, his breathing erratic, his back arching, his shoulders shaking. When his body relaxed, he looked down at her with an expression of deep satisfaction.

"And how much would you give me for this?" she asked smugly, watching his face, knowing she had caused his reaction.

"I say at least another hundred to Gryffindor, Miss Gra Hermione," he said and leaned down to kiss her. When he rolled off her, she sat up and used a corner of the blanket to wipe herself, alarmed when she saw blood. "Hermione, I'm sorry," he said, seeing her expression and looking at the blanket. "Circe, girl, I was too rough. I'm sorry. You won't bleed long..."

"It's okay," she replied, reaching for her knickers and jeans. "I'll just slip a pad into my knickers when I get back to my room."

Snape stared at her. After a moment's hesitation, he dressed quickly and stood, leaning against the wall, watching her finish dressing. "Why did you come here?" he asked, his disconcerted tone resurfacing. "Don't you know you have to realize? Circe, girl! If I see you here again, do be assured that this our copulation will happen, again. Unless that is why you've continued seeking me out here. I strongly suggest that you reconsider coming back..."

"Seek you out?" She'd been zipping up her jeans and froze. "Why did you come here tonight? You don't usually come up here at night! You come in the morning you said so!" She stepped backwards, nearly stumbling.

He took two steps and pulled her back into his arms. "Why me? You could have anyone."

"No, I can't," she said, clinging to him. "I don't want just anyone...."

"Only because of the spells," he said. He stared at her, and she could see the desire in his eyes even though he was trying to control himself. "If you were not under the curse of this room, we would not be doing this." He kissed her hungrily, then pushed her away. "Go to your common room, *now*, before I have to dock you points for being out after curfew," he growled, letting go and heading for the stairs

Down in the first floor corridor two hundred more rubies had floated up in the Gryffindor hourglass. By breakfast everyone was wondering how those points got there. Hermione blushed all through the meal and could hardly wait to get to class, secretly hoping no one knew or bothered to ask Snape how Gryffindor got the points.

Author's Notes:

According to my Brit-consultant, (XXXXX), the up and coming thing in body products in 1977 was *BadeDas*. It was pretty popular in Germany and they were just starting to expand into other countries. It has horse chestnut extract in it and the strong and refreshing fragrance of a lush forest, and apparently smells absolutely divine. It became extremely popular in the UK by 1984.

Attracting Attention

Chapter 10 of 25

Severus is happy with the relationship he has with Lily, even the playful competition in classes. Too bad Black has to try and make trouble for him, ruining a perfectly pleasant afternoon.

Twenty years later, Hermione realizes that others might have started to take notice in her change of behavior. Still, she wishes that Snape would open up to her, even though he seems to be finally starting to come to terms with her and accepting their relationship.

I can finally acknowledge and say thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

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Attracting Attention

~Spring 1977~

Severus bent over his cauldron as he stirred in his fenugreek, making Laxative Draft for Slughorn's Potions class. As per usual, Severus was in a friendly competition with Lily to see who could brew it better since they were not working in pairs today. Lily was already slicing her comfrey roots, and Severus smiled knowing that she was cutting them with perfect precision.

"Good for constipation, but tricky to make, eh, Evans?" Slughorn asked as he passed by her workspace.

Slughorn must be feeling a bit bloated today because this potion is hardly OWL level, let alone NEWT. Whatever. Three more turns and I'll add my comfrey leaves, then my roots, and be caught up to her. He was two steps behind Lily because he'd added an extra clockwise stir with every seven counter-clockwise movements and added peppermint to soothe the stomach and improve the taste, but his roots were already sliced, sitting in the dish all ready for him to add in. Still, his potion was the soft green it should be while Lily's was still slightly grey. He withdrew his long-handled spoon and dropped in his comfrey leaves, smiling as the potion foamed slightly then settled. The soft green color was perfect.

Lily was waiting for her potion to change, checking her shredded Cascara Sagrada bark. She looked at him and tried to peek into his cauldron, and he smiled, leaning back a moment to let her see. Her pout was adorable and he smirked at her. He added his roots, stirring the required five times and started shredding his Sagrada bark. Lily's potion began to froth and she lowered her flame. *Damn, she's ahead of me!* He added his shredded bark and watched his potion froth and settle, the color still perfect. Yes. He lowered his flame to let the potion simmer and finished his notes, adding the annotations of his additional steps and the deviations he'd made, smiling. *Libatius Borage may be a celebrated author, but between Lily and me, we've improved each and every potion in the book. When I rewrite this book, updating these potions, I'll be famous! We'll be famous. Lily and Severus Snape, famous Potion masters extraordinaire!* Lily finally extinguished her flame and began to ladle her potion. The color was a soft green but Severus knew his was better. He extinguished his flame and bottled his potion. He set his vial on the table as he pulled out his essay to turn them in and heard a crash as Black walked by his worktable.

"Black!" Lily exclaimed furiously. "How dare you!"

Black smirked and Severus swore.

"Black, did you?" Slughorn asked, and for a moment Severus thought that Black's little stunt would lose Gryffindor house points. "I'm sure it was unintentional."

Severus sighed. *Of course not. Why wouldn't Black do something like this on purpose?*

"It was an accident, Professor," Black said smoothly. "Snape must have set his vial too close to the edge of his desk."

Lily quickly handed him another vial, but the potion was thickening. "Here, you can still salvage your marks! Quick!"

He knew that the potion had to be removed from the hot cauldron immediately, or it'd thicken until it was as solid as bar soap *Damn*.

Slughorn nodded to Black and looked at Severus as if trying to accept Black's version, but not really believing that Severus would be that careless. It was obvious it was warring with his conscious, knowing Severus wouldn't be that daft. "Well, accidents happen," Slughorn finally said. "Clean up your work area, Mr. Black."

The sample Severus took to the desk was a better color than Lily's but a thicker consistency. "Well, Mr. Snape, let's see then," Slughorn said, checking the potion. "Very well done, excellent color, too bad about the consistency... Left in the cauldron too long, I see. Miss Evans, good, very good, color's a touch off, but consistency is perfect...."

Severus knew; Lily would be given the higher points today. She was Slughorn's favorite.

Lily smiled at him as they walked back to their worktables. "If Black hadn't knocked your sample to the floor you would've won. So I deem you the winner today."

"No, you won. I was careless to think I shouldn't have set my potion that close to the edge of the worktable," he said with a slight snarl. "Never trust a Black."

"Oh, Sev, you know you didn't. I saw him... It wasn't your doing. You didn't place it that close he did it on purpose," she said as she cleaned up her cauldron and counter top. She checked her work area and picked up her book. "So, how about a stroll to the library? Do you want to come with me?"

"I can think about half a dozen places I would want to take you," he said cheekily, hoping to go somewhere much more private. "But sure, the library."

"Okay, where," she asked, taking the bait.

"How about a quiet corner in the dungeons?" he asked. She shook her head, and he smiled, knowing she didn't like the dungeons. Mulciber and Avery were still planning a reprisal for the madder root powder Potter had dumped on them for cornering her again, giving them dandruff for a week. Mulciber and Avery had asked Severus for an antidote, but he'd said he didn't have all the ingredients and told them to get him some solarium and he would. Neither Mulciber nor Avery even knew what solarium was, so they weren't able to get him the ingredient. Finally, Avery gave him a Galleon to get the solarium and help them get rid of the dandruff. So, that's why it'd taken a week for Severus to make the antidote. "How about our tower room?" he asked with a smirk.

"We've only got about an hour, and I still need to revise for today's quiz. How about the lake, we could go down to the lake?" Lily asked. "I can get two butterbeers and I have Mum's biscuits? You could help me revise."

"Okay, sure." *I'd prefer the dungeons or the tower. Potter, Black and company will be by the lake...* "Whatever you want, Lily love." She smiled at him and quickly dismissed herself to get the offered refreshment. Severus watched her run off and turned to his common room to get her the Honeydukes malt balls she liked so much. He didn't see Black duck into a doorway behind him as he turned the corner that led to the Slytherin common room.

A half-hour later Severus was sitting next to Lily on the grass by the lakeshore, savoring a quick kiss. He let go of Lily's face as their kiss ended, smiling as he watched her, waiting until her eyes opened again. He loved the way she seemed to freeze when his kisses ended as if waiting, hoping that he hadn't stopped. Her eyelids fluttered open slowly, her dazed gaze meeting his stare, and he smiled as she blushed. He tenderly brushed a strand of her hair away from her face so he could see her eyes better. She ducked her head as she reached into her pocket and pulled two butterbeers out, handing him the first one. Severus uncapped the bottle, let the fizz settle, and took a big swig of the butterbeer, then grimaced. He rechecked the bottle, but the dark glass looked normal. However, the taste it was really off.

He burped, and Lily looked at him, her face scrunched with concern. "What's wrong?"

"The butterbeer, where did you get it?" he asked. An odd tightening sensation seemed to clench in his gut.

"Eh, from Hogsmeade, I think," she replied.

Severus quickly placed his hand on her arm to stop her from drinking hers. "Did you by any chance get these from either Potter or Black?" he asked, then belched *Damn. Bloody hell...* He belched again, feeling something give then tighten in his gut.

"Yes, but..." she said, looking at him worried.

He quickly dumped the contents on the grass. A thick, glutinous substance came out with the amber brew. "Don't drink it, Lily. It's been tampered," he warned, feeling like he was going to pass gas, "with."

"They wouldn't!"

"They did." He grabbed hers and poured the contents onto the grass. The liquid was normal. He checked the bottle, but it didn't look any different than his did. "Did how...?" He suddenly knew. "Black gave you these bottles of butterbeer, didn't he?"

She placed her hand over her mouth. "Yes. He gods, Sev! He put a potion in it, didn't he? But how could he know which one you'd get. Unless it was meant for me..."

"Your polite, Lily," he said, getting up and hoping he'd make it to his common room in time. "You always serve your guest first. You handed me the first one I assume it was on top of the other one?" She nodded and he swore, turning to go. She rose quickly and followed him. "He gave them to you in the right order, it was meant for me." Severus knew he wouldn't make it, but he took off running all the same. Lily tried to keep up, called out his name, but Severus didn't listen. He was already planning his revenge. Before he reached the castle doors, and as his body reacted to the Laxative Potion, the retaliation he'd planned became even darker and more vengeful.

*

Severus managed to slip an extremely strong purgative and Bum-Engorgement Draught into a couple of brownies and laced them with a hallucinogen. He'd sent the box the following morning to Pettigrew, figuring he was thick enough to not only eat the treats but to also share them with his friends. All four had tried the brownies and had gotten quite sick, spending the night in the hospital wing. Unfortunately, Lily had found out and was livid. Lily had actually hexed him, stormed back up to her common room, and wouldn't come out until dinner. Not only that, but she refused to speak to him for the rest of the week. Severus tried sending owls and house-elves to give her notes, but the owls returned his unopened letters and the house-elves started refusing to deliver his notes.

He tried sending leaves, transfigured into flowers, but that didn't work either. He'd made about twenty three-inch lilies, telling the house-elf to leave them on her bed. He found out that she simply gave them to the first and second year girls, after Transfiguring them into hair clips. It was vexing to see his lilies in the hair of twenty first and second year girls at the Gryffindor table. Worst, Mulciber teased him about the flowers, taunting him that if he was trying to find a girlfriend, he'd be more than happy to match him up with a suitable Slytherin.

Finally, Severus brewed some of the shampoo and conditioner he made up, which had the same smell as her Muggle ones, but they were returned with a scathing note to *'use them yourself* and a Sticking Jinx on the bottles. It'd taken him several minutes to undo the jinx and free his hands, much to Avery's amusement. He'd been rather pissed off at her for that one for the rest of the week.

~Spring 1997~

"Hermione, where were you this morning?" Lavender asked as Hermione sat down at the table across from her friends.

Hermione had turned her head, looking at Snape just then, averting her eyes away from Ron snogging Lavender across the table from her *Finally, coming up for air from Ron's face? Actually, that isn't fair. Harry asked Ron a question about Quidditch, and Ron had unstuck himself long enough to turn and answer him.* "I have a project I'm working on," she said noncommittally.

"But you're gone nearly every morning now," Lavender stated nosily. "I see you sneak out well, I hear you dressing and leaving. You even take longer selecting your clothes than you usually do."

"I do not," she protested. *Circe! She notices? I'll have to ward the space beside my bed from now on...*

"And you're wearing fancy knickers now, too. Do you have a beau? Is that where you go?" Lavender persisted.

"No, Lavender, I have a project I'm doing for extra credit," Hermione said, her eyes darting to Ginny, who was sitting on the other side of Harry, deep in the discussion about the upcoming game between the Harpies and Tornados. She looked away, not wanting to look at Lavender, and her eyes sought out Snape. *He's staring at me, she thought, watching his gaze linger on her before his gaze swept up the Gryffindor table and over to the Hufflepuffs.*

"You don't go to the library it's not open that early. So where do you go? You used to just sit in your bed and read, or finish your essays and revise the chapters of your books... but lately... It's because of Ron and me, isn't it?"

"No, Lavender, it's because I'm working on a project," Hermione insisted, grabbing toast and a heap of bacon, rolling them in her napkin and leaving the table. She had to end this conversation. No one was to know that she spent nearly every morning with Severus either in his office or in his lab. *We are getting nowhere, trying to find a way to break the curse of the tower, and frequently we simply end up brewing potions together.* Ironically, morning was becoming her favorite time of her day.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

Hermione pulled the slice of toast from her mouth. "Harry, I didn't finish my Defense essay. I'm just going to the library."

Harry nodded and waved her off with a knowing smile. "Sure, I'll see you in class then."

"Thanks, Harry, I'll see you later." She glanced at the High Table and immediately caught Professor Snape watching her. Sighing, she turned and hurried to the library before class.

~Spring 1977~

He shouldn't have gotten so mad about Lupin. *They'd only been studying together, but seeing their heads so close to each other pissed me off* It was ridiculous to be jealous of Lupin. He knew that they were only friends, nothing more, but it still irked him to see them together.

He knew that Lupin was a werewolf. He had no proof except for his unexplained disappearances each month the day of the full moon and the fact that he was always sick the day after. Severus had been keeping careful calculations of the lunar calendar, and he knew precisely when the moon would be full and what time of day the full moon would rise. And frequently Potter and Black could be spied, sneaking from the castle on those evenings. *But surely Potter and Black wouldn't be so thick as to try and watch Lupin change? That would be ludicrous!* Still he'd tried to warn Lily before, many times, about Lupin...

Severus looked up at the huge clock in the clock tower. It was four-twenty-five. *The moon is going to rise at four-fifty today.* He checked his lunar calculations just to be sure. *Yes, the moon was due to rise in only half an hour* He'd seen Lupin walk down to the hospital wing shortly after Charms, but he hadn't looked any different. Madam Pomfrey had met Lupin in the corridor and guided him down to the end of the corridor, and they'd disappeared. *They didn't go to the hospital wing after all. She's putting him somewhere else, hiding a werewolf inside a room in the unused southwest tower possibly or down the tunnel under the Whomping Willow. It wasn't safe, keeping something that dangerous in a tunnel. Even with that vicious tree, Lupin could escape.*

It made him angry, being forced to accept the danger of living in the castle with a werewolf *Anyone could get bitten, even Lily!* Severus ran down the first floor corridor toward the stairs to go to the library and spotted Lily hurrying down the marble staircase, heading for the Entrance Hall. He'd just reached the stairs as Lily was leaving the castle. *Not tonight, you can't!* "Lily, wait," he called out as soon as he passed through the huge oak doors. She didn't turn around. *Damn.*

Well, I can protect her at least He'd been reading up on werewolves, and his Sectumsempra spell would work on a werewolf, it had to *Besides I've gotten really proficient with it and can slice a tail off a salamander now. That or I could always use my Deiciocontortum Hex, which will hurl someone several feet away with a fairly good amount of force, enough to really hurt a wizard.* He didn't know how it would do against a werewolf, but it would fling the creature away and knock it to the ground really hard. Severus had cracked large rocks with this spell. "Lily, wait, not tonight," he called after her.

"Not, tonight what, Sev?" she asked, turning around. "What do you want?"

"It's going to be a full moon..."

"Oh, Circe, not that again," she huffed and started walking away. "I told you, Headmaster Dumbledore and the school governors would not allow a werewolf in school."

"How about in the forest? Ever consider that?" he asked. *Merlin's beard, I sound like a wet prat!*

"The Forbidden Forest?" she asked, looking at him exasperated. "I'm not going into the forest! I'm going down to the lake!"

"Then I'm going with you," he announced authoritatively.

"Oh, bloody gorgons, why?" she asked. "I'm not going swimming, and if I did, I can fend my own against the squid!"

"Maybe I just want to hang out with you," he stated. "At least talk to me."

"You really hurt those guys, Sev. Pettigrew started hexing everyone, and as house prefect, I had to try and stop him, protect the other kids. I was hexed pretty badly *I got hurt by your stunt me!*" She looked at him, her green eyes staring at him as if trying to read his soul. "Don't do it again."

"Merlin's beard, Lily! I didn't know," he said, hanging his head. "Circe, I'm sorry!"

Exasperated, Lily turned and started to walk away. "I cannot do this, Sev." Severus followed her, listening to her rave, knowing that if he commented, defended his actions she'd storm off again and refuse to see him. "You and I I really care about you I don't want us to keep fighting, but you are hanging around the wrong sort, and you don't like who I associate with. It's going to tear us apart." They walked in silence, although this silence was good silence, awkward but very much like things used to be sort of. Severus scooped up some shale rocks from the lakeshore and chucked one across the surface of the lake making it skip twice.

"Oh, you can do better than that," she teased him, though her voice wasn't as light as it usually was when she did. "Give me one."

He handed her a rock with a grin and watched as her rock bounced only once. "Oh, yes, much better. You really should show me the technique." He chuckled another, watching as it skipped three times.

"Oh, give me another one," she said with a smile and tried to skip it across the surface. It skipped twice.

"Not bad," he said with a smirk as his next rock skipped three times again.

~Spring 1997~

Snape entered the classroom, his robes billowing out behind him. Hermione had just stowed her bag under her chair and quickly opened her book, waiting for him to address the class. "Please open to page three hundred twenty-four," he said, turning to hand back their essays. His dark eyes scanned the room, lingering on Hermione a moment longer than he usually did, although no one seemed to notice. As Snape passed by her desk, she heard Harry exclaim softly regarding the '*disma*' written across the top of his parchment. Hermione turned hers over and was barely able to read, '*I'm sorry I snapped at you*' before it faded from the top corner of her essay, and a *barely acceptable* took its place.

She seethed about his grade and yet, pondered over the message, hardly believing that the words had really been there. *It could've been a trick of the light, the angle I held the parchment. Surely, he didn't apologize about snapping at me? He snaps at me all the time.* She hung back at the end of class to ask him, taking a deep breath before approaching his desk.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he asked without looking up.

"Sir, on my essay..."

He sat up, his dark eyes meeting hers, his fingers steepled in front of him as he watched her, and she swallowed the lump she felt from his intense stare. "If after all these years of being in my classes you have not figured this out, let me be perfectly clear, Miss Granger. I'd prefer to read your *opinion*, supported by evidentiary materials," he said smoothly as he rose and walked around to the other side of his desk to stand directly in front of her. "Your hypothesis and your thoughts, not have the books quoted back to me. I've already read the books. I know what they say. I'm interested in reading what you have to say."

Hermione was momentarily taken back. "No, I mean the other, the..." She didn't want to say apology. "Message. I didn't it wasn't... Thank you."

"Do I still make you nervous, Hermione?" he asked softly, watching her intently. "I'd have thought by now you'd have gotten over that."

She smiled and relaxed slightly. "Some habits die hard."

"Yes, they do, don't they? Others simply fall to the wayside inconveniently," he said smoothly, crossing his arms. "Why did you leave breakfast so quickly this morning?"

"I didn't finish my essay..." she started to say, then lowered her eyes. "I wanted to be somewhere else."

She looked up at him, realizing that he hadn't stopped staring at her. The silence stretched until she felt the need to speak. "I wanted to go to the tower room, but I went to the library instead."

"Why?" he asked softly.

She swallowed and returned his gaze. "Too see you, be with you, I suppose."

"But I was in the Great Hall," he said with an amused smirk.

Hermione squared her shoulders and stared back into his dark eyes. "I preferred more mature company and wanted to be somewhere else at the time. I wanted to... be with you."

He reached out and gently gripped her chin in his fingers. "Why?"

Hermione had no idea what to say. She looked up into his dark, unfathomable eyes and wished she did know him, really knew him. A jumble of thoughts flickered in her mind as she contemplated his question: every moment she'd had in his company, her thoughts about him before she fell asleep each night, and even a few of her dreams. The corner of his mouth curled upwards slightly, and she lowered her gaze, suddenly aware she'd been staring at him again. "I just want to be near you. I..."

"You hardly know me, Hermione," he stated.

She licked her lip nervously. "You don't let me get to know you," she replied.

"And you think you want to?" he asked, and she nodded. "Why? You know me as well as any and far more than most."

She smiled. "But I want to get to know *you*, as a person, as a friend, not just... intimately."

"Be careful what you wish for around here, Miss Granger," he said softly, crossing his arms as his next class filed in. "Rewrite your paper and give it to me tomorrow. If, and I mean *if*, your writing has improved, I'll award you the higher grade. Now, leave."

*

Hermione was sitting on the windowsill again, sipping on her tea trying to rationalize the feelings she'd been having. She couldn't stop thinking about Severus. She dreamed about him at night, thought about him while she was reading, eating and walking to class, and in her bath. In her bath and at night, she'd tried fingering herself in hopes of creating the same sensations he'd given her when he'd touched her. She could create the building pressure, but not the mind-blowing release, and when she did have a release of sorts, it wasn't the same, not as intense. Only schoolwork kept her from thinking about Severus, but it took all her efforts to concentrate. Luckily, none of her professors noticed.

The door to the room opened, and Hermione turned, not the least bit surprised to see Severus enter the room. He stopped, the door latch still in his grasp as if contemplating whether to enter or leave. Hermione sighed and turned back to the window. She heard his boot steps as he crossed the room and stood over her.

"Hermione," he said finally, breaking the silence.

She could see him reflected in the glass against the dark sky, just a narrow part of his face: the dark eyes, nose and his lips as if he were an apparition. "I know. I shouldn't be here." She could feel him and wanted nothing more than to stand and embrace him, kiss him, touch him...

He leaned over her, placing his hand on the glass for balance, cupping her face with his other hand. "Then why are you?" he asked as Hermione leaned her cheek against his palm and closed her eyes. "Hermione?"

Her mind went blank as his fingers caressed her cheek and slid down her neck. All she could think about was what he could do with those fingers. "Uh-huh." She turned, dropping her legs off the windowsill to face him. She opened her eyes and looked up at him. "I don't know. I wanted..."

His dark penetrating stare sent shivers through her. Severus Snape was gazing down at her, eyes glinting, and she couldn't tear her eyes from his. "You shouldn't have

come up here," he said softly as she watched his face move closer to hers.

"I waited until nighttime," she said, closing her eyes just as his lips nearly reached hers. She waited, anticipating his kiss, wanting it so much. She opened her eyes and noticed that he'd pulled away from her. She exhaled slowly and swallowed, wondering why he'd changed his mind. He was still close, leaning into her and she could smell the herbs and smoke that added to his scent. She inhaled deeply, and her senses seemed to spin slightly.

His lips curled into a smirk. "I know," he said, his breath caressing her skin, and his lips brushed gently against hers.

It was maddening, the gentle, teasingly soft kiss. Hermione tried to sit up straighter and kiss him, but he moved away as she did. His fingers slipped down to her front as he opened her blouse, and she moaned.

She reached out to fumble with his buttons, and he laughed at her attempts. He pulled her up onto her feet and allowed her to remove his coat and shirt as he opened her blouse, cupping her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples through the lace of her bra.

"You come up in the mornings," she said, fumbling with his belt. She slid the zipper down, and as his trousers fell away, she suddenly realized that he didn't have any pants on underneath.

His fingers slid down her body to her jeans. "Not since you started to come to my office every morning," he said, lowering himself down her body, trailing kisses as he pulled her jeans and knickers down to her ankles. "I shouldn't do this," he said silkily, just before his tongue licked her, and she gasped, grabbing onto his shoulders for balance, as his hands gripped her hips holding her against his mouth. She wanted to open her legs and give him full access, enjoying what he was doing.

In minutes her breathing became harsh, her knees weak, and she sank onto her knees, as she climaxed, and into his arms. She placed a kiss on his lips, seeking entrance to his mouth with her tongue, tasting herself as he opened his mouth to her, and stroked his tongue over hers. "I could leave," she lied, drawing back slightly, and his mouth lowered to her shoulder.

He looked up at her, one eyebrow arched challengingly, and smirk played up on his lips "You won't get out, and you know it," he said, lowering her to the floor.

Hermione was stunned to feel a soft, cushioned pad under her.

Severus moved over her, his erection grinding against her thigh, and Hermione opened her legs to let him position himself at her entrance. "Not until the room decides you and I have gone far enough forward," he said, stroking himself against her moist lips, and she tried to raise her hips to meet him, wanting him inside her. He chuckled when she moaned with desire to have him enter her, and he pushed into her, filling her.

His girth and length, as the books had called it, was deliciously satisfying as he withdrew and reentered slowly. He felt so good inside her now, and she groaned again as he plunged into her. "How much more forward can we go?" she asked, her fingers trailing on his skin, her mind focused on the sensual rhythm of his movements.

"Merlin, girl, you are innocent," he said in his deep silky drawl, and he nipped at her chin. "I suppose you want to find out, don't you? You'd let me do whatever I wanted to do with you, wouldn't you?" He kissed her and bent down to suckle on her breast.

"Yes. Keep this up and yes... anything!" she answered him.

He leaned up, his plunges more urgent as she lifted her hips to meet him. She tried to urge him faster, tried to control the pace, and he laughed. Gripping her tightly, he moved with her, increasing his movements, his dark eyes looking down at her as her climax built again and released. Severus shifted slightly his hand going down to her sensitized nub, caressing her as he moved. She inhaled sharply, both in pleasure and from feeling too tight to relax. She was so sensitive it was nearly painful. His fingers made firm strokes that sent sharp jolts through her post climatic body the pressure inside her intensified with his movements and she tried to halt him, make him stop.

He laughed as he watched her struggle. "No, Hermione, feel. I want to see you come again."

She tried to lift up and kiss him, and his fingers cupped her head, helping her, his kiss as forceful as his movements. Her head fell back, her body tense and tight as the sensations seemed to swell inside her, every nerve in her body straining. When her climax came, it was as if her entire body gave into him. Severus' growl was nearly feral, and he thrust into her one last time as he climaxed, his body pinning her. She looked up at him, and his shoulders were shaking just before he collapsed on top of her. "Circe, girl, what you do to me," he growled silkily in her ear, and she wrapped her arms around him protectively, feeling rather smug herself.

*

A few days later, Hermione was scurrying back from Potions class after spending a few extra minutes with Professor Slughorn to ask him about her antidote. She'd just rounded a corner when she ran smack into Professor Snape. His hand reached out automatically to keep her from knocking him over, but instead of holding her at arm's length, he pulled her into him, almost into an embrace, his head leaning forward as if to kiss her in the middle of the corridor. Swearing, he pulled her by the arm into the nearest doorway, pulling her back into his arms as he waved his wand behind her back. His mouth descended on hers in a crushing kiss, taking her breath away.

"Sir, we'll get caught... We'll be seen," she stammered as his kisses trailed to her neck, making her insides melt.

"I'm no fool. I've set up wards, Disillusionment Charm, Repelling Charms," he growled lustily, astounding her. He crushed her against the wall, and his hands slid up her sides to cup her breasts. "Damn," he said stopping abruptly. "I'm sorry, Miss Granger, I..."

"Don't mind in the slightest," she finished for him, her book bag falling on the floor as she stood on her toes to kiss him, flinging her arms around his neck.

"Merlin's beard, girl! I'll be flogged for this," he said before surrendering into her kiss.

"Might as well be hanged for a dragon as an egg," she replied, unabashedly nipping at his lips.

He growled, claiming her mouth roughly, and she closed her eyes, savoring his kiss. "Enough," he snapped breathlessly. "I have class and so do you. Be in my office after dinner." He kissed her hungrily once more and released her, quickly pulling away and leaving.

Hermione stood transfixed in the doorway, watching him walk away and disappear around a corner, trying to catch her breath.

"Miss Granger, are you all right?" Professor Slughorn asked, stopping to stare at her.

Hermione looked up startled to see him there. "Oh, yes, Professor. Never better," she said before running for her next class, feeling an odd sense of elation. *He wants me he really wants me!* She knew she was grinning and couldn't help it. *I'm having an affair with Severus Snape!*

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Author's Notes:

Latin translation source: <http://catholic.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

*Deicio -icere -ieci iectum: 1. to throw, cast, hurl down, to throw to the ground, fell; 2. of persons, to kill, bring down. In general, to fling away or aside*

*contortum: whirling; so powerful, vigorous*

*Seco, secare, secui, sectum: to cut , amputate; to wound, hurt; to divide, part; hence to settle disputes; to cut out, make by cutting*

*semper: always , at all times*

## The Apparation Test

Chapter 11 of 25

Severus and Lily take their Apparation test in Hogsmeade with great success and with a little trouble from Potter and Black, putting a strain on their relationship.

Twenty years later, Hermione and Ron take their Apparation tests in Hogsmeade, albeit with some difficulty of their own, although, thankfully, Professor Snape was on hand to lend assistance. Once again, Hermione is aware that Severus's actions do not always fit the persona he has built for himself.

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### The Apparation Test

~Spring 1977~

Severus had plans to meet Lily in the Entrance Hall, so they could go down to Hogsmeade for their Apparation test together. Unfortunately, when she came down the marble staircase, she was followed by Potter, Lupin and Black as well. Sighing, Severus ducked behind the Hufflepuffs, who were also entering the Entrance Hall at the same time, and managed to come up behind Lily, grasping her arm so that she turned around, and he could pull her aside in the throng of students. As luck had it, Marjorie Reynolds chose that exact moment to say hi to Lily, and Severus watched with a sly smile as the Gryffindor trio passed by without noticing him. Lily looked up at his smug grin and smiled back, finally realizing that he was the one holding her hand as he waited patiently while she exchanged pleasantries with the dark-haired Hufflepuff. Severus didn't mind the rambling inane comments of Reynolds, since she'd just been party to his plans, and created a convenient diversion from Potter, Black and Lupin for him.

Unfortunately, his luck didn't hold out for long. On the way down to gates, Black turned, saw Severus, and hit Potter on the arm, giving Severus a wicked smirk as he drew his wand. Immediately Potter drew his as well, turning to see what had caught Black's attention and grinned malevolently. On reflex, Severus drew his wand, holding it casually in his finger, but fully ready to fight if either Black or Potter even lifted their wands at him. Lupin quickly moved between Severus and his friends, his move imitated by Lily.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Lily admonished them. "I'll take house points from you. Wands down."

"Not here, guys," Lupin started to say as Reynolds began to gasp loudly, "Wait! Don't fight, not now! The professors! They're watching!"

Severus rolled his wand in his fingers in a deceptively casual manner as if he wasn't at all prepared to defend himself. "I'd reconsider the circumstances. This isn't the most opportune time for this, considering," he said smoothly, watching four of his housemates walk past them, although, thankfully, they didn't see him standing there with Lily.

"Oh, this is bloody ridiculous," Lily said, pulling on Severus's arm to walk away. "I'm early on the list, Sev. Let's go. I don't want to be late."

Severus allowed her to guide him and Reynolds away, although he kept a wary eye on the Gryffindor trio as they continued towards the gate. *Next time. Choose your fights, and choose your locations...* Malfoy had said before his last year, he remembered while he continued to roll his wand in his fingers as Reynolds once again picked up her idle chatter. *Circe, does this girl ever shut up?* he thought as Lily looked up at him with a smile, then answered Reynolds' question, giving Severus a subtle squeeze on his hand.

Nevertheless, when they all reached the school gates, Severus clearly heard Professor Ethelridge scold Black, informing him that since his birthday was still several days away, he did not have permission to go to Hogsmeade. Severus held back a snicker as Professor Ethelridge admonished Black soundly, deducted five points from Gryffindor, and told him to return to his lessons.

Professor McGonagall, who'd been checking students off her list, approached Professor Ethelridge. "What is the problem, Robert?"

"Not of age, I'm afraid," Professor Ethelridge stated, blocking Black from passing the gates and causing a hold up.

"My birthday's in a few days," Black said, annoyed, "surely..."

"Not," Professor Ethelridge said adamantly.

Professor McGonagall shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Black, the Ministry did not grant your request for special compensation to take the test. You will have to go back to the castle and return to class."

Professor McGonagall nodded to Severus, Lily and Reynolds as they passed through the school gates, checking their names on her list. Severus's grin widened as he continued to Hogsmeade, still holding Lily's hand, followed by Marjorie Reynolds and her incessant chatter.

~Spring 1997~

Holding the leaflet *Common Apparition Mistakes and How to Avoid Them* in her hand, Hermione walked casually down the corridors and through the large oak doors to head down to Hogsmeade. The leaflet had been alarming with all its ridiculous warnings and no acceptable explanations. She'd spent most of her weekend in the library trying to research out the answers to all the questions the leaflet left unanswered and unexplained.

"Oh for Merlin's sake, Ron! It's Hannah Abbott!" she snapped, irritated that he once again hid behind her when he saw a girl, any girl, appear. So far Hannah was the ninth he'd ducked from that morning. Not only that, Hermione was still agitated that Harry was somewhat miffed that she hadn't wanted to go to Aragog's funeral, even for Hagrid's sake. Truth was she had a desire to go to the tower tonight. Besides, burying an eight-foot spider seemed like such a pointless thing to get a detention for if they got caught.

As they passed the gates, Professor Snape checked their names of a list on his clipboard, his dark eyes staring at Hermione a few seconds before another student distracted him. Hermione smiled inwardly, and she and Ron walked down to the test site and passed through the roped off area. Mr. Twycross and Mrs. Ferrero from the Ministry were lining everyone up according to another list in alphabetical order. Hermione waved to Ron and mouthed, 'Good luck,' as he was shuffled away.

"Deliberation, determination, divination, no, desperation, uh, and destination..." the girl behind her kept muttering.

Hermione turned around. "It's destination, determination, and deliberation," she said kindly to her.

"Indeed," Severus said smoothly as he strode casually down the line of students. "Pay attention," he snapped at someone in the front of the line. He walked past, and she watched the way his robes billowed in his wake, knowing exactly what was hidden underneath and blushing as that thought distracted her.

"Oh, they would have him here, wouldn't they? I'm nervous enough as it is without him scowling at me," the girl said, breaking into Hermione's imaginings.

"Just remember, fix the place where you want to go to firmly in your mind. Be determined that it's the place you want to be, and be deliberate when you cast the spell, and you'll do fine."

"Can you say that again?" the girl asked. Hermione smiled, repeated her suggestion again slowly, and turned her back on her as the line moved forward.

"Miss Granger, you are next," Severus said. "Please walk over to Mr. Twycross."

She looked up at Severus, seeing the briefest of winks before he schooled his face into a mask of indifference.

Hermione stood on the marker listening to Mr. Twycross tell her where she was to Apparate to. Taking a deep breath, she focused on the site on the train platform and turned deliberately, determined to be on the exact spot specified. When she opened her eyes, she found herself standing at the train depot platform and smiled. *I've done it! I've passed*, she congratulated herself, taking the slip of parchment from the testing coordinator on the platform. *Now to find Ron!*

She ran all the way back to Hogsmeade. She arrived in time to see Ron move forward in the line. "Ron, you'll do fine," she encouraged him quickly. "Just remember to fix the place you want to go firmly in your mind, be determined that that's the place you want to be, and be deliberate when you cast the spell."

He nodded as Severus strode down the line again. "Congratulations, Miss Granger. However, please remove yourself from the line. Mr. Weasley needs to concentrate."

"Yes, sir," she replied, mouthing, 'Good luck,' to him again as she backed up to stand next to the Three Broomsticks. When his time came, Hermione tried to listen to the destination Ron was given. She wasn't sure, but she thought he'd been told the post office, and she ran quickly down the street to watch him appear. She'd just stopped when a crack sounded and Brian Weathers, from Ravenclaw, appeared. A few seconds later another crack sounded, and Ron appeared. *He did it! He... Oh, gods! He's bleeding!* She quickly ran up to him. "Ron, Ron!" He looked shaky, and she quickly clamped her hand on his forehead.

"Miss Granger," Severus said, suddenly appearing next to her. "Bring Mr. Weasley here to me."

Hermione complied, helping Ron walk over to Professor Snape while still holding onto his forehead. Blood was oozing from under her fingers. Severus had his wand ready, uttered a quick cleaning charm, and then shook his head. He pulled a bottle from his pocket and poured some essence of Dittany on a square piece of flannel. "Mr. Weasley, sit down," he ordered. Ron sat on a chair Hermione hadn't seen seconds before.

"Remove your hand."

She did, and the blood began to flow down Ron's face. Severus did another quick cleaning spell, and he quickly placed the flannel on Ron's forehead where his eyebrow used to be. "Miss Granger, hold this in place, please." Hermione's fingers slid over Severus's as she replaced his hand with hers, and for a moment his eyes darted to hers with an odd look before he pulled another bottle from his robes. "Blood-Replenishing Potion, Mr. Weasley. Drink." He handed Ron a teacup, and Hermione took the offered potion, holding it up to Ron's lips. Severus uttered a spell while flicking his wand across Ron's forehead. "I'll be back. Keep pressure on his wound, Miss Granger."

Hermione nodded, but he was gone before she could answer him. A second crack later, Severus was back, holding Ron's eyebrow. "Half an eyebrow, Mr. Weasley. I'd say you've failed, but the decision will be up to Mr. Twycross."

~Spring 1977~

Severus was elated; he'd passed. Well, he really hadn't had any doubts that he would. Nevertheless, he was holding his Apparation parchment, and it said he was now licensed to Apparate. He hurried down to the Three Broomsticks to meet up with Lily. She was standing outside Madam's Secret Enchantments, looking at the window display, holding a small bag. "Hi, there," he said, dropping his voice slightly and rolling each word carefully.

She turned around, grinning. "I love it when you talk like that."

"I know. Are you ready to head back?" he asked, using the silky drawl again with a grin.

"So I am to guess or are you going to tell me?" she asked as they walked.

"Tell you what, Lily love?" he teased her, saying her name slowly deliberately.

She looked up at him and raised her eyebrow. "Did you pass, or what?"

"Yes, of course I passed," he replied, grinning. "You had any doubts?"

They talked about the others that she knew, discussing who she knew passed and those who hadn't. As they'd left Hogsmeade, they passed several students who'd splinched, lined up for the mediwizards, or in clusters around a Healer or teacher, several of them covered in blood. "Although, thankfully, no one splinched too badly today. I was reading..." Severus spotted Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew walking across the grounds and pulled Lily back beside green house three, hidden from view by the twisted trunks of the Death Angel Trumpet vine.

"Ouch!" Lily exclaimed, stubbing her toe, making her trip and fall against him. "Sev?"

"Hush! I don't wish to be dangled upside down again," he explained in a whisper.

"Oh, let me up." Lily tried to push herself out from behind the angel trumpet trunk where he was trying to make her crouch with him. "Aren't you being a little paranoid?"

"No." He covered her mouth and pointed his wand at her throat. *Silencio Infantis*, he hissed to prevent her from giving them away. She squirmed and fought against him, but he held her tightly until Potter, Lupin and Pettigrew were out of sight. *Is it my imagination, or did they come from the Whomping Willow?*

Lily was silently shouting at him now, her expression angry, and her cheeks flushed. She kind of looked cute, her hand on her hip, the other pointing at him as she silently berated him, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Lily, you have to calm down for me to reverse this," he stated, his wand held level with her throat.

She struggled to her feet, turning at him, pointing her wand at his chest.

"Okay, I can try to take it off but you have to calm down."

Her hand made a quick sweep as she pounded her foot, still trying to yell at him. *If Potter and Black are anywhere near, they'll hear her* He took a quick look over her shoulder and pointed his wand at her throat. *Finite Incantatem*. I don't suppose..."

"*How dare you!*" she snarled, storming off toward the castle doors.

Unfortunately, Potter saw them. "Hello, Evans," he said, smiling, as they neared the great oak doors. "Pass, did you?"

"Of course I passed," she said, eyeing him. "Did you?"

"First try," Potter replied smugly, turning to eye Severus, his gaze sweeping him from head to toe. "Don't see any blood on you, Snivellus, so I assume Evans must have cleaned you up already."

Pettigrew snickered at his comment. "Cleaned him up..."

"He passed, if you must know. First try," Lily said proudly, shoving past them.

Potter was keeping pace with them, and Severus knew that this didn't bode well. Halfway up the stairs, Black stepped out from castle and approached. As soon as he saw Severus, he drew his wand. "Oh, no you don't," Lily warned. "I mean it Black I'll take points from you if I have to."

"What, I was just waiting for them to come back," Black said, waving his wand between Potter and Lupin, who was coming up behind them.

*Great, ambushed*, Severus thought as he slipped his wand casually from his sleeve.

"No need to draw wands," Lily warned as Black raised his wand and pointed it at Severus. Severus had his held at the ready as Potter lifted his arm, his wand already in his hand. "No, guys, no! Don't. I'm warning you..."

Twin pulses of light shot simultaneously from two wands, which were immediately followed by more flashes of color from the other two. Severus managed to fire two spells almost a heartbeat apart while ducking: one, a Stunning Hex at Potter and the other, a Protective Shield in front of Lily. Black flicked his wand, ducking as Severus effortlessly blocked a jinx and fired a Leg-locker toward Black.

Lily tried to stop fighting and moved in between Potter and Severus and was hit by a hex, falling to her knees, just as Lupin grabbed hold of Potter's arm. "Hold on," Lupin shouted. "Lily, are you okay?"

Severus grasped her arm to help her up, but she shrugged him off. "Leave me alone, all of you," she shouted. "Just leave me alone!" She quickly turned and ran into the castle.

"See what you've done," Potter called after Severus as he ran after Lily. "Snivellus..."

He didn't care. Lily was hurt and he had to help her. He caught up with her just as she entered the Entrance Hall, and he pulled her aside toward the stairs that led to the dungeons. "Lily, are you all right?"

"No," she snapped, "I'm not and... and you're bleeding!"

"It's nothing," he said, trying to see where she was hurt. "Where does it hurt, Lily? What did they do to you?"

She wasn't listening but was digging into her pockets. "Get your robes off so I can see your shoulder," she said. She pulled a small vial of essence of Dittany out and a lacy handkerchief. "Come on sit down and remove your robe. I need to stop the bleeding..."

"It's just a scratch," he said, pulling his robe off as he sat on the steps. He could hear Potter's voice complaining in the Entrance Hall above them. "Lily, are you sure you're okay?"

She tugged at his shirt to expose the shoulder and grimaced. "No, I'm not. My chest hurts and my left leg is sore from that hex. As soon as I stop this bleeding, you and I are going up to the hospital wing." She dabbed the Dittany on his wound, and he winced as it stung. "Why do you always have to fight them? Why, Sev?"

"I tried casting a Shield Charm on you and got this because I was distracted," he said, wincing again as she added more Dittany to his cut. "I didn't want to fight, but I didn't want you hurt either. Black and Potter..."

"Enough," she snapped, flustered. "Okay, the bleeding's stopped. Help me up to the hospital wing then if you're so concerned. Merlin's balls, I wish the four of you would grow up. I'm getting tired of this. I don't like the fighting, Sev. I wish you'd all just call truce or something."

He stood. "It wasn't my fault. Black was..."

"Enough," she said, annoyed. "Look, I recognized the Shield Charm, and I thank you. I know you tried. But this is really getting old." She sighed. "Come on, let's go. My leg is still prickly as if it's asleep, and I want to get it checked out."

~Spring 1997~



On her way up from Hogsmeade after Apparation testing, Hermione turned to Ron and told him that she wanted to go over to Hagrid's hut to console him and to explain why she couldn't come to Aragog's funeral. It had plagued her that Hagrid hadn't been at either breakfast or lunch, and she figured that Hagrid was taking the death of the creature a bit personally. So she figured a brief visit in the afternoon, to offer her sympathy was the least she could do. "And it's on the way to the castle, just a quick detour," she said, as if needing to explain her change of heart to Ron. "Is that all right with you?"

Ron nodded, still smarting from his failure to pass his test and wasn't really paying attention to her. She could have led him into the lake, and he'd likely not have noticed until his shoes got wet. *Possibly not even then.*

"And where do you think you are going?" she heard the silky voice of Severus ask from behind them. "Mr. Weasley, I believe I made it clear you were to return to your common room for the rest of the day."

"Ah, err, right," Ron stammered, looking up at Professor Snape, and his ears turned red. "I was just..."

"Going to see Hagrid for a brief visit," Hermione finished for him. "He lost his, err, pet, and we wanted to give our condolences. *Severus must have followed us to see what we were up to...* she thought, looking at Ron. He was still a bit pale, but he seemed fine enough.

Severus's lips almost curled into a smile. "Miss Granger, if you feel the need to console Professor Hagrid, by all means, proceed. However, Mr. Weasley is to return to his common room and rest," he stated firmly.

"Mione, I'll be fine. Give Hagrid my, I mean, Professor Hagrid tell him, I'm sorry about Aragog," Ron stammered, backing away, uncomfortable under Severus's stare. "I'll just go."

*That wasn't very nice,* she wanted to say, but held back.

"I believe," he said with an amused glint, "you were going to see Professor Hagrid."

Hermione nodded, walking in the direction of Hagrid's house, and was surprised to see Severus follow her. Several times she glanced over her shoulder, acutely aware that he was still walking with her, but unsure why he chose to accompany her. "Sir, I wasn't aware you ever visited Hagrid," she started to say but was cut off when he quirked his eyebrow up a notch.

He made a deep chuckle, watching her with a sardonic grin. "We are colleagues. Occasionally I ask Hagrid for assistance." He offered no other explanation, sweeping his hand to indicate she should continue.

As they approached Hagrid's house, Hermione could see the Acromantula in the pumpkin patch, apparently balanced on its legs, which were curled up underneath it, and propped upright with rocks. She stifled a laugh. *Of course Hagrid wouldn't want his pet lying on his back. That would seem undignified to the kind-hearted man*

Hagrid was energetically digging a hole, standing waist deep in his pit as he flung dirt onto the pile next to him. He paused, turned and looked at Severus, his eyes opening wide in surprise. "Professor, nice to see yeh. What brings yeh down to see me? Oh, hello, Hermione. I didn't see yeh there. Did yeh need anythin', Professor?"

Hagrid climbed out of pit as Severus spoke, "I believe Miss Granger has something she wanted to say to you, Hagrid. I simply came by to see if you needed assistance. I was unaware that your..." he paused to look at Hermione before continuing, "pet was an Acromantula."

Hagrid looked from Severus to Hermione, a sad smile spreading on his face. "He was my pet when I was in school. We've been friends since, Aragog and me."

Hermione felt something scratchy begin to fill her hand and looked down to see a fist full of wild flowers materialize. "Hagrid, I wanted to come down and, well, I won't be able to come tonight. But I wanted to tell you how sorry I am and..." She had no idea what to say. "But I wanted to give you my condolences," she said while Severus stood watching, arms crossed, with a smirk on his face.

"An' yeh brought 'im flowers?" Hagrid asked, tears welling up in his eyes.

"They are from us," Hermione stated, holding them out, and Severus looked at her, his eyes narrowing for a brief second before he turned back to Hagrid.

"He is a spectacular creature, Hagrid. I know it's unseemingly for me to request, considering your fondness of the creature, and his untimely death," Severus said, moving closer. "But might I ask a boon with you?"

"Sure, Professor," Hagrid said, still looking at the flowers Hermione had handed him.

"You see, Acromantula venom is a very expensive and a very rare ingredient, used in some rather tricky healing potions," Severus said with the upmost respect in his voice. "I was wondering if maybe you'd allow me to collect his venom?"

Hagrid looked up and smiled. "Oh, sure, Professor, o' course. I think ole Aragog would be proud to know his venom could be used to help someone," he said.

Hermione was stunned that Hagrid had agreed to let Severus collect venom from Aragog, even more so that Hagrid would think that the Acromantula would have been remotely pleased by the suggestion. Hagrid disappeared into his house and returned with a very large pitcher, and Severus actually smiled as he accepted it.

"Thank you, Hagrid." Severus turned to Hermione. "Well, Miss Granger, do you care to learn how to milk an Acromantula?"

Not passing up such an opportunity, she quickly followed Severus and watched attentively as he showed her how to collect venom. It was amazing to see how much venom came from only one fang. Severus transfigured the pitcher into a large jar and then transfigured a rock into another equally large pitcher. "All right, you try," he said softly. "Watch your fingers. The fangs have burrs and the tips are quite sharp."

Hermione carefully copied each step Severus had shown her, following each direction as he spoke it. The pitcher was quickly filled as the venom almost poured out of the Acromantula's venom sack. Once the large pitcher was full, Severus carefully transfigured the pitcher into a jar and nodded to Hermione. She grinned, pleased that he'd allowed her the opportunity. They stayed a while to listen to Hagrid bemoan Aragog's admirable qualities, although Severus eventually ended the wake, saying that he had to escort Hermione back to the castle, so Hagrid should resume digging Aragog's grave.

All the way back up to the castle Severus asked Hermione various questions about Acromantulas and their venom's properties, filling in some of the gaps of her knowledge and suggesting she write a brief summary to some of the questions she didn't know. Still, it was a very enjoyable walk up to castle, and she was sorry to reach the castle steps so quickly.

\*

That night, Hermione and Ron tried to sneak out and go down to check on what was taking Harry so long at Aragog's funeral. She'd been so distracted lately, she'd completely missed the obvious solution to Harry's problem. Harry had told them Dumbledore wasn't having any more lessons with him until he got Slughorn's memory, and Hermione had been racking her brain trying to figure out how he could get it. Only that wasn't true. Her thoughts kept drifting onto other subjects, such as Severus Snape. Therefore, it had been Ron who'd thought of the perfect solution: Harry's Felix Felicis Potion.

They had managed to slip through the castle and down past the staircases to the first floor when they ran into Mrs. Norris. "Shite," Ron swore and pulled Hermione down the corridor. They had just about reached the marble staircase when Severus's shadow loomed around the corner. Ron quickly ducked behind tapestry just as Severus appeared. Hermione turned, knowing she was caught, and decided to simply face the consequences bravely.

"It's a little late to be wandering the halls, Miss Granger," Severus said coolly.

"Yes, Professor," she said, hoping he didn't see Ron's feet under the tapestry.

Severus looked down the corridor, then back at Hermione. "You are now out after curfew, Miss Granger. I suggest you follow me," he said, indicating the way with his hand. "Now, please."

She had no choice. She numbly followed him along the corridor. She was surprised that, although he didn't speak to her, he was guiding her the long way back to her common room, instead of taking the most direct route. "Have you started on my summaries?" he asked, breaking the silence, startling her.

"Er, yes, Professor, I have," she replied as they climbed the stairs. "I've nearly finished them."

His brow furrowed before he looked away. "You do realize I will have to give you a detention."

"Yes, sir," she replied, mentally swearing under her breath.

He paused just before entering the corridor that led to her common room. "I expect those summaries on my desk when you arrive for your detention," he said, looking down at her intently. He reached out his hand and cupped her face, looking into her eyes. "I was quite pleased with your Apparation today." His lips grazed hers in her softest of touches. "You were given the longest distance for your test. Although with you, I'd have expected nothing less than a perfect Apparation." He teased her lips, nipping at her bottom lip before fully kissing her.

She wrapped her arms around his waist, her fingers stroking his back as she tried to move closer to him, and he chuckled, his hands still cupping her face, keeping a gap between their bodies. His kiss was teasingly gentle, sensuous, but she wanted to feel his body pressed against hers. He moved one hand into her hair as he tipped her head back, and she took a step backwards to keep her balance, discovering the wall at her heels. She'd not even realized he'd been moving her backwards. She leaned against the cool stone as he loomed over her, his mouth never leaving hers. His fingers began to trail down her front, caressing her breasts as his tongue flicked on her upper lip and delved into her mouth. She stroked his tongue with hers as her fingers explored the buttons on his frock coat.

"Not tonight, Hermione," he said softly, "and certainly not here." His soft lips brushed against hers in a slow, luxurious kiss, titillating her senses and arousing her. She wanted more, wanted him. His leisurely caress of her body sent shivers down her spine and to her toes. She wanted to feel his skin. She pouted as he pulled away from her, his dark eyes deep, fathomless pools against his fair skin. "Circe, girl, I know better than this. You make me forget myself."

She smiled up at him. "Does that mean I get out of my detention?"

"Oh, no," he said, his eyes staring at her libidiously. "You'll serve your detention under me, Hermione." He kissed her again, then he stood back watching her, a smirk on his face. "You won't get off that easily. Go on, now. Get to bed with you."

"Good night, sir," she said, turning to go.

"Good night, Hermione," he replied softly in his silky drawl. "Pleasant dreams."

Ron was in the common room already, waiting for her by the fire when she entered. "Mione, did the greasy git give you a hard time? Did he do anything to you?" he asked, coming up to her quickly.

"Not yet, Ron, no," she admitted, trying to hide the grin on her face. "I've detention again, though, tomorrow."

"Git," Ron snarled.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

I simply cannot forget to say thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

I've given Sirius Black a June 4th 1960 birth date for this story and make him a Gemini. Therefore, like Harry, Sirius would have to wait until his seventh year to take Apparation test. This would mean that at 16, Sirius ran away from home to live with the Potters to escape his parents' pureblood mania, which, I'm assuming, took place over the summer before his sixth year. Also at 17, he apparently bought a house of his own with money from Uncle Alphard, so this seems like it happened over the summer too, which would be a great graduation and coming of age gift.

The only bad thing... How much venom does an Acromantula have? I know Slughorn collects the venom just before the burial, but Aragog is a huge, eight-foot spider with large fangs. I do know that venomous snakes have venom sacks on both sides of their heads, which are large in proportion to their heads. Even after a professional milks a snake, he does not get all the venom out of the sacks, and the snake can still bite and poison the handler, which is why milking a venomous snake is so dangerous. It's possible that Severus collected a good portion of the venom, but not all of it; therefore, if he collected venom in the afternoon, the remaining venom could fall in the sacks, and thus, I'm assuming, Slughorn would still be able to extract some as well later that night.

Latin translation source: <http://catholic.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

infans infantis: speechless, unable to speak

Strain and Discord

Chapter 12 of 25

Hermione might have jeopardized everything in her relationship with Severus, trying to cover for Harry, but she technically hadn't lied to him, just didn't offer the answers he wanted – or expected from her.

Twenty years earlier, Lily uncovers a revenge ploy Severus set up against Potter she definitely doesn't approve of. However, Severus catches her in a compromising position he definitely doesn't approve of either.

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Strain and Discord

~Spring 1997~

When Hermione arrived for her detention, Snape was brewing a potion at his worktable. "The potions are on my desk, Miss Granger, please drink them," he said, not even looking up as he meticulously measured his next ingredient. Hermione drank the silvery Mind-Clarity Potion, watching his movements with a sense of awe, then poured herself tea, adding in four drops of the Calming Ascetic Potion and carried the cup over to his worktable as she sipped it.

"I suppose I'll have to give you something to do so that you stop staring at me. You can clean the muddaubers and extract their secretions," he suggested, indicating the bowl next to him on the worktable. "Do you need me to show you how?"

"No, I've done this in Slughorn's class," she replied, setting down her empty cup.

He nodded and turned his attention to his potion, stirring with even, controlled strokes.

Hermione picked up the first thirteen-centimeter, grub-like creature with the forceps lying next to the bowl, stabbed it just below the two antennae, and sliced it from its mouth downward, about five centimeters, making the green sac protrude out of the cut. Snape passed her a large, wide-mouthed vial, silently, and then returned to cutting up his roots. She held the muddauber over the vial and nicked the sac, using the blade of her knife to extract the liquid mucus. Considering the size of the creature, it produced a surprisingly large amount of the visceral green stuff. Once done, she carefully slit the grub down the center, and extracted out the organs.

The second grub-like creature was slightly smaller than the first. It squirmed a little when she picked it up, and she was extra careful to avoid the mouth or antennae as she cut the creature, knowing that one bite would cause a severe reaction of searing blisters. The creature's tail end curled as she worked, and she was nearly stung by the antennae as she cut down the center of the body. The next two were lifeless and no trouble at all. The last one was larger than the others. She had just picked up the last grub, sliced the skin along its side when the muddauber turned in the forceps, nearly biting her fingers, and the antennae stung her. Hermione cried out in alarm as her knife slipped, slicing the sac, and the liquid mucus squirted all over her front.

"Get your blouse off," Snape barked, jumping up and coming quickly around his worktable.

Hermione didn't need to be told, as she was already struggling to remove the soiled garment before the visceral liquid could soak through to her skin. Nevertheless, she could already feel the wetness of the acidic gel, and her skin began to burn.

Snape swished his wand, shredded the blouse at the seams and pulled the garment off her. "Let me see," he snapped, concern in his eyes. Red patches were already beginning to burn on her chest, shoulder and stomach.

"Do not put any water on it," he snapped sharply as he ran quickly to his storeroom.

The red rash was rapidly spreading by the time he returned with a jar of green gel, which smelled like cinnamon and celery. "Take off your bra."

"It hurts," she said, waving her hands to try to cool the burning sensation and patting the places it burned.

"I know. Stop that, you'll make it worse! Hold still," he said as he turned her roughly by the arm. He cut the bra strap, and turned her around to face him as he quickly yanked her bra off. "Here, this will prevent your skin from breaking out in pustules," he said, dabbing the green gel on the spreading rash. The cooling effect was immediate, and as he continued to wipe the gel over her chest and stomach, the gentle sweeps of his fingers elicited shivers down her spine as well. She watched him, his brows furrowed in concentration and his dark eyes showing his concern as he meticulously covered every part of her that had been touched by the mucus, creating a growing sense of desire within her. "What happened?" he asked as he smeared the gel on her neck and shoulders.

"It almost bit me," she said breathlessly. "It stung my finger."

"Show me," he said, grabbing her hand. She didn't need to. Her index finger where the muddauber had stung her was already starting to turn blue and swell. He jammed her finger into his jar.

Instantly her finger felt better. "I didn't know some of them would still be alive. I'm sorry. I know better," she said as he checked her finger. "But the ones I've cleaned before weren't, so I didn't expect... I should have known." Idly, she scratched at an irritated spot on her stomach.

"Don't do that," he snapped, pushing her hand away. "They~~shouldn't~~ have been alive. I prefer them freshly caught and just expired," he said, then his eyes narrowed. "Did you bother to check them before starting to cut them?"

"No, I assumed..." She'd closed her eyes, listening to his voice, fantasies of his touch and kisses swirling in her mind. "Severus, I don't think your potion is working," she said, slowly opening her eyes, her gaze meeting his.

"No?" he asked. "Where does it hurt?"

"No, not this one, the other one," she replied, finding herself lost in his dark eyes. He continued to spread the green gel on her body, and her skin tingled as he did, but she wanted so much more contact than just his fingertips. "I, um, I don't know how to say this... I want you to kiss me." His hand froze on her breast as he stared at her. She bowed her head, ashamed at her presumptuousness. "I shouldn't have said that," she added demurely. "I'm sorry."

His hands reached out and cupped her face as his lips gently brushed hers. "Don't be." Hermione closed her eyes and savored the soft feel of his mouth on hers. "I've got to stop taking advantage of you," he murmured against her lips.

"And if I don't want you to?" she asked, her hands clasping the edges of his robes.

He drew his head back to look at her. "I'd have to stop."

She moaned from the loss of his contact. "That's not what I meant." She stood up on her toes to try to kiss him. He laughed and leaned down to kiss her, sensually teasing her lips while still keeping her body from rubbing against his. She groaned in frustration, trying to get closer to him and undo his frockcoat. "What if I don't want you to stop?"

"This is madness you know. You are only reacting to me because of that blasted tower," he said as Hermione tried to resume their kiss. "Hermione, we cannot do this; I cannot touch your rash," he said, backing up as she pressed forward. "Circe, girl, stop that," he hissed at her, grabbing her wrist. "If I irritate your skin right now, it will

become inflamed and blisters will spread..."

"Why not? You were touching me before," she said. "I want you."

He growled in response, his kiss deepening as he slowly backed her across the room toward his desk. He pushed her against the desk. "Sit," he ordered softly. She pushed herself up onto his desk as he loomed over her. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she replied in breathless anticipation. He flicked his wand at her and her palms stuck to the desk. "Hey!"

"Then do as I say." He continued to spread the gel on her until the cool tingling seemed to cover her entire front. "Why in Merlin's name do you think you are behaving the way you are?" he asked.

Hermione stared at him, speechless, not sure what to say.

"Yes, that is my point," he stated with a subtle sneer.

"No, it's just that I really do feel attracted to you. I've always admired and respected you, even though you've never liked me," she replied earnestly, and he scoffed at her. "This is the first time you've let your guard down since I've known you. Usually you just brush me off or say some scathing remark, but lately we've actually talked, sort of. And I like the real you, the one behind the gruff mask you always wear. The more I'm around you, the more I find I really like being around you."

"That is simply the effects of the spells," he said, although a flicker of a smug smile flashed on his face before he schooled his expression into his usual mask of indifference. "Don't put on your bra or your blouse. They'll have to be destroyed, I'm afraid. I'll disillusion you and get you to the hospital wing," he said, releasing her hands.

She jumped down off his desk. "What about your potion?"

"I set a Stasis Charm right after I noticed that you showered yourself with the muddauber's secretions," he said, fastening up the buttons she'd managed to undo. "Come on, I need to get you up to see Madam Pomfrey."

~Spring 1977~

Severus had been up in the stands, watching his team play Gryffindor. Mulciber had been flying really well today, focusing entirely on Potter throughout the game, nearly knocking Potter off his broom three times during the course of the game, forcing Potter to make some sharp turns and dives. The reason was because Severus had bet Mulciber a cauldron of Polyjuice Potion that he couldn't knock Potter off his broom. Never had Severus wanted to lose a bet so much. The score had been close with Slytherin only thirty points in the lead as both Regulus Black and Burnaby soared after the Snitch. Mulciber had managed to get one more good swing at the Bludger, which had forced the iron ball to swerve and hit Potter's shoulder. The impact caused him to lose his balance and slip, so he dangled precariously on the handle of his broom, forcing him to drop the Quaffle to the waiting Slytherin chaser below him, just as Regulus's fingers had closed around the Snitch. Severus watched with satisfaction as Potter struggled to land while he dangled from his broom with one hand and his other arm flailed limply at his side.

"Did you see that last one, Severus?" Mulciber said, running up to him after the game, grinning excitedly. "I got him! Knocked him right off his broom! So it's mine. When will it be done?"

"Tonight," Severus answered, hiding his grin carefully. He saw Lily as she exited the stands with her friends.

"Broke his shoulder probably!" Avery said. "So we win the bet! We get the potion."

He would have given it to them anyway since Avery and Hardger had stolen the ingredients for him, although they didn't know he'd already been brewing the potion for nearly a month. But this way was so much more rewarding. "Yeah. You win," he said, schooling his expression into one of regret. "I'll give you the potion."

"Cool, see you down in the dungeons." Mulciber grinned mischievously, taking off to find his girlfriend, Madelia, with Avery running after him.

"Bet? What bet?" Lily asked, walking up to him.

Sirius Black was making his way from the crowd right behind her. "Yeah, what bet? You bet Mulciber that he couldn't get James, didn't you? You had him single James out so he'd get hurt!"

"He wouldn't do that!" Lily exclaimed.

"And what if I did?" Severus asked defensively. "It's not like that isn't a risk of playing the game."

Black looked outraged; Lily looked aghast. "He targeted for James the whole game; he wasn't trying to get anyone else."

"Potter was simply unlucky always in the line of fire," Severus said smugly.

"What did you promise them?" Lily asked, perturbed. She didn't look all that happy about his bet with Mulciber, intended as revenge on Potter.

"A potion, wasn't it?" Black asked. "What potion are you giving them?"

"None of your business, Black," Severus stated.

"I've made it my business. What potion did Mulciber want in order to kill James?" Black asked with a snarl.

Lily looked at Black, then at Severus, and back to Black, gobsmacked. "Kill him! Sev?" she asked, her gaze landing on him again.

"I made a bet that he couldn't knock him off his broom, that's all. Besides that's what Beaters do knock players off their brooms. Or don't you know the rules of the game, Black?" Severus asked, watching Black's eyes narrow. "You might want to catch up to your friend and see if he's all right, though."

Lily's mouth dropped open. "How could you? He got hurt, Sev, bad."

"It's a broken arm, Lily, nothing more," Severus tried to explain. "Madam Pomfrey will have him right in no time." By the look in her eyes, she wasn't appeased by his rationale.

"Just a broken arm. Maybe you'd like to have one as well?" Black snarled.

Black drew his wand only a second before Severus drew his. "Stop this! Stop!" Lily cried out, drawing the attention of other students and Professor McGonagall, although neither guy was listening to her. "The professors, everyone is watching!"

"Bracchium Fractum," Black said as Severus growled, "Expelliarmus," sending Black flying forcefully back against the stands, but not before Severus felt the bones in his arm splinter.

"How dare you? How could you?" Lily shouted at both of them as Professor McGonagall came walking up with a scowl.

~Spring 1997~

As chance would have it, Hermione saw the Grey Lady floating down the corridor as she made her way to the common room. "Please, wait," she called after the ghost.

The Grey Lady turned and waited for Hermione to approach. "What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you about the spells on the tower," Hermione asked hopefully.

"I told you what I remember. That was a long time ago," she replied in a compunctious manner. "You're already under the influence of the spells on the tower room. Can't you tell what they are by their effects?"

"But I've read about the spells you mentioned, as well as similar spells, and according to the spells books, those spells don't last forever. They terminate when the caster dies." She covered her mouth hoping that the Grey Lady wasn't as sensitive about her death as Nearly Headless Nick was. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you..." Hermione apologized quickly, but the Grey Lady looked offended. "No, what I mean is, well, if you cast them when you were alive, why are they still in effect?"

"I don't know." The ghost looked away as if trying to remember. "I suppose they were very strong," she said, although Hermione heard a sense of wistfulness in her voice. "I tied my magic to his in hope that I could interfere with his spells so that others, such as yourself, would turn back from seeking entrance to the room above and not become ensnared. I wanted to boost the will of the unwary so they could resist. Most students that find the room never push past the barrier. I think you didn't want to resist the pull of the tower room or you wouldn't have kept going up there to see Professor Snape."

"I didn't go up there to see him," she protested, but the moment she said it, she knew it wasn't true. She had been as drawn to Snape as strongly as to the room itself, like a moth to a flame.

At that moment, Harry passed them in the corridor, running flat out, and Hermione stared down the corridor after him, curious.

The Grey Lady sighed, pulling Hermione's attention away from Harry's odd behavior. "He's the one you should be with. Not Professor Snape."

"But I don't fancy Harry that way. We're only friends," Hermione insisted.

"No, I suppose not. Apparently, you fancy Professor Snape. I cannot help you. Maybe you should seek out the Baron," she said, floating away.

"Wait, wait!" she called after the ghost, but the Grey Lady simply floated into the wall without looking back. Hermione continued to the common room lost in thought and was nearly bowled over as Harry came running back down the corridor, carelessly swinging his bag, almost knocking her over with his schoolbooks. She watched him disappear around the corner, wondering what had him in such a hurry that he hadn't even seemed to notice her. Shrugging, she turned her thoughts back to the two conversations she'd had with the Grey Lady and the contradiction regarding the longevity of the effectiveness of the spells she knew were placed on the tower.

*

Hermione, Ron and Harry had had an argument over Harry using the Slicing Spell from his Potions book on Malfoy when he'd had no idea what the spell did. In her mind it was an extremely reckless and dangerous thing to do, and she was appalled at Harry's, and for that matter Ron's, cavalier attitude. The fact that it wasn't the only spell he'd tried from the book made Hermione livid with him. So, finally tired of the cold shoulder treatment from her friends over the Half-Blood Prince and his book, she decided to retire early, choosing to review what she knew about the tower room.

Hermione had asked Nick about the longevity of spells cast by a person before they became a ghost, wondering if being a ghost had anything to do with it. But Nick had told her that dying was dying and that even though one was a ghost, their magic was tied with the corporeal body and the spells she was asking him about, hypothetically, would dissipate or terminate upon the wizard's death. Very few spells lasted beyond the life of the caster; only the strongest, most draining to cast, or blood magic might since it's magic sometimes then transferred over to another witch or wizard.

The protective spells on Hogwarts were like that, the ties between the magic and the caster passing on to the next headmaster, assuring the safety of the school. It's why the deputy headmaster had to be an extremely talented and strong witch or wizard; the magical source of the spells automatically transferred to them the moment the headmaster died.

She pulled out her parchments and charts, going over her list again, rechecking her annotations and summations, wondering what she was missing, but the words of the Grey Lady still haunted her.

*

The next morning Hermione left her common room early, fighting the urge to go to the tower room instead, forcing herself to turn for the dungeons, not sure where else to find the Bloody Baron. Within minutes of multiple turns, following random corridors, she was lost. It was only by chance that she saw a shadow in the corridor, recognizing the billowing shape of Snape's robes as he walked. Hopeful, she followed him, grateful when she finally saw him enter his office. She knocked on the door with a sense of relief.

"Enter," he called out, clearly annoyed by something.

Snape turned on her as soon as she closed the door. "Do you have any idea what you *friend*, Mr. Potter, did to Draco Malfoy?"

"Er, yes, Harry told me about it," she answered, intimidated under his angry expression.

He crossed his arms, looking at her sternly. "Where did Potter *learn* the spell he used on Malfoy?"

Hermione swallowed nervously before answering, "From a schoolbook."

"Liar," he snapped at her. "I know where he got the spell."

"You asked me where he learned it; he learned it from a book," she replied, trying not to show her fear.

"A schoolbook?" he asked firmly. "A Potions book, perhaps?"

Oh, gods, he knows. Harry said he switched books "Harry said that he showed you all his books," she stated, telling him a deliberate half-truth. It was a lie and she knew it, and worse, she knew he knew it, too.

"He lied," Snape snarled at her. "Where is the Potions book?"

"I don't know," she said honestly.

"You are lying," he sneered at her. "Tell me the truth."

"I am most certainly not! I don't know where the bloody book is," she insisted, angry at his accusation, knowing he was partially right.

"Do not raise your voice to me," he snapped at her.

"You are raising your voice to me," she snapped back, then inhaled sharply, turning her head, and added, *sir*," berating herself for losing her temper. *He's going to put me in detention or, worse, detention with Filch!*

"Get out of my office!" he yelled at her and turned, his robes flaring out dramatically.

She stormed from his room, fuming that he'd called her liar, tears welling in her eyes. *Well, I wasn't exactly telling him the whole truth, was I? I was covering for Harry. But really! I hadn't lied outright!* She ran all the way to the tower room and fell onto the windowsill, crying against the glass.

~Spring 1977~

Severus heard Potter in the corridor ahead of him and ducked into an alcove to avoid a fight. "He's a right foul git, and you know it. Admit it."

"He's heavily into the Dark Arts. He knows more Dark Arts than anyone in school, even as much as that wizard, You-Know-Who, everyone's talking about," Black snarled.

Severus' ankle still hurt from having been hung upside down again earlier that day, and his head and shoulder still ached from Black's latest hex. *If I could only figure out how to do a counter spell to my Levicorpus Charm nonverbally, that particular spell wouldn't be as much of a problem anymore.* "I can't believe you'd pick him over me. Why can't you see him for what he is?" Potter asked. "He's a Dark wizard; he's not going to amount to anything good."

Severus became incensed by the accusation.

"You don't know that! Severus is a nice guy and he's wicked smart," Lily's voice carried down the corridor. "He's my friend, Potter. You leave him alone!"

Severus smiled at hearing Lily defend him. *She must still care if she's standing up for me.*

Potter's voice answered her, "They all call you a Mudblood, all of them, Lily. How can you be so blind?"

"Even Snivellus calls you that. We've all heard him," Black spoke up next.

"He said it once *once* last year; he's never said it since. Besides, as I recall, he was hanging upside down and being taunted and hexed *by you! Both of you!* You embarrassed him!" Lily said angrily. "He hadn't meant it, he told me so."

If he hadn't still been under the influence of Madam Pomfrey's potions, still feeling slightly sluggish, he'd show them.

"His friends are Avery, Mulciber and Rosier! Their families are all Death Eaters," Black pointed out angrily. "Wake up, Evans! It's just a matter of time before old Snivellus joins the ranks. I wouldn't be surprised if he already has. Then what? How long would you and your family be safe? They are attacking Muggle-borns and their families. It could be you. You're safe now in these walls, but Merlin's balls, Lily, think! Summer is coming then what? Do you really think you're going to be able to protect your family?"

"The Ministry has set up protections on my parents' house, and I've been learning the warding spells we're shown in Defense," she stated defensively. "And Severus is not a Death Eater. I'd know if he was one."

"A lot of good that'll do, they're learning the same spells, Lily! Snivellus and his friends. You're a fool! He's no good and you'll only get hurt," Potter sneered at her.

"I can handle my own, Potter," Lily stated. Severus could just imagine her eyes narrowing in anger.

"You are a really *stupid* witch, you know that. You don't even see what's right in front of you," Black sneered. "Even Regulus said that *all* the Slytherins call you a Mudblood. *All* of them! He's going to end up joining them you know, the Death Eaters, and then what will you do? When your *friend*, Snivellus is one of them you think he'll still be your friend then?"

"Severus would *never* become a Death Eater!" Lily protested.

"Merlin, you're stubborn," Black said. "Go on then, get yourself mixed up with the Slytherins and see how long you live. They hate you, all of them, and he's one of them. He's no better than they are."

"No, he's not!" Lily protested.

"He's their friend! He's going to end up just like they are, as a Death Eater, and he will only end up hurting you *again!*" Black said venomously. "You mark my words. There's not a witch or wizard who's joining You-Know-Who who wasn't in Slytherin!"

"No, he's not like that!" Lily snapped back furiously.

"Why even bother defending you then, if you're just going to set yourself up as a target?" Potter snarled. "You aren't worth the effort! See if we're there for you next time, Evans. See if we come to your aid. I'm through trying to make you see reason."

Severus was stunned. *Next time? What happened? Did someone attack Lily?*

"Well, I don't need you!" she spat back, and Severus heard her footfalls as Lily ran down the corridor.

Severus decided he needed to know what happened and to see if Lily was all right. *If it means taking on Potter and Black again to find out, so be it!* He stepped from the alcove, hurried down the corridor after Lily, and suddenly came to a halt.

Lily was in Lupin's arms, his hands stroking her back as he whispered something against her hair. *My Lily in the arms of that werewolf? How dare she?* She had her arms around him, her head resting on his shoulder as his hand continued to stroke her. She looked up at him, and Lupin caressed her cheek, smiling at her. *She is my girl, and she's hugging that werewolf!*

Lily dropped her head on his chest, and her shoulders slumped as if she had sighed heavily, and she stepped back, her head bowed, wiping her cheeks on her sleeve. "Do you want to come to the library with me, then?" Lupin asked. "Or maybe you'd prefer going somewhere private to talk?"

"Private. I don't really feel like running into anyone right now. Least of all those two," she replied softly and then turned, her green eyes going wide as she met Severus' stare.

He was furious. *Sure, go off with that werewolf!* Severus turned and left, running all the way to the dungeons. He could hear Lily call out to him and heard her footsteps as she followed him.

"Severus, wait!" she shouted, her voice echoing off the stone walls of the dungeons.

He stopped and turned, glaring at her angrily. "What do you want, Lily?"

"It's not what you think," she said imploringly.

"What isn't? You were hugging that werewolf!" Severus sneered at her. "If you want to be with *Lupin*, fine, go *be* with him." He turned and started walking, and Lily followed him.

"He isn't a werewolf! They wouldn't let a werewolf in the school!" she exclaimed, reaching out her hand to grasp his sleeve, trying to make him stop and talk to her.

Severus turned and faced her. "He *is* one, Lily, open your eyes. Maybe Potter's right, you're too blind, too naïve, to see what's going on right in front of your face. Go back to your gilded tower." He turned on his heel again and walked down a seldom-used passage, wanting to be alone.

Lily followed, catching up to him again. "How could you be so jealous of Remus? He's only a friend."

"He's friends with Potter and Black," Severus sneered. "The golden boys of Gryffindor, the big wizards on campus."

"I can't believe you!" she exclaimed. "Why can't you all just stow your wands and let things go? Why are you always fighting? At least, Potter tried to save your life last week, even though you are *mortal enemies*! It's ridiculous."

Severus stopped and turned on her, barely able to contain an uncontrolled burst of his magic in his anger. "Saved my life? Did you just say ~~saved~~ *saved my life*? *That's a lie!*"

"No, I heard what happened," Lily protested. "Potter tried to save you from whatever monster is down that tunnel under the Whomping Willow!"

"Lily, Black *tricked* me into following Lupin through that passage underneath the Whomping Willow! Potter only came to my rescue so that his *friend* would not be expelled. He *knew* that I would encounter a full-blown werewolf at the end of the passage and stopped me from going all the way through! It wasn't to save my life it was to save Black from being expelled. That's the only reason he prevented me from going through! And Dumbledore had the audacity to say that Potter saved my life!" Severus was so furious, a tiny bit of spittle spurted at his last words. "*I'm* not allowed to talk about it! *I'm* forbidden to tell anyone what *really* happened! But obviously *Potter* is bragging about his *heroics* in his common room. How typical!"

"Yes, he told a few of us. But he did stop you from going through the tunnel," she said imploringly. "He did try to keep you from encountering that monster in the tunnel."

Severus stared at her in disbelief. "You *believe* the lies about what happened? That Potter went in there to save me?"

"Well, he did! He saved you from whatever is down there," Lily insisted.

"Black tried to get me killed or worse turned into a werewolf myself," Severus snarled. "He told me that's where Lupin goes each full moon!"

Lily touched his arm in supplication. "Lupin isn't a werewolf, Sev. He can't be!"

"Oh, yeah? Black, Potter and Pettigrew were all there, all *three* of them. So where was Lupin? Eh?" Severus spat angrily. "*HE* is the werewolf. *He* was down that tunnel!"

"If it was a werewolf down that tunnel, then Potter risked his life to save you!" Lily insisted. "You're now indebted to James Potter because of this. Dumbledore is right; it's called a life debt. I know about this. It's ancient magic..."

Severus looked at her in disgust. "I am not indebted to Potter; he was in on it! He is as much to blame..."

"You're kidding! Are you thick?" she said, stunned. "He saved your life, Sev."

"Go back, Lily," he spat back at her, disgusted by her constant defense of the marauding golden boys of Gryffindor. "I'm sick and tired of Potter, Black and Lupin. If you like Lupin so much, fine. But it's either him or me. I'm not sharing my girlfriend with a werewolf!"

He turned heel again, starting to head toward his common room, until Lily's scared voice made him pause.

"Sev, where are we? I'm lost."

Severus looked at her, seeing fear in her green eyes, and he shoved his anger toward her down inside him. He would have to lead her out of the dungeon maze; otherwise she'd be down here for hours and could fall victim to Avery or Mulciber again. He didn't really want her running into any of his housemates after all. "Okay, back this way. You shouldn't follow me down here. You get turned around too easily."

"But I've you to show me the way out," she replied with a smile. "I just wish you'd stop fighting..."

"Give it a rest. We'll never be friends," he said, exasperated. *Circe, she's going to harp me about this all the way back to the Entrance Hall*

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's Notes:*

*I have no idea when the incident in the tunnel took place, so I used it here. Poor Severus, things aren't going well in either of his relationships.*

*I simply cannot forget to say thank you to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.*

## Undaunted Choices

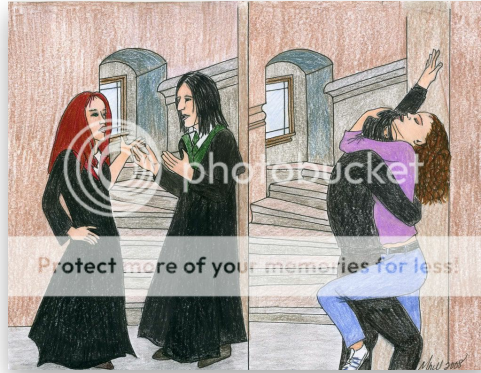
*Chapter 13 of 25*

Lily gets mad when Severus breaks their date to go to a party at Hogsmeade with his friends instead, starting up the typical argument they always seem to be having lately.

Twenty years later, Hermione, still trying to assess the spells on the tower, makes an astounding discovery from Hogwarts' past. Unfortunately, she simply cannot keep away from the tower, finding herself once again confronted by Snape in the tower room.

*I owe a great deal of gratitude to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, for all her help and support. Thanks for all your infinite patience with me. I appreciate it far more than you could possibly know.*

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Undaunted Choices

~Spring 1977~

Avery, Mulciber and Rosier were still fuming over some misfired hexes they'd been hit with in Defense class. Severus sat on the end of the couch, listening to his friends complain about Potter and Black with nearly the same venom in their voices as he felt toward them most of the time.

"...and just to protect those little Mudbloods, Evans, Fitzwater and Wallace," Avery snarled.

Rosier sat in the chair across from Avery with his feet propped up on the coffee table. "Why they even let Mud like that in the school, I'll never know."

"They let in anyone with magical talent," Severus stated off-handily. "It's to teach them how to use their magic properly, and the importance of keeping their magic from the Muggle world."

"Lot of good it does," Mulciber said, turning to face Severus. "I mean look at all the families these Mudbloods come from, and not just their parents and brothers and sisters neither, but all the others, too: their aunts, uncles, cousins, and the lot. They learn about our world, too, don't they?"

"That's the point," Avery stated, leaning around Mulciber's shoulder. "We get exposed by them all anyway. They're a nuisance."

"So, if someone is born into a Muggle family, and they develop magical talent, should we just leave them unchecked out there?" Severus asked, setting his book down and turning to face his friends. "Just let them make random acts of magic that the Ministry has to go clean up? Come on, isn't it best to rein them in, teach them control, and segregate them into our world?"

"Geeze, Severus, you sound like bloody Dumbledore!" Rosier stated, smirking. "I know you've a thing for that Evans girl, but really!"

"Evans bested you in class today, *again*," Severus stated. "For *Mud* she can really do some strong magic."

"You're just infatuated with her," Avery said, laughing. "You should just shag her and get it over with."

"She's a powerful witch and intelligent," Severus stated, ignoring Avery's crude remark. "I think power and intelligence is what matters most."

Rosier snorted in disgust. "I think power and prestige is what's important."

"Just give me a nice, rich, little pureblood," Avery stated, indicating Karaleen Ridgeon and her friends conversing in a circle across the common room with a nod of his head. "I don't really care if she can think as long as she satisfies me."

"You're thick. You would honestly want just any witch as long as her blood is pure?" Severus asked, shaking his head.

"Well, yeah, and she has money," Avery said, sounding put off. "Well, what do you want in a mate, then?"

Severus picked up his book and set his foot on the coffee table. "I want intelligence, wit, a good sense of humor, capable and gifted..."

Rosier started to laugh at him. "You don't even care if her blood is dirty just so long as she can hold a conversation about interactive potion ingredients."

"Well, yeah. I like someone who can actually understand what happens during the combination of ingredients in a cauldron," Severus admitted. "I want someone who appreciates the subtle reactions when the ingredients are blended together and understands what the chemical rearrangement undergoes when brewing. I want someone who can converse about what results are achieved during the interconversion of the ingredients, the syntheses and decompositions ordinarily impossible unless it's within a cauldron, and the probable outcome of varying or adding ingredients during experimentation. Yeah... Beats shagging a dunderhead."

"Severus, you're the one that's thick!" Mulciber said, giving Severus a friendly shove on the shoulder. "That's what mates are for not girls."

"Yes, I'm so lucky to have you to discuss these things with, mate," Severus replied, his smirk carefully hiding his innuendo. "Besides, you didn't even get into Potions this year. You only pulled an Acceptable O.W.L., if I recall, and that was simply because I helped you all last year."

"Well, Dad was right pleased with an Acceptable," Mulciber stated defensively. "Besides, I got into Transfiguration, didn't I?"

"I don't suppose you care to converse about the elemental conversions of the organic properties of an object during Transfiguration?" Severus asked, grinning. "Or debate



the translocation and matter redistribution versus disbursement of matter during Transfiguration manipulation into disproportionate objects?"

"Ah, no..." Mulciber said, his brow furrowed. He turned to Rosier as if to ask him what Severus was on about.

"Severus, mate, you're talking over his head again," Rosier kidded, laughing as Mulciber scowled. "Hey, did you know that the Malfoys are hosting Walpurgis Night! My dad told me that loads of influential wizards are going to be there."

"Yeah, my parents are going. I was told that they were going to have an honored guest," Mulciber said. "I wonder who? I got an owl from Lucius Malfoy. He and Rabastan Lestrangle are hosting a party at the Hogshead on Beltane. It's a Saturday this year, and the Headmaster added the date to the Hogsmeade weekends list."

"Everyone in Slytherin got the invitation," Avery said excitedly, "even ole Severus here. From what I heard, several of the guys who left are comin' back to see us. Like a reunion party." Avery turned to look at Severus. "You are going, aren't you, mate?"

All three guys were now looking at him with expectant faces. Severus knew that this was a rare opportunity, and that many of the wizards in the house he'd looked up to during his early years at school were going to be there. Besides, his invitation had an additional note from Lucius, telling him that he was looking forward to seeing him again. "Yes, I've already sent my return owl. I'm going to get my Charms book and get started on my essay," he said, getting up to go to his room. *How could I not go? If wizards like Lucius Malfoy and Rabastan Lestrangle want to see me again, and they obviously want to maintain a friendship as Lucius implied in his note, who am I to decline? They're both from very well connected, influential families. Knowing them, and counting them as friends, could open loads of doors after school.*

*As Severus was walking through the common room, he noticed a slip of parchment sticking out from under one of the sofas. It was a sketch of Hogwarts as seen from the air, as if the artist had been hovering on a broom directly over the castle. It was pretty good actually, although unsigned, but he had a pretty good idea who drew it. Severus was about to drop it when he noticed that his tower was on the sketch.*

*He turned, walked over to the end of a table, turned a chair so that he could lean on the wall, and sat down with his feet on the chair next to him. Looking at the sketch reminded him of the last time he and Lily had been in the tower together. It also reminded him of the spells that were supposedly on his tower and on the tower room. Severus took out a quill, turning the parchment over, and began drawing the tower: the tower walls, the lower room, the stairs, the tower room and the secret entrance and the tunnels that lead to the room. He knew the tunnels didn't have any spells on them. Only the tower did. He began to label the areas of the tower with the spells the Baron had told him about and where he actually felt their effects. He was surprised to realize that the Alluring and Enticing Spells were actually on the stairs, not the room itself. No!*

*I know that the door is enchanted like the dormitories are. There is a faint but discernible Repelling Charm on the lower room, more so near the entrance to the stairs. He'd assumed that the spells the Baron had told him about were on the room itself. He recalled the calm serenity he had felt when he'd been in the room alone. Do the spells on the room affect me when I'm alone, only I can't sense them, or are they only in effect when I'm there with Lily? Are there spells that make Lily and me have sex when we are together, or is it only because the door won't open unless we do? Lily is always more willing to have sex when we are up there, and so inhibited when we're anywhere else. He tried thinking of any spells that would make a girl want to have sex, and he could only recall the effect coming from a potion, not a spell. He looked around the room, trying to decipher what the Baron had meant about making a girl susceptible and consenting. Maybe the Baron wanted to Charm the room so that his girl would surrender to him, but it didn't work that way. At least that is what I think he was trying to tell me when he gave me his warning. Still, the spells shouldn't have lasted so long if the Baron had cast them when he was alive.*

*He got up and headed to his room, still wondering about the enchantments on the tower, repeating his list of spells he'd associated with the tower. What do I care anyway? The tower's enchantments have helped my relationship with Lily, made her love me again, and for that, I'm grateful. If I can get Lily to come back up here with me, I could talk to her, and maybe we could talk things out. Then everything will be fine again. I just have to get her back up here, that's all.*

~Spring 1997~

Hermione wasn't getting anywhere with her charts. She was certain that she'd labeled the spells correctly, but she knew that there was something she was missing. Her search for the elusive Prince person wasn't proving fruitful either, but truthfully, she'd been busy these last few days and hadn't devoted as much time to it.

Hermione rose early, stretching to wake up. The dark grey skies out her window suggested rain today, which meant that the library would be crowded. She dressed, gathered a quill and her parchments, and left the room as quietly as she could so as not to wake her dorm mates.

She walked down the corridor, thinking about the tower room, and was soon standing in the lower chamber. *Ron, Harry and I came in from there* she thought as she pointed to the entrance she'd used the first time she'd gone when the room was full of flying keys. *The brooms were floating in the middle of the room... Ron and I backed up to the wall to see if we could spot the key, which would go with the lock...* Hermione backed up to the wall as she'd done that day, surprised when she realized she was standing at the edge of the barrier.

The desire to move away was greater this time, but still the sense of longing to go up to the tower room was stronger. *I must have backed into the portal for the stairs that day, but I hadn't actually pushed through the barrier. I only leaned into it. 'You can only pass the barrier if you are meant to be together,' the Grey Lady had said. Severus wasn't with me the first time I came here; I was with Harry and Ron... However, I'm clearly being drawn to this room to be with Severus. I've never seen Ron come back here, and he's never mentioned the room. Could just touching the barrier, leaning against it have been enough for the spells of the tower to affect me? Then why didn't they affect Ron? Could the Grey Lady have been mistaken about spell?* She shook her head. *No, the Grey Lady had been so certain.*

Which possibly meant that her first time in the room the magic on the barrier would have let her pass through. Could there be some prophecies or destiny I don't know about yet, which connected me with Harry and Ron, something that fated us to be friends best mates? All the talk about prophecies, fates, destiny, karma and astrology ... but I always thought all that was nonsense.

She pushed her way through the barrier to the stairs, lured by the now familiar pull of the room above her. She knew without a doubt it was Severus she wanted to see in their secret hideaway, not Ron. She entered the room and heard the door close behind her just as Professor Snape let out a deep growling sigh.

"Miss Granger, how nice to see that you have once again defied my wishes and have returned to this room. Have you no self-control?"

Hermione spun around, her heart beating wildly. It was one thing to want to see him, to know exactly what being here with him meant, but quite another to be so confronted. "I was just checking the effects of the spells," she replied lamely. "Documenting my research with the effects I sense perceived..."

"They have not changed nor dissipated," he said, walking up to her. "And you do know what we will have to do in order to leave?" His fingers were already deftly unfastening the buttons of his coat and cuffs.

"Progress our relationship further," she stated automatically as she stared at his fingers.

"Yes, progress our *sexual* relationship further," he replied as his black coat and waistcoat were unceremoniously tossed on the floor, and he began to unbutton his shirt. "But this is why you came here, isn't it?"

"No, sir! I wanted to clarify the spells on the tower and this room," she stated, backing up toward the wall.

Snape simply smiled at her as he pulled his shirt off and tossed it on his coat. "By coming here when you knew I would be here?" He reached out, caught her by the waist,

and pulled her body tightly against his.

"I didn't," she protested, staring up at him. His eyes narrowed and she swallowed nervously. "I might have unconsciously, but I just sort of woke up thinking about the room, and you, and just started walking... and I just ended up here. It was sort of unintentional."

"Now it's too late. Whether you intended to or not is now irrelevant," he said before his mouth landed on hers firmly with a deeply sensual kiss, making her senses swim.

When he broke the kiss, her knees felt weak. Only his embrace kept her from stumbling. "Tell me you want this," he said softly, his tone making it sound like a question.

"Yes," she replied, nodding in anticipation.

A small smile softened his face as he slowly removed her robe, letting it slide from her shoulders to the floor. Slowly and deliberately, he removed her light jumper and then opened her blouse, his fingers sliding over her breasts as he pulled the garment off her. Being undressed by him under his intense stare gave her goose bumps, made her breathing heavy, and her heart race. His fingers traced her sides before he stepped closer to her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and unzipped her skirt. Hermione swallowed as he pulled her skirt and knickers off, his nose bumping into her stomach before she felt him try to lift her foot. Hermione quickly unhooked and removed her bra as she lifted each foot to let him free her ankles from her clothes.

When he stood up, he was frowning. "I wanted to do that," he said, indicating her bra. His fingers slid on her skin, encircling her breasts. "Next time, you will let me do it, understand?"

Hermione swallowed. "Yes, sir," she answered, nodding in assent as his mouth brushed hers.

His hands slid down to her waist, pushing her gently, making her walk backwards until she felt the wall at her back, and he leaned over her. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she replied honestly. He pulled her arms up above her head and secured them to the stone with a softly spoken spell. "Hey!"

"So much for trust," he said with an amused smile. "You wanted to know how far we could go, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh," was all she could say. Hermione tried to watch him, as Severus knelt, placed her legs over his shoulders, and lowered his head to her groin. With gentle fingers, he parted her folds, stroking her as his tongue began making little circles around her sensitive spot. Her head fell back against the wall, and she closed her eyes, losing herself in the sensations he created. Within minutes, she was straining against the spell holding her wrists, crying out his name, pleading with him not to stop as she climaxed.

He stood up, keeping her legs around him as he positioned himself at her opening and eased himself into her while he watched her face. "Please, my hands I want to touch you," she pleaded.

"No," he said as he moved. He grasped her hips as he thrust into her, watching, apparently amused, as she struggled, trying to twist and squirm.

Hermione curled her legs around him and tried to lean forward, but she couldn't move much with her wrists stuck to the wall. "Let me down, please," she pleaded again. She felt helpless and frustrated, wanting very much to touch him, and unable to do so.

With a smug smile, he pulled back, nearly withdrawing from her, then plunged deeply into her, repeating the same maddening withdrawal as he watched her.

She tried to push herself down on him with each plunge, but could barely move her hips from the wall. "Oh, gods, you feel good," she moaned.

"Good," he replied, his breath as ragged as hers. "Merlin, you're tight," he groaned, and Hermione smiled, trying to tighten herself on him again, pleased when he groaned. Snape positioned his hand on her, pressing her against the wall as he rolled his thumb on her nub.

The sensations were too much and she fought her restraints. "Free my hands, please," she begged as her body began to climax again.

"No," he said with a crooked smile, and his movements quickened, driving into her as her body began to spasm from the inside out. He didn't stop, but continued to grind against her, making the orgasmic sensation increase instead of decrease.

"No, stop too much," she was saying with each thrust. "Ohmygods, ohmygods, Severusss, please, no, too much..."

"No, come for me, Hermione," he said, nearly a feral purr, plunging himself into her roughly. "I want to see you come again."

The second wave crashed over her, making tears roll from her eyes as she screamed his name over and over. "Oh, my gods, Severusss, oh, Severusss!"

He growled in response. He slammed into her as his body convulsed, sweat beading on his forehead, his eyes closed for a few seconds before looking at her with a contented grin. He stayed deep inside her until his breathing slowed to normal and withdrew from her, the extraction almost painful.

"Oh, no, no, don't," she whimpered.

"I'm afraid I have no choice. Scourgify," he said, cleaning her first, then himself, in one sweeping flourish of his wand. He released her wrists, and Hermione nearly crumpled to the floor, but he caught her in his arms. He had a smug expression on his face as he held her up to steady her until she found her footing.

Hermione hugged him and kissed him fervently, trying to pull him back into her arms.

"No," he said, drawing back away from her. "Merlin, girl, you're insatiable."

"And you're incredible."

~Spring 1977~

Severus hung his head. *Shite, I forgot!* "I can't go with you to Hogsmeade this weekend. Most of the guys from my year are going to the Hog's Head for a party, and my friends want me to join them."

"Avery, Mulciber and Rosier? Why am I not surprised?" Lily asked angrily.

"And what does that mean exactly? Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy and Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrangle will be there, and the Malfoys are hosting the party," Severus said, surprised that she was so against him attending a simple party. "Lucius sent my invitation personally!"

Lily looked at him as if he'd lost his mind and betrayed her. "Malfoy and Lestrangle? They hang around with the very worst witches and wizards, and from what I've been told, they're in league with You-Know-Who!"

"Lily, the Malfoys are rich and well connected, and the Lestranges are a very old, well-respected wizarding family. They were nice to me when they were at school," he tried to explain. "It's just a party, and I've been invited."

"Yes, well connected... with the Death Eaters! Black said his brother Regulus goes to these parties Lestrangle and Nott give, and if this is anything like those, it'll be a recruitment party! Sev, you don't want to be associated with them. This Death Lord as they call him he's You-Know-Who. He seeks to destroy anyone with Muggle lineage

like me! The Death Eaters want to eliminate all the *dirty blood* from wizard society. They want to gain complete power and control over the *entire* wizarding world and bring Muggles to their knees. They talk about elevating and restoring the magical community, but only for the purebloods," she ranted. He was astounded by the fear and worry in both her eyes and her voice. "And you want to associate with them? Why? I thought you liked me?"

"Yes, I do! But, Lily, it's not like that. This is just a party," he tried to reassure her. "No Death Eaters or Knights of Walpurgis just some friends of Malfoy and LeStrange. I think Thanes, Blackburn and Wilkes will be there. It's just a party to celebrate Beltane."

Lily crossed her arms. "Beltane, falls right after Walpurgis night, Sev. Those revels for Walpurgis go well on through Beltane, and you know it. You don't think it's a coincidence that this party has been set to celebrate the day after Walpurgis night, especially when You-Know-Who's followers call themselves the Knights of Walpurgis?" she said, trying to convince him that there was an ulterior motivation behind a simple party hosted by Lucius Malfoy.

*Geeze, why does she automatically think that anything that involves my friends is all about You-Know-Who?* Lily, Lucius was my House prefect. Lucius and Narcissa liked me, and he wrote to tell me he's looking forward to seeing me again *me!* From what I understand, it's just a party to help us unwind and have some fun. A break from revising. Nearly all the Slytherins in seventh year are going and most of mine. It's just a circle of friends," Severus explained. "Besides, I already said I'd go."

"It's the wrong circle of friends," Lily said, clearly deeply disappointed and upset.

"It's just a party! A few guys from Slytherin coming back to see old friends," he said, exasperated.

"I can't believe you want to go," she said angrily. "Fine! Your mind is made up. But I don't like it, Sev. These people you call your friends are Muggle-born haters, and they hex and curse us every chance they get. You-Know-Who is having Malfoy try and seduce as many more recruits as he can, and the best place to get them is from here," she said with a sweep of her arm to emphasize her words. "I don't like it. Avery, Mulciber and Rosier are always saying anti-Muggle-born trash to anyone who will listen to them and spouting pureblood mantra all over the school. I just know they are all going to be Death Eaters."

Severus hung his head and sighed deeply. "Lily, it's not like that..."

"Yes, Sev, it is," she stated as she turned and ran from him.

He hit the wall in frustration. *It's a party just a bloody party with some wizards and witches who used be in Slytherin House. Nothing more than that. It's not a big deal!*

~Spring 1997~

She'd spent weeks of her free time both researching and comparing the spells she knew to be on the tower or trying to locate someone named Pince in any book or publication in the library. It gave her something to concentrate on besides her affair with Severus. One day, on her way back to the common room, Hermione got trapped on the moving staircases, and it took her an extra ten minutes to get to her dormitory. However, it also gave her an epiphany. The next morning, Hermione ran to the library to find any book to support her new theory and started on a new chart for the spells on the barrier, the tower and the upper tower room. Her new theory in fact had everything to do with the stairs, the moving stairs in the castle, and the towers and rooms that had been magically added or enlarged over the centuries. She couldn't wait to show her discovery to Severus.

Hermione arrived at Severus' office the next day during his office hours, struggling to balance her rolls of parchment, maps and books, so that they didn't fall in the floor.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "And what is all that?"

"I think I made a discovery about the tower." She quickly explained the charts, which listed which spells she knew to be affecting each section of the tower, pointing out the color variations she used; the spells with shorter durations in lighter shades of blue to those with longer durations in dark blues. "Also most of the spells on the tower are usually cast on people not objects."

So far Severus was not all that impressed, judging by the expression on his face. "Repelling Charms are cast on objects not people."

"Well, yes, but the rest aren't," she pointed out. "Anyway, I was on my way back to my room yesterday when I got stuck on the stairs, the moving ones, and I realized that the spells on the stairs are in the stone itself. I had tried looking them up ages ago, to determine which would make the stairs move, but there are few references to them. Apparently, Rowena Ravenclaw created them herself in a way to make the castle change and expand with the needs of the school."

"Yes, I am very well aware of this," Severus said in a bored voice.

"So I think that these spells, the ones on the tower, are somehow in the stone itself," she said, watching his expression, "and not cast on a person whose life is limited, but on a castle designed to be timeless."

Severus regarded her for a few seconds in silence, then walked over to his bookshelf, and pulled out a green journal. He returned and handed it to Hermione opened to a diagram and chart. The writing was the same as in Harry's Potions book. The detailed sketch of the tower included the lower room, the stairs, the tower room, and the secret entrance, all labeled with the spells Severus thought was on each section, exactly as Hermione had done. Even his chart was similar. It was dated May 1977. "I had already considered your hypothesis."

She flipped the page back and was amazed to see a beautiful sketch of Hogwarts as it appeared in his time, noting that not much had changed, and then turned back to the page with the details of the tower. She looked up at him and smiled.

"What is so funny, Miss Granger? You've been showing me what I all ready know..."

"Did you draw both pictures?" she asked, scrutinizing both sides of the page.

"No, the castle was drawn by Karynna Arora. I drew the tower and labeled it," he stated.

Hermione looked up at him, beaming. "You drew the door to our tower," she said.

"Yes, I drew the door to the tower," he said, frowning.

Hermione handed Severus a book of poems, open to a marker. "Here is a poem of a magical tower. The tower has a magical door only the lovers can find. In fact, the author's poems are all of love lost, love's regrets, unrequited love, and his undying love being his eternal torment. They're really quite moving. Lavender reads them all the time."

"And why would I be interest of such dribble?" he asked, handing the book to her as if disgusted by the thought she would want him to read them.

"Because this is a book of Beaumont Smethyk's poems, and it was dedicated to Dorcus Wellbeloved, the love of his life. Not surprisingly, Beaumont Smethyk was rumored to have died of a broken heart in 1848. However, his first poem was written in 1829. His poems became so popular a new poem was printed in the *Daily Prophet* every week until his death, each one dedicated to his *one true and unrequited love*, Dorcus Wellbeloved. In 1848, the year he died, Obscurus Books published a collection of his poems in a book. It became a celebrated best seller, and the *Daily Prophet* started running his poems again. So twenty-one years after his first poem was in print, Obscurus Books published three more books of his poems on Valentine's Day in 1849, 1850, and 1851, each book carrying the same dedication, to my beautiful Dorcus, the love of my life, my one true and unrequited love. Ironically 1851 was the same year Dorcus Wellbeloved organized the Society for Distressed Witches.

"Your point?" Severus said smoothly.

"He often alludes to or describes sunrises from the window of an east-facing tower. In fact, he even wrote several poems with the East Tower mentioned in the title: From The East Tower Window, The Lady Of The East Tower Room, Sorrow Of The East Tower, Regrets O The East Tower... I believe Beaumont Smethyk and Dorcus Wellbeloved were another of the six couples that the Grey Lady told me about. I believe they were under the spells of the tower, too," Hermione stated proudly.

"So you think you've found others affected by the curse of the tower room," he said coolly. "How does that answer the question of our problem?"

"I know I have. But because he called it the East Tower, I was reminded about something I saw in Hogwarts, A History. The East Tower is on the opposite side of the castle from Ravenclaw Tower. I didn't think too much about it until I recalled this." Hermione pulled out her copy of Hogwarts, A History and opened the book to the first sketch of Hogwarts. "This shows the original manor house, huge for its time, surrounded by a wall and four towers, one for each of the founders." She turned the page to an old sketch of Hogwarts dating back to 1086. "This next one shows two additional wings with an expansion of the original manor, and two more towers as does the next drawing dated 1159. I believe that this tower, shown on both drawings, is our tower, but it's labeled *Raven's Roost* and is next to Ravenclaw Tower in the 1086 sketch, but is simply labeled as East Tower in the one painted in 1159. Rowena Ravenclaw's tower was moved to the west side of the castle to one of the new towers." She turned to another map. "Here is another diagram. The original manor is now a full six-story structure, another wing and two towers having been added, and there is the Astronomy Tower. However, our tower is indicated as being abandoned, same as in this painting from 1560. In fact, I think the tower hasn't been used since sometime before 1159."

She turned the page again and indicated another drawing dated in 1489. "This was painted by Wulfred Olins, a famous artist from a wealthy wizard family, who sketched the castle in 1484. He subsequently hung himself twelve years after he finished this painting. Surprisingly, he left his entire estate to Daisy Dodderidge, including this painting. The original hung in the Leaky Cauldron until April 1947 when the painting mysteriously disappeared. It was considered to be the most detailed magical rendition of the castle ever made. The viewer could supposedly see inside the castle, through every window on every floor as if looking into a dollhouse. The copies of this painting, it's said, loses the original's detail and only shows the outside. However, there is our tower."

"And how can you be sure he had actually been in the tower room?" Severus asked, although he finally sounded intrigued.

"Here is a book on the history of Diagon Alley," Hermione said, pulling another book for her pile, opening it to a page she'd marked. "Wulfred Olins painted a portrait of Daisy Dodderidge. Look behind her at the window. Look familiar?"

Severus's eyebrows rose in surprise at the recognition of the window in the background of the painting, showing the view of the forest and mountains, beautifully offset by a dramatic sunrise backlighting the comely young witch.

"I think the spells were cast on the tower sometime after 1086 and that there was something about the tower, something that happened there that was the reason Ravenclaw Tower was moved to the west side of the castle."

"You are talking about a seventy-three year difference," he stated. "If that was the case, the Ravenclaw Tower would have been relocated anytime between 1086 and 1159."

"Precisely," Hermione said, beaming. "What if something horrible happened in the tower sometime shortly after 1086, something so terrible that Rowena Ravenclaw had Ravenclaw Tower relocated to the opposite side of the castle? The next painting, depicting the castle and grounds was painted in 1159, seventy-three years later. This artist did not label the tower as Raven's Roost, but simply called it East Tower instead. Its association with Ravenclaw is disavowed, or unknown, and it's apparently unused. I think something happened in the tower, something awful, something not mentioned in the history books."

Severus had scanned through the book of poems as she'd been speaking. "Interesting conjecture, Miss Granger. But that doesn't tell us how to break the curse does it?"

"But now we know when the Grey Lady lived and possibly when the spells were cast on the tower," she said beaming. "And I think she knew Rowena Ravenclaw, and she might know why Ravenclaw Tower was moved."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

Please indulge me. The history about the castle is not canon. Certain facts about the history of Hogwarts, Ravenclaw Tower and the Enchanted East Tower are of my imagination. According to canon, however, Daisy Dodderidge was the founder and first landlady of the Leaky Cauldron, and according to HP Lexicon she lived between 1467 -1555. She'd have been seventeen in 1484. Wulfred Olins is of my own creation, as is Beaumont Smethyk. Dorcus Wellbeloved, according to HP Lexicon, lived between 1812 1904 and was the founder of the Society for Distressed Witches. She would have been seventeen in 1829. Its my own assumption that seeing a poem dedicated to you every week for nineteen years would make someone nuts, especially if those poems came back again as a celebrated book, not once, but three times. Poor girl.

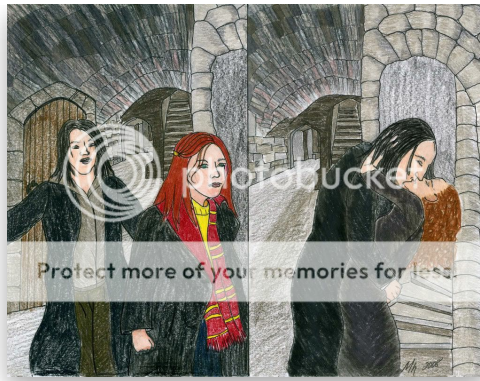
Besides these dates, yes, there is a certain date that is meant to catch your attention...

The Lovers Curse

Chapter 14 of 25

Severus confesses his love to Lily in the tower room, to his utter regret. In his confusion, Severus seeks out the Bloody Baron and learns his sad tale.

Twenty years later, Severus mistakenly confesses his love to Hermione in the tower room. Utterly confused, Hermione seeks out the Grey Lady and hears her romantic and tragic story.



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## The Lovers Curse

~Spring 1977~

Severus walked to the tower room retreat, seeking the serenity he usually felt while up there. The party had been exactly what Lily had said it would be, but she was completely wrong about the wizards who had shown up. Yes, there had been much talk about the Dark Lord and his philosophy, even about his designs to bring Wizardkind out from under suppression. But his goal was simply to get Wizardkind to come out of hiding. This kind of talk was common in Slytherin. Yes, there were wizards who seemed only interested in those of his house that believed in it, too, and they had pulled them aside to talk. He'd seen Rosier and Avery pulled aside several times, and there were wizards who had been interested in Severus as well. Quite a few of the men had been very interested in his Potions abilities and his skills with the Dark Arts. Severus had been introduced to several of the wizards by Malfoy or Lestrage. Truthfully, Severus had liked the group of influential and powerful wizards who'd shown up and couldn't help but listen to what they had to say.

Lily was standing in the room when he opened the door, and she turned to face him with her hands on his hips. "What do you want?" she asked accusingly.

"I just came up here to see the view to think," Severus replied.

"Oh, I bet you have," she snapped at him. "You came up here to see me, didn't you?"

"No, I had no idea where you were," he replied, hurt by her sharp tone. *You stopped coming up here in the mornings, not me. I'm usually here, every morning before dawn.* He didn't want to fight with her. "Look, you've trying to been avoid me since the last Hogsmeade weekend, and when we do talk, you're distant. Why?"

"You know why," she said angrily, crossing her arms.

"No, actually, I don't," he said, crossing his arms, looking at her and trying desperately to control his emotions.

"I hate it that you broke our date to go hang around with them," she said with a sweep of her hand toward the window.

He knew exactly whom she was referring to. "It was just a party," he said, for what had to be the hundredth time.

"Really? That's not what I heard. Janice Lansing said her brother was there," Lily stated.

Severus remembered him. *That tall bloke, stocky excellent at Transfiguration.*

"She told me what was going on, and she didn't like it. She said it was a recruitment party for You-Know-Who."

He wondered what else she had heard. "It was a group of powerful, influential wizards from some of the oldest wizarding families in the country and a chance to meet them." He stepped closer to her and she backed away. "Lily, when I graduate I want to pursue a master in Potions. I met a wizard, Mr. Kennington, who will introduce me to Master Ogden."

"I'm happy for you," she stated, turning for the door. "You'll be well connected, I'm sure."

"Lily, I love you. I want to work things out. I want to protect you," Severus confessed, trying to stop her from leaving.

Lily's eyes seemed to change, she simply gaped at him, and her expression reminded him of someone who'd just snapped out of the effects of a spell. She was momentarily speechless, her mouth dropped open, and her eyes became huge. He waited for her to respond, feeling a sense of dread deep in his gut. After several heartbeats, she looked as if the reality of what he'd said had finally hit her. "You what? You *love* me?" she said, her voice an octave higher than normal. "Did you just say that you *love* me?"

"Yes, I love you. I always have," he said. His chest suddenly felt very heavy as he watched as her lips formed a sneer.

"Yet you are joining these parties, associating with wizards that are rumored to be associated with You-Know-Who. And you hang around Mulciber, Avery and Rosier all the time!" she said, frustrated and angry. "You are fascinated with the Dark Arts, just like they are! Your so-called friends spout this pureblood nonsense all the time, call me and my friends Mudbloods and you just stand there! You don't correct them or stand up to them or anything! They hate me, Sev. Not just dislike me they *hate* me, and only because of who my parents are."

"I retaliate. I get even for you," he said, knowing she was right.

"Yet you hang around with them!" she said, her eyes flashing angrily. "You could *choose* other friends!"

His hand curled into a fist as it fell to his side. "They are friends. Just like you claim that Lupin is your friend. For all I know you are hanging out with Potter and Black now."

"And what if I am? At least they don't use the Dark Arts to hurt people," she said, standing her ground.

"Oh, no? They hurt or torment people just to amuse themselves. They hurt *me* all the time," Severus sneered. "And you know I'm not the only one they pick on! They're bullies!"

"They simply use hexes and jinxes. It's not the same," she replied defiantly.

"Isn't it?" he asked. He couldn't believe she was still defending them.

Lily looked at him in the eyes. "You're always fighting with them. Can't you just find a truce with Potter and Black?"

"No, Lily, I can't. If you recall, *they* always start it. Potter and Black have tormented me ever since that first day on the train and ~~o~~*any* given opportunity since. I hate it that you still want me to cower from them when Potter and Black are the ones that draw wands first. I am not a coward." Severus seethed, but managed to keep his voice even, even though he flexed and clenched his fingers. "And I don't like seeing you in a relationship with Lupin. He's dangerous, even if you refuse to see it. I hate seeing you associating with Potter, Black and Pettigrew. I know you have been. I saw you with them by the lake. Don't deny it."

"I'm not. Yes, I was talking to them down by the lake," she said, not bothering to deny it. "As you keep pointing out when I complain about Mulciber, Avery and Rosier Potter, Black, Lupin and Pettigrew are in my house. Occasionally, I have reason to talk to them. Merlin, you are impossible. If you insist on staying friends with Mulciber, Avery and Rosier, then we are through. I just can't be with someone who would choose friends that go out of their way to hurt me like they do."

"And what about Potter and Black, eh?" he asked angrily. "You tell me to drop my friends for you, yet you're associating *with them*!"

"I was *never* their friend! I don't associate with them except when I have to in class, simply because they were mean to you. I avoided them because I didn't like how they treated *you*. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I should have," she spat at him and turned. She pulled open the door and ran away crying.

*Bloody hell! The door allowed her to leave! She simply walked out and the door opened for her* Severus stood staring at the door in disbelief. The words above the door had changed. It now read: *Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit.* Severus stared at the words, its meaning embedded in his mind. *No!* He quickly ran down the stairs after Lily. But he'd delayed too long. She was nowhere in sight.

~Spring 1997~

As soon as Hermione opened the door and saw Severus at the window, she rushed over, throwing her arms around his neck. Since their last time up in the tower, Hermione had been back, several times, seeking the quiet of the room, but also hoping to see him again.

"You're back," he said, nearly accusingly.

"So are you," she replied, sliding her fingers through his hair.

"Why?" he asked as his lips brushed against hers. "You know the consequences."

Hermione closed her eyes and savored his kiss before answering him. "So do you. I wanted to come up here to think," she said, moving his hair aside so that she could trail kisses along his jaw line. His sharp intake of breath emboldened her. "I also wanted to see you."

"Really?" he asked as his arms encircled her waist. Hermione leaned back and began opening his buttons. "What are you doing?"

"Undressing you. For someone so brilliant, you are acting right thick," she replied as her fingers trailed down. She got as far as his waist and then started on his shirt buttons. "You have way too many buttons."

He cleared his throat, and she looked up, smiling as she realized he'd been watching her. "If you are through playing," he said when she tried to push him back.

"Not at all," she replied, fumbling with his belt.

He laughed softly and then grabbed her hands when she'd opened his trousers. "Anxious, are we?"

"Don't, let me," she implored, pulling her hands free of his grip. His trousers fell to the floor, and she finished the buttons on his shirt, sliding his clothes off his shoulders, baring his body to her gaze.

"My turn," he said with a feral grin. Hermione felt her bra strap give as he pulled her jumper over her head, dumping it on the floor next to his clothes. "So which shall it be then, the windowsill or should I simply shag you on the floor?" he asked, kicking his feet free of his boots.

"Are you tired of windowsill?" she asked, teasingly.

"No, tired of the floor," he replied as he pulled her to follow him to the window. Hermione pushed him down to sit and straddled his hips. She cupped his face, brushed his hair back and kissed him. His arms curled around her, pulling her tightly onto his lap as he kissed her back. She could feel his penis press at her, and she rubbed herself against him. "Stop that," he growled.

She laughed at him and wiggled in his lap again, stroking him with her jeans-clad crotch. "Stop what?"

He pushed her off his lap fumbling with the snaps of her jeans. "I like you in skirts, they're easier."

She smiled, her fingers making trails and swirls on his skin as he tugged her jeans and knickers down. "And I like you in anything," she replied, lifting up one foot, then the other to help him. She ignored his indication to straddle his hips again and slunk down to her knees, playfully swirling her fingers on his thighs, stroking his soft sac, feeling the two lumps inside.

His eyes closed as she stroked him, and she bent forward, kissing and sliding her tongue on the soft skin. His harsh intake of breath made her smile. She caressed, sucked and licked his sac, smiling as he squirmed under her ministrations. She trailed her tongue to his tip and covered his penis with her mouth, sliding her fingers down as she moved her head. His hand stroked her hair, not really applying pressure but sensually caressing her in rhythm to her movements.

After a short while, he gasped. "No, stop," he breathed sharply, lifting her off him. "You'll undo me, stop." She smiled as she followed his lead and straddled his hips. "I don't deserve you," he said as his mouth found hers.

"Why ever not?" she asked innocently.

He groaned before answering. "I'm too old you're too young... A thousand reasons."

"That's only two." His penis poked at her, begging for entrance. "No, you're not and I don't care." She rubbed herself against it, feeling it jerk with each stroke. "I want you in me," she whispered, straining to find the right angle to make him enter her.

"As you wish," he replied, cupping her hips tightly, adjusting her position, and entered her. She arched her back as he filled her. "Circe, you feel good," he moaned as she slid down on him.

"Yes," was all she could think to say in response. His soft laugh as she began to move on him made her smile in return. Soon she was gasping, grabbing onto him, trying to drive herself down on him with each of his upward thrusts. She felt her release coming, her vaginal muscles clamping down as she gripped her legs tight against his hips. He stood up, making them tumble onto the floor onto a huge mattress that he'd conjured for them. He repositioned himself and entered her again, and she arched her back as he filled her. Several minutes later, another wave rolled through her. She cried out his name, arched into him and pulled him down to her.

"Gods, you are tight," he growled as she gave into her release.

As her climax ebbed, his seemed to overtake him, his body plunging into her in hard thrusts with each of his grunts. "Hermione, my oh, Mother of Merlin Hermione!" he

groaned. He was sweaty, his hair falling forward, nearly concealing his face, and Hermione pushed it aside to watch him. "Circe, I think I'm falling in love with you," he said as his face distorted in orgasmic bliss. "I do... I love you. Merlin, I love you," he said, his body going limp as he collapsed on top of her.

Her eyes widened in shock and her mouth dropped open. "What did you say?" Hermione lay there unmoving, trying to grasp what she'd just heard. He pushed up, staring at her, and his dark eyes became hard. She knew she must look like some dunderhead, gobsmacked guppy, but the reality of his confession just kept repeating in her mind. It was as if everything had suddenly become clear to her, like the effect the Mind-Clarity Potion should have given her. She simply stared at him in utter disbelief.

Severus watched her face, his dark eyes actually getting darker. "Nothing," Severus dropped his head on her shoulder and groaned. "I shouldn't have... I apologize."

"You love me?" she asked, oblivious to his apology. Hermione had no idea what to say. Her mind reeled as his words echoed in her head. She didn't even know that he cared for her that way, let alone that he was beginning to love her. She thought it was the spells on the room that had made them become intimate. The best she'd dared hope for was that they were becoming close, lovers yes, but she didn't know that he'd developed any feelings for her. She had fallen for him, she was certain of it, but she'd been preparing herself for heartache when they found a way to break the spells and he wouldn't want to see her again. The idea that he could love her in return left her befuddled and nearly speechless. "Did you say you love me?"

He looked up at the door, got up quickly and grabbed his clothes. "I shouldn't have," he said angrily.

"Shouldn't have what exactly?" she asked, confused as he stood up and moved away from her. "Severus..."

"Done this! Any of this..." he snarled, heading for the open door. "It's completely wrong..."

"No, wait," she tried to say to his retreating bum, only to find herself staring at the door. Above the doorway, the words in the stone changed, and she rose, standing before the door. *Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit...* She knew Latin well enough to translate the individual words. *Love's enduring promise turned away, refused, begets an everlasting sorrow. What the...? No! It can't be...*

~ Spring 1977 ~

Severus had all the right books with all the right spells marked with small slips of parchment. He was sure of that. He stared at his sketch of the tower: the lower room, the stairs, the tower room and the secret entrance, all labeled and the spells identified as best as he could determine them to be. *There has to be something I'm missing. Allurement, Enticement, Seducement and Ensnarement Charms, but these charms cannot make someone love you. Not even potions can make someone love you. But things were going so well in the tower. How did the tower forsake me?*

He tried to remember the Bloody Baron's words. *The Baron warned me to stay away, warned me not to speak of my affections to Lily in the room. He said that sorrow was what I would get. I would do better unrequited and in sorrow which is what the words said over the door. But if my true love isn't Lily, if she isn't my true heart's intended who is? 'Your heart shall be broken and you shall waste away in mourning...' Okay, I've got to find the Baron.*

Finding a ghost when you wanted one wasn't as easy as it seemed. However, it was Peeves who told Severus he could find the Baron on the Astronomy Tower. "I need you to tell me what happened. I want to know why you put the spells on the tower and what happened in there," Severus said, coming to a halt in front of the ghost.

The Baron looked at him as if seeing into his very soul and then sighed. "I cursed the room because I thought to win the hand of my love, only she didn't love me as much as I loved her. That room will entrap you and hold your soul."

Severus tried to make his expression as desperate as he could. "Please, tell me what happened. I need to know."

The Baron hovered backward a moment, then sat down on one of the benches. Severus quickly sat down next to him and waited. "I was asked to go and bring back the daughter of a friend. The girl was a beautiful, intelligent young witch whom I'd known since I was young and loved dearly. She lived in the castle with her mother, but she had run away. The request was a favor, but I was honored to have been asked. It gave me an excuse, you see," the Baron began.

He told Severus about how he tracked down his one true love, the woman he wanted above all others. But when he'd found her, she refused him, refused to return with him, so he stunned and bound her, and brought her back to her mother. "Her mother was ill and dying. She was lying very still when I brought her daughter to her, but she was only sleeping, a deep sleep. Nevertheless, Helena thought her mother to be dead. She was distraught and ran. She ran to her tower room. I thought, this is my last chance, so I asked her again, thinking that the spells I'd cast on the tower room would work in my favor as they had so successfully aided me in my courtship of her. They didn't," the Baron said with regret.

"When I confessed to her that I loved her, she suddenly seemed to be released by the spells as if awoken from a dream. She refused me, refuted my offer of marriage, my pledge of love. My heart broke, but my pride, oh my pride..." He turned away from Severus, his eyes glistening as if he would shed tears. It was most disconcerting to see such remorse. "I killed her," he said as if speaking to the wind rather than Severus. When the ghost turned to look at him again, there were silver tracks down the opaque cheeks. "These chains I wear are my penance for killing her. How I hate these chains, but wear them I must for eternity."

"How did you die?" Severus asked, hoping he didn't sound too insensitive.

The Baron pulled up his sleeve. "I tried to slit my wrist, but I was too weak willed. The cuts were not deep enough. In the end, death came when I fell on my knees to hold Helena, my ladylove, one more time. I slipped on her blood, and my knife pierced my flesh." He opened his coat, and there was a wound, a deep gash just under his sternum. "The blade was true, even if I was not. I heard her scream, heard her curse me for dying with my arm around her. I opened my eyes and realized that our faces close enough to kiss, so I sat up to console her, not realizing I was pulling out of my corporeal body until it was too late. She ran away from me, and I followed her, but she will not speak to me, not once all these years. I've never been able to tell her that I am... She will not allow me to beg for her forgiveness. Not that I expect her to ever give it to me."

"But what about the spells on the tower? Did this happen in the tower?" Severus asked, but the Baron was floating away through the door.

~ Spring 1997 ~

Severus's last reaction bothered Hermione a great deal. *Did I do something wrong? No. It was good right up to... when he told me he loved me. But why did he get so angry? Was he disappointed in me for not telling him for behaving like a twit? I still can't believe that he just confessed that he loved me and then ran off... Why did he leave?* Hermione was sitting up in bed, flipping through the pages of a book she'd found misplaced in the Ancient Runes section of the library. The text was very old and written in the romantic courtly love style with loads of thees, thus, thous and therefores. Hermione had been reading a love poem when her mind drifted and she'd started thinking about Severus again. The poem was poorly written in both rhyme and prose, but it was a heartfelt poem to a woman of immense beauty, charm, intelligence and worth.

Hermione looked at the illustrated letter in the top left corner of the page and admired the intricate detail and scrollwork. *They just don't make books like this in the Muggle world anymore. Magic books are so much more beautiful.* Suddenly, Hermione noticed something in the detail of the drawing. She pulled out her wand and carefully magnified the illustration. The words, *Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit* appeared. *Love's enduring promise turned away, refused, thus begets an everlasting sorrow...*

Hermione flipped the pages to check what year the book was published. 1968! *Madam Pince used her spells to copy and preserve this book. It has to be* Hermione began reading the spells in the book, suddenly aware that many of the Dark Art Charms indicated in the book were actually the same spells in the books in Severus's office. Several pages later, the scrolls and vines in the margins and along the bottom of the page were once again twisted and convoluted. The poem this time was about

lamenting over a refuted love, an unrequited passion for a woman the author couldn't have... *The Grey Lady! Or maybe another man hurt by the spells of the tower room.*

\*

Luna came running up to Hermione before lunch. If you still want to speak to the Grey Lady, I know where she will be."

"Yes, Luna, I do," Hermione said enthusiastically.

"She's in the library now," Luna stated. "Be sure to address her formally. She's really quite proper."

Hermione thanked Luna, quickly grabbed a roll, an apple and cheese from the table and told Harry and Ron she was going to the library. The Grey Lady was sitting in a chair reading a book when Hermione entered. Hermione took a deep breath and approached the ghost. "Pardon me, is this seat taken? May I join you?"

"Certainly," the Grey Lady said as she looked up and indicated the empty chair with her hand. "Did you come here to see me?"

"Yes, I did," Hermione admitted. "I wondered if I could ask you about what happened in the tower. I don't mean to be offensive or intrusive, or anything, but you were lured up to the tower, too. Except you didn't fall under the spells. You're right, I have, and I'm trying desperately to break them. Please tell me what happened. Help me..."

"I don't think I can help you. I'm not sure if I tell you that it will help," the ghost replied sadly.

"Then may I ask you, when you were alive, was the tower room called Raven's Roost?" Hermione asked softly. "Did you know Rowena Ravenclaw?"

"Yes. I knew Rowena Ravenclaw she was my mother," the ghost said softly. "Helena. When I was alive, my name was Helena," she added after a long pause. "The room at the top of the tower was mine."

"So, you were a student, then?" Hermione asked.

"I lived in the castle as a little girl. I never felt that I lived up to my mother's expectations." The Grey Lady paused and closed the book. "When I had been a student, I knew that when I grew up I wanted to teach, like my mother. However, she didn't feel I would be a good teacher. She wanted more for me than that. But my mother did make me one concession. I was allowed to consider prospective suitors and to marry whom I wanted. You see, the Baron had asked for my hand, and my mother approved of the match. However, I didn't want to marry the Baron, so he put the spells there to trap me into marrying him; therefore, I didn't trust him."

"But in your time, you said that marriages were arranged," Hermione said, confused. "Why would he go through all that trouble to curse your room?"

"Baron Blenkinslop was an arrogant and wealthy landed Baron who was insistently persistent. Irritatingly so. Nevertheless, my mother greatly admired him and happily approved of him as a suitor. She *wanted* me to marry him," the pretty ghost explained. "You see, he was too enamored with me even obsessed. I spurned his advances. I told you this before. When I found out what he did, I refused to return to the room, moving back into the dormitories with the other girls."

"But that didn't stop him, did it?" Hermione asked, enthralled by Helena's tale.

"No," Helena replied. "But I missed my tower room and the view I loved so much. I wanted to remove the spells and couldn't. So, I took something of my mother's something I shouldn't have hoping I could use it to break the spells. When my mother was looking for who stole it I fled... This was ages ago. But then my mother became ill, fatally ill I was told, and she sent the Baron to find me so that she could see me one last time. At least that is what he told me. I never liked Baron Blenkinslop," she said, laying the book down on the table. "However, I thought it was another trick, much like the trickery he'd used to my favorite room, Raven's Roost, my tower room."

"The Baron had always had a violent temper, possessive nature, been jealous and very much into the Dark Arts. He bound me and dragged me back to the castle, but it was too late, or so I thought. I thought my mother dead when I was brought to her when I saw her lying there... I..." A thick opaque tear slid down her cheek, and she delicately wiped it away. "So, I fled up to my tower I didn't think as I ran. He followed me and cornered me. He confessed his love for me in that tower room, but I refused him, again, venomously, and he stabbed me. I died in that room..."

"The Baron you mean, the Bloody Baron killed you?" Hermione asked, saddened by the tale.

The Grey Lady lifted the side of her cloak, and there just above where her heart would have been was a gash, a hole in her chest. "When he saw what he'd done when I fell on the floor of my beloved room he was overcome with remorse. Stricken with grief, he took the weapon that he'd used to kill me and slit his wrists, and then stabbed himself. He fell next to me. I was appalled to have his lifeless body lying so, cradling mine, so I moved away from him. I cursed him, yelled at him, to no avail. He sat up out of his body, a ghost, and began to plead my forgiveness. That was when I realized I had become a ghost, too, a mere apparition of myself, so I fled. I left him there."

"But what happened?" Hermione asked, enthralled by the romantic and tragic story.

"My mother heard that I had returned, and even frail that she was, she came to find me... She found our bodies in my tower room. My mother brought our bodies down the stairs, but she tripped and fell. She used the last of her strength to conceal the door to the tower, hide half of the stairs that led up to my room from sight, and the archway that led to them. I tried to console her, but she had drained the last of her power into the tower and fell at my feet." She was crying now, silvery, opaque tears streaming down her pale cheeks. "I could do nothing but wail over her dead body. I could not hold her or comfort her in her last moments as she bled out. The Baron, he wanted to console me, but I turned and cursed him, yelled at him and blamed him for what happened. I've not spoken to him or any Slytherin since."

"Your blood, his blood and your mother's?" Hermione gasped, her hand covering her mouth. "The spells of the room are sealed in your blood the blood of all of you the last essence of the life blood of all three..."

"I suppose so," Helena said sadly, rising to leave. "That was and is considered Dark Arts I've never been into the Dark Arts."

"But the door to the tower, why was I able to find it if your mother concealed it?" Hermione asked, having more questions now that she knew the truth.

"The door appears to those who have found a way into my tower. Once you have been in the tower, the door will appear to you," the Grey Lady said, turning to go. "I don't know why. I cannot help you. Please, I... I'm sorry." She floated away, and Hermione watched her go, feeling sorry for the ghost.

\*

Hermione cornered Severus in the corridor outside his classroom. "I need to talk to you."

"Not now, Miss Granger, I've a class to teach," he refuted her, trying to sidestep her.

Hermione blocked his path again. "Please, sir, hear me out," she pleaded.

"No," he said, taking her by the arm and shifting her aside. "Now, go." His dark eyes almost looked haunted as if with deep sorrow.

"I know what happened," she said, opening the book in her hands to show him the page.

"As do I," he sneered. "Twenty points from Gryffindor for accosting me in the corridor and another twenty for making me late for my class." He started to walk away.

"Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit," she read aloud, not caring who would hear her. "Love's enduring promise turned away..."



Severus turned around, staring at her in shock. "What did you say?"

"It's a Blood-Bound Binding Curse." Hermione stepped closer to him and showed him the book. "This is a Binding Spell, a Dark Arts Curse I believe. It binds a spell to another spell and adds its effects to it, creating a double effect. The Grey Lady told me she'd bound her spells to those of the Bloody Baron's. I believe Rowena Ravenclaw did the same when she tried to seal the tower. I believe the spells were sealed in their blood. During your lecture on Blood Curses, if the caster adds their blood with the curse, it can last for life in this case the life of the castle."

"I know what Blood-Bound Curses are, Miss Granger. They are the darkest of the Dark Arts," he sneered. "It's why all books on the subject are kept in the Restricted Section!"

"But look at the illustration. See the vine? It's written in the vine. Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit: Love's enduring promise turned away, refused, begets an everlasting sorrow. I saw these words above the doorway. They appeared just after you left. I felt this sense of dread deep in my gut, like my heart was shredding, and these words appeared."

He stared at her, unmoving, his dark eyes locked on hers. He crossed his arms while holding the edges of his robes as if to protect himself from her. "Now is neither the time nor the place to discuss this. You will be in my office immediately after dinner. Bring that book." He turned to leave, then paused. "Forty points to Gryffindor for your diligence in your research, Miss Granger. Now I suggest you get to your down class before you lose those points for being late."

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

*In regards to the Grey Lady's story: I know that in DH the Grey Lady says that the Bloody Baron stabbed her in the forest in Albania. (Raincoast Publishing, p495.) I've just stretched the events some to fit my story plot, adding in that the Baron bound her and brought her to the castle, proffered his love to her in the tower room, where Helena refused him again, and he killed her there rather than in the forest. I hope you'll allow me this indulgence. In regards to the Grey Lady's admission that she never spoke to another Slytherin since she's not being truthful here. She isn't admitting to Hermione that she had spoken with the dashing, charming and charismatic Tom Riddle, is she? *hint hint* Or that her version, which she tells Harry Potter later in DH, isn't as detailed as when she spoke to Hermione, but a brief, more condensed version of how she died, since that's not what Harry was interested in. It's not that she lied, per say, it's just that Harry and Hermione get different details because their questions are different.*

I want to acknowledge and say thank you to my beta, Southern_Witch_69. I owe a great deal of gratitude to her for all her help and support. Thanks to her infinite patience with me, I actually have something readable for you.

Latin words I used were borrowed from <http://catholic.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl> and corrected by HannahSmith. Thank you, Hannah, for the help. I don't know Latin and do appreciate the help in getting it right.

Amor = love

Aeterna = eternal

Devotio = devotion; oath; sacrifice (to the gods). I like this word here because of the double meaning of devotion and promise.

Spreta = 'scorned'. This is the word that Vergil uses in his

Aeneis for his famous scorned woman, than whom hell knows no greater fury, as we all know; so it means exactly what you want here.

Reiectaque: -que just means 'and'; links a word to the previous one. 'reiecta' = rejected

Aeternum = eternal

Dolorem = accusative (= object) of 'dolor' (nominative = subject), 'grief'

Parit = from 'paro' = begets, brings forth, produces, creates

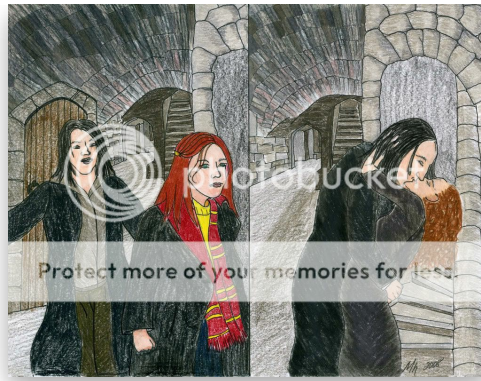
Swinging of the Pendulum

Chapter 15 of 25

Severus still pines over Lily and is tortured by seeing her with Potter. But she won't speak to him and insists that their relationship is over.

Twenty Years later, as the year winds down, Hermione makes more than one startling discovery.

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## Swinging of the Pendulum

~June 1, 1977~

Severus sat reading in the shade of a beech tree. He could see the lake from his position, but at the moment he didn't want to. Lily was walking along the shore with Potter, Black and Pettigrew. He knew that Lupin was in the hospital wing since it was the day after a full moon, which explained why the Gryffindor bullies were one short. Lily was laughing, smiling at Potter and Black. His gut clenched. After that last time in the tower, Lily wouldn't meet with him or speak to him. Worse, she was actually hanging out with Potter and Black now.

He glowered as he replayed the last conversation he'd had with her the following day, after he'd confessed his love to her in the tower room, watching as Potter had the audacity to brush a strand of her hair from her face...

★

Severus spied Lily as she was leaving the corridor that led to the kitchens. "Lily, wait," he called out. "Wait – damn it!"

"What?" she asked, turning around.

"What do you mean what? We need to talk," he said, coming to a halt in front of her.

Lily crossed her arms. "Talk about what?" she asked, the exasperation apparent in her tone again.

Her green eyes were hard but determined, and he knew that this wasn't going to be easy. "Lily, I love you. I always have," he pleaded, opting for the direct approach. "We've been friends for too long to just – you can't just not talk to me."

"Friends? You love me? You have a funny way of showing it," she said, looking at him incredulously before her expression turned to one that clearly showed her frustration. "All right, you want to talk – let's talk."

"Don't be like this," he asked, not sure what to say to get her to come around again. He hated the cold treatment and knew she'd been avoiding him as much as possible.

"Don't be like what? Mad? Upset? How am I supposed to act?" she asked, the hurt in her voice tainted with annoyance. "Every time I turn around I'm in the middle of a skirmish between you and my housemates or in a confrontation with yours. You hang around those thugs you call friends. We sneak around the castle having secret trysts because neither of us wants to be seen by the others in our houses. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of the fighting. I'm sick of being harassed by *your* friends. I'm sick of having to constantly worry about being hexed, or worse, from behind my back. I'm sick of trying to get *you* to understand that this wizard all the Slytherins seem to worship is evil."

"Lily love, I'm not trying to..."

"Stop calling me that," she said, turning her head and staring at the wall.

"You will always be Lily love to me. My Lily love," he said in his silky voice she'd always said she loved so much, reaching out to touch her arm.

"Stop that," she said, jerking away from his hand. "Look, Sev, I know we've been friends forever it seems. But we've grown apart. I should have known the day you were sorted into Slytherin... Slytherins and Gryffindors don't mix. We're like myrrh and water, and unless there is something else in the cauldron, we just don't blend."

"We were doing just fine a while ago. What happened?" he asked, confused.

"I dunno. It's like a light went on, and I could really see things for what they were. I could see what our relationship was and knew without a doubt it couldn't continue. We are too different," she explained. "Sev, I still care about you, but I'm Muggle-born. I can't change that. So unless you decide to accept that you are half-Muggle, too, and choose to stand up against those who'd hunt us down and kill us, we don't stand a chance. You have to choose. It's You-Know-Who and his knights, these Death Eaters – or us, witches and wizards like us. It's simple."

"I know I'm half-Muggle!" he said, a bit angry that she'd brought that up. "What's that got anything to do with it?"

"You tell me, Half-Blood Prince," she snapped at him. "I bet your friends don't even know your dad's a Muggle? I bet they are ignorant that you grew up on Spinner's End, too. Eh? I'm also willing to bet that you've not told them we were a couple." Severus opened his mouth to retort, but she cut him off. "Your mate Avery called me your fling. Told me I should just shag you and get it over with because you have better things to do than sully yourself with the likes of me. And it's not the first time I've had to endure their taunting."

"I don't kiss and tell, Lily," he said, hurt. "I respect you too much to besmirch your reputation by telling them anything. It's not their business anyway. It's ours – you and me."

"But they don't know I was your girlfriend, do they?" she snapped at him.

"Yes, Lily, they did know that you were my girl," he said emphatically.

"Oh, really?" she asked, her eyes narrowing. "Then why all the sneaking around? Why all the unused corridors and abandoned towers? Why have we never gone to a Quidditch match together or Madam Puddifoot's?" she asked challengingly.

"You hate Madam Puddifoot's – you said so," he answered defensively.

"That's not the point! You're ashamed to be seen with me because of your friends and my housemates. You never stand up for me! I stand up for you all the time – but you won't stand up for me!" she stated angrily.

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you! I just don't want to run into Potter and Black! And I always stand up for you, or get even for you – all the time!" he stated. "Besides, sometimes it's easier to just get even with my mates than to cause a confrontation. But I get my point across..."

"No, you do not! It's not the same," she snapped. "Oh, this is pointless. Deanne was right! This won't work. I've tried and tried and I just can't anymore. Please, just leave me alone," she said, turning to go.

"I can't give you up!" Severus said, following after her.

"You have to," she said over her shoulder, not bothering to stop. "I'm not an object you can possess. I'm a person. And I just can't do this anymore. Please, let it go. Get over me." She started to run, and Severus let her go, watching her run up the stairs.

~Jun 1, 1997~

Hermione ran into Severus in the corridor on her way to his office. She was a bit late, having recalled a book she'd read once in her second year when researching the castle for the location of the Chamber of Secrets, thinking she might need it to support her hypotheses.

Severus stopped and stared at her, scowling as she approached him. Just seeing him this close again made her heart race and the feelings of nervous anticipation swell in her gut. "I thought I made it quite clear – immediately after dinner. My time is valuable, Miss Granger, and therefore, I do not appreciate dalliances."

Hermione's heart seemed to fall, landing in the vicinity of her stomach. "I didn't dally, sir, I went to retrieve a book," she stated, hurrying over to stand next to him. He was watching her, and Hermione fought the urge to plead with him to hold her, tell her things could go back to the way it had been. *He'd confessed he loved me after all, and if he'd meant it, that doesn't just vanish, can it? People don't just fall out of love that quickly, do they?*

"You left the Great Hall over half an hour ago," he stated.

Hermione mentally cringed from his harsh tone. *Maybe Severus could.* "Heather Croombrite had a book I wanted to show you, and I had to find her to borrow it," she said, pulling a few books from her bag. She opened up the book on Blood-Bound Curses.

"I'm not interested in the book; I'm interested in your declaration in the corridor," he said smoothly. He grasped her arm and pulled her with him into a deep alcove. He taped his wand at the wall, and a doorway appeared. "Inside."

Hermione entered the dark space. When the wall sconces lit, she realized it was a small classroom of sorts. Hermione felt her cheeks grow hot and ducked her head to avoid his stare. "I'm sorry about that. I know you wanted to keep all this private. I shouldn't have blurted it out like that. I was just so stunned when I saw that the words above the door had changed."

"Tell me again what they were?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"The words above the doorway read: *Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Pari*," she said, looking up at him and nearly felt her pulse skip. "It means: Love's enduring promise turned away, refused, begets an everlasting sorrow. I looked it up."

"I know what it means," he said, leaning back against the wall. "You said that the new words appeared as soon as I'd left?"

"Yes," she admitted. "It was like I could feel them; the meaning of the words seemed to sear me as I watched the door close behind you."

He looked shocked, momentarily, then became thoughtful as if remembering something.

"What?" she asked, worried.

"I think you should know that you've been released from the spells of the tower," he said firmly, his expression showing hints of regret.

"Released, but how?" she asked, aghast. "If I'm released, then why do I still crave the tower, still feel the urges I have?"

His eyes narrowed. "Urges? You still feel the pull of the tower?"

"Yes, like if I could just be there with you one more time, I could make this – all of this – all right again," she said, not caring how pathetic she sounded.

"But I saw it in your eyes," he said, an edge of hurt in his voice.

"You saw what? That I was shocked by your confession! I had no idea you *felt* anything for me, let alone anything like I feel for you," she confessed, hurt by his aloofness. "All I knew was that our actions were caused by the spells of the tower, but I didn't know how much. You even said we were only intimate because of the spells on the door. But the longer this has been going on, the more time I spend with you... I knew, or thought that I knew, that this was all it was for you – an inconvenient entrapment with a student. I thought that in the end – when this was over... What I expected was that once we solved the spells on the tower, you'd end things, you'd be free, and I'd simply have to get over you!"

Severus transfigured two desks into slightly more comfortable chairs. "Sit," he demanded.

Hermione set the books down but remained standing. "I think you know a lot more of what is going on than you're telling me, aren't you?" she asked, rounding on him. "I have tried piecing this together, tried solving this like a puzzle, and yet, you don't offer me anything. I've told you everything I know and everything the Grey Lady told me. I showed you all my research, and yet you don't offer any of your own input, except to show me books you've read, drawings you've made, and a list that matches mine."

"Are you through?" he snapped. "Please sit."

"No! Not until you start telling me the truth," she said angrily, sounding like a child. "I want to know what you know."

"All right. Fine! I have been under the influence of that tower since my sixth year," he snapped, jerking his hand up in the air to indicate the tower. "I found the tower when I was seventeen, just like you are now. I saw those words, too, and realized what they meant. I spoke to the Bloody Baron to try to reason out the spells on the tower and the stairs, and I came to the same conclusions you have. I admit that you have reasoned out a few things I hadn't considered, but as you can see, the end results were the same. The spells broke – I saw it in your eyes."

"What did the Baron tell you?" she asked, stunned by his confession. "Please, I need to know."

"Not much more than what the Grey Lady told you, or that you've been able to deduce yourself," he said. "He told me what spells were used and which books to look into. I learned that he'd placed the spells on the tower because of his love for a girl. He'd only identified her to me once. He called her Helena, I think. She wasn't important to me, since it was him – the Baron – who'd cast the spells. But what I do know, her mother was a professor here. I'd assumed she taught around or after the founders' time judging by the Baron's attire. I had assumed that the incident in which he'd created the spells on the tower happened later than the dates you uncovered, but when hadn't matter to me, just that he had. I had simply wanted to understand how they worked, and what they were, not why."

"And you didn't think to show me what you knew?" she asked, perturbed. "You simply allowed me to do all that reading and research for nothing?"

"Nothing?" he sneered. "With you and me, knowledge is never for nothing. You crave it as much as I do. You are so like me it's frightening. Only you've led a more sheltered life, made different choices... Look, I thought that since you wanted to get to know me – I'd let you. Solving the spells on the tower gave me an excuse to have you in my office. You're my student for an augury's wail! But I knew, with each time you came up to the tower, what was happening, and it couldn't be stopped unless *you* set your mind to stop it. Unless you used your will power, which by the way, you didn't do. I still don't know why, but because you didn't, yes, we became intimate."

"I fell in love with you!" she nearly shouted, "and you tore my heart apart as if you didn't even care!"

He stiffened at her remark, his expression becoming hard. Hermione stood frozen for a few seconds, her heartbeat pounding in her ears, before felt that same sense of dread, that huge lump in her gut. She turned to leave, but Severus grasped her arm.

"You're a fool to want me," he said, making her turn around, but Hermione refused to look him in the eye, lest he see her tears forming.

He'd closed the gap between them, pulling her into his arms, and she clung to him, grateful that he still seemed to care. "I'm a fool to let this continue," he said as he grasped her head gently, his fingers sliding into her hair. "But I love you."

She looked up, stunned, just as his lips landed on hers. There was a hunger in his kiss that he hadn't had before. He ravished her mouth with a fierce desire that made all coherent thought drain from her mind. She clung to him, trying to reciprocate. Her body seemed to melt and her knees gave way, but his arms held her tightly, supporting her weight effortlessly.

He broke the kiss and rested his forehead on hers. "You love a dead man, Hermione."

Her eyes flew open. "What? What are you talking about?" she asked, pushing away so she could look at his face.

He looked tired and overburdened, and there was a deep sense of grief that filled his eyes. He pulled her to him in a crushing embrace, burying his face in her hair. "We don't have much time."

"We have forever." She could feel the weight he was carrying as he clung to her and she cradled him in her arms as best as she could, trying to soothe and reassure him. "When this is all over – when we win – we'll have the rest of our lives."

He pushed away. "Not with me you don't. I have to go," he said, turning and leaving the room quickly, leaving Hermione alone, staring after him, gobsmacked.

~June 2, 1977~

So, Lily has chosen to sit in the back of the room with that dunderhead Phyllis Figergrey and Sirius Black instead of our usual worktable. Severus thought, angrily, as he walked across the Potions classroom to take his seat. Larry Proudrew walked up to him, obviously delighted, and Severus glowered at him for having the audacity to take the seat Lily would have occupied. "So, you and I, we're partners today?" he'd asked enthusiastically.

"No," Severus sneered coldly as he stared at Lily, who was talking earnestly with Figergrey. *She's supposed to be my partner! My Lily.*

He got up and went to the cupboard to retrieve his ingredients, stopping to tie his trainers so that he'd arrive at the cupboard the same time Lily did. "You'd prefer working with Figergrey instead of me?" he asked her in an angry hiss.

"Yes," she replied in an angry hiss of her own.

Severus passed her the Lithfold skin strips, and she took it, looking at him briefly from the corner of her eyes. "Lily, I'm sorry," he said as he counted his Ramora eggs. She avoided his eyes as he tried to hand her the jar. Lily ignored the offer and picked up another canister off the shelf. Severus set the jar down next to her.

"Severus, I just can't anymore. Please accept it." She selected a piece of Gillyweed and then set the jar back on the shelf. "Where's the jar of spiny scales from a horn toad?" she mumbled as she searched through the jars.

"I said I was sorry," Severus said, handing her the canister. "Here, I've got my twelve."

"Thank you," she said automatically.

"You're welcome. Lily," he said, hoping to draw her into conversation, "I just think we could work this out..."

"No, Sev, we can't." She counted out her quills, then set the jar back. She was clearly trying very hard to ignore him.

Finally, Lily started to tuck everything in her arms and pockets, and Severus tried to assist her. "No, Sev, leave me alone," she said as she got up and left.

At the end of class, Severus dumped his things haphazardly in his bag and hurried from the classroom to catch up to Lily. He barely managed reach her before she got to the stairs. "Lily, wait," he called out, trying to pull her aside in the corridor.

"Sev, please, it's over. Let it go," she said, pulling her arm free of his grasp.

"No, talk to me," he pleaded.

She turned to go. "No, I don't want to," she said, her expression hard.

Severus grasped her arm again and stepped in front of her. "Lily, please wait a minute," he said.

"No, I've got to get to Transfiguration," she said, trying to sidestep him.

"Lily, please," he pleaded, successfully blocking her again. "Please, give me another chance."

She turned and looked at him, her green eyes guarded. "You have chosen your friends, and I have chosen mine. You chose them over me. What is there to say?"

"What if I choose you?" he asked, imploringly, but his frustration made his tone harsh.

"Sev, it won't work. I am what I am, and it won't change. Your friends, given the chance, any chance, would really hurt me – maybe even kill me," she said firmly. "Black is right. They're just waiting to side with You-Know-Who and might have already. They already talk like him and act like him, and if you're still friends with them, you will be pulled in, too." She pushed past him. "Now leave me alone."

~Jun 2, 1997~

Hermione's idea of trying to find the elusive Half-Blood Prince by looking for individuals who excelled in Potions proved to be quite fruitful. However, there wasn't a Prince mentioned in the potion journals for nearly a hundred years. Hermione read the article written by Edgar T. Prince, and although the yellowed article was slightly faded, he was apparently explaining the benefits of combining dragon blood with Ramora fins and silver Pearlfish scales. *Not that that was much help*, she thought, putting the journal

aside. *He's much too old to have owned Harry's book* Still it gave her a name. After checking through many more journals, and a few more *Daily Prophets*, Hermione found a marriage announcement in the *Daily Prophet* dating back one hundred and twenty-seven years:

### *Isabold and Justin Prince and Annemarie and Clefold Jenkins are proud to announce the marriage of*

Edgar Theodore Prince renowned Potions Brewer to Jezibelle Jenkins in Canterbury last Saturday...

Edgar Prince, Master of Potions at St. Mungo's for the last twenty-five years...

Still, it was a start and could possibly prove that the Half-Blood Prince was in fact a descendant of the Prince family line. *Now all I have to do is try to find any mention of a Prince attending Hogwarts, since...* She calculated it in her head. *1870. Harry's book was printed about 1946, and I've already checked the registries from 1945 to present. So if the Half-Blood Prince did have a Muggle father, it would be his or her mother who was a Prince, which limits my search down to sometime after 1881...* So back to the school attendance records.

Hermione was engrossed in the 1920 school registry when she felt a hand slide around her waist and a body press into her back. She set the registry down to turn around, but her silent assailant pressed her into the bookshelves. "Tell me who you are, or I will hex you," she said, hoping that her tone was threatening enough to cover the nervous anticipation Severus was causing as his hands roamed her body.

"I should think, witch, that would be obvious," he said silkily in her ear. "What are you doing way back here?" he asked, his one hand sliding down her stomach to press her against his groin as the other raised her skirt. "This is not the section I granted you permission to be in."

"I was looking for someone – something," she said with a deep, throaty sigh. "Let me turn around."

"No," he said, his hands now sliding on skin, one under her skirt, the other under her blouse. "What if I was to simply make love to you right here? Could you be quiet?" he asked softly.

She could feel soft wool of his trousers on her bum, and she pressed into him, making him chuckle softly. "Someone will come," she said, teasing him by rubbing against the bulge in his trousers and sliding her hands on his thighs.

"But you want me to, don't you?" he asked as his trousers opened and he freed himself.

Hermione groaned as she felt the silky-soft skin against her own. "Yes, but we'll be seen."

He pushed her legs wider with his foot as he ripped off her knickers with a wandless spell. "I'm not that foolish," he replied, and she could practically hear his smirk. Hermione gasped as he prodded her, easing into her slowly. "I haven't spent the last seventeen years as a spy and not learned how to cast Concealment Charms."

Hermione arched her back as his penis moved in and out of her, his hand firmly pressed at her groin teasing her clitoris, the other braced upon the shelf above her head. "That's it, you like this, don't you?" he asked smoothly.

"Oh, my gods, yes," she purred, still trying to touch him and roll her hips with his thrusts. The knowledge they could be seen, that someone could walk up upon them, heightened her arousal, regardless of his assurances to the contrary, and she began to shudder. He moved faster, harder, pressing her into the books. Her knees nearly gave as she surrendered into the sensations in her body, and she slid a hand down to place it over his. She felt him stiffen slightly, knowing he would climax any moment, and it excited her even more.

"I love you," he said softly in her ear. "Circe, Hermione, come with me."

Her climax hit her hard, making her buck against him, gasping for breath, and she clenched her jaws to keep quiet, nearly biting her tongue. His feral growl in her ear was her complete undoing. She felt her body yield into the euphoric bliss as he slammed her into the books as he came. He held her protectively in his arms, until his breathing slowed to normal.

She turned around and embraced him. He simply held her, and she could feel his warm breath in her hair.

"I should leave you to your studies," he said, finally, kissing her gently. "Thank you."

"Thank you," she replied. "I wish you didn't have to go."

He smiled as he stepped back from her, straightening his robes. "If this has anything more to do with the tower, bring me your findings tomorrow," he said with a smirk.

"It doesn't," she replied, and he raised his eyebrow, questioningly. "It's personal. But I'd like to come see you later tonight?"

"However, I cannot tonight," he said sadly. His dark eyes stared at her face as if he was memorizing it. "Be good," he said before sweeping away from her quickly.

~June 3, 1977~

Severus, Avery, Rosier and Mulciber were gathered in the shade of the trees, watching the Gryffindors down by the lake. Lily was skipping rocks on the lake surface with Potter and Lupin while Black chased her friend, Leanne.

Black caught Leanne in his arms and then tried to throw her in the water. She kicked and squealed until he set her down on the shore. As usual, Pettigrew was clapping and laughing at Black's antics, but Severus was really only paying attention to Lily and Potter.

Severus felt a hint of satisfaction that Potter could only make the rocks skip once – twice at best, while Lily's always skipped twice. He watched as Lupin managed to make his rock skip three times, and Lily turned to pat him on the arm. *Just like she used to do when I was skipping rocks with her* Severus remembered how frustrated she'd get with him because he could make his rocks skip three times and how she'd touch his arm, begging him to show her how. *Just like she is doing with Lupin now.*

"Look at them, the whole bloody lot, thinking that they are all that," Rosier sneered.

"Heard that those girls were up at the Transfiguration classroom with the Headmaster for two hours yesterday," Mulciber stated. "Did your Muggle-born girlfriend get a detention, Severus?"

Severus just shook his head, scowling. "No, Lily didn't have a detention. She doesn't do stuff to get in to trouble."

"With Summer coming, Dumbledore's going to go all out, fighting against the Dark Lord. From what I've heard, he's really putting up a weak effort so far," Avery said, sneering. "My dad told me that there will be loads more raids on Mudbloods this summer. What with all of them going home, it'll be easy pickings."

"What?" Severus asked, then quickly schooled his expression into one of curiosity.

Rosier didn't catch the look of shock in his eyes. "Yes, the Dark Lord's followers are growing in numbers, and even the Ministry can't stop him. You watch, this summer there will be loads of Mudbloods that get it."

The announcement made Severus feel sick. In his gut he actually felt sorry for those with a Muggle parent. His own thoughts drowned out his friends as they extolled the Dark Lord's powers. *Lily? Is that why Dumbledore was pulling all the Muggle-borns aside? To warn them and tell them the same thing? I know that Lily and her friends Deborah and Leanne were summoned to Dumbledore's office. Could Lily be in danger? Would they really try and kill her family?* For the first time, Severus was really worried about the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters' attitudes towards Muggle-borns. *Lily won't let me near her! I can't protect her unless... I could add to the wards on her house. There are books in the library... but I'll have to modify them so they can't be identified. Can I do it though? Will she let me?*

"Severus, mate, are you with us?" Avery asked, drawing Severus' attention.

"What?" he asked, then quickly recovered. "Yeah."

"Cool," Mulciber said, grinning wickedly. "Right after we get off the train then, we'll all go. I can hardly wait."

Severus suddenly felt apprehensive. *What?* "Go where?"

"He'll be at the Lestranges' home," Mulciber stated, apparently not having heard Severus' question. "At least for a while."

*Shite, the meeting! Avery is supposed to meet him.* Severus groaned inwardly. He'd have to set the wards on her house after this meeting. *One way or another, Lily, I'm going to make sure you are all right. Even if you're upset with me now – I'm still going to protect you.* A solid feeling of sickness filled his gut, and he fought back the surge of emotions of regret and loss. *One way or another, I'll win you back...*

~Jun 3, 1997~

Hermione finally found an Eileen Prince in the school registry. It was much easier then to track the Prince family backwards to Edgar Theodore Prince. She had also found an article on Eileen Prince, and it had gotten her thinking. The Prince family had been a prominent and well-respected wizarding family for generations. Unfortunately, except for Eileen Prince, there hadn't been a member of the Prince family attending Hogwarts for sixty years.

Furthermore, Eileen Prince had never won a Potions award, so her being the owner of the Potions book seemed unlikely. Especially since the annotations in the book showed that the original owner had a remarkable talent for Potions and an affinity for the Dark Arts. What Hermione had found out was that Eileen had been Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstone team in 1938 and 1939, her fifth and sixth years at Hogwarts, and the Regional Gobstone Champion in 1941 and again in 1944. So it was apparent she hadn't been on the Gobstones team her N.E.W.T. year, although she'd still played Gobstones after graduating Hogwarts. There was no indication that the sullen-faced girl was ever into Dark Arts or Potions. That confirmed that either a son or a daughter of Eileen Prince was the most likely candidate for the Half-Blood Prince.

Hermione scanned every page of the old *Prophets*, looking for any mention of Eileen Prince in any issue dated after the article about her winning the Gobstone Championship in 1941. She had found a spell that made a single word glow, which made scanning for Eileen's name easier. She read the names in the birth announcements carefully, but the *Daily Prophet* wasn't consistent on where they put the announcements. Depending on how prominent, famous or well connected the parents were often depended on which page the announcement was placed. Hermione knew that Eileen Prince was a pureblood, but that she'd obviously married a Muggle or Muggle-born since the owner of the book deemed him or herself a half-blood. Apparently, there were years where any marriage involving a Muggle was tucked away in the gaps between articles or on the bottom corners of a page.

Then she found it.

A tiny article in the corner of the Prophet mentioned the marriage of Eileen Prince to a Tobias Snape in 1958, and Hermione inhaled in surprise. She kept searching, finally finding what she was looking for, a brief mentioning for the birth of a baby boy, born in January, 1960.

### *Severus Tobias Snape, son of Eileen Prince Snape*

Born the ninth of January,

7 pounds, 14 ounces and 19 1/2 inches

I finally found the connection of the Half-Blood Prince, and it turns out to be Severus Snape! she gasped, amazed. It's Severus?

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

In regards to the final days, the countdown to Dumbledore's death, I have used these dates simply as a reference and don't know if they are accurate coinciding to the dates JK was using when she wrote HBP. Therefore if there are inconsistencies with the dates I have chosen in relation with canon, I apologize.

In regards to Severus' birth announcement, I was told that in the UK pounds, ounces and inches are occasionally used, and since this is what I'm familiar with I chose to use them here.

Thank you, Southern_Witch_69, for sticking with me and betaing this story, helping me to catch all my errors. You have been so terrific and I really enjoy not only having you as my beta but as my friend.

Walls Come Crashing Down

Chapter 16 of 25

Death Eaters enter the school, and Severus' role has now dramatically changed. What does one do when the walls come crashing down?

Lily is now hanging out with Potter, Black, and Lupin, and Severus is determined to find a way to win her back.



Walls Come Crashing Down

~June 4, 1997~

Filius burst into his office in a near state of panic. "Death... Death... in the school," he kept stammering, trying to say something, although he was breathless.

"Spit it out, I haven't all day..." Severus started to say, then froze, the full force of what Filius was trying to say finally hitting him. *Draco did he succeed! Did that insipid boy actually kill Dumbledore?*

"Eaters Death Eaters in the castle," Filius finally managed to get out.

Severus' mind whirled. *Bloody hell!* No! "Stay here, I'll..."

"Don't be daft, Severus! We have to fight! We have to save the children!"

Fight you? And have an all out war on our hands! I don't think so. Severus whirled around in disbelief. The wizened old wizard was still breathing hard, gasping for breath after running down here to alert him of the attack. *And he is going to go fight? He'll be killed for sure.* Severus cared too much for Filius to lose him today. *'Stupefy, Frigidulusileo Totalus,'* he said, saying the first spell much louder than the second. Filius fell to the floor as if he had fainted. "This is not for you to deal with. I'll handle this. Dumbledore and I expected something like this to happen. Stay here," he said and turned, running for the door.

As his luck would have it, he was stalled in the corridor by none other than Hermione and Miss Lovegood. "Professor, there are Death Eaters in the castle!" Hermione practically shouted.

"I'm aware of that, Hermione," he snapped. *Oh, no. You're staying here.* "See to Professor Flitwick; he has collapsed. I'll see to the invasion." He was pleased that she nodded and quickly entered his office. He took the time to ward his office to keep her inside. *I'm not going to risk you running off to fight either. I finally have someone who truly loves me someone I can love and I'm not going to lose you, too.*

Severus ran through the castle, racing toward the sounds of shouting, screams and explosions. *Merlin's balls! A full invasion? If things go bad... Is Dumbledore back yet?* He remembered Dumbledore's plea should Death Eaters invade the school, *'...as little bloodshed as possible, Severus. I need you to protect the students at all costs, but do not blow your cover. This is important... I need you to stay in Tom's good graces...'* *Damn, could this be the final attack? Potter isn't ready! No, it can't be I'd have been instructed...*

He dodged a jet of yellow light that shattered the frame of a picture behind him and kept running. *Bloody hell!* "Watch it!" he snarled. Bill and Nymphadora were fending off Selwynn and Krauter as he passed. Severus fired off a Stunner as he ran, careful to make his spell only graze Nymphadora's robes, bounce on the floor, and ricochet up at the Death Eater behind her. He turned the corner, nearly getting caught up with the fight between Gibbon and Lupin. "Draco Malfoy, where is he?" he growled, not seeing the blond-haired boy anywhere.

"The tower, Snape where else?" Gibbon shouted as Severus rushed past. "Oi, where..."

*

Hermione and Luna followed Professor Flitwick, running to help their friends and ran into Ginny in the corridor. "Where have you been?" Ginny asked as she ducked a jet of pale blue light. Hermione, Luna, and Professor Flitwick stopped short, wands drawn. Professor Flitwick's and Ginny's spells hit the Death Eater at the same time, making him fly back against the wall and crumble to the floor in a heap.

"Snape tried to lock us up in his office," Hermione said angrily.

"Here, drink this," Ginny suggested, thrusting a tiny bottle into Hermione's hand. "It's Felix Felicis. There is enough for each of you to have a large drop."

"Brilliant, Miss Weasley," Professor Flitwick exclaimed, beaming. "Fifty points to Gryffindor!"

Hermione swallowed a drop of the potion and then handed the phial to Luna. "Rather a moot point right now, isn't it, Professor?" she pointed out to him, although she was smiling, knowing that the Felicis would definitely sway things in their favor. "We're at war!"

"Good point, Miss Granger," he said, taking the bottle next, "but this will definitely turn the battle to our favor, won't it?"

*

McGonagall and one of the Weasley twins were fending off Travers and Lujan on the stairs, and Severus acted as if he were fighting his way through, although he deftly cast a Slicing Hex at Lujan immediately after a Shield Charm to protect Minerva. *Hopefully he didn't catch that.*

He sensed the Shield Ward at the base of the Astronomy tower, easily recognized by the tingle in his left arm. Severus held up his arm as he pushed through the ward and hurried up the tower stairs. The sight before him as he burst onto the top of the tower nearly made him sick. Dumbledore was barely able to stand, and two brooms lay on the stone floor, although the owner of the second broom was nowhere to be seen. He quickly searched for a slightly shimmering translucent form, which should've been pressed up against one of the merlons of the parapet. However, he didn't see any sign of someone hidden by a Disillusionment Charm. *It must be Potter under his bloody cloak, then.* Draco Malfoy was holding his wand out, pointed at Dumbledore's knees and gripping Dumbledore's wand in his other hand while four other Death Eaters stood guard. That idiot werewolf, Greyback was there as well, and he'd even had the audacity to be wearing Death Eater robes as if he was one of them. *Insolent beast.* Severus

refocused his attention back on Dumbledore, aware that something was terribly wrong.

Severus watched the scene with absolute clarity and felt a sense of loathing rise up in him. It was time, just as Dumbledore had predicted, and he knew what was expected of him. That didn't stop him from hating the fact he had to be the one to do it.

'It has to be you, Severus. Please,' the soft voice echoed in his mind.

As if it's necessary to remind me! Damn you, Dumbledore!

"Severus," he heard Dumbledore plead with him. Dumbledore slid farther down the wall, his face sweaty, and his eyes, which had lost their twinkle, were beginning to become unfocused. The ragged breathing and the grotesquely pallid look of Dumbledore's face told him that the Headmaster had consumed a poison, and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

As the seconds ticked by, each feeling like minutes, Severus watched, taking it all in, yet finding no other solution *It won't take long now, he's completely at their mercy, too weak to fight or even to hold onto his wand. Shite, his death is imminent... I can't do anything else.* All the scenarios he'd tried working out, all the alternates to Dumbledore's plan he'd considered hadn't accounted for this particular event. His eyes scanned the crenellation of the battlement for a second time, noting nothing else amiss.

"Severus... Please..."

Shite, if you'd taken me instead of Potter you'd I'd have been able to care for you save you He didn't have time to think of anything, and there was no way out of this *I'll do this for you old man rot for it. "Avada Kedavra,"* he said, ending the life of this century's most renowned wizard, his mentor and friend. Severus was revolted by his action, but knew he had no other choice. "We have to get out of here, quickly," he said to Draco. Without so much as a glance at the others, he grabbed Draco by the scruff and hauled him away.

*

Hermione dodged to the left just as a jet of sickly green light whizzed by her head. If it hadn't been for the Felix Felicis, she'd probably be dead, but the luck from the potion was literally guiding her, not only telling her which spells to cast, but directing her body movements as well. All she had to do was trust Felix and react to the suggestions as if they were her own thoughts and ideas.

Neville was fending off a Death Eater in the corridor behind her, trying not only to subdue the wizard but also protect Luna and Fred *Or it could be George,* she supposed, but she was too engrossed in her own fight to be sure. Fred, or George, took off running as screams could be heard from some students, who had been cornered due to the fighting. Hermione smiled as Neville, who didn't hesitate to follow, fired spells blindly over his shoulder with amazing accuracy as he ran to help.

Hermione saw Severus dragging a stumbling Draco past her from the corner of her eye as she fought against a swarthy Death Eater, ducking his curses. A jet of red light shot from Severus' wand, nearly missing Luna, but hitting the Death Eater she'd been fighting in the foot, turning it into set of crab-like pinchers.

Severus looked Hermione's way and added a slyly cast Impediment Jinx, just as she fired off a Binding Hex. The Death Eater fell down, never once realizing that Severus had assisted her. She turned to thank him, but Severus was gone. Seconds later, Harry came running past, apparently chasing after Severus. A jet of blue light barely missed her shoulder and rebounded off a strip of lead on the stained-glass window behind her, hitting the Death Eater who'd cast the spell in the chest. He fell backward as Hermione pressed forward, stunning the man.

~June 4, 1977~

For the first time in ages, Potter and Black walked by Severus and didn't even bother to hex, jinx or curse him. Pettigrew, of course, saw him and crinkled his nose at Severus in disgust, but no one raised a wand. Naturally, Lily, Deborah, and Leanne were with them. Severus waited a few seconds, allowing a group of Hufflepuffs to pass between them before changing directions and following Lily, Potter, Black and friends to see where they were headed. The group exited the castle, obviously seeking the sunshine in the courtyard. Severus walked along the covered walkway, finding an arch in the wall that was partially obscured by a large camellia bush and sat down. He pulled a book from his bag so that it would not appear as if he was there to observe them, should they look up and see him. Lily sat down, and almost immediately, Potter sat next to her. Lily placed her hands behind her and leaned back, raising her face to the sunlight with her eyes closed, looking as if she were wishing away every care in the world.

Leanne and Black began an animated discussion with hands moving, fingers pointing and brows furrowed. Potter was watching Lily, but was obviously adding his wisdom to the discussion occasionally, judging by how Leanne would turn to him, pointing and motioning with her hands in emphases with whatever she was talking about. Deborah on the other hand, looked worried, biting on her fingernails and interjecting her thoughts into the conversation occasionally.

Lily sat up, and Severus was surprised to see worry etched on Lily's face as she made a comment in the discussion. Potter leaned over and touched her arm, his expression one of concern.

Severus had a fair idea of what they were discussing: wards especially protective wards, or about the Dark Lord or as he was being called now days, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or You-Know-Who, since he was a common topic everywhere in the castle lately. Everyone was nervous, scared or apprehensive about going home. Nearly every Muggle-born or half-blood in the castle was getting continued lessons from Dumbledore himself on home security with every professor attending and offering assistance to those having difficulties learning how to set wards and protective spells on their homes.

Severus thought that these lessons were a waste of time, if anyone had bothered to ask him of his opinion on the matter *The Dark Lord is the strongest, most powerful wizard there is, maybe even stronger than Dumbledore himself, and his Death Eaters are growing in numbers, many of them alumni of Hogwarts. Even some of my housemates are just waiting to graduate and join the ranks. With the emphasis on protective spells in Defense, there isn't a protection spell in the Hogwarts library that I or one of my housemates don't know about.* Severus was sure that those who had left Hogwarts would know about them as well. *The problem is that if you learn how to cast them you can also learn how to disable them. No, you have to alter them. It's like the Dark Arts. They are as varied and ever changing as one's own imagination, and some I know are really imaginative. Likewise, if you are to protect your homes and families, you have to come up with spells and wards that are creative and imaginative, or make new ones. Ones the witches or wizards trying to break them down won't know.*

Severus pulled his Charms book from his bag. In the margins of nearly every page in the book, he'd written all the charms, wards and protective spells he'd found, and the ones he'd been working on, including the few spells he'd altered and intensified, underlining those which he knew would work. Lily may not be talking to him now, but he'd see to her safety regardless. *I don't have to be in her home to apply them, all I have to do is get close enough. I can ward her home and garden and make sure that at least there, she is safe. She'll thank me, someday, she'll find out how much I'm doing to do for her and she'll thank me. Maybe if I ensure her safety, she'll realize just how much I love her, and she'll come back to me.* He felt the now familiar wrenching in his gut that was there whenever he thought about winning Lily back.

He watched Lily argue with Black over something and smiled. *He can't protect you, but I know how and I will. Beside, Black's brother, Regulus, is one of the Slytherins who joined up. I heard him talking to Rosier. Rosier and Avery are going to join, I think; at least they talk about the Dark Lord as if they might. Mulciber, too. Lily was right; they admire the Dark Lord and what he stands for. I don't completely agree with them; blood and power are not synonymous ability, strength of power and intelligence will beat out blood any day. Knowledge and the ability to use that knowledge that's what's important. That's real power. And you, Lily, have that in spades.*

He watched her, the deep ache in his heart pulsing with his heartbeat as he wished she was sitting with him instead of his nemesis *The determination in her expression, the fierceness in her eyes... she's telling them the same thing, I'm sure of it.*

He smiled as he bent his head over his book, contemplating three charms that if used together should fortify glass windows, making them both unbreakable and repel most spells aimed at them. If he could only figure out the right way to make them work together and remain in place...

~June 5, 1997~

Hermione was terribly confused and distraught. She'd trusted Severus, completely. He'd even saved her life with that Impediment Hex, assisted Luna by Transfiguring that Death Eater's foot into pinchers, and she heard Professor McGonagall say that he'd helped her out with a Shield Charm. Nevertheless, Harry was insistent that Severus had killed Dumbledore in cold blood, and Tonks said Severus had attacked her, although she did admit the misfired spell had hit her opponent.

It didn't fit.

She sat in the tower room, watching as the shades the predawn sky changed, furious that the sky gave the promise for a beautiful day *How could it be beautiful? Dumbledore is dead. He's actually dead. Bill is marred for life, and no one knows for certain if he'll be infected by lycanthropy or not. Neville and Professor Flitwick are injured and are lying in the hospital wing. Likewise, Ron had a broken arm and a few ribs. Several third years were sleeping off the terror of having been caught in the fight unawares. Even Luna was being kept overnight for a curse that hit her arm.*

She wanted the sky to be cloudy and grey, like her mood. She missed Severus terribly, wishing she could somehow talk to him, to reason out what happened. She'd come up here to be close to him, their private place in the castle, but the room didn't offer her any comfort at all. Instead, she was plagued by the memories of the times they'd shared together in the room and his glorious hands on her body or the way he felt when he'd entered her. She couldn't stop thinking about him. It was maddening.

She had stopped by his office after the fight, but the door was locked and she couldn't get in, although she was hardly surprised.

Harry was withdrawn, and exceptionally moody, except when he was with Ginny. Watching Harry, all she could think about was her desire to be with Severus, hold onto him and never let him go. A deep empty hollow seemed to occupy itself in her chest, a dull ache that never truly went away.

Hermione was glad that Harry and Ginny were finally a couple, but things didn't bode well. Harry was already talking about a mission, something Dumbledore insisted that Harry had to do, and it was not finishing school. *The Horcruxes. Harry is going to go after the Horcruxes.* Hermione had tried searching in the library, even in the Restricted Section, but couldn't find anything on what a Horcrux was or how one was destroyed.

On a fluke, she'd cast the charm at the Headmaster's tower, and two books had flown out to her. Gobsmacked, embarrassed, and relieved, she had brought the books with her to read and was sickened by what she found out. The worst was that there were so few ways to destroy them. *Feindfyre, which is completely uncontrollable unless you are a very powerful wizard. Even if I could do the controlling charm I don't know if I'm strong enough to control Feindfyre. Feindfyre has a mind of its own and wants to burn everything, even its creator. It'll turn on the wizard who creates it if their concentration wavers even for a few seconds, so that's not a realistic option. Basilisk venom destroys a Horcrux, which is nearly impossible to find. Unless the venom of the Basilisk Harry had killed in the Chamber of Secrets is still viable after four years in a decaying corpse. We could use Godric Gryffindor's sword. Harry said that Dumbledore used the sword to break the ring, but I seriously doubt that Professor McGonagall will simply hand it over to me. She'd tried Summoning the sword, but it hadn't come to her. You have to destroy the soul inside the object, effectively killing it while getting around the protection spells. Sounds so much easier than it probably is. How are we going to accomplish this mission of Harry's? If only I could ask Severus...*

Severus. Every thought she had returned to Severus, making the ache inside her deepen even more. *He's gone over to Voldemort. He's a Death Eater again. Dumbledore trusted him as his advisor, confidant and master of Potions, and yet Severus killed him.*

I need to know why he did this! Why he ran off with Draco? Why did he leave me? She had reasoned out every possible reason why he had locked her in his office with Professor Flitwick and Luna, and the only logical reason was to keep her from harm. That made sense. *But he should have sent me an owl. He could have charmed it so that only I could read it, to let me know. But he hasn't. He won't, will he?* Tears ran down her cheeks again, unchecked.

My professor and my lover is now a traitor and murderer. It was enough to make her want to scream. *But he saved my life, Luna's, and he saved Professor McGonagall. Heck, he even tried numerous times to save Harry as well as Ron and me. Ron.*

Ron had been uncommonly affectionate towards her, needing her support. *Ron wants to be my boyfriend, he even said he wants a chance at a relationship with me, but I still love Severus. He is trying to be comforting, even though he doesn't know exactly why I'm melancholy... He thinks I'm sad because of Dumbledore, which I am, but more so because I miss Severus so much.*

Giving up on finding any solitude in the tower room, she left to seek the reassurance of the books in the library, hoping to find any spells that would help Harry in the search for the Horcruxes or a likely candidate for the elusive R.A.B.

After hours of scanning the papers she found two names with the initials R.A.B.

One was a witch, Roselind Antigone Bungs, and the other was a wizard, Rupert 'Axebanger' Brookstanton both possible people for the elusive R.A.B. Nevertheless, upon further investigation, Hermione discounted either of them as likely candidates for the mysterious R.A.B. From the note in Harry's locket, R.A.B. was a Death Eater. But neither Mrs. Bungs nor Mr. Brookstanton fit the description of what Hermione considered a Death Eater type.

Roselind Antigone Bungs had been a Primary school teacher, who ran an exclusive school for four- to ten-year-old wizarding children. The article for enrollment in the Roselind Bungs Primary School stated that there was an entrance exam to get into her school and that she supposedly only admitted the top fifty of the eligible wizarding children. Which meant that the families who applied to send their children to her school had to be able to afford her tutelage. Her curriculum included: maths, English grammar and spelling, garden herbology, basic Latin, music, painting, ceramics, and pet management. Apparently, puffskeins, streelers, toads, and mice were acceptable 'pets' at her school, although the older kids were allowed half-crups and half-kneazles.

Likewise, Rupert 'Axebanger' Brookstanton didn't seem the type to have been a Death Eater either. He was a fairly famous woodcutter who obviously traveled a great deal. He was well known for finding very rare and very powerful wood types for use in magical devices such as wands and trunks. He was a father of six sons, three of whom were shown in a picture with their father on a wood gathering expedition in the African plains. Another picture of him showed a heavily muscled man, holding a huge axe slung across his shoulders, whose face was marred by hundreds of scratches, possibly from bowtruckles. Yet, he was still a remarkably handsome wizard, and his eyes and smile seemed warm and friendly in the picture. Not only that, but his image kept shifting his weight every now and again, occasionally turning his head as if he'd felt a bit shy about having his picture taken.

Groaning in frustration, Hermione returned to the Defense Section, wishing she still had access to the Restricted Section.

~Meanwhile~

Severus knelt down before the Dark Lord, dragging a cowering Draco down with him to keel at his side. "Severus, what is this I hear?"

Severus used the few moments he had to rearranging his thoughts so that the events of the battle, as he remembered them, were sufficiently askew. "If you are referring to Dumbledore's death, yes, it has been accomplished, although not as you may have liked."

"I am indeed referring to Draco's task."

"He hesitated," Severus stated, finally ready to be mentally violated by the Dark Lord. "Dumbledore was using his skills of persuasion on the boy, trying to confuse him and

making promises he couldn't keep. It was for naught, but time was short, so I acted. I didn't want Draco to fail in his first task, my Lord."

"I have already heard from the others," the Dark Lord said while pacing. "The Carrows and Rowle were rather impressed. However, Draco, you have disappointed me." Luckily, Draco did little else but grovel silently.

"If I may be so bold, you gave a man's task to a child," Severus spoke up before Draco did or said anything to make matters worse. "He was destined to fail. Dumbledore was an icon at Hogwarts. All the students looked up to him, even the Slytherins. I was hardly surprised that Draco hesitated. If so many of the Order hadn't been present, fighting in the corridors below, I'd have gladly waited Draco out."

"But why were you even there on the tower? This was not the plan I had for you," the Dark Lord said irritably. The invasion was swift following the question. The Dark Lord wasn't interested in his memories of the battle he was searching for something else.

Severus barely had time to block his memories of Hermione from his mind as the Dark Lord searched for the answer he wanted. Knowing the probing could open the wrong memories, Severus showed him the vision of the vow. "What is this?" he hissed angrily as Narcissa's visit replayed in his mind.

"I did not allow her betray you, or your plans. But yes, I made an Unbreakable Vow with Narcissa so that your plan whatever it was would be fulfilled. All I thought I had to do was make sure Draco did it. He was difficult and resisted my assistance, but I never wavered. I was diligent, even though he didn't want my aide. I was available and supported his efforts in any way I could, and as much as I could from within."

"But, Severus, this is a new problem, and I don't want problems right now. *I want you at Hogwarts*," the Dark Lord emphasized venomously. "Especially now that the castle is weakened and within our grasp. I wanted you there! Not here."

"My Lord, all is not lost..."

"No, it isn't," the Dark Lord said. "It just means that we shall have to move my plans up and expedite the arrangements to take control. Nevertheless, Hogwarts is essential. I must have control of the castle. I must have *YOU* back in that castle, Severus."

~June 7, 1977~

Severus stood in the trees, using them as cover to avoid being seen. As usual, Potter, Black, Pettigrew and Lupin were sitting down by the lake with Lily, Charlene, Deborah, and Leanne. Severus knew that Charlene was Black's newest conquest, a fairly pretty, busty girl from Hufflepuff who in Severus' mind was a perfect complement to Black, half-blood, half-wit, and well endowed but not in the financial sense. *She'd made her way through the finically well-endowed Slytherins and has opted to debase herself even further with Black. I wonder if he's aware she's a pureblood gold-digger? The wench even made a go at me when Avery told her I was descended from the Prince family.*

Lupin, as usual, was reading, occasionally snickering at something one of his friends or the girls said, and Pettigrew was laughing and clapping at everything Potter or Black did or said as if he were their biggest fanatic. *Pathetic. Well, one more year down and, thanks to that lot, I've enough counter-curses, counter-hexes and counter-jinxes under my hat for next year. That and all the defensive spells I have been working on. I'll be able to protect what's mine, he thought as his gaze focused on Lily, and what ought to be mine.*

Severus had a hard time keeping his eyes off Lily. He wanted to walk away, leave and not have to torture himself wanting and watching her. She was lounging in the grass between both Potter and Lupin, holding a flower in her hand. Severus knew that she was making the petals move as if the flower was talking to her. It was one of her favorite magic tricks.

Lupin leaned over to her and showed her something from the book in his hands, and Lily leaned toward him to read whatever it was he wanted to show her. *Everywhere I go I see Lily with Lupin! Lupin, that werewolf! She ditched me, threw my friendship over for Lupin's!*

Whatever it was he'd shown her engrossed her enough to set down the flower and pull the book onto her lap to read the print as Lupin picked up another book. He was flipping through the pages, stopping occasionally to show her something, obviously comparing what he found to what she was reading. Potter picked up her flower and tucked it into her hair clip, sliding his fingers down the silky lock. *Just as I used to do. He's not supposed to be the one doing that I am!* If Severus dared hexing Potter, he would have, even from where he stood. *But now isn't the time.*

Lily turned to look at Potter, smiling, and Potter caressed her cheek. Whatever he'd told her made her smile even more, her shoulders rising and falling as if she'd made a big sigh of relief. Potter rolled toward her to whisper in her ear, and Lily lowered her head as if she were blushing. *He's flirting with her my Lily! Potter is making moves on my girl. How dare he!*

He wanted to scream. He wanted to curse someone. He wanted to kill Potter and drag Lily back up to the tower so they could talk. Actually that wasn't true, he wanted to hold her in his arms. He wanted to make love to her and believe that things hadn't fallen apart. He wanted to believe that Lily wasn't with Gryffindor golden boys.

Severus turned and walked deeper into the trees, unable to take much more of watching Lily sitting with his mortal enemies. The further in the trees he walked the darker his mood became, and the anger festered in his mind. *Potter is flirting with Lily! Potter and my Lily! It looks like she's thrown me over for Potter! And apparently, she still trusts that werewolf!*

There was a snarl and a growl from somewhere in the trees, but Severus didn't care. The way he felt presently, nothing had better try and cross his path. He'd kill it. Avada Kedavra it in its tracks. He'd just think about Potter and zap a snarly, growling creature would be a dead creature.

~June 7, 1977~

Severus stood in the trees, watching the people at Dumbledore's funeral. The stooped shoulders of the old man's body hurt his back, and the only way to ease that pain was to lean against a tree, but the old man's legs were weak. Severus had tried sitting on the roots, but they had hurt his bum. Still, he was not going to miss the funeral and make his farewells to the one wizard he truly looked up to all these years. Regardless of all the times Dumbledore had used him or asked him for things he hadn't wanted to do. He still respected the man, as much as he hated him. So this disguise was a necessary inconvenience he would simply endure.

It had been for Lily that he'd switched sides, and had sworn his oath. And now now he had another reason. She would never forgive him of course, but he'd see her live, make sure she survived. And she couldn't live under the Dark Lord. She'd be a target. She represented everything the Dark Lord preached against, her existence, intelligence, power, and her skill proved him wrong just like Lily had.

The song of the merpeople caught his attention, the mournful melody wafted on the breeze. A tear ran down the old wrinkled face, unchecked. All around him in the edge of the trees, the centaurs started arriving, standing in the shade as the head wizard of the school governors spoke. Severus wasn't listening. His mind was full of memories, remembrances of times spent with Dumbledore: each time he scoffed at the proffered lemon drop, each time he returned from the Dark Lord both to give his report and to receive the next order. The times when Dumbledore spoke to him about his plans and what needed to be done. Severus knew his tasks weren't finished, completed, he still had promises to fulfill. His part was only beginning anew. *'Protect my students, Severus. Make sure Harry wins,* Dumbledore had pleaded. *'I know Tom will want to get back into Hogwarts, Severus. He will want to take over the school. With me gone, he will be able to, I fear. You must do what you can to take my place. There are things here in my office,'* he'd said, looking at the Sorting Hat and the Sword of Gryffindor, *'that Tom must not get his hands on. I've placed many memories in the cupboard. Use them to validate your actions, my son, should you survive. But those too would destroy you in the wrong hands. I've placed a heavy burden on you all these years, but you've always proven most capable and my faith in you has always been valid. I'm afraid I still need you; Harry still needs you, but I know you will not let us down....'*

Only when the bright white flames flared to life, their magic concealing the erection of the tomb, did his focus return to the funeral. As if on cue, as soon as the flames died down, the centaurs shot their arrows in tribute, their aim true, creating a half circle around the marble tomb. Severus took another mouthful of the potion in his pocket. He didn't want to leave without seeing Hermione. As the mourners rose and began to move about, he lost sight of her. She had been sitting with Potter and Weasley, crying, but she wasn't in her seat now. She'd moved off into the crowd.

Severus saw Potter talking to Miss Weasley. The emotions warring on their faces were so evident that Severus didn't even need to hear the conversation to know what the boy was doing he was breaking it off with her. Severus watched as Potter turned and walked away, leaving Miss Weasley crying in his wake. Severus didn't care; he knew it was the right thing to do. *The Dark Lord will use anyone he thought Potter was close to against him.* Severus watched the girl, locking the memory of the break up and Miss Weasley's devastated expression in his mind. At least he could tell the Dark Lord that Potter dashed the girl's hopes, that she wasn't that important to him. *That will protect the girl.*

Severus moved carefully among the crowd, leaning heavily on his cane. He followed Potter, knowing he'd lead him to Hermione. Severus saw her before Potter did, in the arms of Mr. Weasley. She was crying on his shoulder while Mr. Weasley stroked her hair. A rage grew in him he hadn't expected, a familiar feeling upon seeing her in Weasley's arms, even though he knew with absolute certainty it was only because he was offering her comfort. *I should be doing that. That should be me not that insolent snot!* He growled, catching several looks, but Severus didn't care. *She is my witch.*

His rational mind warred with his reason. *Even if things were different even if I hadn't killed Dumbledore and Draco had... No, I wouldn't couldn't have been the one to comfort her. Not in public. But I could have given her a sign, a signal that I was here for her. I could have at least pretended that... I could have brought her to my office except all the Slytherins would be seeking me out, asking questions, confused, crying, and invading my privacy. No, I wouldn't have any time for her, unless we went to our tower... and I can't risk meeting her there now. Damn, Dumbledore, why didn't you wait and destroy the ring at the school? Together we could have done it! What was so special about that bloody ring? Why didn't you take me instead of Potter that night? What was that poison you drank? Why didn't you send for me immediately when you realized what you'd consumed?*

Severus watched as Minister Scrimgeour approached Potter and noted the boy's stiff posture as Potter glared at him. Whatever the Minister wanted, Potter wasn't going along; the emotions on their faces were much too easy to read. Potter turned and walked over to Hermione and Weasley, and Hermione turned to console her friend. Severus was close enough now. Deftly casting a subtle but difficult charm allowed him to hear the conversation. What he heard didn't surprise him. Potter was going after the Horcruxes, and Weasley and Hermione were going with him. Severus swore silently. *How am I supposed to protect you, keep you from harm, and help you defeat the Dark Lord, if you're going to go wandering around, Merlin knows where, in search of only the Dark Lord knows what?* Severus wanted a stiff drink and a long talk with a portrait. One he couldn't even get to yet.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

*Frigidulusileo* is a made up word using the Latin words: *Frigidulus*, meaning: somewhat cold or faint, and *sileo*, meaning: to be still, silent, to be silent about, to be still, rest, be inactive.

*For those not familiar with the words merlon and crenellation: the crenellation is the top of the castle, or battlements, where the stone has gaps for the defense of the castle walls. The merlons are the solid stone part between two crenels, (gaps in the battlement), where the soldiers or bowmen would stand to reload, then lean around to fire.*

*I appreciate the help from Hermione278 for pitching in to help me with the beta read on this chapter. It was really sweet of you to do so. And a big thank you to Southern\_Witch\_69 for helping me with the final clean up. Thank you. I really appreciate it.*

## Unrequited And In Sorrow

Chapter 17 of 25

Feeling that his heart is broken and entrapped by the spells of the tower, Severus must deal with having lost Lily to his nemesis.

Twenty years later, Hermione repines for Severus while hiding from the Death Eaters, Voldemort, and the Ministry. Meanwhile, Severus, now Headmaster of Hogwarts, although he believes that Hermione has lost any trust she may have had in him, is still trying to find her and Potter so he can help them.

*Thank you to those of you who requested an update of this story for Christmas. I am so very happy to comply. I hope you like this chapter, and Merlin willing, I'll have 18 up soon as well. Merry Christmas!*

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Protect more of your memories for less

Thank you to MadBrilliant and southern\_Witch\_69 for the beta read. Hugs, and my deepest gratitude. Good betas like you are worth their weight in Godiva!!

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Unrequited And In Sorrow

~Summer 1977~

Severus stood a short distance from Lily's house, checking on the wards he'd set on her house last Saturday. He hadn't seen Lily yet and that worried him. He'd seen Petunia and Mrs. Evans coming home with bags from the local stores, but they'd gone straight into the house as if in a hurry.

Severus was delayed in his plans to set his wards on the house because he'd gone with Avery, Rosier, and Mulciber to the Lestrange house as soon as the train arrived at King's Cross. A porter had met them to ferry the trunks to a large black car. The gathering at the old country house had seemed like a reunion of Slytherin house with several Ravensclaws, a few Hufflepuff purebloods, and even some Gryffindors, two who'd just graduated, mingling around the back garden, all drinking a strange punch.

Severus had been suspicious of the punch the moment Bellatrix Black had handed it to him, smirking and eyeing him speculatively. If he hadn't been aware of her reputation and hadn't been told she was engaged to Rodolphus, he'd have sworn on Salazar's grave the woman had been flirting with him. Nevertheless, Severus had only pretended to drink the punch, slyly spilling some of the liquid on the grass and deftly switching his glass with an empty one as a house-elf passed by. When the others joined in the party, Severus had acted drunk, mimicking the actions of his housemates.

When the Dark Lord arrived, Severus had to fight down his initial reaction of revulsion. The wizard who'd entered the garden in long, sweeping, dark green robes had been like no man he'd ever seen before. His face and hands had looked deathly pale, almost white with a moist, waxy appearance, and his facial features had seemed oddly distorted. But the eyes, his eyes had been red. It had looked to Severus, who'd had his own eyes bloodied from beatings, that the wizard had recently suffered an injury to both eyes. Except the Dark Lord's eyes had intensity and focus, an intelligence that had shown through the strange redness.

The Dark Lord, Lord Voldemort, had spoken to the collected guests as if they would all become close personal friends. He had answered questions and had listened to each teenager as if they had been saying something of vital importance. Several of the young men had been drawn aside with several of the Death Eaters in attendance; for what, Severus could only extrapolate. His friends had been more than eager to be drawn away, returning with satisfied smiles. Severus had wondered if he'd be asked to follow the robed men into the grotto, but he hadn't.

Later, as Severus had watched his friends itch their arms, he knew – they had joined. Lily had been right all along. The only reason Severus had stayed was so as not to rouse suspicions. But as the evening had progressed and the party grew rowdy, the talk around the house and gardens turned to more sinister topics: Muggle baiting, Muggle inferiority, putting Muggle-borns and Muggles in their place, showing Muggles that wizards were superior, removing Muggle-born and Muggle infiltration and influence from wizard society, and purging the Muggle-born and Muggle contamination of the pureblood of wizard kind. Severus had been worried, wondering if the reason he'd hadn't been drawn aside was because his father was a Muggle, and relieved that he hadn't been asked.

Severus desperately wanted to talk to Lily, to tell her he was sorry and that she had been right. He needed to see her, talk to her and listen to her advice. He sat outside her house, blending in with the shadows and waited.

As the sun started to go down, a crack, followed by a loud pop seconds after, broke the silence of the street. Severus saw Potter only moments before he saw Lily, his Lily, approach her house. Potter walked her up the path to the front porch and stood next to her for a while. Suddenly, Severus saw Lily hug Potter, and he was hugging her back, tightly. She let go first and moved back a little, but he leaned down, his face inches from hers, nearly nose to nose. Lily turned her head slightly and pulled away, a smile on her lips. Potter's hand moved to her face, gripped her chin and made her look up at him.

The next moment they were kissing. Kissing. He was kissing her. His Lily.

Lily wasn't struggling or trying to push him away either. She was holding onto his waist and letting him kiss her.

Severus felt sick. His gut clenched. His chest ached.

Without caring if anyone heard him, Severus Disapparated away for Avery's house.

~Summer 1997~

Hermione looked out the window at the Death Eaters pacing the pavement in front of Grimmauld Place. The *Daily Prophet* on the desk announced Severus had been made Headmaster of Hogwarts. She was so proud for him and worried. By all accounts, and of course from what Harry had said, Severus was a murderer. *He killed Dumbledore.* It unnerved her that there was no denying that he had. But his other actions that day were in complete conflict with what Harry insisted was true – that Severus had been in Voldemort's side all along. *He stunned Professor Flitwick so he couldn't help, killed Dumbledore, nearly stunned Tonks, but saved Professor McGonagall. He helped me and I saw him help Luna. Neville said Severus helped him fend off Death Eaters as he fled the castle. By my count, Severus had fired curses at five Death Eaters during the battle, and yet he'd tried to prevent Professor Flitwick from fighting.*

Hermione couldn't untangle the events she knew about from the rumors and statements Ron and Harry were saying about the battle in Hogwarts. Even Bill, Remus, and Tonks had been talking surprised by Severus's actions. *I saw him assist Luna, hitting a fellow Death Eater as he dragged Draco from the castle. That was not a misfired spell – it was deliberate. Tonks said that Severus had fired a shot at her, but it had hit the Death Eater she was fighting purely by luck. Harry said Severus had prevented anyone from killing him when he'd followed them to the gates... but that was because he'd said that Harry was for the Dark Lord to kill – Voldemort wanted Harry for himself.*

Her chest ached each time she thought about Severus. It was like a drug withdrawal that never gave her a reprieve. She remembered everything about him with perfect clarity: his expression each time she entered his office or their tower room. His intense stare just before he kissed her, and his hands, those glorious hands and how they had felt on her skin. At night in her bed, in the tub, or even in the library, she remembered the way he'd made love to her, each time surprisingly varied from the time before, and yet so passionate and so sensual. All she had to do was close her eyes and she could almost feel him again. It was so strong it nearly made her cry in frustration and longing.

Two more men in long black robes showed up on the pavement, catching her attention. They were arguing with the two who had been here all morning since dawn. She dropped the curtain, sure that Severus wouldn't lead any of his Death Eater brethren to the house, even if he could. *But he could come here to see me. Harry would try to*

kill him on sight, then again, so would Ron, but he could evade them. Then there is Kreacher. How would he react if Severus tried to get in the house? The mere thought of Severus slipping into the house unnoticed, entering her bedroom with the sole purpose of making love to her again, sent shivers of desire through her, a lust that was lately unquenchable.

Hermione opened her eyes. *Thinking about Severus is not conducive to proper research of warding spells, disillusionment, or anti-tracking... and they have to be here somewhere. I remember Sirius saying something about it before...* Determinedly, Hermione started pulling books down from the shelves and carried them to the desk. She had many things to work out and memorize, and she had no idea how long this house would remain a safe place for them.

~September 1997~

As she had done on countless nights, Hermione stared out into the night and her mind wandered. She pulled her knees up tighter to her chest to fend off the cold, wrapped her cloak tighter about her, and wished she were in bed. In a bed, curled up next to a warm body, his arms wrapped around her, giving her a sense of security and peace she so craved. She longed for a bed, a real bed, with pillows, blankets, and quilts. She imagined being curled up in her imaginary bed with Severus and quickly shook her head before she once again got lost in that fantasy.

Instead, she pictured Ron, stretched out languorously on his cot, covers twisted around him as he tossed and rolled, and the thought nearly made her laugh. *No, sleeping with Ron would be a battle over the covers.* She sighed, her eyes sweeping over the white snow, covering the forest like a white down comforter. With a sigh, she imagined the comforter was real, covering her and her lover in warmth. *His arms holding me tight against his lean body, his soft breath in my hair, his legs entwined with mine.* The thought almost warmed her, even down to her toes. She closed her eyes for a moment to fully appreciate the warm fantasy, imagining rolling over to kiss Severus' nose and jar him awake. *As my fingers stroke his skin, tracing his pectorals, circling his nipples, fingering his chest hair and following the line of dark hair down his stomach...* She could visualize his dark eyes opening and watching her, his body shifting so that she could glide her hand down to his penis to stroke the soft velvety skin, feeling him harden by her touch.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, shaking her shoulder. "Are you awake?"

"Blimey, Harry! Sorry. I think I dozed off," she replied, stretching.

Harry sat down next to her. "No problem. I should take watch now any way. Get some real sleep."

"Thanks," Hermione replied, giving Harry the wool blanket and going inside. Ron was lying curled up in his bed, his covers all rumpled and twisted up with one of his legs exposed. Hermione slipped into her bag and tried to get comfortable. As she lay there, staring at the roof of the tent, her mind wondered again to Severus. *Blimey! I can't stop thinking about him. We had a fling for four months and three days, and I still crave him, dream about him, and miss him terribly. I wonder what he's doing right now. Where he is. If he's happy.* She punched her pillow and tried to force herself to sleep, slipping back into the familiar dream of lying once again curled in Severus' arms, only to see him rise to fire spells at her friends and the Death Eaters who invaded her dreams. She rolled over. She tried to control her dreams, only to have the same nightmare again and again. But her nightmares always started out the same: lying in Severus' bed and passionately making love to a man she knew she'd never see again or, if so, would never have a future with.

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Severus sat on the windowsill of their tower, sipping on Earl Grey tea. It wasn't his preferred blend, but then every time he'd had a cup of his Broken Orange Pekoe lately, the flavor only reminded him of Hermione's kisses. He sighed, remembering the excitement she'd had with each new discovery regarding their tower room. Her energy and exuberance was stimulating to him. No other student had her yearning for knowledge or her intellect. He smiled. *Four months. For four months I knew the pleasure of her company, regardless of how I tried to dissuade her and drive her away. Well, I did at first. Her inquisitive nature and natural curiosity led her to me, and I took advantage of her in every way possible. And in the end she confessed to loving me – me, her snarky professor. She's the first student I've ever even looked at that way – and she'll be the last.* To make sure, Severus had added his own wards on the barrier to the tower room just in case his reinforcing of the Repelling Charms on the tower entrances wouldn't work.

Severus sipped his tea, grimacing at the taste. It was a superb blend, a favorite of most of the staff, but he missed his Orange Pekoe. However, he just didn't need the reminders of how lonely the castle was now that Hermione was no longer attending school. *Not that she'd have been allowed to.* At least he didn't have to teach Potions. *No more dunderheads melting cauldrons, no more insipid questions, and no more explosions.* No, he had a completely new set of problems this year.

He leaned back against the stone, gazing out at the brilliant sunrise. The colors were exquisite this morning, but his attention wasn't on the view. He couldn't help recall the times he'd been up in this room with Hermione, each morning he'd watched the sunrise, knowing that he'd have his way with her. Still, there had been differences between his times with Hermione and what he could remember of the days he'd shared this view with Lily. *Sure, Lily had responded to me, but not with the passion and uninhibited reaction to my touch that Hermione had shown. Then there were the stolen moments in the corridors, recessed doorways, and alcoves. No, each time Hermione had been as eager and as passionate as she'd been in here. Lily was never as passionate with me outside of this room.* Nevertheless, both girls had had the same inability to elaborate on their feelings for him, and both had snapped out of the spells the moment he'd confessed his love for them. *It was like seeing a replay of my nightmare break-up with Lily when Hermione had been released from the spells. Severus finished his tea. Yet, still, she allowed me that one last time in the library...*

Severus forced the memory from his mind, stood, and left the room, heading back to his office to prepare for the staff meeting he'd scheduled for before breakfast. *This one had best be short. I don't want any more trouble between Minerva and Alecto.*

Severus descended the stairs to the large chamber at the bottom, thinking about Hermione's chart. He stopped in the lower room and looked up at the stairs, partially hidden by Concealment Charms. It suddenly hit him; the allure of the tower was broken. He no longer craved the room above. It was simply a sanctuary, a hidden room no one else knew about. It was as if his own ensnarement by the spells had been broken. He left the tower, his robes billowing as he strode purposefully to his office. *One thing is for certain, I no longer pine for Lily anymore.*

He wondered where Hermione was, yet again. Wondering if she was all right and if she was still helping Potter. *Of course she's helping Potter! The idiot boy would be nowhere without her. If we have any chance of winning this, it will be because Hermione is behind Potter and for little other reason.* He'd spoken to Dumbledore's portrait, knowing now what those lessons were all about. *Little good it will do Potter. Dumbledore should've had those lessons with Hermione as well. She's the one who'll be figuring everything out anyway. I should've set up a way to communicate with her... I just didn't have the forethought to do so.*

~Autumn 1997~

Hermione looked out the tent flap, wishing that he'd come back. She could hardly believe that he'd been so irascible, whiny, childish and down right insufferable. But he'd left; Ron had simply left because things were difficult. *What did he expect? That Voldemort would have his Horcruxes on a map?* Still, he'd abandoned her. *First Severus, now Ron.*

Hermione cried at night and frequently during the day. Not because what Harry probably expected, well, partly, but not only because Ron left, because she felt abandoned. Her worst childhood fear had been the thought of being abandoned, and this was real – he'd left. She tried to keep as quiet as possible so as not to disturb Harry, but Ron had been her first ever real friend and childhood crush. They had been through so much, and he'd abandoned them, just like Severus had abandoned her.

Hermione purposefully concentrated her thoughts on the only constructive thing she had – determining where Voldemort would have hidden his Horcruxes and what they might be. And on how to get the sword. Hermione was convinced that somehow Severus still had the sword. In true Harry fashion, he was convinced that Severus had it hidden or possibly had given it to Voldemort. Hermione wasn't convinced he'd have given it to Voldemort, although she couldn't persuade Harry. Of course, there was no way, short of the two of them storming the castle, for them to acquire it. Hermione had no idea how to reach Severus except by owl, and an owl could give their hideout away. Besides, they didn't have an owl. Her only hope of news, of discovering what was going on with Severus and her friends, lay with Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black.

The portrait of Phineas was almost always out now, and Hermione tried to get information about what was happening at Hogwarts whenever the cantankerous man appeared, feeling slightly elated whenever he spoke about Severus. But the portrait was honor bound to serve Severus, and Hermione was reluctant to be too overt in asking about the sword – or anything of that matter. Headmaster Black revered Severus, expounding on his abilities as Headmaster with high regard and deference. Nevertheless, he did tell them that Severus was having difficulties. There were constant outbreaks of mutiny from some of the students. Ginny had been banned from being allowed to visit Hogsmeade, and Severus had reinstated some of Umbridge's decrees specifically the decree of banning student gatherings of three or more, probably to discourage the reforming or Dumbledore's Army. He'd also reinstated the degree regarding punishments, although stating that the Headmaster had the supreme authority over all punishments, sanctions, and removal of privileges. He also now had the power to alter any punishments, sanctions, or curtailment of privileges set by any professor as he saw fit.

Hermione watched the portrait as Harry asked him questions, wishing she dared ask the image to send a message to Severus, but decided it wasn't worth the risk. If Severus had turned against them, against her, it was too great of a gamble. If he hadn't, she could inadvertently expose him, and she couldn't do that either.

At night, as Hermione sat in the dark gloom of the tent, she closed her eyes and reminisced about her mornings in the tower with Severus. She could imagine his hands, his kisses, and she stifled a moan as her knickers became wet. Rolling onto her back, she listened for any sounds that Harry was awake before sliding her hand into her knickers to relieve the growing need and frustration she felt. But try as she might, she was unable to achieve the mind-blowing orgasm Severus gave her when they'd been together. Giving up, Hermione rolled onto her side and wept.

*

Phineas returned to his frame and loudly cleared his throat.

"So, where are they?" Severus asked without looking up.

"Hard to tell. The insipid girl had the audacity to defile my canvas with a censorer band. It covers my eyes so that I cannot see anything," Phineas snarled venomously.

"Did you really expect her to do anything less? They're in hiding, in case you've forgotten, and they don't trust me." He set down his quill and looked up at the portrait. "So, what was said this time?"

Phineas looked affronted but quickly recovered. "I told them about the decrees and about..."

"I'm not interested in what you told them," Severus interrupted him. "What did they ask you?"

"They want to know what is happening at school," Phineas stated, and Severus nodded, urging him to continue. "About the uprising of the students – they wanted to know which students. The boy was most curious about the Weasley girl." Severus nodded again, and the portrait felt emboldened. "They want to know if anyone had tried to break into your office, either before or after the failed attempt of those hooligans, Weasley, Longbottom, and Lovegood. The girl was most curious if anyone had stolen a book, and the boy wanted to know about the Sorting Hat and the sword. I told them they are still here, safe and secure, and that no one could steal from you with all of us watching over the office..."

"You are sure Miss Granger asked about a book?" Severus asked.

"Absolutely. She specifically asked if you or anyone noticed any missing books," Phineas stated. "She was also very curious to know if the Carrows entered your office or if there were Death Eaters in the castle. She tried to get me to tell her if you were summoned anywhere, but I told her that wasn't any of her business, and I wouldn't tell her about your private affairs. I am honor bound to serve the Headmaster of this school, not some dawdling teenager who steals my portrait from it's..."

Severus steepled his hands in front of his mouth, his own thoughts drowning out the painting's ranting. *A book... if someone had stolen books from the office. I shall have to check the office inventory then, make sure that all the books are still here. Or have the Weasley and Lovegood girls do it for me as a detention. Hermione wouldn't have been concerned about a book unless she knew it was a book of importance... Or unless she took a book – or Dumbledore gave a book from the office. Harry's question about the Hat and sword, that's obvious. I know the boy needs the sword, but how am I to get it to him if I have no bloody way of knowing where he is?* "But you have no idea where they are. You didn't hear any unusual sounds, or hear anything that would give me a clue so I can find them?"

"I couldn't see anything that would be much help. The chintz chair wasn't facing anything I could recognize," Phineas answered affronted by the question.

"Yet, you could see a chintz chair? What did you see that you couldn't recognize?" Severus said smoothly.

"Well, I couldn't see much with the censorer band on my canvas," Phineas started to say, and Severus gave him an angry scowl. "All right." He began describing the inside of the dwelling, speculating that what he saw was possibly a tent, adding all the detail he could recall seeing with relish.

"And if you could see the dwelling, did you actually see Potter and Granger?" Severus asked, carefully suppressing his impatience.

"I could see little bits of them when I moved, but..." Phineas started to say, but Severus' scowl darkened. "The girl looked thin and haggard. She looks as if she's not sleeping very well, and her voice is worn and tired. The boy didn't look any different at all from any other time I've seen him, but she looks like she hasn't been eating very well."

Severus suddenly picked up on the fact he'd only mentioned one boy. "Did you say boy – as in only one boy? Which one?"

"The Potter boy," Phineas stated.

"No red-headed boy?" Severus asked, his right hand clenching into a fist.

Phineas stroked his beard, as if thinking. "Nope. He had a snit about there not being any food and that he was sick of the girl's cooking. I think he stormed off and left them..."

He left her! The Weasley brat ran out on them? Severus turned and looked up at Dumbledore's portrait. "Dumbledore, wake up and come to the other painting. I need to talk with you," he demanded sharply and stormed from the office to his room, stopping barely long enough to make sure Dumbledore took notice.

Dumbledore was waiting for him in the scenic painting in his sitting room. "What is your concern, Severus? You knew that Miss Granger would follow Harry and assist him with his mission."

"Did you hear what Phineas just said?" Severus asked, pacing in front of the frame.

"Yes, every word," the image of Dumbledore said. "I wouldn't worry, he'll find his way back."

"How can he find them, Dumbledore, if I can't?" Severus asked, stopping to look at the image of Dumbledore sitting comfortably on the painted park bench. "Phineas tells

me that they relocate their campsite, constantly."

"I made sure that in such a case, Mr. Weasley would always be able to return to them," Dumbledore replied. "Our real concern is for you to find them, Severus, and before it's too late."

"I am trying!" Severus said. "But they are careful to keep their location secret, and even when Phineas thinks he's figured it out – I can't find them. Apparently, Miss Granger has learned a few warding and camouflage spells during her copious amounts of spare time when she was here and is using them quite effectively."

Dumbledore beamed happily back at him. "Yes, she really is quite the little witch, isn't she?"

~Autumn 1977~

Severus had noticed two things that were very different this year: one, Potter and Black had stopped picking on him, so the fighting had stopped. Two, Lupin was actually trying to be friendly, and three, Lily was now hanging around Potter and Black almost exclusively. She was working with Black in Potions and teaming up with Potter, Black, and Lupin in Charms and Herbology. She was in the clutches of Potter in the corridors. In addition, even his friends noticed that Lily was now apparently seeing Potter. In fact, Lily and Potter had been caught snogging a few times in old classrooms and unused corridors. Okay, that was actually seven, but admitting it only made Severus clench his jaw in anger and want to blow something up.

He still followed Lily around when he could and was becoming quite stealthy about it, but she had either been going to meet up with Potter or to the library to revise. Wherever she'd gone, she had been joined by Potter most of the time. Lily and her friends, Leanne and Deborah, were frequently surrounded by Potter, Black, Pettigrew and Lupin. By the time Halloween had come and gone, Severus was repining more and more over Lily and really struggled with the anger he felt seeing her arm in arm, laughing, with his loathed enemy.

The only place he felt any reprieve from his distress was up in his tower room. Of course, Lily never came up there anymore, but the view was calming and serene, even if the room brought back painful memories each time he went. His emotions warred within him, the confliction he'd refused to admit to or recognize while he and Lily had been together were becoming clearer. Lily had never really been affectionate towards him, not like she was towards Potter or his friends. Lily had not really shown him any passion when they'd had sex, it was mostly one-sided – his side, although he knew that she'd enjoyed every minute of it.

Each time the door opened easily for him made his chest ache. The Baron's warning not to confess his love to her repeated in his mind each time he left the room. The warning was like a knife that twisted in his gut now each time he witnessed Lily kissing Potter or each night when he dreamed of making love to Lily in his sleep. He couldn't get her out of his mind or his heart. He felt like he was sinking into emerald green pools of ice water every time he thought about her.

Worse, his Patronus was changing. The huge hawk now had four long legs and an arched neck with a delicate head. If he didn't know better, he'd swear it was becoming a doe.

~December 1997~

Hermione strolled in the snow, looking for golden crisps and juicy berries, foraging like a bear in the woods. Her basket was full, but she knew that winter was coming and that food would be scarce. A pair of warm, firm hands took hold of her arms and pulled her up against a firm, familiar body. His warm lips caressed her neck, and Hermione tilted her head to give him access, craving his touch more than anything else in the world. Her robes seemed to open effortlessly as she turned to embrace him, wrapping her arms around his bare torso under his cloak. The dark material surrounded her, engulfed her in his heat and scent as his hands caressed her body. His kisses and his touch were welcomingly familiar and so very needed to make her feel warm and alive again. He spoke no words but she knew exactly what feelings finding her nude in the woods evoked in him. Gently, he laid her down on her bed as his kisses roamed down her flesh. She was reciprocating, passionately, touching and stroking his body in return. His hard penis was inside her, his mouth sensually pleasuring her on every sensitive spot, and the crunch of boots on the snow...

Hermione woke, startled by the sound of something walking past the tent, fully aroused and cursing silently. Every night was the same. Her dream Severus came to her, made love to her, sending her to new heights only to have the dreams shattered by the sounds beyond the tent walls. Hermione reached down to touch herself in desperate efforts to finish what the dream Severus started, but even though she could reach climax, it was never the toe curling, earth shattering, melt every bone in her body kind that Severus could give her.

She mentally fantasized about seeing Severus enter the tent to watch her, knowing that Harry was right outside, knowing that she'd have to be quiet. Her orgasm came in soft rippling waves that made her turn and moan into her pillow. Still unsated, Hermione curled up on her side and wished to see Severus one more time. *Please, Circe, Merlin, God, any of you, please, just let me hear his voice and feel his kiss... just one more time.*

*

Severus stood in the snow, berating himself. His Patronus, which had been a doe for twenty years, had changed again. When he'd tried casting it, it had resumed to his original hawk form. He had to forcefully focus all of his thoughts and emotions on his strongest memories of Lily in order to make it morph into the silver doe Potter might recognize as being similar to his mum's and follow without question. However, it had taken him several tries before the doe-shape emerged from his wand, and he'd almost missed his window of opportunity that the boy would even see it. The concentration it had taken to maintain the Patronus forced him to recall every possible memory of Lily that Severus had buried, every fantasy, all the ones he'd wanted to forget. But he needed both Potter and Weasley to come to the pool, Potter first, in order for the plan to work. So far, this was proving to be far more difficult to execute than he'd planned. Finally, Potter saw the doe-shaped Patronus and was following it, crashing and stumbling through the forest with complete disregard to his surroundings. Severus shook his head. *Arrogant and reckless as ever. It's a wonder you've survived this long. Don't worry about vigilance. There couldn't possibly be a Death Eater within a hundred miles of you! By all means, throw caution to the wind.*

Severus was sweating by the time Potter finally reached the pool of water.

Severus waited.

Potter stared into surface of the water as if willing the sword to rise out of it. *Accio sword."*

Leave it to a Gryffindor to try the obvious! Why do all Gryffindors act without rationalizing out the situation and behave illogically? Severus turned his attention away from the idiot boy. He tried to produce the doe Patronus again, this one for the Weasley boy. It was a difficult strain to produce a strong enough doe-shaped Patronus to send to Mr. Weasley, but without him the entire mission would fail. He glanced over his shoulder at Potter, who was still trying to work out how to obtain the sword.

Do something, you idiot boy! It won't come to you – you have to go get it! He wanted to shout at Potter, but couldn't. He watched impatiently, amused at Potter's reluctance to get wet. Potter would have to swim for the sword, actually go down into the icy depths of the pool.

Finally, Potter removed his shoes.

Severus looked up and scanned the trees. The Weasley boy didn't appear.

He knew that Weasley was near, he'd seen him only a few minutes ago, but at the moment he couldn't see or hear the boy.

Severus watched as Potter stripped. *"Diffindo,"* he said loudly, apparently still unable to cast a nonverbal spell. Severus waited as Potter wadded into the in the knee-deep ice-cold water and tried simply reaching for the sword. Severus sneered, watching the boy as he rationalized and contemplated the problem he faced. *You have to go down*

and get it, you dunderhead. Potter sank up to his shoulders in the pool. But Potter wasn't the one destined to retrieve the sword. The pool was cursed to pull him down and hold him underwater, and Severus was gambling that the Horcrux in the locket might fight Potter from getting the sword as well. Dumbledore had thought that the soul fragment in the locket might recognize the sword and would not want Potter to retrieve it. It was a gamble, he was putting Potter at risk, but there was little choice.

Potter finally dove under the water.

Severus cast the doe-shaped Patronus again, sending it to guide Weasley to Potter, and hoped the boy would follow it as blindly as Potter had. It was a huge gamble, and he hoped it would all work out as he'd planned. Dumbledore had said that in order to make the sword come to you, you had to have need of the sword to get it. Only someone who displayed the very traits of Gryffindor himself: bravery, courage, chivalry, or loyalty could yield the sword. So Weasley would have to pull Potter out, save Potter's life and draw the sword at the same time. If the locket recognized the sword, Severus was hoping that the sword might recognize the locket for what it was – evil. He could have simply used Hermione and Potter, but he couldn't bring himself to do so, and Severus was loath to alert anyone else to Hermione's camping place, so this test of bravery, loyalty, and friendship was the best he could devise.

Potter had been under the water for a full minute already.

Severus looked up and realized that Weasley wasn't in sight. *The boy has been bumbling around in the trees for hours, looking for them and yet, he isn't here? I was leading him right to Potter. How could he have gotten lost?* He swore under his breath and was about to cast his Patronus again when Weasley came crashing through the trees. Weasley shed his outer clothes quickly and dove in. Severus had planned to wait only long enough for Weasley to dive in and save Potter, not wait until the boy pulled Potter and the sword out.

Nevertheless, Severus waited. He didn't even realize he was holding his breath until his body forced him to breathe.

Finally, the boys broke the surface, Weasley dragging Potter with him. Severus cast a silent Levitation spell to help Weasley pull Potter from the pool yet allowing Weasley the delusion that he'd heaved Potter out of the water one handedly. Severus watched to see if Potter would survive the test and let out a sigh of relief when Potter began choking and retching, expelling the water from his gut and lungs on the snow bank.

Good, they won the sword, and Potter is still alive. Before he turned to go, Severus spotted Weasley panting and coughing, noting that he was already staggering to his feet as he did so.

"Are – you – mental?" Weasley practically shouted at Potter.

Severus sneered at the question, turning to walk away. *Dumbledore will be furious that I went ahead with the challenge I set for Weasley, but the ends justify the means, as the old man always said. They have the sword, won by Weasley's chivalrous act and the need to destroy the Horcrux. The idiotic boy actually came through.*

He'd had hoped to see a sign of Hermione, any sign to assure him that she was all right. He'd been tempted to place large salmon in the pool when he'd charmed it, but refrained. It would have appeared odd and would have alerted Hermione to someone's presence, even if she couldn't guess it was he and not someone with malicious intent. But that didn't prevent him from backtracking Potter's tracks to where they started, hopefully close to their tent, carefully concealing his footprints as he went. He looked around wistfully. Of course, there was no sign of her tent, not that he expected there to be. *Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit, Hermione, Love's enduring promise turned away, refused, begets an everlasting sorrow... I feel it too, my love.*

He left large slabs of chicken and steak transfigured into edible mushrooms where they would be easily seen and transfigured apples and oranges into berries on a bush nearby. Hopefully she wouldn't question it and pick the berries. He knew that Hermione would recognize the fungus at least as the edible variety even if Potter and Weasley couldn't. The nutritional value of the chicken, steak, apples and oranges would still be the same as if they'd eaten them instead of just mushrooms and tiny berries and should help nourish her body.

He scanned the space in front of him, knowing that Hermione was close, possibly close enough to hear him if he'd dare speak. *shouldn't. She doesn't trust me anymore. Any hope I had with her ended the night I killed Dumbledore. I've lost her. I need to make sure she's okay, try and help her, but there isn't anything more I can do at this time without raising suspicions.* He closed his eyes a moment, trying to believe that he'd done something – anything that would prove he was still loyal, still loved her, still on her side. *Had I known, I could have shown her how to Transfigure leaves into bread and cheese.*

Severus cringed at the sound of the boys returning, thrashing through the trees as if they were returning to the castle after a Quidditch game and talking about the rescue as if it were a grand adventure. *Silence, you idiots! You are in hiding. You are on every Death Eater's wanted list, dead or alive, and only Potter has a 'better be alive' bonus reward!*

Severus smoothly slipped into Disapparation, making as silent an exit as he could, appearing in an upstairs room in the Hog's Head. He nodded to Aberforth as he entered the bar and ordered a glass of bourbon. *Mission accomplished,* he thought as he raised his glass to drink. However, it was Hermione's face, her lithe body and her euphoric expression as she climaxed under him that filled his thoughts as he sipped his drink.

~December 1977~

Severus was withdrawing from everyone, concentrating on his essays, revisions, and spell work. In his free time, he was researching new spells or revising them, altering them to fit his needs and adding as many spells as he could to his books. Every page of his books was covered with his tiny writing, on the margins and even in between the lines of text with his annotations of spells he'd taught himself or he'd altered in some way. Madam Pince had scolded him, rebuked him sharply for defacing his books, so Severus began placing Repelling Charms around him to make her leave him alone. Some of his more creative Repelling Charms even had strange side effects, such as drooling, or once her right eye became all wonky, and with another one it looked like she'd lost her depth perception and kept dropping everything, thinking things were closer than they actually were. But it served her right for lambasting him like she had.

He still attended the Slytherin Quidditch games and still went to Hogsmeade with his friends, but most of his time was spent revising or learning warding and concealment spells. At least with his attention rigidly focused on learning and creating spells and potions, he didn't think about Lily all that much anymore. Except at night, when he was alone in his bed. He'd yet been able to force her from his dreams when he'd closed his eyes. So Severus was staying up later and later each night even though he was still waking at dawn. His friends had started teasing him about becoming a vampire because of the hours he kept. That was fine, the less sleep he allowed himself, the more exhausted he was before bed, and the less he reenacted his passionate moments with Lily in his dreams.

Avery and Rosier had tried, unsuccessfully, several times to get some of the Slytherin girls in their year to go out with him, but his attitude was becoming acerbic. He was slowly transmuting into a surly, snarling type, who took umbrage easily. Most everyone left him alone, except the few brave or desperate who wanted his help with a potion, either sanctioned or illicit. Severus would brew any request as long as the price was met and the ingredients supplied beforehand.

Several times Severus would see Leanne or Deborah in the corridors, but they scurried away from him like little mice.

He frequently saw Lily, arm and arm with Potter, but he'd lower his head and pretend he hadn't.

He went up to his tower nearly every morning to watch the sunrise or to read.

Severus even gave up trying to prove Lupin was a werewolf.

And wherever he was, in the library, in the courtyard, or in class, there was Lily, sitting next to Potter. Lily, his Lily love, looking at Potter the way Severus had always wanted her to look at him. It infuriated him seeing Potter touch her hair, put his arm around her possessively, and worst of all, kiss her. Mulciber and Rosier had stopped

teasing him about Potter stealing his girl, but Avery hadn't. Once, when Avery had gone too far, Severus hexed him with his Extremus Gelidus, and Avery never teased him again.

~ T B C ~>

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#### Author's Notes:

According to the Astronomical definition, spring begins on March 21st and lasts until June 20th, or the vernal equinox in the northern hemisphere. According to this definition, therefore, the traditional mid-Summer's day is the first day of summer. By the Meteorological definition, spring starts on March 1st since this more in line with weather conditions thought to be typical of spring. The Phenological definition of spring relates to the blossoming of a range of plant species. It, therefore, varies according to the climate. Modern calendars typically use the Astronomical definition, but the Meteorological definition and Phenological definition are more in line with what we commonly consider as spring time. However, according to the solar term, spring begins on February 4th (as does this story,) and lasts until about May 4th. I'm assuming that, as a wizard, Severus is well aware of these different definitions of spring, and he is referring to the solar term for spring (February 4th) through the Astronomical (continuing into June) when referring to his time with Hermione.

The Latin used is from: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl> A terrific site for anyone wanting Latin wording.

#### Extremus Gelidus:

Extremus = extreme cold!

Gelidus: cold , frosty, icy

## Love's Helping Hands

### Chapter 18 of 25

Separated by their choices as the events of the war spiral towards the final battle, Severus and Hermione find themselves on opposite sides, worlds apart, but not off each other's minds.

Twenty years earlier, Severus is gaining notoriety as a Potions brewer from several prominent wizarding families. With his newfound income, he regains hope of winning Lily back.

*The dialogue between Severus and Minerva in the corridor and Voldemort's words are quoted from DH and belong to JKR. I simply borrowed them for a bit. I hope she doesn't mind, but as I don't know her to ask her I'll just cross my fingers and hope it's okay.*

*A huge thank you to my beta, Southern\_Witch\_69, for typo hunting for me and helping me clean up my mistakes. I appreciate you dearly and really feel blessed to count you as my friend.*



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Love's Helping Hands

~Spring 1998~

Severus had his hands full. He was roaming the corridors under the pretense of checking the wards. *Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Finnegan and their DA are causing trouble around the castle, and I can't convince the Carrows, or my fellow Death Eaters, that allowing Alecko to torture them isn't the solution. She'll kill them. Not that it was ever easy convincing my fellow Death Eaters that serving detention with Hagrid had been a suitable punishment for their antics either.* He scoffed at the thought. *Not that it is an option any longer. Especially after that disastrous 'Support Harry Potter' party in his tiny hut. Besides, Hagrid is now on the run and probably living with that brother of his somewhere.* So as much as Severus hated it, and it angered Dumbledore's portrait to no end, the Carrows and Filch now had free reign on detentions and punishments. The brutality Severus knew that was being wrought on the students, especially the Gryffindors, was truly barbaric, but he couldn't stop them, at least not directly.

He could, however, continue to thwart the Carrows from being able to capture the students indirectly. He still had the loyalty of the house-elves and the portraits of the Headmasters, who were sworn to keep his secrets. Of course, it also helped that Peeves hated the Carrows and was quite pleased to be allowed a free hand in tormenting them as a personal charge. *And the ghosts are more than happy to assist the students, passing on warnings and haunting the Carrows' every movement!* The Fat Friar, the Bloody Baron, and Nearly Headless Nick, as well as The White Knight, Amos Swarthendale, the Scot, Bernard Blackmore, and that ruddy Lord Illingworth, had all been taking turns either following the Carrows or keeping a close watch on the members of the DA.

The translucent Scot in his kilt and carrying his bagpipes rounded the corner. "Headmaster, good to see ye."

"And you," Severus said. "How goes the watch?"

"My vigilance of me young charges is going well," the Scot said. "The young 'uns are all in their tower and all is well this eve. I am off to practice my pipes."

Severus smirked, knowing full well that the previous Headmasters had refused to allow the Scot from playing his bagpipes from the battlements at night. Headmaster Fortsecue had even charmed the ghost's pipes so that only those who desired to hear the Scot play could do so. That way, he didn't disturb anyone's sleep with his playing. "I'm sure the children will *love* the serenade."

"Oh, it's not the young 'uns I'll be playing to, but a lass," he said with a wink. "Tonight, Miss Carrow be mine to watch. Master Filius has charmed me pipes. I can serenade her to me heart's content."

"Pardon me?" Severus asked.

"Professor Filius has made it possible for me to serenade her. As long as *lintend* for her to hear me play she can. He said she'd love to hear me play so who am I to deny a lady the enjoyment of me pipes?"

Bloody brilliant, Filius! Severus wanted to laugh. *This is a new development, one I'll have to thank Filius for.* "By all means, don't let me delay you. I'm sure she's anxious to hear your tunes."

The Scot made a quick incline of his head and swept away.

"Twenty points to Ravenclaw for your ingenuity, Filius," Severus said softly, smiling as he decided to turn in for the night.

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Severus had been very attentive to any and all news about Potter, hoping to get any real news about their progress, location, or activities. Potter and Hermione had been spotted frequently or, rather more accurately, frequently thought to have been spotted by Snatchers. The Snatchers had also been claiming to have seen Weasley occasionally, although Severus was certain that the sightings were false or desperate claims in order to collect on the reward, nothing less than random redheads and overactive imaginations. But it had been frustrating nonetheless.

When Draco Malfoy had left for Easter hols, he'd let slip that the Lovegood girl had been incarcerated at his house, and his father still had Ollivander the wandmaker in his basement. They were apparently being held by the Dark Lord's orders and weren't to be harmed. But Lucius' idea of 'not harmed' was hardly consistent with his own.

Severus had learned about the disastrous escape of Potter and his friends from an irate and frightened Draco. Narcissa, terrified that Draco might be harmed, had brought him back to school as quickly as she could so Severus could protect him. Severus learned from them that Potter not only saved the Lovegood girl from Malfoy Manor but also Mr. Ollivander, Mr. Thomas, a goblin, and an elf as well. Potter had also snatched Draco's and Bellatrix's wands in the process and had fled with Gryffindor's sword and the Dark Lord's dagger.

By morning, the debauched fiasco was major gossip among the Death Eaters, and the fall from grace for Lucius and Narcissa was now nearly complete. In fact, Severus had received six letters informing him of what had happened, although he still believed Narcissa' version as truth. Bellatrix had been severely punished, although her fawning and groveling had apparently finally appeased the Dark Lord, and once she'd assured him of her loyalty, *she* had at least been forgiven. Nevertheless, the Malfoys had become prisoners in their own home with six Death Eaters, Wormtail included, taking up permanent residence.

Draco was now sniveling at Severus at every opportunity he could to try and find a way to save his parents, but Severus had precious few moments to spare with Draco, nor the patience, trying to keep the Carrows from killing the students and trying to help suppress Dumbledore's Army from wreaking havoc. Still, Draco frequently sought out Severus, pacing his office, deeply concerned for his parents and his own hide, but apparently, the boy was finally wisening up. The problem was, Severus couldn't afford to tip his hand, not now, not with everything spiraling to a head. He had to maintain his position, his charade, lest the Dark Lord find out and all was lost. There was too much at stake now.

Severus paced his sitting room or the school corridors nightly, sometimes even seeking the quiet solitude of the tower room to think. He was worried. Actually he was furious. Draco had told him that Hermione had been tortured, cursed by Bellatrix, and *that beast*, Greyback, had manhandled his Hermione and had requested her as his reward for Potter's capture.

He'd have used her! Or worst, toyed with her before he bit her he constantly lamented as he walked the corridors. Corridors she once called a home *He wouldn't have let her live, but... Oh, Merlin, if he'd actually gotten hold of her to do as he'd pleased!* He paced angrily, frustrated at his inability to protect her. *Thank the gods she escaped!* He wanted to see Hermione, desperately wanted to know if she was all right.

There was no word on where Potter had led his friends after their escape. Phineas was absolutely no help anymore where Hermione was concerned. He had told Severus that his picture frame had been left in the tent. Severus slipped out one night to the spot Scabior had said they'd captured Hermione and her friends and found her tent easily enough, but it had been ransacked and abandoned. Severus had collected everything anyway, and now all of Hermione's and her friends' belongings, what was still left of them, was now tucked away in his room. The second portrait of Phineas was now hanging in Alecto's room, and once again Phineas was of use to him again, spying on the Carrows.

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While Harry had continued to insist that the Deathly Hallows could be real, Hermione had wanted to concentrate on what she knew was truly real: the mystery of who had cast the silver doe and any possible clue as to what or where the other Horcruxes could be. Moreover, unbeknownst to either boy, she had desperately wanted to know what Severus was up to and if he was okay. Her only link to him had been Phineas' portrait, but that had been lost to her when they'd been captured. She had thought of sending him a letter by owl but was worried that it might fall into other hands. Not knowing and worrying about him troubled her sleep, giving her vivid dreams. Not that she didn't dream about Severus every night anyway.

She had also been very concerned for her friends especially Neville, Luna, and Ginny constantly worried if they were all right. She'd even fretted about the Creevy brothers, who were stupidly brave enough to be trying to fight Death Eaters all on their own, and Hermione had frequently added them in her nightly prayers as she'd prayed to every deity she knew to watch over those she cared about.

She also knew Harry's scar had been bothering him, and as the weeks had turned into months, she could tell that the frequency and duration of the visions and nightmares had been increasing.

Now, though Luna was safely with them, the stories she'd told Hermione about what had been happening in the school terrified her. She'd begged Luna to keep quiet about the tortures, the punishments, and the disappearances from Harry, needing his focus on the task at hand and not on another rescue mission. But the things she'd heard made her sick with worry for the others everyone she knew. She now cared a great deal more about the outcome of this war that Voldemort had to be defeated at any cost, even her own life, if it came down to it. She saw what was happening at the castle as a clear indication of what life under Voldemort and his Death Eaters would be like. It was more horrible than her own imagination had contrived, and Luna had lived through it, only escaping by lucky circumstances.

Hermione sat in the sun on the cliff thinking as she stared out at the sea. As usual, when she was alone, she thought about Severus when she wasn't thinking about their mission. Nearly every night and frequently throughout the day, Hermione repined for Severus. She could easily see him in her mind's eye: writing at his desk, brewing potions at his worktable, leaning back in his chair as he listened to her talk, the intensity in his dark, fathomless eyes when he was aroused, the shine to his eyes when he was excited, made a discovery, or found a solution to something.

It was his predatory look just before he kissed her, the way his eyes bore into hers as he entered her, the look on his face when he climaxed that haunted her the most. She loved the intense and unrestrained feral look on his face as he came, as if all his energy as well as his essence surged from him and into her. She even missed his smug look of completion and achievement as she lay gasping for breath after her own climax. *Two usually, sometimes he gave me three. The man is simply incredible when it comes to sex!* She truly regretted that she'd never had the opportunity to see what he would have been like in a proper bed *Or if he'd made love to me on his desk or his worktable... Get a grip, Granger. You've other things to worry about right now!*

She shoved aside her thoughts about Severus and tried to rationalize out what the last Horcrux could be, repeating the list over in her mind *Something of Rowena Ravenclaw's would be six. What is the seventh? Voldemort himself? Harry said that Dumbledore was certain that he'd had made seven. Harry said that in Slughorn's memory Tom Riddle wanted to make seven seven being the most powerful magical number... but to rip your soul seven times?*

She was certain that Voldemort had gone to Harry's parents' house to kill them and make a Horcrux from their deaths. She looked at Harry as he walked along the cliffs, not too far from where she sat. She remembered Harry's words: *'Dumbledore told me that Voldemort transferred some of his powers to me the night he gave me this scar...' 'Oh, my gods! Harry? No! Couldn't be! 'No one has ever survived the Killing Curse except for one person who incidentally is sitting right here in front of me,' Professor Moody had I mean Barty Crouch Jr. had said. Harry's mum died to protect Harry, sacrificed herself, and then Voldemort tried to kill Harry. It all backfired it all went wrong. But did it take?*

Hermione tried to list off everything Ginny had said about how the soul fragment in the diary affected her the blackouts, the disorientation, doing things against her will. *Harry doesn't do any of these things unless you count the visions and his dreams* She concentrated on how the locket affected her, its poisonous influence, but Harry didn't act like that either. *He is good, kind, and loyal... Parseltongue, Harry is a Parselmouth, and it's not from anyone in his family. If James had been a Parselmouth Sirius and Remus would have known it, and from what I read, being a Parseltongue runs in families it doesn't skip generations.*

Too many questions, and there's no one I can ask about it. Damn, I miss the library As soon as she thought of the library, the memory of Severus making love to her in the stacks, their last time together, came to mind. *Why, Severus? Why did you kill Dumbledore? Why haven't you even tried to find me owl me anything? I miss you. I have so much to ask you.*

She shifted her weight, trying to get comfortable and failing. Her body still ached as if she had degenerative joint disease or severe arthritis in every joint of her body. Bellatrix had really wanted to punish her, really wanted to hurt her, badly, and she'd been unmerciful. *Still, the witch did know when to pull back so as to keep me from losing my mind like she did to Neville's parents. But what was it that enraged her so?* Bella had only asked her about the sword where and how she had gotten the sword. It was all she wanted to know. *Gringotts her vault? She thought we had been in her vault! Harry is right one of the Horcruxes is in the vault. Why hadn't I been able to figure that out! It's so bloody obvious! Places that would have been important symbols of greatness to Tom Riddle. I have to stop thinking about the man, Voldemort, and start thinking about a teenage wizard who grew up in an orphanage among Muggles who hadn't any idea he was a wizard until he received his Hogwarts letter.*

Hermione was going over the list again, repeating aloud to herself what she already knew. "Peverells' ring, an ancient wizarding family line, proof that Tom was a direct descendant of wizard blood, an old and famous family line at that. Dumbledore found the ring in the Gaunt house? He'd hidden it in his great grandfather's house a descendant of Salazar Slytherin again proof of his wizarding lineage and that he was the heir of Slytherin...."

Harry sat down next to her. "He said it was," he said softly, "but he never got around to telling me about the ring."

Hermione turned to face him. "The diary Tom's was hidden in the Malfoy library, a huge, elegant, wealthy wizard's estate. But he'd had that as a boy. Not likely he bought the diary for himself it could have been present given to him while he was a student. That would make it significant, if it was a gift from a classmate or a girl."

"If you say so. I don't see him as the romantic, sentimental type though," Harry stated. "The young Tom I saw was full of himself, cocky, manipulative, and cunning."

Hermione was racking her brains now. "Helga Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket which he stole both belonging to the founders. We now believe that one of the Horcruxes is in the Lestrangle vault in Gringotts a place young Tom Riddle would have seen as proof of belonging in the wizarding world having money in a vault in Gringotts."

"Yes, we know this," Harry said softly. "The locket was supposed to be in the cave right, so the cup will be in the vault."

"If it's the cup that You-Know-Who gave to Bella to protect. If he made seven pieces of his soul purposely divided it into seven we still have two other options, something that belonged to Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. And two more places." Hermione stared at the sea, thinking. "Hogwarts... Where would teenage Tom hide something in Hogwarts where he believed no one would ever find it?" She was onto something but just couldn't put her finger on it. "I think I have to agree with you. I know that a Horcrux is hidden in Hogwarts."

"Yes, we already decided on that, too," Harry said, his brows creasing as he regarded her. "The castle is huge, it could be anywhere."

"Harry, could one be hidden in the Chamber of Secrets?" she asked, sure that if Tom had hidden a Horcrux in the castle that would be a very likely place.

"I dunno," Harry said, shrugging. "I didn't see anything when I was down there."

"Professor Snape, he's Headmaster," she continued to reason out her thoughts audibly.

"Yes," Harry stated.

"Dumbledore used people," Hermione stated as if he hadn't spoken.

"I'm aware of that," Harry said, sounding annoyed.

Hermione ignored his comment. "And if he was dying, if he thought that the Dark Lord would try and take the castle... he wouldn't want to just hand it over to Voldemort. He'd make it so Professor Snape would be put in charge Snape, who You-Know-Who *wanted* to take a position in the castle... all this time his most loyal servant in charge of the castle."

"Snape is loyal to *him!* Not Dumbledore anymore," Harry spat out sharply.

"If you say so..." Hermione just couldn't agree. "But Dumbledore always trusted Snape completely and was steadfast in his faith in him. There is more to what happened that night than what it seems, Harry. I just know it."

She looked out at the ocean. *What if killing Harry was to be the death You-Know-Who was going to use to make a Horcrux* She turned to look at Harry. *His greatest victory killing the Potters would be his last and final Horcrux. I'm certain of it it has to be.* She noticed a glint of metal on Harry's belt and saw the dagger Bellatrix had thrown at them, killing Dobby. "Harry, do you know what might have happened to the sheath?"

Harry's brow wrinkled again. "The what?"

"The sheath, the scabbard... Did the sword have one?" she asked earnestly. "Swords usually have a sheath or a scabbard, don't they?"

"I suppose so." Harry shook his head. "Er, no. I pulled it out of the Sorting Hat."

"Do you suppose it ever had one I mean it must have? But could it still exist?" She turned to look at him. "If it did, if it had been in the Headmaster's office when Tom was a student, if he'd seen the sword... or if someone had it and he'd found out!" *Severus. He might know or one of the portraits. Bugger.* She wished she still had Phineas' portrait. *It would be worth the risk to ask him.*

"The sword wasn't in the Headmaster's office," Harry said, his brows furrowed. "The sword appeared inside the Sorting Hat. It just magically appeared when I begged the Hat to help me. It was all I had, Fawkes and the Hat, before the sword fell on my head."

"The sword came to you when you begged for help. Ron told me he was praying you were all right when he dove in the pool of water to get you, pleading for help to get you out... He saw you were wearing the locket and reached for the sword. He said it seemed to come to him." She looked out at the sea. "So, no scabbard. No known relative of Gryffindor, no known family line there has to be!"

"I dunno," Harry said, holding a strand of grass in his fingers. "I never heard of anyone claiming to be."

Hermione threw a rock at the horizon. "Bugger, I miss the library!" she exclaimed as she stared at the line created between the sky and the sea, wishing she could get into Hogwarts library. Her frustrated mind created an image of Severus, standing in front of the bookshelves, naked, reading a book that held her answers, *Horcruxes and Where To Find Them*.

~Spring 1977~

Severus was attracting notice outside of Hogwarts. Avery and Rosier had apparently told their parents about him and his skill with Potions. Both Mr. Rosier and Mr. Avery had owed him with questions and later requests, sending the necessary ingredients. Lucius Malfoy and the Lestrangle brothers took notice apparently that Severus would brew anything for a price and had sent him requests as well. They had even sent him two new cauldrons, one silver and the other a copper one, per his requested requirement. More than once, Severus had noticed that the directions sent by Malfoy or one of the Lestrangle brothers were very old and could be improved upon with a simple added step or ingredient, and occasionally the potion desired was extremely difficult but a fun challenge to brew. To Severus, the requests and the money he was earning gave him a sense of importance. His new patrons never begrudged him his fees, and the money was always paid in advance, prior to delivery.

There was a small branch office for Gringotts in Hogsmeade, run by six goblins for students to have access their accounts from Gringotts in Diagon Alley. It was mostly a means of wizarding families to allow their kids spending money without sending precious gold by owl. However, Severus was using the services of the goblins to create an account in his name. Thanks to following Potter and Black all those years, Severus knew about the passage behind the tapestry on the fourth floor that led to a door in the alley behind Dervish and Bangs. From the other side, the door simply resembled a cellar door for the shop. Once you figured out the locking spells, it was an easy way to get into Hogsmeade and slip over to the apothecary or the Gringotts office whenever he needed to.

The only problem was he had to be careful that Potter, Black, Lupin, or Pettigrew were using the tunnel themselves. He was perturbed that there wasn't a way to alert Mr. Filch about the times Severus knew that Potter and friends were skiving off thorough the tunnel without alerting Filch to the tunnel's existence. More than once, Severus had left a Tripping Hex or a Garotting Jinx on the tunnel after he'd used it, knowing that Potter or Black would fall prey to the spells.

At least now, Lily was speaking to him again, although not like she used to. Mostly it had been sociable hellos in the library and corridors, and occasionally she'd said something to him in Potions. But other than that, she avoided him. When they both were in the library, he'd nod to her when she looked at him, and frequently she'd turn to look at him in the Great Hall, not that he was staring at her. However, she never waved like she had before, simply turned her head or resumed talking to her friends or Potter.

On the occasions when Potter and Black had been with Lily, they'd looked up at him when Lily had and made rude gestures, which Lily had then slapped their hands and admonished them for. Other times they'd given him smug or smirking looks, which had annoyed him. Several times, Black or Potter had stopped him in the corridors, warned him to leave off Lily, as if he'd been doing anything to her, and threatened him to stay away.

The worst of it was that he simply couldn't shake his feelings for Lily. He missed her terribly. He wanted to make things like they were before but knew he couldn't. He couldn't help watching her whenever he got the chance. Even though he knew that he couldn't have her, even though he knew that she was not going to come back to him, he wanted her, and only her. The memory of their friendship and the relationship they'd shared had become like a potion he'd become addicted to. He had her picture hidden under his pillow, the old silver frame tarnished from holding it every night before falling asleep. Nevertheless, he knew in his heart he would never let go. In his dreams, she was his. In his dreams, he won her back. He began to believe that when he had enough money saved away, when he was a well-known Potions master, when he was somebody important, she'd come back to him. When he was big and powerful, something impressive, she would take notice and come back to him.

Deep in his heart, he knew he would try anything just to win her back.

~May 1, 1998~

Everything had happened so quickly. As soon as Griphook had agreed to help them, Harry and Ron had begun to plan. Ron had been amazing; he really had a strategic mind. Ron and Griphook had worked out the most feasible plan of action and had managed to convince Harry it was possible, although Hermione still had her doubts, right up to the day she'd donned the outfit she'd made to look like Bellatrix Lestrangle's and had swallowed the Polyjuice Potion.

Oh, of course the history books will make it sound great! Said in simple terms, 'We flew a dragon to get out' yeah, it sounds so great, so daring and brave! But the scales were scratchy, and they cut and scraped our hands, and it was freezing cold and the clouds made us wet. Oh, yeah, it was fabulous! Hermione thought, bemused. She was dirty, bruised, and scorched from the curses on the treasure in the Lestrangle vault, smelling rather awful from riding the dragon, and still slightly damp from the lake. Now she could add slimy, grimy, and smelling putrid from sliding down the plumbing of Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. *Harry is right, in hindsight, everything does sound much cooler than it really is.* She was now sitting in some dank tunnel, rolling up long strips of the Basilisk skin and shoving it in her pockets as Ron, only several feet away, was once again trying to say 'open' in Parseltongue. "Argh! I heard Harry say 'open' a hundred times on the locket!" she heard him grumble.

"I could use a Memory Charm to try and help you remember," Hermione mumbled softly to herself, lest Ron hear her and snap at her again.

Suddenly the two huge snakes parted, the wall cracked and the doorway opened. "I did it!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "I told you I remembered it!"

"I'll say! Let's go," Hermione said, jumping to her feet. They entered the chamber, and both Ron and Hermione stood a moment, staring at the sight before them. Huge towering stone pillars entwined with snakes lined the chamber, supporting the ceiling beams, and equally impressive serpents carved from stone rose up in two rows. *Oh, if only Severus could see this! I wonder what he would think.* There was an eerie greenish gloom about the room and a soft, diffused light that seemed to come from nowhere.

"Look for anything. He could have easily hidden something in here," Hermione suggested as she carefully examined the space around the first pillar, marveling at the detailed carvings.

"Nothing. I don't see anything," Ron said as he climbed down from searching the hollow eye sockets of the first huge snake.

"Keep looking," Hermione suggested. "This place would have had a *huge* significance to Tom Riddle, and we know he was in here."

Their progress down the immense chamber was slow as they carefully checked around every pillar and each serpent as they went. At the end of the cavernous room lay the decaying remains of the Basilisk.

"Ew, gross!" Ron articulated nicely.

Hermione was looking up at the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin that stood before them like a god on a dais, taking in Salazar Slytherin's appearance from his slanted eyes and squashed wide nose to his thin lips. He wasn't a particularly attractive man, but Hermione could definitely see why Harry said he looked like a monkey. Her gaze traveled down the elaborately carved details of the robes and long stringy beard that came down to his sandaled feet.

"Nothing," Ron called out from the side of the chamber.

Hermione handed Ron two long strips of the snakeskin. "Here, wrap your hands with this. We won't have a phoenix to help us if either of us gets poisoned by a fang. And be careful. I'll say the spell to loosen the teeth, and you pull them out, okay?"

"Yeah," he said. "How many should we pull?"

"As many as we can. I don't know how much venom is still in the fangs. I think the top ones might have more venom than the bottom you know, gravity," she instructed. "*Absolvere*," she said, loosening the first fang, and Ron yanked it out easily.

"Only about a hundred or so to go," Ron said as he set the tooth aside. The job of removing the teeth went much faster than Hermione had assumed at first. Many of the larger ones still had a viscous substance within the hollows of the fangs, which Hermione magically sealed within so that it would squeeze out when the fang was used to pierce something like a syringe. She laid them carefully in a separate pile.

When they pulled as many as they could carry, Hermione turned to examine the statue more closely. "Harry said that the Basilisk came out of the statue's mouth." She searched around the statue. "Oi! There is a space in here," she said excitedly. The only things in the space were two books and a long object wrapped in cloth. She pulled them out and realized that the books were Dark Arts books on blood magic and poisons.

"You don't think it's another Horcrux, do you?" Ron asked, leaning over her shoulder.

"No, these books are not Hogwarts books," Hermione said, examining the book on poisons. The descriptions they were ghastly and made her sick. She flipped through the pages of the other book, finding a marker. Her mouth fell open when she realized what she was reading. "This is the preparations and spell on how to make Horcruxes! I think these are the books Tom Riddle used to make and protect them... These spells are horrible."

"Well, we knew he learned how from somewhere," Ron said, taking the other object and unwrapping it. "Whoa!"

"What?" she asked, turning to see a very old, worn scabbard with an elaborate tip, several decorative bands and a thick hilt at the top all made from silver and, surprisingly, untarnished. But the greyish purple leather, by comparison, looked old, dry, and flakey.

He examined the detail of the silver work. "Graphorn hide... definitely Goblin made, I think," he said very softly.

She didn't know why, but she had the urge to whisper. "Is it?"

"I do feel something from it, yeah, like the locket only quieter." Ron laid the scabbard on the ground carefully and grabbed a fang before the soul fragment inside realized what was happening. He stabbed the soft leather, and it made a loud strangling cry. Ron stabbed it with the fang twice more as the screams became garbled and faded, followed by a thick noxious smoke. "Well, that was anticlimactic. At least we know the venom is still good."

"The cup! Hurry," Hermione suggested.

Ron pulled out the cup, and it began to quiver. The sound of Tom Riddle's voice began to emanate from the cup as Ron set it on the ground. Hermione clasped the handle to hold it steady as the cup shook violently, cursing and sneering at them. "Whatever it says, don't listen to it," Hermione yelled over the pleading and snarling coming from the cup.

"Don't worry, this one I'm ready for." Ron selected the largest fang and jammed it into the cup. The soul in the cup made a loud piercing scream, which became a strangled gagging sound as a miasma of smoke wafted up from the cup, and they both quickly jumped back so that they didn't inhale it.

"Well, that takes care of that one! Are you ready to go now? We'll miss the fighting," Ron said, looking down the chamber as if they destroyed Horcruxes every day.

Hermione started laughing. "I suppose we should hurry back. Harry will wonder where we are."

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Severus felt the searing pain in his Dark Mark and knew that one of the Carrows had alerted the Dark Lord. That meant that Potter had been seen or, worse, caught within the castle. *Shite!* He was slipping back into the castle along a secret tunnel Black had unknowingly shown him his sixth year, hoping to get to the school in time. He had to reach Potter before the others did and especially before the Dark Lord arrived. *Shite! Damn bloody Horntails!* However, luck seemed to be on his side. Just as he slipped through the concealed doorway behind a suit of armor, he heard Minerva running his way, whispering to someone while hurrying along, although she could have been muttering to herself. The door made a soft squeak of rusty hinges as the tunnel closed behind him.

Minerva suddenly stopped and turned, brandishing her wand, obviously ready to fight. "Who's there?" she asked, the strain of fear and determination in her voice.

"It is I," he said calmly, stepping from the shadows. "Where are the Carrows?" he asked calmly, although his heart was pounding in his chest.

"Wherever you told them to be, I expect," she replied coolly.

He didn't have time for this. The sensation in his Dark Mark told him that the Dark Lord was coming. *Did Alecto apprehend him? What about Hermione? Has Potter been to the Ravenclaw tower already?* "I was under the impression that Alecto had apprehended an intruder," he said smoothly, forcefully controlling his voice to hide the fact that his arm was still throbbing.

"Really, and what gave you that impression?" she asked a bit too calmly.

My Dark Mark, you witch! She is too defensive... she's hiding something protecting possibly. His Dark Mark burned again, and Severus knew that the Dark Lord was furious. *This has been going on all night! This does not bode well; he should be happy not angry. Something is seriously wrong.* He looked around the space hoping to see a glimmering distortion. He tightened and flexed his fingers of his left hand to try and fight the searing pain.

"Oh, but naturally. You Death Eaters have your own private means of communication. I forgot," Minerva sneered at him.

However, the corridor was eerily quiet. *No Alecto or Amycus, and Minerva's acting like she does while protecting her precious cubs.* "I did not know that it was your night to patrol the corridors, Minerva." *Potter is here right here or nearby. That means that this is it the end the final showdown.* He expected to see the Carrows or at the very least hear them come crashing down the corridor any second.

"You have some objection," she said, standing defiantly in the middle of the corridor.

Blast it, witch, I told Dumbledore that I should've confided in you. But no lies and deceit. Keep things on a need-to-know basis and never reveal everything... secrets and lies. I'll have to trick her into telling me. "I wonder what could have brought you out of your bed at this late hour."

"I thought I heard a disturbance," she replied stiffly.

Her posture told him she was ready to defend someone. "Really? But all seems to be calm..." He wanted to ask *Where are the Carrows? Is Potter here with you? I have something to tell him, something Dumbledore entrusted to me that he must know... But I don't dare, unless... Do I dare reveal my hand? There isn't much more time.* "Have you seen Harry Potter, Minerva? I know he is here. You'd do best to tell me, let me..." He was cut off by the sound of a crash from somewhere down the corridor. *All right, the blunt approach. 'Please, Minerva, trust me,'* he tried to say with his eyes. "Because if you have, I must insist..."

The flicker of her eyes suddenly told him that Potter was here, right here, under his father's cloak. "Why would you think I have seen Potter?"

He decided that now was the time; he'd just tell her the truth, tell her so Potter could hear him. There was no one else around but her and Potter, he was sure of that now. Severus was just about to tell her that he had vital information for Potter... He'd just opened his mouth to speak...

He never got to say what he wanted; his confession died on his lips. Minerva, obviously protecting her precious cub, lashed out at him, and he'd had just enough warning reflected in her eyes for him to raise a Shield Charm to protect himself. However, he had underestimated her. Minerva McGonagall was a sprite, wiry woman in prime magical shape for her age and exceptionally strong and gifted.

They were both thrown off balance for a moment. Severus recovered only a second before Minerva did. *Shite, this isn't how I wanted this... She won't trust me because I've maintained my cover far too well. Curse you, Dumbledore! You taught me well, old man.*

She ripped a torch off the wall, Transfiguring the flame into a lasso as she aimed it at his head. *She believes that I'm loyal to...* Severus Transfigured the ring of flame into a black snake, which Minerva quickly vanquished into smoke. ... *the Dark Lord. I'm a traitor in her eyes.* The smoke became daggers, which he avoided only by grabbing the suit of armor and pulling it in front of him. *Damn, she's good. So much for your belief that she'd keep her faith in me, old man!* His Dark Mark seared with pain again, and he knew that the Dark Lord was furious about something.

"Minerva?!" Filius called out, running to her aide with Pomona and Horace entering the corridor right behind him, and Severus knew that any hope he had at trying to reason with Minerva was gone. *And Potter won't trust me now either not that that insolent whelp ever had.*

"No," squeaked Filius, aiming his wand. "You'll do no more murder at Hogwarts!"

The Mark burned from a Death Eater's summoning, and he knew that wherever Amycus was, he'd just alerted the Dark Lord. *Probably some news about Aleccio... or possibly Hermione!* The thought terrified him. *What if he's captured Hermione?* The jet of light hit the suit of armor, and it came to life, turned and grabbed Severus from behind, the dagger hilts now jabbing painfully into Severus' back.

The Dark Mark seemed to sear into his flesh right down to his bone, and the pain of the Dark Lord's anger nearly brought Severus to tears. *can't hope to find her if every teacher on my staff turns against me!* He struggled against the steel arms of the armor. *She's strong, capable... I have to believe...* Using his Deiciocontortum Hex, he managed to send the armor flying backwards away from him. He had no hope now of reasoning with either Minerva or Filius, and Pomona and Horace were blocking the corridor behind them, their wands drawn. His Mark seared again, and this time the feeling was quite different. *They'll never believe me, and I'm out of time! He is here. I have to stall him! Give them time to get out! I hope Potter got whatever it was Dumbledore said was hidden in the castle... If not... Bloody hell!* Turning, Severus ran for the nearest door. The last thing he heard before using the flying spell the Dark Lord had taught him were the words "Coward" being yelled after him from the castle.

Damn you, Dumbledore, I hope you rot! I did it your way, and I've failed! I failed Potter! How in blazing horntails am I going to pass on the information you entrusted to me now? Why in all your ubiquitous omnipotence couldn't you have foreseen this happening? Secrets breed distrust, old man, as much as lies do! Why didn't you tell your camarilla in the Order about me! Now Hermione is in the castle, the Dark Lord is coming, and I haven't had the opportunity to tell Potter what he must know! This is it, the end, the final battle is about to commence and Potter doesn't know! And what HE doesn't know could get my Hermione killed!

~May 2, 1998~

The fighting had been awful so far. There were severe casualties on both sides. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had moved through the castle feeling the strain of lack of sleep and insufficient food, functioning merely from a constant surge of adrenaline and necessity. But as the voice of Voldemort echoed across the grounds, Hermione knew the night was far from over.

The Horcruxes are destroyed with the exception of Voldemort's snake. In order to win, Harry has to kill the snake at all costs! Although Hermione was certain it was a bad idea, Harry had led the way to the Shrieking Shack, and she and Ron had crawled in right after him. She was nervous and scared, unsure what, if any, obstacles or challenges they'd face. Still, Harry had to face Voldemort, and she'd be damned if she'd let her friend go alone. He needed her.

Now he knelt, as if immobilized, at the entrance to the Shack. "Harry?" Hermione whispered, trying to get him to react. He finally moved, shifting the obstacle from the opening so that they could all climb inside. When she poked her head out, she saw fresh scorch marks on the walls and Harry's trainers as he crawled toward a body on the floor. *Oh, Merlin, no!* She gasped in alarm upon seeing Severus lying so pale on the floor, trying to stop the bleeding from the neck with his hand. *There is so much blood!*

She scrambled the rest of the way out, her eyes watching Harry to see if he'd try to help Severus. Harry didn't, either because he didn't know how or didn't care. Either way, Hermione knew it would be up to her, *again* if Severus was to have a chance of survival. Hermione pulled out her wand, casting spells to try to retain his blood, to stop the flow until help could be summoned.

Severus seized the front of Harry's robes and pulled him close. "Take... it.... Take... it...." he tried to say; only his voice had a terrible rasping, gurgling sound, and she knew that the wound on his neck had come from the bite of Voldemort's snake.

As she moved around Harry to get a better angle, she noticed something silvery leaking out of Severus from his eyes, nose, and throat, and she gasped in shock, wondering what the substance could be. *Memories maybe... His memories is this what he wants Harry to take? His memories. Things he wants us to know... Dumbledore's death perhaps? I knew he had to have had a reason! Is this what he wants us to know? His reasons.*

Her attention was brought back to the situation at hand when Severus spoke again. "Look... at... me..." he whispered with great effort.

Hermione's heart seemed to drop into her stomach and thump slowly. *No... no, don't give up! Don't you dare give up!* Hermione moved forward, wand held ready, and her foot kicked something. *A vial. A vial? An empty vial...* She picked it up and turned it in her hands. It was still warm. *Retineo Sanguinis!* she immediately cast on Severus's neck as a booming voice, high-pitched and cold, broke the silence.

"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery," the voice announced.

Yeah, right, like I believe you value anything but yourself. Hermione forced herself to concentrate on Severus, ignoring the eerie voice as Harry jumped to his feet and stared at the wall. *"Captus Areteriae, Continere!"* she incanted, keeping her focus on Severus's neck. *Come on, please!*

"Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen," the high-pitched voice proclaimed.

"*Retino Sanguinis*," she repeated worriedly while reaching into her pocket for the bottle containing her essence of Dittany with her other hand.

"I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste," Voldemort's voice vociferated throughout the entire area.

Yeah, right, you megalomaniac! What about Severus's and he was one of your favorites your most trusted She thanked Merlin that the bleeding had finally stopped. "*Conceptum Sanguen*," she added quickly, and the blood reversed somewhat, drawing back into his wound, but there was still a great deal of blood on him and the floor. "*Amplector Coercere*."

"Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured."

Don't worry, you sick bastard. I will, she thought as she checked the amount of Dittany she had left and poured it on Severus's neck *Please be enough. Please...* There was little more she could do. Silently she prayed to each deity she could name, pleading for them to spare his life and give him strength to recover. "Please, Severus, live," she said, leaning down close to his ear as Voldemort continued to reverberate off the walls. "Live for me. I need you to live. I love you. Please don't give up and die."

"... yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest..." the voice continued to boom.

"Likes hearing himself talk, doesn't he? How could you stand him?" she said softly to Severus. Hermione sat up *He needs help... Who?*

"... battle recommences. This time I shall enter the fray myself..." the voice of Voldemort announced.

Aberforth! Yes, Dumbledore's brother, proprietor of the Hog's Head. He can come get Severus and hide him.. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on a happy memory, any happy memory. *Think, concentrate... His kiss! Focus on his kiss, on the time spent in his office, any one of our times together, and concentrate* She tried to hone her thoughts completely on the feeling of Severus' kiss, the feel of his arms as they embraced her and pointed her wand at the window behind them. "*Expecto Patronum*," she said quietly so as not to alert anyone who could be standing outside the door. 'He's here in the Shrieking Shack. He's one of us! He's hurt and needs help. Please, Aberforth, please help him. He's one of the good guys really. Please believe me...' She forced her thoughts into the silvery, iridescent otter as it sped from the room.

"... child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour," Voldemort said.

The voice suddenly stopped. There was an eerie silence all around them, except for the sound of her pulse and her own breathing in her ears.

Hermione siphoned the silvery strands of Severus' memories into her Dittany bottle, and then rose to her feet to stand next to her friends. "It'll be all right," she said, hoping that the concern and fear she felt wasn't in her voice. "Let's let's get back to the castle. If he's gone to the forest, we'll need to think of a new plan...." She glanced at Severus's face as he lay there. *He's so pale, the blood at least his blood has stopped seeping from the wound. But he lost so much already, and I don't have any Blood-Replenishing Potion. I don't know if I've done enough for him, but it's all I can do,* she thought as she hurried back into the tunnel entrance. *Please, Aberforth, please help him...*

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Author's Notes:

Horcrux list:

*We know about Tom Riddle's diary, Cadmus Peverells' the Resurrection Stone ring, Salazar Slytherin's locket, Helga Hufflepuff's cup, and Rowena Ravenclaw's diadem. I figured that Voldemort made Nagini into a Horcrux as a last resort since she helped Voldemort survive, thinking she would replace the diary. So, assuming that Tom Riddle intended to make his final Horcrux with the deaths of the Potters, there would have been still one more unidentified Horcrux. So, I used the scabbard in this story as the possible sixth Horcrux. Voldemort made Nagini a Horcrux after his resurrection after learning about the fate of his diary. This also means that Voldemort might have been unaware that Harry had a part of his soul, but may have figured there was some kind of connection simply because of the scar/rebounded curse, or realized it at a later time.*

*As used in chapter 9 as well, the Deiciocontortum Hex is comprised of*

Deicio -icere -ieci iectum: 1. to throw, cast, hurl down, to throw to the ground, fell; 2. of persons, to kill, bring down. In general, to fling away or aside

Contortum: whirling; so powerful, vigorous

Absolvere: to loosen , to free; using solvo solvere solvi solutum: to loosen; to untie , release, free; to dissolve, break up; to exempt; to break up, weaken, bring to an end; to pay off, discharge a debt

My favorite Latin translation source is, of course <http://catholic.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

## Facing the Dark Lord

Chapter 19 of 25

It is the final battle, and the future of mankind, both wizard and Muggle, hang in the balance of the outcome of the final confrontation... and someone has a major role to play.

Twenty years earlier, Severus receives some information that will change his life forever.

*This story now deviates away from canon. Hope you don't mind the liberties I've taken. There are some lines of dialogue that are borrowed or similar to ones from DH, and some of the situations are the same. No plagiarism was intended, but I don't know JKR to ask permission, so I hope she doesn't mind.*

*Huge thank you to my betas, MadBrilliant, for typo hunting for me, and Southern\_Witch\_69, for helping me clean this up and make it presentable. I appreciate it so very much.*



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Facing the Dark Lord

~May 2 1998~

Severus woke up at some point in a dark room on a lumpy bed with the image of a sad looking girl, gazing down at him from over the fireplace. He tried to move his head and felt an intense pain shoot through his body.

He heard someone walk over and sit on a stool next to the bed. "So you've come back, have you?" the man asked gruffly. Severus was surprised to see Aberforth leaning over him as he lifted Severus' head and force-fed him some potions, two he could identify as Blood-Replenishing Potion and a general healing potion. The other tasted more like cinnamon tea.

Finally, Severus felt he had the strength to try talking. "Have I?" he managed to say, but his voice was barely audible, only scratchy croaks in his own ears.

"Save it," Aberforth said, scooping up Severus' head again, holding another potion for him to drink. "Your neck is still pretty tore up. What bit you? I'm guessing it was that huge snake of that Lord of yours."

Severus was surprised by the taste of the potion; it was his potion, the same one he'd brewed for Arthur three years ago. "Yes, the Dark Lord's familiar."

"Them is rhetorical questions, boy, not for conversation. Eat." Aberforth forced Severus to eat, well swallow, this time some bread soaked in a thick, beefy broth and some beer.

Severus ate as much as he could. The food was good, and it did quiet his stomach as well as sate his hunger. "Who won?" he managed to croak out. He tried lifting his head to sit up, straining to lift his shoulders.

"No one," Aberforth said, pushing Severus back down on the bed. "Save your strength, boy. The big battle hasn't happened yet. That Lord of yours was giving Potter one hour to surrender to him. Time's nearly up."

"What?!" Severus exclaimed, ignoring the strain on his throat.

Aberforth made a mirthless chuckle. "They're collecting their wounded on both sides. It's been quiet at the castle. Even the fighting in the town has stopped. But them giants are still pacing around out there. I think your side is gathering in the forest, or so I heard. One last attack on the castle."

"So it's not over," Severus said, inhaling deeply, steeling himself to try getting up again. Gingerly, he rolled onto his side to rise. "Potter, is he still..."

"Lay down. Potter's in the castle," Aberforth said, trying to make Severus lie down again.

Severus resisted, pushed himself up with his elbow, and forced himself upright. "I have to go, Herm-he needs me." He was still lightheaded, weak, but this wasn't over. *With any luck, I can still find Potter, not that Fortuna has ever favored me when I really needed her.* For some reason, the memory of what he wanted to tell him was fuzzy absent. He tried searching his memory for why. *I... did it, didn't I? I released the memories. But will he see them in time? Did I tell him?*

"If you go out there, they'll kill you," Aberforth said gruffly.

Severus turned his head, the pain nearly making his eyes water. "Didn't you know? I'm already dead." He pulled himself warily to his feet.

Aberforth raised his hands in surrender as Severus staggered for the door. "Pardon me, I thought you needed saving. She was rather clear that I was to help you."

"And I thank you for all you've done," Severus replied as he walked out the door to fulfill his promise.

Severus had no idea how he'd managed to find the strength to make it to the edge of the forest. Scrambling through the tunnel from the Shrieking Shack and out from under the Whomping Willow had only increased his resolve to keep going. If he couldn't get to Potter, he had to see Hermione one last time to prove to her he was still on her side. Before he died, he wanted her to know the truth. He was wandless, but that didn't matter. He was a dying anyway. He would show his face, stand among those fighting against the Dark Lord, and hopefully it would shake the Dark Lord's confidence. He hoped it would be enough. The Dark Lord was so arrogant, so overconfident in what he believed, and Severus had fed that overconfidence, his vanity for years, groveling at the narcissistic fool's feet to prove his loyalty. He would prove where his true loyalties lay today. It was worth it, and a quick Avada Kedavra was preferable to a slow painful death anyway.

He arrived at the scene just as Hagrid was being forced at wandpoint to carry Potter out of the forest and up to the castle, followed by a triumphant Dark Lord and his followers. His shoulders sagged as he leaned against a tree. *I'm too late.* Severus swore as the Dark Lord told Hagrid to dump Potter on the ground in front of the castle in view of the door and called out to the people within. Severus cursed himself for his incompetence. *I've failed.* Severus remained where he was hidden within the trees to watch and listen. *Nothing for it now, it'll be a bloody battle to the end but he'll win. But I'll prove it to Hermione... At least she'll know. It's not much, but I have to show her the truth.*

From his position, Severus could see the Dark Lord pace as he reveled in his victory one that Severus knew hadn't even been decided yet, although with Potter dead, the Dark Lord was sure to win now.

"You have lost. Fighting me is futile! You must all see that now," the Dark Lord called out to the occupants of the castle. "There doesn't need to be any more fighting. Surrender and I will be merciful."

Severus heard the doors of the castle open and saw the people as they filed out onto the grass to face the Dark Lord, wands drawn, hardened expressions and determined eyes.

The Dark Lord sneered as he watched the defenders of the wizarding world face him. "You would still fight me? You still defy me? You would choose death rather than

surrendering? How foolish." He pointed to the place Potter's body was lying on the grass in front of him. "Here is your Chosen One, your hero the one you all thought could defeat me! See him. He lies here dead I killed him your defender."

Severus wanted to cover his ears, but his eyes caught a flash something orange, or a ball of flame, move in the windows of the castle. From somewhere inside the castle, echoing from the open windows and gashes in the wall, a familiar cry was heard the defiant cry of a phoenix. Everyone stood still as Fawkes swooped down from the castle and dropped what looked like the Sorting Hat in front of the Dark Lord, right where Severus assumed Potter lay, and then flew off in Severus' direction. Severus' attention was riveted on the bird as he flew straight at him and landed on his shoulder.

The bird was surprisingly light, and his soft cooing felt like an elixir to his soul. Regardless, Severus had to sit down. What strength he'd had was leaving him. Fawkes walked down Severus' arm and came to rest on his forearm, looking at him with a questioning air. When the phoenix leaned over to nudge his neck, Severus felt the warm drops of Fawkes tears drip off his beak and roll down his skin. He gratefully loosened his bandage as the bird continued to cry on his wound. Within seconds, he could feel the difference in his neck as the wound healed, and he could feel some of his strength coming back. Nevertheless, Nagini's venom still coursed through his veins, and he knew that the neurotoxins were already eating away at his nerves and muscles, but he also knew that he now had strength enough for what he knew had to be done. "Thank you," he said, noticing that even his voice was stronger than before.

Fawkes cooed and hopped to the ground, looking at his pocket. The bird nudged him, tearing his attention from what was happening in front of the castle, and Severus stuck his hand in his pocket, surprised when his fingers touched a glass vial.

"Now how did you know I still had this?" he asked, withdrawing the vial.

Fawkes preened and nudged his hand. Severus unstopped the vial and swallowed the last few drops of his Pain Potion. He let his head fall back against the tree and closed his eyes as the potion took effect, trying to tune out the sarcastic voice of the Dark Lord. The Pain Potion helped or, rather, the pain he felt was lessened. Fawkes nudged his hand again, indicating the now empty vial.

"You want this?" he asked and held it to Fawkes. Severus was surprised again when the gentle bird tilted the vial toward him with his beak, leaned over the opening, and filled the medium vial with his precious tears before flying off into the trees.

Severus stood and walked toward the edge of the trees to see what was happening. It was apparent that the battle would take place there on the grass in front of the castle. The collection of students, teachers, a few Order members, and Aurors looked haggard and worn, their numbers far less than Severus had hoped. Mr. Longbottom stood in the forefront with Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood on his right, Mr. Finnegan and Ronald Weasley on his left, and the Order lined up behind him with the Aurors interspaced amongst the staff and students.

Severus apparently missed some of the confrontation between the Dark Lord and Mr. Longbottom. "You insolent whelp!" he spat.

Severus watched as the Dark Lord Imperiused Longbottom and made him walk forward. "You defied my followers all year, wreaked havoc and mayhem in complete disregard to the fact that you were counted among the privileged few to be allowed to return. You who were given the opportunity to further yourself to the glory of our kind. You who are a pure-blood from one of the oldest families, you, who I would have honored to be in my new order you defied me! And for what? For Potter? For some sense of honor? Do you not know that I am doing all of this to set us free? To take us out of the shadows and in our rightful place..."

"I did it because it was right!" Mr. Longbottom shouted back, finally breaking the hold of the Imperius. "Because you are evil! Because being pure-blood doesn't mean you are better or smarter or more..."

"Silence!" the Dark Lord yelled and locked the boy in a full Body-Bind. "I have heard enough from you! All I heard all year was about you and your band of blood traitors!" He summoned the Sorting Hat and placed it on Longbottom's head, pacing around Longbottom as he continued to rant and rave.

The centaurs nearest Severus snorted in disgust and stepped out from the forest, arrows drawn, ready to fight against the Dark Lord and his followers on the left. Across the school grounds, members of the villagers began to appear on the lawn, creating a flank against the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters on the right, with quite a few students within the ranks. Severus was pleased to see Slytherin sixth- and seventh-years among them.

As Severus took note of the tactical advantage the defenders of the wizarding world now had, both in position and in numbers, he almost missed seeing Longbottom pull the sword of Gryffindor from the hat, wondering when the Dark Lord had released the boy. In a defiant, yet familiar hiss of Parseltongue that Severus had heard all too often, the Dark Lord told Nagini to attack.

The huge snake lunged forward and missed as the boy jumped out of her way, using the sword to protect himself. Nagini recoiled, and those closest quickly stepped back. Nagini lunged again, and Longbottom swung the sword to his left in another sweeping arch, causing the snake to miss. Hissing in rage, she tried to withdraw to strike again, but Neville had swung the sword back and it made contact. Nagini arched in pain, and Longbottom swung again, this time the cut taking Nagini's head clean off. The Dark Lord went into a rage, trying to curse Longbottom, who miraculously managed to avoid being hit as if a Shield Charm protected the boy.

While everyone was distracted, Severus scanned the area for Hermione, finding her standing with several Weasley boys behind Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood. His heart skipped a beat, seeing Hermione standing among those ready to fight. Miss Weasley suddenly cried out in alarm, pointing to the ground near Neville. Severus looked, expecting to see Potter's body on the ground, and suddenly realized that he had vanished, a fact that was soon discovered by the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord raged in anger, looking around furiously, demanding to know who'd taken the boy.

The next moment, Potter removed his cloak and was standing next to Neville. "You've made a huge mistake, Voldemort, or should I call you Riddle? Tom Riddle. That's your name, isn't it, Tom?" Potter asked belligerently.

"How dare you speak his name?!" Bellatrix yelled from across the lawn, moving defiantly forward to stand beside the Dark Lord.

"Oh, I dare, as will *everyone* from now on. Tom Riddle. You've lost," Potter taunted the Dark Lord.

"Oh, no, Harry Potter," the Dark Lord sneered, brandishing Dumbledore's wand so Potter could see it. However, Potter only smiled when he recognized the wand. "You see, I possess the Elder Wand, the Deathstick, the Wand of Destiny. It's mine."

"Are you sure about that? Are you absolutely sure that Dumbledore's wand is now *yours* that it will *respond* to you?" Potter asked, still grinning as he stood defiantly facing the Dark Lord, his wand held in his hand ready to fight. "From what I've seen it's not working all that well for you. Your spells seem to be less effective either that or you keep missing your target." The Dark Lord glared at Potter, but he sneered right back. "Because as I understand it, Riddle, you can't simply take a wand from someone's grave to own it, you have to *conquer* a wand to truly possess it, especially the fabled Elder Wand. If that *is* the Elder Wand, as you claim. Just having it isn't enough. You have to take it from its previous owner by force, subdue him, *win it*, and Severus Snape *never* did that. Draco Malfoy did."

"You lie, Potter," the Dark Lord sneered. "Severus Snape killed Dumbledore. He took the wand from him."

Potter smirked, and for the first time Severus was pleased to witness his arrogance. "Dumbledore *wanted* Severus to have his wand he *told* him to take it from him if the time came, but he didn't. Draco disarmed Dumbledore. Snape picked up Dumbledore's wand when Draco dropped it while they were fleeing. Snape didn't own the wand Draco did. Past tense, Tom, as in he did then."

He was there! Now Severus understood the ploy Dumbledore had planned with his vow. *It wasn't only to set me up to take his place as Headmaster! He'd planned for me to have his wand. Dumbledore had set me up to die to be a sacrifice for a wand!*

Potter was now smirking insolently at the Dark Lord. *I* disarmed Draco, in his own house the day I rescued my friends *I* subdued him in a fight, and *I conquered him!* He

held Draco's wand up so the Dark Lord could see it clearly.

Severus looked closer at the wand in Potter's hand and realized that he was indeed holding Draco's wand, not the holly wand Potter had used for six years.

"That's right," Potter said arrogantly. "I was there that night on the tower. The day Dumbledore and I stole your locket. ~~He~~*begged* Snape to do it. I heard him pleading."

Severus looked up, seeing the plan, all of it, far too clearly now. It wasn't just enough to keep Potter alive all these years for this moment. Dumbledore knew the Dark Lord would want his wand! That's why he had Nagini kill me over a bloody wand! I nearly failed to tell the prat what he needed to know because of that bloody wand. You lied to me. 'Give him the memories' at least that part was accomplished, you old fart. Literally over my dying body. Severus looked at Potter with new insight. *He played us, my hatred for your father, my loathing of you, for this this! He concealed his real plans from us both.*

"It was Draco Malfoy who disarmed Dumbledore. *He* held him at wandpoint and subdued Dumbledore, not Severus Snape. You killed the wrong wizard."

"Severus Snape killed Dumbledore," the Dark Lord snarled, but Severus could hear the conviction in his voice, the doubt. Severus knew what Potter was doing and applauded the boy. *Yes, I was right, the Dark Lord's confidence can be broken. If the Dark Lord doubts if he's unsure the strength behind any spells he casts will be lessened.*

"Yes, because Dumbledore *made* him do it. Severus Snape was Dumbledore's man. He was *on* my side right to the end," Potter sneered back, defiantly, his arrogance finally serving him well.

The Dark Lord's brow creased, and for a split second, his wand dipped.

"Severus Snape swore an oath to Dumbledore, a wand oath, to protect me. He made a vow to ~~do~~*everything* he could to make sure I survived to face you, here, now, today. And he succeeded!"

The Dark Lord drew himself up to stand taller, erect and firm, rather than the relaxed casual stance he usually had. "You are a fool, Harry Potter. He ~~was~~*is* my spy, my most loyal..."

Potter shook his head, a smug expression on his face. "He turned against you. Severus Snape was working against you all along these last sixteen years. He was working with Dumbledore to bring you down because you killed my mum. Severus Snape swore an oath to protect me, to help me, and he has every day since we first met. He's helped protect and strengthen *me*."

The Dark Lord literally took a step back, the anger and doubt evident to Severus from where he stood. "You lie, Harry Potter, you were fooled, as were all of you!" he nearly shouted.

"You'd like to think so, wouldn't you? Why then did Severus Snape *save* my life, and my friends' lives, over and over again? First year from a troll, again when you had Quirrell hex my broom, and he was with Dumbledore when they saved me from you when I found the Sorcerer's Stone. Second year, he brewed the potion to cure those petrified by the basilisk. Third year, he tried to protect me from the Dementors twice and from a werewolf. Fourth year from your imposter Moody, and fifth year, Severus Snape saved Mr. Weasley from Nagini's bites and warned the Order about your plans in the Ministry, sending the Order to save me and gave me private Occlumency lessons. And last year, even though he killed Dumbledore, he fought *against* your Death Eaters as he left the castle, protecting me, Draco Malfoy, the Auror Tonks, Professor McGonagall, and my friends. And this year, Severus Snape again protected my friends from the Carrows and gave me the sword of Gryffindor the real sword, not the fake one he gave Bellatrix Lestrange."

"That's a lie!" Bellatrix shouted, looking quickly from Harry to the Dark Lord and back. She raised her wand, pointing it at Potter. "You lie! I had the sword the real one and you stole it from my vault!"

"Severus Snape gave me the sword in December," Potter said, smiling smugly. "Right after we escaped your familiar in Godric's Hollow."

"*Enough of this!*" the Dark Lord yelled, enraged, and Severus knew that Potter had nearly managed to weaken the Dark Lord's confidence. "You lie. You can twist what happened all you want, Potter, but I know the truth. He was my..."

Severus stepped out from the shadows under the trees and staggered forward to face the Dark Lord to prove Potter's words were right. Hermione rushed over to him, stopping only long enough to see how weak he truly was. She was worried. Worried for him. She was too thin, her clothes were dirty, and her hair was in a messy braid with tendrils of curls flying every which way. There were dark circles under her eyes, a cut on her cheek and on her arm. There was mud, grime, scorch marks, blood, and soot all over her. But to him, she had never looked more beautiful. The most beautiful sight in the world.

"See him. He lives. Your snake didn't kill him. He's right there on my side not yours," Potter said, pointing at Severus and Hermione. "My friends know the truth. Even Bellatrix Lestrange knows that Severus Snape had turned away from you. Chose to switch sides and fight against you," Potter said. "She's suspected him all along!"

Severus wasn't really paying attention to anything but Hermione. He felt another arm slide around his waist as Hermione moved to support him. Severus turned his head, surprised to see Miss Lovegood smile up at him, her wand held firmly in her hand. Miss Weasley and Mr. Finnegan hurried over, and Draco followed, the three of them stopping to stand in front of Severus and Hermione, wands drawn ready to defend him. The Dark Lord looked at Severus with pure hatred in his red eyes and turned his attention to Potter as the insolent boy continued, undaunted.

"Do you see now? He was *never* yours. He is *on* my side, as is Draco Malfoy," Potter sneered, turning to face the Dark Lord.

Severus could see Narcissa moving in his direction, most likely so she could defend her son when the fighting resumed.

"They're not yours. They stand against you as do many other people *you thought* were destined to follow you," Potter said, pointing to the Slytherin students and people from Hogsmeade. "Severus Snape was in love with my mother. Did you know that, Riddle? Did you know that Severus Snape's Patronus is a doe, just like my mum's? Did you realize that when he begged you to spare her life? Severus' love for my mum made you make your biggest mistake, Tom, your first miscalculation. Not only did my mum's sacrifice protect me all those years but you also marked me as your equal that night. You gave me powers I wouldn't have had otherwise."

"You liar," the Dark Lord practically shouted. "I have seen your so called skills. You are nothing! You ~~are~~*not* my equal. You are nothing but an insolent child, who has, until now, relied on luck and the aid of those better than you..."

"Really? Then explain our connection, how I can read your feelings, your thoughts, and see what you see? How I knew about your Horcruxes what they were and where you hid them? How I knew where you were most of this year enough to evade you to escape your traps?" Potter asked, and Severus could see the Dark Lord pause. "They are gone, you know, all of them. Gone. Destroyed! You are mortal now. There is no coming back this time."

"That is irrelevant," the Dark Lord sneered. "I will win. You will die, and I will rule all."

"Like you did the Malfoys? There they are, Mrs. Malfoy and Draco standing next to Severus Snape and my friends." Potter pointed to the small group standing opposite the Dark Lord's left among the centaurs. The Dark Lord looked and sneered. "And where is Mr. Malfoy, eh? Why isn't he standing among your followers?"

"They don't matter. I'll deal with them later. It will make no difference," the Dark Lord spat angrily.

Severus knew; Potter had broken the Dark Lord's confidence. For all his bluster, his defiance, Severus could hear doubt in the wizard's voice.

"I am going to kill you, Harry Potter."

Potter stood ready, his wand arm up, shoulders back, and feet set in a duelist stance. "I don't think you can, but go ahead. Take your best shot!"

"*Avada Kedavra.*," the Dark Lord said as Potter yelled, "*Expellarimus!*" Twin jets of light shot forth from their wands, but the spells collided and combined. However, the force of Potter's spell, apparently the stronger of the two, made the combined ball of light continue on its path and hit the Dark Lord square in the chest. Dumbledore's wand had flown from the Dark Lord's hand the moment the two spells had collided, and Potter reached for the Elder Wand, catching it as the Dark Lord fell.

Screams and cries erupted as the Death Eaters raised their wands and the defenders, theirs. Both sides shouted various spells and shots of light crossed the field.

Several Death Eaters dropped their wands, falling to their knees, fingers laced behind their heads in surrender.

Hermione had moved forward into the fray, fighting valiantly. Lestranger turned to fire at her, and Severus raised his hand, concentrating the last of his strength on one spell, sending Lestranger flying backwards.

The last thing Severus saw before he passed out was Hermione stumble and land on the ground only a few yards in front of him.

~May1978~

The Warrington house was one of the oldest houses in Hogsmeade. It stood tall, an imposing rectangle of stone among the old trees. The wards surrounding the place made it look like nothing more than an igneous formation of plutonic rock unless one was given the secret, but even when one could see the house, it looked like it was made from one huge block of stone. Today was the last Hogsmeade weekend of the year, and Aeron Warrington had invited Evan Rosier and his friends to his house for lunch.

Mr. Warrington claimed to be a descendant of the Woodcrofts, the founders of Hogsmeade. He had beady black eyes, a pudgy nose, and a goofy grin, which was in stark contrast to his tall frame and long, thick, hairy arms. He was known to be a stern man and a wicked fighter, but his movements were usually slow and deliberate. He was also a zealous supporter of the Dark Lord.

By now, Severus was getting used to the formal dining style of the pure-blood families and knew that he should always wear his best robes. After lunch, as was the custom for the pure-blood males after a formal meal, they gathered in the study for smokes and drinks. An old female house-elf served the boys firewhisky watered down with gillywater instead of butterbeers. As was expected, considering the company he was in, the conversation turned to the old debate of blood purity and the activities of the Dark Lord. "...the Ministry still tried to stop it, of course, but as usual they arrived too late. The deed was done. One less Muggle brat to infiltrate our world," Mr. Warrington said, extolling the details of the latest raid.

Mr. Warrington had made not one but two confirmations about raids on Muggle-born homes in which the families were killed. Severus tipped his drink to his lips to hide his disapproval. Avery and Rosier laughed as if Mr. Warrington had been telling them a joke and not about the deaths of a family of five and a family of three. All Severus could think of was that either home could have been Lily's, and come summer, she would very likely be a target. Severus knew that Avery and Mulciber had accepted the Dark Mark, and he was certain that Rosier had as well. All three despised Lily because she bested them in classes and at Potions. There wasn't a spell taught in school that Lily couldn't do. She was pretty, a Gryffindor, and she was well liked by the other students and her teachers; and it grated on his friends' nerves. In addition, the fact that Severus had feelings for her was a constant source teasing from his friends as well.

"I heard from Thaddeus Nott that the proposition to adopt out the Muggle-borns and half-bloods to proper wizarding families was denied," Mr. Warrington told the boys. "It was an outrage! The idea of imposing those brats upon good honest families! The Ministry just doesn't comprehend the situation. Nott was told that the new DAAM office will address the issue of the Mudbloods' accidental magical outbursts cover it up more likely."

Severus knew that he was complaining again about the newly created Department of Accidental Adolescent Magic because Rosier's dad worked in the Ministry.

"It's bad enough that the Muggle-borns are not bound the first time the Ministry has to go clean up their accidental magical outbursts, but to have a whole department of wizards to clean up the mess they make and to Obliviate the witnesses it's an outrage," Rosier said.

"Not when the Dark Lord rises to control, it won't be," Avery said proudly. "Dad says that the first thing the Dark Lord intends to do is bind their magic. That way we won't have to worry about those buggers anymore."

"Can he do that?" Mulciber asked.

"Dad said he can," Avery replied, sipping on his drink.

The thought that it might be possible to bind a Muggle-born's magic made Severus' blood run cold. *No*, he rationalized as he sipped on his drink. *It can't be done, not yet. Otherwise, he wouldn't need to kill the kids and the families with Muggle-borns. It's just talk.*

"That doesn't solve the problem of the ones that we already have pretending to fit in," Hardgrave sneered. Severus remembered that at the last Knight of Walpurgis party, Hardgrave had proudly accepted the Dark Mark, showing it off to his friends. "They dilute our families, expose us to the Muggle world with their inability to control their magic, and infiltrate our government, take over our businesses, and pollute our school and then expect *us* to conform to them their ways."

"I'll never accept their way of doing things." Jensen, a seventh-year from Ravenclaw snorted in derision. "The old ways are completely lost on those Mudbloods," Jensen said. "Imagine, I had two first-years who didn't even know how to use an owl they had to be told!" The other boys laughed. "One even asked me where the school post box was! And when Jensen's Mum Flooded him they threw water on her! Because the flames flared up and they were startled, they said!"

"That's not all, I tried explaining about wand etiquette and safety to our Mudblood first-years, and all I got was blank faces," Hardgrave said, jerking his head in Jensen's direction. "And when we explained about house solidarity, one of them thought I was talking about rooting for the house football team, whatever that is. He didn't even know about Quidditch! I also had to stop one from trying to charm his... cassette player, I think he called it."

"What's a cassette player?" Mulciber asked.

"A Muggle device to play recorded music on," Severus said. He didn't really want to explain it, but he hated to sound ignorant. "I saw one once has plastic cassettes..."

Mulciber still looked confused.

"I see it every day. The Mudbloods have no understanding of our world," Mr. Warrington added. "It's a shame that the old ways are not taught in the houses anymore."

"They are in Slytherin," Severus said, knowing that the old traditions were strictly upheld in Slytherin house. "Even the new students are inducted properly on the first night they arrive. Those who claim to not know the traditions are expected to learn them."

"We have stopped doing most of them in Ravenclaw. I was told by my Prefect first year that the Mudbloods didn't like them thought they were antiquated," Hardgrave sneered. "But then we have many more Mudbloods than you do in Slytherin. I know that Gryffindors completely ignore the traditions and embrace the little Mudbloods as if they were *precious*."

Severus knew the smear was intentional, to get a rise out of him. He smirked. "I know Potter and Black are not concerned with traditions, unless you consider breaking every rule as a Gryffindor tradition."

"Bloody Mudblood loving prats," Avery sneered, "strutting around the castle with that Mudblood Evans. It's bad enough Dumbledore favors them."

Severus nearly choked on his watered down firewhisky.

"Over half the house is Mud or nearly Mud the other half are all Muggle lovers," Mulciber sneered. "It's disgusting."

"Well, we won't have that problem any longer once the Dark Lord takes over. We'll be Mud free." Mr. Warrington tipped his glass at Severus. "Be a whole new world done the right way, if you ask me. Be right good to be done with them, I tell you."

Severus' mind whirled as he considered the ramifications of what he was hearing *Lily's going to be in trouble! She will be a target!*

When the party was coming to an end, Mr. Warrington motioned Severus aside. "I have been hearing some impressive things about you, young man. Nott and Avery tell me you are becoming quite the accomplished Potion brewer."

"Thank you, sir," Severus said, pleased by the compliment, wondering if the man would become another of his clients.

"Your friends say you are right good at defending yourself," Mr. Warrington said with a wide smile that didn't seem as friendly to Severus as the man might have meant it to be. "I understand you can really hold your own in a duel, even when it's two against one. And that you're quite knowledgeable in the Dark Arts. You are of age, are you not?"

"Yes, sir, I'm eighteen," he said, managing to hide his surprise at the question.

"Yes, I'm glad to hear it. In fact, the Dark Lord is looking forward to your next encounter," Mr. Warrington said, placing a hand on Severus' shoulder and giving it a friendly squeeze.

Severus felt a chill he tried desperately not to show.

"I understand that you will be invited to join the Knights this summer," Mr. Warrington said, leaning in toward Severus' ear as if divulging a confidence. "Oh, yes, the Dark Lord is quite interested in you."

Severus didn't know what to say, so he chose to look politely interested.

"I know Malfoy spoke for you, as did LeStrange, but I'd like to stand for you as well," he said, his expression indicating that he thought he was offering Severus a great honor. "You'll be staying at the Malfoys' over the summer."

It wasn't a question. Severus simply nodded his head, more in acknowledgement of the statement than a committal.

Mr. Warrington smiled, pleased with what he assumed Severus' nod indicated. "I look forward to seeing you there."

Severus left the house, realizing what Mr. Warrington had implied. He would have to decide, and decide soon, or he'd be taking the mark this summer regardless. He wondered if he could refuse at this point. Those who defied the Dark Lord always ended up dead.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's Notes:*

*Okay, yes, I deviated from the dreadful last chapters of DH. Did you expect me not to?*

*In regards to the incident first year with the Troll... Okay, a bit of a stretch all right a fib but Snape did come running to the girl's bathroom with Professor McGonagall, and he did check to make sure the troll was unconscious while Professor McGonagall dealt with her charges. In regards to Severus protecting Harry from a werewolf (Remus Lupin), he did go running to the Shrieking Shack to save Harry and friends from Black, but the saving from Lupin I admit to borrowing from the movie.*

*Oh, and by the way I'm in complete denial of the last few pages of misprint, otherwise known to some as the epilogue.*

*Sorry for the evil cliffie in the middle of the chapter, but if I didn't stop here, this chapter would be twice as long!*

## Survivors, Victors and Victims

*Chapter 20 of 25*

The Wizarding world deals with the aftermath of the war. Hermione finds herself in the publicity mill, and Severus is in recovery.

Twenty years earlier, Severus finds himself at odds with his mum and facing some dangerous decisions.

*A huge thank you to my betas, MadBrilliant and Southern\_Witch\_69, for typo hunting for me and helping me clean up my mistakes. I appreciate you both dearly and really feel blessed to count you both as my friends.*

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Survivors, Victors and Victims

~Summer 1998~

As soon as the fighting had stopped, Hermione had run over to the spot where she'd last seen Severus, looking for him, and then she'd hurried down to the Hog's Head, praying he had made it back there. But Severus had been nowhere to be found. He was gone.

Aberforth had insisted that Severus had never returned to the Hog's Head after he'd stormed out to go make his appearance on the battleground. "He'd have been too weak to have walked off on his own afterward, girl," he'd said as he'd filled a few pints for his customers. "I have no idea how he had the strength to get as far as he did. That man was a walking corpse when he left here." Aberforth had then walked off, and she'd known it was pointless to keep asking him.

Hermione had made several trips between the battleground and the Hog's Head, casting every kind of tracking spell she could find and asking anyone she could question if they'd seen him, trying to determine where Severus might have gone after the fighting. But no one had known anything helpful. The Aurors investigating Severus' disappearance had claimed that someone must have absconded with the body, which had only angered and frightened her. However, the portrait for Severus in the Headmaster's office still only portrayed an empty, comfortable-looking chair and bookshelves that resembled the ones in Severus' office when he'd been at Hogwarts, assuring Hermione that there was hope he was still alive, although where, she had no idea.

There had been numerous funerals that followed the battle. For those who had died defending the wizarding world, their graves had been dug on a hill that overlooked the village and Hogwarts castle with the white marble headstones all spaced out in perfect rows. The memorial services for the fallen of the Great Battle, also called the Final Battle of the Voldemort War, had been held at Hogwarts, although there had been individual services throughout the country for the families. However, the fighting was far from over. There were still pockets of resistance causing trouble and leaving the Death Mark as a reminder, as well as many small skirmishes while the Aurors tried to search out the last of the Death Eaters.

Hermione had attended the service at Hogwarts the day the bodies had been buried even though she hadn't needed to be among those surrounding Dumbledore's grave to remember all the lives lost. She could picture their faces. She could still visualize them fighting in her mind. She could still see the blood, burns, lacerations, missing body parts, and vacant eyes. She could still smell the smoke and dust, see the flames, and hear the explosions. At night, the friends she'd lost haunted her dreams, refusing to let her sleep. But her worst dream was the one in which she saw Severus collapse on the field and vanish into smoke before she could get to him.

She'd stood among her friends the day the members of Dumbledore's Army had been given special awards for services to the school, although several of the DA members were still in St. Mungo's, a few buried a few days before, and some just unable to attend. There were candle vigils to mourn those who'd fallen: the heroes, the victims, and the innocent casualties. There were plaques, statues, and monuments, each with a dedication ceremony. And there had been parties, celebrations, awards handed out, medals, and honorariums. And for each event, Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the surviving members of the DA had been expected to attend.

And Hermione had stood beside Harry, Ron, George, Seamus, Neville, Ginny, and Luna at the rededication for the rebuilding of Hogwarts castle and again when the monument in Ministry atrium had been dedicated to the defenders of the Wizarding world. Hermione and Harry had searched the monument for Severus' name, and both had become so incensed when they'd realized he'd been omitted that Hermione had had Harry help her as she'd added his name herself.

Between appearances, Sundays at the Burrow, and the occasional summons to testify during a trial, Hermione had searched for Severus. She refused to accept his death, had refused to attend his memorial service or to acknowledge his grave.

For the rest of the month of June and well into July and August, the *Daily Prophet* had been filled with conflicting announcements. The paper had had one article after another in celebration of the fall of Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle interspersed with announcements of endless funerals, wakes, births, deaths, weddings, the reopening of businesses or new ones, and the completions, refurbishments, and reconstruction of properties that had been damaged in the war. Readers even learned that this time Lucius Malfoy had not escaped conviction and had been given a twenty-five to life sentence in Azkaban. Even Draco had been arrested because of his Dark Mark. In fact, just having a Dark Mark was a guarantee of internment.

Narcissa had appealed to Hermione and her friends to testify on Draco's behalf. Harry had testified that Draco had lied to protect him when he'd been caught by Snatchers and that he had switched sides after the incident in the Room of Requirement, fighting against Tom Riddle in the end, which Hermione had confirmed. Luna had said Draco had snuck food and potions to her, Ollivander and the others when they'd been held at the Manor, and Seamus and Neville had both stated that Draco had helped them elude the Carrows a few times in the last few months of school when they'd tried saving students from being tortured in the dungeons.

But even after their testimony, Draco had been sentenced to six months of house arrest, community service, and one year of probation under a tracking spell. Surprisingly, Narcissa had sounded grateful in her last letter to Hermione, thanking her for her help in not only saving her son but for also giving testimony as to his change of heart. Hermione actually had done nothing of the sort she'd simply told the truth and answered the questions she'd been asked honestly.

As August came to an end and Hermione prepared to return to Hogwarts to finish her education, she still couldn't sleep well, but when she did, she dreamed of making love to Severus only to have the dreams turn into nightmares of him fading away on her or falling to the floor dead, bleeding from his neck. Occasionally in her dreams, she saw him lying in the Shrieking Shack, dying as she tried every way possible to save him, or she'd dream about searching the grounds during the battle, screaming out his name because she couldn't find him. On those nights, she woke up crying out for Severus, frequently screaming for help. Harry, Ginny, or Ron would come running to try to comfort her, as she shook and sweated profusely, crying inconsolably from her nightmares. Even Luna came regularly to sit with her, just holding her hand or hugging her when she cried. However, everyone just assumed her emotional unbalance was from posttraumatic stress.

Throughout the previous year, Hermione had held onto the hope that when the war was over, she'd find Severus and tell him she loved him. She wanted to try every way possible to convince him it was real and not just the spells from their tower room. Hermione knew logically it was hopeless that they'd end up together, but in her heart, she'd hoped that she could convince him. But now, almost four months after the final battle, months of searching, utilizing every resource and spell she knew to try to find Severus, she was beginning to think he was deliberately hiding from her. But regardless of how many times she was told by her friends, or anyone else, that he was dead, Hermione refused to believe them.

He was out there, somewhere, and she knew it. Where simply eluded her.

As the construction on the castle continued, Hermione stood on the grounds each morning, looking up at the East Tower, thinking about Severus, and wishing she knew what had happened to him. She'd had all of Severus' possessions boxed up and safely stored away before looters could ravage through them, except for a shirt, his pillow, and his soap, which she kept in her bedroom. As the weeks passed by, she'd cried over his loss, wearing his shirt at night. In her daydreams, he came to her in her bedroom or in the tower room. Every morning, Hermione drank a cup of tea and remembered him as she watched the sunrise. On the wall by her desk was a portrait with a background of a comfortable, dark green chair in front of a large, overstuffed bookshelf in a gilded frame, matching the empty portrait in the Headmaster's office. Every day,

Hermione checked the portrait to see if his image had materialized and felt reassured whenever she saw the empty chair.

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When Severus had awoken the first time, all he remembered was being surrounded by white: wispy, fluffy, soft white, bathed in beams of sunlight, and the noted absence of shadows. The second time he'd been awake, he remembered seeing white gossamer hangings, pale blue sky, and being surrounded by beams of pale gold sunlight. But the first time Severus could lift his head, he'd realized that he was in a huge bed in a simply furnished bedroom with a house-elf staring at him nose-to-nose. The elf had grinned before it popped out. Minutes later, Narcissa had followed behind the elf. She had tried to answer all his questions as the house-elf helped him eat. Thankfully, the potions Severus had made when Arthur had been bitten by Nagini were still in Lucius' storeroom and viable.

Narcissa frequently went to his bedchamber to see him and had brought books for him to read. She had changed, becoming more thoughtful and demure than he'd ever known her to be. The loss of her husband was a part of it, but there was more to it than that, Severus was sure. In the mornings during his recovery, Narcissa had read the paper to him while the house-elf had fed him breakfast. She had provided for his potions, most likely buying them from some private Healer. But in order for a full recovery, he'd had to instruct her on which potions he'd wanted and dictate the directions for the more complicated ones. At least Narcissa had the frame of mind to listen and follow his instructions precisely.

Because of Fawkes' tears, he was able to move his head easily enough, his throat and voice had fully recovered, and the wound on his neck was nothing more than a series of tiny scar marks from Nagini's fangs. But it had taken nearly a week before Severus could sit up in bed unaided and three weeks before he was strong enough to walk because the toxin of Nagini's venom had greatly damaged his nervous system and atrophied his muscles. Severus had been relieved when he could finally sit on a stool and brew his own potions with Narcissa's help. After that, his healing progressed much quicker. Nevertheless, Severus had stayed hidden in Malfoy manor for two months.

Draco returned to the Manor near the end of July after his trial. Severus had watched Draco closely over the few weeks they'd spent together, and he'd noticed a vast difference in the young man who had been an arrogant child as a student. The war had changed him, and Severus was glad to say it was for the better.

Like his mother, he'd developed a respect for Potter and his friends, especially, and most surprisingly, for Hermione. Narcissa continued to read to him from the *Daily Prophet* every morning, however her tone when she read articles about Potter and his friends carried an inflection of respect she had never used before.

When Draco had told him about the outcome of the war, about Potter, and even when he'd spoken of Hermione, he hadn't sneered as he'd had in the past. Draco never explained what had brought on his change of heart or why he'd defected from the Dark Lord the day of the final battle, but Severus had his suspicions.

If that much had happened there, in Malfoy manor, he wondered what else had changed. Neither Malfoy spoke of their changed attitudes openly as Draco kept it to himself, and Narcissa never said anything more than, "Harry Potter and Hermione Granger saved Draco's life," which left him with little to speculate on.

~Summer1978~

Severus had been practicing Warding Charms right up until the end of the school year. He'd amassed a vast collection of spells, both Dark Arts and not, in hopes of increasing the wards, not only on his house but Lily's as well. He'd tried every variation of the spells he could come up with to either strengthen the wards or make them obscure enough so that they wouldn't be recognized and easily undone. Listening to his friends talk had made Severus realize that he was in grave danger as well if the Death Eaters ever found out that he was a half-blood, actually less if he believed what some of them did. He'd overheard a few of them saying more than once that being a half-blood meant one parent was Muggle-born and the other had acceptable blood, not having a Muggle parent. To those men he'd, having a Muggle parent was akin to *being* a Mudblood. It had sent a chill through him he couldn't shake. Each time he remembered the conversation, he worried for his mum's safety as much as for Lily's.

He had sent an owl to his mum, warning her about what he'd heard and pleaded for her to abandon the house on Spinner's End for somewhere more secluded and easier to hide. She'd written back that his father was ill and that he didn't want to move. Severus knew Tobias' illness was alcohol related. Nevertheless, try as he might to persuade her, he hadn't been able to convince her to move. Once again, she'd chosen her husband's wishes over good old common sense.

When Severus and his friends had disembarked the train, Mr. Avery and Mr. Rosier had been waiting to collect them. At the Rosier's house, Mr. Rosier's family and friends had warmly greeted Severus and his friends. The dinner party had gone on well into the evening, and there had been plenty of drinks served. By the time the Dark Lord had made his appearance, Severus had been snookered.

Lord Voldemort had been charismatic and enigmatic. He was tall, lean, moved with a masculine grace, and exuded power. He'd spoken softly, but when he'd spoken to Severus, his voice had carried well over the other conversations in the room, and his manner toward the boys had been open and friendly. Severus could tell that many of the young men and students at the party were eagerly desirous of joining the Knights, but for him, he felt like he was being drawn in without a choice. Lily's comments about Severus becoming a Death Eater rang in his thoughts as he'd listened to those around him talk.

Severus had left the party feeling shaky and Apparated near Lily's street instead of his own. Her house was dark when he'd arrived, and after close inspection, he knew no one was there. Severus could feel several of the wards that had already been placed on the home, but they were ones Severus knew had been taught at school and that anyone at Rosier's party would know how to circumvent them. He added his own versions of the spells, tying the magic from the existing wards to his own, strengthening Lily's protection. He also added a few warning spells on the perimeter of her property and as far as he could extend them. *That will give Lily some warning of an attack.*

He was nearly done when a car pulled into the drive. Severus quickly ducked out of sight and adjusted the wards to recognize Lily's parents and Petunia as they entered the house, wondering where Lily was. He was uncertain if he'd be welcome if he went to the door to ask, not knowing what Lily had told her parents about him.

He waited in the dark, watching the house for Lily's arrival, but she never showed up. Finally exhausted and hungry, Severus turned to go home.

The next week, both in the afternoons as well as in the evenings, Severus had waited outside her house, but he hadn't seen Lily. He didn't see her the following week either. It was becoming obvious that Lily was apparently spending the summer somewhere else.

At home things were bad. His father was just as abusive as Severus had ever seen him, and most of the fights had to do with him, his use of magic, and the cost of his schooling. Not that his father had ever paid one shilling toward his education; he was on a scholarship. At first, Tobias had been livid that Severus wouldn't give up his wand to him, choosing instead to carry it around in his pocket in plain sight. Tobias had tried to use his belt on Severus for his supposed insolence, but Severus had simply made the belt vanish into smoke. Tobias had then tried the poker to no avail. Tobias had even tried to take his frustration at Severus out on his mum, but Severus had hexed him to make him leave off her each time. Another time his father had become violent toward him, Severus had tossed his dad across the room effortlessly with a flick of his wand.

The problem was that his mum had desperately intervened each time, trying to pacify Tobias, and had yelled at Severus to leave the room. But his father had only gotten more violent toward his mum each time, blaming his mum for Severus' actions. Now, Tobias glared at Severus when they passed each other in the house or sat at the table to eat. His father refused to speak to him and drank even more. Severus hated his father, although each time he'd said it out loud, he'd cried hurtful tears.

Severus had shut himself in his room, sulking most of the time he was home, until an owl from Lucius Malfoy had arrived with his invitation to come stay a few days at Malfoy Manor. Severus read the invitation a few times, knowing that if he accepted it, he would be faced with the expectation of accepting the Dark Mark and pledging his allegiance to the Dark Lord. He'd been dreading the invitation ever since leaving school. But he knew that he had little choice.

He knew that if he declined, his friends would turn against him, he'd be marked as a blood traitor and Muggle sympathizer, and both he and his mother would be placed on a hit list. If he managed to escape death, he'd be on the run without any place to go that would be safe for very long, and he didn't know how or if he'd have access to his money in Gringotts. That and his mum would be killed for his defiance. On the positive side, if he accepted he might be able to protect his mum and Lily. If he were in the good graces of the Dark Lord, then he'd know if they were in danger and might be able to do something to save them. Regardless, no matter how he weighed his options, he knew he didn't have a choice.

He couldn't eat, and he couldn't sleep. He took a walk by the river the next day, deep in thought about his options. His mind warred between what he knew he had to do and his will to live, against his common sense telling him what was right. If he took the Mark, he'd be choosing what was easy.

He went to see Lily's house one last time, slipping through the wards and peering into the window. Petunia was sitting at the table with her parents. He watched as they talked and laughed as they ate. *This is how a family is supposed to be*, he thought as he sighed and turned away.

He hung around Lily's house, wishing he could talk to her about his problems like they'd used to. As the street lights turned on, he finally accepted the fact that Lily wasn't going to be home at all over the summer hols, and if she had, she probably wouldn't have wanted to talk to him at all anyway.

Sighing, he returned home. His father was yelling at his mum again. Severus waited outside, leaning against the wall until his father stormed out of the house for the pub. He entered the kitchen, and his mum refused to look at him. "Mum, I've been invited to Malfoy Manor for a few days," he announced, leaning on the doorframe.

She turned around, her eye swollen and discolored and her nose bleeding. "Are you going?"

"Damn it, Mum! Why do you let him hit you like that? Yes, I'm going," he said, standing up and walking toward her. "You should come too."

"I can't," she said, turning away from him.

"Won't," he sneered, coming to a stop. "You won't! He treats you like dirt! He beats you, and you *just take it!* You're nothing but a punching bag to him his scapegoat because he's a drunk, out of work, too lazy to get a job any job, and he's not worth a shilling. He's nothing!" He regretted his words the moment he said them.

She faced him, anger flashing in her good eye. "How *dare* you talk about your father like that?"

"He's killing you, and you don't even raise your wand to him," he shouted, his hands clenching in a fist. "Instead you just cower from him like a dog and won't defend yourself!"

"He's my husband!" she shouted back. "And you have no right saying that to me! I'm your mother! You ~~are~~ never to speak to me like that again!"

"Yes, you're my mother! But I will not stand by this summer and watch him beat you senseless!" he shouted back. "He will beat you to death if you don't stand up to him don't you see it? I should turn him into a chair! At least he'd have a purpose!"

"Severus Snape, you will not raise your wand against your father! Is that understood?" she shouted, pointing her finger at him.

"If he hits you don't count on it!" he snapped back, his anger nearly making his magic surge within him. "He's just a filthy Muggle! We are better than him! When the Dark Lord rises, he will be put in his place!"

Eileen's eyes grew large as she backed away from him. "Where are you getting this from? He is your father!"

"He's a drunken, good for nothing Muggle that hasn't been able to hold a job since the factory closed!" he spat, his hands in tight fists at his side. "We would be better off without him!"

His mum paled and staggered back. "You can't mean that... He's had difficulties..." she stammered, but Severus crossed his arms and smirked at her. She straightened up and pointed for the door. "Go to your room! I will not hear this such disrespect from my own son! Go. Now!"

"Fine," he snapped, turning and running for the stairs. She was defending him once again taking his side and making excuses. He wished that she'd let him help her, wished that she'd leave him.

Severus packed his best robes. His mum was with his father in their room when he was ready to go. She didn't even look up when Severus said good-bye. Severus Apparated to the place Lucius said he'd meet him, wondering why he even bothered to care about his parents.

~September 1998~

By September fifth, the school had been nearly finished; all the dormitories, major classrooms, and the Great Hall had been reconstructed. But in several places the roofs, a few turrets, battlements, and exterior walkways were still being repaired. The kitchen and greenhouses had been completely refurbished. The gamekeeper's hut had been rebuilt into a larger, two room cottage to accommodate Hagrid and give him a bit more living space. And on one side of the school gates, where the wall had been rebuilt, one large block of stone bore the words: *Together we stood strong, the Houses united, and won back what was Ours. Never tickle a sleeping dragon. 2 May, 1998*

Hogsmeade had a new street that intersected the main lane with several new businesses and three new inns. A large memorial statue stood in the center of what was now called Hogsmeade Square of Harry, Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Neville, and Draco standing in a ring back-to-back, wands drawn as if ready to fight. Hermione and her friends had attended the resurrection and dedication of the monument and received their Order of Merlin first class just before school started.

Hermione had returned to Hogwarts in mid September with Ginny and Luna, when the school was deemed fit for students, even though there was still some construction being done on several sections of the castle. Hermione had noticed as she'd walked to lessons that those sections were magically roped off to keep students from crossing into hazardous conditions. The castle seemed to have almost as many students as before, but even with all those who were not allowed to attend the previous year returning to Hogwarts to complete school being placed in the year they missed, the loss of those who had died was quite noticeable in the classrooms and dormitories.

The Sorting Hat had apparently decided to make some changes, too. It had quickly become apparent at the Sorting Feast that the restriction of blood preference was no longer a factor for placement, since the new first-years seemed to have been placed without any regard to heritage. The Sorting Hat had taken longer placing some of the students, especially the Muggle-borns. Slytherin finally had Muggle-borns in their dormitories, and the returning Slytherins were put on strict warnings to get along or be expelled and possibly lose their wands from both the Ministry and Headmistress McGonagall.

Hermione found returning to castle for her seventh year to be different from what she'd expected. For one thing, she was a national heroine. She had to put up with people whispering about her, being the brunt of constant gossip, and there had been the occasional request for a picture or autograph the first few weeks. Thankfully, Ginny and Luna were getting a little of the same treatment as well, but it was odd being treated like a celebrity. Hermione was also now in the same year as her friends, and sharing dormitories with the girls who had been a year behind her. At first, the other girls had been shy around her, whispering together or had suddenly become quiet when she and Ginny had entered the room. By the second week, Lorraine and Adrianna had asked if they could sit next to Hermione in the common room, and had begun asking her questions about her adventures with Harry and Ron. By the weekend after that, even the shyest girl, Allison, had been attempting to make friends.

There were also additional professors hired to teach in several subjects. Classes were no longer simply divided by house anymore to promote better inter-house relations. There were clubs organized in each subject, and inter-house study groups were highly encouraged. Even the Great Hall was available after dinner hours so students could congregate and revise together. Only Quidditch remained as it had been, each house having its own team, but the stands were no longer by house. Both sides of the Quidditch pitch were decorated in the colors of the teams playing that particular day, the same way professional teams did. Post-game victory parties were frequently held in the Great Hall so that friends from other houses could gather and help celebrate the winners.

And punishments were now regulated under very strict guidelines. The new guidelines were posted in Deputy Headmaster Flitwick's office, as well Filch's office, much to Filch's dismay, and the dungeon detention chamber was cleared out of all its chains and torture devices. Filch even had to surrender his shackles to the Aurors in order to keep his job as caretaker.

And for Hermione, her sanctuary quickly became the one of the places she wasn't supposed to go, the old East Tower.

The good thing was that, since no one seemed to know about the secret door, no one noticed where Hermione went to every morning. It was serene and comforting to be up in the tower room, even though memories of Severus would hit her more strongly there, and sometimes she'd end up crying into her tea. Kippy and several other house-elves were usually cleaning up the common room when Hermione went downstairs, and Kippy, delighted to see her again, always had a steaming hot cup of Broken Orange Pekoe for her. Hermione hadn't had the heart to tell the smiling elf that she'd stopped drinking the blend because it reminded her of Severus' kisses.

She'd also given up trying to solve the mystery of the spells on the tower room, instead trying to focus on her classes and preparing for her N.E.W.T.s.

~September 1978~

Severus was enjoying his time with Lucius and the Lestrage brothers, exploring Wizarding Britain. His new friends took him to all the magical places and introduced him to numerous people. Lucius would sit with Severus in the library, talking about how great it was to be so connected with the right sort of wizard and how good an impression Severus was making on the members of proper society. Severus was allowed to brew anything he wanted in Malfoy's potions lab, and he was even encouraged to experiment. He was making a name for himself and earning Sickles and Galleons for his work. He was dressing better than he'd ever dressed before and now had two pairs of dragon hide boots.

He was sipping on his drink after dinner when he heard the men in the study say that the Dark Lord had offered Lily Evans and James Potter a place in his circle and had even given them a second opportunity to join him. The men were outraged by the Dark Lord's audacity of offering a Mudblood to become one of them and questioned his reasons, something Severus knew they'd never do when the Dark Lord was around. Severus was not surprised to learn that Lily and Potter had refused both times and had drawn their wands against the Dark Lord. He listened as Nott scoffed at the fact that the Dark Lord must have *let* them go, but regardless, Lily and Potter apparently had barely made their escape alive.

Severus felt like his blood had gone cold as he listened to the recounting, although he managed to hide it from the others in the room. Mr. Nott began telling the story of how Frank and Alice Longbottom, the newest Aurors of the Ministry, had faced the Dark Lord in Devonshire, and that they too had refused to accept the Dark Lord's offer to join the ranks. "At least they are pure-bloods blood traitors if you ask me but pure-bloods," Mr. Malfoy said snidely. "They will get what's coming them, mark my words, they'll pay. Pure intolerance, defying the Dark Lord... the very thought."

"Always believed all that nonsense Dumbledore spouts about love being the most powerful of all magic, that it's our choices that define us, not our blood or..."

But Severus was barely listening. He was staring into his glass of firewhisky, thinking about Lily. His Lily *She was nearly killed for standing up against the Dark Lord the Dark Lord himself! Twice! What was she doing standing up to him in the first place? I know that somehow Potter is to blame for her being anywhere near... What if he'd killed her? Potter is just the type to fight against the Dark Lord and he's dragging Lily down with him. He will get her killed for sure!*

"I should've been there," he mumbled as he took a sip.

"That can easily be arranged, son," Warrington said with a wide, goofy grin.

Severus looked up at him, trying to piece together what he'd missed by letting his thoughts wander.

"He'll be here tomorrow, lad," Nott said, clamping his hand on Severus' shoulder.

Lucius was smiling at him proudly. "It will be good to have you as one of us! Just think of what we can achieve!"

Severus felt his heart sink. *They had been talking about someone accepting the Dark Mark* He downed his drink as he tried to figure out how to get out of this predicament. He quickly weighed his options and realized he really had no choice. If he was going to protect Lily, it had to be from the inside.

The next night, he found himself in the grand ballroom room of the Manor, surrounded by his friends with Lucius Malfoy, Mr. Avery, and Mr. Warrington standing behind him as Voldemort encouraged him to kneel and declare his pledge. His conscious warred with his sense of self-preservation, one side saying there was no other way while the other told him he was becoming exactly what Lily hated. He lied to himself that this was what he wanted, even as Lily's condemnation of what he was doing rang in his ears.

Severus said the words being fed to him by Mr. Warrington from a scroll. "I solemnly swear allegiance to you, my Lord, body, mind, and wand; that I will support my fellow Knights, and defend our world against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear loyal and faithful service to you, my Lord; and that I will obey your orders and be a true and humble servant, obedient to your will; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservations or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the Knighthood upon which I am about to enter; so help me. This I swear to you upon my blood and my wand."

As the Dark Mark was seared into his skin, Severus had only one thought: by taking the Mark, he was certain that he'd at least be in a position to protect Lily.

~Autumn 1998~

The biography on his life had come out, and it made Severus want to Avada Kedavra Rita Skeeter on the spot. Draco had been given his copy as a gift from Goyle, and he'd shared it with Severus. Rita had dug into every corner of Severus' life that she could to ferret out any and every tidbit she could find to twist around and create the novel on his life. Much of it was grossly exaggerated, some outlandish, and the rest was half-truths and lies. It seemed that everyone who had survived the war and remembered anything about him or had any story to tell about Severus' life was quoted. Even Potter had apparently spoken to the reporter. The only person who'd seemed to have refrained was Hermione, as she wasn't quoted much except to praise his efforts as professor, Order member, and Headmaster.

The book claimed that he had been so blinded by his attraction to the dark side, so insecure as a teen, so alone and vulnerable as a child, that he'd craved membership of something he thought would make him great. *Something Lily would find impressive* he snorted in derision. *I thought if I joined, I could protect her. I foolishly thought that if I became a Death Eater, I would know in advance if and when she'd be attacked and be able to prevent it from happening. I was wrong. In the end, it was my loyalty to that narcissistic megalomaniac that cost Lily her life.*

Not only that, but the *Daily Prophet* had devoted several pages regarding the investigation of Severus' part in the war. It seemed that Kingsley Shacklebolt and Harry Potter were trying valiantly to proclaim Severus a war hero and an essential part of the Order, dedicating his life to defeat of Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle. A few members of the Order had even come forth and had declared him a martyr.

Severus decided that he didn't want to hide anymore.

The trial over his posthumous Order of Merlin was underway when Severus Snape, in disguise using Polyjuice Potion, slipped into the Ministry of Magic. He stood aside and listened to the new Minister, Kingsley Shacklebolt, give reporters a few statements about his investigation, smirking at the questions and answers. As the Minister began to wave off the crowd, Severus slipped into the lift and made his way to the level one. It didn't take much to befuddle the receptionist into accepting that he had an appointment. Severus watched as Kingsley arrived, addressed a few concerns of other Ministry officials, and entered his office. Severus rose and walked into the Minister's office unannounced.

"Did you mean what you said about Severus Snape, Kingsley? You think he's innocent?" the old wizard asked as he watched Kingsley for any clues of deceit or lies. The old man's vision was somewhat poor, but his hearing was very acute.

Kingsley looked up from his parchment, momentarily startled by the old wizard's appearance, but apparently recognized him from the group in the atrium earlier. "I think he played a significant role in the war yes. May I help you with something, Mr. ... ?"

"No, I was just wondering about Severus Snape's investigation. He was a Death Eater," Severus stated, trying to draw the wizard out. "He is no hero. He was a murderer,

turncoat, traitor, and committed acts you know nothing about. He was responsible for many of those atrocities we read in the paper. Why spend all this effort on a war criminal?"

"Severus Snape is no traitor. He was a valuable resource into Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle's plans. He was a spy, working on our side from inside Tom Riddle's inner circle at great personal risk to himself. Many more atrocities were prevented because of Severus Snape's warnings. Yes, there were many unfortunate incidents and tragic deaths, but many more were avoided by his valiant efforts. If you have followed the papers, you know that I have been trying to clear his name and have him acknowledged as the war hero he is." Kingsley laid his wand casually on the desk next to him. "Do I know you?"

"Yes, and no." Severus looked at the cane in his hand, listening carefully to Kingsley. So far the wizard seemed sincere. "So you really do believe in his innocence?"

"Yes, I do," Kingsley said with conviction.

"And if he's still alive?" Severus asked, still trying to draw out the wizard into talking. "What then? Another trial to disprove his innocence to have him locked away in Azkaban?"

Kingsley set down the parchment and gave the old wizard his full attention. "No trial. All of that is being covered in his hearing for his Order of Merlin and no, he wouldn't be sent to Azkaban. Not if I can help it."

"No? Why ever not?" Severus asked. "Isn't that why the Aurors are searching for him?"

"Yes, we are still searching for him. We have no idea what happened to him. His body was never found," Kingsley stated. "He was last seen on the battlefield. He apparently survived the attack of Tom Riddle's snake long enough to have made a stand against Tom Riddle at the final battle and walked away or he was taken by another Death Eater. We don't know for certain." Kingsley looked at him earnestly. "I would like to find him. If he's alive, help him if I can if there was anything he needs. I want to congratulate him, have him acknowledged for his contribution. I want to thank him *personally* for all he did. If you have any information in regards to the whereabouts of Severus Snape, the Ministry has offered a substantial award."

"I'm not interest in an award for turning him in." Severus smirked at the mention of Aurors. "How substantial?"

Kingsley began to look interested. He eyed the old man sitting in front of him speculatively. "We've offered one thousand Galleons for solid information regarding his whereabouts. If you have any information regarding where he is, you must tell me," he said earnestly, rising from his chair. "I want to help him. I want to see him."

"Why?" Severus wanted to believe him. He waved his hand to indicate that Kingsley should sit and leaned back in the chair facing his desk. "Don't get me wrong, but I have little trust in the Ministry lately. I don't believe that he won't be sent to Azkaban. He has the residual of the Dark Mark still branded on his skin. Why should I trust you?" Severus asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. Although Kingsley had offered some assurances, Severus wasn't going to show himself without knowing for sure. "He would be better off dead," Severus said solemnly. He didn't have much more time. If he stayed any longer, the Polyjuice would wear off before he could exit the building. "He's much better off where he is left alone to his own devices, away from everyone and everything."

"You're insinuating that you know where he is," Kingsley said, sounding hopeful. "Please, tell me."

"Yes, he is alive. Yes, I know where he is. I have all the information you need to know," Severus stated, starting to believe that he could trust him.

Kingsley leaned forward in his chair, obviously desirous of the information. "He must come in or I'll go to him. But he must turn himself in so that he can be fully cleared," he said earnestly.

"He is only now recovered from You-Know-Who's snake bite," Severus stated. "But he trusts no one."

"He can trust me!" Kingsley exclaimed. "Look, he was my friend. We worked together in this war. I have all the facts I can gather regarding his involvement. But if he's alive, he must speak up for himself, answer questions. He has to come to the Ministry."

Severus had been startled by the Minister's declaration of being his friend. He had no idea Kingsley considered him so. "No jail time, he is still recovering," he stated firmly.

Kingsley shook his head. "No! Of course not! But if he's still hurt, we can help him. St Mungo's..."

"And whom do you think provided the anti-venin and restorative potions for those bit by You-Know-Who's snake?" Severus asked, nearly laughing at the suggestion. "St. Mungo's cannot do any more for him than he is receiving."

"Tell me where he is!" Kingsley demanded, his hands placed firmly on his desk as he leaned forward a little further.

Severus clearly detected a note of sincerity in the wizard's voice. There was no deception. Still, he wanted assurances, but he was out of time. He could feel the creeping in his skin that signaled the change. "Promise me he will not be sent to Azkaban. I want your word. House arrest or under supervision is acceptable, but not Azkaban."

"You have my word as Minister of Magic as his friend and comrade. I swear to you, no jail time. He will not set foot in Azkaban," Kingsley said reassuringly. "Where is he?"

Severus was surprised that Kingsley considered him a friend. The roiling in his gut was starting. He had no choice but to believe the wizard now. "Not far."

"Well, take me to him," Kingsley said, rising from his chair.

"No need," Severus said as the Polyjuice Potion began to wear off.

Kingsley grabbed his wand as he watched the first changes take place.

Severus simply crossed his arms and settled back in his chair. "I am he."

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*Author's Notes:*

*I'm sorry that this is a little long winded and lots of stuff, but I wanted to cover a few months in a chapter.*

# Consequences and Reflections

Chapter 21 of 25

Severus faces the consequences of his choices, both as an adult and as a young man.

Hermione has an encounter with the Baron, which leads her to once again try to determine the answer on how to break the spells on the tower room, and is led to seek help from the most unlikely of sources.

As always, thank you, MadBrilliant and Southern\_Witch\_69, for sticking with me on this and catching my mistakes. I appreciate it very much.

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## Consequences and Reflections

~November 1998~

After Severus had come forward, his investigation had become a long and drawn out trial in which every aspect of his involvement in the Voldemort Wars had been examined. From the time he had been cleared of all charges at the end of Voldemort War I to when he'd joined Hogwarts as the Potions professor, up through and including his disappearance after the final battle of Voldemort War II, he had come under intense scrutiny. Numerous people had been brought in for questioning, including those Death Eaters who had surrendered on the battlefield and those who had been caught after; because they'd thought that by providing statements against Severus, the Wizengamot would grant them more leniency in their own trials. Severus had sat in the courtroom in that dreaded chair, trying to ignore the rattle of the chains as he'd listened to the witnesses and waited for the verdict.

Severus' barrister had also brought forth witnesses, which had included: portraits, house-elves, his colleagues at Hogwarts, the members of the Order, a few Healers, Ollivander, Aberforth Dumbledore, Harry Potter, Neville Longbottom, Luna Lovegood, and Ronald Weasley, and a few of the families Severus had been able to save from the Dark Lord's plans. Even Filch had appeared on Severus' behalf. It had caused quite a stir, his barrister calling in so many non-wizards, magical creatures, and portraits.

With each new magical creature and portrait brought in as witnesses, the debate over the validity of their testimony had been questioned as well. It had been unheard of to call on so many, and only because of the insistence of Kingsley and Harry Potter, as well as the surviving members of the Order, now all acclaimed war heroes, did the Wizengamot concede to listen to their testimony. Moreover, with each magical creature that had been declared as an acceptable witness, a new precedent had been set.

It had surprised Severus that Aberforth had known many of Albus' plans, including Albus' plans for his own death. There had been little surprise that Kingsley Shacklebolt and Arthur Weasley had known about the curse that had been eating away at Dumbledore's flesh and that they were well aware of Severus' failed attempts to reverse the effects. Apparently, Minerva McGonagall, Madam Pomfrey, and Pomona Sprout had also been well aware of the attempts that Severus had tried to save Dumbledore. Still, Severus testified that he had only managed to delay the inevitable.

Both Harry and Ron had testified on his behalf, stating that they knew about Severus' vows to both Narcissa and Dumbledore. The big shock had come when Harry Potter had stood before the Wizengamot and claimed to have poisoned the Headmaster, on Dumbledore's orders to do so, which had led to the Headmaster's weakened state when he'd faced Draco and the Death Eaters on the Astronomy Tower. Then there had been the letters from Remus Lupin to both Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall. Apparently Remus had known about Draco's task to kill Dumbledore, as he'd heard Greyback bragging about it, and had written Dumbledore several times voicing his concerns. Apparently, when Dumbledore hadn't seemed to take the warnings seriously, Remus had appealed fervently to Professor McGonagall to intervene.

Then special arrangements had to be made to accommodate Bane and Firenze by temporarily relocating to the Great Hall at Hogwarts for a few days. Hagrid had entered the improvised courtroom with the centaurs and smiled at Severus before he'd nervously taken his seat. Severus had no idea how Hagrid had convinced the centaurs to come, although getting a direct answer from the centaurs had been a true test of his barrister's patience.

The members of the Wizengamot, on the other hand and most unfortunately, had to refrain from losing their patience numerous times throughout Bane's testimony. Severus had found himself hard pressed not to grin each time Bane and Firenze had both insisted that Mars had been bright, that a shooting star had crossed the new moon, and that Venus would rise. Nevertheless, his barrister had managed to get Bane to testify that he had overheard Dumbledore's plan to have Severus kill him instead of allowing Draco to do so, in the hopes of saving Draco from becoming a killer. In addition, both Bane and Firenze had even witnessed the vow Severus had made to the effect to Dumbledore, apparently on the night Mars had been obscured in shadow.

Hagrid had confirmed that he overheard Dumbledore plead with Severus to keep his vow and the argument they'd had over it. He had also testified at great length about how Severus had tried to keep a rein on the punishments made against the students, by having let Hagrid oversee many of the detentions. Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnigan, Luna Lovegood, and Ginny Weasley had all verified that Severus had tried repeatedly to protect them from the Carrows.

Several house-elves had testified that they had been under orders to slip food to the students in the Come and Go Room when the Headmaster had known that they had gone into hiding until the Carrows had threatened them all with clothes. The ghosts who'd answered their summons had gleefully told about the mischief they'd been allowed when they'd haunted the Carrows or had given the students warnings to help keep them from falling into the Carrows' hands. The Baron and Bernard Blackmoore had both explained how they'd helped Longbottom and Finnigan free students from Filch's chains in the dungeons. The Bloody Baron, the Scot, Bernard Blackmoore, and Sir Nicholas de Mimsy Porpington had all testified to the fact that Peeves had even assisted in haunting, er, harassing the Carrows.

Ginny Weasley had also testified how Severus had helped her escape the Carrows at Easter by having Tonks impersonate her on the train and then slipping Ginny out of the castle by Portkey.

When Hermione had entered the Great Hall to testify, Severus had felt his heart leap in his chest. She had carried herself proudly, smiled warmly at him, and had taken her seat with an assured confidence. She had testified about what she'd seen during the battle the night he'd killed Dumbledore, how she'd been certain he'd given Harry the sword of Gryffindor, and how he'd stood wandless against Voldemort in the final battle. Several members of the Wizengamot had questioned her, challenging her statements, but she'd maintained her composure, unruffled, and had answered their questions clearly with well thought-out responses. When she'd been dismissed, she'd turned, smiled, and had nodded her head at him in encouragement. He'd barely inclined his head in return, not wanting the members of the Wizengamot to see any of the emotions that had swelled up inside him. She'd made the tiniest wink of her eye and then had walked out confidently.

He had watched her leave, trying to scrutinize her every action at the time, and he'd dared to hope that if he was freed, he'd be able to contact her and maybe just maybe she'd be amenable to write him. The thought of receiving a letter from her had actually boosted his spirits.

But as much as seeing Hermione had lifted his hopes for a future, Severus had still hated having his life and actions examined so openly, especially because of all the reporters that had been scribbling away behind him.

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Hermione had followed every word of Severus' trial in the *Daily Prophet* and *The Quibbler*. Even *Witch Weekly* had been following the trial. The monthly journals, *Contemporary Potions* and *The Healer Practitioners' Periodical*, had run articles on the potions produced by Severus during his time under Dumbledore, as well as his Anti-Venin and Restorative Potions for those bit by Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle's snake.

Finally, on the twenty-seventh, Severus was cleared. Hermione was elated. She rounded the corner on her way to the library while engrossed with reading the announcement in the *Prophet* and nearly walked through the Bloody Baron. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Pardon me, I didn't see you."

"It would behoove you to watch where you are going, young lady," he replied, clearly affronted.

Hermione blushed at the chastisement, but quickly recovered, realizing that she had the perfect opportunity to talk to him. "May I speak with you?" she asked before he had a chance to float away.

He stopped and turned, his scowl turning into a questioning stare as he regarded her. "Aren't you afraid of me, little Gryffindor?"

She was amused by his assumption. "No, you're a Hogwarts ghost... Look, I was hoping to ask you something that's been plaguing me for almost a year now."

"You want to ask about the tower room," he said, crossing his arms as he stared down at her.

The fact that he was hovering over her in an attempt to tower over her didn't faze her, but that he knew exactly what she wanted to speak to him about did. It was as if he could read her mind. "How did you...? Yes," she stammered.

He chuckled, a deep and humorless sound. "I have heard about you, that you are clever, and I have seen your notes, the diagrams on the blackboard, and the chart. You are correct in your assumptions; those are the spells that were used on the walls, stairs, and door. However, I can't tell you anything more than what you already know."

Hermione was stunned. "So, my chart is correct?" she asked, proud that she was right, but crestfallen at the same time, because she didn't have the answers she needed.

"Yes, your chart is correct. You know what the spells are," he said.

Hermione felt her heart sink. "So, I am going to be in love with Severus for eternity? *Forever in love with someone who doesn't love me in return, just like Wulfred Olins and Beaumont Smethyk had been.*

"You confessed your love for him in the tower room?" he asked. His expression actually softened as he lowered himself to let his feet touch the floor. "You will yearn for him, yes, and you'll feel discontentment for any other man. Your feelings for him will grow and fester, and I'm afraid that you shall be unrequited in your sorrow."

"Is that what happened to you?" she asked, already knowing his part in the story.

"Yes," the Baron said, sinking a little further. "My love for my lady became my everlasting sorrow." He looked her in the eye with the deepest expression of remorse.

"So, I shall be doomed like the other men I read about?" Hermione asked as he started to float away. "Wait! None of the women pined away for the guys they were with, why should the spells affect me like they did you and the other men?"

"Do you yearn for Severus Snape? Are your dreams about him so vivid that you wake, expecting to see him leaning over you or to walk through the door? When you see him, does your heart break in your chest, but the thought of choosing someone else seem so pointless, because you'd rather be with Severus Snape than any other?" the Baron asked, and Hermione's mind was saying yes to each question. "Does the thought of life without him make you want to give up living?"

She turned her head, refusing to give him the answers in her heart.

"Then when you confessed your love to him, you sealed your fate."

Hermione looked at the floor, remembering the last time in the tower room vividly as it replayed in her mind like a horrid nightmare.

*He said her name repeatedly as he'd neared orgasm. His body was slick with sweat, his hair had fallen forward, nearly concealing his face. She pushed it aside to watch his expression. She loved seeing his face as he came, the way the walls he kept around him melted away. "Circe, I think I'm falling in love with you," he said as his face distorted in orgasmic bliss. "I do... I love you. Merlin, I love you." She wrapped her arms around his body as he went limp and collapsed on top of her, feeling utter happiness wash over her.*

*But, it had only lasted a few seconds as his words resounded in her mind. Hermione opened her eyes in a complete state of utter shock. She had no idea that he felt that way that he actually loved her. As he pushed himself up to look at her, she stared at him in disbelief, stunned that the one thing she'd not dared to dream, wouldn't let herself hope for was real. She was dumbstruck, finally blurting out the only thought she'd had, "Did you say you love me?"*

*He looked away and closed his eyes as if he hadn't meant to say what he had, and her hopes were instantly dashed by his dark, angry expression. His change of demeanor confused her, and she thought she'd done something wrong. He rose to his knees and grabbed his clothes. "I shouldn't have," he'd growled, his usually velvety smooth voice cold and distant, disdainful.*

*He was angry, angry with her and, at the time, she couldn't fathom why. "Shouldn't have what exactly?" she asked, feeling hurt and confused as he stood up and moved away from her. Her heart felt heavy, the preverbal 'breaking in her chest' as she realized he was rejecting her actually shoving her away like he used to do after their first encounters. "Severus," she'd said imploringly, uncaring how pathetic she sounded. She wanted him to turn around, to hold her and tell her it was all right. "What...?"*

*"Done this! Any of this," he snarled, heading for the open door. "It's completely wrong."*

"No, wait," she tried to say, hoping to change his mind. But as she rolled over, all she had seen was his retreating bum. She climbed to her knees, only to find herself staring at the door. Above the doorway, the words in the stone had changed, and she rose to her feet, standing before the door. Fear and dread crept upon her slowly as she read the words aloud...

"*Amoris Aeterna Devotio Spreta Reiectaque Dolorem Aeternum Parit...*" she whispered and wiped the tears that had started to fall from her cheek. Seeing the Baron looking at her with such an expression of sympathy brought back what he'd just said to her. "No, wait, I didn't he did. *He* said that he loved me I didn't say it. I was too stunned to say anything! And then he became angry and stormed away before before I could tell him that I loved him too."

The Baron was thoughtful for few seconds. "You did not confess your love to him yet you mourn him as I do my lady love. Did you not even say it to him before he'd left the room?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, he'd gone he'd left the room the door had closed already."

"I do not know what to tell you, child. Nevertheless, I have seen you slipping off to the tower and your face when you leave. Your expression is one I know well. You are ensnared by the spells and are now cursed to the same fate as I. I truly feel sorry for you, but I cannot help you."

Hermione leaned against the wall, mulling over his words. "It can't be. I love him. I didn't refute him unless he refuted me. Is that what happened?"

"I am sorry," the Baron said as he floated away. "I do not know."

~December 1998~

Severus sat on the hillside, gazing at the snow-covered valley and village below, contemplating life. He yanked up and tossed a blade of dried grass. The reality was that his whole life had been under the thumb of someone who'd only used him, abused him, and lied to him: his father, his friends, the Dark Lord even Dumbledore had used him, the one wizard Severus had believed cared about him, although in all fairness he'd done his part for Dumbledore willingly. But although he'd had Dumbledore's unwavering trust, the others had all suspected him, even those he'd considered collaborators in the war hadn't trusted him, especially after Dumbledore's death. No one had been on his side during the war. He was merely a tool and discarded as such.

Kinglsey had held true to his word though, and Severus didn't spend one day in Azkaban. Even his proclaimed house arrest hadn't precluded him from being able to leave Malfoy Manor when he'd had the urge to, not that he had left the grounds much. His only stipulation had been to have a Ministry wizard or Auror with him, for his protection, at least until the end of the trial. It was ironic actually that the one wizard that kept reaching out to him, that had constantly volunteered to escort him whenever Severus had wanted to leave the Malfoys' grounds was none other than Harry Potter. The boy seemed actually dungbog-bent on amending past grievances and developing a relationship between them.

Severus leaned back against the rock at his back. No, the confinement hadn't been too hard to take, but the constant public interest in him, the public scrutiny and insistent persistence from the reporters did bother him. A lot. Thanks to his trial, Potter's confessions and declarations on the battlefield, Rita Skeeter's two books, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* and the unauthorized biography on his own life, Severus now knew that the entire truth, the whole ugly picture, all the lies and secrets, were laid bare. His entire life was now made public, and to a very private person, it was extremely disturbing. Added to that, it made him a sort of celebrity.

Hundreds of letters and packages had been sent to him on a regular basis, some of the packages even containing brassieres and panties. The only thing that had prevented him from hexing Draco's mirth over the objects of infatuation that witches of all ages had sent him was Severus' own sense of honor not to hex an unarmed wizard. Severus idly wondered where the annoying mail from his demented fanatical admirers was being delivered to now that he was in a place where mail couldn't be delivered.

Severus rose and walked slowly along the path that would lead him to the small cottage that was his current sanctuary. It had belonged to a victim of a raid and had stood abandoned since. With his wards, Anti-Muggle Repelling Charms, and the Fidelius Charm in place, he felt as secure as he ever had. No one knew where he was or how to find him. Even the ruddy owls couldn't find his hideaway, except for the barn owl that had adopted him when he'd first moved in. Well, he and Harry's bothersome snow owl Hagrid had given Harry for his birthday after the war or Kinglsey's African Grass owl. His new owl was named Ruddy or, more accurately, the barn owl had taken the name Rudduinuise after Severus had snapped at the bird one evening in their early association when the bird had regurgitated the remains of his kill on the kitchen floor. Since then, the owl had proven to be quite reliable, but the name stuck.

He watched a hawk circling, wishing that for once he could feel as free as the bird. He had few options before him. He was not going to return to the school. That part of his life was over. The corridors held too many memories, and none of them were worth revisiting. He could always fall back on his potions skills, but working for an apothecary or St. Mungo's was not appealing. He didn't want to be under anyone ever again. Besides, in his opinion, there was too much public fear surrounding his name and about his character to approach Mr. Jiggers in hopes of a job.

He didn't have much, just the bare minimum. Severus had snuck back into the castle through the passage Dumbledore had set up for him to retrieve his belongings, but his rooms were empty. Not that he was surprised. He had packed up what was left of his personal effects from the lab and storeroom and left the castle unnoticed. He missed his books, the memorabilia, and his extra robes. He assumed that looters had raided his belongings, for whatever reason, after the war. Other than his books and several potions, he had no idea why anyone would have wanted any of his things.

He'd gone back to Spinner's End to collect his belongings, and, as predicted, Harry had been one of the two Aurors who'd volunteered to assist him. He'd been inside for only a few minutes when the reporters arrived, and there had been several people pounding on his door. The reporters, and whoever else had been staking out his house, had made such a ruckus that the few neighbors he had had called the police. Someone had even tried to throw a rock through his window, not that it had done anything. All his windows were protected with an Unbreakable Charm on the glass. Regardless, it had been aggravating to deal with all that nonsense, so for the time being, or however long it took, he'd decided to stay away until the interest in him died down. He had simply grabbed what he could in a hurry, sealed off his house, and left, but he hadn't had enough time to get everything.

He couldn't sell his home on Spinner's End. The area was so dilapidated that there wouldn't be anyone willing to buy it, and with the magical enlargements, the magically concealed basement made by his mum, and then later reinforced by himself, he couldn't sell the house to a Muggle. He'd have to reverse the spells and have the house restored to its original state. He didn't want to take the time or invest in the effort. Besides, the house was constantly being watched, and until his enemies and those interested in him for whatever reasons lost interest, he couldn't go back there.

So, he was starting over, from scratch, to eke out a living while trying to remain unnoticed.

He now had his life, but no direction, no prospects, and no future.

\*

Hermione felt exhausted. She returned *Understanding the Defense of Blood and Bone Enchantments, Defeat the Allure and Avoid Ensnarement and The Acknowledged Dark Arts of Morgana le Fay* back in their places in the Dark Arts section of the Restricted Section and realized she had reached the end of the bookshelf. She'd exhausted the books in the Hogwarts library, searching for anything that told her how to reverse Blood-Bound Curses, looking for a way to break the Blood-Bonded spells on the tower room. Although in all fairness, she'd had to work on the puzzle around her preparations for her N.E.W.T.s and her class work. Still, there was a limited amount of material on breaking Blood-Bonded Curses and Charms, even in the Restricted Section. The ones she did find were for specific curses and charms and didn't apply. Finally accepting defeat and realizing that she was at a standstill, she decided to turn to Professor Flitwick. She was surprised to learn that he'd even heard of the room.

"Yes, I remember hearing about a Lover's Tower in my youth, but I don't recall anyone ever finding it. Everyone assumed it was the Astronomy Tower. Leave it to you and your friends to solve another of the castle's mysteries," he said jovially.

"But, Professor, the tower room is enchanted. I have discovered at least three other couples that have fallen prey to the curses on the tower. The Grey Lady said there have been several more. What I do know is that Helena Ravenclaw, Rowena Ravenclaw's daughter, died in that room, along with the wizard who'd enchanted the room to help him win her heart - it backfired on him, and he, er, killed her. In his grief, he killed himself. I have every reason to believe that the curses are embedded in the stone with a Blood-Bonding. I want to know how it can be broken."

She showed him the entries in *Hogwarts: A History* and her documentation of the other victims of the tower, unsure why she wasn't telling him everything, just enough to get him to help her.

Professor Flitwick became quiet, his expression deeply thoughtful in the silence that seemed to stretch out uncomfortably. "I've never heard about a curse on the Lover's Tower, but there was a rumor of a couple from my youth who stumbled on the tower and became betrothed, but I had assumed it was the Astronomy Tower. Blood Curses, you say." His gaze became blank as he stared into nothing. "I don't profess to know much about Blood-Bound Curses. Professor Dumbledore knew about them of course... and so did Severus Snape, but I have never been able... They are Dark Arts, Miss Granger, the worst sort. I'm afraid there is very little that I could tell you about them."

"I've looked everywhere in the library that I could on Blood-Binding, but there isn't much, only explanations of what it is, not how to break it," Hermione said, feeling at a loss. "I thought you... Is there anyone at the Ministry I can contact on how to break them?"

He looked up at her and smiled. "I'm not surprised. Dumbledore would have had those books in his private library... but the Ministry is still reviewing his Dark Arts books. You could contact Severus Snape, except no one knows where he went." His eyes lit up. "I might suggest that you contact the Malfoys. As part of their probation and rehabilitation, they are to avail their library to the Ministry and academicians for research. I'm sure your request would be accepted. I'll see if I can get Professor McGonagall to sign the necessary papers."

Hermione managed to hide her disappointment well as she thanked him for his time and left his office. Later that night, she sat on the windowsill of the tower room contemplating his suggestion. She didn't like the idea of involving the Ministry if she could help it, but to visit the Malfoys wasn't a welcomed option. She knew that asking the Curse-Breakers at Gringotts for help wasn't an option; the goblins would never forgive her and her friends for essentially robbing their bank. However, the next day Professor McGonagall requested that she stay behind after her next Transfiguration lesson.

"Am I to understand that you wish to learn about Blood-Binding, Miss Granger?" she asked when they were alone in the room.

"Yes, Professor," she said, setting down her bag.

Professor McGonagall inhaled and looked at her sharply. "And may I know why?"

Hermione sighed and explained about the tower room, but didn't tell her anything about Severus Snape or his role in her dilemma. "I want to be able to break the spells. If I can't, the tower will have to be destroyed or sealed off. I asked Professor Flitwick, and he said he didn't know how to do it and referred me to the Malfoy's library. It's a long shot, but I have to try."

Professor McGonagall pursed her lips. "I had heard rumors... So you think you and either Mr. Weasley or Mr. Potter... never mind. Leave it to you and Potter to find the Lover's Tower. Are there any other myths within the castle you intend to uncover before you leave this school?"

Hermione stared at her in shock until Professor McGonagall smiled. "You're teasing me, aren't you?" Hermione asked.

Professor McGonagall laughed. "Yes, and no. You and your friends do have a way of entangling yourselves in the most dangerous and unbelievable adventures. If you think spending a week in Malfoy Manor is the way you wish to spend your hols, who am I to say no?" She handed Hermione a packet of folded parchments. "Hermione, if you decide to go, I want you to have this." She handed Hermione a red stone pendant, decorated with gold runes. "This was my sister's. This pendant shares a special connection to the one I wear. If you grasp it with your wand hand and concentrate, I will feel mine vibrate. It's a Protean Charm; change the Runes on this one, and I will see them on mine. All you have to do is ask for help and help will be sent. If the runes don't change after I feel mine vibrate, I will know you are in trouble and will send help immediately."

"Thank you," she said, holding the pendant against her chest. "I know how much this means to you. I'll bring it back, I promise."

"I know you will. Good luck, dear," Professor McGonagall said. "Now go. My fifth-years are arriving, and you have lessons to attend as well."

That night she drafted a letter to Narcissa Malfoy and went to the owlery the next morning before breakfast, not sure how her request would be received. She knew that the Malfoy library was extensive and contained many books on curses and Dark Arts. She was quite surprised by the letter that came to her that very night, granting her request and offering Hermione the hospitality of the Manor for as long as she needed, even inviting her to stay over Christmas hols. Since both Draco and Narcissa were technically still under house arrest, they were sure to be there, and Ginny and Luna were both a little apprehensive when Hermione announced her intent to spend a few days of her hols at Malfoy Manor. Both girls promised to keep their DA Galleons close in case Hermione had any trouble, and Ginny helped Hermione create a pair of two-way mirrors so they could communicate with each other.

When the Ministry-assigned guard admitted Hermione through the gates of Malfoy Manor, she was surprised to see Draco Malfoy waiting on the path that led to the house. "Hello, Miss Granger," he said rather formally, but much nicer than he'd ever greeted her before. "Welcome to my home."

"Thank you, Mr. Malfoy," she replied. She had a sudden chill as she looked up at the Manor house for the second time in her life, wondering what had possessed her to even consider coming here.

"Are you all right?" he asked, waiting for her to continue.

Hermione forced herself to smile at him. "Yes, sorry."

"I think I'd be apprehensive as well, considering. I thought you'd be more comfortable in the east wing. The stairs are closest to the library. If you'll come with me, I'll show you to your room," he said, indicating with his hand. He paused when they entered the foyer. "Didn't you bring a traveling trunk?"

"I have a small bag, Mr. Malfoy," she admitted, knowing that her beaded purse was in her pocket with her clothes and necessities, and her school bag held all the scrolls and diagrams she and Severus had worked out on the tower room as well as his journal.

They walked in silence, neither having much to say to each other. "My mum is in the solarium, tending to her flowers. She will be joining us for lunch," he finally said.

Hermione only nodded in understanding, thinking that Mrs. Malfoy would want to keep her distance from her Muggle-born guest.

He led her to a guest room that reminded her of a Wedgewood china box with its soft Wedgewood blue walls and white trim and adornments. The furniture was a rich combination of curly cherry and cocobolo woods. It was by far the most opulent room Hermione had ever been in. "Go ahead and put your things in the wardrobe, and freshen up if you like. Just say 'Dextin,' and he will hear you if need anything. You can call him when you're ready, and I'll come to show you to the library."

"I'd like to go now, if that's okay," she said, turning to face him.

"By all means. I only thought you'd like to settle in - but I should have known." He moved aside and indicated the doorway with his hand. "You may call me Draco, if you want," he said softly as they descended the stairs.

"Thank you. I wouldn't mind being on a first name basis," Hermione replied. When he opened the door and led her into the library, she gasped in shock. She knew it would be large, but she wasn't expecting it to be as big as it appeared. The room was at least three or four stories tall, possibly the size of a grand ballroom, with walkways, ladders, and two spiral staircases. Bright, stained-glass panels took up most of the ceiling, emitting a soft diffused light that wouldn't fade the books or dry out the expensive

and old leather bindings. The furniture looked inviting, and a fire blazed in the grate.

"If you would tell me what you're interested in, I could direct you to the right section," Draco suggested, clearly pleased with Hermione's pleasure at seeing the vast wealth of his family. For there was where most of the Malfoy wealth was, in those books books that went as far back as the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and even older than that.

Hermione knew she'd have to confide in him in order to know where to begin. "Blood Curses, specifically Blood-Bonded Curses and how to break them," she said, hoping he'd not ask too many questions.

To his credit, Draco didn't sneer at her; he nodded, understandingly. "The Dark Arts books are on the top level. There used to be a false ceiling concealing it, but it's been removed." He led her to the farthest stairway. "Blood-Bound Curses are simply curses that the caster uses blood, his or an animal, when casting them. They won't be in a separate section. Start on this end."

~ Christmas 1978~

Severus wasn't actually looking forward to Christmas this year, not that he ever looked forward to Christmas, but this time he'd be alone. Oh, he'd have parties to go to, some of the raiding variety, but he'd miss the Christmas dinners at the castle.

The Dark Lord was taking action against the inclusion of the Muggle-borns in civilized Wizarding society and making claims that half-bloods with Muggle parents should be dealt with. Severus overheard a few of the fellow Death Eaters talking about trimming the Muggles and Muggle-borns out of the family trees. Severus knew that many of the Death Eaters took the Dark Lord's words to the extreme, speaking about eliminating Muggle-borns altogether, some even boasting about murdering and severely torturing Muggle-borns and half-bloods during the raids. Some in the gatherings thought that those were the actions of the zealots and simply kept their distance from them, but Severus could see that these few zealots were gaining favoritism from the Dark Lord.

The *Daily Prophet* reported what was happening with a biased slant. Every death was Death Eater related whether the Dark Mark appeared over the scene or not. There were reports of entire families murdered, saying that the Dark Mark had been left behind as a warning to everyone but some of the casualties didn't make sense to Severus. Some of them were pure-blood families, like the Langleys and the Alcotts. The Langleys were well-established Wizarding families. Mr. Alcott had been working for the MLE for years, and then there was the Huffer family who ran an antique shop where he'd bought instruments for Potions before. They had been attacked and killed on the night before.

Nevertheless, the boastfulness of the other Death Eaters about their activities made Severus cringe. He wasn't certain if they were misinterpreting the Dark Lord's sentiments or if they really meant to eliminate every witch and wizard with Muggle-born relations or associations, regardless of how insignificant.

The raiding parties Severus had been told to participate in were simply warnings: Muggle baiting, random acts of petty larceny, and property damage. They used hexes, curses or Unforgivables when they met resistance or had been confronted during a raid, and after each raid, they left the Dark Mark over homes as a warning. However, the raids Severus went on were not limited to families with a Muggle parent, or parents, with magical offspring either. Known Muggle-born and half-blood sympathizers were being targeted as well.

The public was growing in fear of the Dark Lord. His name, Voldemort, was never spoken, and just the sight of his Dark Mark was enough to make most people literally cower and run. Houses under which the Dark Mark had appeared in the sky were abandoned, businesses where the Mark had been scorched on the windows or door, closed the next day, the windows boarded up, the owners vanishing.

Then there were the other unusual occurrences. Werewolf attacks were happening more frequently, thankfully, many of the victims not surviving the bites. Reports of Banshees coming out at evenings and screaming on the streets, Giants coming out of the mountains and causing havoc in towns and villages, and vampire bites were being reported in the *Daily Prophet* more frequently than normal, although why these things were being associated with the Dark Lord, Severus was unsure. However, it was highly suspicious that the attacks of the Dark creatures were targeting witches and wizards with Muggle parentage.

According to the *Daily Prophet*, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named or You-Know-Who, as they were calling the Dark Lord, had enlisted the hordes of Dark creatures to his side. This didn't fit with what Severus saw at the recruitment parties, but if it was fact, and the Dark Lord was indeed controlling the Dark creatures, that meant that the Dark Lord was indeed as powerful as Avery and Mulciber boasted.

Severus sat at the riverbank contemplating his role in the Death Eaters. He was not learning about the raids beforehand, never heard about the plans or participated in making them. The zealots like Rodolphus and Rabastan LeStrange were, as was Bella Black, Rodolphus's fiancée. Severus knew that if he was going to save Lily from a raiding party, he was going to have to find a way to get in the Dark Lord's good graces and become one of the Dark Lord's favorites the inner circle of knights. That meant he'd have to start befriending the zealots or find a way to earn their trust.

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

I know, I still haven't gotten Severus and Hermione back together again. It's coming, I promise you.

The African Grass owls resemble Barn owls, but they differ in appearance from their cousins the Barn owl in being larger, stronger, and with stronger contrast in their coloring. The feathers on the upperparts of their bodies are a dark brown, and the underparts are lighter, the feathers on the belly a spotted cream and the rest being more whitish than a Barn owl. Their faces are also more rounded than that of the Barn owl and are white as well. I thought that Kingsley should have one since he was depicted wearing African style robes in the movies.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/African_Grass-owl

Prospects, Plans and Promise

Chapter 22 of 25

Severus takes a chance to make some prospects for himself and receives a proposition that intrigues him. Hermione deals with disappointment as she makes plans for attending the Ministry's May Ball and receives a surprising request.

Twenty years earlier, Severus overhears some devastating news that infuriates him into making some drastic actions in

order to abate his anger and hate.

Pookah, thank you so much for checking the contiguity of my story. I really appreciate your honest opinions. Thank you also to MadBrilliant and Southern_Witch_69 for the beta read. We are almost at the end, girls. Thank you so much for sticking through this with me.

~~~~~o 22 o~~~~~



## Prospects, Plans and Promise

~Winter 1999 ~

When Hermione finally repacked her small beaded purse, she wasn't any closer to solving the question of how to release the spells on the tower room. Surprisingly, Draco had spent a good deal of the week with her, helping with her research, even though she'd never really told him what she was looking for. Hermione realized that Draco had been actually making a concerted effort to be nice to her, although he'd still made the occasional sneer or sarcastic comment, which seemed so much easier to accept than when he'd been solicitous toward her. Even Mrs. Malfoy had been more gracious than Hermione had expected, each afternoon inviting Hermione to join her for tea in her solarium. Even the meals in the formal dining room had been pleasant, although Hermione suspected that it took every ounce of Narcissa's good breeding and social etiquette to remain the perfect hostess.

Nevertheless, Draco had been very helpful. He had pulled out books and set them in piles on the large wooden table to help Hermione in her research. One pile of books had references on how the Blood-Bonding was done, one tall pile of books actually had Blood-Binding curses in them, and another, albeit small, pile were books that mentioned bypassing or escaping the curse. These were the ones in which Hermione was most interested, although very few of the books had any kind of directions on how to reverse or remove the curses, and those that did, didn't seem to apply.

In the week she'd spent in the Malfoys' library, she'd garnered more information on Blood-Bonding than she had ever wanted to know: how it was done and what types of blood made the strongest bonds. She'd discovered that human blood was not always the best choice, which had surprised her. Frequently, the blood of the victim or a servant was suggested, as it tied the other person to the spell, not the person casting it. Occasionally, when the one performing the spell was to add his or her own blood, only a prick or a cut on a finger was suggested, which meant that there wasn't a lot of blood used. More importantly, she had a good idea of how long Blood-Bonding could last: a few years, the life span of the caster, and, in very few cases, for as long as their bloodline survived.

What Hermione did figure out from the books at Malfoy Manor was that, somehow, it had to be the caster, in this case the three casters, or the person whose blood was used, who had to release the spells on the tower. If there was a known living descendant a direct line heir, it might be possible that they could release the spells, but in the case of the tower room, finding an heir was a long shot, if not impossible.

Hermione was convinced that the reason the spells on the tower had lasted so long was because it was Rowena Ravenclaw's and Helena Ravenclaw's blood that bound the spells they'd cast. Hermione assumed that Rowena Ravenclaw didn't have a living relative since Helena had never married, and it wasn't likely she'd had a child. As one of the founders, the castle itself was Rowena's magical legacy. In essence, it was Rowena's magic, the spells that she'd cast on the castle during its creation, the ever-changing floor plan of the castle that made the castle practically sentient. She suspected that the spells Rowena and Helena had cast on the tower would last as long as the castle itself, and that they were now as much a part of the castle as any other section of the castle a semi-sentient magical living entity made of stone, wood, mortar, and magic.

Hermione knew that Rowena Ravenclaw's spells were merely to conceal the stairs and the lower chamber, and they didn't necessarily need to be reversed. It was the spells on the door and the room that Hermione wanted to reverse or break, the ones that ensnared the unwary lovers and sweethearts in the Blood-Bound enchantments. Unfortunately, Hermione had no idea if the ghosts both mere imprints of Helena's and the Baron's corporeal selves would be able to retract their spells.

Once back at school, Hermione had to set aside the puzzling problem of the tower room.

The professors were all increasing their efforts to cram as much information and practice into the last remaining weeks of school to prepare them for their N.E.W.T.s. If Hermione thought that she had had loads of extra work in her fifth year, her last year was proving to be even more demanding. The essay subjects given out were far more in depth than ever before. The pages of her study guide were a mess: due dates were either charmed to glow as the date approached, underlined in red, highlighted, or numbered. Her essays were likewise indicated in a different color per subject with added notations, circles, and arrows, or underlined in red as well. She was even using the five colors of highlighters Harry had given her for Christmas, and the planner itself would give her verbal reminders of pending dates and deadlines.

Many of the students were being given Calming Draught or sleeping potions, and several classmates were using pimple creams and salves for rashes most likely resulting from the added stress. But for Hermione, she found her stress relief in her bath, the tower room, and in bed before she fell asleep: she simply closed her eyes for a few minutes and fantasized about Severus, finding him and making love like they used to.

Still occasionally in the late hours of the night or when she slipped away to have her cup of tea in the tower room, when she wasn't revising, writing essays, practicing her spell work, or when she wasn't contemplating the probability of the tragic lovers of the tower room, she was daydreaming of Severus Snape.

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As necessity sometimes did, Severus had swallowed his pride and approached the Master Brewer in Charge at St. Mungo's, Jargons Nortquist, to offer his services. He had chosen several potions to send with his letter, requesting an interview, three of them the most complicated ones he knew, and thus expensive potions, as examples of his work. The Master Brewer had taken almost two weeks to respond, but Severus answered the summons to meet with the Healer at his office as soon as it had arrived.

"Mr. Snape, I have received letters of glowing recommendation on your behalf from the Minister himself, one from Mr. Arthur Weasley, one Dedalus Diggle, and Harry Potter, as well as from both Minerva McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey. Most unfortunately, St. Mungo's isn't currently hiring new Potions masters," Mr. Nortquist stated, reviewing Severus' curriculum vitae.

Severus was ready to simply thank the wizard for granting him the interview and leave.

Finally, Mr. Nortquist set down the parchment, looked up, and smiled. "However, I am well aware of your skills and innumerable contributions during the war, especially in regards to antidotes and antivenins. Those potions you created for Arthur Weasley..." He shook his head. "If it hadn't been for you, the man would have died. And your

Euphoria Elixir you sent as a sample I've not seen quality like that since Hector Dagworth-Granger himself, Merlin rest him. And your Wolfsbane Potion is superb, even better than Damocles Belby's own brew."

"Thank you," Severus said, feeling like he was wasting his and the elderly wizard's time.

"Unfortunately, at present, I have enough Brewers to handle most of the average daily healing potions, pastes, and elixirs." Mr. Nortquist stared at a spot on the wall. "But as you know, we frequently have need of those unusual or complicated potions... Yes, I can see how... If you'd be willing to brew on an 'as needed basis' as an independent per diem status, supplying potions on an assignment basis," he continued, "I'm sure we could find a mutually beneficial arrangement."

"That would be agreeable," Severus said, knowing that this arrangement would suit him best, brewing the occasional rare, complicated, and extremely advanced potions. At least he wouldn't be in St. Mungo's basements with all the other Brewers who met the daily supply of routine potions.

"I don't suppose you'd consider taking a position as an instructor in our Healer Training program, would you?" Mr. Nortquist asked, clasping his hands together and looking at Severus with an eager expression.

Severus tightened his fingers on the armrest of his chair and controlled the smirk he wanted to give the wizard. "I'm afraid that my teaching days are concluded."

"Oh, well, one can only ask," Mr. Nortquist said, unable to effectively mask his disappointment. "I admit that I was hopeful. Are you sure you won't reconsider? We are talking about N.E.W.T.-level graduates?" He paused, looking hopeful. "No? More's the pity. With your level of knowledge and skills, our Healers would benefit greatly. So, I'll just have legal draft up the necessary documents and owl them to you. I'll send a list of our stock requirements as well, and we can negotiate your fees."

Severus nodded and rose. "Thank you."

Mr. Nortquist rose as well, extending his hand. "I look forward to a productive relationship, Mr. Snape. Do let me know if you change your mind regarding the position in our training program. We could match the amount of your salary from Hogwarts, maybe even offer an increase. Research opportunities."

Severus managed to control his smirk at the old man's persistence. "I'll consider it, but not for a while yet," he relented, shaking his head. "I really want a break from teaching."

"No? Well, do keep it in mind anyway."

Feeling emboldened after that interview, Severus had decided to try approaching several apothecaries as well and was able to establish a consignment basis with several of them. In Slug and Jiggers, a woman followed him from the shop after he'd secured an agreement with Mr. Jiggers.

"Mr. Snape?" she asked.

Severus turned around. "Yes," he replied, eyeing the woman suspiciously. "May I help you?" The woman was wearing a long Indian-style dress made of a bright, reddish-pink silk and lavishly decorated with embroidery over loose fitting pants of the same color, although she did not appear to be Indian herself. However, her light, sandy-brown colored hair was braided loosely down her back, and she had a red dot between her brows like Indian ladies wore.

"My name is Sunita Gupta," she said, looking up at him with earnest, violet-grey eyes. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop on your conversation in there, but were you looking for a position as a potion brewer?" she asked, demurely pointing to the door of the apothecary.

Severus crossed his arms and regarded the woman, allowing his curiosity to show in his expression. "Yes."

"And he said that you were a master at potions," she said, adjusting the scarf on her shoulder.

Severus nodded, watching her with a level gaze. She shifted nervously, then stood up and faced him as if pulling on some inner courage. "I am looking to hire a potions brewer of some skill for my shop."

"And what does your shop sell?" he asked smoothly.

"Well, I have aromatherapy oils, custom blended fragrances, bath products, skin care, massage oils, and skin treatments... basic skin treatments, but I'd like to branch out a bit more. Offer an assortment of lotions and potions for skin, hair, and nail problems... for eczema, psoriasis, kitschy-horn, fungus... and maybe..." She paused and looked away. "Not your thing, I suppose."

Severus was watching her, angry that she would consider hiring him to brew beauty products, but when she'd mentioned the idea of producing skin treatments for generalized dermatitis and chronic, non-contagious autoimmune diseases of the skin, he thought it might not be too bad.

She looked up at him, and a soft flush colored her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I've wasted your time, sir," she apologized.

"No, go on," he said smoothly.

She smiled and began telling her of her desire to offer treatments for basic skin, hair, and nail ailments, chronic curse and hex maladies. "Would you like to see my shop?" she finally asked.

Severus shook his head, and she lowered her gaze to the ground and sucked her lower lip under her front teeth. "I'm more interested in further discussing what you see as my role in your business," he said, and she looked up at him and her eyes widened. "All right, let's go to your shop and discuss your needs in further detail."

He followed her to a shop that stood at the junction of Knockturn Alley and across from Wlado's Whatit's and Wiggets and Gringotts. The door of her shop opened up at the corner so that it could just as easily have had a Knockturn Alley address instead of Diagon Alley. It was not a space that had held a business for long.

Inside the shop appeared to combine Muggle mysticism with Magical aspects of mystical study. The shop had several customers, looking around and waiting by the counter to be rung up by the shop assistant. That in itself was promising. There were a few shelves of books on cosmology, astrology, and esotericism. There were counters and shelves with potions, lotions, shampoos, soaps, oils, incense, and herbs. A display on one wall held music albums, and there were glass cases of crystal jewelry and various stones carved in the shapes of animals and eggs. The shop had a second floor and a basement; the second floor had the darker aspects of the shop and the basement was mostly for storage. The most curious thing about the shop was that it could appeal to either the curious wizard or witch or the more shady clientele of Knockturn Alley.

Halfway through his tour of the shop, Sunita introduced her sister, Avani, a woman that reminded Severus of an Indian Trelawney, except without the glasses, and her waist-length raven-black hair was in a neat plait.

"My sister and I share the responsibility of running the shop, although Avani does the books, and I make some of the items that you see," Sunita explained when they'd sat down in the small office in the back room. "The thing is, I have noticed that although St. Mungo's doesn't necessarily have a health clinic for chronic care, most witches and wizards hate waiting in the reception line just to refill their potions. I was thinking that I that is we, if you're interested, could provide refills of their potions, possibly even have some healing potions for common ailments..."

"So you are considering having an apothecary service in addition to your beauty products," he said, still scrutinizing the shop and the two witches.

"Exactly," Avani said softly. Up until now, the girl had been very quiet, letting her sister do all the talking. "It's Sun's idea. We would prefer to have a contracted source rather than a brewer on the premises, although if you needed space we could make some in the basement."



"I would want my name on the labels of my potions," he said smoothly, and both girls beamed at him.

"Absolutely," Sunita said, smiling and her eyes sparkling again.

Severus left the interview and walked down Diagon Alley to the Leaky Cauldron for a pint. If nothing else, he now had the makings of a small personal business as an entrepreneur providing potions for St. Mungo's, two apothecaries, and the Gupta sisters' shop. Things were looking much better.

Several months later, Severus entered the offices of Holmes and Chaney, Magical Realtors, in the hopes of procuring the house in which he'd been residing. In the entire time he'd been living there, no one had been by looking for the cottage. He hoped that the cottage could be declared as abandoned by the previous owners and that he could claim the property by squatter's rights; therefore, Severus would own not one but two properties. He had already turned Spinner's End into his private potions lab, but he definitely preferred living at the cottage.

~Spring 1979~

By sheer coincidence, Severus overheard Leanne telling Mary in Madeline's Magical Mélange in Diagon Alley that Potter and Lily had married. He had been in the shop, picking up a new frock coat he'd ordered to wear to dinner at the Notts' home. Severus moved through the racks, keeping out of sight of the girls as he listened in on their conversation. Apparently the wedding had been a quiet affair with only a few friends in attendance.

Severus had ducked into the dressing room to avoid anyone seeing the angry tears welling up in his eyes. He eased from the shop and followed the girls until by happy chance they entered the bookshop and got separated. Leanne was terrified upon seeing Severus, but with a quick, forceful Imperius, the use of Legilimency, and an Obliviate to erase her memory of their encounter, he had a vague idea where Potter lived and knew that Lily had been living with him all this time.

Severus felt a searing feeling of despair that he turned into a raging hate by the time he was summoned to the site of the raid.

The raid that night on a supposed 'safe house' for Muggle-borns in a quaint fishing village had been a brutal one. The blasting hex he had used made a huge hole on the side of the house that had made two walls tumble and the roof collapse. Severus had lashed out against one dark-haired bespectacled wizard, brutally using his Sectumsempra, and the house had been left in shambles.

Another well-aimed spell and the car on the drive exploded. Screams and cries could be heard along the street when Severus indicated for everyone to leave. He shot the Dark Mark in the air above the house with a bit more gusto than he'd normally have done, making the image of the Dark Mark almost three times the size he normally produced.

That night, he went to the location he'd retrieved from Leanne's mind and tried the Scrying Charm to locate Potter's house. Severus broke into the house that he thought belonged to Potter, smashing and exploding everything in sight. Disapparating when the sounds of the sirens announced the arrival of the police. He crumbled on the hearth of his Floo with a full bottle of Ogden's and cried, devastated that he'd lost Lily forever.

The next morning, ignoring the hangover, he searched through the week's newspapers, thinking he'd missed the announcement. *Nothing*. The announcement of the marriage of James Potter to Lily Evans had never made the pages of the *Daily Prophet*. Severus scanned through his papers again. Nothing. He checked a few back issues.

The *Daily Prophet* reported the attacks on Bruce Hall and Patricia Knollwood and their families that Severus knew had been a raid. There was a hurricane incident on the coast of Weymouth, Doeset, and the wreckage of several fishing boats caused by a pair of giants the Dark Lord controlled. In the highlands, a small village of Buckhaven was destroyed over a supposed feud over grazing land and the interbreeding of weeples and the local Muggle sheep. There were other reports of the Death Eaters' activities, which were highly exaggerated, but Severus didn't care. His eyes brimmed with unshed tears as the hurt and anger swelled up inside him. His Lily, his Lily love, had married Potter. Potter had won her, and he, Severus, had lost her forever.

McNair, Lestrangle, Roiser, and Avery were standing with Severus by the grand staircase that evening, waiting to be brought before the Dark Lord. "You should have seen it," Avery said, trying to stifle his laughing. "The size of it! Anyone would have been able to see that Dark Mark for miles!"

Severus turned to look down the empty hallway. "It was nothing," he said, wondering why it had amused Avery so much. He'd lost control that night, wanted to vent out his anger acted with vengeance, and now regretted his lack of control.

"You were awesome last night," McNair said, patting Severus on the shoulder. "You should have seen him; he was unstoppable. Those Mudbloods didn't stand a chance."

Severus tried to tune out Avery's recounting of the raid as he waited patiently to be summoned before the Dark Lord. He glanced up as Malfoy walked over. Severus nodded to Malfoy when he looked in his direction with a look of wonder after listening for a while.

"Merlin, I'd love to know that spell!" McNair said, turning to Severus. "Will you show me some time?"

Severus simply nodded once and sipped his drink. *I'll show you the first attempt, the failed version, but not the actual one...*

"Cool," McNair said before turning back to listen to Avery boast.

Severus' attention was diverted as Mr. Warrington walked over to him. "By the way, I heard from Carrow that you managed to perfect the Thurkell Potion?"

Severus shook his head. "No, I would hardly call it a potion." Fact was Severus hadn't really tried to make it work.

"Pity. Would've been the perfect answer," Mr. Warrington said as he ran a hand down his robes to make sure he was presentable, "turn 'em all into Squibs."

"Is that what it's supposed to do, turn them Muggle-borns into Squibs?" Avery asked, and Severus shrugged.

"I like that, make 'em Squibs so they stop polluting our world," Rosier said, giving Avery a nudge with his shoulder.

"The potion directions Mr. Carrow sent me apparently made his female Crup miscarry, and the pups all died. However, the bitch died from hemorrhaging. He'd considered the potion a success and had wanted my input on the matter." Not that Severus agreed with what Amycus wanted to use the potion for. "A poison given to a pregnant female would have done the same." The mere thought of actually using the potion on women, witches like Lily, made Severus' skin crawl.

"*He* wanted to talk to you about it," Mr. Warrington said proudly. "It's why he came here tonight."

Severus cringed. *So that's why I was summoned* He knew what the potion was supposed to do, and he knew what needed to be done to it to make it work. However, he hadn't wanted to. He wasn't sure he could convince the Dark Lord that he'd been unsuccessful with the potion, although he'd heard that no one could lie to him. "I'm having difficulty with the formula. The one that seemed hopeful failed," he said calmly. It wasn't an actually lie; that variation had failed, on purpose.

"I'll pass on the information to Carrow," Mr. Warrington said. "Let me know if you require any more ingredients or test subjects."

Severus made a slight nod of his head. "Thank you, but I'm fine for now." Severus counted as he forced himself to breathe slowly so that he appeared calm and in control. Most of the Death Eaters he knew were in the Dark Lord's inner circle were present, milling around in small groups. The worst part of being summoned sometimes was the wait until you were called to appear before the Dark Lord, giving you plenty of time to think about what the Dark Lord wanted and dwelling on the possible reasons in anticipation.

Finally, Bellatrix came to retrieve Severus. "He wants to see you now."

Severus nodded and followed her into the large dining room. The massive table was lowered to the floor, making a type of dais, upon which the Dark Lord sat in an armchair. Severus walked up to the edge of the table and kneeled. "My Lord, you have summoned me before you," he said as smoothly as he could, forcefully pushing his emotions down so all he felt was calm.

"Yes, Severus," the Dark Lord said, his long fingers curling around the carved lion heads of the armrests. "Rise and approach me."

Severus did as he was told.

"I have had news that you reviewed Amycus' potion. What have you to say on it?"

Severus inhaled and repeated what he'd told Mr. Warrington.

The Dark Lord remained silent as he paced in front of his chair. "Very disappointing," he finally said and turned, his robes flaring before he sat down.

Severus didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until the pain in his chest reminded him to exhale. He let it out as slowly as he could.

"Well, if the potion only causes miscarriages and hemorrhaging as you claim, then that is what we shall use it for," the Dark Lord stated dismissively. He leaned forward, his expression far more attentive but his tone cold when he spoke. "I have heard about your actions during the last raid. I must say I was surprised."

"I wanted there to be no mistaking the intent of the raid, my Lord," Severus said as smoothly as he could.

"However, the children live," the Dark Lord accused.

Severus remained as he was, his mind replaying the raid, trying to remember if he recalled seeing children, if any. "If they did, my Lord, I was unaware of the children's existence. We were informed of an elderly witch, the mother of the victim, his wife, and him..."

The Dark Lord smiled. "See, Bella, he speaks so calmly of the victims." He turned his penetrating gaze back on Severus. "Nevertheless, the children and the wife fled to the back of the house and Disappeared away."

Severus ran the raid over in his mind, replaying the explosions. The Dark Lord's eyes narrowed. "I had believed that the family within the targeted house had all been dispensed with as per your orders," Severus said. He wanted to hang his head, hide the guilt he felt, but remained standing, ready to meet his fate. "If I have failed you, I will accept my punishment."

There was silence in the room as Severus waited. The Dark Lord rose and regarded Severus, his gaze never leaving his face. After what seemed to be minutes, the Dark Lord raised his hand and waved him off. "You may go."

Severus bowed and backed away, only turning when he'd reached the door. Avery was standing in the doorway and shifted aside to let him pass.

"Avery, he's ready for you now," Bella said with a smile.

Severus walked as casually as he could for the exit, wondering how he'd escaped punishment for the surviving children. He heard Avery scream when he reached the front doors.

~Spring 1999~

Announcements were posted in every publication and on the notice board at Hogwarts; the Ministry of Magic was sponsoring a ball on the second of May at Hogwarts to commemorate the end of the Voldemort Wars. Two days later, Hermione received her invitation for the ball, permission from the Minister to attend, and a brief note that if she needed dress robes for the occasion, she could contact Auror Avengard Nettles to escort her to Diagon Alley to purchase them. Professor McGonagall sent a note asking Hermione to see her after her last lesson before lunch.

As soon as Hermione sat down, Professor McGonagall came right to the point. "You and I are to go shopping for new dress robes, it seems."

"Pardon me?" Hermione asked, surprised at the announcement.

"For the Ministry's ball on the second," Professor McGonagall said calmly, although there was a slight girlish glint in her eyes.

Hermione was a bit stunned by the offer. "I wasn't really all that keen on attending the ball," she said demurely, hoping that she didn't offend the Headmistress.

"Nonsense," Professor McGonagall said offhandedly. "Besides, I know that your friends and the members of Dumbledore's Army are expected to attend. Miss Lovegood and Miss Weasley will be coming with us as well. I have even been given money to assist you and Miss Weasley in paying for the dress robes if you don't have money enough of your own."

Hermione's eyes widened and her mouth fell open, and she knew that she must look like a gobsmacked guppy. She finally managed to say, "You've what?"

"You heard me," Professor McGonagall said, lacing her fingers together on the desk. "As you know, it will be here, in the Great Hall, the Entrance Hall, and there is to be a huge tent on the grounds in front... quite an undertaking. I am to allow all sixth- and seventh-years to attend. I don't really think that this is optional." She turned and looked at the parchment that bore the Ministry seal. "Several members of the Social Events office are arriving on the first of May, and I am to assist them in making all the necessary preparations as we did for the Yule Ball. This means that for two days, the students will be eating in their common rooms."

Hermione could tell that she was annoyed at the Ministry for imposing. "Might I make a suggestion?"

"Yes, certainly," Professor McGonagall said, looking at her questioningly.

"You could have the Room of Requirement imitate the Great Hall during that time, if you think that the elves could deliver the food there...? That might be one possible solution."

"An excellent idea, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said, smiling as she picked up her quill and made a notation. "I can even arrange for a bit of a celebratory dinner for the students unable to attend. Now as we don't have much time before the ball, we shall go this Saturday to Diagon Alley."

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The next morning, the students who did not get invited to the Ministry ball were grumbling and bemoaning the inequality of it all. Professor McGonagall had waited until dinner to announce that for the days that the Ministry would be using the Great Hall, the students would be dining in the Room of Requirement on the seventh floor, which caused quite a stir. Many of the students had heard about the now infamous Room of Requirement, so excited murmurs broke out from all four house tables.

The next day, school owls delivered special invitations to all the students not attending the Ministry's ball to attend the Hogwarts May second celebration. Schedules were placed on every notice board regarding special activities planned. On the first, there would be a picnic for all students outside on the school grounds with broom races and obstacle courses on the Quidditch pitch, and boating on the lake. On the second, there were games scheduled for the afternoon in the library before the party, wizard chess and Gobstones competitions by year in the large classrooms on the second floor, and of course, the Hogwarts' party to celebrate the end of the war. Also, students were informed that George Weasley would be providing fireworks afterwards.

No matter how much Hermione protested that she didn't want to attend a Ministry ball to be congratulated, stared at, and pawed over by every wizard in the room, Professor McGonagall wouldn't hear of it. That Saturday, Luna, Ginny, and Hermione met Professor McGonagall in her office. Auror Avenguard escorted them through the Floo to Diagon Alley and to Madam Malkin's for dress robes. Each girl was given her allowance and allowed to try on any robes they liked. Madam Malkin herself attended the girls, and Hermione was certain that the robes she was showing them were of finer quality and more expensive than the amount they had to spend. In the end, Hermione was given a set of lovely iridescent peacock blue-green satin robes, Ginny a set of rich emerald green wrinkle-free taffeta, and Luna iridescent purple chiffon that showed gleams of green when she moved.

\*

Severus received an owl one morning that flew in through the window behind Ruddy. Ruddy dropped the two letters he was carrying and flew up to sit in the rafters, his favorite perch, to preen.

The young Snowy Owl that arrived looked exhausted, but she proudly held out her leg as Severus untied the letter, then flew up to the rafters to sit next to Ruddy. "I suppose you are waiting for a reply," he said, receiving a muffled sleepy hoot back. Seeing the Ministry seal on two letters Ruddy had brought him, he set them aside and picked up the letter the Snowy Owl had delivered.

The message was from Potter, inviting him to the Leaky Cauldron for lunch or dinner, whichever was more convenient. Severus scoffed and set it aside.

The second letter he opened was an impersonal letter from the Social Affairs office about some bloody ball to be held at Hogwarts on the second of May. Not surprising, the second envelope held his invitation to the ball and a note that his R.S.V.P. had already been accepted and that he would be an honored guest of the evening. Severus scowled at the impertinence of the witch, assuming that he'd even consider attending until his eyes fell on a name in the list of honored guests: *Hermione J. Granger*. Severus stared at the name as he walked over by the fire and sat down. She'll be there. *I'll be able to see her*. His arm moved to the armrest, still clutching the letter as he stared into the fire. *But will she want to see me? I haven't written or spoken to her all year* He felt a knot in his gut and a sense of guilt. *It's never too late to write a letter*.

By the time he'd gone to bed, Severus' waste bin was half-filled with scraps of torn up and crumpled attempts at the letter, and there were a number of balled up parchments littering the floor around it. Severus had never been at a loss for words before, always able to say exactly what he wanted in the minimum number of words, but this letter had proven to be nearly impossible to write.

\*

Two days before the Ministry Ball, a young barn owl swooped down in front of Hermione and proudly held out a letter to her. Hermione gave the bird a sausage and opened the letter. She recognized the slanted script immediately, and her heart started thumping in her throat.

*Dearest Hermione,*

*I hope your N.E.W.T. year is going well. I know that you will receive an Outstanding in every exam. I well remember the effort you put in your work, always reading every reference you can find even the most obscure books, journals, and periodicals that the Hogwarts library contained. The alacrity of your remarks, your hypotheses, and supporting arguments had always been above the level of your peers. You are, and always have been, an inquisitive, compulsive, astute, and perceptive student. In other words, when I was your professor, you challenged me in ways no other student had done for years, and I was annoyed that those around you relied on you and your answers rather than thinking for themselves.*

*So therefore, wishing you luck on your exams is fruitless you will shine and excel since it is in your nature to do so.*

*I regretted that the level of potions I had to teach did not challenge you sufficiently and that due to circumstances of fate, I was unable to tutor you beyond the normal curriculum. For during my years of teaching, no other student seemed worthy of my time, and unfortunately with the second rising of the Dark Lord, I was unable to show you any favoritism, regardless of how I might have enjoyed seeing how far you would be able to go.*

*But I digress.*

*I have intentions of attending the Ministry Ball this second of May. Although I know that you will undoubtedly have an escort to the ball, I would be most honored if you'd consent to save one dance of your evening for me. But if not, I will graciously abide your wishes, shall remain aloof, and not bother you.*

*Sincerely,*

*Severus Snape*

Hermione stared at the letter, her heart pounding in her chest and read the letter again, still not believing that he'd written her, let alone gave her a compliment the caliber of which she'd never received before. He'd even requested to dance with her. She was about to read it again when Ginny leaned over.

"Who's it from?" she asked and sucked in her breath when she too recognized the handwriting. "Is it no, it's can't be! After all this time and he suddenly writes you?"

"He says he's coming to the ball and hopes to dance with me," Hermione said in quiet awe, still not believing her eyes.

"You're kidding!" Ginny exclaimed, reaching for the letter. Hermione let her take it from her fingers and watched her friend's expression as she read it. "Oh my! Oh, wow! No he would have with you? Oh my," Ginny finally looked up. "Oh my gosh! Are you going to?"

"I don't know. What should I do? Write him back? I don't have any idea where he is or if the letter would reach him," Hermione babbled, her mind in a whirl.

"So I suppose you'd tell him yes?" Ginny asked, handing back the letter.

"I want him to explain where he's been. What happened to him? Why he never wrote to me or contacted me before now or why suddenly now he wants to see me," Hermione rambled in a rush, simply mouthing everything that came to mind.

"Well, in two days you'll find out, won't you?" Ginny asked, biting off the end of another sausage.

"Well, we'll see. Opening up and divulging everything isn't exactly a Severus Snape trait, is it?" Hermione countered.

"Well, no," Ginny said, smiling. "But we are going to make you look as lovely as we did for the Yule Ball and knock his dragonskin boots off his feet, that's for sure. Maybe we can set you up for the ball. I know my brothers are all coming." She set down her fork. "Bill will be with Fleur, of course... George is bringing Angie... Ron's been seeing one of the girls from the Magical Sports office... Percy... No. Dag-nag-it! I suppose you could ask Dean or Terry?"

"No, this one I'll be attending with you and Harry, but I want to see what Severus has to say for himself," she said, picking up a slice of toast.

Ginny couldn't stop grinning all through breakfast. "I did like the part where he told you how brilliant you are."

"Gin, he was only saying that as an apology for ignoring me all year," Hermione replied, but her mind was still overwhelmed by his letter, and her heart was racing. This was going to be two very long days. "Ginny, would it be possible to turn my dress robes red no, green? I want to be wearing green for the ball. Maybe I should have gotten the other one, you know the strapless one."

Ginny started laughing. "We can send an owl to Madam Milliken, asking how to change the color. I'm quite certain that it will not be the first time her customers changed their minds about the color of their dress robes last minute. But don't change dress robes. The one you selected is gorgeous on you and really shows off your figure."

Hermione smiled. "Good, I think that a dark green would go very well with my grandmother's Brazilian tourmaline jewelry."

"And be a stunning color on you," Ginny said with a wink. "I'll send a letter to Harry and see if he'll make the grand entrance with you. That will really get all the gossips wondering. Won't it?"

"Sure, that will be great," Hermione answered, still staring at the letter Ginny had handed back. *He is coming. Here. In two days* Her palms were getting sweaty, her throat was restricting, and her heart was beating a crescendo against her ribs. *Severus.*

~ T B C ~>

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Author's Notes:

Next up the long awaited reunion.

Reunited

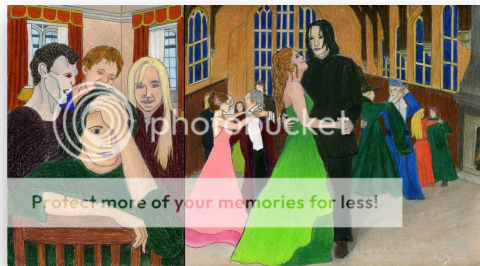
Chapter 23 of 25

Severus goes on a raid and is surprised by who the victims are.

Hermione and Severus attend the Ministry of Magic's May Second Celebration Ball and make confessions that will change their lives forever.

Pookah, thank you so much for checking the contiguity of my story. I really appreciate your honest opinions. Thank you also to MadBrilliant and Southern_Witch_69 for the beta read. We are almost at the end, girls. Thank you so much for sticking through this with me.

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Reunited

~May 1979~

Being in the inner circle wasn't exactly how Severus thought it would be. The Dark Lord rarely planned his raids in advance, unless he wanted to attack a village or something big. The scouts would report what they knew, or the messages came from spies within the school or the Ministry, and the Dark Lord would summon whom he wanted for the attacks. Being called for a raid usually meant scraping the bottom of the barrel in Severus' opinion. Moreover, some of the more zealous Death Eaters took it upon themselves to make numerous random attacks on Muggles and Muggle-borns, boastfully reporting their successes to the Dark Lord in hopes of gaining his praises.

In addition, the Dark Lord did not trust Dumbledore; he was always wary of what Dumbledore was doing, what he was planning, or where he might be. It was annoying. However, from what Severus observed, Dumbledore was only intent on stopping or impeding the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters, and he rarely made preemptive strikes. Not that there was a place or a headquarters to strike against because the Dark Lord himself, wherever he happened to be, was where they were summoned and gathered, and he was rarely in the same place twice.

Most of Severus' friends were now from the influential pure-blood families, and among the Death Eaters, he was accepted by all of them, except Bellatrix Lestrange. She was becoming more and more like a zealot of the Dark Lord, as were some of the more shady characters the Dark Arts attracted. Severus was spending most of his time at Malfoy Manor or the Lestrange estate because he hated being at home. Lucius and Rabastan didn't mind. They liked having Severus around, especially Rab. Both houses held huge libraries in which Severus was welcome to spend countless hours. Of course, that came with a price the experimentation and formulation of new potions or the development of new spells and curses. However, the favorite spells of the Death Eaters were still the Cruciatus and the Killing Curse.

Severus looked over the wizards called together for the attack on three sites in Manchester: Rusholme, Deansgate train station, and Burnage.

Severus never liked Macnair, Darney, or Barton; they were wild cards in a fight, slicing and dicing, or toying with their victims before killing them. Rowle and Thortensen, they liked to blow things up and create massive damage. Hodges didn't really have the stomach for gore, but he packed a wallop behind his curses. They were to target the train station.

Dolohov was in charge of the Rushlome raid. The plan was laid out and the targets identified, a section of low, terraced homes said to be harboring Muggle-borns. As one of the oldest Death Eaters, Dolohov was experienced in this type of attack.

Severus cringed as Dolohov spelled out his strategy for attacking the houses, knowing that he was expected to do the same thing at the house he was being sent to. "You

demolish the house and the ones nearby. We are to make as much destruction as we can and get out. No survivors," Dolohov stated, and the Dark Lord nodded, obviously pleased.

Severus was being sent with the Carrows, McBurnery, Hawthorne, and Macnair to Burnage to strike a semi-detached house, thought to be the home of Aurors, a family of blood traitors, and a Muggle-born. The Dark Lord was coming on this raid himself. Severus tried to avoid looking at either Amycus or his sister, Alecto, as the Dark Lord laid out his plan. For all their arrogance, the Carrows were dirt poor, living in a single shanty, but they were pure-bloods. And they gave Severus the creeps. They simply loved to torture and kill.

Severus and the others Apparated directly on the grass in front of the house and instantly moved to their respective positions. The Dark Lord positioned himself boldly in the front garden. His voice rang out true and clear in the evening air, and what he said made Severus' blood run cold.

"Sirius Black, I know you are in there. Come out. Come out and I will forgive you. You are of the oldest and noblest of families, and I would welcome you to my fold. There is no need for you to hide from me. Your friends, they have deceived you. You and Potter, both. Potter, you and that wife of yours, I'll give you the same chance."

Sirius' voice came from a down stairs window, "Never," he shouted as Lily's voice came from above him.

"You liar! You would never spare me. How could you since I represent everything you despise."

McBurnery was to demolish the base of the chimney so they couldn't escape through the Floo, but he looked nervous and anxious. This was supposed to be a kill, demolish, and run raid. Severus was supposed to enter the house from the side, by way of a Blasting Hex, making as much damage as he could and kill anyone he saw inside. Lily was upstairs in the other side of the duplex. If he made his blast strong enough, and fired early, he might give them a chance to get away. Severus waited for the Dark Lord to give the signal, the spell already on his lips.

"For you, lady, I will make an exception," the Dark Lord offered. "I will grant you your life if you serve me."

"I could never serve a murderer like you!" Lily shouted loud and clear.

The Dark Lord bristled and moved out of Severus' sight to stand facing the window from which Lily was hiding and shouted, "One more chance, witch. Join me. Join me or die."

Three jets of light shot out from the house all aimed at the Dark Lord. He deflected them easily, but Alecto took the attack and the resulting sparks as the signal to attack back, as did her brother. Severus reached as far down in himself as he could and released the spell, destroying the side of the house. He hit it again for good measure, making the kitchen of the house erupt in flames as if it were a gas explosion. McBurnery fell on his bum, his spell hitting the upper part of the chimney, before he corrected himself, making the rest for the bricks crumble and fall in the explosion.

Back at Malfoy Manor, the Dark Lord paced in rage, ranting about the incompetency of the Carrows. "You let them escape!" he snarled venomously. "We had that Mudblood and those blood traitors in our grasp, and you let them escape!" He pointed his wand and hit her with the Cruciatus.

Alecto fell to the floor, screaming and writhing in pain.

Severus watched, trying to maintain a mask of indifference as he waited either for his turn to be tortured or dismissed. A few seconds that seemed like minutes to Severus, Amycus was writhing on the floor as his sister had been. Severus waited, trying to control his breathing, appear calm and keep his heart from pounding in his chest, dreading the fact that he could be next as the Dark Lord paced, still ranting at the incompetency of his followers.

"And you, Severus, what have you to say on your defense?" the Dark Lord asked.

Severus hung his head in mock shame to hide the fear in his eyes. "I heard the explosions and thought you'd given the signal, my Lord. Had I all I can say is that I am guilty of acting prematurely. If they escaped, then I, too, am to blame."

The Dark Lord stopped directly in front of Severus. "Look at me," he demanded softly.

Severus swallowed, thinking, *'placid lake, blue placid calm, keep calm'* as he looked up. There was a sharp, thrusting feeling in his mind as the Dark Lord stared at him, glaring angrily, the brown irises surrounded by red sclera of his eyes so difficult to stare back into. Severus knew he was being violated with Legilimency; nevertheless, there was little to see in his mind but the truth. When the connection between them was broken, it made Severus sway on his feet. The Dark Lord turned, his robes swirling about him as he rounded on McBurnery.

Once he was dismissed, Severus Disillusioned himself and returned to the street of the raid. Firemen, police, and rescue workers combed through the wreckage. Severus magically changed his robes to mimic a rescue worker, walked casually to the house, and began making his way up to the room in which Lily had been. It was a bedroom, or what was left of a bedroom. He looked around the charred, water-soaked furniture, blackened, sopping wet rugs, and blistered, burnt paint. He saw picture frames lying burnt and broken on the floor. In the wardrobe, there were robes, boots, Muggle clothes, and a small box. Severus took the box and, after searching further, realized there was nothing else left in the room.

He Apparated to a small hilltop and opened the box. Lily's Hogwarts letters, various cards, and other letters were stashed inside, bundled in ribbons. He scowled at small collection of cards and notes from Potter tied in a red ribbon, then smiled at the notes and letters he'd written her, tied together with a green one. Under the letters were her prefect and head girl badges, a charm bracelet, an old pocket watch, a penknife, a pair of pretty hair combs, and a Moke-skin pouch. He opened the small pouch and a small gold cross on a chain, a Snitch charm on a chain, a pair of earrings, and a ring fell out into his palm.

Severus sighed seeing the ring, his lips stretching into a smile, and a tear slid down his cheek. It was a simple green stone between two knots that he'd given Lily a friendship ring, a promise to be friends forever. *She kept all my letters, every one, tied in the green ribbon I gave her to wear to our first Quidditch game and my ring* He held the ring tightly in his hand as he stared out at the grassy landscape and tall majestic oaks. *She did love me, I know it. Oh, Lily, why do you defy him? Why fight him when we could be together by his side?*

Severus put the everything back inside the box and closed the lid, laying his hand on the smooth surface. He would try harder. He would learn to control his fear around the Dark Lord, master Occlumency, and ingrate himself even further with the Dark Lord. Somehow he, Severus Snape, the Half-Blood Prince, would become a Prince of the Death Eaters. He would find a way to be indispensable and never be in the dark as to the Dark Lord's activities again. Only then could he truly protect Lily.

~May 1999~

The afternoon of the Ministry ball and Hogwarts May Second celebration, most of the girls were in their rooms getting ready. Although Professor McGonagall had indicated that the Hogwarts party would be casual dress, many of the girls planned on wearing dresses and dress robes, even though few of the boys wanted to dress up. Hermione was surprised that Darlene wanted to attend the one in the Room of Requirement rather than the big Ministry party in the Great Hall.

Hermione was thrilled, and a bit surprised, to see Harry, Ron, Neville, and Hannah in the common room when she and Ginny came down the stairs. Harry's mouth literally fell open when he saw them. "Almost a year apart and I suppose he forgot what I look like?" Ginny giggled as they stepped off the last step.

"Gin, you have grown up a bit this year, and you are now a lovely young lady," Hermione chided her, sounding so much like her own mother at the moment.

Ginny smiled. "Thank you, but I think I'll go greet my fiancé properly," she said. She coyly glided over to Harry, wrapped her arms around him, and Harry kissed her once he came to his senses, causing quite a few catcalls and whistles from the other guys of the house.

Ron and Neville were openly gawking at Hermione as she approached, greeting each of her friends with a hug. Ron bashfully introduced Roseanna Montero, the pretty Spanish girl Ginny had said he had been seeing.

Dinner was served under a huge gossamer tent so sheer that the guests could see the stars, which were held up by delicately carved poles that resembled flowering trees. There seemed to be at least a hundred tables, each with a tall slender vase of cascading flowers like miniature trees, surrounded by tea lights and iridescent glass bubbles. Fairies and butterflies fluttered among the flowers and softly glowing bubbles, and the tiny candles filled the tent with a soft glow.

As heroes of the war, Hermione, Harry, and their friends were seated at a table near the high table that held the Minister, several key people of the Order of the Phoenix and several department heads. Three nearby tables were reserved for the members of Dumbledore's Army. Hermione sat at the designated table with seven of her friends, Harry, Ginny, Luna, Neville, Hannah, Ron, and Ron's date, Roseanna.

The acknowledgements and accolades seemed to stretch on for over an hour, and several people were asked to give speeches. The members of the Order of the Phoenix were asked to stand and be recognized, each receiving a gold medallion with a relief of a lovely phoenix on it. Hermione stood when her name was announced and scanned the room one last time when Kingsley announced Severus'. He never stood meaning that he wasn't present. Her heart sank in her chest.

"He'll come," Ginny whispered, getting an odd look from Harry. "He's probably just late."

Likewise, the members of Dumbledore's Army were asked to come forward and receive honors. As acknowledged leaders of the DA, Hermione, Ron, Harry, Luna, Neville, and Ginny were asked to come forward first. Hermione tried looking at the sea of faces in hopes of seeing Severus enter. She waved at Seamus, Dean, Padma, Parvati, and Lavender at one table and Justin, Megan, Susan, and Ernie at another, but she couldn't see Severus anywhere. When the rest of the DA gathered on the dais, Harry leaned over to whisper to Kingsley. He nodded in understanding. "We have two young men who joined Dumbledore's Army's ranks last year and stood in defense of the castle the day of the final battle, Draco Malfoy and Greg Goyle. If you'd both like to join us here and be recognized."

A stunned Greg Goyle, apparently astounded at hearing his name called, had to be urged to stand and go forward. Draco had a momentary expression of surprise, but stood proudly and came forward. Harry and Draco shook hands as Hermione shook Greg's.

"These two men crossed the lines, leaving Tom 'Voldemort' Riddle's side and standing valiantly for ours, showing a strong face to the world for what they knew to be right. Gentleman, I congratulate you," Kingsley stated. As people clapped, the members of the DA shook hands and hugged friends before taking their seats.

Kingsley then announced the recipients for the Order of Merlin. Hermione, Harry, Ron, Neville, Ginny, Luna, and Draco were called up together, to be acknowledged again for receiving the gold first-degree medallion and Seamus received the silver second-degree medallion. Kingsley announced Severus' name along the members of the Order of Phoenix to receive their Order of Merlin, and as with the honor presented earlier, the Minister accepted Severus' gold first-degree medallion on his behalf.

Hermione turned her head while she applauded the recipients, trying to keep from crying, and felt Ginny's arm slide across her back, giving her a reassuring hug.

"He probably is just delayed... or he wanted to miss the ceremonies," Ginny whispered.

"You'd think he'd want to be here for this," Hermione answered. "I'm just so disappointed that he isn't here to receive the accolades he so justly deserves. Shouldn't he have wanted to show everyone that he was a hero? He deserves this, Gin, all of it."

"Yes, I agree. But he is a private person, isn't he?" Ginny whispered, her eyes imploring her to keep on hoping. "He'll be here. He said he would. Severus isn't the kind of man to back out on his word, is he?"

Hermione made a small shake of her head gave her friend a wan smile. "You're right, he isn't." She was thrilled when the ceremonies came to an end and dinner was finally served. Throughout dinner though, she still watched the doors, eagerly anticipating Severus' entrance.

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Severus had decided to arrive late to avoid any grand entries and as much of the ceremony as possible. He knew that Narcissa and Draco had arrived earlier, wanting to be on time, but he'd begged off, and thankfully, Narcissa had understood. Because Draco's and Narcissa's parts in the war had helped ensure Harry's defeat of the Dark Lord, Severus had sent a letter to the witch in the Social Affairs office insisting that the Malfoys be allowed to attend as his guests or not to expect him at all. Narcissa's letter, thanking him for inviting them, had accompanied a set of handsome dress robes. In all probability they were merely ones that Lucius hadn't worn, but Severus was thankful for the gift, besides the fact that he had nothing in his own wardrobe that would have sufficed for the occasion.

He arrived just as people started to mingle about. Long tables of fruits and desserts and shiny silver fountains of punch stood on the edges of the tent and in the corners of the Great Hall.

"Severus!" Minerva exclaimed, quickly coming to his side. "Young man, how are you? Where have you been? No owl, no messages of any kind... Goodness, I was wondering what had become of you!"

"I had a life to rebuild," he said softly, feeling somewhat like having been scolded.

She looked at him, her usually stern bearing replaced with that of a concerned friend. "A life... of course, you did," she said with a smile. "You look well no, really! I've never seen you look better."

"I have a lot less stress in my life as of late," he said, relaxing somewhat from her friendly demeanor.

"You had to carry more on your shoulders than any one person should have. And you had to keep so many of Albus' secrets; the things he asked of you. I had no idea," she said, clearly gearing up for an apology. "Can you ever forgive an old biddy?"

"Minerva, I forgave you for any transgression you may or may not have committed long ago," he said with a genuine smile. "Albus' secrets breed mistrust, lies generate distrust, and my actions could well have ensured that you'd never trust me again or forgive me. All I can say is that I should have trusted you, but Albus wanted everything kept close to the vest."

"I truly understand, Severus. I've given that ol' painting of his quite an earful over the last year," she said with a smile. She turned her head and then looked back at him. "Will you dance with an old lady?"

"Minerva, I'd be delighted," he said, accepting the olive branch for what it was reconciliation.

They stayed together on the floor for two dances, the first having to assure her that no hurt feelings remained from her lack of faith in him and the second answering her inquiries as to his future plans.

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Hermione saw Ron walking toward her, but Ernie touched her arm from her other side and asked her to dance. "How are things?" she asked him, once they started moving to the slow waltz.

Ernie was smiling at her as he tried to lead her to the music. "I'm fine. I'm working at the Ministry with Mr. Weasley. Oh, and Megan and I are getting married," he said, his smile getting even bigger.

She accidentally missed count and stepped on his foot. "Ernie, that's wonderful! I'm happy for you," she exclaimed.

"Er, thanks," he said, shaking his foot once and holding her a little farther away than before. She grinned in understanding. He laughed and started off their dance again. "She's dancing with Justin. Did you hear? He's been attending law school wants to be a barrister." He tried a turn, and she was glad that they didn't collide with anyone. When the song ended, he dropped his arms. "It was good to see you. Thank you for the dance."

"Thank you. I'm sorry about your toe. Do give my best to Megan, in case I don't get around to saying hi to her," she replied.

Ron swooped in a second later.

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During the second dance with Minerva, Severus saw Hermione dancing with Ronald Weasley. She was standing close to him, laughing at his comments and trying to protect her toes. She was a vision in dark emerald green, her hair pulled up with long tendrils of curls to cascade down in back. She was laughing and smiling, obviously having a good time. His heart skipped a beat seeing her and fell as he realized she must have come to the party with him.

When Severus saw Hermione next, she was dancing with Potter, if that's what you could call the slow awkward movements the pair was doing. Ginny Weasley was now dancing with Dean Thomas and Susan Bones with Ernie Macmillan next to them. When the music changed, the six friends formed two lines, exchanging partners in the promenade steps of the dance.

Severus waited and moved into her line of sight as the music of the dance came to a close. She turned and saw him, her hand grasping Potter's arm as if she'd seen a ghost. His heart sank, and he turned away. She never had answered his letter, and she apparently had moved on with her life, as she should have. He didn't deserve her anyway.

"Severus," he heard her say. He turned around, facing her again after such a long time apart. She rushed over to him, clasped his arm, and looked up at him expectantly. Being this close to her, gazing into her eyes, she took his breath away. The youthful child who had been his student had developed into a mature and beautiful young woman. Her lips were accentuated in a rosy pink that reminded him of how they looked after he'd kissed her. Her eyes were dusted with shadows, and her lashes were darkened in a way that framed them without being too overly painted, making them stand out dramatically. But her expression was one of concern and uncertainty.

"I..." He had no idea what to say to her. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her, to hug her and kiss her again, but he had no claim on her. He had forfeited that right to let her have the life she deserved.

"You're here," she stated, as if not trusting her eyes or the hand that rested on his arm.

"I did tell you I would be," he said softly, fighting the urge to caress her face. It was an odd feeling, the room faded from view, and all he could see was her, standing in front of him.

"You promised me a dance," she said softly, expectantly.

"So I did," he said, taking her hand from his sleeve and indicating the floor with his other. He started the dance with proper decorum, holding her in a formal position as the music started, not daring to be improper toward her. She moved with him easily, not that he wasn't a firm lead. He wanted to hold her close, feel her body move with his, and smell her perfume. But even in this formal dance position, she felt so good in his arms. As the music changed, they were dancing closer to each other, swaying and turning to the music. They danced in silence, and he so enraptured by her smile and the happiness in her eyes that he barely noticed the music change again. Well, not until he realized that Hermione had turned to his side as the other dancers were doing, and she was swept away as she rotated, palm to palm with another wizard before returning to face him.

It was his turn. He kept his eyes on the girl he rotated with and smiled as he faced Hermione, clasping hands as they stepped right, then left, and faced partners again. The annoying country-dance continued, each repeat in the music separating them as he watched her turn with another wizard.

*

Hermione couldn't believe it; he was here, dancing with her and seemingly able to keep his eyes off her. When she returned to face him each time they parted in the steps of the dance, the intensity of his gaze made her heart skip a beat. He looked dashing in his tuxedo-style dress robes and pristine white shirt and waistcoat. His hair was clean, brushed back a bit from his face, and he looked healthier than she remembered.

When the music stopped and the participants applauded the minstrels, he stepped forward again.

"Severus, thank you, but I could use some fresh air," she said and quickly amended, "Will you walk with me," when she saw his expression take on his old 'mask' at her words.

One side of his mouth curved into half a smile as he nodded, but he only said, "As you wish."

She looped her hand on the crook of his arm and followed him through the doors to the grotto beside the tent. Topiaries of roses and rosemary were alight with fairies, and night jasmine lined the walkways, filling the air with their aroma. "Oh, it smells divine," she murmured, taking a deep breath and gazing up at the stars. He remained quiet, watching her as they strolled slowly. At a fountain surrounded by a low rock wall, Hermione stopped and turned to face him. She was bursting with a myriad of questions. "Aren't you going to say anything to me?"

His look of shock nearly made her laugh. "Yes, of course."

"Well, what happened to you? Why didn't you ever write me? Where have you been? What have you been doing?" she asked, the questions flowing from her lips like water crashing through a broken dam.

He smiled and cupped her face with his hand. "You have no idea how I've missed you."

"You've an odd way of showing it," she said accusingly and regretted her tone, but he only smiled at her.

"Oh, Hermione, I couldn't have contacted you until after the war, for fear that it would have given your hiding place away. Then my trial, no matter the assurances of Kingsley and Potter, I still expected to be found guilty, and by the time I had my freedom, I had no idea what to do with my life. I felt homeless. I moved into an abandoned home of a raid victim and tried to piece my life back together. I didn't want to teach anymore. I didn't want anyone over me, telling me what to do... and I had nothing nothing to give you, not that I believed that you were waiting for an old wizard like me."

Hermione threw herself at him, hugging him tightly. "Oh, you foolish wizard! You're not old."

"Not so foolish. I had nothing, Hermione," he said softly against her hair, and she could feel him inhale as if taking in her scent. "I couldn't even go to my house because of the people watching it, and someone had taken all my belongings from my quarters here... so I had nothing. I was starting life all over with nothing from scratch."

"I have them," she said, laughing, as she inhaled his scent, the familiar oak moss, sandalwood, patchouli, leafy vetiver, and various herbs of potion ingredients.

"What?" He pushed her away at arm's length and looked at her, confused. "How?"

She pulled gently on his hand in an unspoken gesture to sit with her on the wall and held his hand on her lap. She inhaled to steady her nerves and hoped that he wouldn't become angry with her. "Well, I I mean Ginny and I broke in. You I blew up the door, then repaired it once we were inside. We collected everything I could find and asked Kreacher, you know, Harry's house-elf, to take it all to Harry's house." Severus cringed at the mention of Kreacher, or possibly that his things were now at Harry's, but she

couldn't read his expression. "Oh, Kreacher's changed, such a transformation since Harry gave him Regulus' locket. He even recognized my and Ginny's voices when we asked for him."

"He never said anything," he said, staring at their hands.

Hermione didn't want him to think Harry had taken any of his possessions. "I didn't tell Harry what it I have your things in boxes with the stuff I kept from my parents' house. I didn't want anyone rifling through and taking... But it's all safe, and you can have it back anytime you want."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," she responded automatically.

He asked about school. Photographers appeared and he tried to shoo them away, but they were undaunted, requesting poses and smiles. Clearly irritated by their persistence, he guided Hermione back inside and out onto the dance floor. "It's safer."

"It's to be expected," she said, smiling. "We're famous now."

"Infamous, you mean," he said, holding her reverently and gazing into her eyes. "Oh, yes, the greasy bat of the dungeons dancing with the Gryffindor princess."

"I never called you that," she snapped, then chuckled when he raised an eyebrow. "And I'm hardly a princess."

"You are to me," he said softly. After three more turns on the dance floor, they slipped out into the grotto again. Severus drew her into a secluded corner and cupped her face, his thumb caressing her cheek.

Hermione forced herself to breathe as she waited for him to kiss her. Suddenly struck with the memory of her Yule Ball, an uncontrolled giggle escaped her.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied, feeling her cheek warm under his stare.

He lowered his head closer to hers. "Liar, you're practically grinning like a Cheshire cat."

"This reminds me of it's silly but I feel like I did at my Yule Ball, only with you as my partner," she admitted and felt her cheeks grow warmer, undeniably blushing.

"You were beautiful that night, just as you are now." Severus' lips curved into a smile. "I wanted you to be I wanted to ask you to come to this with me, but I didn't think you'd be inclined."

"Why not?" she asked, looking up at him, ignoring the heat in her cheeks.

"Because of the way I treated you all those years, the way I took advantage of you," he said softly, moving a stray curl off her face. "Because I'm older my past lots of reasons."

She leaned her face into his palm to feel the contact again. "All of which don't matter to me. I wanted to thank you for your letter. I can't tell you what it meant to me."

Severus leaned forward and kissed her, a soft gentle caress that made her heart skip a beat. She wrapped her arms around him, and he teased her lips sensually before deepening the kiss as if savoring her. He pulled back and rested his forehead on hers, and she was surprised to sense that his breathing was as ragged as hers.

"I have wanted to do that for so long."

Hermione smiled, never feeling this happy in her life.

He stood, as if suddenly aware that they could've been observed by the photographers. "Are you thirsty? I can get more punch."

"I'd like that."

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Severus went to get punch, feeling like a young man. Filius intercepted him on his way to the refreshment tables. "I'm sorry I doubted you, Severus. All this time you were on our side, and I never knew! But in all fairness, you could have trusted me you didn't... I had no idea what you were doing, of course. I-I'm sorry..." Filius stammered and then held out his hand. "Forgive an old wizard?"

Severus bent down and shook it. "I hold no grudge. I hope you can forgive me."

Filius beamed. "Already did, and, Severus, I'd like to be friends if you'd like."

"I'd be honored to call you my friend," Severus replied softly, hoping that Filius didn't hear the crack in his voice.

Severus looked up and saw Hermione dancing with Kingsley. He conversed briefly with Filius, then excused himself to get refreshments. Hooch hurried up to him, took one glass of the punch and began a speech of apology, forgiveness, and friendship. He excused himself and retrieved refills. Professors Sprout and then Vector were the next to approach him, followed by a snookered Trelawney. Severus only managed to get Sybill to release him, by dumping her off on Elphias Dodge, who likewise had come up to apologize. He couldn't believe the acceptance his old colleagues were extending toward him, especially after the horrid year they'd had when he'd been Headmaster.

He was cornered by Hestia and Dedalus on his way back. Unfortunately, he could see Ronald Weasley confronting Hermione only a few paces away, and Hermione looked upset.

*

"I can't believe you're here with *him*," Ron spat angrily, grabbing her arm and turning her around to face him.

Hermione nearly lost her balance at the way he'd jerked her around. "He's..."

"A traitor and murderer, regardless that he got off," Ron sneered.

She recoiled in shock. "Ron, you can't be serious?"

"It doesn't change *what* he is. Besides, he's old enough to be your father. He was your professor, and you're throwing yourself at him," he snapped.

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. "I-I'm *what*?" *He has a date. I thought he was over me! Ginny and Harry both said so!*

"You heard me. You can have any bloke you want," he said, flinging his arm at the couples dancing, then pointed at Severus, "and you settle *fdrim*?"

"I am not settling! You're just jealous because I broke it off with you," she shouted back, no longer caring that they were drawing attention.

"We never had anything to begin with, right? Isn't that what you said?" he snarled, his ears red. "You were never going to be with me, were you? I was simply convenient the sidekick."

"I never..." She couldn't believe this; he was with someone. He was supposed to be happy. "You're just jealous! This is just like you you're acting just like you did when I went to the Yule Ball with Viktor Krum! What is it with you?"

"Right, I wasn't famous then just good ol' Ron. Just like now. I should have known, I was never good enough for you," he said and stormed off.

Hermione followed him back into the castle in through the open doors, hoping to make him see reason.

By the time Severus reached the Entrance Hall, Weasley was storming off out the huge oak doors heading for outside, and Hermione was running up the stairs.

Severus knew where she'd go, and he followed her.

*

She had no idea why she came here; she was too distraught to feel any solitude. All her repressed emotions were whirling in her, and she hugged herself. The door opened, and Severus stepped in, this time setting a thick wooden wedge under the door to force it to stay open.

Hermione turned to gaze out the window at the forest not wanting him to see her tears. "I suppose that is so you can leave without molesting me?" she asked, not sure why she was lashing out at him. Ron was the one who'd hurt her.

"It's so you can leave without my needing to. Is that how you feel, Hermione, that I molested you?" he asked softly, hurt evident in his silky voice.

"No, I never thought of it that way." She couldn't look at him; his presence was enough. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing," he asked, moving to stand behind her until his face appeared on the glass next to hers as if she was gazing at a portrait of the two of them.

"I needed to think, to be by myself," she replied, unable to face him. His reflection on the glass was enough. "Too many memories, too much heartache. The patronizing and having to smile when I wanted to... needed to..."

"Cry?" he asked tenderly.

"Yes, cry," she admitted, two huge tears escaping her eyes. "Why did you follow me?"

"I didn't follow you, although I knew where you would go."

His voice was soothing, but he was partly the reason she was here. "Really," she choked out and wiped her face. "See me in your inner eye, get a vision in your ice cubes, an afflatus?"

"No. This is where I always came when I was troubled or needed solitude," he said, handing her a handkerchief.

She stared out of the window, not really seeing the forest so much as their reflection in the glass. "I'm not troubled, I just wanted some peace and quiet."

"Then look at me," he demanded softly.

She wiped her face. "No."

"Hermione," he implored.

"I can't," she choked out and wiped her face again.

"Why?"

"Because, I can't." Her heart was breaking; she was trying to fight back the tears and was losing. "I-I just can't."

She heard his footsteps retreat and covered her face in her hands, openly sobbing but still trying not to make any sound. He kicked the wedge away and approached her as the door slammed shut. She spun around to face him. "Why did you do that? I'm not shagging you again. I can't go through that again!"

"You won't have to," he said, standing in the middle of the room.

"We are stuck in here now until we do!" she cried out, raising her voice at him, although she didn't really mean to.

"No, you only have to be honest with yourself and with me," he stated, the side of his mouth curving up in a cocky smile.

She dropped her hands to her sides, fisting his handkerchief in her hand. "What do you mean? I have always been honest with well, most all the time!"

"Say it," he demanded softly, crossing his arms.

"Say what exactly?" she asked, flinging her arms up and back to her sides.

He stepped forward, and she took a step back. "How you feel. Be honest, but say it," he said firmly.

"Why?" She toyed with his handkerchief noticing a green SS stitched in one corner.

"Just do it," he said, taking another step forward.

"I I can't," she sobbed and turned around facing the window. He stood immobile and silent behind her. "I all year I thought about you. I couldn't get you off my mind."

"But how do you feel, Hermione?" he asked, now so close she could feel him. "Could there be any possibility between us? Could you ever find a way to..." He hesitated. "See yourself with me. Do you have any feelings for me?"

"I loved you!" she replied, her voice cracking.

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said, staring at the monogram on the white cloth in her hands.

"Say it," he urged her. "I have to hear it, Hermione, say it."

Her fingers tightened on the cloth. "No, I can't do this. I lost you once I can't!"

"You can't what?"

She whirled around. "Love you. I can't you'll only break my heart again."

"Not if you say you want me," he said, his eyes looking at her with such longing. "Do you want me, Hermione? I'm yours if you'll only say you do."

"Yes, I want you. I've always wanted you," she said, giving in to her heart.

"Tell me what I need to hear," he said, angling his head to try and look her in the eye. "Do you love me?"

"Yes, I love you," she admitted, looking up at him. "I love you, all right?"

"Perfectly all right," he said, reaching out, pulling her to him, and wrapping his arms about her. "Do you feel it?"

She clung to him, feeling like she was melting in his embrace. "Feel what?"

He tipped her head up to look in her eyes. "Free. Like a weight has been lifted off your heart. Like everything is clear."

"I have only one question for you," she asked, feeling her gut clench in anticipation, their gazes locked onto each other's.

"Yes?"

"Do you love me?"

"Yes. Merlin, yes!" he exclaimed, pulling her to him and embracing her tightly. "It was you, your voice I heard in the Shack that made me fight back that made me want to live. It was for you that I walked up to the castle to face the Dark Lord. I love you, Hermione Granger. And if you'll have an old ex-Death Eater, double agent, greasy git, murderer I'm all yours."

Everything about him assaulted her senses: his strength, scent, warmth, and the solid feel of his chest under her cheek, and felt like she was flying. "Yes" was all she could say as fresh tears streak her cheeks.

He kissed her, capturing her mouth and nearly bending her as he poured all his feelings into the contact, and she clung to him, returning her feelings for him as much as she could. When he broke the kiss, she stumbled, her knees weak as rubber, her heart pounding, and breathless. His exuberant smile was infectious and made her heart soar.

"Hermione, when your schooling is over, after you leave, I would like to court you."

She laughed at his formality and with the joy overflowing from her. She threw her arms about his neck and squeezed tightly. "I'd like that very much," she said, burying her face in his neck. "But why wait until then. Why can't you be mine now?"

He hugged her and lifted her off her feet. "If that's what you want." He set her down and cupped her face. "But I'll still have to wait until you finish school until we can be together."

"But we're together now," she said suggestively.

"And you'll be missed from the ball, madam." He kissed her soundly. "How about going back to your room and fixing your face so nobody thinks I made you cry, and then come back to the Great Hall with me? I want to show off my witch."

She hugged him and followed him from the room, never realizing that the door opened for them to let them leave unimpeded.

~ T B C ~>

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*Author's Notes:*

*Sorry for the nod to the Yule Ball and Ron's behavior, but I had to get them back into the tower room. Needless to say, I hope, they had a good time at the ball. Because they caused a few raised eyebrows and few people stared... but isn't that to be expected?*

*On another note, this chapter ended up having a lot here, so unfortunately there are two more chapters, and that will conclude this story. Thank you for reading and following along, even though I haven't updated all that frequently. Your support and reviews have made this a wonderful experience for me, and I appreciated every comment you made. Hugs~*

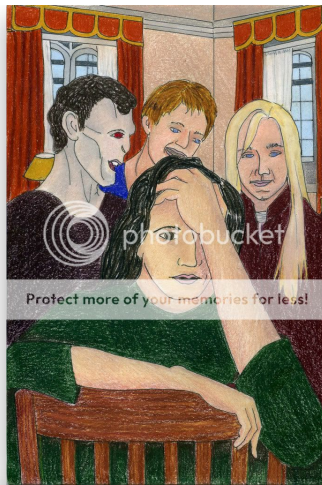
## Breaking the Curse

*Chapter 24 of 25*

Hermione, Severus, and the ghosts manage to break the spells on the tower room, but with almost disastrous results.

Thank you to Pookah for acting as a sounding board when I had a brain freeze and to Duchess of Arcadia and Southern\_Witch\_69 for their beta work to make this presentable for you.

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Breaking the Curse

~June 1999~

After everything she'd been through, Hermione was now more than ever determined to end the enchantments on the tower room, which meant that she had to pin down the Grey Lady and the Bloody Baron and get them to release the tower from their Blood-Bound Curses. That wasn't going to be easy, and she didn't know what they would need to do in order for the spells to be broken.

In true Hermione style, she turned once again to the library, in search of information on ghosts. She had already read many of the books about ghosts on her second day of school. When she had seen Nearly Headless Nick float up through the table in front of her, it had nearly made Hermione wet her knickers, not to mention seeing the other ghosts soar into the Great Hall to greet the new arrivals. So she knew that none of the books she'd read then would answer the question foremost in her mind: can ghosts undo magic?

Nevertheless, she pulled out every book on ghosts on the shelves and carried them to one of the tables. She pulled out a long piece of parchment, quill, and ink and set to work to find her answer. She had spent most of her morning reading each book carefully and taking notes of what abilities spectral beings possessed.

"Miss, er, Granger, isn't it?" a young man asked.

"Yes," she replied, looking up into the opaque face of a seventeenth-century young man.

"I couldn't help noticing... well, my Lady and I, that is," he said, indicating the Grey Lady who was seated a few chairs away, "that you are researching something about spectral beings."

Hermione sighed and nodded. "Yes, I am. I want to know if ghosts can do magic. If a witch or wizard did a spell or an enchantment while alive, can they reverse the spell if they are a ghost?" she asked and told him what she was hoping to find.

His perfectly arched brow rose, and he looked at her with such amusement that Hermione wanted to throw the book she'd been reading at him. "No, not like we once could. Only that magic which is present in our plane of existence, no more," he said, obviously trying to keep a tight control of the corners of his mouth to keep from laughing at her.

"And what exactly is that?" she asked, affronted that he found her question so amusing. She was exhausted, revising for N.E.W.T.s and her additional research.

"We can walk through walls and warded doors, move small objects, open things like windows, cabinets, wardrobes and doors, manipulate doorknobs, locks, faucets, and things like that, and on rare occasions possess a human although that is highly frowned on and weakens us terribly. We can write on foggy windows, some more maladapted malcontents of our kind can do harm, but the Ministry wizards do deal with those. Why do you ask?"

"She is hoping to break a curse on my mother's tower, Raven's Roost. Why, I don't know?"

Hermione hadn't noticed the Grey Lady float over and hover near her on her other side, and she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"I thought that you got what you wanted."

Hermione felt her cheeks warm, and she nodded, then looked up at the lovely ghost. "I did I do but... Didn't you tell me that there have been other couples ensnared by the enchantments of the tower? You do know that not all of them had happy endings, right?"

The Grey Lady shrugged as if unconcerned.

The indifference infuriated Hermione. "I believe that Daisy Dodderidge and Wulfred Olins had been up there, and they didn't have a good ending he hung himself over his unrequited love for Miss Dodderidge. Likewise, Beaumont Smethyk was a poet who had been in love with Dorcus Wellbeloved I'm pretty sure they were another couple ensnared by the spells of the room. She, by the way, was the founder of the Society for Distressed Witches, in case you didn't know."

"I remember the poet, vaguely," the Grey Lady admitted.

"Pardon me for saying this, but I would think that receiving a poem every day would be enough to make someone a nutter, but then seeing them printed in the *Prophet* every week dedicated to you for nineteen years, would make someone distressed, don't you? Especially if those poems came back again as a celebrated bestselling book, not once, but three times. Oh, yes Beaumont Smethyk had apparently died of a broken heart also from unrequited love," Hermione said, rising to her feet as she tried to prove her point. "I found out about Westley Weasley who had drowned in the lake after the girl he loved refused him. My friend, Ginny Weasley, told me about him her great-grandfather's younger brother. I just bet he and his girl were victims of your tower. Is that the legacy you want? A tower room that lures unwary couples to their doom a fate like yours?"

"How dare you suggest that I would wish such a thing!" the Grey Lady exclaimed haughtily and turned to go.

"Then help me!" Hermione shouted after the ghost, getting several scowls from students reading or revising at the tables and a reprimand from Madam Pince.

"I don't know how to do what you want," the lovely ghost replied, hanging her head. "You're right; there have been several who have befallen the Baron's and my fate."

Hermione walked over to the Grey Lady. "In my research I discovered that if there is a living relative, anyone who carries your bloodline or the Baron's, they can possibly reverse the curses. But I would need you both of you to help me. Please, I'm running out of options. If the spells cannot be broken or reversed, then they will have to tear down the tower all together."

The Grey Lady turned to look at Hermione in shock. "NO! They can't! Not my tower!"

"They will have to," Hermione stated softly but determinedly. "There is no other choice. The room is dangerous, and I will inform the Headmistress and Charms professor where the tower is and how to get inside so they can have the tower dismantled. I can't leave school knowing that the tower could entrap someone else."

The Grey Lady squared her shoulders. "I will not be..."

"My, Lady, you must," the young male ghost interrupted her. "You cannot allow this curse to continue. I have seen you suffer for far too long to carry this in your heart any longer."

The Grey Lady looked at him, her haughty expression slipping as she hung her head. "That is not the regret I carry." She turned to look at Hermione. "I will help you, but I don't have any living descendants. I'd never married nor did I have children out of wedlock, and I was an only child."

"Can you reverse the spells?" Hermione pleaded, uncaring who was listening anymore.

"I cannot do magic in the sense that you can anymore..." She glanced at the books on the table, then moved close to Hermione and leaned close to her ear. The contact of their bodies made Hermione feel cold. "The tome you seek is not kept in the library, but in the Headmaster's suite," she whispered, "*The Book of Spectral Beings: Apparitions, Spectral Spirits, and Lost Souls*. It is too dark a book for us spectral spirits, but if there is an answer, it will be there." She lifted suddenly, floating away quickly.

The young man moved to follow her.

"WAIT!" Hermione shouted after him, turning quite red when Madam Pince scolded her again, but Hermione was already chasing after the ghost. "I need to find the Bloody Baron," she said, skidding to a halt, ignoring Madam Pince's reprimand to put away her books before leaving the library. "I have to get him to I have to ask him the same question."

He turned to face Hermione, his expression stony. "Is he the one?" His gaze swept to the place in the wall the Grey Lady had passed. "She never told me." He turned once more to face her. "He will not speak to me. Not since she and I became friends. But if you are looking for the Baron, wherever Peeves is that infernal poltergeist tries to be at the other side of the castle. That has been my observation."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "I suppose I should see the Headmistress about the book first, then," she said regretfully.

"I will ask the other ghosts," the young man said, placing a hand over Hermione's shoulder, sending a chill through her. "The Friar and Sir Nicholas are on the best terms with the Baron, I'll seek them first."

"Thank you," she replied, smiling up at the handsome, earnest face.

The gargoyle at the entrance to Professor McGonagall's office wasn't really very cooperative, insisting that Hermione return to her studies and not bother the Headmistress. She was trying to explain that she needed to speak to Professor McGonagall on a personal matter when Professor Flitwick walked by. Hermione quickly brought him up to date on what she had discovered and told him about the book the Grey Lady had suggested.

Professor Flitwick looked astonished at the mention of the book. "No ghost would ever that's a carefully guarded secret that book!" He turned to the Gargoyle. "Purple Saxifrage." The gargoyle reluctantly jumped aside.

In the Headmistress' office, Hermione had to fill in both professors on what she had found out in the Malfoy library and from the ghosts. "She told me that the book I wanted was here, in the Headmaster's suite, *The Book of Spectral Beings: Apparitions, Spectral Spirits, and Lost Souls*"

When Professor McGonagall recovered from her shock, she looked at Hermione with an expression of awe. "That book is a carefully guarded secret, Miss Granger. Tell me why..."

"Miss Granger, what exactly did you have in mind?" Dumbledore asked her from his frame.

Hermione looked up, smiling at the magical portrait. She quickly outlined her problem and what she knew about breaking the curse. "I need to know if a ghost can break a Blood-Bound curse," she replied. "If not, I'm afraid the tower will have to be destroyed. I read that such a cursed place can be dismantled and the rocks placed in hallowed ground, the wood burned and glass melted to remove..."

"Hopefully that will not be necessary," a familiar looking red-nosed, corpulent wizard stated from his frame, interrupting her.

"I agree, Dexter," Dumbledore replied with a nod.

"Minerva, you know as well as I do that no ghost would admit the existence of the book to a student, yet apparently the Grey Lady did tell Miss Granger," Professor Flitwick said and turned to Hermione. "This book has power over the ethereal world, Miss Granger. With it, the Headmistresses and Headmasters of this school can control the ghosts. Its secrets must be regarded with the most confidential..."

"Filius!" a witch with silver-grey ringlets Hermione recognized as Dilys Derwent from *Hogwarts: A History* exclaimed from her frame. "You cannot suggest that the Headmistress should allow this child to see the book!"

"Ah, but she must, Dilys," Dumbledore said from his.

"Albus!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed, aghast as several portraits likewise admonished him.

"If you would please allow the interjection of an old man," Dumbledore said, his eyes sorrowful. "I know of this legendary tower, but alas, I never found it. Miss Granger, the book is more than a book on ghost lore. Within its pages are spells that even ghosts fear ones that can vanquish them. If you will agree to only read this book in the presence of the Headmasters and Headmistresses, past and present, and only those sections we approve, you may look at the book." He gazed longingly at Professor McGonagall. "You have long trusted my judgment, Minerva, please trust me on this."

"But, Albus, surely you don't mean..." Professor McGonagall exclaimed, placing her hand on her chest and stopped short.

"Yes, Minerva, I do mean. Miss Granger is in a unique position to do what needs to be done, and we should help her do just that."

Professor McGonagall nodded to Dumbledore, rose, crossed her office, and walked up a flight of stairs as several portraits tried arguing against Dumbledore's decision. Dumbledore, however, was looking pointedly at Hermione. "Now, Miss Granger, as I'm sure you have read every book we have in the library on the ethereal world. What exactly are you hoping to find?" Dumbledore asked her.

"Like I said, I'm hoping to find a way that a ghost can use magic or, more specifically, release spells that they had cast in life," Hermione stated.

"That's impossible!" the red-nosed wizard Hermione supposed was Headmaster Dexter Fortescue, exclaimed.

"There is only one way," a sallow-faced wizard with a short black fringe said, sounding as if he really regretted admitting it.

Hermione looked at him hopefully, recognizing Headmaster Everard Prichford from *Hogwarts: A History*.

"That is not an option!" Phineas Black shouted. "It's forbidden!"

"It's not forbidden it's not allowed unless under dire circumstances," Headmaster Prichford said, shaking his head, refusing to look at Hermione.

"And you think some bloody spells on a ruddy tower is sufficient enough to take that risk?" Phineas sneered. "You're nutters!"

"We must consider other options!" Headmistress Derwent said, and Professor Flitwick agreed wholeheartedly.

"Indeed," Dumbledore stated as Professor McGonagall came back carrying a large, thick, well-worn tome. "Minerva, it might be best if Miss Granger sits beside your chair so I may observe which page she is on. Miss Granger, you will be restricted from reading the entire book. Some pages are not for a student's knowledge."

"You've read this book, then?" Hermione asked as she moved her chair.

"Every Headmaster and Deputy Headmaster is required to read this book," Phineas said curtly, clearly unhappy with what was happening. "It is our duty to sort out spectral beings that might harm the students and control the ones we have." Several of the other portraits admonished him. "What? Not only does she now know the book exists they are letting her *read* the bloody thing!"

"Miss Granger, open the book and start with chapter two: *Facing Life, Love, and Loss*," Dumbledore said while glaring at Phineas' portrait.

Hermione opened the book. Following the directions and suggestions of several of the portraits, she read the sections they permitted her to read and skipped the pages they directed her to pass over. Finally, she held up a hand. "I think this is it!"

Professor McGonagall leaned closer and read the page over her shoulder as Hermione read aloud, "'A spectral being, tied to a place of death ... who leaves upon this earth a curse...' Oh, no." She looked at Professor McGonagall. "It definitely says that a curse made by a ghost before their death, 'ties the curse to the blood of the bloodline ... of the living being bearing the blood...' The previous section mentioned that allowing possession might work, but this refutes it. This states that it must be a living relative. But the Grey Lady never had children, she told me so."

"The Baron does," said Headmaster Prichford from his silver gilded frame. Hermione looked up at him, and he continued, ignoring the chastisement of the witch in the ebony and gold frame next to him. "Every so often he takes particular interest in a child, even one not of his house." He turned to his right and grasped the painted armrests of his huge armchair. "What? If what this girl says is true, then she should have our support lifting this curse from the castle. Didn't she and her friends rid us of Slytherin's monster?"

"That was the Potter boy," interrupted a wizard with heavy eyebrows and a large thick mustache, Hermione thought might be Headmaster Nathaniel Frobisher. "He killed the monster, and fought off Dementors, a werewolf, and broke every rule in the school!"

"I was Headmaster when Beaumont Smethyk pursued poor dear Dorcus Wellbeloved. The child was in such a state, I tell you, receiving poem after poem every day from the young man sometimes two or three times a day!" Headmaster Prichford said, remorse evident in his voice and watery eyes. "If that tower was responsible like she said... it has to be done, or the Headmistress will have to tear the tower down."

"But to break a Blood-Bound curse, we need a bit of blood for the counter-curse. If the Baron must shed the blood," Hermione said and then closed the book with a sigh as she slumped back in her chair. "It's the best I've found, but a ghost can't bleed."

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore said as Hermione rose to leave. "If you think this through, I believe you have the answer you seek." He winked at her and stepped from his frame.

Hermione watched him leave, her brows drawn tightly together as she considered what he said. She thanked Professors McGonagall and Flitwick, then thanked all the portraits.

"If you have need of my assistance, come see me. I daresay you have the password. Do not give it to anyone else," Professor McGonagall said as she escorted her from the room. At the door, she added softly, "I will be reading the *Book of Spectral Beings* myself. If I find anything of use, I'll send for you."

"Thank you, Professor."

~*~

Hermione tried finding the Baron after leaving the Headmistress' office to no avail. She hurried through breakfast the next morning and ran through the corridors, trying to find him. Nevertheless, she only ran into Peeves instead, getting pelted with wet socks as she tried to get away from him. The few ghosts she encountered in her search had no idea where the Baron was and were not comfortable helping her find him. Finally, sad and feeling that the only option was to have Professor McGonagall tear down the tower, she saw the Baron scolding Peeves in a corridor. Peeves had rarely looked so terrified.

When the poltergeist flew off, the Baron turned to glare at her. "What do you want now?" he snarled.

When angry, he was rather intimidating to behold. Hermione swallowed and bucked up her courage to face him. "I was wondering if I could ask you a personal question," she said, surprised that her voice didn't crack.

"You are wondering if I have any living descendants," he said coolly. "And why, exactly, should I tell you?"

Once again it surprised her that he knew. "Because if you don't, the tower will have to be torn down!" she answered him before she lost her nerve.

The Baron's face became darker, then paled. "You wouldn't!"

"Headmistress McGonagall will have to," she declared. "I know that you have had a particular interest in certain students throughout the years. Why is that?"

He stood erect, three feet off the ground, gripped his sword tightly in one hand at his side and floated backwards into the rock.

She was about to call out, 'Wait,' but the Baron floated down to eye level with her, ankle deep in the rock.

"How did you find out?" he asked softly, his clear, bluish-grey eyes appearing haunted.

"It was more my being hopeful than anything," she admitted, feeling regret at the remorse she saw in his expression. Staring eye to eye with an angry ghost was slightly unnerving, especially this particular ghost, but her heart gave out to him. Only she had no idea how to comfort a ghost.

Finally, he sighed and his posture relaxed. "When I was alive I was known as Baron Æðelred," he said softly, so only she could hear.

Hermione pulled out her wand and cast the Disinterest and Disregarding Charms on the part of the corridor where they stood and encased them in the Muffling Charm so they'd not be overheard.

"Thank you. When I was alive, I had an illegitimate child from an illicit affair, a daughter. However, I loved Helena with all my heart, and I denounced the young witch. Helena found out about the child; but by that time, the young woman was married, an arrangement made by me, to a respectable wizard. I saw her again, the child my daughter, when she came to Hogwarts. She was placed in Slytherin, my old house. She looked so like me, it hurt to be near her, so I kept my distance. Her child my grandchild... or was she my great-grandchild... It is so easy to lose track, was later placed in Slytherin as well, which was why I asked to be the Slytherin house ghost."

"How did you know that she was your grand- or great-grandchild?" Hermione asked, intrigued. She'd never considered that the ghosts were once real people with real lives and loves until this all happened with her and Severus.

"By her birthmark," he said and then held up his hands in supplication. "I wasn't being untoward I saw it by accident when she was being lifted onto a stretcher. When I found her, her robes had been torn. She had a birthmark on her shoulder, exactly like mine." He showed her his birthmark, only a slight pale mark just over his collarbone.

Hermione recalled seeing such a birthmark once, but couldn't place it off hand.

"It's hereditary; it was how the young witch I'd had the affair with tried to prove her child was mine," he said, looking down the corridor, "but I wouldn't listen to her." He hung his head in shame and floated backwards a little. "Another of my past deeds for which I am remorseful." He disappeared into the rock.

She stamped her foot in frustration, regretted not having the chance to ask if he'd seen another with the birthmark. Hermione was certain that she had. It was such a pretty birthmark, considering what they usually looked like. She tried to recall who'd had that birthmark all the way to the common room, knowing that she'd seen it once. In her room, she penned a letter to Severus to tell him what she'd learned and to tell him of her day, her gaze occasionally darting to the bouquet of roses, rosemary, and jasmine Severus had sent her.

Ginny came in, greeted her and started getting dressed for the night. Hermione looked up, staring at her and gasped, "Ginny, what's that on your arm?"

"Nothing, why?" she asked, grabbing her arm to look, her nose crinkling when she realized Hermione was pointing to the large red spot that was too big to be called a freckle. "What? My birthmark?"

"Yes!" she answered, her brow creased in concentration. With a great deal of imagination, and looking at it at the right angle, it was shaped not unlike a fluffy ferret or weasel as Ron called it or a splayed out fluffy cat. "George has one just like it!"

Ginny dropped her arm as she smirked at her friend. "And just when did you see my brother's birthmark?" she asked, pulling on the cami pajama top from Victoria Secrets Hermione had given her for her birthday.

Hermione turned her head as Ginny dropped her pants, once again looking at her flowers. "I saw it the night he lost his ear. I was helping your mum change his dressing. It's like the one I'd seen on Ron's shoulder. I asked your mum about it. He said that all Weasleys have that trademark birthmark."

"Some types of birthmarks can be hereditary," Ginny stated, joining Hermione on her bed, sitting crossed-legged facing each other. "Especially in magical families."

"Yes, I remember Mrs. Weasley telling me about magical birthmarks ones passed down family lines. So I looked it up. Birthmarks are called *doglie* in Italian, *antojos* in Spanish, and *wiham* in Arabic; all of which translate to *wishes* because, according to folklore, they are caused by unsatisfied wishes of a witch during pregnancy." Hermione looked up, finally remembering where she'd seen the Baron's birthmark before. "Susan Bones has a pale birthmark on her upper arm! It's like a spade a heart with a curly tail... I saw it when she asked me to help her with a bandage after the war." Hermione suddenly felt very elated. "Do you know what this means? Susan can break the curses with a drop of her blood!"

"No, Miss Granger, she cannot. Leave Miss Bones alone," the Baron said, floating into the room. "You are not to involve her in this."

"I can't! Not if she can remove the spells! If she is your relative your bloodline she has to help!" Hermione whirled around to face the ghost as Ginny screeched and grabbed for her dressing gown.

"Leave her out of this!" he snarled, floating forward to stand in her bed.

Hermione jumped to her feet beside her bed to face him. "She's my friend; I know she'll be willing to help, but I don't have to tell her the connection between you and her. I can just say she has the power to break the curses," she promised him. "But if she can break the curse, I have to ask her."

The Baron got mad, demanding that Hermione leave Susan out of this. Hermione was equally adamant, arguing that Susan was the key to breaking the spells. Ginny was the one who finally broke up the argument by asking, "Would someone please tell me what this is all about?"

"Well, Gin, it started about a year ago..." Hermione said, and the Baron threw up his hands and disappeared through the wall.

~*~

Hermione was sitting in front of the Headmistress' desk with Severus and Professor Flitwick sitting next to her, facing Professor McGonagall. "Wait, I know it's a long shot, but what if we might try having Susan pass a drop of her blood through him."

"I don't understand," Professor Flitwick said, staring at her intently enough to feel his gaze on her skin.

Severus shifted nervously in his chair. "What are you suggesting?"

"Susan would have to give him some of her blood, from a small cut," Hermione stated, turning to look at Professor Flitwick. "She could cut a finger and push her hand into his disembodied form. The blood would essentially pass through him so, in theory, his form would bleed since Susan is from his bloodline his blood. He could then banish the curses on the tower room."

"He is a non-corporeal form, miss, not a poltergeist," Headmaster Fortescue stated condescendingly from his frame as he scowled down at her.

Hermione looked up at him. "If she is his direct descendant, then she carries the Baron's bloodline. His are the alluring and entrapment curses. If by chance Susan were to let a bit of her blood pass through him, the Baron would essentially bleed. It's a long shot, only a theory, but it might work."

"Then who says the anti-curse?" Severus asked.

Hermione looked at him and hoped he would be open to her suggestion. "You and I would only not as ourselves, as Helena Ravenclaw and Baron Æðelred. Once his blood passes to the floor, he'd have to possess you, and she would have to possess me."

Professors McGonagall and Flitwick didn't like her suggestion, and judging from the clamor of protests that erupted from the portraits in the office, neither did the past Headmasters. Only Dumbledore and Severus remained quiet, Severus staring at her, his face inscrutable, and Dumbledore smiling with that damnable twinkle in his eyes.

"I told you she was brilliant!" Dumbledore exclaimed as he clapped his hands together.

"What?!" a few voices screeched.

Everyone turned to look at Dumbledore. "Well done, my dear. I really love seeing how your mind works, well done."

"Do you mind explaining to me what is so..."

"Out of the question!" Phineas Black shouted, cutting off Professor McGonagall.

"No, she has worked out every aspect of the problem and reached the only plausible conclusion," Dumbledore said, his eyes still sparking with delight. "Yes, Miss Bones must be involved, if indeed she is the Baron's living heir. Amelia and Edgar would have been so proud to have known... But, yes, Miss Bones's blood is needed, and I concur with Miss Granger that, in theory, her blood passing through the Baron might meet the requirement for him to bleed. Also, since both Severus and Miss Granger are the only known couple, still living, that has been or is still affected by these spells, by allowing their bodies to be possessed by the ghosts it will strengthen the bonds and provide the spectral beings wands."

"Now all we have to do is get the ghosts to agree to cooperate," Professor Flitwick said, pressing the index fingers of his clasped hands against his lips.

"And get them to promise to release you after they remove the curses," Phineas sneered from his frame. "If they will, that is. Once a witch or wizard willingly gives a ghost a body, they don't like letting go."

Professor McGonagall smiled benignly. "Oh, I'm quite sure / can get them to release Severus and Hermione."

Hermione turned to Severus, hoping he'd agree to her plan.

"Do I have a choice?" he asked coolly.

"I rather hoped you'd choose to do this with me," Hermione said, laying her hand on his.

~*~

Susan had been a lot easier to convince than Severus. It's not every day that you find out that you have a famous ancestor, even one as infamous as the Bloody Baron Æðelred. Susan and Hermione sat with Professors Sprout and Flitwick in Professor Sprout's office, listening to Hermione's abbreviated explanation of what she'd learned about the Baron, the spells on the tower and what Susan's role would be. "Oh, and before I forget, Susan, are you seeing anyone? I mean, do you by chance have a beau, someone special? Because if you don't, I'm not sure how to get you past the barrier to the stairs," Hermione asked, crossing her fingers in her lap.

Susan blushed a deep pink and held up her hand, showing Hermione a Claddagh ring with a bezel-set ruby heart clasped in the hands. Susan had it turned inwards, indicating that she was in a relationship or that her heart has been 'captured.' "I have a beau, but we're not engaged or anything yet. So, he will have to come with me, right? But will we get stuck in the room... Will we have to, you know, in front of everyone?"

"I'm certain that if this works then there will be no worries of that," Hermione said, mentally crossing her fingers. "Besides, all you'll have to do is kiss." Again, Hermione wondered if that would be true or not, the spells made you advance your relationship further, and she had no idea how far Susan and her boyfriend had gone.

"Miss Bones, I'm sure Miss Granger is correct in her theory," Professor Flitwick said, patting her hand in reassurance.

Professor Sprout looked less convinced.

The day after N.E.W.T.s finished, Hermione was called up to the Headmistress' office after breakfast. Severus, Susan, and a sandy-haired Ravenclaw, one of the guys who'd finished school her sixth year, were waiting for her.

Professor McGonagall indicated that she sit down. "Miss Granger, we are waiting for Professor Flitwick. He is bringing the Grey Lady with him."

Hermione sat down next to Severus, placed her hand in his and gave him a small smile.

"Nervous?" he asked softly, squeezing her hand gently.

"Yes, a little," she replied, grateful for the subtle reassurance. "I got your letter."

"Possession is not normally allowed, Hermione," Severus said, watching her carefully. "It is very hard for a spectral being to relinquish a corporeal body once they possess it, especially one offered freely, and more so if the willing participant is a witch or wizard."

"Yes, I've read about that," she said, smiling at him for his concern. "I'm sure that we'll be all right. Professor McGonagall explained it to me as well."

Severus' fingers tightened around hers as his intense stare held her gaze. "Once she is in you, it will take a great deal of inner strength to repel her if she tries to maintain control. The longer they are in us, the stronger they will become, especially since you are a powerful witch. Your magical strength will be like a euphoric elixir to her," he said and stroked her hand with his thumb. "I don't want to lose you."

Hermione laced her fingers with his and gazed up at him, reassuringly. "You won't, I promise."

"Severus? Is there something I should know?" Professor McGonagall asked, apparently trying to suppress her smile and look serene. She was failing miserably.

Susan and her beau were obviously surprised by the tender exchange they were witnessing.

"Yes, Minerva," Severus said smoothly, his gaze still on Hermione. "I would have thought that you'd have told them."

Hermione blushed. "I didn't want to get you in trouble, so I left out a few details," Hermione explained. She looked up at Professor McGonagall just as Professor Flitwick entered the room. "Severus is the wizard that I'm well, that is I love him. The tower room kind of brought us together."

Susan gasped, the Ravenclaw boy smirked as he chuckled, and Professor Flitwick took a startled step backward into the Grey Lady. Several of the portraits made several

comments and groans about inappropriate behavior and illicit conduct unbecoming a Hogwarts professor, and Dumbledore smiled, clasping his hands together as he congratulated Severus and Hermione.

Professor McGonagall sat primly in her chair with a knowing smile on her face, her eyes practically shining behind her glasses. "I rather assumed there was something going on between you two, considering the amount of attention Severus bestowed upon you at the Ministry May Ball. But, Severus, as you are no longer a professor here, I will simply say congratulations."

Severus made a soft, amused snort. "Is that all, Minerva?"

"No," Professor McGonagall said, her smile stretching across her face. "I do hope that you and Miss Granger will have tea with me after this is all concluded."

"So you can make a spectacle of yourself in private," Severus said smoothly, although there was a hint of humor in his tone.

"Well, of course!" she replied, beaming happily.

"As would I," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Severus, Miss Granger, while I am surprised I am also quite pleased." His attention was diverted to something beyond his frame. He looked at the group in the office with a somber expression. "If you are all ready, the Astronomer from the portrait on the third floor has informed me that the Bloody Baron is waiting for you. Good luck and I look forward to hearing of your success."

On the way down to the secret entrance, Hermione and Severus walked beside Susan and her boyfriend. "Hermione, have you ever met Merrick?"

"Pleased to meet you," Hermione said politely while Severus smirked at the guy. "I'm Hermione Granger."

"Oh, I know you! Well, about you who doesn't? I'm Almerick Stevenson Cadwallader. Everyone calls me Merrick," he said, holding his hand out to her.

Severus regarded Susan and Merrick, intently. "I hope you both know what you're getting into if this doesn't work out."

Susan blushed when Merrick said, "Susan explained to me about the spells on the tower, sir. I do love her, and I intended to ask her... but I had planned on waiting until she left school and I had my business going. Besides, Susan said all we have to do is confess our love, right?"

"That would do it," she laughed, smiling happily for her friend.

"I am going to be sick," Severus groaned softly, and Hermione nudged him in the side.

Severus opened the door and ushered Susan, Merrick, Hermione, Professors Flitwick and McGonagall inside and closed the door behind him.

"Oh, I remember this room!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed, gazing about the smooth, curved walls, the high arched ceiling, and the staircase that began halfway up the wall. Susan and Merrick were staring at the Bloody Baron who was floating on the stairs halfway to the vaulted ceiling.

"This is the room where I had enchanted the keys," Professor Flitwick said in awe. "Remember, Severus?"

"How could I ever forget," Severus said smoothly, walking across the room, clearly focused on the situation at hand.

Hermione was surprised that she hardly felt the allure anymore. She looked at Severus and he smiled, indicating the place where the magically obscured opening was. "We are here for a reason. Miss Bones, Mr. Cadwallader, Madam Ravenclaw, if you'd please follow Hermione and me."

Professor McGonagall protested his exclusion of her and Professor Flitwick. "Minerva, as I explained to you before Hermione's arrival, you cannot pass through the barrier unless you are with someone for whom you are intended. I'm quite sure Alejandra Flitwick would disapprove."

Professor McGonagall conjured up two comfortable armchairs to wait their return. Professor Flitwick walked Susan to the place where Severus was standing with half of his arm thrust through what appeared to be solid stone. Hermione entered the passage and made her way up the stairs. Susan followed Merrick in, and soon all four of them had ascended the stairs and were standing in the center of the tower room with the Bloody Baron and the Grey Lady.

Severus pulled a knife from his pocket. "It's Charmed to make a clean and painless cut, and it's aseptically clean," he said soothingly to Susan. "You only need to press the tip to your finger."

"I can heal the wound," Merrick said, nodding for her to go ahead and cut her finger. "Don't hesitate or think about it; just do it quickly."

Hermione pulled a large piece of parchment as she turned to face the ghosts. "Here are the counter curses and charms and the wand movements. I didn't know if you'd remembered them, so I wrote them down." She held up the sheet of parchment for them to see.

"Tack it on the wall, there," the Grey Lady suggested. She turned to the Baron as Hermione hung the parchment on the wall near the window. "I told her about the book. I don't trust you."

"You never have," he said in a hurtful voice that reached his haunted eyes. He turned to look at Susan. "Are you ready, my dear?"

Susan cut her middle finger, making a deeper cut than she'd obviously intended and nearly swooned at the sight of her own blood. Merrick steadied her, helping her to hold out her hand, passing it into the spectral form of the Baron. Susan pressed her finger and thumb together, making a few drops of her blood pass through the ghost and land on the floor at his feet. "My blood your blood," she said softly, making a few more drops fall to the floor through the ghost.

Two dark streaks remained through him, as if Susan's blood had stained him.

"Are you ready?" the Grey Lady asked Hermione from behind her.

She nodded in response, unable to voice it because of her fear of the possession. The Grey Lady entered her from behind, the same time that the Baron slipped into Severus. For a moment, Severus seemed to shimmer with an opaque glow, and then the aura seemed to meld into him. Hermione looked at her arms, seeing the same effect happening to her, and then lost control of her body. Hermione struggled against the feeling and began to panic.

'Relax,' Helena's voice sounded in her head, 'and let me use you to draw your wand.'

Severus was moving jerkily as he pulled out his wand and turned to look at the parchment. "Seems such a waste," he said, but his voice was cold and different.

"You will not take advantage of him," Helena said through Hermione.

Hermione could feel her jaw and lips move, but she felt cold, every part of her body felt horribly swollen and impossibly thick. She tried to relax and not fight the possession, but the sensation of her body movements were so foreign to her now.

Helena tried removing her spells and sighed. 'I don't think it worked, but it was worth trying.'

'It was worth trying. It's his that must be broken anyway,' Hermione tried to answer.

'Don't fight me, Hermione,' Helena said, turning them to face the Baron in Severus's body.

Unlike Helena's possession of Hermione in which they seemed to be relatively coordinated and smooth, Severus was still moving stiffly as if fighting the Baron within him. Helena raised Hermione's wand and pointed it at his chest. "Reverse the spells. Do it," Helena demanded.

Hermione could feel her wand in her hand, but her fingers felt as thick as sausages.

"You've always hated me for this, didn't you?" the Baron asked, eyeing Hermione's body lustfully. "I can feel I feel alive."

Helena stiffened her arm holding Hermione's wand, ready to strike at him. "Break the curse reverse the spells."

Severus' body turned, and the Baron read the counter spells, but the wand movements he made looked awkward and forced. Severus' wand tip glowed and a bolt of blue shot from the wand, making a large part of the wall glow. "Anxious, are we?" he sneered. "All right. All right." The Baron stepped back and said the words to release his spells this time the wand movements were well-coordinated quick flicks and smooth swishes. Various shades of color spread across the walls encompassing and illuminating the room and the door, then fading into the stone or wood.

The room grew dark, and unsure of what to do, Susan pressed her thumb to her finger again, milking her finger to make several more drops of her blood fall on the floor. The room slowly grew warm. "No! Don't spill any more blood," the Baron admonished her and then suddenly shouted, "*Susan, cut your wrist!*"

Hermione knew that the second outburst came from Severus and not the Baron. The moment she thought that, Helena's voice in her head agreed, 'Yes, he doesn't want more of her blood spilled. Something is... not wrong but different.'

Susan looked like she didn't know what to do.

"Do not cut yourself!" the Baron cried, followed by the stern voice Severus often used as a professor, "Do it, you imbecile girl. Do what I tell you! Cut your wrist!"

"Do it, Susan," Helena said through Hermione, easily moving them over to stand next to the frightened girl. "Hurry, while Severus Snape is still able to control him. Do it now!"

Merrick held her arm, encouraging her to trust Severus as Susan placed the blade at her wrist, staring it in fear. "It's okay, I can heal the cut. Just do it quickly and don't think about it," he said, standing close to her, one arm around her waist, the other still supporting her arm.

Severus' body jerked forward, then fell backwards as Severus struggled against the Baron. Severus lunged forward again and then staggered as Susan's arm jerked and the knife cut deeply without Susan needing to move the blade but few centimeters. Blood gushed from her wrist and she fainted.

The Baron roared in anger, rushed forward and pulled Hermione to him, capturing her mouth in a demanding kiss. Hermione could feel Helena fighting to push him away as much as she was, and she felt an extremely painful ripping sensation throughout her body that nearly made her scream in agony.

Hermione saw Helena move away from her as she struggled to break free of Severus' grasp, and her body suddenly felt weak, her joints hurting and every muscle she had tightening with spasms or cramping.

"You will NEVER have me!" Helena screamed in fury and floated out of the room as Hermione fell to her knees and out of the Baron's grasp.

Severus' body was jerking with spasms as if he was struggling against the Baron again. "Merrick, open the door," Hermione shouted, turning to see Merrick tending to Susan's cut. "It has to be you or Susan or we won't know if this worked!"

Merrick reluctantly left Susan and turned to test the door. The wood, which no longer looked well tended, but old, rotted, and brittle, crumbled into shards and dust at his feet. The iron hinges, which likewise suddenly looked ancient and rusty, turned to dust. Only the stone archway remained. The stone above the door remained unchanged. Hermione and Merrick waited but no words appeared.

"Go get the professors! I'll try and get the Baron out of Severus," Hermione cried, urging Merrick to leave. "Go, we need them!"

"Oh, no you don't," the Baron said, reaching for Hermione.

Hermione pointed her wand at him. "Oh, no, *you* don't. You cannot have him. Leave his body or you will have to be banished excommunicated."

Severus lunged for the doorway, and Hermione screamed as he went flying out of sight. She ran to the doorway after him, thinking that he had jumped to his death, ignoring Susan as she struggled to get to her feet.

When Hermione reached the archway, she saw that Severus had landed at Professor McGonagall's feet. "Help me," he rasped, collapsing to his knees. He bowed his head, then tipped it to the side, and back from the internal struggle between man and ghost. Professor McGonagall was weaving a complicated series of movements, making various flashes of color that only seemed to bounce off Severus' crouching form. Severus' head fell forward, then he threw his head back and screamed in agony and desperation, which echoed within the chamber below.

"Hermione?" Susan pleaded as Hermione watched Professor McGonagall and Severus with growing concern. Hermione wanted to rush down the steps to Severus, but knew that the Headmistress had promised to read *The Book of Spectral Beings* and would know how to help him better than she could. Reluctant to turn her back on the scene below, she turned to help Susan to her feet.

"Is it over? Are the spells broken?" Susan asked weakly, cradling her wrist to her chest.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I think they are." She severed her sleeve off her robe with her wand, ripped it open and Transfigured it into a large square cloth to make a sling for Susan's arm. "Let's get you down stairs. Can you walk?"

"Yes, I think so," Susan said, accepting Hermione's arm about her waist and placing hers across Hermione's shoulders. "I'm just feeling light headed, that's all."

Merrick met them half way on the stairs and scooped Susan up in his arms. Susan hugged him with her free arm and buried her face against his neck.

Hermione hurried past them and down the stairs as she rushed to Severus' side where he knelt at Professors McGonagall's and Flitwick's feet. "Is it you? Are you all right?" she asked, falling to her knees in front of him. "Is the Baron gone?" Hermione brushed his hair from his face as she tried to find any sign that he was himself.

Severus turned and enveloped Hermione in his arms. "Yes, it's me," he said, holding onto her tightly. "Are there any more insufferable questions?"

"Only one," Hermione managed to say before he silenced her with a kiss.

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Author's Notes:

Twenty house points if you can guess Hermione's question!

Hermione's remark about the Spanish, Italian, and Arabic translation of birthmark means wishes; and that according to folklore, birthmarks are caused by unsatisfied wishes

of the mother during pregnancy, is from a quote borrowed from Wikipedia.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birthmark>

## As Past and Present Collide

Chapter 25 of 25

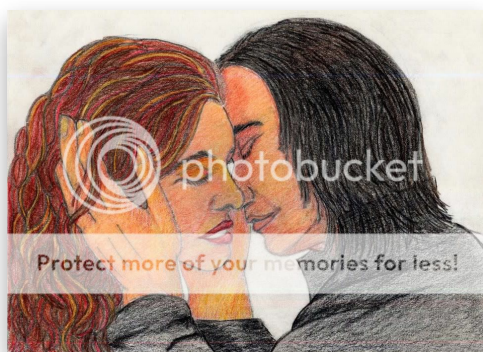
It's the final day of school for Hermione, and Severus has a question to ask.

As a young wizard, Severus' life takes some drastic turns.

And the final mystery is solved.

Thank you to Pookah for acting as a sounding board when I had a brain freeze, and to DuchessOfArcadia and EverMystique for their beta work to make this presentable for you.

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As Past and Present Collide

~Summer 1999~

Hermione entered her room on the last day at Hogwarts to find Kippy folding all her clothes and repacking her trunk, his shoulders slumped and his ears hanging low as if sad to see the students leaving. "Kippy almost done, miss," the elf said as he made sure every pleat of her skirt was sitting perfectly before folding it neatly.

Hermione was flabbergasted, watching how carefully he was treating her clothes and books. She looked around, trying to recall a time, if there ever was a time, when a house-elf was seen in her dorms. She knew that they came in here, but not while the students were about, surely.

The house-elf stood and looked up at her. "Kippy takes your library books back for you, miss, and Kippy brushes your half-kneazle. But he runs off, miss, and Kippy cannot find him to put him in his carrier," he said, wringing his hands, his eyes larger than normal and his lips quivering.

"Kippy, don't worry about Crookshanks," Hermione said, hoping that she sounded reassuring. She knew how much Crooks liked being brushed, but he didn't like being put in his carrier until the very last minute. "He always comes around when I'm ready to leave."

Kippy nodded and looked relieved, but his shoulders were still stooped and his ears were droopy.

"Kippy, stop a moment," she said, sitting down on her bed. The elf slowly set her jumper in her trunk and then turned to face her. "Kippy, what's wrong? I know something is wrong."

Huge tears leaked from his eyes. "Kippy is a bad house-elf, miss. I-I – I is g-given CLOTHES!" he wailed, falling onto the floor and sobbing uncontrollably.

"WHAT?!" Hermione jumped down onto the floor and stroked his back. "Kippy, it has to be a mistake! No one would have given you clothes!"

He continued to wail in misery.

"Kippy, please, stop and tell me who gave you clothes!" she beseeched him.

Kippy sat up, reached into the plain, white towel wrapped about his body, and pulled out a poorly knit elongated object. "Kippy – this – I..." he stammered, apparently incapable of saying it, and blew his nose on the offending knit object.

Hermione reached out her hand and grasped one end of the knitted tube. The stitches were uneven and here and there were evidence of missed stitches, but she immediately recognized the item. "Where did you get this?"

"Kippy finds it jammed in the sofa under the cushions when Kippy whisks it, miss," he said, sniffing loudly, then wailed in grief again, blowing his nose on the object. "The head house-elf t-takes – takes – takes Kippy's Hogwarts towel!" He threw his head back and cried with deep wracking sobs.

Hermione felt her heart sink into her gut.

"Kippy, is – is – HOMELESS!" he wailed and threw himself on the floor. "Kip-py is t-to I-leave today a-after clean-ning Gryf-if-indor t-tower." He was crying so hard he was

reduced to hiccoughs.

She grabbed his wrist and made him look up at her. "This is all my fault! I'll talk to the head house-elf and straighten this out. You don't have to be homeless," she said.

He sat up and looked at her. "How can nice miss have done this?" he said, brandishing the sock.

Hermione sighed, not wanting to admit what had to be said. "I made that when I was learning to knit. It wasn't intended for you," she said, the last bit a small lie. "I'm sorry, Kippy, I thought that Dobby had found them all!"

Kippy looked at her as if she'd confessed to killing Santa Claus, shaking the sock in his fist. "Miss makes this?"

"Yes." She hung her head in shame and then looked up at him. "I'll do anything to make it right," she said earnestly.

"Miss will make the pledge with Kippy?"

That wasn't what she meant. "Kippy, I..."

"Kippy can only be not-disgraced if miss makes pledge with Kippy. Otherwise, Kippy is disgraced *and homeless!*"

"I can't!" she said, running her hand through her hair. "I abhor slavery."

"But if miss do not wants Kippy, and Kippy cannot stay at Hogwarts – Kippy – disgraced house-elf and homeless!" He threw the sock on the floor. "Kippy would serve the House of Granger and be a good house-elf for miss. Miss can make Kippy honorable again. Kippy needs a *home*, miss. Makes Kippy have a home!"

Hermione looked at the offending sock and realized she had little choice. "Okay, but you must have holidays and receive pay. I can't have anyone enslaved to me... otherwise..."

"Good house-elves will not take coins, miss. We put them back! Kippy wants work! Not coins. Not holidays. Holidays are bad!" he said adamantly.

To which Hermione argued, "A Galleon a week and Sundays off." They haggled, the bargaining literally becoming ridiculous. In the end, Kippy would get a Sickle a week, which he could put in a jar in her closet, and one hour off a week to do whatever he wanted as long as it wasn't cleaning or cooking anything. Hermione held out her hand to shake on it.

"Kippy swears to serve the noble House of Granger, to keep miss' secrets, and serves miss diligently and honorably for as long as Kippy and Kippy's children, and their children after them shall live." A band of light circled and bound their hands and wrists. Hermione tried to pull her hand back but the cords held their hands firmly locked together. "You are to accept, Miss." His ears sagged. "Unless you refuses Kippy, but then Kippy is *forever* disgraced and can *never* have a home again! Kippy would be *homeless* forever and ever..."

"Oh, Merlin, help me! Fine – I accept," she said and the light faded into the skin of their wrists. She looked up to see Ginny, Lorraine, and Adrianna standing in the room, looking at her and Kippy in shock from witnessing the bonding.

"Done." Kippy was beaming with joy. "Kippy takes mistress' things now," he stated, looking up at her expectantly. "Er, where does Kippy take them, Mistress?"

"You're taking home a Hogwarts house-elf?" Lorraine asked, gobsmacked. "How did you pull that one off?"

Hermione smiled at Kippy, ignoring Lorraine. "I assume wherever the house-elves take all the students' belongings for now."

When Hermione had mentioned taking Kippy on the train, his eyes had grown to the size of saucers, and he'd looked as if he was about to cry, but the mention of Harry's house made him smile. "I likes working with Kreacher, Miss! Kippy will go there and make Harry's house ready for when mistress arrives!" He turned and left, Hermione's trunk floating in front of him.

"So... Can you explain what just happened?" Ginny asked. "I thought you hated the fact that house-elves were *enslaved!*"

Hermione tried to explain, "I didn't really have a choice... well, I didn't think this through. He was so distraught, and..." She covered her face with her hands. "I have a house-elf and no home. Could my life be any weirder?"

Ginny started to laugh. "Better keep this quiet or you'll have all the house-elves in trouble."

"It doesn't work that way!" Adrianna said in a huff. "Fine, don't tell us! You and Potter always did get away with everything!"

Lorraine and Adrianna made frequent envious looks as Hermione looked around at the bed and through her window, feeling a sudden sense of loss. This room and the one where the first-years were now packing had been her home for seven years, just as the castle had been, and leaving felt nearly oppressive. She inhaled deeply, fighting back the wave of sorrow that overcame her. She could still smell the lingering scent of Severus' flowers but the bouquet had already been removed from her bedside table. Turning slowly, Hermione left the room for the last time.

Ginny was waiting in the common room, looking at the chairs by the fireplace that they used to hang around in.

"Odd, isn't it, leaving?" Hermione asked as she walked over to her side.

Ginny turned and nodded. "I never thought it would be so hard, saying goodbye, but it's like leaving home for the last time."

They followed everyone as they made their way to the carriages. The Thestral-drawn carriages were lined up where only a year ago the defenders of the castle and the wizarding world had stood against Voldemort and his followers. Hermione turned to stare at the place Severus had appeared from the trees, defiantly showing the world whose side he truly belonged. Ginny nudged her, indicating that it was their turn to board. Hermione looked up at the castle when she took her seat, her eyes flicking at each place where something significant had happened during her stay: the Astronomy Tower, the Great Hall, the greenhouses, Gryffindor tower, and finally the east tower and her own sanctuary, Raven's Roost as it had been aptly renamed. The carriage drove past the Whomping Willow, and then Hagrid's hut as the Thestral pulled the carriage to the gates.

Ginny turned to her, having been watching the same landmarks pass that had played such an important role in their lives. "What are you going to do first when we get to London?" she asked.

"I dunno; send Severus a letter, find my parents, find a place to live, and get a job come to mind, although not necessarily in that order," Hermione rattled off quickly. "When I find my parents, I have a lot to explain, and I really hope they forgive me. And Severus and I, we need to spend some time together – real time, no sneaking around or hidden tower rooms. I have a life to start, and I don't know which to do first."

"It'll be odd not seeing you every day," Ginny admitted, looking at her hands.

"We'll make a promise; we will meet for lunch, every day, no matter what," Hermione stated then laughed, "or at least try to. You, me, and Luna."

"And we have to have Sunday dinner at the Burrow, and dinner at Harry's at least twice a week," Ginny suggested, smiling at the idea of making such a vow. "Maybe I'll ask Luna to paint our portraits like she did in her room."

"You saw that?" Hermione asked, gobsmacked.

Ginny nodded as the carriage stopped. "Over hols. You're not my *only* friend!" Ginny said as she climbed from the carriage. She turned to look at the other students disembarking and back to Hermione. "So, I suppose you'll be talking over your summer plans with Severus. I can call him that, Severus, I mean?"

"I suppose so, but you'll have to ask him," Hermione replied.

"No time like the present," Ginny said with a mischievous smirk, staring ahead at something behind Hermione.

Hermione turned around to follow Ginny's gaze and gasped. Severus was leaning against the wall of the depot, watching her. He pushed off the wall, his dark eyes never leaving her face as he jumped from the platform and strode forward, walking toward her. The students automatically parted for him as he approached her, just as they had when he was teaching. Hermione felt rooted on the spot, her breath caught in her throat.

"Miss Weasley," he greeted smoothly as he reached out, slid one hand in Hermione's hair, cupping her head as his other slipped around her waist and his mouth claimed hers, making her nearly lose her balance. Hermione clung to him, holding him as tightly as he held her.

"Hello, Severus," Ginny said back, as the other students gaped in shock, made catcalls, whistled, or turned away in embarrassment.

"Humph," he grunted, and Hermione felt him stiffen momentarily as he slowly broke their kiss, his eyebrow rising at Ginny's presumptuousness. His hand slid to cup Hermione's face as he gazed at her lovingly, ignoring the students staring and moving around them to board the train. "I have something to ask you, I'd rather not ask here. Will you come with me?" he asked softly.

Ginny clasped her hands together, beaming happily as Hermione, blushing slightly from his affectionate display, nodded. "Of course," was all she could utter, her breathing ragged, heart thumping, and her head spinning as if drunk.

Severus clasped Hermione's hand tightly, nodded to Ginny, saying simply, "Ginevra," before Disapparating and taking Hermione with him, but not before Hermione heard Ginny yell, "Ginny, if you —"

They landed on a hill overlooking a village in a valley and a small town beyond. "Where are we?" she asked, taking in the view.

"Near my home," he said with a pleased grin on his face.

"But I thought that you lived in Manchester, a place called Spinner's End?"

"That damn book. Too many people know of that house now. I moved here in Lancashire, well, down there in Pendleton," he said, pointing to the village, "just on the outskirts, of course. That's Clitheroe in the distance. And over there is Mearley Hall." He dropped his arm and added, "That's not what I wanted to ask you."

Hermione turned to face him, looking up at him with expectation, swallowing nervously as she hoped it was something good not bad. He held her hand, as if examining her skin and each finger, then held it firmly as if she'd pull away from him. "I — we — aw, bloody hell! I could court you for months if you'd like, but you and I already know each other — for the most part. I'm not an easy man to live with, but if you could love me in return... You do still feel the same about us, don't you? You still love me, right?"

Hermione felt that if he hadn't been holding her hand so tightly her heart would have lifted her off the ground to soar. "Yes, I love you — I still love you!" She yanked her hand free to fling her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. He hugged her back, lifting her to her tip-toes, and then set her back down to kiss her.

"Wait," she gasped, pulling back before his lips touched hers. "I have to go to Australia!"

"Australia? When? Now?" he asked, jerking away from her, his arms still clasped about her waist.

"My parents; I sent them to Australia!" She quickly explained the situation to him and why she'd done it.

He shook his head in amused disbelief. "Well, I'll have to meet them some time, and I can help you restore their memories," he replied with a smirk, then became serious. "You'll have to explain to me exactly how you did it, what spells, but I'm sure their memories can be returned as long as you didn't Obliviate them." He reached out and tipped her face up to look her in the eye. "You haven't answered my question?"

Hermione suppressed the urge to smirk. "Yes I did; I love you."

"That wasn't the question," he asked, a crease appearing between his brows.

"About Australia, I thought we covered that?" she asked, knowing that wasn't what he'd meant at all.

"No, the — blimey, woman, do you want me to court you or not?" he asked, clearly exasperated by her avoidance.

"Of course I do," she said, smiling, then bit her lip as she looked up at him, sweetly. "If that's what you want."

"What do you want?" he asked, dropping his hands from her waist and looking at her questioningly.

"I want to make a difference in the world, and the magical one really needs a lot of work. Kingsley offered me a job in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures that I want to accept. I don't want to be an Auror; I've done enough fighting for a lifetime," she rattled off quickly, still pleased at the position he'd offered her, assistant to the head of the Being Division! She quickly added, "And I want kids, at least two, and a crup. I always thought that owning a half-crup-half-terrier would be fun," and watched his face for his reaction. "That's if Crookshanks, my half-kneazle, would get along with a crup-terrier mix."

"Is that all?" he asked, crossing his arms and scowling slightly at her.

"Well, I was hoping you'd already offered me what every girl dreams of," she said coquettishly.

His eyebrow rose as he asked, "And what's that?" still standing like he used to when she'd asked him questions in class.

"A home with the man I love," she stated, still smiling sweetly at him.

His body relaxed, and he reached out again to wrap her in his arms. "So that means your answer is yes."

"You haven't asked me that one yet," she said, toying with one of his buttons.

"I just did?" he snapped questioningly, sounding frustrated again. "Blimey, you're making this difficult. Will you marry me, Hermione?"

"Yes!" she answered, as she flung her arms up and clasped them around his neck.

"About bloody time," he mumbled, turning his attention back to thoroughly kissing the witch in his arms.

When he ended the kiss, Hermione had to grab his arms to steady her feet, which made his mouth curve into an amused smirk. He stroked her hair as he watched her face.

"So are you going to show me my new home?" she asked, toying with his buttons again.

He grasped her hands and smiled. "Shall we Apparate, walk, or fly?"

"Walk," she decided, "and you can tell me about your plans for us."

~Summer 1980~

Aberforth hauled Severus out the back door and threw him into the alley behind the bar. "Get your lousy arse out of here. If I see you in here again – it will be too soon," the barkeep said as he wiped his hands on his apron as if Severus had soiled his hands. Severus seethed as Aberforth turned and closed the door.

Severus scrambled to his feet, slipping and landing on his bum in the mud made from the rainfall and whatever else had leaked out of the bins lining the alley. The night was cold, below fifteen Celsius and wet, quite unusual for July, and at the moment quite uncomfortable to be sprawled in the mud, in a drafty alley in northern Scotland. Severus scrambled to his feet and tried to remove the mud with his wand. He was soaked, filthy, and angry from all the indignity and embarrassment he'd had to endure from Dumbledore and his bloody brother. Still seething and flustered, he Apparated home, the tiny house in Spinner's End that he'd inherited from his parents. He used the rain falling from the gutter to rinse off the mud and grime and shed his clothes in his kitchen. He wiped himself down with a towel and rinsed his hair in the sink, drying himself off with his wand. Upstairs he bathed in the tub he'd put in the box room.

His mind raced over what he'd overheard. *'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... Born to those who have thrice defied him... and the Dark Lord will...'* That's when he had been discovered by that bloody barkeep, Aberforth Dumbledore, and the door had opened. Inside the batty woman from the bar was speaking, only not in the soft, phony, misty voice she'd used downstairs, but harsh and scratchy, *'...survives... the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies...'* Then her head dropped for a moment and she turned, screeching at Severus for eavesdropping on her interview.

As Severus lay in the warm water, he thought about whom, other than Lily, the nutty woman could mean. He'd read about prophecies, but never believed in them or considered them valid. But something of what he'd seen made him feel cold. He knew that Lily was pregnant; he'd seen her briefly in Diagon Alley. *So are the Longbottoms; Rosier said she was on maternity leave. Another Weasley brat had both been born in March, so he couldn't be the child of the prophecy, but there is Mrs. Brocklehurst...* Severus had overheard Narcissa talking to Catherine Rosier about the baby shower. *Abigail Dexter is pregnant – she left the country after... No not her. Alexthia Corner...? No. And I think I heard that Mrs. Bones is on maternity leave from the MLE, as well as Mrs. Abbott... and they are both resisting the Dark Lord...* Those were the only witches he knew to be pregnant.

Severus stood and dried himself, disturbed that the only witches that he knew to be pregnant and to be defiant toward the Dark Lord were Lily, the Longbottoms, and the Bones. The Abbotts, Dexters, and the Brocklehurst were not actively defying the Dark Lord, but they were not openly supporting him either. At least Severus had never seen Mr. Abbott or Mr. Brocklehurst summoned for a raid, and Mr. Dexter was a coward. The more he thought about what he'd overheard the more it bothered him. "That Trelawney witch was as nutters as a loon, there is no way her ranting to impress Dumbledore could mean anything," he snarled as he pulled on fresh robes.

On the third of August, Severus nearly choked on his morning cup of tea as he glanced at the happy tidings section of the Sunday *Daily Prophet*. Listed as one of two babies born that week to magical families were Neville Algarius Longbottom and... Harry James Potter. Severus felt his gut clench and his palms began to sweat. He was so worried that the prophecy made by Sybill Trelawney to Dumbledore that night might be Lily's son – or worse – that Dumbledore might think so and get his claws into the boy... raising him to be... "Oh, my, gods! To be the great defender of the wizarding world!"

His Mark chose that exact moment to burn.

Severus Snape couldn't shake off his concerns; he couldn't calm his worried mind as he answered his summons. He couldn't suppress his fear for Lily, her and her newborn son.

"Severus, what is this I see in your mind?" Voldemort asked when the connection was broken.

He knew immediately what the dark Lord had caught a glimpse of: that nutter Trelawney talking to Dumbledore in that room above the Hog's Head. "I'm not sure my Lord? Some babble a strange woman was saying to Dumbledore," he answered with just a hint of an indifferent disdain, hoping to convey his ambivalence of the situation and his disregard of the witch. "I met her; she's nutters, a complete imbecile who believes that she has the *inner eye*, the ability of divination."

"Tell me what she said, and be specific," the Dark Lord insisted, leaning forward and staring Severus in the eye.

~Autumn 1981~

Severus was entering the Headmaster's office when Sybill Trelawney almost barreled into him. "The Headmaster is..." He didn't get to finish the sentence.

"I have important portents to convey to the Headmaster at once!" she said, looking up at him through her thick glasses and brandishing cards at him, her bangles rattling. "The moon – deception, the high priestess – not what he seems, He's here in the castle – death, doom!"

"I'm sure he is," Severus said, his tone dripping with disdain. "The same omens you always have for me."

But Sybill was looking at the Sorting Hat, sitting on the headmaster's desk on his wicker headstand. Her eyes rolled and her mouth went slack and she began to talk, only in that harsh grating voice, *"In Gryffindor they must reside, amongst the brave at heart; the chosen one shall meet the loyal knight and brightest mind will shine. Through adversity and strife, together they'll be strong, the strength of the founders four united in a bond. So place them together, this trio to befriend, for on them do our hopes rely..."*

The Hat peeked up as if taking what she said as a dire warning, and Sybill slumped, barely giving Severus enough time to grab her and dump her in a chair before she collapsed on the floor. She came to just as Dumbledore arrived. "Ah, Sybill, more warnings, I presume?" he asked, walking over to her. He handed Severus an old tome, his attention still on the Divination professor.

"Yes, Headmaster. I have seen it in the cards, the same three!" Sybill said, climbing to her feet and showing him the cards.

"And so I shall then be prepared," Dumbledore said, patiently escorting her to the door. "Thank you so very much for stopping by, but I have important matters to discuss with Professor Snape. I'll see you at dinner, I hope."

"Why do you put up with her?" Severus asked, taking the seat she'd evacuated, and pulling a card out from under his leg. She'd left behind the one with a picture of a lovely woman on it.

"I fear the Seer's right and this boy must not be set alone," the Sorting Hat stated.

"And how so," Dumbledore asked, steeping his hands in front of him.

"Hogwarts worked in harmony before discord grew, feeding on our faults, prejudices, and fears," the Hat answered, "and ever since the four founders were whittled down to three, have the houses been divided, which was not how they were meant to be. You know the warnings our history shows and we must heed these warnings now and unite again or face the perils out there. So I warn you, Headmaster, don't make me divide them, for together we must hold fast, for divided we shall fall."

"I'm afraid that this is the tradition of the school, a long standing tradition that I must uphold," the Headmaster replied solemnly. "But I agree with you. However, I have always thought..." He looked up at Severus.

"I know, we sort too soon," Severus said, having heard the same thing so many times before. "I doubt that would have changed anything, Albus; my enemies chose to hate me before we even left the train."

"I still think that you would have done well in my old house," Dumbledore said sadly, making the Hat peek up again and bristle.

~Summer 2000~

Severus left his meeting with Minerva and the Board of Governors, feeling as if he'd been bowled over by one of Hagrid's Skrewts! He was offered the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Head of Slytherin house, and Deputy Headmaster all in one go. It was nearly too much to take in. In addition, when he'd dropped off his last shipment of potions for St. Mungo's, Mr. Nortquist had inquired if he'd changed his mind about working for the hospital in a teaching position in the training program. He could have either; it was mind boggling. The Gupta girls' shop was still doing well, and his own potions label was very well received, even sought after.

Hermione was doing well. She'd started as assistant head of the Being Division and was making news regularly in regards to changes in the laws for centaurs, house-elves, and especially werewolves. However, since she'd successfully broken into their bank, the Goblins were still disinclined to work with her. Still, Hermione had also championed the reorganization of combining both the Werewolf Services and Werewolf Registration offices under the newly established Werewolf Liaison Office. Unfortunately, that put the Werewolf Hit Squad under the MLE. She was currently working to bring them back under her department in the Being Division. However, currently, both Harry Potter and Ron Weasley were keeping an eye on the hit squad activities, something that Severus was sure Kingsley, the Minister of Magic, had a hand in.

Severus stopped on the way home in Clitheroe to pick up some more of the Cocoaball éclairs from Hermione's favorite bakery, which she'd been asking him frequently for as of late, and some lemon scones for himself. He considered stopping at the greengrocer down the street.

He had a decision to make, and putting it off wouldn't make it any easier to decide. Truth was, he liked the prospect of both, returning to Hogwarts, or maintaining his own business. He selected a few plums, peaches, and some zucchini from the greengrocer, placing them in a bag.

He still had reservations about working for St. Mungo's on a permanent basis, but being Deputy Headmaster, under Minerva for a few years until she retired, might not be that bad. She had privately confided in him the desire to retire in three years, long enough for him to become Headmaster after her. *Headmaster, without any tyrannical narcissistic megalomaniac pulling my strings and rebellious teens – although it's no guarantee I won't have...*

"Professor Snape?"

Severus turned to see who had addressed him and was stunned to see Dennis Creevey, standing on the pavement looking up at him excitedly. "It is you! How are you, sir?"

"I am well, Mr. Creevey," Severus replied, smirking at the small boy, "and yourself?"

"I'm doing great. I go to Hogwarts in a week; I'm on the Quidditch team – Seeker, just like Harry Potter was! I made my Potions OWL, and nine others! I never did thank you for teaching me. You were always so strict, but you were a really great teacher, really made me think things through and organize and plan ahead and all," the boy babbled on eagerly.

Severus assumed his ramblings were nervous energy from being faced with the feared bat of the dungeons. "Thank you, but you and I were only associated for two years in Potions, if memory serves me," he said smoothly. Fact was, little Dennis had always rather impressed Severus with how diligently he tried in his subjects. He wasn't the sharpest whip, but he made up for it in tenacity of practice and paying earnest attention in class. More than once, he'd caught the Creevey brothers practicing spells or brewing potions in a classroom late at night. "I was sorry to hear about your brother. He was a good lad and very brave."

Dennis' smile grew even wider. "Thank you. He was afraid of you sometimes, but he always said you were a good guy, really brilliant and that we were lucky to be learning from the likes of you. I still have every essay of Colin's and have read every book you suggested he read." The boy turned as if to go, and then faced Severus again. "I heard that you might be coming back? Is that true? Are you? It would be so great if you did! I hope you teach Potions. Slughorn is retiring, and when I heard that I immediately told Alan and Richard that they should bring you back. You were the best. Slughorn doesn't challenge us like you did."

He waited a count of five to see if the boy was through before answering. "I have been asked to return, as professor of Defense."

"Oh that would be awesome!" Dennis exclaimed loudly enough to draw attention. "You were the best we had – well, I only had you, that Umbridge woman and the imposter Professor Moody. We have Professor Podmore now, he's a retired Auror, you know. I didn't know he was leaving."

He turned his head again and Severus was about to answer when Dennis said, "Oh, there's my dad. So good to see you, Professor. I really look forward to your lessons again. Bye!"

"Good, bye, Mr. Creevey," Severus replied as the boy turned to run across the street. He paid for his groceries and walked to the road that he often used for Apparation, contemplating what little Creevey had said. He'd always thought the Creevey boys were afraid of him, despising him like all the others. Apparently, he had been wrong. Severus made a mental roll-call of the students in Creevey's year, smirking at himself when he'd been able to name all forty-nine of them. He tried listing all the students what would be in sixth-year, pleased that he was able to recall the names of all fifty-one students and their faces.

He arrived at the gate to their home with a smile on his face. His roses were in bloom, as was the jasmine along the house and rosemary along the fence. The odoriferous plants were too pungent for his taste, especially combined in a small front garden, but Hermione loved their aroma. He'd even started using their essences with wild fern in her bar soap and bubble bath, which he admitted, was less potent that way, but quite provocative.

"You look happy," Hermione said, sitting up from beside the tomatoes. "Dinner's nearly ready."

"I saw Dennis Creevey in town," he said, handing her the box from the bakery.

She wiped her hands on her apron and stood up, accepting the box with a smirk. "And that made you happy?"

"It was what he said," Severus replied, looking at the warm glow on his wife's face in the evening light. Sunset was only an hour away, and nothing filled him with more joy than having dinner in the garden on a summer night as the sun set. He cupped her face with his hand and kissed her. "Let's eat. I have something I want to ask you."

She nodded, holding his hand as they walked into the house. Over dinner in the garden, Severus told Hermione of his two offers and his meeting with Dennis Creevey.

"So which would you like to do?" Hermione asked, sipping on a tall glass of iced grape juice.

He stared at the matching color of his wine. "I never thought I'd ever admit this, but I am leaning toward returning to Hogwarts."

"You might want to reconsider the implications of leaving your wife alone for nine months before you make your decision," she said cooly.

His eyes narrowed in reaction to her expression. "Explain."

"We'll I'm going to need you around a bit more than normal for the next nineteen months to help me out. Possibly for longer, depending on whether Kippy likes changing nappies," Hermione said off-handedly. "I'm not going to be able to lift anything once my stomach gets huge."

Severus was staring at her, gobsmacked, his mind not exactly registering what she meant by nineteen months... But Kippy changing nappies and that her stomach was going to be huge could only mean one thing. "You're going to have a baby?"

"Yes, I'm two months along actually," she replied. "Molly said..."

"I'm going to be a father?" he asked, still in a bit of a shock. "How did this happen?"

"If you don't know, I'm not going to explain," she chided him, grinning as she sipped on her grape juice.

"No, I know how it happens, but how – when – me, a father?" he babbled incoherently like a first-year.

"Yes, you, a father." She got up and walked around the small table to sit on his lap. "Are you at least amiable to the idea?"

He pulled her to him and placed his hand on her belly, staring at her abdomen in surprise. Hermione laid her hand over his, and he looked up at her as if she were a miracle. "I'm going to have a child."

"Well, I am, but I'd rather hoped you'd want a hand in it all, daddy?" she teased him, leaning down to kiss him. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her gently, still reeling from the magic she'd brought to his life.

~March 2001~

Hermione's baby was due any day, and once again they were sitting on the sofa with her feet in his lap as he massaged them. "Hugo? Are you trying to set our son up for ridicule?"

"My grandfather's name is Hubert, but every one called him Hugh or Hugo," Hermione replied, her eyes closed in bliss as he worked his thumbs along her arch.

"I'll accept Hubert, as long as no one calls him Hugo," he stated, watching the blissful expression on her face.

"Hubert Severus Snape... What?" she asked when he'd stopped moving his fingers.

He scowled slightly at her suggestion. "Severus? I never liked the name Severus."

"Tobias," she suggested.

"Don't even think about it," he warned her, going back to massaging her foot. "Sean is acceptable."

"Hubert Sean Harry Snape," she suggested with a sigh.

"Hermione..." He squeezed her foot gently, running a finger gently to tickle her.

"Stop that! I was kidding," she said with a reflex tug of her foot but he held her foot in a firm grip. She settled down since he'd not repeated the action. "If he grows up to be in Gryffindor..."

"Or Slytherin," he interrupted her.

A log crackled in the fireplace. "He could be in Ravenclaw, I almost was," she stated.

"What?" he asked, switching feet.

"Ravenclaw, the Sorting Hat strongly considered me for Ravenclaw, but said 'a bright mind, but your bravery, your loyalty, that I would be needed...' Oh my gods!" she said, grasping the back of the sofa as she tried to sit up, something her huge belly prevented.

"What?" he asked, calmly, laying his hand on the top of her foot.

Kippy appeared and pushed a pillow behind Hermione's back. "*That's* why I was able to get past the barrier in my first year when I was with Ron and Harry! The Grey Lady said you can only pass the barrier if you are *meant* to be together... What if...? But how would the Hat know?" Hermione rambled, still straining to sit up to face him.

He was trying to piece together the relevance of what she was saying. "Know what precisely? What are you talking about?"

She lay back down against her pillows and Kippy gave her a glass of iced grape juice. "The Hat had a difficult time placing me and then put me in Gryffindor," she explained and he nodded, finally getting what she was on about. "After a few months of school, actually in early November, I went to ask Professor Dumbledore to let me be reassigned to Ravenclaw since I didn't feel that I was fitting in and thought there had been a mistake. The Sorting Hat told me, that I was *meant* to be in Gryffindor... '*He would need me to overcome what he faced*'; that we were *meant* to be together – Ron, Harry and me!"

Severus smirked at her logic. It was sound, and fit what he'd overheard Trelawney say in Dumbledore's office years ago, but still not relevant to the magic of the barrier in his mind. "All right, you were meant to be with Harry and Ronald. Considering the fact that neither boy would have passed a single class or survived their *rule breaking* and *meddling* without you, or would have survived your year together on the run or been able to defeat the Dark Lord... the Hat's statement obviously has merit," he argued in his soft teaching voice. "I don't see the connection."

"The Barrier! I had pushed into the barrier in my first year. If neither Ron or Harry were my soul mate – of which I am most certain you are – it was because I was meant to be with Harry and Ron. You know – the Golden Trio. That's why when I returned when I was seventeen I was drawn up to the tower room. I'd been affected since my first year, but I hadn't really felt the pull of the room until I was of age, an adult," she explained, and frowned at his smirk. "Don't you see?"

"If you say so." Severus started laughing, accepting the glass of wine Kippy offered him as he thought about her logic.

"What's so funny?" she asked, clearly hurt that he was dismissing her theory so casually.

"You're missing something in that theory of yours." Severus sipped his wine as he worked out exactly when she'd found the lower chamber room. "Am I correct in assuming that you found the portal the night Potter led you on that fool's mission to steal the Philosopher's stone?"

Hermione tried to sit up again, grabbing the back of the sofa to pull herself up. "Not steal – save it – and it wasn't foolish, we, well, Harry did save it!"

"No, Dumbledore, Minerva and I saved it," he said pointedly, yet casually, remembering the night in question all too well. "Hermione/was in that tower that night, when Dumbledore summoned me to help him save you three from the mischief you'd gotten yourselves into – again." He slid his hand on her leg, appreciating the silky smooth feel of her skin. "You were really quite a handful."

"You were?" she asked stunned, falling back against her pillows.

He laughed at her. "Yes, I was. I was in the tower room the night you and your friends set out to get the Philosopher's Stone."

"But that would mean that you and I – even back then?" she stammered, amazed by the implications. "But you never said anything!"

"And when exactly, wife, was I supposed to?" he asked, his fingers lazily stroking her leg as he sipped his wine. "I tried to warn you to stay away every time you came up there. I even tried to persuade you to meet me in my office, hoping that you'd stay away from the tower room, but you couldn't. No more than I could, even though I knew what was happening, I was unable to stop it myself. We were both trapped the moment you entered the upper room of that tower."

She looked at the fingers of her left hand and the lovely emerald surrounded by diamonds he'd bought her. "Do you regret it?"

"Not for one moment. Well at first, but only because I knew I was taking advantage of you in ways that were wholly inappropriate as your professor. But do you think you'd have fallen for me otherwise? I'm not so sure I'd have allowed myself to develop feelings for you since you were my student."

She examined the perfect princess cut of her stone. "No, maybe not. But..." She looked up at him, her expression worried. "Are you glad that things turned out this way? Do you have any regrets?"

Severus smirked and then laughed softly. "Oh, I have regrets, Hermione. I have many regrets, but very few of them involve you. You are the best thing that's happened to me, and I wouldn't allow a Time-Turner in this house to change things any other way."

She smiled happily at his pronouncement, and he set his glass down, rose up, leaning over her carefully to kiss her. "I love you, Hermione Snape. Don't ever doubt that," he said softly as their lips met. After giving her a loving, sensual kiss, he sat back down and pulled her feet back onto his lap.

Hermione was beaming happily, and then became thoughtful. "I heard from Minerva that the new Transfiguration professor goes up there every morning to have tea. There isn't a door anymore and the house-elves have put furniture up there."

"Furniture. In our room?" he asked. "What kind of furniture?"

"A chair, a comfortable sofa, a thick rug, and a bookshelf," she stated, looking at the ice in her glass.

"Too bad they didn't put that up there before," he stated, smirking behind his.

"They couldn't," she said, adjusting her position and her pillow. "Kippy said it was something about dark, bad magic and evil magic or something like that. They didn't like the smell and feel of the room. Apparently the smell and bad feeling is gone." Kippy appeared and helped adjust Hermione's pillows. "Thank you," she replied and turned to face Severus as Kippy gave Hermione a glass of water. "Besides, we did fine without furniture. I thought you liked the windowsill?"

He grimaced at the memory of the pain of the hard stone floor on his knees. "It wasn't the windowsill I minded as much as the floor," he said, smirking at her.

"That didn't bother you several months ago if I recall," she said, smirking back at him adorably. "You did right admirably in my opinion."

He tipped his wine glass to his lips to hide his satisfied grin at the memory of that particular night. "That was because you were too randy to climb the stairs to our bedroom," he reminded her. "We did manage to make it to the sofa."

"That was because it was the place in the house we hadn't christened," she said with a mischievous grin.

"Oh – Oh!"

"Yes, oh."

~ The End ~

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*Author's Notes:*

The Latin used in this story is from: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl> A terrific site for anyone wanting Latin wording.

"On a cold, wet night sixteen years ago, in a room above the bar at the Hog's Head Inn." (Dumbledore, OoTP) The weather in the UK the summer of 1980 was particularly poor, ( cold and wet) especially from about 18th June to 18th July in 'high summer' during which seven of those days the temperature failed to reach 15C or 59F. The first week of July was particularly cold – the coldest in recorded history for that month.