

Culmination

by Cosette

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Prologue

Chapter 1 of 23

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Prologue:

Hermione:

Hermione didn't know what she was doing. It was the summer after her sixth year at Hogwarts, and she didn't know what she was doing. She was supposed to be studying for her NEWTs. She was supposed to be spending her days reading, practicing wand movements, translating ancient runes... After all, she had started preparing for the OWLs from nearly the moment she arrived home two years earlier. Instead of doing all those things she was supposed to be doing, she was pacing back and forth across her room.

Dumbledore was dead, leaving Harry to finish finding and destroying the horcruxes. And with Dumbledore's fall at Hogwarts, Voldemort's next move had seemed extremely obvious to everyone except the Ministry of Magic. Within days, Voldemort had overturned the Ministry of Magic and appointed one of his Death Eaters as Minister of Magic. Shortly after, the *Daily Prophet* had announced the appointment of a new Headmaster at Hogwarts: none other than Severus Snape.

And with that, all of Hermione's plans, her dreams of academic grandeur, seemed to fade; with everything that was going on, she didn't even know if she would be returning to Hogwarts in the fall. How could she return to Hogwarts when the man who had murdered Dumbledore would be taking his place? But if not Hogwarts, where would she go? Her place was with Harry, that she knew; but she hadn't heard from him since they left Hogwarts.

And so, she paced back and forth across her bedroom, because she couldn't think of anything else to do at that moment.

Draco:

It was supposed to be a good summer for Draco. With Voldemort's power increasing every day and Severus Snape installed as headmaster of Hogwarts, it was supposed to be a good summer for any loyal to the Dark Lord. And Draco was loyal to the Dark Lord; after all, it's not like he had been given much of a choice about it. He certainly wasn't going to dishonor his family name like that traitor Sirius Black had done.

His father had hosted a great party to celebrate the death of Dumbledore. All of Voldemort's Death Eaters had attended, as well as Voldemort himself. It had been the first time Draco had seen Severus since Dumbledore's death. They had shared hidden moments of intimacy and joy throughout the last year; moments where Draco felt his worth as a person, not just as Lucius's son, the future Death Eater, but as himself, just Draco. And at this party where he had hoped that Severus would take advantage of his new standing within the Death Eaters to make public their relationship, where all Draco had wanted was a dance, a public dance with Severus holding him close, had Severus even spoken to him? No! Severus had avoided him all night, slipping effortlessly into the crowd whenever Draco had approached.

Two days later, Draco received a letter by owl from Severus. All it said was: "It is over." And with that, Draco's summer became rotten.

Severus:

Severus Snape leaned back forcefully into the stone wall of his dungeon. The acrylic taste of the potion lingered in his mouth. He noticed a slight blurriness in his vision, as if he were viewing the world through a misty window. Parts of his shoulders, back, buttocks, and legs were covered by bruises of varying sizes and colors. He knew Madam Pomfrey would've been easily able to heal those, but she would've asked questions that he wasn't willing to answer. Better to suffer silently than to give away any inkling of his secret project to anyone.

He leaned back again into the wall, ignoring the pain radiating from his bruises. Still nothing. He tried again, pushing against the wall even harder. For one moment, he thought he felt a vibration between the wall and his body: but it was gone quickly.

This should have worked, he thought to himself. The vibration he had felt was a good sign, but he hadn't been spending all of his spare moments for a mere vibration. He knew that what he was trying to do was difficult at best and potentially impossible, but he felt strongly that it could be done. And if he could do it, it would give him a power that even the Dark Lord had never dreamed of.

Chapter 1: Hermione

Chapter 2 of 23

Back at Hogwarts, Hermione wonders why Harry insisted they return... and how they can keep an eye on their new Headmaster.

Chapter 1:

Hermione:

The Gryffindor common room was mostly empty when Harry, Ron, and Hermione came in. Even within the mighty halls of Gryffindor, there was palpable fear hanging over everyone. Most Gryffindor students hadn't returned that year, leaving Gryffindor house unusually quiet and subdued. And those who had returned retreated to their dormitories whenever possible, coming out only reluctantly to attend classes. It was no longer safe to be a Gryffindor at Hogwarts; in fact, it was no longer safe to be anything other than a Slytherin at Hogwarts. At least, though, this meant that the trio didn't have to worry about anyone overhearing their conversation.

"So, what'd you find out, mate?" asked Ron.

Harry had a heavy look in his eyes, the weight of the burden left to him constantly pulling him down. He glanced around one last time, making sure that they were the only ones in the common room. But the room was as empty as the feeble hope that rested in their hearts. Satisfied, he reached into his bag and pulled out a chocolate frog collectible card.

Curious, both Hermione and Ron leaned forward for a closer look. The face in the card looked up at Hermione and Ron happily, and then smiled.

"Can he," Hermione paused, "see us?"

A very small sound seemed to come from the card.

"Whoa," said Ron.

"He can see you," replied Harry. "And he can hear you."

"Wicked," whispered Ron.

Hermione leaned down closer to the card. Very faintly, she heard the face in the card whisper, "Why, hello, Hermione!" The sparkling blue eyes winked at her.

"I didn't know the images in these cards could talk," Hermione said excitedly. "Why has this never happened before?"

"I don't know," Harry answered, "but the important thing is that Dumbledore told me that he suspects the remaining Horcruxes are hidden here, at Hogwarts."

Hermione had suspected as much: well, not that Dumbledore had told Harry from his frame in a chocolate frog collectible card, but that the reason Harry had said they needed to return to Hogwarts was because he found out something to indicate that there were Horcruxes hidden at Hogwarts.

"Did he have any idea where they might be hidden?" asked Hermione.

"Not really. We know the Horcruxes probably were made from objects connected to the Houses; so maybe they're hidden in the dormitories?" Harry wondered aloud.

"How are we supposed to search the school with that greasy git hovering around all the time?" asked Ron.

Harry nodded reluctantly as he replied, "I don't really see how we can. If Snape finds out we're looking for the Horcruxes and he tells Voldemort, he'll just move them somewhere else."

"Harry," Hermione pursed her lips and continued, "what's to stop Voldemort from coming here and killing you?"

"Dumbledore, he said that there would always be a place at Hogwarts for those who were loyal to him. I don't know, Hermione, but I just feel like the safest place for me to be right now is here."

"You know, Harry, Dumbledore was a great man; but he could have been wrong. I mean, he was wrong about Snape, wasn't he?" Ron asked.

"Harry, have you talked to Dumbledore's card about this?" Hermione added.

"Yes, I have. And Dumbledore happens to agree with me."

A slight murmur from Dumbledore's card made them bend down towards it.

"Harry will be safest at Hogwarts as long as those in power are loyal to me," Dumbledore said mysteriously. "And now, I apologize, but I need to go visit my other cards before my absence is noted." And with that, Dumbledore walked out of the card.

"He wasn't talking about Snape, was he?" Ron said incredulously.

"I think so. Dumbledore's insisted throughout every conversation that Snape is still loyal to him. But whenever I try to ask him how he knows that, he says he has to go visit his other cards and walks away," said Harry, clearly frustrated.

"Well, we need to find out. If Snape is still loyal to Dumbledore, he might be able to help us. And if he's not, we need to be able to keep an eye on him. And I have an idea about how we can do this," said Hermione.

Chapter 2: Draco

Chapter 3 of 23

Draco wants to spend more time with Severus to try and win him back, but an unlikely obstacle gets in the way...

Chapter 2:

Draco:

Potions had become Draco's most and least enjoyable class. Though the class was made more enjoyable by Potter's and Weasley's absence (Severus had made it clear that they were not welcome in his class), it was made less enjoyable by the one part of the trio who did remain: Hermione Granger. Her presence in this class rankled him on so many levels. Not only was she a Mudblood, he had to grudgingly admit that she was good at Potions. And, to top it all off, without Potter around, Severus didn't seem as interested in belittling Granger as he used to be. In fact, Draco couldn't help but notice that Granger seemed to hang around just to talk to Severus after each class. And what really stung was that Severus did not seem to mind! But when Draco tried to talk to him, he always mysteriously had other things that were more important to do. And yet he could find time to talk to Granger without any trouble!

Draco was desperate to find a way back into Severus's heart. He was convinced that Severus had broken it off not without thinking about it, but perhaps without being aware of the depth of Draco's feelings. Whatever excuses Severus had given himself to break things off with Draco, Draco was determined to change his mind. And the first step to doing that would be to get Severus to spend some time with him. It had only taken Draco a few days to think of the way to do that: he was going to ask Severus to give him private lessons in Potions. With Draco's extraordinary talent in the subject and willingness to learn, how could Severus say no?

But first, he had to catch Severus after class. (Since becoming Headmaster, it had become impossible to find Severus outside of class. He was either nowhere to be found, or hiding out in the Headmaster's office.) This should have been easy, but that cursed Mudblood always hung around after class! It seemed like she always had some excuse to speak to Severus after class. "Oh, Professor, can you elaborate more about the properties of hippogriff droppings when boiled as opposed to fresh?" or "Oh, Professor, exactly how does a bezoar work as an antidote?" It was enough to drive him crazy! And to have Severus actually take these questions seriously! Since when was he so interested in answering Granger's questions?

All in all, it had been a frustrating first month at Hogwarts. Yes, there was the slight pleasure in terrifying students from the other Houses merely by walking past them and

sneering and the immense satisfaction Draco had personally felt when Severus had stood after the Sorting and announced that not only would Hogwarts no longer be teaching Defense against the Dark Arts, but that any student who had not received an E in his or her O.W.L.s could not take N.E.W.T.-level Potions: the shock and anger that had reverberated on the faces of the Gryffindors made Draco's insides dance with glee.

But today, he was tired of waiting. He was simply not going to allow Granger to get to Severus before he did at the end of class. He made sure that he was ready to go minutes before class was over. He did his best to finish the potion early and had put his books and supplies in his bag. Severus had barely finished dismissing the class when Draco jumped out of his seat and walked with quick determination up to Severus's desk. A small moment of shock registered on Granger's face as she realized what Draco had done. But she left quickly and without comment.

"Yes, Draco, what is it?" Severus asked curtly.

"Sir," Draco began, "I would like to ask you something."

Severus arched an eyebrow in warning as he replied, "Yes?"

Gathering up his courage, sure that Severus would not be able to find a way to deny him this, he asked plainly:

"I wish to receive private Potions lessons from you. You know very well how skillful I am and that I am more than capable of brewing far more complicated potions than the ones you teach in this class. Besides, there are potions I wish to learn how to create that cannot be taught in a public class anyways."

Severus did not seem taken aback by Draco's question. He seemed to have expected it. He paused for a moment before answering.

"I'm sorry, Draco, but as I am already providing one student with private instruction, I don't have the time for another."

The question was out of Draco's mouth before he could stop it, even though he knew what the answer would be.

"Who are you teaching?"

"Hermione Granger."

Chapter 3: Severus

Chapter 4 of 23

Severus meets with Voldemort and has a private lesson with Hermione which gives him an uncomfortable realization...

Chapter 3:

Severus:

Severus snuck a look up at Voldemort as he bent low in the required bow. Voldemort's eyes had a smug, confident gleam that contrasted with his cautious actions. Though the Ministry of Magic was indirectly controlled by Voldemort now, Severus had wondered at the Dark Lord's lack of open action. Only Death Eaters and members of the Order of the Phoenix seemed aware of the power Voldemort now possessed; it was a sure sign of general stupidity, Severus thought, that no one else seemed to suspect much at all.

"That is sufficient, Severus," Voldemort's voice slid through his mouth like an eel through water. Severus rose slowly, allowing his eyes to meet the Dark Lord's. Though he had performed this feat of Occlumency many times, it was still tiring to show the Dark Lord only what Severus wanted him to see without giving any indication that he was fighting or holding anything back. To maintain a state of closure while appearing to be open and relaxed was taxing.

Memories, seemingly random, rose to his mind's surface: Hermione Granger bent over a cauldron, sneaking glances at him when she thought he wasn't looking; Hermione Granger, hanging on his every word as he explained a complicated theory of Potions as the glimmer of understanding danced in her eyes; Hermione Granger, helping him chop up fluxweed until it became a fine powder; Hermione Granger, telling Severus how she enjoyed these private lessons and the intellectual stimulation they provided.

And, to complete the charade, Severus allowed another, more personal thought to rise to the surface: how beautiful Hermione was when her eyes had that glint of understanding in them, how he was drawn to stare at her mouth when she asked piercing questions about Potions -- questions he hadn't ever before been asked but had thoroughly enjoyed answering.

"She is starting to trust you, I see," Voldemort said appreciatively.

"Yes, my Lord. I feel she is starting to value our conversations and might be willing to reveal what Potter has been up to soon," Severus said slyly.

"And why have you not used Legilimency on her, Severus? Why have you not taken from her mind what, I'm sure, would be very easy to find?" Voldemort prodded, challenging Severus to find a satisfactory reply. Luckily, Severus had prepared for this question and had a quick reply:

"Though she has not been trained in Occlumency, she likely knows of Legilimency and knows how to detect it when it occurs. She knows much, my Lord, of many things; I fear that, were I to attempt Legilimency on her, she would detect it and I would instantly lose her trust."

Voldemort nodded thoughtfully.

"It is too bad she is a Mudblood, and so loyal to Potter. There is no way to change her allegiance, Severus? She could never join us openly, of course, with her... tainted heritage, but another powerful intellect to complement yours could be very useful."

"There is a way, but it will take time." Severus allowed some of his more suggestive memories of Hermione Granger to rise: the blush that would color her face when Severus complimented her work; the appreciation in her eyes when he explained a particularly challenging technique to her... and the emotions these memories stirred in him rose unbidden as well.

A sinister smile split Voldemort's lips in two.

"Well, well, well, Severus! It seems things are progressing better than expected! Report back to me as soon as anything changes. Good work, Severus... See to it that it

continues," Voldemort said in dismissal.

Severus left quickly, Apparating back to the grounds just outside Hogwarts.

After all, he didn't want to keep Hermione waiting for too long, now did he? He arrived to his classroom just in time to set things up for today's lesson before Hermione knocked politely on the door. Though Severus had suspected these lessons were just a charade for Hermione to spy on him, he had to admit they were enjoyable. The Granger girl was far more intelligent than he had suspected. She wasn't just good at memorizing words from books: she knew how to apply what she had learned; indeed, she knew how to piece things together intuitively.

He watched her as she entered the classroom, her cheeks slightly flushed. He knew that whatever Potter was up to, it was certainly keeping Granger busy. There was, as usual, a hidden eagerness in her eyes to learn what only Severus could teach her. As much as he wanted to resent the girl for denying him the opportunity to teach Draco, he had to admit that teaching Draco at this moment would have been awkward at best. As fond as he was of Draco, it had been a mistake to let their relationship go as far as it had the year before. No, it was good that he was teaching Hermione instead.

He had only ever known one other witch whose aptitude at potions seemed to come so naturally. As he watched Hermione start chopping ingredients for today's lesson, another image rose in his mind: a redhaired girl with startling green eyes whose smile was worth every torment he had endured and more. Yes, it was undeniable: Hermione Granger reminded him of Lily. And that made this more complicated.

Chapter 4: Hermione

Chapter 5 of 23

Hermione's private Potions lessons with Professor Snape continue, much to her enjoyment. Frustrated with Harry and Ron's inability to comprehend what she is trying to tell them, she loses her temper and does something she would instantly regret.

Chapter 4:

Hermione:

It was late when Hermione finally left Professor Snape's classroom. What she had learned invigorated her such that she knew she would have trouble sleeping. Potions had become more interesting to her now that she was learning some of what Snape knew. When he spoke, it was easy to get lost in his words: he spoke with such a passion about Potions theories and techniques that even he would get lost and say more than he had intended. Like tonight, when he had started talking about inventing potions and had suddenly started ranting about the difficulties involved and how the ingredients don't always do what he wanted... and how damn difficult it was to find a good apothecary that sold valerian root reliably.

Her ears had perked at that one: not only had she never heard of valerian root being used in a potion, but she recognized the name from Muggle "Natural Remedies" adherents. Her father, in fact, had recommended some of his more difficult patients try taking valerian root for a few weeks before a particularly painful procedure, like a root canal. She had suggested that the professor might have better luck in Muggle stores when his expression had frozen with surprise. Immediately, he started talking about the theories involved in brewing complicated poisons instead. It was too late for Hermione to raid the library for information, but she was determined to find out as much as she could about valerian root as soon as possible. If Snape was trying to invent a potion, it would be useful to know what he was trying to accomplish. Even more useful would be knowing whether Snape was making the potion for Voldemort or not, but he would have to become much looser-lipped before that question could be answered.

Without any real evidence, Hermione was forced to rationally conclude that the verdict was still out on Professor Snape. But her instinct said otherwise. It was hard for her to believe that such an intelligent, creative, inquisitive, and curious man would have nothing better to dream of than being a distant second to a master who only would use his intellectual prowess and not appreciate it. And Hermione also had to admit that Harry had been safe thus far at Hogwarts: while the Slytherin students had been caught occasionally assaulting other students, there had been no Death Eaters yet at Hogwarts this year. The Marauder's Map had proven that. This was, of course, assuming Snape himself wasn't a real Death Eater: but Hermione just felt that Harry could have easily been killed by now if Snape had wanted that. If Snape had wanted it, Voldemort himself could have become a fixture at Hogwarts. Instead, other than the absence of Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hogwarts was functioning almost normally. Why? Hermione felt that it had to be because of Snape.

Unfortunately, Harry and Ron didn't agree with her. Over breakfast the next morning, she tried to talk to them about how her private lessons were going and what she thought of the professor. She mentioned the valerian root; as usual, they were as interested in hearing about what she was learning about Potions as they were in Blast-Ended Skrewt anatomy.

"Fantastic, Hermione. And what about the professor teaching you? Have you learned anything about him yet?" Ron asked.

She answered using vague words indicating she thought he possibly could be trusted. But these words proved far too vague for Harry and Ron, who were staring at her with that familiar blank look on their faces that frustrated her so greatly and so often.

This was so unlike her recent conversations with Professor Snape. She had to admit that she'd been finding those conversations far more enjoyable than most of the ones she'd ever had with Harry or Ron. And one of the joys about talking with Snape was that he always understood what she was saying. He never stared at her with a glazed look in his eyes when she talked. In fact, he often stared at her with rapt attention... Sometimes it was even too much for her and she would have to look away, but not before feeling only the slightest of heat rising in her cheeks... She caught herself suddenly thinking about Snape's intellectual prowess and that look in his eyes when she understood what he was saying. But it was not Snape she was speaking to now. It was Harry and Ron, and they were being dense. And she was starting to get tired of it.

"Oh, for goodness sake! Do you two have cave trolls hidden in your family trees? I'm trying to tell you that I think Professor Snape might be on our side!" Her voice had risen to an unfortunate level as she realized that every person in the entire Great Hall had heard what she said.

Chapter 5: Draco

Chapter 6 of 23

Is this the chance Draco's been waiting for to win back Severus's affections?

Chapter 5:

Draco:

Draco guffawed loudly as Hermione's words echoed around the Great Hall. The thought of Severus being aligned with the Chosen One was laughable... Wasn't it? A sliver of doubt began to rise in Draco's mind. But before that doubt could materialize, Severus Snape himself stood up.

"Miss Granger," the Headmaster said in a decidedly icy tone, "I would ask that you please keep your inane ponderings to yourself. And if the urge to hypothesize about my loyalty overwhelms your impressionable young mind, I would remind you of what happened to the last man who sat in this chair. 50 points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. And detention with me later today, to show you whose side I'm really on." With that, Severus smugly sat down in the Headmaster's chair.

Draco watched with glee as the Boy Wonder started to stand, his cheeks flushed with rage. Granger and Weasley were barely able to restrain Potter. And Granger, that thief of Severus's attention, looked sheepishly mollified. For once, Draco mused, the expression on Granger's face perfectly matched the texture of her hair.

Draco was even more delighted later to see the angry look Severus gave her as he left the Great Hall. Perhaps all was not well between Severus and Granger after all. Maybe now Severus would see Hermione's true colors and realize that Draco was a much worthier and loyal student. If Severus could see that, Draco might still have a chance at winning him back.

In Potions later that day, Granger was blessedly silent. She asked no questions and did not hang around after class to speak with Severus. *This is my chance*, Draco thought. An unusual sensation of nervousness splashed onto Draco. He had always assumed that Severus's fascination with Hermione Granger wouldn't last, but there was this uncomfortable fear that Severus would reject him again. Unbidden, the words, "It is over", flashed before Draco. But what was he worried about, really? What did that Mudblood have that he didn't? Okay, there were the breasts and other female parts, but surely by now Severus would be missing Draco's manly touch. It was simple, really: Draco was just a better catch than Granger. Now he just had to bring Severus back to his senses.

He sauntered up to Severus's desk, trying to ooze confidence that he still wasn't entirely sure he really felt.

"Good afternoon, Professor." Draco mentally stroked his ego as he congratulated himself on a smooth start.

Severus looked up from his desk in what appeared to be, but couldn't really be, amusement. For a brief moment, Severus's eyes locked onto Draco's. Basking in the attention, Draco momentarily forgot that Severus was an accomplished Legilimens. His entire scheme blinked into his mind and that same amusement flitted across Severus's face. It couldn't really be amusement, though, because Draco was worth more than that. Still, he had to admit that the amusement broke the starkness of Severus's face like pears mixed with sharp cheddar cheese. It had been a long time since he had seen anything but starkness on Severus's face.

"Perhaps I have been too hard on you, Draco." *No*, Draco thought wryly, *the problem is that you haven't been hard on me at all*. "If you like, I might still be able to find time for," Severus paused as if he wanted to savor the words that would follow, "private instruction."

"Of course, Professor. I can always find time for you," Draco added boldly.

The smallest hint of a smirk appeared on Severus's face. "How about later this evening, after Miss Granger's detention?"

"And how late would that be, Professor?"

"Shall we say 10 o'clock?" Draco beamed at the time suggested. Perhaps this would be easier than he thought.

"Of course, Professor."

"Then 10 o'clock tonight it is, Draco. But do be sure to be on time. I would hate for our evening together to be cut short because of your aptitude for tardiness." Draco couldn't help but smile as he remembered the many times during the spring when he had been no more than five minutes late for Severus. Draco had received some very pleasant punishments for his tardiness.

"Certainly, I will be on time, Professor. But I humbly beg your forgiveness if my punctuality does not happen to agree with your clocks."

"Until then, Draco. But now I must ask you to leave, as it appears that my hopeless class of first-years desires my attention."

Draco turned around in surprise to find dozens of meek first-year students looking on. He nodded politely to Severus, gathered his things, and walked out of the dungeons. An enormous smile split his face as he felt that, finally, he was going to have his Professor back.

Chapter 6: Severus

Chapter 7 of 23

Severus ponders what his next course of action should be.

Chapter 6:

Severus:

Everything seemed to be going according to Severus Snape's plans. Hermione Granger's outburst at breakfast was unexpected, but useful. It revealed to Severus how much Hermione had begun to trust him and also how much Hermione had begun to question her taste in friends. *Related to cave trolls, indeed*, Severus Snape mused in

amusement. It had also given him the chance to publicly quell any suspicions the students or faculty might have had about his loyalty. That had meant humiliating Hermione, but all could be explained later. She was smart enough to realize that appearances must be kept and that a public chastisement had been his only option.

Draco was an... enjoyable complication. The boy's intentions had been clear on his face even before Legilimens had confirmed them. After all this time and all the rejection, Draco still thought he could win Severus back. The truth was that it was flattering. Draco had been an attentive, passionate lover. As attracted as Severus was to Hermione (that truth still rankled, but it was undeniable now), he did find himself sometimes missing Draco. He wouldn't—how had Draco put it?—quite say he was missing Draco's "manly touch", but he did miss the banter and the playfulness they had shared. Hermione, for all her intellectual prowess, was always so intense and so serious. Of course, that was part of what attracted him to her, but it did not diminish the simple enjoyment of exchanging banter with Draco.

Reining in his thoughts, Severus began to focus on what his next move should be. If he played this right, both Hermione and Draco would be convinced of his loyalty. (And, if done right, both Hermione and Draco would be convinced of his affection.) But after his public humiliation of Hermione, he would need to tell her something important to make her believe that he was still really on their side. Perhaps the time had come to tell her about his secret project. His private nature rebelled against this idea, as he was fully aware that being attracted to someone did not necessitate her loyalty or trustworthiness. And he could not be sure that she would not tell Potter or Weasley. Even if she did, what would happen? Potter and Weasley were surely not intelligent enough to understand this potion.

The potential gains from this course of action were twofold: first, there was the chance that Hermione could solve the problems he'd been having with this potion. His pride buckled at that statement, but the reality was that Severus had not been making any real progress for weeks and needed a fresh pair of eyes, particularly eyes that glinted with cleverness. Second, after revealing such an enormous secret to Hermione, one that even the Dark Lord was unaware of, what might Hermione reveal to him in return? (Unbidden thoughts of Hermione in various states of undress flitted through his mind.) If he was lucky, she might share with him what Potter was keeping her so busy with. And that would be something to take to the Dark Lord if any still doubted his loyalty.

In this case, it seemed best to work against his secretive nature and share his project with Hermione. The potential benefits far outnumbered the potential complications. Still, the matter of what to do with Draco (again unbidden thoughts rose momentarily) needed to be decided. Draco would need some convincing as well to prevent him from stirring up any trouble between Severus and the Dark Lord. The methods of conviction that Draco was most susceptible to were pleasure and flattery. Severus had had his reasons for breaking things off with Draco when he did, but those reasons dwarfed compared to the present concern of keeping up the appearance of being the Dark Lord's faithful servant. It was decided: Severus would resume his romantic liaison with Draco that evening. He had to admit that he was even looking forward to it.

But before that could happen, he needed to prepare for his "detention" with Hermione Granger. He removed from his stores of ingredients those used in his secret project: fluxweed picked while still young, graphorn horn, mandrake root, pika blood, ground ibex hooves, valerian root, and a variety of gemstones and minerals. The current batch of potion was just about ready to have its final ingredient added. That step, he decided, would be taken with Hermione Granger.

Chapter 7: Hermione

Chapter 8 of 23

What will happen at Hermione's detention with Professor Snape?

Chapter 7:

Hermione:

Hermione Granger knocked on Professor Snape's door reluctantly. She no longer knew what to expect from the professor she had learned to respect and whose company she had even started to enjoy.

"Come in."

Hermione walked in to find an odd array of potion ingredients on the table. In the midst of the potion ingredients was a Muggle bottle of valerian root. Confused, Hermione opened her mouth to ask what was going on when the memory of what happened at breakfast silenced her. Instead, she sat down at the table and waited for Professor Snape to explain.

"I am not angry with you, Miss Granger. But your outburst at breakfast has added some unnecessary complications to my life."

"Professor, I'm sorry about that, but—"

"Your apology is accepted. I am merely trying to explain my actions. It is essential to my well-being that the students here believe that I am the Dark Lord's most faithful servant. Surely you can see the truth in that?" There was an odd hitch in Snape's voice as he voiced his question, almost as if he was truly concerned that Hermione might not believe him.

"Of course, Professor. But do you mean to say that I was right?"

Severus Snape paused for a moment, leaving Hermione worried that she had overstepped her bounds.

"Yes, Hermione. My appearance as the Dark Lord's faithful servant is just that: an appearance only." An unwanted flutter rose in Hermione's chest at the sound of her name being voiced by the lips of Severus Snape. He paused here as well, and she dared to hope that he was relishing the moment as she was. He continued, "And to prove my loyalty to you—" *Not to Harry or Dumbledore, but to me!*—"I have something to share with you. You've no doubt noticed the ingredients on the table and the oddity of their assortment. They are ingredients to a potion I am trying to create."

Hermione looked at the ingredients more carefully, trying to discern their purpose. *Fluxweed, often used in metamorphosis potions... What do the rest of the ingredients have in common? And what of the gemstones?*

"Sir? What would this potion do, exactly?"

"If it worked properly, it would allow the user to travel through stone as easily as one could travel through water." Here, Severus looked at Hermione intently, as though testing her.

"That would be... But the complications involved! How would one breathe? But if it were possible, that would mean uninhibited travel." She looked at Severus meaningfully. "You could travel unnoticed and without worry of being followed. It's the ultimate escape potion!"

A grin slipped across Severus's lips. "I see you understand me. However, I have not been able to perfect it."

Hermione listened in awe as Severus explained the theory behind the potion: how each ingredient except the fluxweed came from a plant or animal that thrived in rocky terrain, how the potion should function similarly to polyjuice potion but that he couldn't figure out the last ingredient...

"Have you tried taking a sample from the walls of the castle?" Hermione interrupted.

Shock sprang into Severus's eyes. Then, with a startling ferocity, Severus Snape began to laugh.

Moments later, the scrapings from the wall dutifully deposited into the potion, they sat down to wait.

Thoroughly convinced now that Severus was truly on her side—*why else would he tell me about that potion?*—Hermione made the decision to tell Severus about the Horcruxes. Perhaps he would know where they were...

"Sev—Professor, do you know anything about Horcruxes?" Surprise flickered across Severus's face at the word.

"Yes, I know of them... and you may call me Severus in private, Hermione."

"Well, Severus," It was such a pleasure to say his name! "Voldemort has made six of them. Dumbledore—he's been speaking to us from one of those collectible cards?—is convinced they're hidden here at Hogwarts. That's why we came back this year—Harry, me, and Ron, I mean. Do you know anything about them?"

"That explains much." He paused here, forehead creasing with the weight of his thoughts. "Yes, Hermione, I know much about them, including where they are hidden."

Relief flooded into Hermione. They could stop their futile search for them!

"But I cannot tell you where they are. I'm sure you understand why..."

"No, *Professor*, I don't. If you're on our side, why not tell me where they are? We've been searching for months and haven't found any sign of them!" Hermione replied icily.

"Because, as I said earlier, appearances must be kept. I am the only one who knows where they are hidden. If suddenly the Dark Lord were to discover they'd been destroyed, who do you think would take the blame? No, Hermione, I can't tell you. All I can say is that Dumbledore is correct: they are hidden within the castle walls."

A small grey puff of smoke rose from the potion.

"Ah, it's done then. I hope you'll forgive me for cutting our conversation short—I do enjoy our talks, truly, Hermione—but I cannot bear waiting any longer to sample this."

With that, Severus Snape drank the potion and walked into the wall.

Chapter 8: Draco

Chapter 9 of 23

Draco's private lesson does not go as planned...

Chapter 8:

Draco:

It was turning out to be a wonderful day. Watching Granger's fall from grace had been eminently enjoyable. The hope of possibility rose high in Draco's throat, making him swallow more frequently than normal. It had been a great day, and it was going to be a great night. All that Draco needed to do was show up at the dungeons on time... Or perhaps five minutes late. But the waiting! It was unbearable. Frankly, Draco had been so aroused since leaving Severus's classroom that it was difficult to focus on anything. The temptation of relief came constantly, but he wanted to be prepared for Severus. And any relief he could give himself would pale compared to what Severus could give him.

By quarter to 10, Draco could wait no longer. He sauntered down to the dungeons in effusive jubilation. After all this time—all this rejection, agony, and loneliness—Draco was going to get his Professor back! An odd noise—*was that Severus tapping his fingers?*—made Draco pause just before bursting the door open. Intrigued, Draco slowly opened the door just an inch and peeked inside.

Hermione Granger was sitting at a table, staring at the wall. *Has she finally lost it? Or perhaps Severus has made her stare at the wall for punishment?* Whatever the reason, Granger staring at a wall was strange enough to warrant further investigation. As Draco watched, her fingers occasionally tapped on the table, betraying what could only be impatience. *But where was Severus? Surely he should be supervising whatever it is Granger is supposed to be doing* From what Draco could see of the dungeon, Severus Snape was nowhere to be found.

The impatience was really beginning to be cumbersome. To come all the way down here and have to wait was torturous. But Draco, for all his impatience, had an instinct for recognizing when something unusual and worth knowing was about to occur. And anything that could cause Granger to stare at a wall and Severus to leave her unattended was worth knowing, even if it required further patience on Draco's part.

Granger's gaze on the wall became more intense, catching Draco's attention. A slight shimmer was happening in the wall. The shimmer increased until a small section of the wall looked fluid. Before Draco could think of any theories to explain this strange phenomenon, Severus Snape himself walked out of the wall. Blinking, Draco tried to absorb what had just happened and was just starting to accept that perhaps he was seeing things when something else happened.

As soon as Severus walked out of the wall—*Slytherin's snake, I must be mad*—Granger bounded up to him. Severus's face was beaming with pride and happiness such that Draco had never seen before, not even at the height of their romance last spring. A sick feeling rose in Draco's stomach as the distance between Granger and Severus closed. *This can't be happening, not my Severus, not with a dirty Mudblood—not with a girl!* The mute protestations screamed in Draco's head as he watched his beloved Professor kiss Hermione Granger full on the lips.

The need for patience, silence, and discretion fled Draco's mind as the first bout of vomit ran into his mouth and out onto the floor. Pushing the door open in rage, Draco

shouted at Severus, "Just wait until the Dark Lord finds out what you've been doing!" He wanted to shout more, to rage out against the treacherous Professor Snape, but another bout of vomit was rising and his pride would not allow him to humiliate himself any further. He fled to the nearest bathroom, where he waited until the vomit stopped to fulfill his threat.

Leaving Hogwarts was an easy task for Draco, one of the favored Slytherins. All he had to do was walk off the grounds and Apparate wherever he chose. And tonight, he chose to Apparate to the Dark Lord's side. Seconds later, Draco realized how unwise it had been to appear before the Dark Lord unannounced. That was a privilege only given to the most trusted Death Eaters, which did not include Draco Malfoy. With half a dozen wands pointed at him, including the wand of the Dark Lord, there was nothing for Draco to do but speak quickly.

"Severus Snape has betrayed you! I just saw him kissing that Mudblood Granger!" At that, the vomit began to rise again, and Draco had no choice but to swallow it down.

"Silly boy. That sounds like all is going according to plan! Still, let's see if you know more than you think you do." Voldemort's eyes locked on to Draco's and Draco felt his mind open. The events of that evening danced before him: the terrible kiss, the offensive look in Severus's eyes, the shock Draco had felt as Severus walked out of the wall. Released from Voldemort's mind, rage swam across Voldemort's face.

"The boy is right. Severus Snape has betrayed me. Lucius, gather your friends and prepare to punish Severus for what he has done. You may go now, Draco."

The teeniest sliver of regret made its way deep into Draco's stomach as he realized exactly what he had done.

Chapter 9: Severus

Chapter 10 of 23

Severus's masterful plans have completely fallen apart. What will he do now?

Chapter 9:

Severus:

She wouldn't leave. No matter what Severus threatened her with, Hermione refused to leave his side. *Such a stubborn Gryffindor*, Severus thought as Hermione stood with her arms crossed and chin jutted out. It was tempting to kiss her again, but there was no time. Severus knew what the Dark Lord would do when Draco showed up: he would break into Draco's mind and see Severus walking out of a wall, a project the Dark Lord had neither been informed of nor sanctioned. Severus doubted the Dark Lord himself would come—he had not set foot in Hogwarts since the summer—but surely someone would come for him, ready to kill and with accomplices.

He had explained all this to Hermione, of course. Her response had been startling, even after that joyous kiss they had just shared: "You expect me to leave you to die, Severus? Do you not realize how much you mean to me, how happy you've made me? Anyways, no Gryffindor would leave a friend to face a battle alone." That is when she jutted her chin out and folded her arms.

Pulling himself out of his thoughts, he faced Hermione. "Well, if you're going to stay, then make yourself useful. We'll need more of that potion, and quickly," he barked at her.

She jumped in response, rushing towards the wall to collect more powder. Two more cauldrons of potion were awaiting the final ingredient, made in advance so Severus would have several to experiment with. He never expected Hermione would figure out the potion so quickly. How could he have not thought of that? Such a simple answer when he expected a complicated one!

While Hermione dealt with the potions, Severus busied himself with casting every defensive ward he could think of at the entrance to the dungeons. He didn't expect the wards to prevent his attackers from reaching him, but at least this way he'd be alerted when they came.

An uncomfortable realization made Severus feel the weight of obligation for a boy he despised. With his standing with the Dark Lord lost, Severus was thrust onto the side of the Boy Wonder. His only chance of freedom, of being able to live a life without constantly being hunted, was for Harry Potter to defeat the Dark Lord, and for Potter to know Severus had helped. And Potter's only chance of defeating the Dark Lord relied on the destruction of the two Horcruxes Severus had watched the Dark Lord place inside Hogwarts.

Interrupting Hermione's focus, he asked, "Hermione! Do you have a way to contact Potter?"

In response, Hermione pulled out a collectible card from her robes. Remembering what she had said earlier, Severus beckoned her to bring the card to him.

Twinkling blue eyes gazed up at Severus.

"Albus, my cover's been blown. I have to flee. Hermione's refused to leave. Can you take a message to Potter for me?" He was running out of time and he knew it. But this had to be done, or he would spend the rest of his life in hiding.

"Certainly, Severus. What is the message?"

"Ravenclaw's wand is being held by the statue near the Room of Requirement. Hufflepuff's cup is in the Headmaster's office, in the cupboard below your portrait. 'Lily Granger' is the password." At that, Hermione looked at him quizzically, but stayed mercifully silent.

Albus nodded and walked out of the card.

Two puffs of smoke rose from the cauldrons, signaling that the potions were ready. Quickly, he and Hermione bottled as much as they could and destroyed the rest, preparing for the flight that was to come.

A sound bellowed down the hall: "THEY'RE HERE!" as the first of Severus's wards was triggered.

"This is your last chance, Hermione. You can still leave and go to Potter and Weasley. Or you can risk being trapped with me as a fugitive, perhaps for the rest of your life." He didn't want her to leave, but he had to offer her one last chance. He would not spend his time in hiding with someone who did not willingly choose to be there.

"I'm staying, Severus. Albus can help Harry with the Horcruxes, now that you've told him where they are. And, besides, I'm not one to kiss and run." A tentative smile broke her lips then, filling Severus with pleasure.

"Then drink up and come with me." He emptied a bottle into his mouth, watched Hermione do the same, and pulled her close. It was good to be close to her again, but it was even better to have such a valiant excuse for it. He held her as tight as he could, and together, they faded into the dungeon wall.

Just then, Lucius Malfoy penetrated the final ward and entered the dungeon. Severus's heart sank as he saw that following behind Lucius was Draco.

Chapter 10: Hermione

Chapter 11 of 23

Hermione and Severus have been backed into a wall. Where will they go now?

Chapter 10:

Hermione

Hermione wanted to close her eyes and bask in the moment. Severus's arms held her against him as if they were being intimate. That alone would have made this moment wondrous, but to have it done while inside a stone wall! This was unthinkable mere hours before, and now Hermione Granger was being held by Severus Snape inside the walls of Hogwarts. It was hard for her to know what to focus on: the protectiveness of Severus's arms or the odd experience of being inside stone.

Severus held still for a moment, allowing the hold Hermione tried to keep on her brain to be loosed, making it overflow with exclamatory thoughts. She didn't understand how she was breathing, only knew that she was, and that the air was cold and smooth. She felt slight pressure from the stone surrounding her, but it wasn't uncomfortable. The world outside the wall was tinged grey and slightly obscured. Lucius and Draco had been joined by another Death Eater she didn't recognize. With a start, she remembered what they were doing and wondered why Severus wasn't moving.

As if he had heard her thoughts, the stone around them began to flow downward *No, it's not moving—we are!* They rose up through the dungeon wall, the stone breaking around them like a river parted by a boulder. She couldn't tell how he was doing it. His body, still pressed so close to hers, betrayed no movement, and yet they were moving. The potion must have granted him the ability to dictate where they would go by thought, making his body not only able to be embraced by stone, but his mind able to control it. She ached to test this theory for herself, but was deterred by the ferocity with which Severus held her. *There must be some danger of him losing me in here.* But she needed to know.

"Se—" She was cut off by Severus frantically shaking his head. Her questions would have to wait until later.

Each wall parted before them as they passed unnoticed by anyone. Severus led her to a passage uncared for by house elves, its floor covered in dust. When they reached the end, Severus nodded to Hermione and pulled forward.

Hermione mimicked him and stepped forward. For one moment, the wall clung to her and she worried she might not be able to leave. But then the suction broke and the wall snapped back into place. The air felt light and warm on her face as she walked over to Severus.

"This trap door leads to the basement of Honeydukes. We must be cautious: for unlike your friend Mr. Potter, we are not in possession of an Invisibility Cloak." She felt herself grinning as she realized that Severus must have known when Harry sneaked out to Hogsmeade. "When we are safely outside the grounds of Hogwarts, I will Apparate us away."

With that, Severus slid the creaky trap door open a sliver. Motioning for her to follow, he pushed the trap door open all the way and crawled out. She followed him, climbing out of the passage into the aromatic basement of Honeydukes. His arms wrapped around her urgently—I *could get used to this!*—as he Apparated them away from Hogwarts and its dangers.

When they arrived, she first noticed the musty smell of old books. Black and brown leatherbound books hid every inch of the walls. When she managed to tear her eyes away from the books, she saw a decrepit sofa, an old chair, and an unstable table: none of which held any particular interest for her.

"Where are we?"

"This is my house," Severus replied. "I come here sometimes, when I need a break from Hogwarts."

Hermione thought of all those weekends that Severus had been away and realized that, at least for some of them, he must have come here.

"Are we safe here?"

"No. You agreed to follow me, so I will not allow myself to take any responsibility for what may happen to you," Severus said.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked hesitantly. She had assumed that he Apparated them somewhere safe, somewhere they couldn't be found.

"Why do you think Draco was with Lucius?"

Hermione shook her head, admitting she didn't know where Severus was going with this.

Sighing, he said, "Lucius is using Draco as a distraction. He knows those on our side will not intentionally harm a student, and he will continue using that to his advantage. If Lucius is willing to do this once, he will do it again, and Draco will become nothing more than a pawn in battle. But if Lucius dies today... It is Draco's best chance."

"That's despicable! Who would treat their own child like that?"

"Lucius would. Remember: he is our target. Do your best not to harm Draco, but do not act to protect him under any circumstances. The Dark Lord must not have any doubt in his mind of Draco's loyalty, or killing Lucius would be meaningless."

"But—"

"Prepare yourself," he interrupted, "they are coming."

Chapter 11: Draco

Chapter 12 of 23

Draco's regret is not enough to stop his betrayal of the man he loves.

Chapter 11:

Draco:

Draco watched without comment as his silver-locked father tried to force his way into a wall. At another time, this would have been amusing. But as angry as he had been at Severus—as angry as he still was at him—he didn't really want him dead. After all, if Severus was dead, Draco would have no chance at winning him back from that freakish Mudblood.

Apparently coming to the conclusion that he couldn't force his way into the wall, Lucius stopped and turned on Draco.

"Where would he have gone, Draco?" To not answer would be acting against the Dark Lord's wishes, but to answer would be condemning Severus. The best choice, Draco decided, was to pretend he didn't know.

He answered, with as much spite as he could manage, "Why do you think I would know?"

Lucius raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Do you think I'm blind? That I didn't notice what went on between you two last spring? Oh, Severus did a good job of hiding it, but you... You pranced around our house like an excited first year when you heard he was coming to our little party. Spent all evening trying to get his attention, as I recall... It must have stung, didn't it, when he ignored you." The familiar look of malice had entered Lucius's eyes. Instinct told him to tread carefully now, but the remnants of his affection for Severus forced him to ignore it.

"So? I still don't see why I would know where he's gone off to."

"Oh, but I think you do, Draco. And it's so very sweet of you to try to protect your dear Severus after you've just betrayed him to the Dark Lord, but don't you think it's a little late for that? How could Severus possibly forgive you for what you've done? Now, why don't you just tell me where he's gone to so we can follow through with the Dark Lord's orders... Unless you think we should disobey them, of course."

Just tell him before he gets any angrier. What good would not telling him do? He's going to get it out of you one way or the other regardless, you know this. He couldn't do it. Everything he and Severus had shared, how Severus had treated him like a real person and not just an extension of Lucius... Draco couldn't give up on that.

"I don't know where he's gone to." There was no turning back now as Lucius's eyes narrowed.

"You are forcing me to do something I don't truly want to do, Draco. But I will not go back to the Dark Lord as a failure. And I think you do know, I think you know exactly where he's gone to. I've no choice..." And with that, Lucius pointed his wand at Draco, and the word he knew was coming came.

"Crucio."

Hot lashes of pain whipped through Draco as his body gave way and fell to the floor.

"Just tell me where he is and the pain will stop. The Dark Lord need not know of your transgression. But I promise you, Draco, the pain will not stop until I know." He paused here, drawing out the next few words with excruciatingly slow diction. "Exactly. Where. He's. Gone."

The convulsions had begun. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold out much longer: he was nearing his previous record already.

"It didn't have to come to this. If you had just told me in the beginning, this could have been avoided. Why protect him, Draco? Why protect someone who's chosen a Mudblood over you? And you dare to call yourself a Malfoy!"

He knew he shouldn't be listening to him, but the words stung almost as much as the curse did. Why couldn't he just ignore him? But it was becoming harder to think now. The pain would overwhelm him soon, leave his mind so wounded he'd have to join the Longbottoms in St. Mungo's. Was it worth it? Would Severus ever even know what he'd done for him? Would Severus even care if he found out?

Anything to make the pain stop. His mouth opened, forming the words for him even as what was left of his brain tried to stop them from forming.

"Spinner's End! He's gone to Spinner's End!"

The familiar smile of victory split on Lucius's face.

"And, Draco, will you lead us there?"

Anything to make the pain stop.

"Yes! Yes!"

The curse ended, leaving a defeated Draco sprawled on the ground as his triumphant father loomed over him.

"Then get up. Oh, and Draco? If you hesitate again to follow the Dark Lord's orders, if you dare to lead us false, the Dark Lord will know of it. And what he will do to you... well, you'll be looking back on this memory with fondness."

With that, Draco pushed himself up off the ground to lead his father and Goyle to his heart's destruction.

Chapter 12: Severus

Chapter 13 of 23

The battle finally begins...

Chapter 12:

Severus:

Three pops of air alerted Severus that his attackers, along with Draco, had arrived. He nodded to Hermione, who stood alert with her wand facing the door. A polite knock sounded on the door, causing Hermione's eyebrows to arch and an unintended smirk to move his lips. *Lucius and his sense of decorum.*

"Severus? Will you let us in, or do I have to come in uninvited?"

"Of course, Lucius. Do come in."

At a confused look from Hermione, he could only shrug in reply. There was no harm in indulging Lucius's need for politesse. Anything that could be done to lower his guard was worth doing.

The door swung open to reveal Lucius with his arm slung around Draco's shoulders, a sign of affection he had never before seen Lucius bestow upon Draco. Any anger he might have had towards Draco for his betrayal dissipated as he noticed certain oddities: the hollowed look in Draco's eyes, the slight vibration coming from his skin, the way he let his father keep him at his side without protest.

This changes everything... If Lucius had to Crucio Draco to lead them here...

Before he could finish his train of thought, the familiar silky voice interrupted.

"Severus Snape," Lucius drawled, "I come here on behalf of our Master—well, my Master only, as it turns out—to perform your execution. Out of respect for our past years of friendship, I offer you a choice. Surrender, and I will grant you a quick death. Or, we can duel and risk harming one of the students you seem so fond of protecting."

"I trust my students can protect themselves, Lucius."

With a curt nod, Lucius stepped over the threshold, pushing Draco out in front of him. Goyle followed behind, squeezing into the room like an oversized melon.

"Draco, I trust that you can manage the Mudblood on your own while Goyle and I deal with the traitor. Surely you have no qualms with that?"

Fury rose in Severus as Lucius sneered disdainfully at Draco. Hoping Hermione had noticed Draco's weakened state, Severus had no choice but to allow the duel to begin.

Lucius faced Severus as Draco attempted to stride over to Hermione. With a mock bow from both Lucius and Goyle, which he returned in kind, the duel began.

"Confrigo!"

"Duro!"

"Impedimenta!"

"Langlock!"

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Crucio!"

"Sectumsemptra!"

Goyle, always nothing more than a lackey, hovered behind Lucius, occasionally sending a curse towards Severus. The real threat was Lucius. Severus had often imagined what it would be like to fight Lucius, or other Death Eaters, but battles never unraveled as imagined. Lucius seemed as comfortable blocking Severus's curses as he was blocking his. Curse after curse was deflected, flowing harmlessly into the walls or furniture. *That charm was one of my better ideas...*

This battle would continue until one of them succumbed to exhaustion, unless Lucius could be caught off-guard *But how? I've got his full attention. He's well accustomed to my fighting style. What could I do to surprise him?*

Suddenly, a thump from the opposite side of the room momentarily interrupted their duel. Lying on the ground, a victim of *Petrificus Totalus*, was Draco. Hermione had won and had done so without harming Draco.

Goyle stared in shock as Hermione turned her wand upon him.

"I'll, uh, go for reinforcements, alright?"

With that, Goyle Disapparated away.

Both he and Hermione turned their wands toward Lucius, but Lucius only saw Severus.

"Expelliarmus!"

Lucius's wand flew into Hermione's hand.

The temptation to enact revenge for Draco was strong as he looked at the defeated Lucius and muttered, "*Crucio*". *Only for a moment, and then he dies...*

Lucius's body began to writhe as moans seeped from his lips like blood from a wound.

"Severus! What are you doing?"

"Exacting revenge upon my dear, dear friend Lucius."

It's too easy to enjoy this. This is for Draco, for all the times you've hurt him. Did you enjoy it, Lucius? Did it make you feel powerful, torturing your own son?

"Revenge? What—"

"Let me finish, Hermione."

After a few more moments, Severus lowered his wand, allowing the *Cruciatus* Curse to stop.

"And now, Lucius, you die."

As Severus raised his wand, aimed directly at his former ally's forehead, a multitude of popping sounds came from outside.

There's no time. And I have to keep Draco—and Hermione—safe.

Rushing over to Draco, Severus barked, "Get over here, Hermione!"

Relieved that she was able to make it to him in time, he held her with one arm and bent down to hold Draco's stiff body with the other. The door burst open just as he Disapparated them away to safety.

Chapter 13: Hermione

Chapter 14 of 23

Severus has Disapparated them to apparent safety, but where have they gone to?

Chapter 13:

Hermione:

Dust immediately assaulted her nostrils. The room they had Disapparated into was filthy, with inches of dust covering every piece of furniture..*Not that anything in here can rightly be called "furniture"*, she thought. The bed, which once might have been a magnificent canopy bed, had collapsed, its canopy covering it like a shroud. A decrepit piano, its lid hanging open, had strings so frayed that a rat could have broken them...

Why did this room look so familiar? *A rat running across those piano strings...*

"Are we in the Shrieking Shack, Severus?"

Nodding curtly, he released his hold on her and gently let Draco slide to the ground.

"We are indeed, Hermione. It is the safest place to be, if one cannot be in Hogwarts."

He paused briefly to wrest Draco's wand from his stiff fingers.

"I'd ask that you not interrupt once I free Draco, no matter what happens."

"But—"

"Trust me, Hermione, it'd be best if you stayed out of this." With that, he pointed his wand at Draco and said *Finite Incantatem*."

Draco coughed, rubbed the dust out of his eyes, and then stood up in alarm.

"Where the hell are we? And where's my wand?"

"We are in the Shrieking Shack, and I have your wand." Severus replied calmly.

Draco glared at Severus angrily.

"What have you done? Why have you taken me here? And give me back my blasted wand!"

"I removed you from your father's ill-treatment and brought you here for your own protection. And, no, Draco, I will not give you back your wand. Not until I'm convinced you can be trusted not to act impulsively... And your performance earlier tonight has quite convinced me that it'll be a while before you can be so trusted."

"And what do you expect me to do? Stay here with you and that filthy Mudblood in this..."

He paused, as if taking in the unkempt nature of his surroundings for the first time.

"You expect me—a Malfoy!—to stay *here*?"

Hermione couldn't help but be amused at the shock plastered on Draco's face. Though she didn't wish him any particular kind of harm, it would be pleasant watching his arrogance suffer in this—*Well, shack really is the best word, isn't it? Though it's more decrepit even than most—shack.*

Severus did not seem to share her amusement, as his face took on the familiar gleam of firmness every Hogwarts student knew to fear.

"I give you one chance, Draco, and one only. Either you stay here by choice, or you stay here by force. But you *will* be staying here."

Surely he's bluffing. He wouldn't keep Draco here against his will.

"What? You'd hold me here, sharing this disgusting hovel with you and—and *HER*? And you expect me to agree to this!"

"Is that your choice, then? You will not agree to stay here?"

"No, I will not! Now, give me back my wand, and I'll leave you two to your... fitting honeymoon. I can't think of a more appropriate location for a Mudblood and a traitor!"

She was tiring of being called Mudblood, and she was tiring of being ostensibly ignored.

"You're hardly one to talk of betrayal, Malfoy," she couldn't resist interjecting.

Turning on her, Severus barked, "Stay out of this, Hermione!"

"I can't believe I'm being chastised for betrayal by someone who's just abandoned her best friends for a man more than twice her age! Maybe it's just that Mudbloods have no sense of hypocrisy... Must be the dirt in the blood clouding their vision..."

"ENOUGH! Hermione, I told you to stay out of this, and I meant it! If you can't hold your tongue, perhaps you should find a better use for it? Surely you've noticed how decrepit our surroundings are. If you cannot stay quiet, do that!"

Humiliated at being treated like this, she could think of nothing to do or say, so she just stood there, mute as the walls around them.

Severus turned then to Draco and added, "Now, Draco, allow me to explain our situation. Thanks to your temper tantrum earlier, my time alive is greatly reduced if I don't stay in hiding. Hermione, through no coercion of mine, but out of sheer loyalty and affection for me, has agreed to stay with me. I did not plan on you joining us, nor did I particularly want you to join us. What I had hoped was to kill your father to protect you from him—"

"I don't need your protection! I can manage fine on my own!"

"You are no match for your father, Draco, and you know it! Now, let me finish!"

Draco's eyes narrowed, but Hermione was relieved when he said nothing in reply.

"But when you wouldn't lead Lucius to me without first being put under the Cruciatus curse, I knew it would only be a matter of time before your own father branded you traitor and turned the Dark Lord against you. I will not have you be killed, Draco! Slytherin's snake, I *cannot* have you die!"

Acid flames rose in Hermione's throat at the passion with which Severus was speaking to Draco. She had never been a particularly jealous person, but there was no mistaking Severus's passion for anything other than affection. She knew he cared for Draco, but she had thought it was only as a professor to a favorite student, nothing more. Now, suddenly, she knew she had competition for Severus's affection, and this was one revelation she could have done without.

"And you don't think I can fend for myself? You don't think I have places to hide from him? You think running away has never entered my mind? You don't trust me, that's what all this boils down to! I just endured the Cruciatus curse trying to save you, and you don't trust me!"

"And why should I? You haven't exactly shown a great sense of judgment these last few hours! First, you betray me to the Dark Lord instead of asking me what was going on. Had you asked, you would have known that—" Severus stopped short here and looked over at Hermione. "—in any case... Second, having won favor with the Dark Lord for turning me in, you don't take advantage of that to secure your standing! No, you feel you've made a mistake and refuse to tell your father where I've gone to. Then, you fail at redeeming yourself by letting the pain control you and telling your father my location anyways. So, no, Draco, I don't trust you! Now, I'm asking you one last time: are you going to stay here by choice, or by force?"

"You think after all that I'd choose to stay anywhere with you? No, I'm leaving! Now, give me my wand!"

"You've just added to your stack of bad choices for the evening."

With that, Severus pointed his wand at Draco, who once again became as stiff as right convictions.

"What are you doing, Severus? You can't make him stay here by force!"

"I can, I must, and I will, Hermione. Now, please, be quiet!"

What have I done? I've left Harry and Ron to spend my time in the Shrieking Shack with a man who treats me like a child! Is this really the same man who kissed me just hours before?

The sound of dripping blood interrupted her thoughts. As she watched in horror, Severus collected Draco's blood into a puddle on the floor, at which he pointed his wand. His forehead was furrowed in concentration as his wand moved rhythmically over the pool of blood. After a moment, he stopped.

"What have you done?"

"I've saved all of us, though I don't expect Draco to be grateful for it."

With that, he freed Draco.

"You fornicator of Merlin's beard! How dare you!"

Draco ran out of the room and headed down the stairs. Only a moment later, Hermione heard a scream that would haunt her conscience for many nights to come.

Chapter 14: Draco

Chapter 15 of 23

Things are not going well for the young Malfoy...

Draco:

A POP! woke Draco from what had been a fitful night's sleep, made possible only by sheer exhaustion.

"Master said I should wake you. Master said you might be hungry."

Draco tried to blink the confusion out of his eyes and failed, for standing in front of him was a house-elf.

The frizzy hair of fur that had shared his bed last night—*how far a Malfoy has fallen!*—rose to stare at the house-elf curiously.

"Do you have a name?" She asked with more politeness and respect than a lowly house-elf deserved.

"Master calls me Treedy."

Suspecting he knew the answer, he asked, "And who is your master?"

"Professor Snape! And Master will be very angry with me—yes he will!—if you and the lady—" Draco smirked at Granger being addressed as a 'lady'—"have not eaten by the time he returns!"

The opportunity to mock the Mudblood was undeniable.

"Surely since the 'lady' and I have shared a bed, we can dine together?"

A deep, wonderful blush rose on her face as she attempted a verbal parry.

"You know as well as I do that neither one of us had any choice in the matter!"

Treedy had begun frantically pacing. In a moment, Draco suspected the dumb house-elf would begin banging his head against a wall. Hermione must have noticed as well, for she sighed and nodded at Treedy.

"Yes, let's eat."

Another POP! and a table full of food appeared. Scrambled eggs, bread, bacon, pancakes with maple syrup, even a modest serving of eggs Benedictine... no doubt this came from the Hogwarts' kitchens. *Well, at least the food here won't be too bad.* With another pop, two chairs appeared.

"After you, 'my lady.'" Making her blush was too easy and was quickly becoming a new guilty pleasure. They sat down and ate their breakfast in silence. New guilty pleasure or not, there was no way Draco was going to stay here, in this dung heap, with a Mudblood and a traitor. If he could find a way to escape, and soon, he should be able to convince his father and the Dark Lord of his loyalty. And with Severus's double betrayal—of him and the Dark Lord—he had no qualms now about whose side he was on. As terrible as his father could treat him, the Dark Lord offered him power, and that was what Draco desired most of all... *Even more than Severus*, he tried to convince himself.

Yet for now, he had no choice in the matter: he'd watched in horror last night as Severus had bound him to the Shrieking Shack, just as his father used to bind him to his room for punishment. He knew there was no way to break the spell, at least no way for him as the victim. Perhaps, though, the spell could be broken by someone else?

He looked at Granger thoughtfully. Though she was a Mudblood, he knew that her intelligence was a rival for his own. He felt sure she was smart enough to break the spell, but also knew that she was likely inexperienced with Dark Magic. This began a fervent discussion in his head:

But perhaps if we work together, we could find a way?

Work with a Mudblood? Have you gone mad?

Do you see another way out of this? Would you rather we try our luck with the house-elf?

At least his blood is pure!

This is the only way and you know it.

Even after convincing himself that working with Granger was his only chance of escape, another doubt surfaced. Would she be willing to work with him and betray Severus? He remembered Granger arguing with Severus last night: "You can't make him stay here by force!" He remembered the sullen look on her face as Severus had berated her and ignored her protests. A searing heat of rage rose as he remembered Severus kissing her.

Oh, yes, there is a way to convince her to help me... And it even comes with the additional benefit of revenge!

They had finished eating now; and Treedy, bowing low, disappeared, taking the table with him. Severus had still not returned from wherever he'd gone. Time to set this plan in motion...

"Does he always treat you like a house-elf?" His voice oozed kindness worthy of a Hufflepuff even as his stomach turned at what he was doing *it's the only way*.

She looked at him with obvious surprise.

"Well, no, usually he treats me well..." Her voice faltered, giving Draco the chance he needed.

"So, he only treats you like this when there's someone watching?"

"Are you implying I deserve better? You who just last night were so quick to insult me?"

Careful. She's already suspicious.

"You may be a Mudblood, but you're too intelligent to be relegated to the tasks of house-elves... especially since he had one at his beck and call already."

Suspicion still danced in her eyes as she looked at him, but after a moment, she nodded reluctantly and sighed.

"I must admit that I was taken aback by his behavior towards me last night... After he kissed me, I..." She looked at Draco again and he nodded with encouragement. A moment later, she continued. Outwardly concerned as he listened to her petulant tale, inwardly he was beaming.

This might be easier than I thought.

Chapter 15: Severus

Chapter 16 of 23

How will Severus make things right again with Hermione?

Chapter 15:

Severus:

It had been a long, long night for Severus. He had hoped that Draco would agree to staying with him and Hermione, and when he hadn't... What he had done to Draco tightened his throat. But what choice had there been? If he hadn't trapped Draco at the Shrieking Shack, Draco would have become nothing but Lucius's pawn in battle, or the Dark Lord would have been told how he tried to protect Severus. He did what he did to protect Draco!

And what gives you that right? What right do you have to force Draco into hiding?

His obligations as Draco's teacher and Head of House popped up as excuses; but if he was supposed to be protecting his students, he certainly wasn't doing that by fleeing Hogwarts. No, the truth was that Draco mattered to him. He was willing to do anything to protect Draco, even if that meant losing Draco's affection.

And Hermione? What about her?

He winced inwardly as he remembered how he had treated her. She just... she had made it so much more difficult to do what had needed to be done. She had this tendency to make Severus feel like—and want to be—a better man. Usually, it was one of his favorite things about her: that he felt like a good person around her, not the person he truly was. But to do something he knew she would consider wrong in front of her... it had tested his resolve. Now he was worried she would never again trust him or look at him with that light in her eyes. Was there anything he could do to regain her trust, to make her hope again that he was a good man?

After he had finally managed to convince Hermione and Draco to sleep together in the Shrieking Shack's only bed—that had been more difficult than expected, considering how tired they had been—he had retreated down to the entry room below to think. First, practical matters: he needed a bed, they all would need food, and this shack desperately needed cleaning (a pang of regret stabbed him anew); and that meant he needed to contact Treedy, the house-elf Dumbledore had given him as a gift years ago. Treedy was all too eager to obey, leaving Severus with the more complicated concern of what he could do to make things right with Hermione.

Freeing Draco was not an option, but what else was there? He had already done all he could for the Boy Wonder. He was already doing all he could to protect Hermione, given that she had chosen to stay with him. What else could he do?

As if hearing an echo, Draco's voice calling Hermione "Mudblood" reverberated in his head. *Mudblood... Hermione's parents are Muggles... The Dark Lord needs no excuse to kill Muggles...*

He shot up quickly, the plan completely formed in his head. Summoning Treedy again, he told him what he needed and sat down again to await his return. Within moments, Treedy had returned with the address of Hermione's parents.

It was twilight before Severus managed to find the right house, after spending hours walking through street after street. Once there, he spent his time putting up as many defensive wards as he felt could go on the house without calling undue attention to it. He wanted to protect the Grangers, not make the Dark Lord aware of them. By the time he had finished, the neighborhood was beginning to wake up. He was about to Disapparate when someone cleared his throat.

"Excuse me," the man said, "but what have you been doing to my house?"

Flabbergasted, Severus turned around to see Hermione's father standing in his bathrobe, confusion and concern furrowed in his brow.

"Mr. Granger, I am Professor Snape." He wracked his brain thinking of anything he knew about Hermione's parents and came up with nothing. "I have some news regarding your daughter. It would be best if we spoke inside."

Nodding brusquely, Mr. Granger led the way. Once inside, Severus found himself explaining to Mr. Granger that, while his daughter was quite safe, he and his wife needed some extra protection.

At this, Mr. Granger's look of confusion became overwhelming as he asked, "From whom?"

"From Voldemort. Surely—"

"Who?"

Muggles and their blissful ignorance.

When it became clear this was going to take much longer than expected, he excused himself for a moment, claiming he needed to use the restroom, summoned Treedy, and asked him to give Hermione and Draco breakfast.

As Mr. Granger began to understand the vulnerability of his position, his face grew pale. Severus did his best to reassure him that what he had done to the house would make them much safer, as long as they stayed within its walls, but Mr. Granger was inconsolable. Finally, when all of Severus's helpful suggestions had been exhausted, Mr. Granger's face lit up.

"And you, then? You must be a powerful wizard. Couldn't you come round once a day to check on us and make sure we're alright?"

With a groan that just managed to be inaudible, he replied, "Very well. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

Finally able to leave, he Disapparated back to the Shrieking Shack... where he was immediately accosted by an irate, but beautiful, Hermione.

Chapter 16: Hermione

Chapter 17 of 23

Severus has returned, but can Hermione forgive him?

Chapter 16:

Hermione:

It had been her intention to confront Severus with the way he was treating both her and Draco as soon as he returned. It had been her intention to let him know that it wasn't going to be tolerated, that she wasn't going to allow him to force Draco to stay here with them, and that she wanted to know whatever it was he would have told Draco about her had she not been in the room. Severus's voiced echoed in her mind:

"First, you betray me to the Dark Lord instead of asking me what was going on. Had you asked, you would have known that—" Severus stopped short here and looked over at her. "—in any case..."

What had he been about to say? What is he not telling me?

Those had been her intentions. And when Severus Apparated into the bedroom, she had rushed up to him, letting her anger and irritation flush her cheeks. But instead of chewing him out like she (and Draco) had planned, unplanned words streamed from her lips.

"Where on earth have you been, Severus? How dare you just leave me like that, with no explanation, just leaving me to worry!"

Where did that come from?

He stood there staring at her with an unreadable mix of emotions decorating his face. Then the faintest rays of relief sank into his cheeks, and he actually smiled at her.

"You think a smile is going to calm me down? I want answers, Severus!"

His smile broadened even more as his lips parted in reply.

"I've just come from visiting with your father."

The anger froze. *What? My father? What was he doing there?*

"Draco was kind enough to point out your heritage last night, and that made me realize how vulnerable your parents would be, should the Dark Lord learn of their whereabouts... And with me gone from Hogwarts, that would only take a matter of time."

I can't believe I didn't think of this... Of course Voldemort would try to use my parents as bait! Why didn't I realize this before?

And then, fear.

"Are they safe? Tell me they're safe, Severus!"

He nodded happily.

"They are quite safe. I've warded their house. As long as they stay within its walls, they will be safe. Your father persuaded me to check on them once a day, which I will do. I've also taken the liberty of warning them not to allow a certain blonde-haired wizard to come in, no matter how genial or polite he may appear."

Draco suddenly cleared his throat, which reminded her of their agreement. But her anger was melting away with each word that Severus spoke.

Misunderstanding her silence, Severus continued, "I hope this has made amends between us for how I treated you last night, Hermione. I was not right to speak to you in such a manner... and I promise not to make the same mistake in the future."

That was all she needed to hear. Relief flooded through her. He was the man she thought he was. He cared about her enough to spend, by the exhaustion grounded in his face, all night trying to protect her parents. He was man enough to apologize when he made a mistake. She ran over to him, wrapping her arms around him.

"Thank you."

A somewhat-muted gagging noise came from Draco, and the certainty she'd just felt cracked. Still wrapped in Severus's arms, she raised her chin towards Severus, determined to keep her promise to Draco.

"And what about Draco? Are you going to apologize to him and let him go?"

His body stiffened, revealing the answer before he opened his lips.

"No. He won't be safe outside these walls."

Draco's voice piped up behind her.

"I'm allowed to make that decision for myself. I'm not the child you think I am."

Pulling herself away from Severus, she searched his face for the justification behind keeping Draco prisoner.

"You will not be safe outside of these walls. I could not bear for you to not be safe."

As much as she wanted to prolong the feeling she'd just had moments ago when everything had seemed alright between her and Severus, she had to speak up in Draco's defense.

"He's right. You've no right to make that decision for him."

In that instant, Severus transformed from being the Severus she knew and cared for into the fearsome Professor Snape.

"I am his Professor, and I do what's best for my student!"

A sneer sullied Draco's thin lips as he spat, "And was it best for me last year when I was down on my knees in front of you?" Shock roiled through her stomach as the meaning of his words hit her. "Was 'It is over' best for me? Was choosing a Mudblood over me best for me? You've only ever done what's best for you, and you know it!"

Severus's lips puckered with anger, but said nothing. Then, with a sigh, he said, "I've had a long day. I'm going to get some sleep. We can talk about this again later."

With that, he went downstairs, leaving her alone, again, with her conflicting emotions and the person who was indirectly the cause of all of them: Draco Malfoy.

Chapter 17: Draco

Chapter 18 of 23

Will Draco be able to break the curse binding him to the Shrieking Shack?

Chapter 17:

Draco:

Life in the Shrieking Shack was becoming almost bearable. After that first day, a routine had begun: Granger would flit between him and Severus like an indecisive fly while he and Severus did their best to ignore each other; and when Severus left to check up on Granger's parents, they would work on breaking the curse. Mudblood or not, it had taken her a very short time to discover the solution. It had been so obvious that his pride had flailed at not figuring it out on his own.

It was simple: the curse caused him pain while he was in the process of stretching its bound, but caused no permanent damage, physical or otherwise. All he had to do to break it was conquer the pain and walk through it until the bounds were broken. It was so simple and yet so elegant: only someone whose freedom was worth the pain could break it. He shuddered to think of all those days when he thought himself trapped in his room! He could have left at any moment, but he just hadn't been able to see how.

It sounded so simple, yet it wasn't. Each day when Severus left them alone, he would walk downstairs and start pushing the boundary. The pain would course through him, and he'd be just about to stop when Hermione would stand next to him, touch his shoulder encouragingly, and say, "I'm right here with you." Each day, he'd make it a little closer to the outside world. Step by step, the power of the pain to break him was diminishing.

Today would be the day, he was determined. Yesterday he'd made it almost to the front door frame. The doorknob had been within his reach. But the pain had overwhelmed him, and he had backed off, screaming in agony.

Severus left, as usual, at 1 in the afternoon. Breakfast and lunch had been routine: the house-elf brought their food, Granger and Severus argued about what to do with him, and he pretended Severus didn't exist, didn't still pull at his heart (and his loins...).

He was tired of being so easy to ignore and so easy to dismiss as a child. Today, he would break Severus's curse, thus proving to himself and to Severus that he wasn't a child.

Hermione looked at him, oozing encouragement out of her mud-colored eyes. "Are you ready?"

He nodded, and they headed down the stairs, together. It was routine now for Hermione to walk with him each and every step of the way. They approached the front door, the pain starting as soon as he was within sight of it. With each step, the pain increased. She squeezed his shoulder and then held his hand. He wanted to be repulsed, but he couldn't be anymore: the truth was that her encouragement and her belief in his ability to do this were the only reasons he'd come this far. Instead, he held her hand fiercely, as a lifeline.

The door was two steps away now.

Step.

Pain's too much... Can't think... One more step...

The world started to fade, his eyes misting to darkness and sounds receding from his ears.

"Enervate!"

A jolt of energy washed through him. Shaking the darkness from his head, he looked at Hermione with gratitude and managed to whisper, "Thank you."

One more step, and the doorknob was right in front of him. He reached for it, searing heat washing over his outstretched hand. Defeated whimpers escaped from his lips, still embarrassing him no matter how many times he'd done this in front of her.

"I don't... I can't..."

"You can."

She ran her hand down his arm, gently massaging away the pain. When her hand touched his, she pushed it forward, forcing it onto the brass knob. He felt his hand being moved by hers to turn the knob. The door creaked open.

And then, with the pain overwhelming his senses now and threatening to knock him down, she pushed him through it.

The pain stabbed in his chest. He couldn't breathe. He was going to die.

And then... nothing. No pain.

Ecstasy that coursed through him was released as laughter. She was laughing too, her hair bouncing with joy as each ripple of laughter came out of her lips.

Free!

Before he could stop himself or berate himself for what he was doing, he had pulled Hermione into his arms and kissed her exuberantly on the lips.

POP!

They jumped apart, the remnants of disgust trying to find a hold in his body and failing.

Treedy, frantic, didn't notice what he'd interrupted or seem to care that Draco was outside the Shrieking Shack.

"Master in trouble! Master ambushed! Master NEED HELP!" With another pop, a familiar wand appeared in Treedy's hand.

"Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger must save Master!"

And with that, the house-elf handed Draco his wand and a choice.

Chapter 18: Severus

Chapter 19 of 23

The tables have turned...

Chapter 18:

Severus:

Severus couldn't say he was entirely surprised to see Lucius in front of the Granger abode, especially not since Lucius was Headmaster now and had all the resources he would have needed. No, Lucius was expected. But Narcissa? No, he had not been expecting to see her, not with her natural disdain for murder... though from where he was standing, his wards still seemed intact.

"Severus! How kind of you to join us and save us the effort of locating you! It's a shame that I'll kill these Muggles regardless...", Lucius's famous smirk appeared as his voice dripped with false cordiality, "once your wards have... expired, of course."

Narcissa was shaking—from rage? *What is she doing here? What reason would she have to harm the Grangers? She's not even a Death Eater!*

"Lucius," he nodded as politely as he could manage. "Nar—"

"How dare you speak to me!" She brandished her wand as a weapon and began walking toward Severus. "You murder Draco and you *dare* speak to me?"

His eyebrows nearly shot off his head. *Murder Draco? Slytherin's snake, no wonder she's here!* His eyes narrowed suspiciously at Lucius, whose undeniable amusement confirmed his suspicions.

"Lower your wand, Narcissa. I have *not* murdered your son!"

"What reason have I to trust you? Your word?" Skeptical laughter cut through her lips. "As if any word from your twisted lips could be trusted!"

Joining Narcissa, Lucius added his encouragement. "Surely you can't expect my wife to believe Draco would have chosen to stay with you and that Mudblood whore?"

"Narcissa, please. This is between Lucius and me. I would rather not harm you." *This is ridiculous... How could she think I would ever harm Draco? After being with Lucius for all these years, can she still not see through his manipulation?*

"Oh, you'd rather not harm me. But I! I would enjoy *nothing* more than harming you!" Rage tarnished her once-beautiful features as she advanced on him.

The first curse bounded from her wand, followed too soon by Lucius's plethora of curses. Curse after curse he blocked and parried with his own curses, not knowing who to focus his attention on. Narcissa's style of fighting was unknown to him—to anyone!—and her fury only served to increase her unpredictability. And, as much as he tried to fight it, he did not truly wish to harm her. She had been a friend, had always supported his relationship with Draco even when Lucius didn't approve, and she was only fighting him because she thought he killed Draco. He couldn't blame her for wanting him dead! But this was a weakness, and he knew this weakness could get him killed. Hardening his resolve, he renewed his offensive against her.

Yet in the end, he couldn't stop his hesitation and was struck with the *Cruciatus* curse. As the pain flooded his senses, Narcissa easily obtained his wand.

Treedy will know what to do... Keep thinking that... Treedy will get help...

Over and over he repeated that, a mantra for his sanity.

POP! POP!

Help has come... but who? Two pairs of footsteps were approaching, but all he could see was the sky and Lucius gloating over him.

"If it isn't the most infamous Mudblood in England!" His heart leapt as he realized who one pair of the footsteps belonged to... and sank at the same time. *Hermione! I can't let Lucius hurt her...* Lucius's glacial voice interrupted his thoughts. "How brave of you to come to your dear professor's aid! Yet I wonder, did he ever tell you he was seducing you on the Dark Lord's orders?"

He heard her sharp intake of breath. He felt his own heart stop, suspended in this moment: the moment where he finally lost her.

There were two pairs of footsteps... Draco?

"YOU'RE ALIVE!" He heard Narcissa running and his wand fall to the ground.

"Of course I'm alive, Mother! Why wouldn't I be?" *How had he broken my curse?*

With all the distractions, the curse stopped and Severus forced his shaking body to sit up. Lucius was staring dumbfounded at his son and wife embracing. Hermione was looking at Severus with a veiled expression on her face. *She knows it's true. How can she care about me now, knowing I was doing the Dark Lord's will?*

Shaking away the aftereffects of the curse as best as possible, he picked up his wand and slowly stood up. Lucius was advancing on Draco now.

"How dare you choose that Mudblood and that traitor over your heritage? You'd give all that up, and for what? A Mudblood whore and a self-serving chemistry teacher? No child of mine..."

They all stopped and stared at Lucius. They all knew what was coming.

"*Crucio.*"

The curse hit him directly. His body shook, he began to whimper, and then his hand reached out to Hermione... and Hermione took his hand in hers, bent down next to him, and held him.

"Not-t-t-t a-a-ag-ain. Nevvver again." Draco's voice came up in stutters as each wave of pain shook him. Narcissa still stood frozen. Severus couldn't bear to watch him be hurt any longer. Mustering all his strength, he pointed his wand at Lucius...

But Draco had already raised his wand and had somehow managed to calm his teeth enough to say, *Avada Kedavra!*"

And Lucius crumbled. Hermione and Draco were still holding each other, filling Severus's gut with a pit of loneliness. Narcissa didn't seem to know what to do. For once, he didn't either, so he made his way over to her.

"Draco's safe under my—" He stopped. He had been about to say Draco would be safe under his protection, but it was suddenly clear to him that Draco no longer needed his protection.

"Take him. You take him and you hide him until this is all over." He started to nod and then stopped.

"I can't take him. That's not my decision to make."

In front of him, Draco and Hermione were struggling to stand, Draco still weakened by the curse he had weathered and the curse he had cast. Instinctively, Severus reached out to help him and stopped.

"May I?" he asked hesitantly.

Draco nodded, and he bent down to help. As the three of them struggled to stand, his fingers brushed Hermione's. He felt her fingers stiffen, but she didn't pull them back. *Maybe this can work out after all.*

"I owe you an apology, Draco, and you, Hermione. You were both right, and I was wrong. I'll understand if you're not willing, but I would very much like for us to continue our current living arrangements... but only if you are *both* willing."

He stared at them, imagining they would both tell him to leave them alone. But instead, he saw their heads nod their consent. He nodded curtly to Narcissa, who kissed Draco's head lovingly as farewell, and then he wrapped his arms around both Hermione and Draco and Disapparated back to the place that was beginning to feel like home.

Chapter 19: Hermione

Chapter 20 of 23

Back at the Shack, Hermione finally gets her questions answered.

Chapter 19:

Hermione:

Draco had collapsed onto the bed the moment they arrived. Severus barely fared any better. He had eyed the bed longingly and had started to head downstairs when Draco whispered, "Stay with me." She watched as he lay down on the bed next to Draco tenderly.

"Hermione, your parents... Voldemort will be able to take down my wards, if given enough time... Have them go someplace safe." Her thoughts were along the same lines, so she agreed to go back. It had not taken much convincing for her parents to realize they needed to leave. They'd watched the battle from inside, shaking with fear. She stayed with them until they were safely within the airport, told them she'd find some way to email them when it was safe for them to return, and then kissed them goodbye. Voldemort had no understanding of Muggle transportation, so she felt only the slightest worry leaving them.

When she returned, she found Draco sound asleep while Severus was sitting in bed, a pensive look on his face.

"It's true, isn't it, what Lucius said?" She was hoping he'd deny it, but her instincts told her it made too much sense.

Heavily, he nodded. "It's true."

"Then all of this, all we shared, it was a lie?"

"No. I... I'm not a good man, Hermione. All I wanted was to survive, no matter what the outcome of this war. I played both sides. I wasn't fair to you."

She felt her eyes water as she realized he'd just been using her.

"You never cared for me... did you..." Her throat tightened, preventing her from saying any more.

"Hermione... please, let me finish. Please."

She shrugged in response. *What else am I going to do? I've thrown away my life for you already...*

"The Dark Lord—Voldemort—he wanted me to seduce you to find out what Potter was up to. As I said, all I wanted was to survive... but the truth is that I wanted to seduce you as well, not to use you to find out about Potter, but because it's been years since I've seen an intellect as powerful as yours captured inside such a beautiful person. You intrigued me. I wanted to spend time with you. And the more time I spent with you, the more I began to care about you... It didn't take long, Hermione, before I was using the... Voldemort's... orders as an excuse to quiet the warnings my mind was trying to raise. I could tell myself I was just doing his bidding and that I wasn't..." She watched him pause, as if saying the next words were a struggle. "That I wasn't falling in love with you."

Stop. Everything stopped. He sat there, frozen with the words just off his lips. The room brightened and suddenly everything burst open within her all at once.

"You're in love with me?"

"Yes."

"Then... all of this... you..." She didn't know what to say.

"Yes."

She found herself in his arms before she could think of what to say. He held her, planting kisses all over her head.

"Then you forgive me?"

Nodding happily, she said, "Yes... And I have my own confession to make, as well. The private lessons were just a pretense to spy on you."

A snort, and then, "I figured as much."

Sometimes I forget how smart he is.

She kissed him back then, letting her lips trail over his hair, his forehead, and finally onto his lips. Nothing was hidden between them anymore; there was no longer any reason to hold back. She knew he loved her, and he—*Wait, I haven't told him I love him!*

Pulling apart from his happy mouth, "I love you" slipped from her lips as naturally as air. He hugged her tighter. Over his shoulder, the figure of Draco, still sound asleep, caught her eye.

"What about Draco?"

"I cannot deny that I care about him deeply..."

Startled, she realized he'd misunderstood her question... and that she felt no jealousy at his admission.

"No, no, you misunderstood me... I... well, I care about him, too. And I think he cares about me."

"If it were anyone else, it would bother me... but..."

"You don't mind that I also care about Draco? He, um, he kissed me earlier."

"No, I don't mind. And what about you? Does it bother you that I care about Draco?"

Surprised, she found herself shaking her head.

Then rose from the supposedly sound asleep body a voice, "What about me?"

Chapter 20: Draco

Chapter 21 of 23

Draco reflects and insists that a debt be paid.

Chapter 20:

Draco:

When they had returned to the Shrieking Shack—he could still hardly believe he'd made that choice, but... as much as he didn't want to admit it, everything he wanted, needed, was there—he'd been more than exhausted. He'd fallen asleep within moments, only waking up to the sounds of whispered voices later. The impact of what he'd done was just starting to sink in—*Slytherin's snake, I killed my own father*—and he needed some time to think about that. What surprised him, given his past loyalty to his family, was that instead of remorse, he felt only relief: relief to never have to endure another Cruciatus curse that his father "really didn't want to do," relief to never again be taunted or trapped, relief that it was all finally *over*—no more pretending he didn't care for Severus or Hermione, no more having to live up to his father's unreasonable expectations... no more torture, no more abuse.

With that, he started listening more intently to the conversation that was no longer just a conversation between her and him...*Are they kissing?* Memories of the last time he'd seen them kissing flickered through his mind, but the wave of nausea and possessive jealousy failed to appear. Instead, he felt a familiar warmth in his groin, remembered how eagerly she'd kissed him—*Okay, okay, how eagerly I kissed her*—and wanted more of that. And Severus! He had quite the debt to pay off, and Draco knew just what form of "payment" he'd ask for.

His ears perked as he heard his name several times. Curious, he stayed silent, pretending still to be sound asleep. But soon, the growing discomfort in his groin and his desire to have some fun with his would-be lovers made him speak up.

"What about me?" He asked, overly innocently.

The startled looks on both Hermione's and Severus's made him swell with amusement.

"How long have you been awake?" Hermione asked, the barest squeak of alarm tingeing her voice.

He snickered in amusement as he replied, "Since you got back."

Annoyance crossed her eyebrows, but Severus merely raised his. "Did you like what you heard?" *Leave it to Severus to notice...*

"Oh, most of it I found rather boring... It's just that I figured I should join the... conversation if you were going to be talking about me."

"I see. And that's the only reason?" Severus asked, smugly glancing at the obvious mound in his groin.

"Of course. What other reason could there be?"

Hermione was looking back and forth between him and Severus. Following Severus's gaze, the faintest blush colored her cheeks.

"What did you have to add to the conversation, Draco?" she asked, attraction obvious in her hungry eyes *How could she resist me, now that she... I can't take this anymore!*

"Only this," he said as he pulled her close for a kiss. Her mouth opened to his eagerly, and their kiss deepened. Pulling her down to the bed with him, he let his hands roam over her back, gently caressing the curve of her spine as it slid down to her buttocks.

"Ahem! 20 points from both Slytherin and Gryffindor!"

He felt the laughter spill up out of her mouth into his as he playfully pulled away from her.

"Jealous, Severus?" he teased.

Taking the question as an invitation—which it was—he leaned over Hermione to smother Draco's mouth, but Draco pulled back at the last instant, leaving Severus hanging with his mouth partially puckered.

"Just a moment, Severus. I accepted your apology from before, but I'm afraid you need to make it up to me. After all, I endured tremendous pain to save your life today."

Pensive, Severus asked, "That reminds me... How did you manage to break the curse?"

Squeezing her tenderly, Draco replied, "Hermione figured it out."

"I should have known... How was it done, then?"

She piped up, "It was simple, actually, once I realized the pain caused by the curse only happened during the action of stretching its bounds. He suffered no aftereffects, physical or emotional, from the pain. So... I realized the curse could be broken, if the pain could just be endured."

Respect reflected in Severus's eyes as he looked at Draco.

"You walked through that?"

"Yes... Enduring that pain also gave me the strength to break through the *Cruciatus* curse earlier." Severus nodded his understanding in reply. "But, Severus, back to the original subject at hand... Your repayment of a debt..."

"Of course, Draco... What did you have in mind?"

In reply, he merely pointed to his obvious erection.

"Ah. I think I might be able to help with that."

Severus pointed his wand at Draco's clothes, which flew off him, and lowered his mouth to his erection... Hermione leaned forward to continue the kiss that had been interrupted earlier...

And then, POP! from downstairs, and Treedy's frantic voice, "Master!"

Another POP!, and there was Treedy, interrupting his pre-climatic pleasure.

"Master! Master's plan worked!"

Chapter 21: Severus

Chapter 22 of 23

Severus's plan worked, but what was it?

Chapter 21:

Severus:

Severus removed his mouth from Draco's erection reluctantly and glared at Treedy.

"Can you not see that I'm in the middle of something, Treedy?"

The house-elf bunched his hands into fists, doing what Severus knew was an attempt to hide his punishment.

"Master said—"

"Treedy, how many times have I told you not to hurt yourself?"

He released his hands, only to reclench them. *It's hopeless: I can never train that instinct out of him, no matter how hard I try.*

"I am sorry, Master, but Master told me to come right away if He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named fell." *Now this news just might be worth the interruption.*

"My plan worked then, Treedy?"

"Yes, Master! Exactly as Master said it would!"

"Wait, Severus, what plan?" Hermione broke in, and he couldn't help but warm to the excitement in her eyes.

"You remember those extra vials of potion we brought with us, the first night we came here?" She nodded, and he continued. "I had Treedy give them to Potter, along with instructions as to its use, and hints as to its advantages."

Her smile spread from her face onto his and even onto Draco's.

Continuing his earlier questioning, he asked, "Treedy, is Voldemort dead, then?"

"He is! And, Master, he is the only one!"

Hermione piped up, "Harry and Ron, are they hurt? Is anyone hurt?"

"They are not hurt."

An exuberant scream of happiness broke from her throat as she reached for him. She flooded his mouth with kisses, seemingly oblivious to the confused house-elf who just stared at his Master. Reluctantly, he pulled away from her. He needed to be sure of what Treedy saw, because if this news was true... *If Voldemort is dead, then I'm a free man. No more hiding, no more lies, no more spying... If Voldemort is dead, I can be a good person... for her, and for him.*

"Treedy, may I see what happened?"

He nodded his affirmation. It was always tricky, performing Legilimency on a different species. But at least Treedy was a willing and familiar subject. He looked deep into his eyes, raised his wand, and thought, *Legilimens!*

Dobby suddenly gave a yelp and shouted, "Harry Potter is in trouble!" POP! away he went, and then the world shimmered as the trail was followed to the Gryffindor Common Room. All the students were gathered there, grouped by year, receiving whatever instruction the haggard professors could dole out under such circumstances, and there were Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley, talking fervently with Professor McGonagall. She nodded and he followed Dobby just outside Gryffindor Tower.

"You remember the plan, then, Dobby and Treedy?"

"You summon us again when you are closer, Harry Potter, and we say nothing, do nothing, unless you are hurt and needs help. We are to be witnesses to Harry Potter defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named!" Dobby was nearly bouncing with excitement.

"Right. Stay here until I summon you again." He consulted a piece of paper and then he and Ron drank from two vials of potion. Within moments, they faded into the wall.

Dobby paced restlessly until they were summoned again. When they were, they reappeared in a hallway near the Great Hall. Harry appeared from a wall and whispered, "Stay here and keep quiet!"

From the Great Hall came voices.

"Are you sure you want to do this, my Lord? Lucius—"

"—failed. Are you suggesting I am his equal?"

"N-no, my Lord, it's just—"

"Then hold your tongue!"

"You are not welcome here, Voldemort!" Harry's voice resonated from deep within a wall.

He and Dobby snuck up closer to the Great Hall, peering behind a column to watch.

"Where are you hiding, Harry? Have you no manners?" Voldemort's red eyes searched. He and Dobby fell back behind the column.

"Ah, there you are, Harry!"

He and Dobby peeked out again, to see Voldemort raising his wand at Harry, who was no longer in a wall, but right in front of one.

Dobby started becoming agitated, but he pulled him close and whispered, "We has orders!"

"I said, you are not welcome here, Voldemort. Leave. Now." Harry's voice was firm, even as Voldemort and the Death Eaters who had accompanied him turned their wands on Harry.

"Oh, no, Harry, I think you'll find you are mistaken. I am welcome here. It is you who are not."

And with that, Voldemort raised his wand, pointed it at Harry... who started back towards the wall... Avada Kedavra!" But Harry was already in the wall. The spell hit the wall instead of Harry and bounced back to strike Voldemort, whose body slumped to the ground harmlessly.

Severus pulled out of Treedy's mind and nodded his thanks.

"It is true. Voldemort is dead."

Draco and Hermione attacked him with such ferocity that he could only laugh.

A small voice piped up in the background, "Master? Is you coming back to Hogwarts now?"

Looking at her and at him, still completely naked—*How could I have forgotten how lovely his body is?*—he could only reply, "No, Treedy... I have some business to take care of here first. Tell anyone who asks that the three of us will return to Hogwarts shortly."

And with that, Treedy left with a POP!, and Severus, Hermione, and Draco fell onto the bed together, to continue what Treedy had interrupted.

Epilogue

Chapter 23 of 23

Culmination.

Epilogue:

Hermione:

She'd never felt such happiness before. To be loved and so wanted by the two most interesting, fascinating, incredibly attractive men she'd ever met: it made her whole body flush with excitement. Draco, still naked, lay on the bed beside her as they kissed, his tongue sliding in and out of her mouth like the mascot of his house. Severus had returned his attention to Draco's erection. It was almost too much to bear: she couldn't decide whether to focus on kissing Draco or to watch what Severus was doing to him.

As Severus sat up, Draco pushed her away and grunted his displeasure at Severus.

"I think it's about time we join you in your nakedness; don't you agree, Draco? Besides, there are more pleasurable activities we could be doing..." Severus's voice brought an aching to her area as she watched him casually flick away both his clothes and hers.

Lying there in her nakedness, she had but a moment to take in the spectacular sight of her Potions master in his full glory. Draco, from underneath her, pulled her on top of him, letting his hands explore every curve of her body. His erection pushed against her until she could no longer bear it any longer. She bent her hand down and guided him into her.

Severus approached her from behind, letting his tongue and his lips trail the arches of her back and neck. She felt a gentle nudge as his erection pushed against her second hole.

"May I, Hermione?" He asked, his teeth gently nipping her ear.

Draco chose that moment to start moving inside her, sending wave after wave of pleasure through her. She turned her head back, finding Severus's mouth eagerly waiting for hers.

The pressure against her second hole grew as he gently entered her. A moment of agony before the pain began to subside, and then she could only feel the dual pulsing of Severus and Draco within her.

They began to move as one, filling her with ecstasy until she could not contain it any longer. Spasm after spasm shook her, and cries of joy poured from her lips one after another.

When she began to have trouble maintaining her position, Severus gently pulled from her, and she rolled off of Draco. For a moment, they caught their breath, and then Draco climbed on top of her...

Draco:

The pressure to explode was nearly unbearable. He had never—*never*—experienced pleasure like that before, which shouldn't have shocked him so much since Hermione was the first woman he'd ever been with. And to feel Severus's cock pulsing so close to his own... He needed more, wanted more.

He climbed on top of her, letting his hands rest on her curved breasts. Her hair was splayed out under her—still furry, still brown, but beautiful. He pushed into her again, felt the wetness surround him before he began to move.

A familiar pressure prodded his hole hesitantly.

"For Merlin's sake, Severus, do it!"

Thin lips grazed his ear as he whispered, "Do what, Draco?" Pressure as the entrance began. "This?" Fullness flooded him, and he pushed into her harder in response. "Is this what you want, Draco? To be fucked by your Professor?" His cock lay twitching inside him, agonizing in its stillness.

"Yes!"

"Then say it. Say it so she can hear you."

"I want to be fucked by my Professor!"

And he was. The once-still cock began thrusting, harder and harder, rubbing his inside until he thought he would burst. Hermione moaned underneath him, reminding him of the location of his own cock. Within moments, he and Severus had found a rhythm: they pushed and pulled in unison until their cries of exquisite pleasure swelled in unison with their bodies.

His Professor, his own wondrous Gryffindor... he loved them both. He had them both. And they both, at that moment, had him.

Severus:

His penis ached for release, but he wouldn't let it. Not yet. Not until he'd had his taste of Hermione. He bit Draco's ear playfully and whispered, "Fancy a switch?" When he nodded, he pulled out of Draco, quickly cast *Scourgify* on his penis, and lay down next to the only woman who had ever truly loved him.

Her cheeks were glowing, her breath labored, and he watched her face as lowered himself onto her. Her mouth tightened as he entered her and then released a moan.

"Would you like me to move, Hermione?"

"Y—y—y—," She caught her breath, focused her deep eyes on him, and firmly said, "Yes!"

He began to move in her, gently, feeling the curve of her surrounding him. He let his eyes absorb every detail of her body: the rise and fall of her breasts, how her mouth opened and closed with each release of a moan, how her hands gripped the sheets underneath her as each wave of pleasure took her...

A bite at his neck pulled his attention from her to him. Pulling Draco's lips onto his, their tongues playfully battled. Draco entered his hole quickly, without holding back.

The pulsing of Draco's penis seemed to echo in his own, as if their two bodies were truly one. Within moments, the spasms of Hermione joined theirs. With each pulse, he felt it three times. With each thrust, he knew happiness. With each moan, he knew gratitude. And with each moment, he knew love.

All his plans, they could never have culminated like this. And when the final culmination happened, it was for all three: together.