

The Muse

by Scarlet Siren

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The Beginning

Chapter 1 of 2

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~ The Muse ~

One of the most useful skills in life, I've realized, is the ability to observe. To simply sit still and watch the mannerisms and actions of others, to refrain from taking action until the most advantageous moment and take what information you can from life and the people who surround you. You learn to read people as though they were mere pages in an infinite book. A fool will reveal himself as such in a matter of moments. It's useful information, sussing out the fools, but not a complicated art.

But most do not betray themselves as nothing so overt and are, though it pains me to admit it, crafty, scheming individuals. Easy to think that most people are imbeciles. Harder to believe they are much more cunning, more devious, than that. They look out for their own ends under the pretense of generosity. They play at being saints and martyrs, all the while stabbing all who surround them in the back. It's foolish to pretend that these traits are inherent only in my House. I've seen Hufflepuffs turn on their own while showing nothing but an innocent face to the rest of the world.

It's human nature, you see. It's as deeply ingrained within our makeup as the tendency to fit others into nice, neat categories. It makes us feel more secure, more superior. As long as you are able to pigeonhole others, you can build yourself up in your own mind as a more complex being. Slytherins are a cunning, untrustworthy lot. Ravenclaws are nothing but bookworms. You can count on Hufflepuffs to cower and offer blind trust, and Gryffindors are little more than glory hounds (though I'm inclined to think this last may be true). This is what we teach our children from the moment they enter into their education, the endless cycle of segregating and elitism that we propagate and megalomaniacs like the Dark Lord build their platforms upon. And there's a whole wide world outside of Hogwarts and its class-defining Houses, a whole lifetime of placing people into boxes.

I've been placed in such a box my whole life. Greasy git. Bastard extraordinaire. I'm cruel, unjust. Filthy Death Eater. Since adulthood, I've never been able to bring myself to care what others say about me, not after patiently living in the shadows since I could remember. You see, I know more about these same would-be tormentors than they'd like any other soul to know. I'm an observer. I can extract a person's true nature without their even knowing. I can smell a liar. I can taste deceit on my tongue. It's more than being an excellent judge of character; it's the true gift of insight. Not that Divination bollocks Trelawney spouts in a desperate attempt to appear useful and important, nothing so ridiculous.

This gift has served me well.

I stand in the middle of the dungeon room, Charmed sunlight streaming in from a false window, and mix the oils and grind pigments with a deftness no one has seen outside of Potions class. This is my escape from all the liars and fools, the one place where I can shed the mantle of spy and bastard and simply be myself. Where I can

create the truth I see for truth's sake, and serve no one's ends but my own. Deception may not enter here.

I add the burnt sienna to her hair, the golden highlights that meld seamlessly in honeyed tresses. I honor verity with every brush stroke, the pale peach of her back, the touch of black that make up her eyelashes. She is a demure beauty with eyes downcast, looking over one shoulder as she clutches a sheet loosely around her naked body. Innocent, yet secretive expression on her sweet face, rosy lips caught in a half-sigh. Shadows and light, always, like the multi-dimensional person she is.

If she ever saw this--if *anyone* ever saw this--losing my job would be the least of my worries. Archaic as our world is compared to the more progressive Muggle world, this is one area that has moved into modern times. Thou shalt not touch a student. My colleagues would never understand. The Wizengamot would never understand. Time in Azkaban? Most assuredly.

No one would ever guess Severus Snape, cold-hearted bastard, spends most of his days wishing he was nowhere else but here, in this studio, coaxing beauty from blank canvas. I doubt many would even think I know what beauty is. They see nothing but what's on the outside, more the fools they. There is more to beauty than surface. Had I been born with a perfect visage, I doubt I would have learned that lesson, thus I feel doubly gifted. Where others see a pile of molded bricks, I see the splendor of lost civilizations, generations of life and triumphs and horrors and perfect destruction. Where most would moan for sunlight on a rainy day, I see nature at her finest. For the grass is never greener, the flowers brighter, than when the sun's overwhelming rays are muted by the blackest of storm clouds.

No, no one would ever guess, and I like it that way. This is nothing I care to share, nor would I enjoy explaining myself to some gaping-mouthed twit. It's mine and mine alone. It calms the tempest within me.

Even that calm has betrayed me of late; it hasn't come without a price. I find myself exhilarated and appalled in turns by the form my muse has taken, the shape of a girl barely old enough to be considered a woman by the Ministry. A student. A Waterhouse, baby-faced know-it-all. My humiliation and shame are complete.

Yet I paint. I paint as though my soul depends on the completion of each piece, as though there is nothing else on this earth that matters. I think perhaps this may be so.

When had it happened? When had she become suddenly more than an annoyance, a persistent hand in the air, all buck teeth and bushy hair and grimace-inducing haughtiness? I'd like to know at which point I stopped wanting to throttle her with my bare hands and instead began to wonder what secret treasures she hid up her prim little school skirt. How the satin of her young thighs would feel beneath my hands, what it would be like to take her roughly against the cold stone wall of the classroom. How did she go from the bane of my Advanced Potions class existence to the subject of my all-consuming fascination?

Forbidden fruit, I believe is what the Muggles call it. And what ripe, luscious fruit it is.

My brush flies over the canvas painting an image of her that exists only in my most frantic imaginings. I am undone by the power of where my art takes me, creating this truth, this delicate cross between woman and child who is as oblivious to her damnable charms as the idiots who surround her. I no longer possess my own mind; the world narrows to this palette, this stretch of canvas, this piece.

Soon, I am finished. It takes me by surprise, as always. I step back and look at the work, satisfaction spreading from my belly upward. The curls are alive. The peachy flesh glows in the soft light I have created. Bed sheet covers all but the curve of her shoulder, the valley of her arched back, yet the sight holds more eroticism than nudity could ever hope to offer. She is perfection. This work is nearly complete.

Nearly. I pick up a smaller brush and paint in my slanted, sprawling script, *Hermione In My Bed*.

Now it is finished. When it's dry, I'll place it with the others.

Never to be seen.

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A knock. I glare at the offending door and wonder who is foolish enough to bother me in my office. Despite my less than flattering opinion of the twits who inhabit this school (and regardless of Albus' yearly reassurance that any student may seek counsel with their professors outside of the classroom), I've always thought that anyone with half a brain would know that they were... less than welcome in my private hours.

And yet the knock comes again, more timid than the last, as if the owner is losing his nerve.

"What?" I bark. This had better be good. The door pushes inward on creaky hinges. Pale hand grips the edge, flash of golden brown hair. It's her. She clutches a familiar book to her chest.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir."

That honeyed voice, almost too grown-up sounding for a girl her age. The nervousness on her face in direct contradiction with the natural confidence and poise of her posture. I've seen witches twice her age unable to accomplish such an air of dignity.

"Well? What do you want, Miss Granger? I've better things to do than sit here all day waiting for you to find your voice." Thinking of my studio, painting her in the dimness of this room. *Hermione On My Office Couch*.

She takes a seat. If I reach across the desk, I can touch her flighty curls with the tips of my fingers.

"It took some time, but I was finally able to track down a copy." She slides the book toward me, a text on experimental Potions I wrote for extra Galleons when I was in my sixth year of teaching. Only educators, Masters and die-hards would have use of such a heavy-handed tome. I was paid by the word, and it shows. I looked through my own copy a couple years ago and was surprised by the almost optimistic tone of my words, the excitement and vigor I felt for the subject. Time has faded my enthusiasm; after all, you can be talented at something and not love it. It shocked me to be reminded that at one time, I *did* love it.

I look not at the book she has pushed toward me, but at her face. She nibbles her bottom lip and doesn't look up. Innocent bashfulness clashing with a woman's poise. Extraordinary.

"If you're asking for some sort of extra credit, Miss Granger, waste another of your professors' time. Professor McGonagall or Flitwick, perhaps. It seems they can never receive too much superfluous work from their favorite apple polisher."

If I expect tears or silent anger from her, I am to be disappointed. She gives me a half smile and looks into my eyes for the first time since entering my office. "Actually, I was hoping for an autograph."

I feel my eyes widen slightly and her smile broadens. No one has ever asked me to sign before. Why would they? It isn't as though this is some sort of popular fiction novel. But I won't let my surprise show past my initial slip. I pick up my quill and dip it into the inkwell. Red ink, angry red, the red of corrections and fresh blood. "And how would you like it made out, Miss Granger?" I ask in my silkiest voice.

She leans forward. Her tone matches mine when she says, "Any way you like, Professor."

I pause, quill hovering over the book. What is she playing at? I scratch out a message on the inside cover, a message meant to deter further displays such as this one. What must she be thinking with her suggestive tone and boldness? I am overwhelmed with the need to ask her into my studio, to ask her to pose for me, to show her my works. It is this consuming need that directs my hand to write such a warning:

To Miss Granger, whose abilities in Potions are

surpassed only by her inabilities in the fine art of subtlety.

Professor Severus Snape

"You should have a care, young lady," I tell her as I hand the book back. "I don't think you understand what you're doing here."

She takes the book from me, reads the message, and smiles again. "I always take care, Professor. Haven't you been paying attention?"

She stands and leaves, back straight and not a flicker of fear. I cannot find my voice to reprimand her for her cheek, nor can I bring myself to verbally flay her for her blatant impropriety. Instead I stare at the door through which she just vacated and realize two things: Hermione Granger is indeed an expert at discretion, and I really don't know her at all.

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I can't make my exit from the Great Hall fast enough tonight. Albus insisted I have dessert with him, and I had to wonder how many treacle tarts one must endure in one's lifetime. This is what comes of giving creatures in servitude creative freedom, the reason old families like the Notts and Malfoys would never leave the menu up to their house-elves. They simply don't know what to do with that sort of leeway.

I, however, am no house-elf. I know exactly what I want to do, and it involves a blank canvas and a few horsehair brushes, no distractions. A new painting is coming to me, one I'm burning to get down in thick, rich color. The picture is clear in my head, and I sketch it while it's fresh; she's spread out on my office couch, my book propped up between naked thighs and one hand. The other hand rests lightly on her chin, its elbow resting on one thigh, head tilted in thought as she reads.

I study the rough sketch for a few moments and commit it to memory. My hands are restless, anxiousness bubbles through me from my knees up, and I know I will not sleep tonight.

I paint.

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She has passed through this classroom, and crossed my path, several times this week, but has never betrayed a single hint of what went on in my office. Perhaps she's embarrassed. Perhaps she's trying to prove that she can handle discretion. As for me, I can't decide which I prefer to be true.

Was I imagining things, making more of it than it was? No, impossible. Then what? In times of doubt I revert back to my tried and true, the one thing I'm best at. I observe.

I note that she's careful not to raise her hand in my class when I'm annoyed. I see that she has learned not to mother hen the Dunderhead Duo as she used to, but rather offers them a gentler, more subtle approach to counseling that proves more effective than her previous bossing about. It skirts a fine line on manipulation. I secretly applaud her for the skill and stealth with which she employs this talent.

She's careful, so careful never to look me directly in the eye. She never attempts to speak to me outside of class and reads a book as she walks through the corridors. I know nothing of her previous schedule, but I assume the Brain of Gryffindor was always a regular fixture in the library. She has a rather mundane routine: attending class, studying in the library, reading between classes and during meals, supporting her friends during Quidditch matches and taking advantage of Hogsmeade weekends. I've never seen her in the company of a boy after curfew, and I've yet to actually catch her doing any rule breaking this term. There appears to be nothing improper about her. She is the model student and obvious choice for Head Girl.

Except she isn't Head Girl, though not for lack of Hogwarts staff support.

Over the summer, I was less than pleased to be forced to attend an Order meeting while Arthur and Molly's brats (Potter and Miss Granger by extension) were staying at Headquarters. As new members, they were required to attend, a fact that grated on my nerves considerably. I couldn't ignore their presence with their constant questions, and I couldn't order them out of the room. When Minerva brought up Miss Granger's refusal to take the Head Girl position during the meeting, I was first surprised and then annoyed. What did it matter to the Order that the idiotic girl wanted to pass up on Head Girl? Who the hell cared?

Her answer was quiet, but said in a steady and clear voice. She thought with the inevitable war on the horizon, she may be dead within a few months and where would that leave Hogwarts? Who would take over her position? It would be better for everyone if they chose a girl of lower profile who would be able to perform her duties from start of year to finish.

I snorted. What a stupid, melodramatic reason. How *magnanimous* of her to think of what her loss would mean to Hogwarts. Who was she trying to fool? It was clear she just wasn't up to the task, or she wanted more time for her precious studies. I dismissed her reasoning as the talk of a would-be martyr, typical, egotistical Gryffindor behavior.

Now I'm wondering if I was wrong about her.

I notice things I couldn't give a damn about before I began painting her and things I refused to let myself see even after that. Distancing myself hasn't squashed my fascination with the girl, so I'll embrace all aspects of my muse rather than attempt to block her out in the interest of understanding my strange awareness of her, of course. And she's up to something with that book signing business. I can feel it.

Albus has always pestered me about paying more attention to the comings and goings of the thrice-damned Golden Trio. Somehow I doubt this is what he had in mind.

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Hermione On My Office Couch is finished. It is perfection. Soft candlelight envelops her form like a lover's caress, a warm embrace I'll never provide. Her finger grazes a full bottom lip I'll never kiss. Her eyes keep secrets from me. My own tome hides what I most yearn to see. The portrait seems to mock me.

I have a strange urge to pick up my wand and blast this painting to the bottom level of hell. My hand reaches inside the sleeve of my robes and wraps around the cool wood with the ease of long-practice. Her image seems to smirk at me, daring me to do what I will. I pull my wand out and point it at the painting. It shakes in my hand as though in protest of the task it knows I will appoint. Or is it my hand that shakes so?

My arm lowers. Destroy it? I'd easier chew off my own wand arm. Let it mock me; let its subject torment me.

I need a drink.

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I am priming newly framed canvasses when I hear the knock at my studio door. I glance around to make sure the finished *Hermione* series portraits are out of sight, then open the door.

"Tabitha," I say.

"Severus. Well? Aren't you going to invite me in?"

Tabitha is the only soul I've allowed into my sanctuary. Besides myself and Albus, no one else even knows about this section of the dungeons, and even Albus is clueless how to get inside. I step aside and allow her access. She walks to the center of the room, takes in the blank, drying canvasses propped against the walls and the fresh one on the easel.

"Working on anything new?" she asks. Her dry wit, among other things, is what has kept our friendship going for so many years. It's refreshing after spending Purgatory with students who know nothing but toilet humor, snogging in the corridors and the newest Quidditch moves. Some of the professors aren't much better.

She touches a finger to the wet canvas, clucking when it comes away coated in white. "Really, Severus, don't you know what drying charms are for?"

"You know I never use drying charms in my work. Ruins the integrity of the piece. Same reason I never use charmed paint to make them move."

She looks thoughtfully at an old abstract piece I painted a thousand years ago. "You never needed tricks to make your work alive anyway."

"So, to what do I owe the honor of this visit? It's been months."

"I know," she says, walking around the studio to look at the hanging portraits. "I've been busy."

"With the new gallery or the new husband?"

She stops and turns to look at me. "Why do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Inquire about my life choices in that disdainful tone?"

I lean against the wall and shrug. "He was never worthy of you, Tabby."

She snorts. "Is anyone? And besides, he's my ex-husband now."

"I'm very glad to hear it." And I am. "Had enough of living a lie, did you?"

She's silent for a beat. "Offer me a drink, Severus."

"I think that would be a bad idea," I tell her.

She glides up to me and whispers in my ear, "Just a drink, Severus. No strings."

I think about this. There never are strings with Tabitha, but I somehow always end up feeling like I've used her. There's something different about her this time, something almost desperate. I can't do it to her this time or to myself. "As lovely as that sounds, I think we should pass."

She steps back, anger and hurt written all over her face. I take hold of her hand before she can leave. "What's going on, Tabby?"

Tears well up in her eyes and she blinks against them. "Don't think you're doing me any favors. I could have any man in the Three Broomsticks. Or just about any woman, for that matter."

I still haven't let her hand go. "Then why come to me?"

She won't look at me. "Will you... Will you paint me instead, then? I think I just need to feel appreciated right now. You've always made me feel cherished, especially when you're painting me." I release her hand and it's my turn to look down. "Gods, I'm a mess," she laughs through tears. "Too much Muggle daytime TV makes you soft."

I smile and bring a hand up to her face. "If you want a portrait, I'll paint you, dearest." When she's ready to talk to me, she'll talk to me. I already have an idea what's wrong; this is her third failed marriage. Some people weren't made to settle down. Some people are just too free, too full of life to live in direct contradiction of what they are.

She smiles and asks me where I want her. I replace the wet canvas with a dry one and conjure a chaise for her to lounge upon. She begins to undress.

"No, wait," I tell her. She pauses and looks at me in question. Isn't this the way we always do it? her expression seems to say. "Sit here," I say and arrange her on the chaise. An idea has sprung into my head, a way to merge my current obsession with this new work and ease the idea of the Hermione series on my old friend. Tabby's clothing is all wrong, and I transfigure them into the flowing robes and gold arm bracelets of ancient Greece.

Perfect.

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It's a universal fact of life that whenever you dread an encounter or take pains to avoid a certain person, the Fates will push you face-first into the situation and plant their ratty heels into your back. So it should have come as no surprise that I would be in this debacle now.

It's not thirty minutes past dinner, and already my rounds have unearthed a most troubling and unexpected sight in the second floor corridor. Hermione Granger, facing off with Draco Malfoy with wand just short of poking him in the face. Potter and Weasley with their wands trained on Crabbe and Goyle, who return the favor. The latter pairs stand dead still, patiently daring their opponents to strike. The former pair encircle each other like a set of lions set to battle, wands never wavering.

I've had to deal with Potter's hot temper and Weasley's foolish proclivity for getting into pissing contests, but never anything of the sort from the ever-composed Miss Granger.

"Well, well. What's this?" I ask.

Crabbe and Goyle and the male members of the Golden Trio (I can't even think that name without a snort escaping from my lips) drop back and lower their arms, eyes still locked suspiciously on each other. Malfoy and Granger, however, do not end their predatory circling, do not even acknowledge my presence.

Whoever thought that putting hundreds of angst-ridden, hormonal teenagers in one castle and then giving them wands to harness and concentrate their powers was a good idea should have had their balls hexed off.

"Miss Granger, if you cannot cease this ridiculous display, I shall be forced to assign you detention."

Her eyes never leave Malfoy's, their endless circuit never quits. "Go ahead, Sir. I should think it'll be well worth it."

"Fifty points for your cheek, you insolent girl, and detention with me in one hour."

"What, nothing for Malfoy!" Weasley cuts in.

"You don't know what he said he wanted to..." Potter adds.

"Enough!" I turn to Malfoy and Granger. "Lower your wands before I'm forced to do it for you. Mr. Malfoy, return to your common room. Miss Granger, one hour. The rest of

you would do well to make yourselves scarce."

I walk away with the sounds of hot protests from Potter and Weasley at my back. Granger says nothing.

Damn it all! I'd planned to spend a quiet evening finishing *Tabitha and Hermione in the Garden* but now I'll be forced to endure the company of the one person I don't trust myself around in the privacy of the dungeon classroom, with no distractions. A disaster waiting to happen. I have no one but myself to blame. A heated disagreement with Filch over the punishment methods he decided to employ on one of my Slytherins ensured that I wouldn't have his assistance for a long time to come. I can't pawn her off on another professor without expecting them to reciprocate, most likely with some trembling first year who will flee the room in terror as soon as detention is up. I find I have less patience for these shrinking violets as the years go by.

So I'm stuck with her.

I finish my rounds early and make my way down to the studio. I'd like to have a little peace with the portrait before having to endure two hours of Miss Granger's exclusive company. Taking care to ward my chamber door, I walk to the ancient wardrobe in my sitting room and step inside. As a child I read a Muggle book a fellow classmate lent to me called *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*. Its blatantly Christian themes aside, I was fascinated with the concept of entering another world through something as commonplace as a wardrobe. When I began teaching here, I found I needed a portal into a world no one else could enter. After thinking on it, I decided a magical wardrobe would be just the thing. It took little effort to track one down and transport it down here, then enchant it's back to dissolve into a tunnel that leads to my studio once the wardrobe door is opened. Albus has access to my rooms in the case of an emergency, and knows of the large section of the dungeons I use, but doesn't know where to enter. Tabitha is the only person other than myself who knows how to get in. The wardrobe will open to no one but the two of us.

The painting rests on the easel, beckoning to me. I have no time to answer its siren call, but I do stand and study it. Brighter than most of my others. Tabitha lounges on a silken chaise that sits in the middle of a lush garden. Behind her stands a young woman with curly brunette locks, lovingly feeding her from a cluster of grapes. Hermione. Both are resplendent in the robes of ancient Greek aristocracy.

Tabby stares up at the young woman as she takes a grape into her mouth. The expression of entrancement is mirrored on her counterpart's face. They exude so much sexual tension it makes my face run hot. The tableau has a soft finish like everything is out of focus, ethereal. I decide at this moment that the title is all wrong. These women, in this enchanted garden, are not women at all. They are goddesses, one unashamed of her sensuality and one coming into her own. What will they do once the cluster of grapes is finished? Will the dance finally begin, robes slipping off their shoulders, rose-tipped breasts suckled? They yearn for each other, yearn to cross that threshold. My hot face burns hotter still thinking about it.

My fingers ache to pick up a brush, but there is no time. I must get going. Clocks don't belong in a place that is timeless, and no doubt Miss Granger has been waiting outside the classroom door.

The sooner I get this detention over, the better. For everyone.

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I watch as she minces the wormswart. Almost an hour has passed, we are alone, and she has yet to mention a single word to me about her strange visit to my office. Or any word at all, come to that. She feels my unwavering stare on her, no doubt about it, but never lets on it makes her nervous or uncomfortable. I had thought about making her write lines, ridiculously long ones that berated her display in the hallway with every scratch of her quill, but decided in the end to make use of a competent pair of hands and had her prepare ingredients instead. She has not faltered once in her task, no surprises there.

Dimples on that budding woman's face. Smooth, clear skin. Rosy baby cheeks so brand-new I can't stand it. Her hair, sienna shot with streaks of honey, is too thick to be contained by the elastic band she has twisted round the back in a messy knot. Rebellious tendrils curl around her fresh face, a face untouched by copious amounts of makeup. Mouth touched with the barest gloss, lashes swept lightly with black mascara. Maybe a thin patting of powder. Unlike many in her year, she doesn't feel the need to cover who she is with camouflage. Stunning, natural beauty shining through.

Gods, how can she not know how lovely she is?

I've overheard Draco calling her an ugly creature on more than one occasion, this always in a disgusted voice and followed by an affected shudder. The Malfoys have always ridiculed what they cannot have. I wonder if this might have something to do with the confrontation earlier.

She intrigues me, which may be why I bother giving her the chance to explain herself.

"So, what was it Mr. Malfoy did that warranted a duel, then?" I ask in a bored tone.

She looks up from her chopping only for a moment before returning to her assignment. "Draco Malfoy has an exceedingly foul mouth. It's clear to me he was never properly taught that most women aren't appreciative of his vulgar suggestions."

I snort at this. I can't help myself and find myself nodding my understanding. She offers nothing else in the way of explanation and finishes her chore with thirty minutes of detention to spare. As for myself, the past hour and a half has been somewhat informative. Miss Granger is indeed a young woman of maturity and prudence, something which makes me wonder what fit of pique inspired her to bring that book to my office weeks ago.

She waits for my next instruction in silence, eyes the color of brandy looking into my own. I am momentarily bewitched. I consider letting her go early after all, she wasn't the true guilty party but decide against it. This could be interesting.

"Is there anything else I need to do for you, Professor?"

Not a trace of suggestion in her tone. I'm surprised to find I'm disappointed. "So, Miss Granger," I begin in the same bored voice as before. "Planning on doing anything after graduation, or is marriage and family in the cards."

I wait to see if she's offended by the insolence of my question. If she is, she doesn't let it show.

"I haven't decided which subject to pursue just yet, but I can say that children are the last thing on my mind right now. There's plenty of time for that later, if I choose."

"But you're not opposed to marriage?"

She thinks about this for a moment. "No, I think a person will do just about anything when they've found someone they really love."

*A romantic. I never would have guessed.*

"Harry's planning on getting married in July, you know. Now that Voldemort's gone, I think he feels there's no sense wasting time."

I feel the sneer forming on my face. "Yes, I've heard. I'm sure Miss Brightman's parents are thrilled by the prospect of having the savior of the Wizarding world as a son-in-law. And the bride being such a tender age..."

"I suppose when it's right, you know. I don't really see what age has to do with it."

Very interesting indeed.

I wonder what she would make of the gallery I've made of her image not two doors away. Would she be repulsed? Horrified that her dreadful Potions instructor has spent

so much time, so much thought into studying her face and committing it to canvas? Or would she be aroused by the idea. Excited. Once again I am overwhelmed with the urge to show her through the wardrobe and ask her to pose for me like Tabby did a scant two weeks ago. Only this time, I wouldn't stay the hand that unbuttoned robes. I've sketched and painted her semi-nude form a dozen times, but have only had my imagination to draw from. Now I'm impatient to see the real thing, see how it measures up to the fantasy.

Detention is up. I dismiss Miss Granger Hermione and realize something as I watch her walk out the classroom door. I will show my work to her one day, even ask her to sit for me. It's just a matter of time.

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When one is trying to overcome what Muggles call a phobia, the general advice from non-professionals is to face the fear head-on. Acrophobes are told to ride a high flying contraption called a roller coaster or climb a mountain using nothing but ropes and pieces of forged metal. Claustrophobes are advised to place themselves in a small room, or wrap themselves tightly in a blanket from head to foot.

Wizards are born with no such phobias. We are flexible, superior and strong. We can be dropped from high altitudes and suffer nothing more than a hairline fracture. Mental tribulations are almost always the result of some charm or curse gone awry, otherwise a product of Muggle genes in the bloodlines overcoming a wizard's natural defenses. It's no coincidence that the only section of St. Mungo's dedicated to the mentally incompetent isn't called the Psychiatric ward, as it would be in a Muggle hospital, but the Spell Damage ward.

However, we do feel fear. Ask any of Voldemort's *faithful* servants. Ask their victims.

I feel that many fears are well founded. Most are in place to prevent us from doing something stupid. I'm convinced of this. Therefore, I will not jump into showing Tabby the *Hermione* series with all the finesse of a sixth-year Gryffindor on date night, even if part of me wants to do just that.

I've placed the portrait she asked me to paint (renamed *The Goddesses*) in my sitting room rather than ushering her into the studio where I've displayed each of the *Hermione* paintings. If she takes to *The Goddesses* well, I'll show her the rest. If not... well, *The Goddesses* was a mistake I'll be sure never to repeat, I'll tell her with all the sincerity I can fake.

A knock. I open the door to my expected guest.

"Severus," Tabby says and plants a kiss on my cheek.

"Tabitha." She flops down on my sofa. "By all means, make yourself at home."

She grins at me, then points at the cloth-covered easel in the middle of the room. "Is that it?"

Here goes. "Yes."

She grins again and walks to the covered treasure, fingers reverently lifting the cloth away. I turn to the sideboard and pour a Firewhiskey. My back is still turned when I hear her gasp.

"Oh, Severus."

She's studying it intently when I join her, eyes enraptured as they scan the painting. She touches her fingertips to Hermione's face. "She's exquisite. Who is she?"

I take another swig. "She's a student."

Tabby is silent for a moment. Time for a refill.

"The attention to her face is amazing. She's flawless, almost more real than real." She takes a moment to trace Hermione's face with a fingertip again. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were in love with her, Severus."

I laugh, and it sounds mirthless even to my own ears. "In love? No. I'm finding what I feel for Miss Granger even more disturbing than that. Obsessing over a student is a vile pastime."

I see the moment recognition enters, just after I've said Hermione's name. Yes, that's right, Tabby. The infamous Hermione Granger, one-third of the Golden Trio and a Daily Prophet favorite. Tabitha just stares at me. "Are there more?"

"Of course there are more." I show her into the wardrobe with dread and giddiness and mutter a *Lumos* to fill the artificial windows with sunlight. "Here they are, my perversion on display."

She takes her time looking at each painting. They are numbered and placed in order, from *Hermione's Emergence* to *Hermione On My Office Couch*. "Severus, these are remarkable. I think they're the best thing you've ever done."

I snort. "I'm glad you think so. Besides yourself, I doubt anyone else will ever see them."

"You mean she never sat for these?"

"No. She doesn't know," I say

A pause. "I think you should show her."

There it is, the permission I'd been waiting for but never realized I needed. My oldest and truest friend giving me the go ahead to do what I'd thought about doing since that night of detention in my classroom. I'll do it, I tell myself. I'll show them to her.

"And if she allows it, I think you should show the series at my gallery."

A spike of fear and excitement shoots through me. Dare I show them in public? "I'll never pass her off as someone else, Tabby. People know her. They know me."

She places a hand on either side of my face. "You *must* show these, Severus. The sensuality of these pieces, the realism and truth they can't just sit here gathering dust. They'll be more successful than anything you've done previously."

"Work I've done under a different name hardly counts, Tabitha. No one ever knew who I was."

"It's the way it had to be, considering your... former acquaintances. But these, these will be your coming out. Promise me you'll at least consider it, Severus."

I promised.

The Beginning

Chapter 2 of 2

"The past follows us like a starving dog trails a child with a tipping bag of sweets."

The Beginning

For an artist, life is about his craft. I've heard someone mention the phrase "starving artist" before, and from the context in which it was spoken, I'd say this person had it all wrong. An artist can live on his work, warm himself with the breath of life he infuses in each piece, fill himself with the fruit of inspiration. I'm not speaking poetically here. It truly feels this way.

His craft can also carry him through the best and worst of what the outside world has to offer.

I began, at the age of ten, to notice the beauty of art. After all, when there is so little of it in your life, it's easy to fall in love with the scraps you are thrown. The bird dropping-covered statue that stood in the square of the mostly British village where I lived. The sketch artist near the village green who'd lost his legs in the war against Grindelwald. The austere paintings in the manors of Father's associates. There was little to be found in my own home, a dismal place with perpetually closed draperies and amplifying charms on the floors and doors. It would never do for the neighbors to see what was going on inside, you see, or for you to sneak up on Father. In later years, I was able to appreciate the stealth those damnable charms had taught me.

Drawn draperies or not, there was little that escaped the attention of the people in the village where we lived--not that they ever cared, of course. This was no place for Wizarding aristocracy. The people who lived there were the hardened, the downtrodden. Outcasts. Indeed, even our small town was outcast, existing in the middle of the Black Forest where good little wizards feared to tread and wandering Muggles met unfortunate ends.

Father's favorite place was The Erkonig, a place that, thug for thug, surpassed the unsavoriness of the Hog's Head Tavern in Hogsmeade. He was in his element there. Mother and I were thankful for the reprieve; it meant that we could escape his watchful, hate-filled gaze. She'd retreat into the library to write letters to her sister and old schoolmates. I'd make my way to the village green.

"Wotcher, Sev'rus," Pelly would always say. Teeth missing in places, black at the roots of the few still present. His ancient, wooden wheelchair had undergone too many "Reparos" and not enough real repair. The smell coming from the man was enough that none but a small boy with no one else to befriend would dare come too close. Yet for all his physical faults, he could create miracles from his sketchpad and charcoals. I'd watch him for hours as he sketched everything from the ramshackle homes and businesses in the village to people I'd only read about in the history books Father made me read and things I've never seen before in my life. All the while I'd keep one eye out for the front door of The Erkonig. When I'd finally see the black-haired head of my father, I'd rush out a quick goodbye to Pelly and run home to warn Mother. There was just enough time to take our expected places and wear our "welcome homes" like a mask before he came through the door.

When I started Hogwarts, it was with mixed feelings. I was happy to be rid of the small village of Nifflheim, away from my arsehole of a father, but it was hard leaving Mother and Pelly behind. I missed watching Pelly's coals glide over the sketchpad, the feeling of peace settling inside my chest as I looked on. But more than that, I was worried for Mother. Eleven years old, and I was worried my father would finally kill her.

It didn't make for a smooth transition. The other students shunned, me and the ones in my own House were only civil because their fathers were associates of my father. Not friends; a man like Ariston Acacius Snape didn't acquire friends. He acquired business partners and acquaintances from whom he had something to gain. Even the foul wizards who bought him rounds at the pub were more his enemies than anything. It's true what they say about keeping your enemies closer.

I had not a single friend, myself. I was gangly and dark, it was well-known from the students in Slytherin who knew of me through our fathers' associations that I was given regular instruction in the Dark Arts. Father insisted upon it, and I never knew anything different until I came to Hogwarts and found that most wizards and witches found the Dark Arts...troubling. I was alone. Everyone outside my House was afraid of me, and those inside it felt they were beneath me. A noble Wizarding name and pure genes, but no money, no current prestige to claim.

I missed Pelly terribly. I missed the calm I felt as I watched him draw. It was this longing for my one and only friend that drove me to write Mother a short letter a month after start of term. Three weeks later, this was returned by owl:

Dearest Severus,

I trust you are doing well at Hogwarts? I could tell little from your letter, but I cannot imagine a reason that such a bright boy like you wouldn't be doing well. Things are wonderful here. Your father won a prize of five-hundred Galleons last weekend at the pub and has been most amiable! He sends his love and best regards to you.

Since we are on the subject of your father, I feel I shouldn't have to tell you that it would cause him displeasure to find that you're sending personal messages to me. The best time to send an owl would be Wednesday afternoons, after he wakes and before he attends to his business in the village. As for your friend Pelly, I know nothing new of him. Your father has quite considerably taken in a young witch by the name of Estella, who runs all the errands and keeps house, and there is no longer any need for me to leave the house. You see, dearest, he doesn't wish me to tire myself unnecessarily. Isn't that kind?

Unfortunately, I know nothing of coals and paints and other such things, nor could I send for them if I did. In place of these items you asked for, please find the small bag of Sickles and Galleons attached. I'm sure you can send for the things you need yourself. Your father would be most distressed to find this money has been misplaced, so please say nothing of it in your next owl, which, again, should be on Wednesdays.

Love and best wishes, dearest,

Mother

Despite the usual anger I felt whenever Mother was in her habitual state of denial, and my mistrust for Father's new "servant", I was excited. In my hand I held the means to reclaim a piece of what I'd lost, an opportunity to teach myself the very same craft Pelly had shown me was so valuable. I found the address of Calliope Arts, the sole art supplier of the Wizarding world, and sent them my order.

Oh, how to describe that first, euphoric moment when I was finally in my room alone with my package? It was magnificent. The rows of colorful pastels, the pure black of the charcoals. The possibilities within each box... I was overwhelmed. At the bottom of the box lay a sketchpad. I picked it up with reverence and showed it the same respect as I would show any ancient tome when turning its blank pages.

Blank pages. Blank canvas. Is there anything more seductive?

Using these treasures in the room I shared with three other classmates was out of the question. Then I remembered one of the disused classrooms I'd found in the

dungeons, just a corridor beyond dungeon five. It would be perfect. I cleaned it out and set up all my supplies on the largest workbench, careful to keep a Disillusionment charm on the entire unused corridor.

My fledgling efforts granted me all the solace and friendship I needed.

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When term ended for the year, I boarded the Hogwarts Express for the second time in my life. Mother, in her ever-delusional way, sent me an owl before Christmas and Easter expressing how busy I must be and wouldn't it be a good idea to stay at Hogwarts for the holidays and study. Over the summer, however, it was impossible to stay behind. Like it or not, I was coming home.

I dropped my trunk off at home and sought Pelly out straight away.

"Wotcher, Sev'rus!" he called out to me in his usual cheerful way. His oily hair, his unkempt and filthy clothing, his rattling wheelchair were all welcome sights. "Back from school, are you?"

"Yes, just back." I kept an eye out on the door of the Erkonig, just in case. Old habits are difficult to break.

Pelly noticed. "Looking out for that tosser of a father, are you? Well then, I suppose you haven't heard he's gone to London for the week. Everyone at the pub's been talking about how he took that girl what's been working at your house over to see her dying mum. Pretty little thing, too."

The rest of the evening was spent watching Pelly draw images from *The Odyssey* by gas lamp. I observed his style, took note of the fact that, unlike most wizards, he didn't use charmed coals unless he was commissioned by a witch or wizard who preferred the added effect. These drawings he made for himself didn't need parlor tricks to make them spectacular, would have made them almost obscene and ridiculous.

Like any good student, I paid attention.

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Father returned that Sunday, just as Pelly promised. The girl who was now in his service was indeed very appealing. I had to wonder if she was out of school by choice or because she was never sent in the first place. Not everyone can afford the tuition, or had the pride of a Snape to gather the money by any questionable means necessary. No son of Ariston Snape's would ever be an ignorant embarrassment to the family. This requirement did not extend, however, to the sixteen year old servant of the house. What did it matter that she couldn't perform spells above the perfunctory household level? What did it matter that she couldn't read when she could blush so prettily and beam with pleasure whenever Father complimented her on the smallest things?

Her presence grated on Mother's nerves, though I doubt anyone besides me noticed the subtle stiffening of her shoulders or the narrowing of her eyes whenever the girl started giggling. Or breathing, for that matter.

I was disgusted with my father. The man never spent a Knut on anything that didn't benefit him entirely, even when he came into his prize money. Bringing a paid servant into the house to do housework charms that had taken mother less than an hour a day was like replacing the entire contents of your wardrobe because you found a hole in a set of robes--an excessive and pointless waste. Father had never been one to spare Mother the trouble of performing any task before, no matter how difficult or unpleasant. It was quite clear what the girl was here for.

It was clear Mother knew, too.

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It was the second week of my summer "break" when I saw the sign in front of the apothecary's shop.

#### *Assistant Wanted*

Lycurgus Boswillig never took on shop assistants. I was without means to acquire more art supplies. This was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. And if it took me out of the house for most of the break, well then, that was just fine. I went home and waited for my father to arrive for dinner. In the meantime, I was carefully constructing a way to get him to agree. Coming out and asking permission would never do. Finally, I had an idea.

"Father?" I asked as he helped himself to more of Estella's overcooked steak and kidney pie.

His fork stopped just short of its destination, and he scowled at me when I didn't continue. "Well?"

"It's just that all my friends at school have lessons to occupy them over the break. I was hoping I might be able to take on the apothecary's assistant job at Boswillig's. It would be a wonderful opportunity to hone my skills in Potions when I'm not here learning from you." I said this last with great reverence in my voice, head slightly bowed in consideration of the greatness of my father and his teachings. Rather than the scathing rebuke I expected, and regardless of my little act, he threw his head back and laughed.

"Boy, if old Boswillig will take you on, you have my compliments and my permission."

Half the battle had been won. Now the only thing left to do was to convince a man of questionable character, who'd never taken on an assistant, to accept a child into his employ.

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Boswillig's was an ill-lit place where barrels of unpleasant potions ingredients sat at the foot of shelves upon shelves of jar-crammed displays. All manner of dead beasts under stasis hung from the ceilings amidst drying flora and herbs. The stench was overpowering. It was not unlike Slug & Jiggers Apothecary, except for the fact that one could find any number of illicit ingredients in Boswillig's shop, the sort of things a more reputable apothecary would never consent to sell.

Lycurgus Boswillig hobbled out from the back room and took his place behind the counter as soon as the door bell tinkled.

"What's this, then?" He barked. "Come to steal from me, is that it?"

I was taken aback, head shaking in mute protest.

"Well?" He accentuated his demand with a thump of his cane on the wooden floor. His eyes narrowed. "Eh, I know you. You're that Snape boy, aren't you? Well, tell your good-for-nothing father he's not to set foot in this store unless it's to pay his account off." He looked me up and down. "And that goes for you, too."

"Please, sir, I've come to inquire about the assistant's job."

The old man glared at me, quaking with anger. "Get out," he hissed.

I ran. Humiliation beat down on me hotter than the sun which streamed through the massive trees of the forest. Why would he have given me a job anyway? Father's reputation preceded me. I'd just missed my only opportunity to salvage this summer.

"Sev'rus!" Pelly called from his usual spot. I was shaking with fear and self-disgust by the time I reached him.

"What are you running from, lad?" he asked.

"Mr. Boswillig. I was going for the job advertised in the window, but he just told me to get out."

Pelly scratched his stubby beard with one, charcoal-covered finger. "He did, did he?"

"Yes."

"Let me tell you something about that old sod, Sev'rus. He's never been friendly to anyone in his life, so if you're expecting peppermint humbugs and a smile, you're going to the wrong place. But if you're serious about wanting the job, you have to go in there and *show* him you're serious."

I thought about this. Hadn't I already blown it by running away? Surely he'd never see me as anything but a frightened child now. But I took one look at the piece of charcoal Pelly was sharpening with his knife and I knew I had to try again.

"Thanks, Pelly," I told him, and headed back to Boswillig's.

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The place was more intimidating this time, if that was even possible.

"Back again?" the old man asked in a gruff voice.

"Yes, sir. I'd like you to reconsider hiring me as your assistant."

He glowered at me from his position behind the scuffed counter. "Yeah, well I thought I told you to get lost. I've no time for little tossers like you, coming in here like you know what's the what."

I looked around the shop, seeing that his search for an assistant was long overdue. "Please, sir, your Abyssinian shrivelfig is just about to go off and this barrelful of daisy roots you have here has molded."

Boswillig peered around me to look at the ingredients in question. He grunted in irritation. "What *do* you know about potions ingredients, boy?"

"Enough to know that if you don't get these ashwinder eggs into a stasis solution soon, they're going to be just as useless as those Jobberknoll feathers over there."

I started immediately that afternoon.

Mr. Boswillig told me that since I was half the size of a regular assistant, I'd get half the wages. I was delighted, all the same. By the end of the day I was sore from all the wandless lifting and cleaning, but I was earning money with every creak of my young limbs. I was also learning things as I went along each day, things I'd read about but never seen firsthand. The world of potions, always of interest to me, was like a mysterious universe I wanted to explore, to conquer. I was finding Mr. Boswillig to be a most fascinating, if not reluctant, teacher. I knew many of the ingredients from helping Father brew and my own experience from Potions class and reading, but Mr. Boswillig was quick to correct me about the more exotic ingredients and what they're used for. Well, he didn't want me to ruin his precious revenue, did he?

"Boy! Mind those willyneeter petals, would you? No one's going to want them in their Loving Death potion if you've gone and bruised them. Damnable, incompetent little tosspot," he mumbled the last, along with a litany about my parentage, appearance and intellect. Just another day at Boswillig's.

But it was all worth it that Friday, when he handed me my first wages. I walked home, coins shifting in my pocket with a satisfactory "clink" at every step. My legs ached and the stench of the shop was all over my body, in my hair, but none of this mattered. I had the well-thumbed catalogue of Calliope Arts memorized in my head, and now I could finally get some of the things I'd had my eye on for the last four months.

As it happened, Father came out of the pub at the same time I was making my way back to our dismal little house. He sneered at me and snatched my bag by the string, which hung out of my pockets. Once he was finished rummaging through its contents, taking what he wanted, he tossed the bag back to me.

"It isn't as though you took the job for the *money*, is it? After all, you're only working to further your *education*." He snorted and strode off before me. I seethed all the way home, glaring at his back the entire time journey, not for the first time, wishing a most foul and untimely death on him. I looked into the grubby little bag which had contained the fruits of my labors. Three Sickles and a handful of Knuts were all that remained. At this rate I'd never get that deluxe set of pastels I'd been looking at.

From that day on I learned to filter out some of my wages and hide them in my boot before leaving the shop. If Mr. Boswillig noticed, he didn't say anything.

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The little free time I had between lessons in the Dark Arts with Father and working at Boswillig's, I spent watching Pelly in the square. By midsummer, I finally had my coveted set of pastels and was content to dawdle away the precious hours I found here and there just playing with the colors.

It was one of the mildest days of the season when Pelly looked over at my sketchpad, eyebrows raised in amusement.

"What have you got there, Sev'rus?"

I don't think he really noticed what I was doing next to him all those days, or if he did, he never acknowledged it until that day. I showed him the picture I was drawing of the town's one and only attempt at art, the statue in the square, complete with moss and bird-droppings.

"It's looking good," he told me. The praise couldn't have meant more to me if came from the Minister of Magic. "Let me show you something..."

I absorbed the techniques he had to teach like a greedy sponge. The days became milder. It was almost time to go back to Hogwarts. In many ways, I was sadder than ever to go.

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The past follows us like a starving dog trails a child with a tipping bag of sweets. We don't have to love the dog to accept its presence, nor do we need to reach down and encourage it with pats on the head. I choose to block out my past. There is little good to be found there. Yet sometimes it's impossible to ignore that dog any longer. Sometimes that dog sinks its teeth into your leg and *forces* you to pay attention.

Whenever my past bares its teeth, I escape into my studio.

I've pulled all the *Hermione* paintings out of hiding, looking at them all in the order in which they were painted. *Hermione's Emergence* was the first piece featuring my unfortunate obsession. I'd been keyed up after that first Order meeting she attended, the one just before start of term. I couldn't get her out of my mind, that earnest expression on her face in the sitting room as she explained her decision regarding Head Girl. The vision of her in that slip of a Muggle sundress, bare feet with toenails painted wine. I lay awake that night, thinking the sort of thoughts meant for the darkness of one's bedchambers, the sort of thoughts one should never give away to another soul. Forbidden, lustful thoughts. Horror co-mingled with blissful forbiddance, propelling me into climax.

I remember waking well before dawn the next morning, prepared to put the whole incident out of my mind. I'm a man, after all, and these things do happen. In the apex of Voldemort's attempt to reign over the Wizarding world, there were more things to fret over than getting turned on by a nubile, young girl. Besides, what's a little stress relief

in the privacy of your own bedchambers?

This was a lie. Of course, it was true that in the grand scheme of things, my suddenly dirty mind was low on the list of offenses. The problem was that it offended *me*. I've never touched a student, never even *thought* about the little simpletons in such a manner. After two decades of attempting to redeem myself for past discretions, was *this* what I'd been reduced to?

Apparently so.

I didn't sleep that night. My mind was consumed with thoughts of her, my hands aching to prepare the oils. I could hear the scratch/pound of my paintbrush, could smell the turpentine and fresh paint. I was desperate to get to my studio, commit the image of her curled up in that chair in Headquarters to canvas. Anything, dear gods, anything to get the picture, the need, out of my head. I was haunted in the daylight hours and tormented at night.

I sat at my desk the evening before term, words on the lesson plan swimming on its ream and a bottle of Firewhiskey at my side. Drinking straight from the bottle, wishing it was next year already so I could have that girl out of my life forever. Doodles on a spare bit of parchment began to take shape, my traitorous hands sketching the outline of a woman. Unruly hair, delicate features.

I couldn't stop. I pushed the lesson plans to the side, not caring when they fell off the edge of the desk. Every detail was true to the image of her that night at the Order meeting, right down to the garish tapestry behind the chair where she sat and the moth-eaten rug beneath her. I dropped the quill and pushed away from the desk. My eyes felt as though they were too wide open, too surprised by what I'd done. Firewhiskey abandoned, rational thoughts gone.

I hurried to my studio, snatched a half-finished and pointless painting off the easel and placed a new canvas on the wooden frame. The lure, the desire, was indescribable. My hands shook; it was useless resisting. I mixed the media quickly and let my mind slip into that place where it goes whenever I'm painting. Sweetly blushed cheeks, tanned legs. She'd had sun this summer. Hemp necklace with shells around her neck, a gift from her parents vacationing in Jamaica, I believe I overheard her say to the Weasley girl. Her hair as untamed as ever, and a thought came to my mind: such unruliness from such a reserved girlit's as if some part of her is desperate to break free, some nuance of her soul needs to rebel.

The painting changed as I thought about this. A swirled, rusty background streaked with hues of crimson replaced the tapestry. She still sat in the same chair, legs folded to the side and one foot digging into the cushion. But the sundress slipped down a smooth shoulder, her head tilted seductively to one side as the tops of her breasts were bared. Her eyes held mysteries. Her expression made promises a girl her age should never make.

Amazing.

It was almost time for the Welcoming Feast by the time I was finished. Stepping back from the easel, I was caught by surprise by my own work. It had taken on a life of its own, as though I was nothing but a vessel to immortalize this young girl's emergence into a woman. I still remember the mingled guilt and satisfaction I felt when the students began pouring in and I watched her take her seat. More than anything, I was exhilarated. I hadn't slept in over 36 hours yet my heart beat wildly in my chest, and I ached to get back to my studio and begin another painting.

"My, don't the children look fresh and rested!" Albus said to me, then stood to give his annual start-of-term speech. Iciness spread in my chest. Children. A student.

I didn't pick up a brush again until after the Dark Lord's final confrontation four weeks later.

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There are six painting in total, but my eyes rest on the one painting that stands out above all the rest *War Omits Peace*. Black Death Eater robes blotch the dimly lit Death Chamber room in the Department of Mysteries like stains on a weak shadow. A tattered curtain hangs on an infamous crumbling archway, seeming to move with life on its own. Aurors and Order members clash with their enemies; Death Eaters defend their master with zeal. Adults who have lived lifetimes step back to allow three mere children to take their necessary place in battle. As ever, these children do not disappoint.

It is the pinnacle of Voldemort's fall. The professors from Hogwarts have separated the Death Eaters from the Dark Lord, leaving him exposed to Potter. Miss Granger and Ron Weasley form a semi-circle facing him, with Potter in the middle. They cast hexes with impunity as they push in on the dark wizard, whose back is to the archway. I've captured the moment I've savored since that day in September, the moment when comprehension blossoms on Voldemort's face that these children are driving him backward, to his death. The moment just before Potter finally blasts him through the veil with a powerful spell. If he is indeed immortal, let him be so in a place where there is no hope of escape.

Yes, this painting is indeed very different from the others. Yet even though there are many subjects in the tableau and the theme is one of war, the eye is still drawn to Hermione. The fluid sensuality of her stance, the fierceness on her face as she fires off another curse. The curve of her wand arm poised to fight, the slope of her neck, the wild curl of her hair. She's an avenging angel, and she *burns*.

Without realizing it, I'd even made this painting about her. After *Hermione's Emergence*, I'd vowed not to fixate on Hermione Granger ever again.

My vow was broken.

A/N: First of all, I wanted to thank you all for the wonderful reviews! I was floored, honestly. Now for a few tidbits about this chapter:

The Erlkonig: I've heard a couple of conflicting stories behind this name, but the one I favor means Elf King. For some reason I always think of it as the king of the dark elves. How appropriate for a pub where nasty little wizards gather. Of course, it's also the title of a poem by Goethe--one of my favorites, actually.

Nilheim is one of the nine Norse worlds. It's the world of the dead, a land of icy darkness. I thought it was fitting.

Ariston, Severus' father's first name, is derived from ancient Greek, meaning "the best." Acacius, his middle name, also comes from ancient Greek and means "innocent" or "not evil." It was also the name of three early saints, two of whom were martyred. I couldn't bear to choose between the two (Ariston has a nice ring to it, but Acacius holds delicious irony), so I present you with both.

Dungeon five: I don't read much about it in fanfic, which is strange since it's in canon. It suited my purposes, so here it is.

And last, Lycurgus Boswillig the apothecary. Boswillig, German, roughly translates to "willingly nasty." Appropriate?

Sorry to ramble. I don't really like long author's notes because I think they take away from the story, but I couldn't pass up a chance to explain the names I've chosen. Hopefully they enhance rather than detract.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank SusanDara and Southern_Witch_69 for enlightening me about how to use HTML tags. I'm a hopeless case when it comes to computers. You two saved this story from being lost on my hard drive and never posted.