

Consuming Me

by shellsnapeluver

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

No Longer a Student

Chapter 1 of 32

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

It was a warm summer day, and Hermione Granger was lying on the beach enjoying the sun beating down on her skin. She had finished her seventh year just a few weeks ago and was already missing her life as a witch. Well, most of it. She had been in the middle of the war on Voldemort and was glad to get away from that aspect, and at this moment, she was enjoying being just a seventeen-year-old, even though she missed her two best friends terribly.

Harry had moved into Grimmauld Place, and he and Ron started training as Aurors. Hermione had decided to take an apprenticeship with Professor Flitwick, but that didn't start until the new term, so she decided to take the summer off. She needed it after all.

During the past year, they had been trying to search for the remaining Horcruxes. Although they had been successful, Voldemort still could not be completely vanquished. Something else was keeping him alive, and the research to eliminate him for good continued on. Hermione and the boys were finally officially inducted into the Order of the Phoenix before the school year ended, yet on Dumbledore's orders, the three of them were to enjoy their last summer off and do the things that young adults should do before it was time to get back to their duties. So, Hermione came home and was now sitting on the beach, tanning.

Her favorite cousin, Jezzie, the only other family member who knew she was a witch, joined Hermione. Jezzie was four years older than Hermione and worked in a pub near Piccadilly Circus. She was tall, popular, and athletic, quite the opposite of Hermione, yet they were as close as sisters. Hermione wanted to include Jezzie in everything about her life. Besides Ginny, Jezzie was the only other female in Hermione's life that she could stand to be around.

"So, what happened after you broke it off with Ron? Was he really pissed?" Jezzie asked.

"Not really. We both agreed we were better as friends. He has always had a soft spot for Lavender, and I think he still loves her."

"And what about you? We must find you someone!"

"I don't need anyone. Not right now at least. Not with the war going on," Hermione said while she adjusted her sunglasses.

"That's still so strange. You... in a war!"

Hermione threw the bottle of suntan lotion at her cousin. "You know it's a serious thing!"

"I know, I know. But after everything you've told me, I still see you as my little cousin, and it's hard to adjust knowing that you are trying to kill that bastard."

"Well, for the summer, I'm supposed to be acting my age. But Harry sends me information when he can. Like last week, The Order was talking about--"

"Hold that thought!" Jezzie said, reaching into her large bag pulling out her mobile. "It's work."

As Jezzie took her call, Hermione watched the waves rolling in and out. It was an endless cycle, quite like the mess with Voldemort.

"Okay, sorry. I have to go," Jezzie said.

"What? Why? I haven't even started sweating yet!" Hermione complained.

"My manager's wife went into labor, and he needs me there to take over the pub. I hate to ask you this, but could you--"

"Yes, of course. I'll do a Side-Along Apparation to get you there quicker. Let's hurry and clean our mess up. But you owe me a day of doing nothing."

"Deal."

Together, the two young ladies picked up their beach belongings and hiked up the sand to behind a few beach houses where no one was watching. Hermione grabbed her cousin's arm and Apparated them to the alleyway behind Jezzie's pub. They quickly changed out of their beach attire in the loo, and Hermione bid her cousin farewell and Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

"What are you doing here?" Harry said when he opened the front door.

"Well, that's a lovely greeting for your best friend," she said.

"I'm sorry. Hi, Hermione. What brings you by?" he said, moving to the side so she could walk into the hallway.

"I'm bored."

"I knew that wouldn't take long. Well, follow me. Ron and I are back from our training and are starving."

"What else is new," she said sarcastically while following him down the dark corridor to the kitchen.

"Hermione!" Ron said around a mouthful of a turkey sandwich.

"She's bored," Harry said as he walked over to the stove.

"That figures," Ron grumbled. "She doesn't know how to relax and do nothing."

"Hey! I *tried* to do zilch at the beach with Jezzie until she was called into work. And there is nothing for me to do at home; my parents are working, and I miss you guys, so I thought you would enjoy a visit from me."

"Well, it's a good thing you came when you did. We've got a meeting tonight," Harry said, removing a pot of stew from the stove.

"Wonderful! It'll be nice to get some information first hand rather than reading about it from you... although thank you for keeping me informed."

After lunch, Harry and Ron showed Hermione what they had been learning in Auror training. Afterward, Ron left to go visit Lavender, and Harry took a small nap while Hermione made herself useful and tidied the house up and then sat on the large sofa and read a book that had belonged to Sirius' family.

She hadn't realized she had fallen asleep until she felt a warm hand on her arm, gently shaking her awake.

"Oh, Professor Lupin, hello," she said, squinting through her half closed eyes.

"Hermione, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Remus?" he said.

"Sorry, sir, old habits die hard," she said, sitting up and running her fingers through the mop on her head, trying to not look like she had been sleeping too hard.

"Sir is hardly necessary, either. When did you get here?" he asked.

"Earlier today. I just couldn't stand to be away. I know Professor Dumbledore said to not worry about things here, but that's not in my nature."

"We all had a feeling you wouldn't stay away for long. Did you at least relax a bit?" said an older voice from behind her.

She quickly turned to see Dumbledore standing in the doorway, smiling.

"Yes, sir. A bit."

"Good. Well, let's get started," he said, and Hermione and Remus followed him into the kitchen.

When she entered, she was kindly welcomed back, and she took the only seat that was available: across from Severus Snape. He was stiff, covered in black from head to toe, as usual, and smirking evilly.

What the hell is he smiling about?

The meeting didn't last long. It was more of an update of the various events that had been going on. Snape informed the attendees that Voldemort had been doing some traveling, but didn't know where to. Dumbledore discussed the new wards that were placed around Hogsmeade. Overall, Hermione wasn't too interested in the meeting. No, something else had her attention. It was that smirk playing along her ex-Professor's lips; it had unnerved her, yet she didn't know why.

"Hermione--did you hear me?" Ron said, nudging her ribs.

"Ow, Ronald! No, I did not hear you. What were you saying?" she said, rubbing her side.

"Are you staying for dinner? Professor McGonagall said our N.E.W.T scores arrived and are waiting in the other room. Harry and I thought we would celebrate together."

Hermione barely registered all that Ron was saying. She had leaped from her chair, pushed by the remaining members who were chit-chatting near the doorway and run down the corridor into the parlor. Sitting on one of the tables were three envelopes, waiting to be opened. Hermione quickly glanced for hers and pulled it from the pile, hands shaking.

She ripped through the envelope and opened the parchment. There were two letters, but she didn't bother reading them; she just wanted to see her scores. Flipping the front page to the back, she saw what she was looking for. Outstanding in all subjects. Ahh, relief--wait... that wasn't an O. She re-read her Potions grade. It couldn't be. No, there was a mistake... an Acceptable? *ACCEPTABLE?*

Hermione felt the world swirling around her; she couldn't breathe. Her chest was constricting, and the anger swelled inside her. This couldn't be happening.

"Something wrong, Miss Granger?"

Hermione whirled around on her heel. There he was, leaning against the door jamb and still smirking, no less.

"Y-you!" She held up the parchment that was starting to wrinkle under her tight grip and shook it at him. "You*knew* these were here! You*knew* this all through the meeting. This is why you had that look on your face! How dare you! Why did you give me this score?"

"I didn't give you anything you didn't deserve," he said coolly.

"Deserve!"

"Yes, Miss Granger, deserve."

Hermione was beyond furious. She had always been the one with top marks in her Potions class. He had always given her a hard time, but this was going too far. She knew she had aced his written and practical exam; brewing a Blood Replenishing potion had been simple and writing about the uses of different herbs and venoms had been a snap.

That nasty grin playing across his face had finally pushed her beyond being reasonable. She stomped towards him, wanting to escape the dark room as fast as possible. Then, she forcefully pushed past him and under her breath she said, "You fucking bastard."

Like a snake, he snatched her upper arms and pushed her back against the door.

"Get your hands--"

"Listen to me, Miss Granger," he growled, leaning closely to her ear, breathing hot air down her neck. "I am no longer your teacher. You are now playing in the real world, and I will not accept your defiant mouth any longer. You earned that grade, you spoiled brat. I am the only one at that school who saw past your sycophantic bullshit. How many times have I told you that regurgitating something from the book is a waste of time? The only reason you received an Acceptable was because your potion was just that, but your written work was something I wouldn't even wipe my arse with. And *that* is why you deserved that grade."

He roughly released her, shoving her backward into the door before sweeping back down the hall.

Hermione was still against the door, shocked. Then his words hit her. She had strived so hard to impress him all these years because he ~~was~~ the only one that she couldn't get through to and now--he just told her the awful truth; she wasn't the brightest witch of her age... She just knew how to recite facts.

She slid down the door, tears streaming from her eyes. She pulled her knees into her chest, buried her face, and cried.

"Hermione! What's wrong?" she heard Harry saying. She looked up, and he knelt down beside her and placed his hand on her shoulder.

"What's going on?"

"N-nothing."

"Hermione, you are such a poor liar; what's happening?" Ron said, sitting down next to her.

She exhaled deeply and held out the crushed parchment.

Harry pulled it from her hand and read over it. She watched as his eyes widened.

"Hermione... this is--"

"What?" Ron said, snatching the letter from Harry's grip.

"Bloody hell. That fucking git!"

"No. I earned it."

"*Earned* it? Hermione! He did this on purpose!"

"Perhaps," she muttered.

Ron scrambled to his feet, walked into the parlor, and grabbed his and Harry's N.E.W.T scores. Together, they opened theirs.

"Hey! Not bad! I have an Exceeds Expectations in Potions. See this proves it... He did this to you on purpose, Hermione. There is no way I am better at Potions than you," Ron said.

"He's right. I also got an Exceeds Expectations," Harry said.

"How about we appeal this to Dumbledore?" Ron suggested.

"No. These are final. I earned it. He even said so."

"What?" they said in unison.

She didn't want to explain the encounter she'd had with him, so she decided to just give a small account of the incident.

"He said that to you? You should have slapped him, Hermione!"

"What would that have done, Ron? It would just piss him off, and he was very clear that I was no longer his student, and he would treat me as such... meaning he will not hold back. I'm almost scared to think what he would have done if I had smacked him.

"Look, I've had a rough evening. I'm going to go check in with Jezzie and help her out. I need to get away from here for now."

Harry helped her to her feet, and she hugged both of them and walked away. She didn't bother saying her goodbyes to anyone else and slipped out of the front door, then Apparated back to Jezzie's pub. She leaned up against a brick wall, breathing in the summer's night air, letting it wash away the nightmare she had just left.

Severus was in his kitchen at Spinner's End, evil smirk still plastered on his face, as he made himself lunch. He was in a good mood. He just succeeded in making his most annoying student cry one last time. It was a perfect ending to seven long years with the bushy-haired know-it-all.

She was right though; he was a fucking bastard, and he *had* given her a grade she didn't deserve. In fact, her potion was brewed beautifully, and her written exam was perfect; however, she was friends with Potter. She was a Mudblood. She was a forbidden fruit that he desperately wanted, yet could never have. She therefore had to suffer like he did, and nearly failing her was a perfect answer to his problem.

Hermione Granger taunted him. He had never met any other witch who had the brains to equal his. He never had anyone challenge him the way she did. Yes, she was annoying, but nothing he couldn't fix. If he had any love in his black heart, he might say that he fancied her. But no, she infatuated him. He was obsessed.

In his eyes, she turned from a big-toothed child to a vivacious young woman.

Her curves haunted his dreams. He wanted her.

Her aroma was tantalizing his senses. He wanted to claim her as his own.

Her smart mouth calling him a fucking bastard. He wanted to break her.

The thought that a seventeen year old could cause him such agony was preposterous. *He*, the right hand man of the two most powerful wizards in the world. *He*, the ruthless killer; the man that would be handing over Harry Potter on a fucking silver platter to Voldemort could *not* be affected by this girl. But he was. And he was disgusted with himself, and her, for causing this nonsense.

He loathed her.

Today, however, he was ecstatic. He loved seeing the tears swell to her eyes. It only took a few sentences to crush her spirit. Oh, yes *this* was a good day.

Then his left forearm had started to sear.

"Fuck," he mumbled as he pulled his wand from his concealed pocket. Before he touched the tip of the wand to his Dark Mark, he cleared his head and suppressed anything that had to do with her. Then, there was a tug on his arm, like someone was pulling him. He disappeared into the night.

Within seconds, he was standing in front of his master. He quickly dropped to his knees and bowed. Only after he felt the heat of the Dark Mark disappear, did he know it was safe to rise and take his place. He stood silently in the circle, waiting for the other Death Eaters to arrive.

A chilly voice filled the air.

"Good evening. As you all know, I have been out of the country in search of ancient magic to use against Harry Potter. In my absence, some of your fellow Death Eaters caused a bit of a ruckus."

There was a slight stirring among the gatherers.

"When I am gone, I expect you to follow orders. Bradley, Zeller and Jenkins--please step forward," Voldemort demanded.

Three average sized men slowly walked into the center of the circle. Severus could smell the fear coming off of them.

"Care to tell your Lord what you did while he was away?" Voldemort mocked. Severus was aware that Voldemort already knew what they did, but the Dark Lord *did* to make them an example, and slow torture was his favorite. With a small flick of his wand, Voldemort made the black robes and silver masks disappear, leaving the three men in their undergarments.

"M-my Lord, please... we just wanted to prove a point," said Bradley.

"Ssso, you figured you would tarnish the reputation of being a Death Eater by killing several wizards outside the Leaky Cauldron without permission *and* in the middle of the day? You do realize we have strict rules on killing?"

"Yes, your Lordship. Our mistake," said Jenkins.

"Zeller, you haven't said much. Tell me--what was the reason for this insubordination?"

"They were ridiculing you and our cause. So, we did what we had to do, as you would have done," Zeller said, trying to redeem himself.

"Hmm. I take it you can peer into my mind and know what I am thinking and what I would do in that situation," Voldemort hissed.

The tone of his voice made the three men drop to the floor.

There was a deathly silence. Severus knew Voldemort was looking into each of their minds.

"I see what each of you are thinking; a Crucio attack, or worse. And you are wrong *I* am not going to punish you."

The three men looked at him warily.

"Severussss. Please come forward."

"Yes, my Lord?" Snape said, walking toward Voldemort.

"Junior Death Eaters do not take matters into their own hands without following my code. How easily they could have been caught in broad daylight... How easily they could have been forced to tell of my whereabouts. Did they think about this? Apparently not. Now, please show our supporters what happens when you do something as foolish as these three have done."

Severus smiled. This was a *wonderful* day.

Severus held his wand at the ready, watching the three men wince from fright; then, in one swift movement, he sliced his wand to the left; a silver metallic light shot from his wand and beheaded the three men kneeling before him.

The heads dropped to the ground with a *thunk*; the twitching bodies toppled over, and blood splattered everywhere.

Severus then conjured a post beam structure and stationed it in the center of the circle. A few flicks of his wand, and each head sat on the ground, blood drizzling onto it from the headless body that was hung upside down to drain.

"Anyone else wish to disobey?" Voldemort asked after Snape finished.

"Very well. At this time there is nothing new to report, except I will be leaving the country again. And this time, I do not want to have to come back and take matters into my own hands because I promise, the next person to step out of line will be punished by my own hand. And I will not be as gracious as Severussss."

With those final words, the meeting was over, and Snape Apparated back to his home. He stripped his Death Eater robe off, hung it in his wardrobe, and placed his silver mask inside a cedar box lined with black velvet.

Then, he walked into his bathroom, and with a snap of his fingers, hot water began streaming into his deep porcelain tub. He stepped inside and fell back onto the side, letting the sound of rushing water fill his ears and relax his mind. Snape tensed, thinking of his three fellow (former) Death Eaters. Pushing all thought of their gory demise

roughly aside, he began thinking back to his encounter with the girl and how it felt to finally be able to touch her.

To grab her.

To handle her.

As he thought more about placing his hands forcefully on her, he felt a spasm in his groin. An ache that needed to be touched. He slid his slender hand below the water and gripped himself, slowly stroking his cock, but after a few frustrating minutes, Severus removed his hand and gave up.

Damn it. I have to have her. I can't pleasure myself because I want more. She'll pay for this dearly.

Irritated, he stepped out of the bath, dried off. He then went to his cabinet, hastily threw on some black trousers and a black shirt, grabbed his traveling robe, and Apparated directly outside of Hermione's Muggle home.

It was after midnight, and although the house was dark, he knew she wasn't home. She always stayed up well into the early morning hours reading, and a soft glow would stream from behind the drapes. He had been coming here, watching her window and her movements in the house, for at least the last three summers. He knew her routine.

Of course, it was pure torture, the thought of watching her, yet not being able to touch her. Some nights, it nearly drove him mad. But not tonight. She was officially no longer his student anymore. He could do whatever he wanted and not fear losing his post at Hogwarts; spying had come first.

He had seen her inside her room several times when the curtains were opened and could visualize it completely. This was the first time he was going to try to Apparate directly into her boudoir. He closed his eyes and concentrated on his destination; then he disappeared and landed next to a white-washed vanity table; a place he had seen her sitting many times.

Being the efficient spy that he was, he looked around her room without touching anything. He read some of the papers laid out on her desk... mostly from Potter about The Order's efforts, then looked at the photos she had around her room... again mostly of Potter and that other annoying boy, Weasley. Before he had a chance to look further, he heard footsteps and muffled voices coming toward the closed door. He quickly Disillusioned himself, positioned his body in the furthest corner of the room, and waited.

The door slammed open.

"Well, Hermione, if you are *that* angry about it, take it to Dumbledore like Harry and Ron suggested. He can't get away with that; someone else could re-test you."

Complaining about our N.E.W.T grade, are we? And to this Muggle? I've seen her before, now I'll know who she is. Apparently she knows about our world!

"No, who cares about a grade when there are more important things going on?" Hermione said, falling back onto her bed.

Severus caught a whiff of her. It was the same honeysuckle that he smelled when he was so close to her earlier. He felt himself twitch under his robes.

"I'm just complaining. I mean, I've always respected him and defended him... how could he do this to me? Doesn't he know how bad I've always wanted to impress him and that it really matters what he thinks of me?"

I do now.

"Of course not," said the older girl, sitting in a small chair. "From what you've told me, he doesn't like you and from the way you sound... it's like you have a crush on Snape."

Hermione sighed, "No, it's not like that."

"Uh huh. Then what's it like?"

Yes, Hermione... do tell.

"He is the only person to tell me what he really thinks, even if it's not what I want to hear. I always thought he was the best professor for that reason because he would challenge me to strive harder, but when he said... those things earlier... it just proved that I was wrong in thinking that. He would only question my methods, not to help me, but to set me up for failure... for his amusement."

"Oh."

For a split second, Severus felt a twinge of remorse. She really did respect him. But it disappeared when she finished off by saying, "Well, it doesn't matter anymore. He's a prick, but at least he is loyal to our side; underneath all that blackness is a heart, and he's going to be one of the main reasons we win this war."

How dare she presume to understand his heart? She thought underneath it all he was SOFT? Well, he would show her differently.

"Well, I'm going to go. Thank you for Apparating me to and from London today," said the other girl.

She's Apparating this... MUGGLE?

"No problem, Jezzie. You know I would do anything for you. Lock up on your way out."

Severus watched the other girl gather her belongings and leave. He suddenly realized that he was stuck in this room.

Alone. With Miss Granger.

As soon as the Muggle left, Hermione walked around to the side of the bed that he was standing on. She sat down and pulled off her shirt, revealing her silk-covered breasts.

Severus was trying hard to contain himself. He wanted to pounce on her and rip off that black bra and devour the tantalizing nipples that were hard beneath the thin fabric. Then, as if she had read his thoughts, she reached behind her back, unfastened the hooks, and released her succulent tits.

Snape was now fully hard and aching to be released. He ran his slender fingers over his bulge, careful not to make any sounds. Then she stood and slid her jeans over her hips; Severus took this moment to run his eyes across her rounded bottom, wanting to reach out and squeeze it. She threw on a tight white tank top, crawled into bed, and turned out the light.

He was in a compromising position. Somewhere between removing her bra and pulling on her shirt, he had unzipped his trousers and started pulling on his member. He knew he couldn't go anymore, for he would eventually groan so loud that he would get caught--literally with his pants down, but he needed to release.

She wasn't asleep yet, but he didn't care. He removed the Disillusionment charm, still careful not to make a noise. Then, he took a step close to the edge of the bed and leaned over her. She must have felt a presence over her, because her eyes shot open.

Before she could scream, he snatched her jaw in his hand, silencing her yells. Her eyes were wide with fright, and she started to kick out, but he climbed over her body, pinning her to the bed.

"Stop trying to fight me, Miss Granger; you will lose," he sneered.

She stopped moving, and he watched the rise and fall of her chest; she was clearly scared.

"That's it. Now, if I remove my hand, are you going to scream?"

She slowly moved her head side to side, and he released his grip.

"W-what do you want?"

He dragged his finger down the middle of her chest and then over each of her peaks, moaning as he felt her nipples firm under his touch. "I want you."

"What? You sick bastard!"

Again he gripped her jaw, squeezing it so her lips were puckered, and she couldn't speak. "Don't call me names, Miss Granger. You will regret it." Then, suddenly his Dark Mark started searing. *What now?*

He knew he couldn't leave Voldemort waiting, but he wasn't going to leave her there, knowing that he almost took her. Oh, no... he would finish this another day, but he, of course, couldn't have her ruining his plans. He pulled his wand from his pocket and held it to her temple. She was shaking with fear.

"Oblivate!"

Then, he quickly Apparated to his calling Master.

A/N: Well, what do you think? Muwahahaha. Many hugs and kisses to Lariope, my beta. Once again, she has taken on the task of fixing all my mistakes (I have a ton), and I can't thank her enough for her time and patience with me. She is truly wonderful. I am also excited to have Lulabelle72 as my second beta! This is the second story she has done for me, and I am thrilled! Without her advice and Brit-Picking... well, I'd be lost. And--you will see this again on chapter eight, but I am going to say it here too--I just wanted you to know that I started this story and became stuck after the fifth chapter. I ran out of ideas. However, I read An Unreasonable Man by Lulabelle72, and I am proud to say that she is letting me use The Grotto in this story (read her story if you have no clue as to what I'm talking about), and without it, this fic would be sitting in my computer getting dusty. She is a huge inspiration. One more thank you goes to Chivalric. She gives me wonderful ideas and advice on my story, and I am happy to have her input on this, especially when she knocks me back to my senses! Thank you, ladies!

Require Your Assistance

Chapter 2 of 32

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

Hermione opened her eyes after several minutes of *atap, tap, tap* on her window. She rolled over to her left side to see Hedwig flapping around in the morning sky. She rose from the bed and massaged her jaw; it felt like she had been hit in the face. *Must have slept on it funny.* She unlocked her window and let the excited owl zoom inside. Hedwig settled on the rim of her vanity chair, held out her leg, and Hermione retrieved the letter. Before she opened the envelope, she took out an owl treat that she kept in a small tin on her desk and tossed it at Hedwig, who nearly swallowed it whole before flying away.

Hermione unrolled the parchment as she watched the owl fly off.

Hermione,

I know you left upset yesterday, but Ron and I would like you to come by this afternoon. We need to work on our research project.

We'll see you soon.

Harry

Tempting me with research--they do know how to get me to do something. Hermione placed the letter down and headed off to the shower, grinning. She turned on the water so it would warm up and went to the sink to floss and brush her teeth. She pulled out her floss from a drawer, unhooked a strand, and looked up into the mirror to do her teeth. She gasped.

"Crikey! What happened to my face?" she said reaching a finger up to her chin.

She turned her head slightly and saw a discoloration along her jaw. She lightly pushed in on her skin, but immediately stopped. *No wonder my jaw hurts! I don't remember hitting it on anything... Maybe I did it in the middle of the night. I probably just rolled over and hit the corner of my nightstand.*

She shrugged off her concern, finished flossing and brushing and showered. After she finished dressing, she went downstairs to have some toast and coffee. Then, she picked up the phone and dialed her cousin's number.

"I don't know what time I'll be back today, but let's just plan on meeting tonight at that new restaurant over by your pub," she said into the phone.

After she finished talking to Jezzie, she left a note for her parents and Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

"Hi, Hermione," Ron said as he opened the door. "Oy! What happened to your jaw?" Ron leaned forward to examine her bruised face more closely.

"I hit it on the nightstand. I took some healing potion for the pain, and the bruise should be gone by tomorrow," she said, pushing him in the chest so that he would get out of her personal space.

"Oh. Well, just to warn you, Snape is here. We didn't know he was coming... If you want, we can go in Harry's room and talk until he leaves."

Although she really didn't want to face him, she knew she couldn't hide forever. She was a Gryffindor, wasn't she? "No, I'll be fine. What's he doing here?"

"He said he had new information to give to The Order. Dumbledore isn't here yet, so he's waiting for him in the study. We just got back from training, and Harry's finishing in the shower. Want something to eat?"

"No, I just ate. Thanks."

As soon as they started off down the hall, there was another knock on the front door. Ron stopped and turned to answer it. It was Dumbledore.

"Good morning," he said, smiling brightly at Ron and her.

"Good morning, sir," she said.

"I believe Severus wanted to speak to the four of us in the study. Where's Harry?" Dumbledore asked, stepping inside.

Speak to the four of us?

"I'm coming, sir," Harry shouted from the top of the stairs. He came tromping down the stairs, gave Hermione a quick hug, and then the three of them followed Dumbledore into the study.

"Ah, Severus. Thank you for waiting," Dumbledore said, taking a seat across from him.

Harry and Ron sat on either side of Dumbledore, which left a seat open... next to Snape.

Hermione walked over to the chair as if nothing was wrong and sat down, careful to avoid his gaze. She would simply pretend he wasn't in the room.

"Why did you only want to see us?" Harry asked the tall man sitting next to her.

"It's about the Horcruxes. And I didn't want to involve the other members because they didn't know what you were hunting. I believe there might be another one," Snape said, sitting back into his chair and crossing his legs in a nonchalant manner.

"Interesting," Dumbledore said.

"Blimey, I thought our hunting days were over," Ron said, slumping back into his chair and crossing his arms across his chest, looking defeated.

"I was summoned very late last night, and he wanted to be sure I had a secure position at Hogwarts because I needed to guard something of his. He would not say what it was, just that he has something hidden there, and I'm to protect it. It would make sense that it's another Horcrux because he's still alive."

"Hmmm. Well, at least we have a location. You know I must ask you to find out what the object is, Severus."

"Of course. But for now, I'm sure it would be something along the lines of the others--something of importance to him. I figured our resident researcher could come up with some ideas. Of course, she'll have to come to the school and do an onsite exploration," he said, finally looking at Hermione.

She was fuming. How dare he suggest her for this! He had made it clear that her knowledge was worthless yesterday, and now, he wanted her to come to the castle during *her* summer break and do research?

"Hermione? Would you be willing to go to Hogwarts during the days and start researching? Or, would you still like to have the summer off?" Dumbledore asked her.

She didn't know what she wanted. But, since it was Dumbledore asking, and she hated turning him down, she said, "Yes, I could do that. The boys will be at their Auror training, so this will give me something to do."

The headmaster looked positively joyful at her acceptance.

It made her sick.

"Wonderful. We'll keep this a secret for now. Hermione, tomorrow, meet Severus here around noon. He will then bring you up to the school and go over your assignment," Dumbledore said.

Hermione finally turned toward Snape. The same smirk was playing on his face as he'd had the previous day before she found out her N.E.W.T scores. The same fucking smirk. And it wasn't the one he had used while they were in school. No, this smirk was devious. She could almost see the wheels clicking behind his coal black eyes. He was up to something, again.

Then, while she was staring hard into his eyes, an unexpected vision popped into her mind. It was very foggy and blurry, but she was remembering something--a dream perhaps. She saw Snape's eyes a few inches from her own. He was grinning, and then she felt a tingling sensation on her nipples, but as quickly as it had happened, it was over.

She quickly dropped her gaze and could feel the heat rising to her cheeks.

Did I dream that last night? That stupid expression on his face must have triggered something.

"Severus, I'll walk you out," Dumbledore said, rising from his chair and interrupting her thoughts.

Hermione watched the two men leave the room, and as soon as the door shut, Harry said, "Another Horcrux! Can you believe this?"

"Hermione, are you going to be okay working with him?" Ron said, looking actually concerned ~~for~~her rather than himself as he usually was.

"I'll be fine. But he's up to something; I know he is."

"I've been telling you that for years, Hermione!" Harry said.

Hermione leaned against the back of her chair, deep in thought.*Is he going to set me up for failure? What's his problem?*

"Hermione!" she heard Ron yelling.

"Sorry--I was just thinking."

"As I was saying, I thought we could continue looking up some different ways to make oneself immortal in different cultures," Harry said.

"Yes, Harry. That's a wonderful idea. We can do some now, but after tomorrow, I guess we'll have to do that after you guys finish your daily training and I'm done for the day at Hogwarts."

Since it was the weekend, Harry and Ron didn't have training. So, the three of them spent the day in Diagon Alley, replenishing any supplies they needed for Grimmauld Place and eating lunch. While Ron and Harry went to visit Fred and George, Hermione spent some time in Florish and Blotts.

Later that evening she left the boys and Apparated to the alley behind Jezzie's pub, leaving behind the warm summer air for the coolness of the pub as she walked inside.

"Hi," Jezzie said as Hermione approached the bar. "Give me just a second to finish up."

It didn't take long for Jezzie to finish her work, and the next moment, they were walking down the street, and Hermione was complaining.

"I can't believe he volunteered me like that, especially after what he said to me the other day!"

"Hermione, calm down. Who are you talking about?"

"Snape!" she shouted, stopping in the middle of the path.

"Ah... The one person who knows how to get under your skin--I should have known," the older girl said as she continued walking.

Hermione grabbed her cousin's upper arm. "Jezzie, I was supposed to have this summer off; I just did a year of hunting these horrible things and now... I have to do it again!"

"Well, Dumbledore was right; at least you have a location. And really, Hermione, you were getting bored not having anything important to do." Jezzie placed her hand upon Hermione's shoulder to try and calm her down.

"That's not the point," Hermione grumbled.

"What about the ancient magic you were looking up? Any luck there?"

"No. Harry wants to keep working on it, but it is going to be difficult when I'm stuck in the castle all day long and they are training. They get so tired at night, so I'm sure I'll be the one doing most of the research--"

"That's not anything out of the ordinary."

Hermione smiled. That was true. No matter how interested the boys were in the different magical techniques from around the world, they left the research up to her, and she would then teach them in a more practical sense.

"By the way, what happened to your face?"

"Oh, I've been getting that all day. I think I hit my nightstand in the middle of the night."

Hermione sat through dinner with Jezzie and then retired back to her room, still in a foul mood. Her senses told her that something wasn't right about the situation that she was going to get herself into, but Dumbledore trusted him, so she should, too. Right?

After Severus left headquarters, he went to his private home to start putting his plan into action. After gathering a few supplies that he wanted to take to Hogwarts, he went to his kitchen and poured himself a tumbler of Scotch, then settled down into his favorite chair in the only cozy room of his unwelcoming home--the library. The alcohol was smooth against his throat and sent a warm sensation throughout his body. A few more sips, and he could feel the tension in his body easing away.

Step one of Breaking Miss Granger is well underway. Devastating N.E.W.T scores? Check. Isolating her with me during the days so that I can destroy her mind? Check.

Feeling satisfied with himself, he finished drinking, staggered off to his room, and collapsed onto his bed.

She was late. She was almost an hour late! Severus was sitting at an old writing desk inside the study at headquarters, impatiently waiting for the arrival of Miss Granger. His elbows rested on the tabletop, and his hands were steepled on the polished wood. He knew this was one of his most authoritative postures--it communicated so much to the person on the receiving end--you've just pissed off an unforgiving Severus Snape.

How dare she make *him* wait for her! And hadn't Dumbledore asked her to be here by noon? It was so unlike her to go against her beloved Headmaster. He knew that it was because of Dumbledore that she agreed to work with him at Hogwarts in search of the Horcrux; she could never turn down the old man.

And here he was, sitting here, anticipating her arrival. He was utterly irritated. Irritated at himself because his betraying heart would skip a beat each time he heard movement from the hall, irritated that beneath the wooden desk his left leg was rapidly bouncing up and down ready to attack her the moment she walked through the doorway, irritated that as much as he would love to throttle the chit, he knew he was going to just let it go and play his role as a loyal Order member.

Patience, Severus. Be fucking patient with her--just until the time is right.

Finally, the door to the study creaked opened, and she poked her head inside and scanned the room before she caught him sitting in the dark corner where he was waiting with a nasty scowl on his face. By the look of her reaction, he had succeeded in communicating his feelings about her tardiness. She slipped inside, closed the door behind her, and walked toward him.

She stopped halfway.

"Ready?" she asked, like nothing was wrong.

"You're late," he said softly.

"Am I? Must have lost track of time," she said, shrugging her shoulders--eyes never leaving his.

Must have lost track of time!

"I'm waiting," she said, tapping her foot slightly.

This was why he was fixated on the girl--she would always do something that would shock him, and not much surprised Severus Snape. He had been sure she would come scuffling into headquarters, prattling on about why she was late and giving empty apologies, but here she was, proud chin and all, acting as if nothing would ever bother her--especially him.

She had left him astonished numerous times before, such as the time she hexed him in the Shrieking Shack, or the time she stole from his private store to brew a highly complex potion in the deserted girls' bathroom. The little-miss-know-it-all, the goody-goody, the bushy-haired twit, the bloody Gryffindor, would go and do something so completely out of her character that he would have sworn she should have been a Slytherin. He could never figure her out.

And to be honest, he really didn't want to.

That's why she was different from any other student he had taught over the years. He wasn't interested in getting involved with his pupils, and quite frankly, the very idea had disgusted him. But along came Hermione Granger.

She stood out from the rest. He thought intelligence equaled power, not blood status. In fact, the very thought that she was a Mudblood, who had the skills, power and knowledge of a pure-blood with years and years of training, had made her even more delicious. She cared more about magic than a lazy pure-blood. He, of course, had the best of both worlds. Being a half-blood was something he wouldn't trade for the world; he wasn't subject to the prejudices of one side or the other. And unlike Voldemort, Severus knew the value of the pure magic that radiated from a Muggle born--the drive to learn and master both the wizarding and Muggle worlds and use them to one's advantage. Of course, most Mudbloods were lazy, and he had never met one that had the brains to understand the importance of the power a person could have because of their knowledge that came from both worlds.

Until she had come into his life.

And his beliefs of lusting after a student and a Mudblood had been thrown out the window. He just had to have her. No matter the cost.

"Well, I guess you're not ready to leave; I will meet you at Hogwarts then," she said, jolting him back into the conversation.

"You will do no such thing. I will escort you as planned."

He rose up from behind the desk and walked over to the fireplace, removed the lid on a small glass jar that sat on top of the mantel, dipped two fingers into the jar, pinched some powder and then threw the tiny dust inside the burning fire. The flames instantly roared green. He put the lid back on and faced her. She strolled over to him and was getting ready to enter the Floo when he held out his arm and blocked her. She looked up at him.

"If you *ever* have me wait on you like that again, I promise, you will suffer by my hand," he said mellifluously, then lowered his out-stretched arm to let her pass.

She continued to hold his gaze, but was wide-eyed.

Ah, yes. I see that look in your eyes--you should be frightened of me.

And then she said, "Hmm--Severus Snape waiting like the obedient servant that he is and then using a spineless warning on me." She stepped into the fire and faced him. "You must be going soft. Hogwarts, Headmaster's Office!"

And she was gone.

His jaw went slack from the shock of her words.

He really ought to stop judging her.

He watched the flames dance around as they turned back to their normal color, and he could feel his own heat inside. His blood was boiling with rage. She had defied him twice in one day. Perhaps she was right; maybe he was turning soft. Well, he would show her. And what a clever witch she was, mouthing off to him mere seconds before finding a safe haven in the Headmaster's office. She must have known that her words would affect him and that he would have to wait a while before he could retaliate. What was worse, he hated knowing that she knew how to push his buttons. Little did she realize that she had just opened the door to a dangerous game.

A game he would win.

When he appeared in the office, she was sitting across from Dumbledore, laughing at the baby Phoenix that was hopping along the large desk, attempting to fly.

"Ah, Severus, there you are. You should have warned me you were going to be late, so that I wouldn't worry. Thankfully, Hermione sent me an owl over an hour ago explaining that she was running behind."

The minx. She had planned this. She wanted me to look bad. Why, though?

"My apologies, sir. I assure you I had no idea Miss Granger wasn't going to be prompt. I suppose it is too much to ask that next time, Miss Granger also send me an owl." *Great. Now, I'm the one making empty apologies. She will regret this.*

She looked at him with her dark, lying eyes and said, "You mean you didn't receive my message that I sent to headquarters? It must have been intercepted. No wonder you were so upset with me."

Oh, how she played that well. And the old fool would believe her, of course.

"You should have known something was amiss, Severus. That's not like Hermione to ignore a scheduled meeting. If you would have Floored me as soon it was obvious that something might have been wrong, you would have known that she was fine and was only delayed by an hour, and saved yourself from being overly concerned."

I am getting lectured--for something that she caused! As soon as we are somewhere safe, her brave little games will be coming to an abrupt halt!

"Yes, sir," he said, taking a seat next to the scheming brat.

Dumbledore picked up Fawkes and sat him on his perch; then he folded his hands and looked at them both. "Now, I have set up a small guest room for you near the Gryffindor common room. I'm sure you will want to have a place where you can gather your thoughts and feel comfortable whilst you are working hard trying to locate the remaining Horcrux. It's located to the right of the Fat Lady. Just tap your wand twice on the stones and state your name and a door will appear."

"Thank you, sir."

"You can use the fireplace to Floo directly into Severus' office, which leads off to his private quarters, if you need him. You can also come to my office and the infirmary. I'm usually gone during the time you will be here--being a Headmaster keeps me busy. I will also be visiting some other Headmasters and Headmistresses next month in order to gain insightful information in the advancement of this school. Just because we are at war does not mean I can ignore my duties to this institution. Other staff members are at their own homes, so that will leave Severus, Hagrid, Mr Flich and the house-elves in charge of the school that month. And there will be times that Severus will be... called away, so during that time, I would like very much if you could stay overnight here and watch over things--Madam Pomfrey doesn't stay during the summer, and there are times when... Severus needs some assistance."

The only assistance I will need from her will be using her as my personal--

"If that's all right with you, Severus?"

"Of course," Snape said softly.

"Yes, sir. Anything you need," she said.

"Wonderful. Well, I'll leave Severus to show you to your rooms, and you can go ahead and get started where you like. Do remember that the castle is full of magic, and things are not always what they seem. There are certain areas inside the building and around the grounds that are blocked off, but inform Severus, and he will see to it that you are able to enter freely. And I know you'll document all that you do; just be careful when handling anything that might be a Horcrux--you are too pretty of a young lady

to have a blackened hand like I do, or worse. Severus will be assisting you when he is not tied up with other obligations. And I will report any information that I come across to help locate the item. Well, good luck, my dear," Dumbledore concluded. Then, he smiled at the both of them.

"Thank you," she said.

Severus pushed himself out of his seat and started off toward the exit with Hermione on his tail.

He pulled the door open, holding it so she could pass through first, then followed her silently down the spiral staircase. When she reached the corridor, she turned and headed up the Grand Staircase to the seventh floor, and he followed her.

"You may use the kitchens as often as you need," he mumbled when they reached the landing on the sixth floor.

"Okay," she replied and continued climbing the stairs.

The air between them was tense. She must have sensed his foul mood behind his calmness. But did she know what was coming when he got her alone? Surely she must; she wasn't an idiot.

They reached the stone wall next to the portrait, and she faced him and pulled out her wand, ready to tap the stones. "Thank you for walking me here. I'm sure I can handle entering on my own," she said with a bit of uneasiness in her voice.

She's definitely not an idiot. She knows.

"I'm sure you can; however, it's my duty as your host to make sure all is well with your suite," he said, the tips of his mouth turned slightly upward, giving her a false impression that he was trying to be as chivalrous as possible.

He could see her knuckles turning white from her death grip on her wand. He noticed a small bead of sweat traveling from her hairline on her forehead, indicating her nervousness.

"Oh, I'm sure everything is fine. I'm just going to drop my bag off and do a walk of the grounds."

Severus dropped the act. He lowered his head, just enough so his hair curtained most of his face. His small grin turned upside down, he narrowed his coal black eyes. In his most dangerous undertone he said, "Open the door, Miss Granger."

He could almost see her begging from behind her eyes. She slowly faced the stone wall, tapped twice using the point of her wand and then stated her full name. The stone façade disappeared, and a red wooden door with a gold knob in the shape of an 'H' appeared. She held her wand in her right hand, and with her left, she slowly rotated the handle and pushed the door inward. He could see the nervous rise and fall of her chest.

Oh, yes, she definitely knows what's coming.

As soon as she stepped through the doorway, he knew the private wards were set and nobody around the castle would know what was happening behind that door--especially the Headmaster, who was known to stick his nose in places it didn't belong. She pulled her second leg through the doorjamb, and Severus struck.

With all of his might, he viciously shoved Hermione into the room. She went flying into the suite, shrieking with fright. Her neck snapped backward as her body fell forward, her arms grasped at the air for something solid. She stumbled over her dropped bag and hit the hard ground with a loud smack. Then, he heard the clinking of her wand as it skidded across the room.

He didn't give her any time to react. He swooped down onto her like an overgrown bat, yanked her head up by her hair, gripped the front of her t-shirt into his fists, and heaved her upward, but he heard the ripping of her thin shirt, and she suddenly dropped to the ground, leaving him standing there, holding the scraps of her fabric. She was wearing her black bra.

The one with the lace.

She started scrambling backward on the ground, screaming at him to get away. He tossed her shirt to the ground and saw her crawling toward her wand. He bent over and caught her ankles and pulled her across the floor, away from her only weapon. She screamed out in pain as the rough edges of the stone floor scraped across her exposed chest and stomach.

"GET OFF ME! SOMEONE--HELP!"

"No one can save you, Miss Granger!"

He dropped her squirming legs, and she flipped onto her back and started to kick at him. He could have simply used his wand to control her, but then again, that would be less exciting. He loved seeing her writhe in pain as he assaulted her. He stepped back to stay clear of her wild legs, and she took that as an opportunity to push herself over and onto her feet, where she took off running toward her wand. Snape ran after her and wrapped his arms around her body, tackling her from behind. The force of him seizing her caused both of them to lurch over the back of the sofa, bouncing onto the cushions, then slamming onto the cold floor. She yelped in pain as his weight fell into her small frame. He straddled her, pinning her body beneath his.

Her arms were frantically trying to push him away. "GET OFF!" she screamed. He snatched her wrists and pushed her arms above her head--she would never be able to push him off of her. Her breathing was erratic, and he was winded from the physical confrontation--she fought him hard. Now, she lay beneath him, incapable of doing anything else, but watch him as he nearly undressed her with his eyes.

Her pink nipples glowed beneath the black lace. Her creamy skin was scratched, cut and bleeding from him dragging her across the floor. A drop of sweat traveled down his hooked nose, then splashed down onto her forehead and onto the small lump that was forming. One side of her mouth had a small drizzle of blood seeping out of the corner.

"You brought this on yourself, Miss Granger. I did warn you. But you didn't listen. Do you think I'm going soft now?" he hissed.

"I--I'm..."

He clicked his tongue in disapproval. "And how dare you lie to the Headmaster about sending an owl and making me appear like the one who was running late. I have to say, that was sneaky of you."

"I wasn't lying! I *did* send you both an owl!"

Severus released her wrists, sat back on his knees, raised his hand up and swung it into her face *Smack!*

She groaned in pain, but before she could bring her hands to her cheek, he grabbed her wrists again and pinned her arms above her head.

She was shaking with fear and sobs.

"Miss Granger, stop crying. I don't want to hear it."

"T-then you shouldn't have slapped me!" she stuttered through her tears.

"Tell me why you were really an hour late!" he snarled.

"If you must know, I was late because I misjudged the small step outside headquarters that is safe from the Death Eaters that are camped out in front, and I slipped off, showing my presence! They attacked me! Just as you are now, but then again you ARE a Death Eater, aren't you? This is what you do!" she shouted.

"You're lying," he said, ignoring her truthful comment about being a Death Eater.

"No, I'm not!"

"How did you get away?" he snapped.

"I started Apparating in quick succession to several different locations that I was familiar with, and I was able to shake them off. I knew they were following me, and I was finally able to land correctly on the step, away from their grasp. I was so grateful that I hadn't been captured that I just stood there leaning on the door, crying. Then, I realized that I had dropped my bag along the way, and so I had to Apparate back to all the locations that I had visited while I was trying to escape. It took me a while to clear my mind so I could remember where I had traveled so quickly, so I went to Hogsmeade and sent an owl to Dumbledore and then one to headquarters explaining that I would be running late. Then, I started searching for my bag.

"*That's* why I was a fucking hour late! And as far as speaking to you the way I did--you deserved it, especially after what I had just gone through with your... friends! I told Dumbledore what happened, and that's why he reprimanded you! You knew I would be there at noon, and I never showed--you should have known something was wrong!" she yelled.

So, he had overreacted. Again. He usually lost control of himself where Potter or his enemies, such as Black, were concerned, but something in him had snapped, and he let it cloud his usually sensible mind. His entire plan that he had for her was damaged due to his brutal act. He had wanted to break her, mentally first, then physically, not the other way around.

Oh, well.

The affects that his body was having from his attack on her were worth it. The way he squeezed her between his legs--and seeing her lying beneath him, panting--it was such a thrill that he had almost ejaculated in his trousers.

Unfortunately, he couldn't sit here forever, and he needed to fix his small mistake.

He released her arms and in a low voice he said, "Miss Granger... I'm sorry." He reached into his robe. "I have some healing potions. Please forgive me." He pulled out his wand instead of a phial as he led her to believe and once again, muttered, "*Obliviate!*"

He planted several memories into her mind. He kept everything the same, except for his physical harassment. After they left Dumbledore's office, he made her believe that she welcomed him into her guest suite where they continued discussing the nature of her research and exploration of the grounds. He even went so far to make it look like they'd had a intimate chat about her attack from the waiting Death Eaters and how they had abused her, which would answer for the damage done to her body, and then he gave her some advice on how to land better on the narrow step.

He levitated her into her bedroom, removed her clothing and slipped her body between her sheets, leaving her only in her black knickers and bra.

And how tempting it was to take her while she was knocked out cold.

But, he couldn't. He had just performed some complex magic to her psyche and couldn't risk the effects her unconscious body would have on her mind if he sexually assaulted her. He *had* to refrain.

Well, mostly.

He had laid her on her back, and he just had to do something to satisfy his needs. He leaned over her body and buried his nose into her knickers and inhaled deeply.

Oh, gods. Again, he inhaled her scent. *Oh, fuck. What a succulent aroma! I could suckle on her nectar all day!* This time, he ran his tongue over her silky bottoms, wanting desperately to do more to her body. He reached to the top of his pants and unbuttoned himself, then slipped his hand down into his shorts, grasping his fully hard cock. He breathed deeply again, and faster and faster, he stroked himself. Then, he stood up, pulled his trousers and underwear to his knees, and leaned over her body where he continued to pleasure himself until he felt his balls grow tight. He moaned loudly as his semen shot out from the tip of his dick onto her naked breasts.

"Ah--yessss!" he moaned as he slowly ran his hand up and down his dick as his sexual high came to an end. Then, he used his wand to clean himself up, repositioned his clothes and before he vanished his mess that he had made on her body, he wrote four simple letters into his creamy mess: M.I.N.E. Feeling at ease, he walked out of her bedroom, used the Floo to get back to his office, then went into his private chamber and ordered dinner.

A/N: Now, I warned you this was a dark fic! Is your heart racing? I would like to thank Lulabelle72 for letting me use the part when Severus writes M.I.N.E into his... erm... mess... It's in her fic, An Unreasonable Man, and it completed this chapter nicely. Thank you, my dear. Again, massive thanks go to my beta and good friend, Lariope--who is the only person who knows my intentions of this story and puts up with my... creepiness. Also, thank you to Chivalric. Her suggestions come in handy once again!

Slytherin Tactics

Chapter 3 of 32

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

Many thanks to Lariope and Lulabelle72 who have given me endless advice and praise. I couldn't do this without their support and their beta work. Thanks to Chivalric for her comments and dealing with all of my 'then' words! Thank you, RedSkyAtNight, for taking the time to Brit-pick my madness--especially dealing with the word, 'figure'. Ha. Ha. I genuinely appreciate your hard work.

Hermione rolled over, brought the covers up over her shoulders and snuggled down into her pillow, desperately wanting to fall back asleep. But, as she lay in the bed for the next several minutes, she knew her body wanted her awake. Through narrow eyes, she flipped onto her side and looked at the small clock on her bedside table: nine twenty-three a.m.

"Oh, damn! I never sleep in this late--wait, why am I at Hogwarts and not at home?"

Hermione jumped from the bed, ran to the bench that sat in front of the footboard and quickly dressed. Panic was washing through her. She couldn't remember much of the night--couldn't even remember what happened after Snape left her room-- *Snape! What had he done?*

She finished lacing up her trainers and pulled on a pink vest-top that was sitting out for her on the bench--all her other clothes were from the previous day, except her shirt. All of a sudden, a horrible image came floating to the front of her mind. Her shirt had been ripped. Ripped by a Death Eater who had attacked her.

She shook the thought from her mind as she snatched her wand and stormed off to the sitting room. Quickly scanning the small room and finding nothing out of the ordinary, she walked over to the fireplace and Flooed to Snape's office.

He was sitting at his desk as if he had been waiting for her appearance.

"What happened last night? I was supposed to be at home... Nobody knows where I am!" she said, her voice rising higher and louder.

"Calm down. Potter and Weasley were informed that you were going to stay. They let your family know. After the attack you suffered from... the Death Eaters, we thought it would be best if you stayed here for the night," he said.

"So--so it's true then? I was attacked by Death Eaters. I had this horrible image of my shirt being ripped by some... some men, but I thought that it was just the remainder of my dream."

"Yes, it's true. I gave you something to help you sleep after we finished discussing your assignment, then you went into your room, and I left. Some of the house-elves have been checking on you all night."

"I--I would like to go home."

"Of course. After you have started your day's work. You were too tired to walk the grounds yesterday, so I think that's where you need to start," he said.

Hermione sighed deeply, but knew that she needed to get started.

"Fine, I'll just grab my supplies. I'm going to start at the top and work my way down," she said, turning on her heel and stepping through the Floo.

She found her bag sitting on the ground next to the sofa. She opened it, grabbed a Muggle notebook and a pencil and headed to the Room of Requirement.

She decided she was going to start with the most obvious and magical location she had known. She would tell the Room that she needed to know the locations where Tom Riddle had hidden anything.

But, it wasn't that easy.

The only thing the room would materialize as was the castle itself. Each time she asked, she would end up being outside the main doors to the castle. The landscape was the same; she could see everything just as if she were really standing outside. Then, she would open the door, and everything on the inside was the same. She even went up to the Room of Requirement inside the fake castle and asked the same question. Again, she was back outside, in front of the main doors. This became confusing for her, so she closed her eyes and willed the room to turn into the beach that she visited with her family down on the Cote d'Azur. When she opened her eyes, there was a blanket and umbrella sitting next to her. She settled down onto it, pulled her knees to her chest and watched the waves roll in and out.

"This is just the first day of your special project. No need to get a headache by already stressing," she told herself.

She let the sun warm her back a few minutes longer before finally deciding it was time to leave. She stood up, and a door materialized to the left of her. She went through and found herself in the hallway of the seventh floor.

"Well, first things first. I need a map. A map that will show me every room, corridor, staircase, passageway, statue, as well as any magical locations and anything else relevant to my search." She repeated this twice more, then opened the door to the Room of Requirement. Inside a small room, lying on the ground, was a folded piece of parchment. She picked it up and started folding and unfolding the pages--it was strikingly similar to Harry's Marauders map. It was a bird eye's view of the school and included Hogsmeade. She opened the page to the seventh floor and saw a small square room labeled, *Room of Requirement*.

"So, this is how James, Sirius, Remus and Peter created the map. And I'm sure they added their own special touches to it, such as a locating charm for each person who entered onto the grounds. What they forgot to do was show magical locations as *my* map does!"

Excited at her find, she turned and left the room.

It seemed that the castle did indeed have magic running through its walls. On the fifth floor alone, Hermione found three magical rooms, a hidden passage that took her directly to the Quidditch pitch and a portrait that swung open to reveal an alcove that was hiding several brooms that seemed to have been confiscated at some point in time.

She was surprised at how easily the map would reveal the magic of the room or corridor that she was standing in. Since there were no students at the school, having a locating charm like Harry's map had seemed useless. Except for having one on Snape. She attempted to charm the map to reveal his location, but nothing was working. She even went back to the Room of Requirement to ask for another map with a locating charm on him; however, the room didn't produce another map, nor would it adjust the map she already had.

She presumed that because she hadn't specified that special touch the first time, the room was not going to help her out. Disappointed, Hermione left the seventh floor and went back to her suite. She pulled out her notebook and reviewed her day's work. She made a list of magical rooms and what each of them did. Then, she made a list for corridors, then one for portraits. She also started putting a plan together. Every other day, she would explore the castle for its magical secrets and locations. On the other days, she would do research about the items inside the castle and would examine different objects that might be used as a Horcrux. With the knowledge she had of Voldemort and his chosen pieces that contained his soul, she thought she could narrow down the items in no time.

She had skipped lunch and looked up at the grandfather clock that sat in her suite: three thirty. She cleaned her papers up and used the Floo to enter Snape's office.

It was empty.

"Professor?" she called out into the dimly lit room.

Again, she called out, hoping he was in his suite, but when he didn't turn up, she decided to take this time and... look around. His office was a part of the castle. And wasn't she here to search the *entire* grounds? Surely, this meant his office as well. She walked over to the wooden desk and timidly ran her fingers across the edge, waiting for something to jump out and attack her for being so close to his personal items. The top had a few spare parchments, quills and ink wells lying off to one side, an intermediate Potions textbook was opened to page three hundred, and several opened envelopes; the top one had a golden crest in the corner and a large 'M' scrolled in the middle of it. She had seen this symbol before.

Malfoy.

Hermione tried to swallow the dryness in her mouth as she reached out for the letter, but she nearly choked due to the lack of wetness. She swiftly picked up the letter and peaked inside. It was a short note, written in green ink.

Severus,

Narcissa and I would like you to accompany us this afternoon for lunch. We will be hosting a small party in honor of your godson's return trip from the States. He said he didn't want a fancy dinner party as usual because he has plans--with a new girlfriend.

Lucius

P.S. Is she at the castle?

Hermione closed the envelope and laid it back exactly how she found it.

"So, that's where you've been all day while I'm here working!" she said as she crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the small table to the right of her. Then, she spotted something that nearly made her heart fall down to her gut. The files of his most recent ex-students were sitting in a small box. And hers was on the top.

Something inside Hermione was telling her that she needed to run. Now. But she had to know. She had to see what he had written about her--what type of comments he had made over the years. No--she couldn't do that, that would be wrong! She tried to turn away, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. She had to know.

She should have just left, like her instinct had dictated.

She reached out for her file and lifted the top open. The first page was a photo of her on her last day of school. It was from the waist up, and she was smiling and looking off to the left. Then, she would turn and slowly face the camera, blink once, hair blowing in the wind and then the process would start all over again. She hadn't known her photo was taken that day. She thought she looked stunning. Hermione never thought of herself as gorgeous, but the way she was glowing in this photo made her feel very beautiful.

"Why would he have a photo of me, though?"

She flipped to the file under her own: Lavender Brown--a girl most people thought was pretty. She opened it to find another photo. But this one showed Lavender shaking Dumbledore's hand, then waving to the spectators. She didn't look any different to how she normally did--in fact, Hermione was surprised to say that for once, she actually looked better than Lavender Brown.

She flipped to the file under Lavender's: Dean Thomas. Again, a photo was on top. It was the exact same picture as Lavender's, only it was Dean in the photo. She quickly flipped through the rest.

"Well, he's got one of all of us. I wonder if the other teachers have this, too?" she said out loud as she laid the files back into the box and returned to her own folder.

Her photo was the only one that was different. She looked at her picture again. She looked like she was glowing in the sunlight. The edges of the photo were crumpled more than the others had been--like it had been held one too many times.

"Like what you see?"

Hermione shrieked, snatched her hands out of the file box and looked up at the man standing across from the desk. He looked positively livid.

"I... I'm sorry, sir. I shouldn't have been--"

"Snooping?"

*You should have warded the door! You're such an idiot*She felt her cheeks burning with embarrassment. "Erm... Yes. I'm sorry. I came in here to tell you that I was finished for the day and wanted to go home."

She was trapped behind his desk and a wall. The only way to run out of the room was to the left of her, and all he had to do was take one step into her path, and he would have caught her. So, she stayed rooted to the spot. Waiting for his inevitable form of punishment.

And she was shaking with fear. She had been caught with her hand in the biscuit tin--but worse. Far worse. She couldn't blame him for what he did next. No, she had brought this all on herself. Her stupid, curious self.

He walked--no, slithered--over to her. With one long, slender finger, he touched her tightly squeezed fist, and then gently traced his nail across her skin, traveling in a wave-like pattern up her bare arm. The sensation was almost too much. The gentle, yet firm touch of this man, this wicked, demeaning man, gave her shivers that she never thought possible.

He felt her fear and was going to play off it for all it was worth.

"Miss Granger," he hissed as his finger traveled toward her shoulder and then swiped underneath her vest-top and bra strap.

She was sure he heard the hitch in her breath.

"Do you know what happens--" He took a long curl and started twirling it around his finger, dropped it, then traced over her top, across her back, just beneath her neck, to the other shoulder and continued playing with another strand of hair, "--when a cat gets too curious?" he whispered barely an inch from her ear in that low, deep voice of his.

Her mouth opened as if to say something, but she couldn't find her voice. It had disappeared--just like she should have done a while ago.

She could feel his body lightly pressed up against her--it was not as if they were in a wide area. She could smell the alcohol on his breath, too. He's been drinking. But how much? Enough to keep him relaxed? Or is he a nasty drunk--

Suddenly, she felt him grab a fistful of her long hair, and he slowly bent her neck backwards. With his other hand, he ran the same finger across her exposed neck. From left to right. Like a swipe of a blade.

Her eyes went wide at the symbolism that he was expressing.

Oh, gods. Please don't kill me--oh, gods!

"I'm not going to kill you, Miss Granger," he said, looking down at her.

She quickly shut her eyes. Ha! As if a skilled Legilimens needed to be looking directly into the eyes of his victim*You stupid girl!*

"When, in the past seven years, have I given you the hint that I would appreciate you rummaging through my personal belongings?" he said, pulling her head back further.

"Never, sir," she said in a raspy voice.

"Then, do tell me, what made you think it was okay now?" he growled.

"I... I can't explain myself; I'm nosy. I'm sorry. I didn't see anything!"

He roughly released her hair, and she stumbled forward. She whipped around to face him.

"I'm sorry, sir. Please forgive me. I shouldn't have done that. I was just taking a moment to look through here, since it's technically part of the castle, and that's what I was requested to do."

She said the wrong thing.

He launched at her and bent her backward across his desk. She heard one of the glass ink wells knock over and felt the cold ink running down her arm. The books were stabbing her in her shoulder and upper back, and he was inches from her face, hands on either side of her, pinning her to the table.

"Are you suggesting that I would have something of *his* because I'm a Death Eater? Are you forgetting that it was I who suggested you look around here because I'm concerned that there is another Horcrux? And you have the audacity to even *think* that you would have to search my office and my rooms for said object! How ridiculous can you be, Miss Granger? I thought your potion for your N.E.W.T.'s was pathetic--but this reason for meddling in my business is your all time low!" he said in a dangerous voice.

"N--no, sir! I--I just--"

He pushed away from her and pointed his finger toward his door. "Out!"

She slid off the wooden table onto her feet and said, "But, sir... I want to go home--you've got to escort me back, just like Dumbledore said."

"OUT!"

Now, she was nearly crying, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of seeing her tears. "I've got no other way home! He's not here to take me home, and he doesn't want me Apparating without an escort! Please, sir."

"Then I suppose you will be spending another night at the castle, because I'm not escorting you anywhere until I feel like it! Now, GET OUT!" he yelled as his office door magically slammed open, rattling the jars and bottles on the shelves next to it.

Hermione ran from the room.

She bolted up the entire staircase toward her suite, tears flowing from her eyes, wondering how this man was the only one who knew how to make her scared to even breathe. She should have trusted her gut feeling and left his room. Hell, she should have said no to Dumbledore, because she knew when he asked her to do this stupid exploration that it was Snape's idea. He was purposely being evil to her, and she didn't know why.

Of course, violating his personal belongings didn't help much either.

It was dusk outside when Hermione opened her eyes. She had cried herself to sleep earlier, and now her rumbling stomach woke her up. She rubbed her eyes, which felt puffy and heavy, and went to the bathroom to splash water on her face.

"What's wrong with you? Why did you feel the need to search through his belongings? That's not like you," she said to herself.

She dried her face, walked into her small dining area and called for a house-elf. Within minutes, she was scoffing down fish and chips and butterbeer.

As she was cleaning up her mess, there was a knock. Surprised that anyone knew where her suite was located, she opened the door.

Snape was standing there.

"Are you ready to go home for the evening, Miss Granger?"

"I--I thought you said--"

"I said I would take you when I felt like it. And now that I have had some time to think about things, I've decided that I will take you home. I apologize for behaving the way I did earlier. But you must understand that spying through a spy's own possessions is--"

"I know. I am truly sorry. That's not like me," she sighed heavily. "And I don't blame you for reacting the way you did."

"Very well. Now, would you like an escort home, or are you going to stay here again?"

"Home, please. Let me grab my bag."

She darted to the bedroom, threw her papers into her bag and then followed him down the stairs toward the Apparating wards outside the gates. No words were exchanged between the two, although he did offer his arm so she could do a Side-Along. When she arrived in front of her house, he nodded, then turned on the spot and was gone.

Feeling even more exhausted, Hermione went into her house, greeted her family and went straight to her room and called Jezzie.

"You'll never believe what mess I got myself into today..." she said into the phone.

As soon as Severus returned to his office, he put the files of the students that had recently left school back into his cupboard and warded the door. But, not before he pulled the picture of Hermione out of her folder and stuffed it into an inner pocket in his robes. Then, he tossed the letter from Lucius into the fire.

Everything had gone exactly as planned.

He knew she couldn't help that curious nature she possessed. And that given the chance, she would want to snoop through his belongings. And with a special enchantment inside his room, he made sure she rifled through the carefully placed items--he couldn't have her *really* search through his things. That would have been too dangerous.

He had already planned for her to see the files. And the letter from Lucius was an added bonus. He had wanted her to see the picture he had taken of her. That was his job during the ceremony--every year, he had the tedious task of taking fucking pictures of the dunderheads. And every year, it was the same. Same pose. Same smile from Dumbledore. Same everything.

Except this year.

Yes, he had taken that same picture of her--just to satisfy his requirement. But, he had also made himself a special photo. A photo he would keep with him at all times. And he wanted her to see that photo. He wanted her to know that he had it. He wanted her to know that he could look at that photo any time he so desired. And he knew that would make her uncomfortable--yes, she would worry herself to death wondering why he had that photo--that exquisite photo of herself. And that fact alone was stimulating. Yes, torturing her from afar was a very invigorating thought.

And the note from Lucius--well, would she know that she was the subject? It didn't matter. She would eventually work that out.

And oh, how he played his part well of getting angry and throwing her out. The look on her face was priceless--she had really thought she was going to have to stay another night in the castle. He loved dangling the fact that she had to depend on *him* as an escort right in front of her face. It quite obviously drove her insane.

The next morning, Snape was sitting comfortably under a Disillusionment charm on a bench across the street from Hermione's home. It was Saturday, his day off from duties at the school, and he had decided to use his free day to keep an eye on Hermione.

He had been sitting on the bench since sunrise. He knew she was an early riser, and instead of sneaking into her private bedroom, he decided to watch her from the opened window. He knew she wasn't going anywhere until that Muggle girl came to visit. So, he waited.

And sure enough, around nine o'clock, a small car stopped in front of the house, and the young lady hopped out and nearly skipped to the front door. Snape was fast on her heel and very carefully sneaked in behind her when Hermione opened the door.

"Hey, 'Mione," she said, stepping through the threshold.

Snape made his way to the furthest corner of the living room and waited to see where they would go--the kitchen or upstairs. He nearly relaxed against the wall when he noticed Hermione was still standing near the front door. She was like a statue.

"'Mione? What's wrong?"

"Shhh! I... I feel..."

She senses me. She's too young and naive to be able to feel magic--who am I kidding? She's brilliant and will work things out faster than the average witch.

"I feel funny. I've got goose bumps all over. It's weird, but I feel... magic."

"Don't you always have that feeling?"

"No. I only sense magic when I'm in the Muggle world--where there is a tiny supply of it. When I'm in the wizardry world, I don't sense it because there is an abundance of it."

Very good, Miss Granger.

"And I've only started sensing this a few times now. I read that as a witch or wizard gets older, this sense becomes more prominent," she said in a low whisper. She was still frozen in front of the entry--like she was waiting for something to pop out and attack her.

Snape was starting to wonder if he should just Apparate and get the hell out of there, because it was obvious she wasn't going to just let this little feeling pass by, or if he should stay where he was and hope the Muggle would take her mind off things.

But, if he Apparated, she'd hear the crack and would quickly follow. However, if he used his Dark Mark and went directly in front of the Dark Lord, she would never be able to chase after her intruder. No. He didn't want to do that. He wasn't in the mood to deal with his dark master today. So, he stayed and hoped for the best.

He watched her rub her left arm, like she was pushing down the hairs that were standing on end, and thought she was finished panicking. Suddenly, she whipped her wand out. Snape pulled his wand out too, but before he could press it to his Dark Mark, she screamed, "*Homenum revelio!*"

FUCK!

He felt the trickling of warmth as his body re-appeared from under the charm. The Muggle screamed and Hermione shouted, "*Snape!* What are you doing here!"

She held her wand out, ready to curse him. His was still pointing at his Dark Mark.

"Miss Granger," he said smoothly and stood very still.

With wide eyes, she looked at the position he was frozen in: a Death Eater standing--no, hiding in her private home, attempting to use that fucking tattoo to call his master. He could see the sheer terror flash through her eyes.

"Don't you dare!" she hissed. "*Expelliarmus!*"

But, he was faster. He quickly Disapparated and appeared behind her. Her spell hit a lamp, knocking it to the ground. The other girl shrieked.

Hermione whirled around to face him, her wand jutting into his stomach. He had tucked his wand away before she faced him, and he had both hands up, palms facing her. "Miss Granger, I am unarmed."

"You're never unarmed! You're a wizard who can use wandless magic! What. Do. You. Want!" she demanded, jabbing him with the tip of her wand as she said each word.

"I came here to warn you. I didn't reveal myself because of your... friend."

"She knows about our world. Warn me about what?" she commanded, not lowering her wand.

He slowly dropped his hands whilst coming up with a sufficient lie.

"I came to warn you about Lucius Malfoy."

She pulled the wand out of his aching side and stepped back. "What about him?"

"I'll get to that in a moment. Right now, I can tell by the look on her face that your friend is frightened."

Hermione continued walking backward, her eyes never leaving his, wand at the ready until she hit the coffee table. She slowly turned to the other girl, whose eyes were wide. "Jezzie? You okay?"

"Well, I would like to know what's going on here," she said in a shaky voice.

Snape glided over to her, hand outstretched and said, "I'm Severus Snape. I was Hermione's professor."

The girl smiled. "Ah yes. I've heard a lot about you. It's a pleasure to finally meet you." She reached for his hand to shake it, but Snape turned it over, palm down, said, "The pleasure is all mine," and gently kissed the top of her hand while looking directly at Hermione, who stood there looking surprised at his chivalry.

He released her hand and drew up to his full height. Hermione snorted. "Come into the kitchen," she mumbled.

Snape took the other girl by the arm and escorted her towards the other room and said, "So. You've heard about me?"

"Oh, yes. Since she started at Hogwarts. She's always had something to say about you. I'm Jezebel, by the way--or Jezz. I'm Hermione's cousin."

He led her to a seat at the round table sitting in the middle of the kitchen, nodded and said, "Well, Jezebel, I doubt you've heard anything... pleasant about me." He smirked.

Hermione was fumbling around with mugs and the tea pot, clattering them together, making her displeasure at his appearance apparent. Both Snape and this Jezebel girl ignored her.

"Well, to be honest, she's said some pretty nasty things about you. On the other hand, she's never held but the highest respect for you and constantly strives to please you."

"OKAY! That's enough chit-chatting," Hermione said loudly and nearly threw the mugs and saucers on the table. She turned to Snape and said, "Why are you trying to warn me about Lucius? And why didn't you just use my Floo! Or send me an owl." She leaned over at him, inches from his face, and in her best threatening voice, which was, he had to admit, a bit alarming, said, "And why were you hiding in my house, ready to use that filthy Mark of yours, Snape?"

The use of his surname indicated how upset she was. She had always respected him enough to address him properly and would correct anyone who called him just Snape. And he hated being called that. It made him feel like he was a kid again, that he was someone people would pick on. And when used in that tone--that loathing and repugnant tone--it made him want to rip that person's insides out.

And he had done it before. Twice, actually.

Using his own creation, *Sectumsempra*, he had sliced open the chests of two wizards that were three years ahead of him in school. They had been teasing him while he was doing some shopping in Knockturn Alley, two years after he finished school. And he'd had enough. After he'd dissected them, he'd used his own two hands to disembowel them. Then, he had shoved their intestines in their dying mouths and hissed, "Don't ever call me Snape like that again!" And he marched off, robes billowing behind him. It had felt so good to act upon his feelings that he had become hard and had Apparated directly to his home. Standing in the hallway, he had wanked-off for a full twenty minutes, squirting his cum across the wall.

But, he *had* deserved her disrespect. He *did* get caught hiding in her home. And now was the time to pull his best Slytherin tactics out of the bag.

"Oh, come on, 'Mione. If he were here to harm us, he'd have done that already."

"You don't know him like I do, Jezz," she snapped.

"Miss Granger, please sit down so that I can explain," he said softly.

She huffed, but pulled the wooden chair out and plopped down into it. Her lips were pursed as she crossed her arms over her chest and sat very upright, trying to look as intimidating as possible.

And little did she know, her performance was just turning him on.

In a graceful movement, Snape crossed his leg to hide his growing erection, grabbed the mug and took a sip, and said, "It has come to my attention that Lucius is looking for you."

Ah, yes. Lucius's little note will be working out perfectly here. He had wanted her to see that subtle question, "Is she at the castle," for another reason, but seeing as he needed a good story, he was going to use it for another purpose.

"For me? How do you know?"

"I thought you were supposed to be clever, Miss Granger. You know I see him because of my duties--"

"That's not what I meant! I know that you have contact with him! What did he say to you to make you think that?"

"Well, he asked about you. In a note. I believe you read the letter yesterday while you were meddling in my belongings," he said in a low tone.

She blushed.

"Then, when he wrote, 'Is she at the castle?'" that was in reference to me? Why? Why does he want to know where I am? Did he say anything while you were having... lunch with him yesterday?"

She may have been rather embarrassed about him bringing up the subject of her rifling through his things, but she would never deny her act. If it had been anyone other than her, they would be stuttering with excuses.

"Indeed. He had heard that you were going to be there. I couldn't deny it. So, that's why I'm here. Last night, after I returned to the castle from escorting you home, he sent an owl, wanting to pay me a visit. I took the wards off my Floo, and he came stumbling through it. Drunk and babbling about you."

Hermione was buying it. She was on the edge of seat, like her cousin, listening to his story.

"He claims he needs an assistant to do some research for him at the Ministry. It's a lie though. He knows you are the brains of your little group and thinks that if he can nab you, then he can get the attention he wants from the Dark Lord. He said he had been trying to follow you, that he thought he found your home and the next morning, he was going to abduct you. So, I've been outside your home since he left last night, watching over you and your family. Then, it occurred to me, that he might try and do an attack from the inside of the house, so I knew I needed to be in here. It just so happened that your cousin turned up, and I followed her so that I could make sure you were unharmed. And as soon as you started sensing me, I knew you were going to be alarmed, so I tried to disappear using my Dark Mark--it doesn't have the audible crack that Disapparating does."

"Why didn't you just get a member of the Order to come and watch over me?"

He sneered at her. "As you recall, Miss Granger, *I* am an Order member."

Again, she blushed and sat back into her seat.

"Oh, Hermione. Can't you tell he was risking himself to make sure you weren't attacked by this Lucius character? I think that's very charming, Severus. And I'm sure Hermione thinks so too. Don't you, 'Mione?"

Hermione glared at her cousin, then turned back to face him. "I apologize for my disrespect, sir. I just don't understand why you didn't tell anyone else about him wanting to

abduct me."

"Well, most of the time, when Lucius is intoxicated and makes threats, he forgets them come morning. But, in this case, I wanted to be sure before I put the Order on high alert. Besides, I can deal with him. And if he *had* attacked you and the Order was here, there would have been unnecessary blood shed. Since I am a fellow Death Eater and his friend, I could have spared you and your family more easily than the Order could have done."

"Oh. Well, in that case, thank you. But, as you can see, we are fine. He probably doesn't even remember--like you said."

"Indeed. He likes to strike early and would have done so by now."

"Good, so now that we have established that I am safe, you can now leave."

"Hermione!" Jezzie shouted.

Snape liked watching the silent exchange of the two girls in front of him. And he knew exactly how to crawl under Hermione skin. He was going to woo her cousin.

"It's all right, Jezebel. My presence often frustrates her."

"I never said that," Hermione said in a tight voice.

Ignoring her, he continued, "You see, it's difficult to be considered the brightest witch of her age by everyone, except me."

"Yes, she mentioned that you think of her as an insufferable-know-it-all."

"Am I wrong?"

Jezzie looked at Hermione with truthful eyes and said, "Well, he's got a point."

Hermione gawked at her.

"I mean--you've grown out of that stage of being annoying, but old habits die hard."

Snape took another sip of his bland tea and watched Hermione's annoyance elevate.

"Jezzie! After everything I've told you about him--"

"Mione! Look, he's grinning--we are just teasing you. I'm sure Severus thinks very highly of your intelligence."

"Indeed," he said quietly.

"Then why did he nearly fail me at Potions if he thinks so highly of me!"

Jezzie ignored Hermione and said, "Severus, Mione and I were going to go out to lunch this afternoon. Would you like to join us?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the look of horror on Hermione's face. It was priceless.

"How could I refuse such a generous offer? Of course."

Hermione roughly pushed back her chair and stormed out of the kitchen.

Now was his chance to get information out of the Muggle. He wanted to know everything Hermione had told her about him and the Wizardry world.

"So, tell me about yourself, Jezebel," he asked.

As she started off with what she did for a living, he fell into her blue eyes, slowly retrieving the information he wanted from her mind.

After a few moments of the girl's constant talking, Hermione reappeared.

"Let's go. I want to eat before it gets too crowded," she said, standing in the doorway. "And we'll Apparate to the alley behind the café--it will be quicker."

Snape knew she wanted to eat lunch as quickly as possible so that he would leave.

He followed her and the girl inside the living room, where Hermione looped her arm through both of them and dropped them inside a dirty alleyway. She quickly released Snape and took off walking to the main road, leaving both of them in her wake.

Snape loved seeing her in such a bitter mood.

What I'd do For You

Chapter 4 of 32

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

Many thanks to my betas, Lariope and Lulabelle72. A million hugs to RedSkyAtNight for taking Britpicking. And thanks to Chivalric for her comments.

Snape returned to Hogwarts after eating lunch with Hermione and her cousin--he needed a drink. His head was spinning with the information that he had pulled from Jezzie's mind. He couldn't believe that Hermione had told that fucking Muggle everything. *Everything!* She knew of the wizarding world as if she were a witch herself. And what really irked him was how Hermione could be so careless as to divulge every secret of magic to this girl!

His head hurt due to the knowledge he had pulled from the girl's mind, but also from being... nice. Not to mention, it cost him severely to behave in such a caring and well-mannered way to the stupid girl. Hermione would expect this behavior more often. He felt positively sick from it. He needed to lie down and process it. He went to a cabinet in his cramped kitchen, pulled a bottle of gin down and poured it into a tumbler before heading for his favorite chair to think.

Hermione sat--no, paced--inside the study of Grimmauld Place as she waited for Harry and Ron to return from Auror training. Her skin itched with intense aggravation. She tapped a foot angrily on the floor, gritting her teeth as she thought about her lunch with Jezzie and Snape. She was fidgety to the point that she nearly screamed. She *had* to tell the boys that she had just spent the afternoon with the fucking bat of the dungeons. Only they would understand. Jezzie thought it was fun to have him around--she thought he was fucking sweet! How? *How could she think that! After everything he has done to me over the years!*

"Hermione?"

She screamed. She was so caught up in her anger that she hadn't heard them enter the house.

"All right?"

"NO! Sorry--no, I am not all right! Do you have *any* idea where I have been today? And with whom? Snape! We had lunch. In Muggle London--we had sandwiches at the Benugo Bar, then went for a walk along the South Bank and even went for a ride on the London Eye! Why, you ask? Because I caught him in my house--*in my house*--and Jezzie was there, and she just fucking swooned over him! I've never seen that... that man treat another person the way he treated her! It was like he was trying to be a gentleman! And we all know that isn't Snape!" Hermione suddenly stopped and looked frightened. "Oh, my! What if he was under a curse--I didn't even bother to check that! I was just so angry that he was there--"

"Hermione! Calm down! We can barely understand what you are saying--you're talking too fast!" Harry said, placing his hands on her shoulders and pushing her into a chair.

Ron handed her a glass that smelled strongly of Firewhisky.

She swallowed it in one gulp.

"Impressive--although, that's going to burn... Now, what happened?" Ron asked.

After coughing, Hermione, in a slower and semi-controlled voice, explained the day's unwanted adventure. Harry and Ron reacted just as Hermione expected... and wanted.

Just as she was calming down, the fire sprang to life. Snape stepped through. He dusted off his left shoulder, looked at each of them and said, "Ready, Miss Granger?"

Of course not. "Yes."

She snatched her large bag and stepped inside the Floo next to him. Ron and Harry said they would see her that evening, and then she was lost in the green flames.

She pushed past Snape quickly and started for the door to the dungeon corridor as soon as she stepped out of the large fireplace, but as soon as she set foot in his office, her anger level suddenly shot up.

"Shall I meet you for lunch in the Great Hall?" he said, his tone laced with sarcasm.

"Sod off!" she snapped, swirling around to face him. She immediately covered her mouth with her hand. She had never said that to anyone out loud--and in that tone! She had no idea what made her say it now.

His eyebrow slowly raised, and his onyx eyes narrowed to small slits. "Miss Granger," he said in a dangerously low voice.

"I--I'm sorry," she said, then turned and ran out of his office as quickly as her legs could carry her. She took the circular stairs to the main floor two at a time. Her chest was constricted, and a sharp pain was stabbing at her side, but she continued to run toward her private chamber on the seventh floor. By the third floor, she slowed her speed and leaned over one of the banisters to catch her breath.

Why does that man drive me to act like that! That isn't me! I'm never disrespectful like that--even to him!

She finally reached her room. Grabbing a small hand towel from the bathroom, she used it to dry the sweat that had beaded up on her face. Then she plopped down on her small bed and stared into nothingness.

"You need stop letting him get under your skin and just do your research," she scolded herself.

"I agree," said a silky voice from the doorway.

Her heart jumped into her gut, and she sat straight up, nearly screaming from shock.

"How dare--"

"Calm down, you silly girl. I've got some ideas on some objects that will be of interest to you. You left my office before we could discuss them."

"Oh?" she said.

He walked closer to her bed, and suddenly Hermione felt the temperature of her skin rise. Something was all too familiar--like he had once stood at her bedside... doing something to himself... No! That couldn't be possible.

"Yes. There are some items in the Headmaster's office that are not Dumbledore's personal possessions--they have been there since before his appointment. I believe Tom Riddle had access to some of those items when Dumbledore was not in the room. I would suggest looking in there today, as the Headmaster is currently away for the day. Oh, yes--he wanted me to tell you that he will be gone for the rest of the week, and you are to stay here, as promised. I will take you back tonight to get your personal items."

She swung her legs off the bed and walked over to him. Standing directly in front of him and looking him in the eyes, she took a deep breath before saying, "I apologize for my behavior. Again. I'm not sure what's been getting into me."

"You just said that I crawled under your skin."

"Yes," she said, eyes never leaving his.

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he smirked as he looked her up and down. "Do I?" he whispered, leaning slightly into her.

She could feel his hot breath dance across her lips. She closed her eyes and sighed. "Yes. You do."

"Indeed."

She was pulled into in his aura--her groin pulsed, and a chill coursed through her, causing her nipples to harden.

Why? Why does this man make her hate him one minute, then with one silky "Indeed" make her lose all coherent thought and want nothing more than for him to... touch her?

She opened her eyes and was staring into his. His hooked nose brushed against the tip of hers. She was lost in his essence. And she wanted to feel those lips across her own and wanted that harsh tongue, which always seemed to verbally slash her apart, inside her mouth.

"Hermione," he said so softly that she was surprised she heard it with her heartbeat pounding madly in her ear.

He brought a hand up to a strand of hair that was dangling in front of her face, twirling it in his finger as he leaned even closer into her...

Suddenly, he hissed in pain, snatched his finger from her hair--pulling the strand, causing her to hiss in pain--and turned away from her.

"I have to go. I'm being summoned. You are to stay here until I return," he snapped, then fled from the room.

Hermione stood there for a few minutes, rooted to the ground. What had just nearly happened? Had they almost kissed each other? Kissed--Snape?

"No, of course not. He bewitched you somehow. That's what it is. He's playing some wicked game!"

Then, a tiny voice echoed through her mind--a voice that told her how much she desired the man and how much she wanted to run her fingernails across his back. She quickly pushed those thoughts away--how dare she think of things like that--and immediately immersed herself in her work. She would find out what happened when he returned.

Hours later, well into the night, Snape returned. How he made it back to the castle without dropping dead, he did not know. In fact, he was positive that if it hadn't been for his secret flying ability--well, not really secret anymore--he would have never made it.

It was days like this that made him want to rid the world of Voldemort and his fucking Death Eaters for good. The summoning was unexpected, but normal business. It was what happened afterward that put him in this position.

Rodolphus and Greyback had ambushed Snape after the meeting. He had been walking alone to the Apparition point outside Malfoy Manor when he felt the magic from behind him but was too slow to react and was Stupefied. Too slow to react? That was a first. And why? Because of her. He had very nearly had her and could not stop thinking about her heaving chest, the smell of her arousal, the way she opened herself for his kiss. Well, he had been able to push those thoughts away as he sat in front of the Dark Lord, but the minute the meeting was finished, all he wanted to do was to get back to her quickly to see if she would want him again. Yes, she had wanted him. Hadn't she? Well, there was only one way to find out. And as he was thinking this, he was attacked from behind.

He couldn't remember much, except that the wolf and the wizard were cross with him because... well, he wasn't too sure as to why. They never had a reasonable explanation. He had tried using wandless magic against them, but he remembered Greyback tackling him to the ground and slicing--oh, yes, that's why his chest was on fire. Had he been bitten as well? No, surely not, just sliced open for whatever reason. And physically beaten by Rodolphus. And how could he even see out of his eye? It was throbbing!

He made it to the secret entrance that led directly to the dungeon. The only thing that kept him going was the thought of getting his hands on that blue potion that sat on his shelf--that blue potion that would stop all this horrible pain that coursed through his body.

The wards to his room immediately dropped, and the door swung open wide to let him pass. He stumbled over to the shelf, uncorked the phial and let the potion fill his mouth before he swallowed. Then, he slumped to the floor.

He didn't know how long he had been lying there, but by the sounds of that shout that thundered in his head, he knew he didn't look any better. But at least the pain was diminished.

"Professor! What happened? What can I do to help?" He heard her footsteps bellowing across the cold, stone floor.

He had been in this position before, except every other time, it had been Dumbledore's voice that asked that question. And every time he wanted to sneer the hell out of the old man for being ridiculous--it was obvious that he had been beaten. But this time, when he heard her crying out, something inside him fluttered. Before, he had always wanted to be left alone to deal with his pain, but this time was different. She would finally get to see the shit that he had to go through--she would finally get to see the sacrifices he had to make for the Order. And by the tone of her panicked voice, she was genuinely concerned for his well-being. That was something Dumbledore, or Voldemort, had never been.

He felt her warm hand cup his face. He had never known a touch like that, and if he hadn't been so drowsy from the potion, he would have instantly pulled away.

But it was so tender. And her words were so soft. He suddenly felt magic rush through his veins--she must have cast a generic healing charm over his body. Then, he felt something hot touch his lips, and a spicy liquid penetrated his tongue. Pepperup potion.

He opened his eyes and saw her with a horrible look of concern on her face--was that a tear? Was she crying? For him? No one ever did that. But--yes, she was crying.

"Severus--can you hear me? How are you feeling? You're scaring me!"

Severus? Yes. He liked the way that rolled off her tongue.

"I'm better," he finally croaked.

She was on her knees, straddling his limp body, obviously to get close enough to pour the potion down his throat, but the position--the closeness to her warmth teased him, and he felt his member twitch with excitement.

"Here, let me help you up," she said, standing to her knees, leaving his lap--had she felt his cock harden? He hoped so. She offered her hand for him to use as leverage, and he grasped it, pulled his legs inward, and slowly stood up, grunting in pain the entire time.

"Come on, you need to lie down." She guided him toward his room, holding onto him tightly.

"I need a shower first--I feel disgusting," he said softly. His throat was dry, and it strained him to speak.

"Okay," she said and walked toward the bathroom instead.

When he entered the room, he saw his image in the mirror. He was astonished at how horrible he looked, but even more so that she wasn't sickened by the sight--she didn't avert her eyes.

His eye was bruised and swollen over; his lip was split and blood had dried across his mouth. His hair was stringy and clumped in places where the blood had dried it together. His nose--well, it was already crooked so that wasn't too different. And then there was his chest. Five, long and jagged marks were torn right through his chest, starting at his right shoulder and leading down to his left oblique. The front of his black shirt was nearly gone, just bits of cloth were barely holding it together. His wounds were deep, and the blood was still slowly running out of them.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself as he stared at his wounded body in the mirror. Hermione was slightly behind him, off to the side, looking at him through the mirror. She boldly placed her right hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sure killing him would give you great pleasure, but there are other ways to cast your revenge that will last longer."

With his good eye, he looked at her through the mirror. And grinned--well, as much as he could without tearing his lip open even more. She was a devious little girl when she wanted to be. And she was right... Killing Greyback would be wonderful, but that pleasure would only be temporary. If he could draw out his pain--torture the fool... Well, that would be brilliant. And the same with that other stupid fuckwit that had the nerve to attack him.

Now, more than ever, he wanted to kiss her. "Yes. You're right."

She removed her hand and turned toward the large bathtub, filling it up with hot water and bubbles. He staggered over to her and sat on the edge of the stone wall that encased the tub. He slowly picked the torn cotton from his chest and attempted to get out of his shirt.

"Just use magic to remove your clothes," she said.

"I would, but my wounds on my chest are too bad; I don't want them to tear open because of the magic. In fact--I need my wand--I think I dropped it--I need to close these injuries."

She reached into her pocket and pulled his black wand out and handed it to him. He cast a spell over his body, nearly singing the incantation. Bright light emitted from the tip of his wand and instantly closed his open wounds. When he was finished, he looked down--there would be horrible scarring, but he might be able to prevent that if he could rub some of his special salve on it. He flicked his wand and Accio'd a container that sat on the counter. He took the lid off the jar, dipped three fingers inside the teal goo and started rubbing it on his chest. It was so cool and refreshing on his body. He closed his eyes and let it soak into his skin. Then, he felt small fingers on his chest, and his eyes shot open. She was massaging the salve onto his wounds.

"Y-you don't need--"

"Yes, I do. Dumbledore told me to look after you while he was gone. Besides--I don't mind; it's the least I can do. Just relax--I'll do it."

He swallowed hard. She *wanted* to do this? He let her rub the salve into his chest. The running water behind him, the smells of the cinnamon bubbles, and her hand gently rubbing his body relaxed him in a way he had never been. He closed his eyes and tipped his head back, nearly falling asleep. Then, her hand left his chest. And found his belt. He opened his eyes again, and she was unbuckling the leather strap.

In a whisper, she said, "Let me help you out of these clothes."

She bent low and started tugging at his boots. When both feet were free of boots and socks, she stood up and turned the water off, then held her hand out to him.

"Stand up. You need to get your trousers off."

This must be a fucking dream. No... I'm dead. This is my afterlife. Oh, god, she's pulling my trousers down. Yes! No--cold water, Madam Pince, lemon drops, a sunny day, cold water, her hand around my dick--fuck!

His cock was standing at attention, tenting his black boxers. She kept her eyes locked with his.

"A-are you going to tell me what happened?" she asked, her voice shaking. Then, she slipped her fingers under the elastic and pulled his boxers over his hips. He knew she was trying to ignore what she was doing by talking.

"From what I remember, I was attacked as I was leaving from a meeting with the Death Eaters. Greyback and Lestrage."

She was below his knees, and he lifted one leg and stepped out of his boxers. Her face was directly in front of his cock, but she was now staring at the ground. Oh, how he loved the way she looked in this position. He wanted to snatch her head and shove his dick into her mouth and fuck it until she gagged. He felt a wetness bubbling up on the tip of his throbbing head. But he controlled himself, turned around and stepped inside the bath.

The water was hot on his legs, but it felt good. He sank to his knees, and then she helped him lay backward onto the side of the tub. *Gods, that feels good.* The salve protected his wounds, so there was no stinging from the bubbles. He closed his eyes and continued his story. "They didn't say why they attacked me--but I can assure you, when the Dark Lord gets word of this..."

"Shhh... Just let the water relax you. I'm going to go make you some tea and something to eat so that the potions don't upset your stomach. I'll return quickly. Let the water soothe your muscles..."

She was slowly draining his energy with that intoxicating voice. And her touch was worse. He didn't want her to leave! But he was too drowsy to complain, and he did what she asked; he closed his eyes and let the water alleviate the pain in his muscles.

Hermione was fumbling around in the kitchen. Her hands were shaking and tears were collecting in her eyes, threatening to fall at any second. She had Flooded to his room to see if he had returned, and when she had seen him against the wall in a bloody mess--all thoughts left her mind. She was scared--terrified even--but she had to be strong for him. And when she saw the marks across his chest--oh, gods! She knew it was from Greyback--that fucking bastard.

Why? She couldn't help but wonder what made them attack Severus Snape, Voldemort's right-hand man. He's a condescending arse, maybe he said something wrong--no, that's ridiculous. Perhaps they found out that he has been protecting Harry and is for the light--wait, that's even worse than the first idea. He would have been killed, not just desecrated.

Hermione pulled a chair out from the small kitchenette, dropped onto the seat, sat her elbows on the table and placed her head in her hands. No one likes him--not even the Death Eaters. People are cruel to him just because they can be--no wonder he keeps his distance from everyone and is a hateful bastard... I would be too if I were treated with disrespect, if I were constantly picked on--well, for a while I was. Thank goodness for Harry and Ron, or I... I could have been just like him. An outsider--well, more than I already am. He is truly alone. And look what he has been through tonight--will anyone see that besides me, and maybe Dumbledore?

Hermione suddenly looked up, her arms fell limp on the tabletop, her mouth was ajar and her eyes were wide. *treat him like everyone else. I'm just as bad as the boys... Even worse--as Greyback! I forgot he was in the Order when he came to my house to look after me, and I was so hurtful with my words! I may tell others to call him by his proper title, but I called him Snape the other day even though I could see it in his eyes that he hates that--and no fucking wonder! It's so disrespectful! And oh, gods--I'm always quick to blame him for everything! For my N.E.W.T.s--he was just doing his job!*

In a matter of seconds, Hermione's opinion of Severus Snape changed. He may be a pillock at times, but that didn't matter anymore--that was just his personality. Here was a man that put up with a lot of shit. A man that, literally, was being used and abused for the sake of others. A man that needed someone to look after *him* for once. And it was up to her to be that person--to be that woman who supported him--no matter how much he irritated her.

After preparing a sandwich and tea, she darted back to the bathroom to check on him. His eyes were closed, and he was breathing slowly and deeply--he was asleep.

She sat on her knees on the side of the tub, dipped her hand back inside the salve and gently rubbed it into the large bump over his eye. After a few moments, the lump

disappeared, and he actually began to look like himself once more. Then, she scooped some water into her hand and poured it over his head, soaking his hair. The water ran from his scalp, reddish-brown from the dried blood. She found a bottle of shampoo and lathered a small amount in her hand and then massaged it into his scalp. He let out a small moan and she froze.

"Am I hurting you?" she asked in a small voice.

"Never."

She flushed and continued washing and rinsing his hair. Then, she stood up, cracked her back from leaning over at such an awkward angle, and retrieved a towel. "I think you need to eat and then get some sleep," she said, holding the towel open so she could wrap him in it as soon as he stepped out of the tub.

He slowly stood up--and oh! There was that... that... Does he always have a hard-on? Hermione quickly turned her eyes; what was she thinking? She wrapped the towel around his waist and tucked it into itself so it would stay. He used another towel to dry his hair and wipe his arms and chest down. His wounds were looking better--still red and fresh, but better...

He followed her into the kitchen, where his tea and sandwich was waiting. She sat down across from him and waited for him to finish eating. It took him three bites to eat the sandwich. She made him two more.

"I need to go home tonight to retrieve some items so that I can stay here for a week while Dumbledore is gone," she said.

He swallowed his food, took a sip of tea and said, "No. Not without me. We will go tomorrow after I have had some rest. You can use whatever you need to of mine, for tonight."

"O-okay."

He finished eating, and she followed him to his bedroom.

Wow.

His room was well-sized, and in the center was a large sleigh bed. The craftsmanship was beautiful; an intricate dragon was carved into the foot of his bed. Above the headboard were two rapiers, crossed in the middle. The duvet was a navy blue, intertwined with silver thread, and large pillows were lined up across the headboard. Candles were floating high above them--much like the Great Hall--casting a warm glow throughout the room.

He crossed to the right side of the bed and pulled back the covers; then, he walked over to a dresser of matching design, removed a white cotton t-shirt from the drawer and handed it to her.

"Here, you can sleep in this for tonight." Then, he slowly walked back over to his bed, removed his towel *what a nice arse!* and climbed into bed. Hermione tucked the shirt under her arm and pulled the sheet over his lower body. Before she could walk away, he reached out and grabbed her wrist.

He looked as if he wanted to say something to her--his lip was almost trembling. She peered deeply into his eyes and knew what he wanted to say.

"You're welcome," she said, sparing him from having to say those two words that seemed to escape his tongue.

He slowly released his firm grip from her wrist and let his hand lightly slide down hers, pausing at her fingertips for a split second longer.

Yes, her opinion of this man had changed. She smiled down at him as he closed his eyes. She whispered, "Nox," left his room and headed for the shower. She decided to sleep on the sofa--just in case he needed her during the night.

When Severus woke the next morning, he was surprised to see Hermione asleep in a ball on his sofa. She had stayed through the night. For him. This was not the same girl he had known only a few hours ago. Something in her had changed--her attitude toward him. He had sensed it when she started washing his hair. Perhaps seeing him in such a state made her feel sorry for him--or perhaps she truly did care for him. Either way, the beating he had received had had an awesome effect on his plan to--have her. She had nearly kissed him earlier, of her own accord he might add, and then she had nursed him back to health and watched over him. Plus, she had seen him naked. He had seen her looking at his manhood. He had seen the look of desire flash through her eyes.

He was wearing her down. His plan was working.

"How are you feeling?" she said sleepily, sitting up and facing him.

"Much better. I should be completely healed by this evening."

She pushed her blanket off her body and stood up. "I'll just get dressed then."

He couldn't take his eyes off her. How many times he had dreamed of seeing her in his shirt... How many times he had dreamed of seeing her wake up in the morning, her hair scattered around her head, the freshness in her face... He saw her dark nipples through the white t-shirt, and he was so very glad he hadn't grabbed the black one like he was first going to do.

He didn't move as she walked passed him, the shirt barely covering her round bottom. He watched the swaying of her hips and the jiggle of her arse as she went into the bathroom. As soon as she closed the door, Snape ran from his private chamber and into his private lab, locking and warding the door with a quick flick of his wand.

Wanking off to her was something he was used to by now. But he wanted more. He wanted to spill inside her warm quim and not just his cold hand.

Promises, Promises

Chapter 5 of 32

Using her magical map, Hermione discovers Salazar Slytherins' Grotto.

A/N: This chapter is dedicated to Lulabelle72. Her fic, An Unreasonable Man, inspired me to continue with this story. I practically begged to use her invention, The Slytherin Grotto, and was delighted that she agreed. She has really encouraged me throughout this fic, making me want to become a better storyteller. If you noticed, I have also named this chapter and used a different summary--this is another influence of LB72, and I am afraid that this story would never have been finished if it weren't for her ingenious creativity. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

The next morning, Hermione sat on the end of one of the long benches in the great hall, hunched over and tapping her pencil across her lips, deep in thought. She needed the use of the Head Table, which was about five feet in width and nearly twenty feet in length, to fully open the map. Even completely unfolded, the map seemed to be a foot wider than the table. What truly amazed Hermione was the fact that when the map was folded, it was no bigger or heavier than her Advanced Transfiguration textbook--although folding and un-folding it was dreadful, and in her spare time, she was going to have to come up with a spell to make it more manageable.

She stared hard at the parchment and was overwhelmed by the size of the castle. She was supposed to find a single item containing the last bit of Voldemort's soul *in this*? This monstrous labyrinth and its surrounding areas? Impossible! But, yet... perhaps not.

Something had caught her attention.

She pulled a magnifying glass out of her pocket; straining her eyes to read the minuscule writing on the map had given her too many headaches. She put the glass over one of the fold-outs, near the dungeons. Yes, she thought she had seen those two words: Salazar Slytherin. But what was this? Salazar Slytherin's Grotto? *A grotto*?

Oh, how she loved her magical map. She carefully re-folded the map, making sure she kept this new room visible so she could find her way down to it, and then tucked her magnifying glass into her pocket, snatched her notebook and pen, and took off running toward the dungeons.

In her excitement, she missed a step and stumbled down the circular steps, bumping her head, scraping her arms, and shouting the entire time. She landed with a hard *thud* at the bottom of the stairs. Her heart was racing, and pain washed through her body. With a loud groan, she rolled over onto her stomach and pushed herself onto her knees. After checking for broken bones, she looked around the dark dungeon. Her map was sprawled across the cold ground, her notebook was flipped over, pages bent, and the magnifying glass--well, she could no longer feel its weight in her pocket. It was surely broken.

She rolled her neck to loosen the tightness, put her left foot flat on the ground, and slowly pushed herself into a standing position. She pulled her wand from her hidden pocket and Accio'd her belongings to her outstretched hand.

"Damn it!" she yelled as she fumbled with her map, desperately looking for the Grotto. It had nearly escaped her notice the first time, when the map had been neatly spread on the Head Table. Now, with the enormous map once again disheveled, she had no idea where to look.

"Fine! I'll just search these damnable dungeons *without* the help of a map," she yelled as she attempted to re-fold the map to a decent carrying size. It took her nearly twenty exasperating minutes. She became so frustrated that she pulled her wand out, waving it fiercely over the parchment. She suddenly remembered a charm that Molly used when folding laundry--it took her several tries, but the map was finally able to be folded with a few swish and flicks.

She stomped off toward the dungeons, only slowing near Snape's office to wonder if he was in there... If she had managed to heal his wounds well enough... If he was all right.

Putting aside thoughts of Snape for the moment, she continued on and chose a path that led to the left--a path that she had never been down before. Worried that the deep dungeons were indeed going to be like a labyrinth, she used her wand and marked the first knight with a red star so she could find her way back--just in case.

She didn't know how long she had walked or how many doors she had opened with a simple Alohomora, only to find empty classrooms and broom cupboards--but she finally hit a dead end. A dead end with a locked door, a locked door that just wouldn't budge, no matter how many charms and enchantments she placed upon it. Yes, this was it. *This* had to be the entrance to the Grotto. And since it was from the time of Salazar Slytherin, she supposed that being fluent in parselmouth was the only way to unlock it. Or perhaps the Head of Slytherin House could open it. Snape. Yes, Snape should be able to open this!

She quickly retraced her steps--the red stars *had* come in handy--and headed back to his office, where she proceeded to pound his door in her excitement, shouting for him to open up.

The large, heavy door slowly creaked opened. A whiff of his scent leaked out and tickled her nose--crushed herbs, thyme perhaps, and a small hint of leather, most likely from his belt and boots. The burning glare of his eyes made her heart stop for just a moment.

"The next time you bang on my door like a banshee, Miss Granger, you will find yourself--"

"I don't care! I've found something--something of importance!"

He stood there, his face suddenly blank, waiting for her to continue.

"Do you know of Salazar Slytherin's Grotto?"

A wicked, crooked grin broke across his cold features.

"Yes," he said at length.

She huffed. "Well? Tell me about it. How can I get inside there?"

He swung open the door to his office and welcomed her inside. She went to sit at the wooden chair in front of his desk, but he stopped her.

"Come inside my private quarters. We will be more comfortable there."

Surprised at his invitation, she nonetheless followed him through another heavy door. On the other side was a small sitting room. Two oversized chairs with fluffy cushions faced each other, flanking either side of the fireplace. A sofa sat opposite the fireplace. In front of it was a small table with piles of books, parchment and ink wells. As she stepped further into the room, she noticed the small kitchen table to the right--she remembered sitting there with him before they'd left to retrieve her belongings. His words had been stern when he'd told her not to speak to anyone about his attack.

He sat in one of the oversized chairs and gestured for her to sit in the other. As she sank into one of the large chairs, its cushions enveloping her in softness, she forgot for a moment why she was in here--all she could think about was curling up in this incredibly soft chair with a blanket, some tea, and one of his books. That would be heaven.

She snapped back into reality when she realized that he was holding a glass in front of her face. The aroma of wine swirled around her nostrils.

"Oh, thank you," she said, taking the glass of wine from him. For a split second, she wondered if he had poisoned it--but no, she trusted him completely, especially after *that* night. She took a small sip and let the red wine roll around her tongue before she swallowed it. Normally, she wasn't a wine drinker, but *this* succulent, velvety wine--was intoxicating. She took another sip, and he sat down in the chair across from her, watching her avidly.

"So, you found the Grotto. How?"

She didn't want to tell him of the map. But of course, look who she was talking with--Mister Legilimens. He would know if she lied. So, she supposed the truth would be

best. She explained the map and how she had been searching the dungeons for hours.

Talking as fast as she did made her thirsty. She sipped more wine. She didn't realize that it was such a long tale until she watched him stand from his seat, go to the small bar that was tucked into a corner, and pour her another glass of wine.

"Why didn't you just ask me about it when you initially found it on your map?" he asked as he handed her the glass.

She felt the heat rise to her cheeks. She averted her eyes and took another sip.

"Ah. Because working with me is your last resort? Yes?" he said.

"I just need to get in there," she said quietly.

He looked over at the clock that was sitting on the mantel. Then, he looked back at her with that crooked smile and said, "Very well."

Suddenly, Hermione felt uneasy. But she had no time think about that, as he was on his feet and moving swiftly through the oak door, back through his office, and she had to catch up with him.

She felt like a puppy trying to keep up with its owner. His long strides down the dark hallways were no match for her, and she was nearly jogging to keep up with him.

"Can you please slow down?" she exclaimed.

He ignored her!

Finally, after many twists and turns and without marking any knights with stars, they reached the door at the end of the corridor.

He held his wand out, tapped once, and the iron handle became a black snake that flowed through its own keyhole.

He pushed open the door. A cold draft swallowed her body, and she wished she was wearing more than just jeans and a blue cotton, blouse. He continued onward down a steep incline, and she followed, keeping close to his body--for warmth. Hermione tripped as soon as the stone floor changed to hard-packed dirt and stones; she hadn't expected this. She fell against his back, wrapping her arms around his neck and letting her weight fall to her hanging feet. He barely stumbled, even with her dangling from his neck, and came to a dead stop. She berated herself for being so clumsy and loosened her death grip on him, dropping to the floor.

"I'm sorry. I tripped," she said in a tiny voice.

He looked over his left shoulder, his hair covering most of his face, and his hooked nose dominating his profile. The blue-green flames that glowed from the mouths of the black torches of upright snakes flickered off the black eye that was looking at her.

"You seem to be doing that quite a bit today," he said in an icy voice.

Oh, god! H--how the hell did he know that!

Before she could say anything, he continued walking down the steep, narrow and winding path. She followed, and this time, she stayed back a few steps.

Then, they were in a rounded room with rock walls and irregularly cut holes. She peeked into one of the holes and saw the deep green glow of water. They were under the lake. She thought she saw something heavy pass by the window and stir the water, but it happened so quickly, that she really wasn't sure.

"Well? You're here," he said.

He was standing near the rocky wall--or was he leaning? She blinked her heavy eyes and stepped away from the window. Even though it was beyond cold, she was warm. So much, in fact, that she could feel sweat beading up on her forehead.

"T-thank you for bringing me down here. Now, please explain this place to me."

"It was Salazar Slytherin's invention. He wanted a private domain."

She tried concentrating on his words, but she was just so warm. "C-can I get back in here to do some searching later on? Suddenly, I am not feeling so well."

She briefly closed her eyes. When she opened them again, she felt like she was teetering on a boat in the middle of choppy water. And he was behind her. So close, in fact, that she could feel his body pressing into her back. He leaned over her and, in that damnable voice, whispered, "Miss Granger."

She leaned her head back onto his chest and sighed heavily. "Yes, Professor," she said in a dreamy voice.

"You cannot come back in here unless you are accompanied by a Slytherin. What is it that you think might be hidden in here?" His hand softly stroked her hip as he spoke.

"H-hidden Horcrux," she said as she took in deep breaths and closed her eyes.

"It's not here. I've already checked. This has become a hangout for mischievous students who like to experiment with sex and mind-altering herbs," he said, running his thumb nail back and forth over her right breast before cupping its weight and squeezing gently.

She opened her eyes. What was he doing? The room was nearly spinning. And there was a deep pull between her legs, an ache of desire. "S-sex?" she stuttered.

She felt his hand leave her chest. It slowly ran down the front of her jeans, tugged at her zipper, and slipped into her knickers. She felt a cold finger slide into her before stroking back up to press against her clit--and oh, *god*, did that feel good.

"Hermione?" he said softly in her ear.

Faster and faster, he circled her most sensitive area.

"Yes?" she whispered ever so softly.

"I need you."

She could feel her orgasm building, and she leaned back into his body. He wrapped his free arm around her and held her against him. She desperately wanted to spread her legs wider, but standing like this, in jeans, made it difficult.

"You need me?" she asked, then moaned.

"Yes. I need you to promise me something. Can you do that?"

What was wrong with her? A part of her wanted to run away--Professor Snape *wastouching* her! Her world was dizzy--had she drunk too much wine? But his fingers, his voice... they were consuming her, and all rational thought was gone.

"Any--oh god, yes. Anything!"

"Promise that I will be the only man that you will ever want and will ever be with. Promise me!"

She was groaning and breathing so heavily by now, that she was surprised that she was able to answer at all. "YES! I promise! You're mine, and I'm yours! Yes, yes! Oh, gods!" The muscles in her legs spasmed, and she went weak, but he held onto her tightly. Her heart was beating out of her chest--was that her groaning that loud?

Then, everything went black.

Snape pressed his hard cock against her limp body and ran his middle finger through her folds and into her warm, wet quim. He could still feel her walls convulsing from her orgasm. Pushing his finger deeper inside her, he clutched her to him as he expelled inside his trousers. "Oh, fuck, yes!" he shouted and heard his own voice echo off the ridged walls of the Grotto. Pleasuring her had turned him on more than he'd thought possible, triggering this quick orgasm. He had brought her into the Grotto for only one reason, but who was he to complain? This was a special treat, an addition to the plan that he had quickly devised back in his room when she'd begged him--yes, she'd begged him--to take her to his House's best kept secret.

The excitement and orgasm brought him to his knees, with the girl still leaning into his body, passed out. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled her scent. "Hermione," he said in a quiet voice. He knew she was unconscious and therefore couldn't scream at him, but for a moment--a brief moment--it was like she had willingly given herself to him, and that was more thrilling than having to force her. And she had nearly kissed him before he had been unexpectedly summoned. He smelled her desire the second before his Mark started searing into his arm. And what about afterward? He had returned home, beaten and exhausted, and she had helped heal him. He thought he had seen a deep yearning in her eyes at seeing his naked body. Hadn't he? He couldn't be sure, he was never sure with Hermione. And that is why, when she came to him only an hour ago, he had done what he had done.

He had drugged her.

He had slipped two potions into her wine while she was busy making herself comfortable on his favorite chair. The first was a sleeping potion. As soon as the victim drank it, they had thirty-five minutes before they fell into a death-like sleep. The effects were dizziness before passing out, and she would most likely not remember this night. The second potion was a mild aphrodisiac. The fruity flavour of it masked the saltiness of the sleeping potion.

He had expected her to put up more of a fight when he started touching her. Again, she had surprised him *Did she want me to touch her? No. She would never want that.*

Nobody wants you.

He pushed those thoughts out of his mind and laid her onto the cold ground before rising to his feet. He pulled his wand from his pocket and cast a Disillusionment Charm over the both of them. Then, he leaned over her body, put one arm under her back and his other behind her knees, and scooped her up into his arms. He carried her back to his private room, where he was going to tuck her into his bed and let her have a good night's rest.

After all--she *did* just promise herself to him. It was the least he could do.

A/N: Tons of hugs for Lariope for betaing this chapter--she's always there for me, going above and beyond the call of beta duty. Many thanks for RedSkyAtNight for her Brit-picking--you're a doll. Thanks for the support as well, Chivalric.

I have also updated the other chapters with new titles--check it out.

Up Next: Snape is no Lockhart.

Dreams

Chapter 6 of 32

Snape really should brush up on his memory charms...

A/N: Thanks to my betas, Lariope and Lulabelle72. Many hugs to RedSkyAtNight for her fabulous britpicking.

"Do you think I'm going soft now?" a chilly voice whispered into her ear.

Hermione slowly tilted her head back, inhaling deeply as she tried to place that leather scent that was swirling past her nose. She released her breath through parted lips and opened her eyes. She squealed, startled by the black eyes that bore into her own. It was a man's face, although his features were blurry--except for those dark, coal-like eyes. She turned her head, trying to place her surroundings--she was in her room at Hogwarts, but that wasn't her bed--that was her bed from her parent's house...

Suddenly, a cold hand snatched her jaw with bruising strength. She couldn't scream, just groan, as the grip became tighter, squeezing and crushing harder. She tried to pry his hand off her face, kicking out, dragging her nails across his arm, but he didn't budge. Panic raced through her mind--he was going to break her fucking jaw, and there was nothing she could do about it but wait for the sound of bone cracking! She looked up into those black eyes, imploring him to have mercy. Tears fell down her cheeks and over those cold fingers--she didn't understand what was happening...

Suddenly, she was flying across the room! No, she wasn't flying--she had been pushed across, she had felt hands--strong hands--shoving into her upper back. She slammed into the ground on her knees, pain jolting her even as she worriedly swept the floor, feeling for her wand. Ah ha! It was under the table, but as soon as she reached for it, someone was pulling on her legs, dragging her across the stone tiles, scraping her flesh.

"Get off me!" she screamed, clawing at the rough ground, frantic to get away.

"Hermione..." she heard someone calling for her. "Hermione..."

Her muscles relaxed as she laid her head down on her arm, straining to hear her name called again.

"Hermione."

Oh, gods. It was closer, and she nearly melted--that voice--it was comforting, sensual, and she could listen to it all day. She slowly regained control of her breathing as her name echoed softly off the walls of her room. She smiled, lifting her head up. But her room was gone. She was alone. And all around was utter blackness. She felt extremely disorientated as she sat up onto her knees--not knowing which way was up or down. She waved her hand in front of her face, but she couldn't see it. She sat very still, not knowing what horrible things were lurking inside the darkness.

"H-hello?"

The only sound was of her breathing. She blinked--the vast dark was hurting her eyes as they strained to adjust, and the longer she sat in silence, the more nervous she became. Something was waiting for her--she could feel its presence out there, in the blackness.

Suddenly, a deep voice boomed from all around her. "Your written work was something I wouldn't even wipe my arse with. Resident researcher. You will suffer by my hand--"

"Shut up!" she screamed, covering her ears, squeezing her eyes shut and curling into a small ball.

"I want you. I want you. I want you."

"NO!" she cried, rocking herself.

"Hermione," said the soothing voice that she desperately wanted to hear again.

She removed her hands from her ears.

"Hermione. Promise me. I need you. I want you."

She lifted her head and opened her eyes. A soft red glow caught her attention--it was as if it were at the far end of a tunnel--but everywhere else was still completely covered in darkness. She frantically pushed herself onto her feet and started running toward the light, wanting to escape the dark, away from the waiting danger. Her footsteps reverberated in the darkness as she sprinted across the ground, but were replaced by the soft voice repeating her name.

She came within feet of the glowing light, then stopped dead in her tracks. Voldemort was at the end of the tunnel--it was his eyes that were glowing--calling her toward him. Stumbling, she tried to backtrack away from him. He began to laugh as she tried to run away, but she kept slipping on a smooth surface--it was like trying to run up a glass ramp, and she continued to lose ground.

"I'm no longer your teacher! You spoiled brat! Stop trying to fight me off, Miss Granger! You will lose! DO YOU THINK I'M SOFT NOW?" shouted that nasty voice from nowhere, drowning out Voldemort's laughing.

Hermione screamed, cried, and continued trying to run away, but she slipped one last time, falling onto her back. But instead of hitting the ground as she had expected, she continued to fall through the empty darkness. The red glow of his snake-like eyes became smaller and smaller.

Finally, she landed on a soft bed, bouncing onto it several times as her momentum came to a stop. She buried her face in her hands, crying and shouting to be left alone. But the voice became louder and harsher.

"Miss Granger. Miss Granger!"

Then, she felt hands on her--shaking her, smacking her face, pulling on her legs--she wildly kicked and punched at her attacker.

"MISS GRANGER!"

"WHAT!" she screeched. "WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

"I want you!"

A pillow crushed down onto her face, and she struggled beneath it, gasping for air. She felt something scaling, slithering around her ankles, and she could have sworn she heard muffled hisses around her ear--OH, FUCK! She felt them moving under her thighs, gliding across her stomach, wrapping around her arms! She screamed as long and high as her voice would allow; then, suddenly, her legs were yanked apart and something hard and foreign pushed at her entrance, demanding entry. If she could have screamed any louder, she would have. Without warning, the pillow that was smothering her was pushed off her face, and staring down at her was Snape. At first she wanted to bury herself in his arms, just to know that she was alive and safe--to scream at him to make the fucking snakes disappear--but as she sucked in a breath to breathe fresh air, he snarled, "I'm going to fuck you until you bleed!"

He rammed his dick inside her, splitting her into two. She tried to claw at his face, but two snakes attacked her arms, biting into her skin, the fangs piercing her veins and squirting poison into her, contaminating her blood. She knew this was her death, but she was going to fight until her last breath.

"See what happens when you try to fight me?"

"P-please s-stop!" she stuttered. She could feel the ice cold, tingling poison traveling through her body, and within minutes, she felt dizzy and numb, and Snape's face was twisted as he spilled his seed inside her rapidly slackening form. The last thing she saw before the blackness overcame her was Snape, licking his middle finger, which was covered in blood.

It was pitch black and extremely cold when she jolted out of her nightmare--the sound of her own voice screaming in agony had woken her up. She was lying flat on her stomach, and the cotton sheets were twisted widely around her naked body.

"Miss Granger?" said a muffled voice from across the room.

She froze. Her dream came rushing back at her; reliving it a second time made her stomach flop.

What was he doing in her room?

She fumbled around, desperately searching for her wand. She groped around the large bed, looking for the edge--large bed?What the hell?Her bed at home was big enough for two people--the one at Hogwarts was large enough just for her--but this bed... was huge.

I'm not in my room--which means, I'm in--

"Miss Granger, answer me."

Oh, no, no, NO!

"Lumos! Accio Wand!" she whispered. You stupid girl, you don't have wandless magic yet!

She rolled onto her knees and crawled across the soft bed, swinging her legs off the side and wrapping the sheet around her body. A soft rug tickled the soles of her feet.

The door creaked opened and a sliver of light fell into the room--directly onto her. Even though she was covered with a thin sheet, she felt completely nude as the light shone on her. All she could see was the silhouette of Snape, and it unnerved her.

"Miss Granger, I heard you screaming. Are you all right?"

"I had a nightmare. What happened last night? Why am I here?" she said, tightening the sheet around her body. "And more importantly, why am I... naked?"

"I brought you back here after you lost consciousness down in the Grotto. As far as being... in your state... I had a house-elf undress you and place you in my bed. Your skin was on fire and you were sweating. My room is the coolest area in the castle, and I thought your temperature would lower if I let you sleep down here."

"I don't understand. I felt fine all day yesterday. Why did I pass out?"

"I assume you had a reaction to the wine."

"That's never happened before."

"Elf-made wine is strong--it takes some time to get used to it," he said, opening the door all the way, letting the faint light spill in from the other room. He snapped his fingers, and the candles floating on the ceiling came to life.

Hermione wanted to crawl beneath the covers and hide. The light exposed her nakedness, and to be in a room with a man~~this~~ man--covered only in a thin sheet was the most intimidating moment of her life. She felt completely vulnerable and unprotected. She could feel his eyes on her body, and she could nearly hear his mind clicking as he watched her trying to hide herself. She knew he could see into a person's mind, and she wondered if he could see through cotton as well. She wouldn't be surprised--very little about Snape surprised her anymore. And if he could, what did he think about her ugliness--her fleshy thighs, her jiggle breasts, the collar bones that protruded too much--would he bring it up every time he got the chance? But what was she worrying about--she had seen him completely naked--bloody hell, she'd even helped him bathe. If he wanted to cast stones... He had had a hard-on for Merlin's sake!

"Miss Granger, are you all right" he said, stepping further inside the room, interrupting her panicked thoughts.

She lifted her chin up, determined not to be a cowardly lion, and said, "I'll be fine. It was just a nightmare. Thank you for taking such good care of me. If you don't mind, I'd like to get dressed, eat, and continue my research."

"Certainly," he said, nodding once before turning on his heel and closing the door behind him.

Hermione walked over to the foot of the bed and retrieved her neatly folded pile of clothes from the bench and quickly dressed. Her wand was sitting at the bottom of the pile. She did a quick flick, and the bed was made. She tucked her wand into her hidden pocket and headed to the loo.

When she emerged, he was sitting on his sofa, flipping through a Potions journal.

"Better?" he asked without looking up.

"Much," she said, bending down to pick up her satchel.

"Where are you going" he asked, still not looking up from his reading material.

"Well, I haven't been able to search those artifacts in Dumbledore's office as you suggested a few days ago, so I think I'd better head up there before he returns."

"You can use my Floo. I'll be working in my private lab this afternoon if you need me--refilling the hospital wing's supply of potions takes a few weeks to accomplish."

"Thank you," she said, walking over to the large fireplace. She took a pinch of powder from his stash and disappeared into the dancing green flames.

"Good morning, Fawkes," she said as she stepped out of the fireplace and walked past the small bird who was perched on his stand.

He lifted his head, yawned and then softly cooed at her.

Chuckling to herself, she sat her satchel on Dumbledore's office table, rummaged through her bag and pulled her notebook out. She clutched it to her chest and began gazing around at the amazing décor. The ceilings were high, and the stained-glass window reached from floor to ceiling, casting sparkling rays of different coloured lights across the room. There were many trinkets and knickknacks in the room, sitting on the shelves and tabletops. Dumbledore had a vast private library of books. Hermione noticed not only books about magic, but Muggle books about gardening, knitting and cooking! She laughed out loud, imagining the old Wizard reading how to properly bake bread and make jam roly-poly. Her laugh vibrated off the walls, but it was oddly quiet. Usually when she was in here, she could hear the murmurs of the portraits. But today, they were silent. Actually, now that she started looking around more closely, she noticed that many--no, all--of the occupants of the frames were gone.

Except one.

And it had to be him. Hadn't she been forced to listen to enough of his snide ramblings while she and the boys were searching for the Horcruxes? Apparently not. He was staring at her with his cunning eyes, his hands folded neatly on his lap. She wondered why the other occupants wandered off for the day--maybe they all left when Dumbledore was gone.

"Professor Black," she stated as she walked past the large portrait.

"Snooping again, Miss Granger?" he replied.

"Excuse me?" she said after she finished reading the small note that she found addressed to her. It had asked her to look at the artifacts that were laid out on the table and was signed by Dumbledore.

"You heard me."

She ignored him and started waving her wand over the objects, searching for warding spells and traces of magic. It took her nearly two hours to go through the items. When she found that nothing was harmful, she began tinkering around with the trinkets. None of them seemed especially intriguing; some looked like dark magic detectors, while others were everyday objects like stirring sticks for potions or pocket mirrors. She was writing her progress in her notebook when she heard the former headmaster say, "What did you think of the Grotto, Miss Granger?"

Her head snapped up, and she slammed her book shut. "How did you know about that?"

"I have my ways."

Snape, she thought bitterly. She hastily gathered her belongings, feeling suddenly uncomfortable--the silence of the room and his twisted humour was making the hairs on her neck stand on end.

"In a hurry? What a shame. Before you go though, I wanted to ask how your boyfriends are doing."

She was nearly at the fireplace and stopped. *Why did he want to know that?* She faced his painting. "Harry and Ron are my friends. And for your information, I don't have any boyfriends. And I don't want any."

"You *promise*?" he said, grinning. Then, he tilted his head back and laughed--a loud, malicious laugh. She even saw him wipe a tear from his eye.

Hermione's heart was racing, and her palms were sweaty. After having one of his portraits stuffed in her bag for nearly a year, she knew how he worked. He knew something about her and was amusing himself by asking her ridiculous questions. She returned to her private room, wondering what the hell Phineas Nigellus Black had found so damned humorous.

Up next: Find out what really happens at a Death Eater revel.

The Wicked Games We Play

Chapter 7 of 32

A Death Eater revel. Need I say more?

Warning: Although I generally do not care for author's warnings that spell out what will happen in the chapter, I feel the need to say that this chapter contains explicit and extreme details of violence and torture. Please do not read this if you can not handle the evil truth of the life of Death Eaters. I will say that Severus is not the one doing the torturing, nor is Hermione on the receiving end, so no worries about your favorite characters. However, I ask you to step outside of your comfort zone and follow me in this chapter--this was difficult to write because I do not approve of this behavior, but it is extremely important to the character of Snape and to the plot. Just so you know, I succeeded in squicking my two betas, Lariope and Lulabelle72, who have stomachs made of steel, although, my Britpicker, RedSkyAtNight, did her country proud and maintained a classic English stiff upper lip throughout. I also would like to give a special thanks to SiriuslySnogged for taking the time to read this chapter. If you would rather skip this chapter, but would still like to know the importance of it so that you can continue reading, please email me and I will be happy to give you a quick explanation, but I am urging you to please leave your safety zone and read it. Thank you to all of you who are pushing themselves and reading even if they are uncomfortable at times. And thank you for your support with reviews. Many hugs, Shell~

Several days after Snape had taken Hermione to the Grotto, Dumbledore returned to the castle. They met for their usual, brief meeting, with Snape updating him on any news. It ended, as usual, with Snape asking the same, boring questions about the Headmaster's trip and receiving very little information in return.

As it was the weekend, Hermione was at home, and Snape found some time to catch up on some of his experimental potions. While he was diligently working late Saturday night, his left forearm began stinging. Voldemort was calling him.

He knew from the intensity of the burn that it was a special calling--not just a typical Death Eater meeting--and that the Dark Lord was in a good mood. Severus quickly cleaned up his private lab and went back to his room, pulling out his best traveling cloak. He flung it over his work clothes, grabbed his silver mask and disappeared into the night. The Mark transported him to an old, abandoned Muggle hospital that sat atop a steep hill.

Although the building itself was mostly dark inside, the fluorescent glow of the remaining lampposts along the winding street that led up to it bathed the industrial monstrosity in an eerie glow. The exterior of the building was decaying--bricks were missing, windows were broken, dirt and grime replaced the white trim around the windows and door frames, and weeds, dead grass and litter replaced the once lush grounds. Even the rusted bars on the top floor windows looked like they could fall off at any second.

When he walked inside, the horrid smell of urine flooded his overly large nostrils.

Filthy Muggle tramps using this place as a hideout. Disgusting.

He was inside a large room, which used to be the waiting room. There were at least thirty Death Eaters, mostly senior members; however, the best of the junior followers had been invited. Seven of the younger members were holding torches, which lit up the room in a creepy glow. To the left, wide stairs led to the top floor. To the right, a reception area once stood. Graffiti and holes marked the walls. In the center of the room stood several hospital beds with leather straps and strange metal contraptions attached to them. There were several tables that held old and rickety Muggle medical instruments.

But what drew his eye were the three naked women, most certainly Muggles, standing in the middle of the circle, shaking with fear and cold.

"Glad you could join ussss, Severussss," Voldemort hissed from the opposite side of the room where he was sitting in an oversized, throne-like chair. Snape inclined his unmasked head and murmured a greeting. This was a special occasion, and the Death Eater mask was not to be worn so that Voldemort could make sure everyone was watching the show. He liked to see people's emotions play out on their faces.

The women had their heads bowed, scared to look in the eyes of Voldemort, but as Snape walked across the room to take his place next to the Dark Lord, one of the captives lifted her head and looked directly into Snape's eyes. Her mouth dropped opened a bit, but Snape didn't understand why. He held eye contact for a moment longer before suddenly realizing why she seemed surprised. He tried to cover his shock.

Standing before him was Jezzie.

Snape took his place calmly beside Voldemort as though Jezzie was simply another, anonymous piece of Muggle filth and watched as the rest of the Death Eaters gathered around in a circle, enclosing the women, beds and instruments.

As soon as all his followers were accounted for, Voldemort pointed a long, skeletal finger at the girl in the center and said, "Bring her forward."

Dolohov stepped from his place in the circle and snatched the woman by the nape of her neck, pushing her towards Voldemort. "Get on your knees and kiss the floor," he commanded. The woman began to sob; her breasts bounced with every intake of breath. She slowly lowered herself to her knees and obediently kissed the begrimed floor before sitting back on her knees, head bowed. Dolohov stood behind her and waited for the Dark Lord to speak.

"Why did you pick her?" Voldemort asked him.

"She's a squib that has been working as a spy for the Order. She works at the Leaky Cauldron as a housekeeper. I overheard her giving some information to that wolf, Lupin."

Voldemort pulled his wand out and flicked it at the young lady. She automatically raised her upper body while she was still on her knees, terror in her eyes. He was forcing her to look at him, and suddenly, he delved into her mind. After a few minutes, he said, "I'm finished with her. Do with her as you please--however, she knew very little, so I am a little disappointed in you; therefore, you are not to use any magic on her."

"Of course, my Lord," Dolohov said, bowing. He seized the woman again by the neck and led her to one of the beds, pushing her roughly onto it. "Get on and lie down," he said forcefully.

"P-please don't do this!" she begged.

Dolohov grasped her neck and squeezed. "Get on the damn bed and lie down," he said between gritted teeth and pushed her onto her back. Her eyes were large, and she was trying desperately to push his hand off her throat, but she pulled her legs onto the bed and laid her head down. Dolohov removed his hand and picked up one of the large leather straps hanging from the side of the bed and threw it across her arms and under her breasts. He walked around to the other side of the table and locked it into the buckle. Twice more he did this--one across her mid section and one across her knees. She whimpered and tried testing her range of motion by attempting to buck widely. But it was no use--she was strapped securely to the bed.

Dolohov went to the table and grabbed a long, thin knife. He brought it up to eye-level, then ran his finger across the blade. Blood bubbled up on the tip, and he sucked it clean and smiled. His eyes scanned the table widely, and stopped. "Yes, this is perfect," he whispered.

He picked up an extremely long needle and syringe, grabbed a clear bottle that held blue liquid in it and walked back to his waiting victim. He stepped on a small branch that must have blown in from the missing front doors, picked it up, tore the dried leaves off of it and shoved it into her mouth. "Bite down on this--you're going to need it," he said, laughing madly.

For a few moments, Snape couldn't tell what Dolohov was doing--he was hunched over her stomach region. Then her screams pierced Snape's ears. Dolohov finally moved, and Snape could see a word carved into her abdomen before it was obscured by her blood: Squib.

Snape snorted. *Very original, Dolohov. Like that hasn't been done before.*

Then, the man opened the clear bottle with the blue liquid. The smell was strong and overpowered the urine stench. It was some sort of a Muggle cleaning solution--Snape had smelled that before when he was younger. His father had never liked his mother using magic to clean the house, so instead, she used the harsh chemicals. The smell had always nauseated him.

Dolohov stuck the needle into the bottle and sucked up the liquid. He tapped the air out of the syringe then rotated the arm of the woman, pierced her skin with the needle and injected the contents into her veins. He did this about five times, at various points on her body.

By now, she was hoarse from her screaming, and the other two women were holding each other, crying. It didn't take long for her body to start convulsing. White foam bubbled out of her mouth. He could hear her gagging on it, then suddenly, he watched her stomach muscles crunch together as she started retching--most of it was blood. Within minutes, her eyes rolled to the back of her head and her body was shaking. Then, all was calm, and she was finally dead.

Much better, Dolohov--now that was original.

Dolohov nearly skipped back to his place in the circle.

Voldemort pointed to the blond woman and said, "Bring her forward."

The woman released her hold on Jezzie and started to run, but Davis, a newer Death Eater, who was an official at the Ministry, Stunned her, then dragged her body across the dirty floor and placed her in front of Voldemort.

Her wide chestnut eyes bore into Snape's and for a split second, he thought he was looking into ~~her~~ eyes--into Hermione's beautiful, long-lashed eyes. Underneath his robes, unseen to anyone, his foot twitched. Momentarily confused, he tried to quell the rising emotion. He could not remember having such a reaction before to something so mundane in the life of a Death Eater as simple torture.

"Why did you pick her?" Voldemort asked.

"She works at the Ministry and had promised to join us. She got cold feet when I tried taking her to you to be inducted, and she attempted to go and warn the Aurors about me, which would cause my position at the Ministry to be lost. She was going to spy on us for the Order."

"Did she succeed in informing anyone?"

"No, my Lord. I've been holding her captive in my cellar for the past week."

"Excellent. Do with her as you please."

Davis charmed her body to float over to another bed, next to the one with the dead woman. He placed her feet in long metal contraptions, strapped her in, slid her bottom to the edge of the table, pushed open her legs as wide as they would go, and locked them into place.

He then took the Stunning Hex off of her, and she immediately began begging to be let go--just like the last one did. Davis pulled a metal, clamp-like tool out of his pocket and slid it inside her exposed quim. He started fumbling with it, but Snape couldn't see very well so he leaned a little over to the right to get a better view and, oh! *That's what he's doing...*

Davis used the speculum to spread her pussy wide, revealing the inside of her. He then pulled his wand out and sung an incantation over her hole--it was some sort of a drying spell--he had heard Lucius use it before. After he was finished, he released the clamp, tossed it behind him, removed his cloak, unzipped his trousers and pulled his hardened cock out. Again, from his pocket, he pulled an object from it. It was a small ring-type clasp that had tiny, sharp spikes poking out in all directions. He clamped it to his member and pushed himself and the ring into her.

Sexual pain--what a sick cunt!

This was not Snape's cup of tea. Yes, he had done some horrible things to Miss Granger, but nothing that would ever hurt her like this. Between the stench of the cleaning solution, the old urine, the vomit of the dead woman and now this, Snape was beginning to sweat as he held his own stomach contents down. But he knew he couldn't turn away nor do anything about it--Voldemort thrived on seeing how long his victims could last before they died--and if he disobeyed by turning away, he was sure the torture

that would be brought onto him would be extremely slow and painful, drawing out his death for as long as possible.

Snape looked at Jezzie--she was covering her eyes. He couldn't even imagine what was in store for her.

He looked back at the scene. Harder and faster, Davis fucked her. She tried fighting with her upper body, screaming for help, but Davis held her in place--she was no match for him; he was over six feet tall. Blood seeped out and down onto the dirty floor--a small puddle was forming between his feet. Finally, he let out a satisfied groan, squirting his cum deep into her.

Snape presumed that he was finally finished, but he was wrong. After Davis pulled out of her and cleaned himself up, he walked over to the table holding the rusted instruments and picked up extremely thin and long scissors. Before he continued, he placed a Silencing Charm on her, and since she was half-way down the table, he used the leather strap in the center to lock her head down onto the table.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bella dancing from foot to foot--she also thrived on sexual pain. He noticed that her hand was between her legs, circling madly over her robes. Snape couldn't watch any more of this cruelty. He scanned the circle looking for a junior Death Eater. He needed someone who wouldn't have the powers to notice that he was searching their thoughts.

Ah, Ferguson.

He relaxed as he slipped into the young man's mind. He quickly went searching for childhood memories--anything to not have to watch the disgusting performance--but he wasn't quick enough. He caught a glimpse of Davis running the tip of the scissors over her nipples, then the opening of the instrument over her hardened tit. Suddenly, he was watching Ferguson waddle around in a nappie with his thumb in his mouth, holding a wand. A stout woman was chasing after him, laughing as the tiny boy ran, flicking the wand at objects around the house. Yellow sparks shot out of the tip each time he did it, and the little boy would squeal with laughter. Then, another memory floated into his mind. Ferguson was lying underneath a tree reading when a bunch of silly girls walked by him. He quickly eyed one with long strawberry-blond hair. She looked over at him, blushing, and gave a small wave. Snape felt the emotions of the young man--the fluttering of his stomach, the twitch of his cock and the rapid heartbeat in his chest.

Feeling like he had been relieved for long enough, Snape slowly pulled out of his mind.

He saw Davis giving a slight bow before he walked back to his place in the circle. Snape couldn't look at the woman, but he knew that behind that silencing charm, she was moaning in pain and wasn't dead.

She was slowly bleeding to death.

Finally, Voldemort pointed to Jezzie, whose eyes were as round as Galleons. "Bring her forward."

Greyback and Rodolphus stepped from the circle, each grabbed an arm and dragged her towards Voldemort.

"Why did you pick her?" he asked a final time.

"Several reasons, my Lord. First, she is a Muggle that knows about our world. Second, she is the Muggle cousin of Hermione Granger, who is best friends with Harry Potter. And third, because she was seen being a bit too cozy with a fellow Death Eater--a man who should be considered a traitor!"

Ah. So that's why they beat the shit out of me that night. They followed me and saw me fucking socializing with Hermione and her idiot cousin instead of catching one of the trio and bringing her to Voldemort! So they took it upon themselves to--

"And who would that be?" Voldemort asked. His pet, Nagini, slithered next to him and placed her large head in his lap. A white, thin finger emerged from the dark green robes and stroked the top of her head.

"Severus Snape, my Lord," Greyback said.

Nosy bastards!

"Severusssss? Explain yourself," Voldemort said, looking deeply into Snape's eyes.

Snape tried swallowing the dryness that suddenly overtook his mouth and let all thoughts of Hermione drift to the back of his mind.

"My Lord, I was gaining information and had a role to play to achieve my goals. If I captured Miss Granger, then my position as a spy in the Order would have been ruined. This girl," he said, gesturing to Jezzie, "knows of our world, so much in fact that she could nearly pass as a squib--I was merely trying to retrieve all the information from her that I could."

"He's lying. That could have been easily done--you didn't have to walk arm in arm with her--you didn't have to hold doors open or do any of that nonsense! You enjoyed it! My Lord, I believe that he is in love with the girl and is jeopardizing all of us!" Greyback growled.

"Severusssss, he has a point. Why go to all that trouble? You could have gained anything you wanted within a few moments. Do you love her?"

Red eyes gazed into his own, and he could feel the intrusion on his mind--the searching for... something.

And since he in no way loved Jezzie, he let Voldemort search his memories.

"No, I have no feelings about the Muggle whatsoever," he said after he felt Voldemort leave.

"He's telling the truth. I knew it couldn't be true--Severusss loves no one, not even himself. So, Rodolphus, what use is she to me?"

"She could lead us to Harry Potter via Hermione Granger."

"You fool. I know where Harry Potter is located! You know my plans--you know Dumbledore must be killed first before I can touch the boy! So what good would she do me? None! Kill her and make it quick," Voldemort hissed. He clearly was in a foul mood because his time had been wasted.

Jezzie was looking at Severus, tears falling down her face--she was pleading with her eyes. Rodolphus pointed his wand at her--

"Wait," Severus said just before the other man could cast the Killing Curse.

"She could be of use, my Lord," Snape said.

Voldemort faced him and Rodolphus dropped his arm and glared. Bella snorted.

Snape glided over to Jezzie. Her eyes were puffy, her face was as red as a strawberry, and her body was trembling.

"She could become a spy for us." He cocked his head at her as though gauging her usefulness. "Miss Granger tells her everything-*everything* Dumbledore does--this could be our chance to get a step ahead of him--to know his next movement and eventually capture and kill him, my Lord."

"Yesss," Voldemort whispered, his attention now sparked.

Snape walked behind her and gripped her upper arms, tilted his head to her ear and in a soothing voice, he said, "You would like to help us out, wouldn't you? It could be so very... beneficial to you." He released her left arm and swept her hair to the opposite shoulder, then he ran his hand down her neck, slowly.

"You're jealous of Hermione. I can feel it."

"I-I'm not jealous of her-r," Jezzie stuttered.

"You can't lie to me, you know. Deep down inside, you wish you could have the powers that she does--it's only natural. For example, wouldn't you love to be able to do this?" He reached into his pocket and pulled his wand out and waved it quickly over her body. She was suddenly wearing beautiful, blue robes. Another flick of his wand and they disappeared, leaving her naked once more.

Still standing behind her, he ran his right hand down her arm and snaked his hand under hers, lifting it straight out and pointing it at Greyback. His fingers opened wide, hers were limp as they rested on top of his. "Or how about this?" Sparks flew from of his fingertips and hit Greyback squarely in the chest, changing his black robe into a pink, flowering design. He chuckled into her ear before saying, "You could feel the magic leave my hand, yes?"

"Y-yes," Jezzie said, as she leaned against Snape's chest. He lowered their arms.

"You want that power," he stated.

"Yes!" Jezzie cried.

"And you can have it," he whispered into her ear. "I can make you a witch if you become a spy for us."

Snape saw a few of his fellow Death Eaters looking at each other and whispering. They were most likely questioning his method. Only Voldemort was grinning--even Lucius looked confused.

Yessss. Very well done, Severusss, Voldemort said in his mind.

Snape knew he couldn't give the girl any powers, but he needed her to believe that he could--she must agree of her own accord. He could have easily placed the Muggle under the Imperius Curse, but he knew the magic of the curse. She would fight the spell, and Miss Granger would certainly suspect her as being under the influence of the enchantment.

So, instead of placing her under that curse, he was going to have her make an Unbreakable Vow to him. It would be stronger than the Imperius Curse because *hément* was true--she *wanted* to be a spy because she desperately wanted to be a witch. Of course, the girl probably didn't know how the Unbreakable Vow worked and wouldn't know the difference if he didn't promise her anything in return.

"Will you do that for me, Jezebel?" he said in a soft, coaxing tone.

"Yes."

"Excellent."

He turned her around, snapped his fingers at Lucius and motioned for the blond man to come and stand next to him. He caressed her hand between his and looked at his friend. "Be the bonder of an Unbreakable Vow," he stated.

Lucius touched the tip of his wand to their joined hands.

"Do you vow, Jezebel, that you will become a spy on my behalf?" he asked.

"Yes, I promise."

A red jet of light flew out and wrapped itself around their hands. Jezzie gasped at the magic binding them, but Snape gripped her hand tightly to bring her eyes back to his.

"Finish the bonding, Lucius," he said, eyes never leaving Jezebel's. He wanted it done quickly before she remembered that he had promised to make her a witch, and she attempted to trap him in a reciprocal vow.

As soon as the bonding was over, Snape quickly removed his hand. After the last vow he had been forced into making, he had promised himself he would never tie his soul to someone like that again. He felt disgusted by having to do so again.

"Now, the rest of you continue doing your duties and watch for anyone else who attempts sabotage our cause. Oh, and Severusss, make sure the Muggle is returned safely to her home. We don't want anyone to miss her presence if our plan is going to succeed," Voldemort said, thereby ending the meeting. Within seconds, the Death Eaters and Voldemort had all Disapparated, leaving Severus alone with Jezzie and the bodies of the two other women.

She flinched as he pointed his wand at her. With a swish, she was dressed in a black t-shirt and trousers.

"T-thank you."

He nodded and turned around so that he could hook his arm through hers and do a Side-Along, but the sight of the two women in the beds stopped him. He scowled at the two bodies on the tables, pissed off that he had been left to dispose of the evidence. Again. Of course, he could simply leave them like he usually did--Muggles rarely ventured up here anymore, believing the old hospital haunted. He tightened his grip on Jezzie's arm, intending once more to Apparate. But he noticed the chestnut eyes that were frozen open, staring at death.

Hermione, he thought. What if that woman had been her? He would *never* leave her like this, like carrion for stray dogs. Of course, he would never allow anyone to touch her in that manner to begin with.

Aggravated at himself for no discernible reason, he sighed heavily and said, "Stay here."

Slowly, he walked over to the beds. He ran his wand over the first woman, vanishing all signs of her sick, blood and foam. He sliced the leather straps off her body, then used the same spell as he had on Jezzie to cover her body in a black robe. Finally, he placed his fingers on her eyelids and pushed them closed.

He walked over to the blond woman, removed the Silencing Charm, and was horrified to hear her weak whimpers. She wasn't dead yet. He carefully unlocked the metal that was holding her legs wide open and lowered them slowly down, careful not to slip in the puddle of blood. Then, he removed the leather strap across her forehead, looked into her eyes and said, "You will suffer no more." He pointed his wand at her, closed his eyes and found the strength he needed to shout, "*Avada Kedavra!*" A jet of green light shot from his wand. He placed his fingers over her now lifeless eyes and closed them as well--before also covering her body in a black robe.

Then, he spelled the bodies to float in front of him. As he walked past Jezzie, he said, "Follow me."

He went outside, to the side of the building which faced no other Muggle habitats and laid the bodies on the ground. Then, using a blasting spell, he made a large hole in the ground. He magically lowered the bodies into the grave and covered them with the excess dirt. A few more waves of his wand, and sticks and litter from the area covered the freshly dug earth, concealing the new grave.

He turned to Jezzie, grabbed her arm and spun.

They landed in front of Hermione's house.

"Sev--"

"Shh," he said cutting her off. "I'll be in touch."

Then, he held the wand to her forehead and Obliviated all her memories of the night, leaving only the part about the Unbreakable Vow--she needed to know what she had promised him, even if she did not know why she had. He also told her to come up with a lie as to why she was at Hermione's house in the middle of the night. The girl agreed, and he took one look at Hermione's window before he Disapparated back to Hogwarts.

Up Next: Jezebel learns something useful. And Snape's boggart makes an appearance.

I Want You To Want Me

Chapter 8 of 32

It's the weekend--Hermione has fun, while Severus works... and faces his fears.

A/N: A special thanks to my betas, Lariope and Lulabelle72. You both worked very hard on this chapter and held my hand my hand through all the re-writes. I love you both. And to RedSkyAtNight, who just returned from holiday and found the time to Brit-pick my little chapter--you are an amazing woman.

Hermione was glad to finally be back at her parents' house after spending the week alone with Severus Snape. So much had happened in that week--from seeing him injured to helping him heal, to discovering the Grotto and waking up naked in his bed. She was relieved when Dumbledore had walked into the library one morning with a grin painted across his face and a twinkle in his eye. He had thanked her for staying and looking after the castle... and Snape, while he was away. He had told her that she could go home for the weekend, and Severus would Floo to her house Monday morning to escort her back to the school, where she would continue her research.

Overjoyed at her dismissal, she had sprinted from the library up to her guest room on the seventh floor, packed her belongings and jolted down the stairs to the headmaster's office where she Flooded herself home. She had never wanted to leave Hogwarts so badly before; Hogwarts was her home as much as her parents' house, but with all that had transpired that week, she had felt that she needed to get away and clear her mind. Suddenly, she had a brief pang as she realized that she might really miss Severus that weekend, but of course, he wouldn't miss her at all, and besides, it would be wonderful to be in her own house again.

Hermione was finally lying in bed her own bed, comfortably propped up on her headboard reading a good mystery novel, when the musical chimes from the doorbell sprang to life.

She froze--her heart nearly jumped out of her chest. Her ears perked up, listening for something dangerous. Again, the doorbell rang, and she whirled around to look at the digital clock on her bedside table.

2:08 a.m.

Her parents were away for the weekend, and she was alone in the house. After she had found Severus Snape lurking in her home that afternoon where he practically invited himself to lunch with her and Jezzie, Hermione had begun placing protective wards on her home to keep magical sources, such as unwanted Death Eaters, out of her home. Tonight, however, the alarms had never activated. And she had never dreamed that any Death Eater would ring her doorbell like a Muggle--especially at this hour.

She slipped out of her bed and grabbed her wand from the bedside table. She walked past the floor-length mirror and glanced at herself--she surely looked ready to attack an intruder in her purple striped, cotton pants and matching t-shirt, her frizzy, unwashed hair pulled back into a pony-tail high upon her head, bouncing with every step she took. She tiptoed down the hall, careful to avoid the squeaky floor board in front of the bathroom door, down the stairs, wand at the ready, and to the front door. She hesitantly peered out the peephole and was surprised to see her cousin standing there with her arms wrapped around her body, shifting from foot to foot.

Hermione hastily removed the wards and unlocked the door. "Jezzie? Are you okay?" she said as she opened the door.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I think. I--I was on my way over here when I crashed my car into a ditch."

Hermione gasped. "Are you hurt? Come inside!" she said, pulling her cousin over the threshold and looking her over for cuts or bruises.

"No, I'm fine. It wasn't a big deal. I think I fainted, though; I feel a bit groggy. Actually, it's funny, I was dreaming about being surrounded by a bunch of men in black... Then, I woke up to find myself lying across the front seat, and my car in a ditch. My mobile died so I just walked over here--I knew you'd be awake."

"I think we still need to take you to the hospital, just to make sure everything is--"

"I said, I'm fine!" Jezzie shouted.

Hermione was concerned, but she knew her cousin all too well--she was a stubborn arse. And Hermione had plenty of experience in dealing with stubborn arses, so she let her be. *If I get the chance, I'm going to scan her with my wand... Just to make sure she's okay.*

"Well, come inside, and I'll put the kettle on," Hermione said, walking towards the kitchen.

"So, what's new with you? Anything exciting going on with the Order?" Jezzie asked, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"Oh, loads! We had a meeting tonight," Hermione said while pouring water into the electric kettle. She switched it on and took two mugs from the cupboard.

"Really?" Jezzie said softly.

"Dumbledore returned a few days ago. It seems that Voldemort and his Death Eaters have been trying to bring down Beauxbatons. Now we know his reach extends beyond our immediate area. So, we've come up with a plan to help protect Madam Maxime and her students."

"I thought everyone was safe because of that charm that hides people?"

"The Fidelius Charm? Oh, well, of course they are under that for the school. However, Dumbledore believes the Secret Keeper had told the wrong people the location because there was an attack on the school last week," Hermione said as she poured the steaming water from the electric kettle into the mugs. Before Jezzie could ask, Hermione added a splash of milk and some sugar to hers, just the way she preferred it.

"Can't he just ask Severus to find out who knows the location?"

"Well, I suppose he could... if Professor Snape had attended the meeting. I presume he was at ~~an~~ *another* meeting," Hermione said, handing her cousin a fresh cup of tea.

Jezzie took a sip while Hermione sat across from her and stared into her mug, looking at the swirling dark liquid and wondering how Snape's meeting had gone tonight--if he was able to get out of it unscathed.

After several moments, Jezzie said, "What's the plan?"

"It's brilliant!" Hermione said excitedly. "Dumbledore suggested that they needed a new Fidelius Charm and Secret Keeper--someone that isn't associated with Beauxbatons. So, I volunteered! But what is great about this is that Dumbledore and Madam Maxime altered the charm so that the Secret Keeper can only tell ten people the location, before he or she loses the power. It then goes to the first person that the Secret Keeper told. Then, that person can only tell ten people.

"For example, I was put under the charm and told Madam Maxime, then Dumbledore. So, after I tell eight more people, then it will be Madam Maxime's turn to tell ten people. When she's finished, the Secret Keeper's power goes to Dumbledore and he tells ten people. When my tenth person has told his ten people, then the power goes to the first person that *my* first person told, so it would go to Madam Maxime's first person, and so on. It's a brilliant idea because the Secret Keeper keeps rotating."

"What if the Secret Keeper tells the wrong person? Eventually that person will have access to the school and tell other people that shouldn't be able to get inside. Right?"

"Well, that's what I thought when I first heard the plan. However, with this new charm, it detects a person's intentions. For example, if someone accidentally gave away the location to a Death Eater. When it becomes the Death Eater's turn to be Secret Keeper, he wouldn't be able to tell anyone else because it is his intention to do harm to the place under the Fidelius Charm. So, when this person can't tell anyone the location, we will know that he or she is... well, a bad guy."

"Oh. But the Death Eater would still know the location, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes. But that person wouldn't be able to spread the word, and then we would catch the rat."

"Shouldn't this charm be able to stop the Secret Keeper before they tell a bad person?"

"Only if it's their intention to do harm to the place being protected. There are still a few kinks that need to be adjusted, and Dumbledore is continuing to work on the magical properties of the charm, but we needed something fast, and this is what he was able to produce under a time constraint. As of now, if the Secret Keeper's intentions were to cause trouble, they couldn't tell anyone. But if it were an accident because he didn't know that the person he was telling would turn against us, then yes, he or she would know the location.

"So, since I have no internal intentions to ever harm Beauxbatons, I can easily say that Beauxbatons Academy of Magic is located in Marseilles, France at the end of Avenue des Pébrons, hidden in the hills. So, if you were a witch, you'd be able to find Beauxbatons!" Hermione said excitedly, giggling as she stood up and went to the cupboard looking for a snack.

"Yes, if only I were a witch," Jezzie murmured.

Hermione was too busy pulling biscuits out of the tin to see the evil glare that her cousin was giving her, as jealousy flickered in the depths of her eyes.

Hermione spent the weekend hanging out with her cousin and enjoying a break from the madness of the wizarding war. As soon as Jezzie had fallen asleep after appearing at Hermione's house, she had performed a diagnostic spell over her body, to insure that the accident hadn't hurt her cousin internally. Nothing had been found, so Hermione had decided not to speak about it again since it was a touchy subject for her cousin.

After spending most of Saturday at the beach, Hermione Apparated both of them to Jezzie's flat--to clean up and get ready to go dancing at a club near Jezzie's pub. Hermione felt adventurous and wore a pale blue, strapless dress--something that had been hidden away in her wardrobe--charmed her hair straight and borrowed a pair of wedge sandals from Jezzie.

When they walked into the dark, loud room, Jezzie was quickly surrounded by a circle of men, who wanted her attention. Hermione was used to this and stood off to the side, but she was surprised when a tall, blond man approached her.

"Hello, beautiful," he said in a deep voice. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Hermione felt herself blush. "Sure," she said and walked with him over to the bar. He ordered two beers, handed her one and leaned against the bar. He wasn't overly large in the muscles, but Hermione couldn't help but notice his arms and the way they dipped and curved, accentuating the bulge of his biceps. Hermione took a sip of her beer, then realized that he was eyeing her as well, specifically her chest. This time, she took a large gulp. No one ever looked at her like that--not even when she dated Ron briefly.

"You like what you see? 'Cause I know I do," the American said, smirking.

Hermione nodded her head, smiling.

"You're quiet," he stated. "But we can fix that." He turned back to the barman and ordered two shots of... something. Hermione downed her beer, urging herself to relax, that it was okay to feel pretty and to be wanted sexually.

She sat her glass bottle down as he handed her an orange shot glass full of a strong smelling liquid. They clinked their glasses together and drank. It burned as it went down, and immediately Hermione felt dizzy and flushed. She felt his hands around her waist, pulling her closer to his body. Then, she felt a cool breeze on her neck. He moved her hair to the side and was blowing on her skin gently, giving her goosebumps.

She looked over his shoulder onto the crowded dance floor, but she felt like she was spinning. The room was dark, and the only light was coming from a strobe light that made her extremely dizzy. She squeezed her eyes shut. The music was unrecognizable sounds to her ears--harsh sounds that vibrated through her chest. She tried stepping backward, but was caught off guard by the hand that began sliding up her thigh and around her round arse.

She felt herself dampening her cotton knickers, but suddenly she was panicked. Her heart felt constricted, like it was being sat on by an elephant. And the higher he traveled, the worse she felt. Was it the alcohol? Was she having another reaction like she did with the elf-made wine that Snape gave her?

Then, when she felt his fingers under the hem of her knickers, sweeping around her soft curls, Hermione had a sudden urge to vomit. She pushed away from him with all of her might, grabbed her stomach and doubled over, screaming in pain.

She opened her eyes when she heard Jezzie calling her name. Somehow, she was now standing in the bathroom.

"What happened?" her cousin asked worriedly.

Hermione faced the wall and leaned her forehead against the cool, tan ceramic tiles.

"I don't know. I think it was the drinks--you don't think he put anything in it do you?" she said softly, worried.

"How are you feeling now?"

"I feel... better, but scared," Hermione whispered. She opened her beaded handbag, pulled her wand out and clutched it to her chest. She needed to feel something familiar in a place that was so cold and strange. She needed to feel like Hermione Granger again. With a flick of her wand, she did a diagnostic spell over herself--much like the one she did on Jezzie--but everything was fine. No poison or drugs--just alcohol.

"Phone a taxi. We're going home. I don't want to Apparate us feeling so..."

"I understand," Jezzie said, leaving the bathroom.

Hermione walked over to the sink, splashed cold water on her face and waited for her cousin to return.

She had spent the night at Jezzie's flat, and the next morning, after sleeping until noon, she returned home. She felt fine, but was still a little shook up by the sudden illness, so she lazed around her house most of the day. She ate ice cream and read two smutty romance novels--she even fulfilled her own desires that night in her bubble bath. Even with the excitement of the night before, the weekend had been relaxing, but Monday morning rolled around quickly, and Snape had arrived, promptly at eight, to escort her to the school. She was surprised that seeing him--dour though he was, as usual--made her heart flutter a little in her chest. She swallowed and forced herself to greet him with her own usual warmth.

"Good morning, Severus," she said, as she walked into her living room, smiling.

He nodded.

"Let me quickly clean up; my parents will be home later this afternoon and will expect the house to be tidy."

"Did you not understand that I was to escort you back at eight this morning? Do you think that I have nothing better to do than act as babysitter for a girl with no understanding of time?"

Hermione ignored him as she stood in the middle of the room, and using non-verbal magic, she flicked her wand at the books that were lying around the room, floating them all into a nice and neat stack by the foot of the stairs. Then, she floated the stacks up the stairs and into her room. She did a few quick slashes in the air, and the couch cushions were fluffed, the pillows were organized nicely, the dust disappeared, the curtains were pulled back to let the sunlight in, and a nice lavender smell filled the room.

After she was finished, she picked up her tote, which was filled with more books, and slung it onto her shoulder. "Okay, I'm ready."

Snape was still standing in front of the fireplace. "You have an obsession with books," he said.

"So do you," she snapped back.

"No, I don't. I enjoy books, but I'm not obsessed with them./can leave home without a book attached to my hip... unlike you."

Hermione huffed. "You know I need these for the research I am doing at Hogwarts. Besides, I don't always carry a book with me."

"Oh, really. When was the last time you went anywhere without a book?"

Hermione thought about that for a second. *Bugger. He's right.*

"Well?" he asked, cocking his eyebrow.

"Fine, you're right. Excuse me for loving books. Apparently, you know nothing of what an obsession can do to a person, and that's why you are criticizing me," she said in a snippy tone.

He looked at her directly in the eye and grinned. "I know more about obsessions than you give me credit for. That's why I mention *your*s. Because I do understand. And I can relate."

Both of Hermione's eyebrows rose. She was shocked--he was trying to connect with her, and she was being rude. She mentally kicked herself for being an arse.

"Oh. Well, if it isn't books, then what type of fixation do you have?"

He chuckled. "I'm positive that you'll guess mine over time."

"That's quite a challenge--guessing Severus Snape's fascination. And you're sure it's not books? Because I've seen your collection." she said, teasing him as she stepped into the Floo.

He chuckled softly and stood in the fireplace next to her. "Inanimate objects are not worth my time," he said right before he tossed Floo powder onto the ashy ground of the fireplace and shouted their location.

Inanimate objects? Hermione thought as she stepped into the Headmaster's office.

"I'll be in my office for most of the day, if you need me," Snape said, walking past her.

"Ah, Miss Granger. Did you have an enjoyable weekend?" Dumbledore asked. He was sitting in a cushioned chair that sat in front of his private library. He was holding a book about American Film Classics in one hand and a piece of toast in the other.

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"A person must rejuvenate their mind, body, soul and spirit from time to time, Miss Granger. Otherwise, we all would crumble like burnt toast," he said, smiling.

"Is that how you relax?" she asked, nodding toward the book. "By reading things that have nothing to do with our world?"

"Only when I can't go on a holiday to the Caribbean."

Hermione giggled, then started toward the door.

"Oh, by the way... Mr Potter and Mr Weasley are waiting for you in your guest quarters," he called after her.

The boys! Hermione hadn't seen them for almost two weeks--they had been on location for their Auror training. She hadn't been away from them for this long since the

summer between their six and seventh years, and she had felt like a part of her had been missing since they had left.

Hermione waited until she was out of Dumbledore's office before she took off in a sprint up to the seventh floor, smiling from ear to ear.

Severus Snape's weekend had been far less relaxing.

After leaving Jezzie at the end of the Revel, Snape returned to Hogwarts, wanting the strenuous night to be over. He looked forward to drinking half a bottle of whatever spirit he had in his cabinet and crawling into his soft bed. But as soon as he walked into his office, he noticed a familiar blue envelope waiting on his desk. He huffed, then walked over to the table, sat down, tore open the thick envelope and read the letter. After he finished, he rifled through the large package, looking at the rest of the contents. All of a sudden, he angrily threw everything across the room.

Every summer, Snape had been asked to write several articles about different topics within the Potions world to be featured in the most prestigious journal that was printed in all of Europe and North America--this was his chance to speak to an audience of his peers, and he felt that it was really worth his time. The wizards and witches who read these journals were by no means dunderheads, and he looked forward to writing about topics that would stimulate the wizarding world.

He had begun writing these articles thirteen years ago and had made quite a name for himself since then. Well, Severus Snape wasn't famous, but his counterpart, Sullivan Samuels, was. He also had attended conferences and seminars across the globe, speaking about his skills and research, and offering advanced classes to those who could pay for his services, which were not cheap. And because of this, he had made a small fortune; although, no one would know it by the way he lived. At first, when he had begun making almost as much as he had teaching, he spent his money frivolously, but now it piled up his vault at Gringotts.

There had been times over the years--well, several times a week during the entire school term--when he had wished that writing articles and giving lectures had been his permanent occupation; because of the circumstances of his *real* job as a spy, however, he had to teach. But he had always looked forward to his summer break, when he would have the time to do the thing he enjoyed the most.

But not this year.

This year was different. This year, Hermione was finally in his grasp. During the last few years, when she was still his student, he always had his articles, conferences, and classes to help take his mind off her. But this year... She wasn't protected under Hogwarts magic any more--she was no longer a student, and as soon as the special charm to protect her well-being lifted, she became a sitting duck for Death Eaters.

Snape was irritated that he would have to leave for the weekend to speak before a bunch of Italians about how to mix a proper Draught of Living Death and how to refrain from suffering its effects. In fact, 'irritated' was mild. He was furious that this letter showed up tonight and that he would have to leave town and couldn't keep an eye on her. It was even more important to keep an eye on his most valuable possession after the events of tonight's revel.

What if something happened to her while he was gone? He knew Greyback and Lestrage were still intent on exacting their revenge on him, and they had managed to capture her cousin. Although Hermione was powerful, she would never stand a chance against those two disgusting bastards. What if they broke her? Or worse. She was his, and he couldn't suffer the thought of leaving the country--and leaving her.

He stalked to his bed, pulled out the bottle of gin that was in his bedside cabinet, took several swigs and fell onto his bed. He would deal with this predicament in the morning.

Snape woke up Saturday morning in a nasty mood, having had less than five hours of sleep. As soon as he dressed, he went straight to Dumbledore's office where he nearly begged Dumbledore to make Hermione stay at the castle. He even went so far as to concoct a story, saying that it was rumored that she was a prime target, and insisted that he was concerned for her safety while he was away. The old man just smiled at him, assuring him that she would be safe and would be watched over.

This only inflamed Snape further. Who? Who the bloody hell was watching over his woman? That was his job. No one else knew her like he did. No one else would know that between ten fifteen and eleven twenty-five on Sunday night, Hermione would take a bubble bath and would fall asleep in it for about twenty-five minutes and be in her most vulnerable state. How would anyone be able to protect her if they didn't know her schedule?

Feeling as though his hands were tied, he gathered the scattered papers he had tossed across the room last night and reluctantly left Hogwarts. In a foul mood. He Apparated to the Ministry and used an international Portkey to travel to Florence.

One of the letters inside the blue envelope contained directions to the hotel he would be staying at, along with a key and room number. He quickly found his location and checked into his room. An hour later, he was in the ballroom of the hotel giving two lectures to a nearly full audience.

He finally finished speaking after seven, but wasn't able to get back to his room until nine due to the annoying people that wanted to meet the charming Sullivan Samuels, who had been invited by several people to join them for a late dinner. Snape, not having a moment to himself in hours, stomped to his room to clean up before he had to meet his party at ten in the hotel restaurant. He seriously thought about leaving and forgetting about his alter ego, but then he realized that eating dinner with people who had no idea that a notorious Death Eater was sitting with them was going to make the evening much more bearable.

Snape was finishing his entree, when he suddenly began to feel nauseous. He sat very still, breathing slowly, thinking it was his anger over his impotence literally eating away at him, and tried to calm himself and resume eating. But the roiling in his stomach grew too much, and he began to feel violently ill.

He stood up and said in a rushed voice, "It has been a lovely evening, but I've traveled and given two lectures today. Pardon me while I turn in for the night." He nodded quickly, dropped some Italian money from the blue envelope and left the restaurant.

He reached his room at almost a run, sweat beading on his brow. His stomach was twisting in knots, and his heart felt like it was being carved out of his chest by a wooden spoon. As soon as he entered the room, he fell to his knees and crawled to the small bed, pulling himself onto it. Clutching the sheets, he screamed his agony into the pillows. Not even when his Dark Mark burned fiercely when Voldemort had been a bad mood, or those times he had been nearly beaten to death, had he felt pain like this. It was internal, like his insides were being shredded by the claws of an angry dragon. The pain intensified, and his mind searched frantically for an answer--had he been poisoned? Suddenly, the pain ceased. He rolled onto his back and wiped his forehead onto his sleeve, breathing slowly through his nose and out of his mouth. It took him a few minutes to regain his composure and realize what had happened.

Hermione had nearly broken the promise she had made to him while they were in the Grotto.

Promise that I will be the only man that you will ever want and will ever be with. Promise me! The words of the promise rang in his mind.

Oh, yes. This sudden illness and the actual hurting of his heart had been the start of the effects of the Grotto. He had known about the consequences of broken promises, but he hadn't expected to feel them as well--he had thought the person who had made the promise would suffer--not both parties.

Which meant that Hermione was in the presence of someone she desired and wanted, and that other person had wanted her in return. But the pain had stopped; he could only assume that she had felt the same pain as he and left the situation.

And if he was at home, watching over her like always, she never would have been in that position to begin with. He would have made sure of that.

As he had lain in the bed, regaining his strength, he mentally pictured his Hermione out in a pub somewhere, looking sexy in a blue dress... a boy buying her drinks... her knickers dampening as she gazed into the eyes of a stupid, blond, American bastard!

His eyes suddenly popped opened. *Bloody hell*. He realized that in his fit of anger, he'd delved into her mind from across the continent. This was the first time he had been able to do that sort of Legilimency. Voldemort had been known for being able to dip into the minds of others from across the globe, but he had never had the power to do it. Until now.

He didn't bother wondering how he had so suddenly achieved this connection; his thoughts were solely on Hermione. So that's the type of person she wants. A blond idiot. He sat up in bed, fuming. "She's not supposed to desire anyone but me!" he shouted as he leapt from the bed. He looked at himself in the mirror before applying a glamour. Dark circles outlined his eyes, his hair was tangled and matted from thrashing around on the bed in pain, and there was even white spit fizzing out of the corner of his tightly squeezed lips. But after he applied the glamour, he became a blond, blue-eyed, straight nosed swine.

This was what she wanted. And it made Snape disgusted. He desperately wanted to go back home and show her the difference between that blond oaf and a man such as himself, but his return Portkey wasn't until Sunday night, he didn't have a connection to a Floo and would not be able to Apparate because his agitated state of mind was not clear enough for such a long distance.

Swept up in his anger, he decided to go fetch him a few blond men and use them as... What was the expression? Oh, yes... a punch-bag. He disguised himself so that Severus Snape, the famous Potions master of Hogwarts and Sullivan Samuels, the famous author, would not become wanted men in Italy.

As soon as he finished taking his anger out on three unsuspecting blonds, he returned to his room, feeling somewhat better, and tucked in for the night.

On Sunday, he rose early and tried to reach her mind once again, but failed. He should have known it wouldn't work, because using Legilimency across that much distance had seemed to depend on his emotions, but at least he could say that he attempted. He was scheduled for three lectures today... three, long lectures and lunch with the editors of the journal.

He felt like he was being released from a cage Sunday evening, after his lectures concluded. He quickly made his way to the Italian Ministry location to take his Portkey back home.

But instead of going to Hogwarts, he went straight to Hermione's house. Two Aurors were standing by the front door, keeping watch. He looked up to her window, but saw only darkness. Not wanting to Disillusion himself or perform any magic in case the Aurors were alert for it, he started sneaking around her house, hiding behind trees, ducking behind bushes and staying in the dark shadows like a Muggle burglar. He wanted to see the *other* window. Her bathroom window.

Although the curtains were drawn, a flicker of light showed between the narrow opening where the two curtains met in the middle.

Right on schedule, he thought as he pulled his pocket watch out and looked at the time. It was five minutes after eleven.

Remembering what he had seen in her mind, rage began to pour through him. Without thinking of the consequences, he began to break her wards. Wards ~~that~~ she had taught her to use before the trio had gone on that blasted scavenger hunt for Horcruxes. Wards that she still was using to protect her home.

After removing the last of the enchantments, he Apparated inside, landing downstairs in the living room. He waited for the crash through the door signaling the Aurors' arrival, but all was silent outside. He mentally congratulated the Aurors on being such imbeciles; they should have been patrolling the house rather than standing at the doorway, and they hadn't noticed the magic going on at the side of the house.

Levitating himself, he glided upstairs, ready to surprise her with his presence and immediately begin barraging her with insults and demands. But he stopped in the hall; he heard the sound of water running and Hermione... Hermione was whimpering. He immediately stopped levitating and pulled his wand out, ready to kill the person who was making her cry. Darting over to the open door, *Avada Kedavra* ready on his lips, he stopped short as he heard Hermione shout, "Oh, Severus! Oh, god! I want you!"

Surprised, Snape nearly dropped his wand and stood rooted to the floor. After a second, he peeked into the bathroom, while hiding his body behind the wall. Hermione was lying on her back, elbows propping her upper body up, her legs spread wide, heels digging into the wall while the stream of water from the faucet splashed onto her clit. Back and forth she rocked her hips, her wet tits standing on end and jiggling with each movement. Her head was tilted backward, her hair splayed behind her, the ends soaking in a small puddle of water, eyes closed and her mouth slack from moaning.

Again, she called his name, crying out that she wished that he would shag her senseless, that she wanted to feel his fingers, his tongue, his cock, inside her.

Snape was mesmerized. She was a siren.

He had always fantasized about watching Hermione fondle herself, lusting after *him*, the same way he would do for her. Of course, he had never thought she had the perverse mind that he did. And yet again, she surprised him. He couldn't stop watching her wiggle, the way her head bent backward revealing the lines of her slender neck, the way she opened herself even wider at the moment of her orgasm and how her pink quim seemed to be calling him.

His cock throbbed beneath his trousers, aching to be released and touched, but for once, he was frozen in place, not knowing what else to do but to watch his subject and ignore his own demands.

As soon as she finished, she slid up the length of the tub, laid her back against the side, and closed her eyes, waiting for the water to finish filling the tub. Lazily, she turned her head to the side. A book was lying on a chair and next to it, a feathery quill, much like Rita Skeeter's, only in purple. The quill began moving soon as Hermione started speaking out loud.

"Well, Severus Snape, if you knew what I just did, you would probably not be too happy... Thinking how disgusting I am," she said. She shook her head, grabbed a bottle of bubble bath and poured it into the tub. "You had more interest in my cousin, whom you met only once, than you have ever shown in me. You may be a complex person, but you're the only man that I have ever been interested in. It's a pity you would never open yourself up long enough to let a woman like me inside--unless you already have someone special. But I don't think you do. And I know you aren't gay like some of my friends, so there shouldn't be any reason why we couldn't be together. Oh, the things I would do to you if you were mine... The things you would do to me with that nose... And that voice..." she began giggling after that, and instructed the quill to stop writing. Then, she took a large breath of air and slipped completely under the water.

Snape had stumbled backward, hitting the opposite wall with his back. His mind swirled, causing him to feel light-headed. He staggered down the hall, eyes wide open, staring off into nothing.

She wanted him. Really, honestly wanted him. This was impossible! No one wanted Severus Snape, not even his two masters--they always had a use for him, but never truly wanted him.

His heart felt like someone turned its switch on, and it began beating madly. Strange emotions flooded him. He wanted to kiss her then, to take her into his arms. But at the same time, his brain was arguing with his heart, telling him that it was a lie, that she only wanted him because of the promise she had made in the Grotto. But his heart reminded him that the power of the Grotto did not evoke feelings. But she hadn't been calling out for another; she screamed *his* name.

Snape didn't know how he had returned to Hogwarts without Splinching himself. But the next thing he knew, he was standing in front of an old wardrobe that was hidden behind a secret wall in his private chambers. He opened the two doors and took several steps backward, as though in a trance.

Slowly, his boggart emerged from the depths of the darkness. He hadn't faced his fears in quite some time, but after that evening's revelation, he felt he needed to see them once again--to see if he would be able to fight off his many fears, to see if anything inside him had changed, to see if he was going to be able to take the next step and move forward in fighting his demons.

Finally, a perfect copy of Hermione Granger stood before him.

She wore a black knee-length skirt that hugged her form and had a slit up the right side, with a pink, long-sleeved cotton blouse that was tucked into the skirt. The buttons on the front stopped at the top of her cleavage and he could see the black bra, the one with the lace, underneath the fabric of the shirt. Her hair was in perfect soft curls, flowing down her back. In one hand she was holding a book, and in the other, her wand, which was pointing directly at him. Her eyes were narrowed, her lips pursed (not in the cute, pouty way) and her nostrils flared.

Walking toward Snape very slowly, in a tight and controlled voice she said, "No, Severus Snape, I *do not* want you. I hate you; you disgust me. You're a sniveling, filthy, pathetic excuse of a man. You are just a pawn in a game that is being played by both your masters. You are easy to use, easy to manipulate, and *so* easy to throw away! No one will ever love you; you're not worth the time and energy it takes to love a person! You're lower than a maggot eating rotten shit at the bottom of a rubbish bin!"

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed at the boggart Hermione. "She wants me!"

"It's a lie! How could someone as intelligent as Hermione Granger ever want an ugly git like you? How could she ever want a doormat such as yourself? Your mother should have abandoned you in that river like she had planned! And after she decided against it, your Muggle father should have killed you that night you made the television fly across the room, slamming into his collection of his favorite whisky, shattering his two favorite things in life--he should have beat you to death with that filthy cricket bat!"

"SHUT UP!" he yelled, covering his ears. His body was quivering, and already his knees felt ready to give away.

"The only reason you lived that night was because your stupid black cat attacked your father!"

"I loved my cat!" he had cried out, sounding pitiful even to his own ears.

"If you did, you wouldn't have killed it when your father gave you the choice between him killing you, or you killing the cat! You coward! If you really loved that cat, then you should have sacrificed yourself and let him kill you instead!"

"I am NOT A COWARD! I WAS ONLY SEVEN!" he yelled as he sank onto his knees, hands balled up in tight fists. "My fucking drunken father even said that if I had chosen myself, he was going to kill my pet for the hell of it. He would have been brutal! I gave Jynx a quick death--he didn't feel any pain!" Finally, the tears broke free. He sat hunched over, holding himself, crying over his cat--over his first murder, over the one thing he had ever loved with his entire heart.

"See, even now you don't have the courage to stand up to people who force you to do things! Look at you, crying like a little girl who lost her lollipop. Stop sucking in your nasty snot through that crooked, revolting nose of yours," the boggart Hermione said, sneering. She stopped walking and was now standing over him, looking down upon him. She poked the tip of her wand into the side of his nose.

"You know why your mother never mended that hideous nose, don't you? Because every time you looked at yourself, she wanted you to be reminded of why your father left her... Because you outed her as a witch that night you let your magic overtake you and threw the telly across the room. Because your father couldn't handle the truth. It was all your fault. So, she left you with that dreadful nose so you would always know that if your own parents can't love you, then *nobody* ever will."

Snape began murmuring beneath his breath, gripping his wand tighter. His stringy hair was covering his face, and he felt like a beaten animal.

"Have something to say, Snape?" the boggart teased.

"S-she wants me. S-she likes my nose," he had said a little louder.

"What was that, Snape?"

"S-she wants me. She. Wants. Me." he said, standing to his feet, "SHE WANTS ME: SEVERUS SNAPE! CROOKED NOSE AND ALL!" he finally screamed, pointing his wand at the boggart. "RIDIKKULUS!"

The boggart suddenly turned into Dobby, rocking in a chair, knitting socks, and then quickly Snape threw it back into the wardrobe, where he locked it in.

For the first time in his life, he had defeated his boggart. This was one thing that Snape had never been able to do, and he kept it a secret even while he had been a student. At first it had been his father, but it changed during Hermione's third year, when Lupin was the D.A.D.A. teacher. He had accidentally stumbled upon the boggart in the wardrobe one night and was extremely surprised that it changed into a student. He had run out of the room, shaking, and into his bedroom, where he had lain in his bed, covers over him, crying. The morning after, he'd been so angry at himself for letting a stupid boggart scare him nearly to death that he had taken his anger out by visiting a Muggle whore house where he had fucked his hooker, hard and fast. Then, on Monday, he had taken away more House points in that one day than he had for an entire month--which hadn't been unnoticed by the old man who ran the school.

The day had been long, and Snape was mentally exhausted. His last thoughts before passing out on the cold floor were of Hermione. He had made a mistake in wanting to try to hurt her. He chastised himself for ever thinking that he needed to break Hermione Granger mentally and physically before she would submit to him. That had been so foolish. If he had really given her any credit, he should have known that she, of all people, would find something in him that wasn't worthless. That she was the one person who sincerely wanted Severus Snape. And if he let her into his blackened heart, she might one day... love him--something he never had before in his life.

Of course, facing one's fears was a difficult task. But he was Severus Snape. Spy, Death Eater, author, teacher. He could face Voldemort's dangerous magic without batting an eye; he could set out on the life-threatening tasks that Dumbledore set him to, so surely he could be honest with Hermione Granger. He must find out if she could ever love him. And if he wasn't as broken and twisted as he had thought he was, then perhaps, he could love her back in the manner she deserved.

The next morning, his resolutions fresh in his mind, when Snape went to escort her to the school, he had started a small discussion about obsessions with Hermione. He needed her to understand that anyone, including her, could become obsessed with something. That one could let those obsessions cloud their mind and their judgment. He would eventually let her guess that she had been the object of his obsession, but he had hoped that when that time came, she would be willing to understand him more, to not just completely reject him like his boggart had always done.

After leaving her with Dumbledore, Snape returned to his office. His steps were light on the stones; he was in a pleasant mood. She had done exactly as he hoped--she understood about obsessions and even laughed with him over his obscene amount of books, something only *she* would understand.

As he began writing his second article for the Potions journal, he had a sudden jolt of optimism, something very unusual and new to him. He was excited that he would see her later today, if not sooner, that maybe she would need him in some way. He promised himself that their friendly encounters from here on out would be genuine, and that he would try to begin showing her the affection he felt for her. A small thought entered his mind that maybe Dumbledore (and he would never, ever admit this again) had been right--there was something special about love.

Up next: The trio is back together again.

Horcrux Surprise

Chapter 9 of 32

The boys tell Hermione good news.

Hermione left Dumbledore's office, in an excited mood--the boys were waiting for her in her room. She hadn't seen them in over two weeks because of their Auror training. She ran up the stairs and burst through the door, smiling from ear to ear.

"Harry! Ron!"

"Hermione!"

She walked into her room, arms opened, and embraced her best friends. The boys squished her in the middle, Ron's lengthy arms wrapping all of them into a tight hug. Tears welled to her eyes. For a brief moment, she felt like everything in the world was the way it used to be--just the three of them hanging out like when they were younger, before Voldemort came back, before they left school and became adults. Ron began to pull away, but she squeezed around his waist tighter, bringing him back to her body--she wasn't ready to let go.

"Hermione. I can't breathe," Ron teased.

"Oh, Ronald," she said, sniffling. "Stop being such a prat."

Harry chuckled, but it turned into coughing. "Hermione, your hair... It's in my mouth."

She huffed and lowered her arms. "I can't help not wanting to let go of you two. It's been too long."

"We agree," Harry said, smiling at her.

"Come on, it's a nice day out. Let's go for a walk." Hermione put her satchel on the ground. Opening it, she reached inside and grabbed a heavy tome that she had borrowed from the library. But before she lifted it out of the bag, she paused--Snape's words about her not being able to go anywhere without a book echoed in her mind. She let the book fall back into the bag. She smirked to herself--it excited her to prove Snape wrong.

"Could we swing by the kitchens first? I'm starving," Ron said, patting his stomach.

She smiled at him, her eyes still filled with tears. No matter how much their lives changed, some things stayed the same.

"Of course, Ron. Anything you want."

Finally, after gathering Cornish pasties, ham and mustard sandwiches, crisps, and three large slices of chocolate cake, Hermione and the boys walked to a cliff overlooking the Black Lake. They found a large boulder and settled themselves on top of it.

She had told them about *some* of the events of the past week while walking from her room to the kitchen and down to the lake. The boys had been intrigued at hearing how Snape was treating her. Of course, she had kept most things a secret--she wasn't in the mood to hear them bashing Snape.

"So, how's training going? Where have you been?" she asked, after wiping her mouth free of crumbs.

"Eeeeggept," Ron said with his mouth completely filled with food.

"Egypt," Harry clarified.

"Egypt! How exciting! I wish I could go. What have you been doing there?"

"Annncent Meeejek," Ron tried saying while taking a second bite of his sandwich.

Harry looked at him with disgust.

"Whhut?" Ron said, shrugging his shoulders. He chewed three times, and then swallowed. "She asked a question."

Harry turned back to Hermione. "We've been studying Ancient Egyptian curses, spells, hexes, and techniques. Moody says we should be well trained in all different areas of magic and to not ignore history. Constant vigilance! So, we started in Egypt and have been there for two weeks. Where are we going next, Ron? South America?"

"No, not yet. We have to learn about the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas. They have some wicked magic!" Ron said excitedly.

Hermione smiled, but inside, she felt pangs of jealousy. She had always wanted to travel around the world and study other types of magic--to have an adventure. Something that wasn't as sad and horrible as the war.

"You all right?" Ron asked her, patting her knee.

"Yeah, sorry. That's great! I really wish I could do that too. I hope you take Moody seriously and study everything you can; this is an opportunity most people do not get."

"We know. Trust us; we've been working extremely hard. We get a bit homesick, but other than that, it's been an amazing journey, and we have learned so much. In fact, that's why we are here--I mean besides to see you, of course."

Hermione was confused. "What do you mean that's why you are here? What's going on?"

Ron and Harry looked at each other, smirking.

Hermione grinned nervously. "What?"

"You remember how we started researching ancient magic to help with the Horcruxes? And found nothing. Well--"

"You found something!" she shouted.

"Calm down," Ron said. "*We think* we found something while we were in Egypt. But we aren't sure."

Hermione was practically jumping out of her skin with excitement, and she nearly throttled them for teasing her and building the suspense with their story.

"So when we were looking at the artifacts of the chest that we discovered hidden behind a magical ward in that empty pyramid, we noticed that there was a large tome

made of stone. It was extremely heavy, and it was covered in hieroglyphics and--"

"What Ron is trying to say, is that we had it translated, and it mentioned how to locate Horcruxes!"

Hermione's eyes grew wide. "What did it say?"

"Well... that's the problem... The person translating the book for us stopped reading it as soon as it said anything about Horcruxes. He said we were too young to know of such a power. He took the book from us, placed it back in the chest, and hid it back in the spot that we found inside the pyramid! He re-warded the wall where it was hidden, but we didn't know the spells to undo it, and we ran out of time... We had to get back to our training."

"Damn! We have to get that book, Harry!" Hermione grabbed his arms and squeezed tightly.

"I know, I know," Harry said slowly.

She removed her grasp from his arms, her mind racing on ways to get her hands on that tome.

"How long are you going to be in Central America?" she asked while staring in the direction of Ron's shoelace--a plan was formulating in her mind.

"Three weeks," Harry said.

"I can't wait that long." She looked into Harry's piercing, green eyes. "I'll have to go by myself."

"What? No. No, Hermione! It's too dangerous!" Ron said, coming to his feet and jumping from the boulder onto the dirt. Hermione and Harry followed him.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't start arguing!" Harry said, standing between them. "Look, Hermione, you are right. We aren't going to be able to go with you--you will have to do this without us. But Ron is right too--it's dangerous, and you can't go alone."

Hermione sighed. "I know. But is it anymore dangerous than running from dragons or battling Death Eaters? Maybe Dumbledore will come with me, since this is very intense magic we are talking about."

"That's a good idea. Just don't go alone, Hermione," Ron said. He was looking at her intensely, and his brows were pinched. Hermione recognized this look--it was the look he had when studying a chessboard.

Harry reached in his pocket and brought out the gold watch that had been given to him by the Weasleys on his seventeenth birthday. "We've got to go. Moody is expecting us back before noon--we have to go to St. Mungo's for a medical every time we travel. Something about long distance Apparition and multiple Portkeys."

Hermione was disappointed. She had only spent a few hours with them and hadn't finished catching up, not to mention that she simply missed them immensely. "Oh. Alright then. I'll walk you to the Apparition point."

They walked in silence most of the way, chatting about nonsense such as how different the grounds looked during the summertime and what type of food Ron was looking forward to while in Central America.

Hermione was full of mixed emotions. On one hand, she was sad that she was missing out on adventures with her best friends and was going to miss them terribly. On the other, she was excited about the possibility of going to Egypt to search for the answer to the Horcrux problem, and she couldn't wait to talk to the Headmaster.

She hugged and kissed both of them as she bade them farewell. She watched them Apparate, then began the long walk up to the Dumbledore's office, ready for a new adventure.

"Do you think you will be able to escort me to Egypt so we can find this book?" Hermione asked Dumbledore, after she had explained to him in a rush everything Harry and Ron had told her.

"Miss Granger, this is indeed a remarkable revelation. I would love to join you; unfortunately, this couldn't come at a worse time. I am leaving in two days--I have some business at Salem University that I must attend to."

"Oh, no," Hermione said, slouching and feeling defeated.

"However..."

Hermione perked up and looked into his twinkling eyes.

"I have the perfect person to escort you. And you can leave tonight, if you so choose. I certainly do not want you to go alone--it's extremely dangerous."

Hermione nodded and smiled. "Wonderful! I'm sure whoever you have in mind will be perfect. We need to get our hands on that book before someone else does."

"I agree. I will ask your escort to come to your room later this afternoon, as soon as soon as I have a word with them. I would like to warn you though. Egypt is filled with great mysteries and dangers. Only get the book and nothing else. The curses and traps in pyramids are real. Please be careful. If it proves to be too dangerous, come home. We will locate and destroy the Horcruxes the same way we have been doing before we knew of this book."

"Yes, sir.

Dumbledore rose from his desk and walked to a large cupboard. He removed a ward, opened the door and stepped inside. When he returned, he was holding a necklace. A white pearl the size of a Knut was dangling from the chain.

He handed her the piece of jewelry. She looked closer at the pearl--tiny yellow stars were orbiting it.

"It's beautiful," Hermione whispered, mesmerized by the stars fluttering and glittering around.

"It's for reading a foreign language, particularly ancient languages. Just slip it on and you will be able to understand hieroglyphics as though they were your first language. Ingenious, yes? A friend of mine gave it to me before he passed away."

"Sir... Thank you. I will protect it with my life."

Dumbledore smiled. "Your life is worth more than this bauble, Miss Granger. But do care for it."

After she had left the headmaster's office, she had gone to the library in search of all the books she could find written about Ancient Egypt.

Since she had full use of the library, Hermione gathered stacks of books, transfigured them to fit in her pocket, and took them back to her room where she took several pages of notes and questions. She knew the exact pyramid that she needed to visit and researched the Pharaoh that was buried there, hoping for any clues regarding

curses or spells she might encounter. She was immersed in her research when a sudden knock at her door jolted her.

Hermione suddenly felt nervous. In her excitement, she hadn't asked Dumbledore who her escort was going to be. She assumed that it might be an Unspeakable, someone who was aware of Horcruxes and Dumbledore's plan.

"It's open," she shouted from across the room. She was sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, surrounded by stacks of tomes and papers. She could barely see over her piles.

She began gathering her notes, putting them in logical order, when the door squeaked opened. She barely heard the footsteps on the stone floor, and then the door closed shut.

"Miss Granger."

Hermione froze--her heart nearly stopped beating. *No... it couldn't be.* She slowly turned her head, dropping the papers in her hands. Kneeling up, she peered over the tall stack of books.

Snape was standing by her door, a small smile playing about his lips as he took in her shock.

"Severus?" she whispered to herself.

"Yes, Miss Granger. That *is* my name."

"What are you doing here?" she asked quietly, still rooted to the floor. She knew the answer, but didn't know what else to say. She didn't think her escort would *be* him.

"I believe we are going to Egypt tonight," he said.

"Um--yes. Yes, of course."

She lowered her head, hiding behind the books as she gathered her papers absent-mindedly. He was her escort. She would be having an adventure *with* him. *Oh, gods.* Her heart fluttered as she thought back to her bubble bath yesterday night--her fantasy was still vividly fresh in her mind; what if he delved into her mind while in Egypt and saw that? What would he say? How would he react--

"Miss Granger, if you are not ready to leave this evening, we can go in the morning; I, however, am ready to leave now," he said loudly, interrupting her thoughts. She watched in dismay as he walked into her kitchen. There was the sound of the chair as it was pulled out from the table.

"I'm almost ready," she squeaked. Hermione cleared her throat. *Idiot! You sound like a little school girl! Get a grip!*

"Just give me a few minutes while I gather my belongings--I wasn't expecting my escort until later."

She stood up, piles of paper clutched to her chest and slid between the stacks of books.

He was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, legs crossed, looking completely... relaxed.

"You weren't expecting me," he stated.

"To be honest, no. Although it makes sense. You might be the only other person besides Harry and Ron who know about the Horcruxes," she said, setting her papers on the table. Then she flicked the pile with her wand, and they snapped into order. She put them inside a folder and finished gathering her belongings.

"True. But that's not why I was... assigned this project."

She looked at him. "Oh?"

"Not only am I a member of the Order, but have you forgotten that I'm a Death Eater too?" he said, all expression gone from his face. "I am the best person to protect a member of the Golden Trio from attacks from... my kind. Besides, after all this time that I have been escorting you to and from your house and Hogwarts, did you really think it would be anyone else to take you to Egypt, a most dangerous exploration?" he asked softly.

Hermione was surprised that he wasn't being condescending; that he was in fact being earnest.

"You're right. I should have known it would be you. I'm sorry for taking you away from your work and being a burden, but we really need that book."

Snape gracefully stood up and placed his mug on the counter. He walked over and stood in front of her, looking down at her through his dark lashes. "You're not a burden. Besides, I could do with a change of pace by going on a little excursion in the middle of a desert."

Hermione's first thoughts were that Severus Snape and the hot desert did not mesh well. Then, she realized that he had said something nice to her--that he hadn't degraded her, or threatened her--and that his attitude from this morning was still pleasant. And she wasn't a burden to him.

That certainly was new.

"I will need to return home to gather some items, and then I will be ready. How are we traveling there?"

"Well, since this is a secret mission, there will be no Portkeys or Floos. I'll Apparate us to Naples. It is the closest location to Egypt to which I have traveled and therefore know the destination so we can safely Apparate."

"And how are we going to travel from there to Egypt?"

The corners of Snape's lips turned upward.

"We'll fly."

Hermione's eyes became wide. "I *do not* fly on brooms. I hate them!"

"I didn't say on brooms," he said in a low voice. "Nor aeroplanes," he said before she could get the words out of her mouth.

"You mean--"

"Ah, good. Someone *has* told you that I have the power to fly."

Hermione felt all the blood in her face drain--and she briefly wondered if she was a nice shade of green. "P-professor McGonagall *did* mention your... magical ability," she said, trying to swallow away the sudden dryness in her mouth.

He smirked, turned on his heel and headed out of her room, toward the Apparition point. Hermione quietly followed him, her mind trying to wrap itself around the idea that in

a few moments she would be flying.

Literally.

Up next: Come fly with me--the adventure begins.

Many thanks to my girls, Lariope and Lulabelle72. Much love to RedSkyAtNight for her wonderful Brit-picking and giving me a crash course in they types of food one would find at Hogwarts.

Trust in Me

Chapter 10 of 32

Snape helps Hermione deal with her fear.

Real life is awful sometimes. So this chapter is for lulabelle72, who is dealing with real life madness at the moment. I love you very much. Lariope, thank you as always for your support and giving me wonderful ideas. RedSkyAtNight, thank you for coming through for me when LB72 had other things to deal with. Now you know why I need two beta's--my grammar, and obviously knowing the difference between solid ground and water, are horrible.

It hadn't taken long for Hermione to gather a few items from her parents' home, mostly clothes and bathroom essentials. And, of course, an abundance of books.

As Hermione finished Transfiguring her supplies, Snape wondered if she had packed the most important item: the black bra... the one with the lace. No! He couldn't think like that. They were going to Egypt for a specific reason, and if he let his mind wander off his task, it could prove fatal for both of them. He *must* be focused. He *must* ignore her.

A woman was the worst temptation known to man.

For Merlin's sake! You're a fucking spy! Nothing should be able to break your concentration! Not even her. Oh, gods, she smells wonderful...

Snape suddenly realized that Hermione had looped her arm through his and was waiting for him to take action. "Are you going to stand there all evening, Severus? Or are you going to Apparate us to Italy?"

Insolent chit. God, I want her.

Snape closed his eyes and concentrated on his destination. It was a rather difficult task to Apparate, let alone Apparate from England to Italy. But having to Apparate that distance with someone else well, that was altogether another story. He breathed deeply through his beak-like nose, imagining the specific location in a rickety ship-yard on the coast of Italy clearly in his mind. He had been to this location once before--when he was a junior Death Eater. It had been another revel, a night where nine wizards had been slaughtered. By his hand. Yes, that had been his first real test as a loyal Death Eater. He had never seen as much blood as he had *that* night.

Snape shook the memory out of his head and focused on the destination. Suddenly, he felt himself spinning.

He landed in a not so graceful manner. Hermione had toppled over, and he stumbled backward.

"Well. That was interesting," Hermione said, standing up and brushing her clothes free of dust.

"My apologies. It's difficult to Apparate that distance," he snapped.

He looked around his location. Two large, unfinished ships flanked either side of the wooden dock. To the right, lined up against the edge of the port, there were over a dozen crates that were nearly the size of the Whomping Willow. There were two light posts at the end of the pier, then the blackness of the water beyond that. He looked at the left side of the dock and noticed large Muggle machinery--it had been there that the massacre had occurred. Snape could almost hear the ghostly screams and cries of the men he had butchered that night; even clearer, he remembered the way their filthy blood had splattered his face and the metallic taste of it in his mouth.

"Severus?"

Snape whirled around. Hermione was standing just behind him, shivering in the cold and looking concerned.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he ground out, angry at her for interrupting his memory. She stiffened at his tone, and Snape realized what he had done. In a less pernicious manner, he said, "I'm sorry, Hermione. I was just remembering my last trip here."

"I take it that it wasn't a pleasant one, was it?"

"Only for some," he said coldly. "Follow me."

He walked to the end of the pier, Hermione fast on his heels.

He stopped at the end of the dock and held out his hand. "Ready?" he asked her.

Hermione's lower lip quivered as she stared at the open space above the water. "Not really," she whispered.

He cocked his eyebrow at her. Her nervousness was ridiculous--wasn't she a fucking brave little Gryffindor?

"Give me your hand," he commanded, holding his out.

She looked up at him, her brown eyes glazed over.*Is she crying?* She slowly lifted her hand and put it into his. She was shaking, and her hand felt ice cold in his.

"I'm going to Levitate on the count of three. As long as we are holding on to each other, you will go wherever I go."

She nodded.

"One. Two--"

Hermione yanked her hand out of his, clutching it to her chest. "Isn't there another way? I don't feel comfortable flying."

"You know there isn't," he said snidely.

She huffed. "I'm scared," she said, her big eyes pleading with him to understand.

"You're a Gryffindor. Being brave is--"

"You don't understand! This is different!"

Snape couldn't believe how she was behaving. He had never known a Gryffindor, especially *this* Gryffindor, back away from anything.

"I knew you didn't like flying on brooms, but Hermione--"

She was shaking her head. "I don't just dislike it, Severus! It's a fear! Do you understand? I'm terrified!" A small tear fell from her eye and traveled down her face.

Snape looked at her and felt a sudden pain wave of sadness wash through him. Yes, he knew all about fears. However, it had been a rumour that the only thing Hermione Granger was afraid of was failing a test--and that is why he was shocked to hear her admit to this, to something much more reasonable than a fucking exam result.

"I understand fear," he said calmly. *Shall I begin to list mine? Rejection, love...*

"You do?" she asked.

Hesitantly, Snape ran his thumb over the tear, wiping it off her skin.

She looked at him, surprised by his tender gesture.

He had even shocked himself for being so bold, but he knew that he had to get her to trust in him. So, he continued on, being ever so gentle with her, and hoping she would realize that he was trying to show her a different side of him.

"Everyone has fears. Even me," he whispered. He took a step closer to her, and she looked unsure of what he was going to do. "But you must let me help you through this--we have an important task to attend to in Egypt, and this is the only way there."

"I know," she sighed. "I'm just so scared. I feel like such a fool," she said, sniffing.

"You are no such thing." Once again, he held out his hand. "You need to trust me."

She lowered her hands from her eyes and placed her hand in his. "I do trust you."

He intertwined his fingers with hers, twirled her around and enclosed her into his embrace. His other arm was wrapped around her waist, holding her close to his body. He closed his eyes as he buried his nose into her hair--it was something he had always wanted to do.

Then, in his most silky and soft voice, he began whispering to her. "Close your eyes, Hermione. That's a good girl. Now, take a deep breathe and slowly exhale from your mouth."

She inhaled, hitching a bit from the effects of her crying.

"Excellent," he whispered. She continued to hold his hand, but her grip was still tight. However, her tense body was beginning to relax against his chest.

"Promise me you will keep your eyes closed," he said smoothly.

"All right."

Snape cast a wandless Warming Charm them, as well as a special charm that encased them inside a bubble of air.

"Flying, Hermione, is like reading a novel. At first, you're unsure of the adventure that awaits you between the textured covers of a book. Ah, books--your obsession. Think of your favorite book. Can you see it clearly in your mind?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Very good. Now, can you remember when you first read it? Tell me what it was like to touch, smell, and read it."

Hermione explained in great detail about her favorite book while Snape encouraged her to keep talking by asking questions about the content, how many times she had read it, and if she could quote anything from it.

It was a ploy to keep her mind occupied. After hearing what she had said about his voice after he caught her in the bath, he knew that he could distract her mind and body by simply talking to her. It distracted her so much, in fact, that she hadn't even noticed that they were off the ground, flying at an incredible speed across the Mediterranean Sea. His sense of direction was remarkable, but even he had to have directions for flying this distance. Before he arrived at her room at Hogwarts, he had charmed his wand to guide him by vibrating when he went off course.

He flew low, perhaps not even fifty yards from the water's surface, but because it was dark, he could see nothing below him. Every once in a while, in the distance, he saw tiny lights coming from boats.

"And that's why *Hogwarts: A History* will always be my favorite book," she said after talking for nearly an hour.

"Your explanation was... interesting."

She slumped against his body. "If you didn't want me to tell you about that, then why did you ask?"

"I didn't want you to notice that we were flying."

"What?"

Her eyes flew open, and her body became rigid again.

"You--you should have told me!"

"Perhaps. But I highly doubt you would have let me get more than even a foot off the ground before you started hexing me. I even placed us in this bubble to keep the rush

of air off your face, to keep you calm. However, I would like you to experience flying without it."

She gripped his arms tighter and sank her fingernails into his skin.

She must have been too nervous to speak, so he took her silence as a signal to go ahead and release the bubble. He dipped closer to the water so she could see that they weren't flying very high. As soon as he dropped the charm a cool, misty wind engulfed them, rushing against their body--her hair automatically flying backward, blinding him for a moment. He panicked slightly at not being able to see--what if he lost control and dropped her? What if she let go of him? He twisted his head to get away from her tangled hair to see Hermione's mouth opened wide, screaming at the top of her lungs. The wind was loud to his ears, but her high-pitched scream was worse. He didn't mind though; she needed to release the tension that had built up inside her.

Finally, she took a large gulp of air and rested her head against his chest--her breathing was short and erratic. He replaced the bubble so he could speak to her without having to shout over the sound of the wind.

"Have you finished screaming?"

"For now."

Snape tried to shift his arms, but she held on tighter. He was sore, and stiff. He wondered if his muscles would go numb and if he wouldn't notice her slipping from his grip.

"Hermione, I need my wand. I'm going to bind you to my body with a Sticking Charm so that I can relax my muscles, which means I'm going to have to let go of your hand for just a moment. Just close your eyes and keep breathing slowly. There you go." Snape opened his hand, which was cramped and aching, and reached into his pocket. He cast a spell to bind her to him like glue, then put his wand away. Knowing that she was secure and he wouldn't accidentally drop her--or worse, find her with the sudden, unreasonable urge to fall as if she stood at the edge of a cliff--made him feel better. He released her waist and stretched out his arm.

"Now you know what to expect when I remove the charm. Next time, I want you to keep your eyes open, and just inhale the smell of the sea. Can you do that?"

She nodded her head.

"Good girl." Before he removed the bubble, he charmed her hair to stay wrapped up in a bun.

This time, she didn't scream when he released the charm, but dug deeper into his flesh with her nails. He felt his skin break, but it was a price he was willing to pay.

Finally, Hermione felt the soft sand beneath her feet--they had landed on the banks of the Nile. She was drained of all energy, but she was safe. Safe because he had been there for her, holding her hand every step of the way--this had been something that no one had ever done before. The boys would have forced a broom into her hand or made her sit on a Hippogriff or Thestral and told her to, "Get over it." But Snape had taken the time to talk her through it. To show her how to breathe properly; to believe that flying wasn't hell on earth. He didn't seem to mind that she had screamed in his ear or held him in a death grip. He had been patient and caring with her--he wasn't the man that had taught her how to brew thousands of potions. That man was a condescending, sarcastic arse.

For a moment she had wondered if he was bewitched or under the Imperius Curse. But no, that was ridiculous--who would curse Severus Snape to be kind?

She still hated flying, but after she relaxed and did what he asked, she could honestly say that she wasn't afraid anymore. He had shown her that there was nothing to be scared of--that it could be a tantalizing experience with the smells of nature tickling her nose and the lights of distant cities shining brightly like little stars.

But what she would remember most had been the way his body felt against hers. He held her to his chest tightly and talked to her in that silky voice, mesmerizing her. When she had calm enough to think, she began imagining him nuzzling her neck and kissing her softly on her collar bone. From that moment on, she forgot that she was floating over water and let his body and voice engulf her very being.

Hermione looked around. The morning light was peaking over the horizon, casting a soft glow over their surroundings. She could hardly believe her eyes. There, in the distance, were several pyramids, rising high above the modern city. It was surreal--she had never thought she would get a chance to come here, especially in the midst of a war.

Snape started walking along the bank of the river, and she quickly caught up to him.

"Are we going straight to the pyramid to search for the book?" she asked.

"No. I'm exhausted. I need to eat, shower and then sleep before I can go breaking ancient magic to get a bloody book."

Well, Severus Snape: foul-tempered git was back.

"Where are we going to find a place to sleep?" Hermione wished she still had the tent that she and the boys had used while searching for Horcruxes. What hotel would give them a room at this hour in the morning... let alone the fact that they didn't have any money. She hadn't exactly planned this journey well, had she?

"I know of a place. It's like the Leaky Cauldron. We aren't too far from it," he grumbled.

They walked across the sandy beach and towards a large brown building. The street was empty and gave Hermione the feeling that everyone had abandoned this area of town because of some unknown, creepy reason.

As they walked to the corner of the building, a small, flat roofed structure suddenly appeared. Just like the Leaky Cauldron, one had to be magical to detect its presence. Snape pulled open the golden door and let her walk inside first.

She was expecting a run-down pub, like the Leaky Cauldron, but was highly surprised to find a beautiful lobby. Gold columns stood bordering the outer walls; the ceiling was high and covered in a beautiful Egyptian mural. The figures walked around, greeting each other, much like a portrait at the castle. Black marble covered the floors and counter tops.

She hadn't noticed that she had stopped in the middle of the doorway as she looked around.

"Looks can be deceiving, Hermione," Snape whispered in her ear before walking ahead of her to the where a small man was looking at them from behind a reception desk.

"Two rooms," Snape said.

The small man looked directly into Snape's eyes, smirked, and then cut his eyes toward her. Hermione wondered what his problem was and was about to say something when the man said, "Unfortunately, we only have one room available."

Snape slowly turned to face her

She was too tired to care that she was going to share a room with Snape. "We'll make do," she said. She thought she saw the corner of Snape's mouth twitch, but perhaps it was her imagination.

"Room three twenty one," the small man said, conjuring a golden key from thin air and handing it to Snape.

Hermione noticed the stairs to the right and headed up to the third floor. She found their room and waited patiently for Snape to open the door.

She was utterly amazed at the room. In the center was an enormous, ebony sleigh bed covered in a pale blue duvet. A crystal chandelier hung high above it. Hermione poked her head into the bathroom. It was a large rectangular room, with a circular tub in the center. It was encased in black marble and had a step leading up to it. *Why can't the Leaky Cauldron look like this?*

"How did you know about this place?" she asked, walking back into the bedroom. He was sitting on the matching pale blue bench in front of the bed, pulling off his boots.

"Dumbledore," he stated. "Press that gold button on the bedside table and order some food--anything will do," he said, walking past her and into the bathroom.

Hermione pressed the button, and in a matter of seconds, there was knock at the door. She opened it to see a thin, black-haired woman dressed in a gold, knee-length dress. "Can I help you?" she asked Hermione.

"I would like to order something to eat... Do you have a menu?"

"Just state what you want and I will get it," the woman said.

Hermione thought for a moment and decided to order an Egyptian meal--something she remembered from her research.

"Two shish kebabs, please."

The woman twirled her wand through her fingers, then flicked it. A table on wheels, set for two, appeared out of thin air. "Enjoy," the woman said as she pushed the table into the room.

Hermione wheeled it over to the two wingback chairs that sat in front of a large window, which overlooked the river. Included in the meal was a salad, pita bread, coffee, tea, and water. Hermione listened to the water running in the shower and wondered how much longer he was going to be--she was starving.

She walked over to the door, which wasn't closed all the way, and went to knock, but suddenly the door flew open. Hot steam warmed her face.

"Spying on me?" Snape said, smirking. He was wearing nothing but a towel around his waist--it looked like he had been waiting for the shower to warm up before stepping in.

"No!" she said defensively. "I was just going to let you know that the food was here." She kept eye contact, not wanting to look at his naked chest and embarrass herself.

"I know. I heard the chambermaid talking. Go ahead and start. I won't be long."

She walked away quickly as he closed the door completely. She hadn't expected him to open the door and be dressed in nothing but a cotton towel--it was like he was teasing her. *That's ridiculous.* She shook the naughty thoughts from her head. Before she started eating, she removed two pillows and the duvet from the bed and placed them neatly on the plush sofa so that he would have a place to sleep.

Just as she was finishing her salad, she heard the water turn off. A few minutes later, he emerged from the bathroom.

Hermione nearly choked on her water. He was barefoot, wearing black, cotton trousers that tied in the front and a grey t-shirt that was snug against his torso. His hair was damp, and she noticed that he was in need of a shave, but she really liked seeing him with stubble.

Her heartbeat began racing, the butterflies in her stomach came to life and her quim instantly pulsated. She took another sip of water, her eyes never leaving his body.

"Hermione?" he asked, snapping her back to the conversation.

"Yes?"

"I asked you if the food was appetizing."

"Sorry, when I'm tired, I tend to stare and not pay attention. Yes, it's scrumptious," she said, embarrassed that he had caught her staring at his body. *Oh, gods! What must he be thinking?*

She finished quickly and retreated to the bathroom. She turned the silver handle, and water came falling out of the ceiling, like rain. She pulled her luggage out of her pocket, Transfigured it back to normal size, undressed and climbed into the shower.

When she was finished washing, she slipped on her purple pajamas and used her wand to dry her hair and braid it.

She wasn't surprised to see that the room was completely dark when she emerged--he did say he was tired. She softly walked to the edge of the bed, her hand out in front of her to not trip over anything, flipped back the sheets and climbed in. She rolled onto her left side, closed her eyes and sighed heavily. She squirmed a bit to find her favorite sleeping position, then rolled her ankles around as she always did when she was overly tired and her muscles twitched. Finally she was comfortable and sighed once more and knew she would be asleep in a matter of moments.

"Have you finished fidgeting?"

Startled, Hermione yelped and punched what she hoped was his arm.

"I thought you were sleeping on the sofa!"

"You *assumed* I was sleeping on the sofa."

Hermione huffed and rolled over to swing her legs off the bed. "Fine, then I will sleep on the sofa--"

"Hermione, lie down. We are both adults and are extremely tired. It will do neither of us any use to sleep on the sofa and awaken with aches and pains from such an uncomfortable night's rest."

"All right," she whispered, then lay stiffly on her back, her arms at her chest, holding the sheet tucked under her chin.

"I'm sorry I hit you," she said quietly.

"And I should have told you I was going to sleep in the bed."

What a day. First flying, and now I'm sleeping in the same bed with my professor--ex-professor... with Snape! Oh, gods...

"You can hardly be comfortable sleeping on your back," he said.

"You said I fidget too much."

"Hermione," he said in a tone that she was all too accustomed to. She quickly turned on her left side, facing him, lying mostly on her stomach. She put her arm under her pillow to prop her head up and brought her right knee upward toward her stomach. She felt the bed moving as he rolled onto *his* side, facing her. She wondered what they

would have looked like with the lights on--facing each other, almost nose to nose, under the covers...

She slowly drifted off to sleep, her mind whirling with memories of the day.

The next thing she knew she was naked and straddling his waist, grinding her clit into his hard cock. His hands were gripping her hips, guiding her movements. Her hands were splayed out on his chest, and she rolled his nipples between her fingers.

Suddenly he flipped her onto her back. His lips came crashing down onto hers, hungrily taking her breath away.

Then, he moved from her lips to her neck, sucking and nibbling at her sensitive skin.

"I need to feel you!" she moaned from beneath him.

Snape growled and slipped his right hand between his legs, grabbing his member. He rubbed the tip of it through her slick folds, teasing her.

"Mmmm..." she whimpered, locking her legs around his waist, urging him to push deep inside her.

"No, Hermione! It's too dangerous!"

"What?" she said, snapping open her eyes. Ron was standing at the edge of the bed, watching her and Snape.

"It's too dangerous!" he said again.

Hermione was horrified. She looked back at Snape, but before she could ask him anything, his hand covered her mouth. "Don't listen to him, Miss Granger!"

Hermione tried screaming out, but it was muffled by his cold hand. She turned her eyes to Ron, but he was gone.

She started thrashing around, raised her fist and crashed it onto his nose. Snape let go of her and fell to the side of the bed, grabbing his face and crying out in pain.

Hermione scrambled from beneath the sheets, jumped off the bed and opened the door to their hotel room

But instead of the hallway, there was just another door. She opened it again, to find another. Faster and faster she opened the doors, crying out in frustration. She turned around, saw him still clutching his bleeding nose on the bed and ran across the room to the window. She yanked back the curtains, unhitched the lock and slid the window open. A cool swish of air swallowed her up, making it painful to breathe.

"Where you going?" Snape yelled. She looked behind her, and he was standing with his legs shoulder-width apart, arms hanging to his side. His face was streaked with blood, and his lip was curled high in an evil sneer.

Hermione stepped out onto the tiny balcony. Snape pounced on her, grabbing her arms and whirling her around to slam her backwards into the stone wall.

"You're leaving me?" he shrieked. "You're mine! MINE!" he shouted, shaking her.

"I'm not an object--you can't possess me!"

He suddenly removed his arms, and his face went blank.

"Yes, of course, you're right, Miss Granger. You *aren't* an object," he said calmly.

He took several steps backward, and Hermione stood up straight, her back stinging from the rough surface. She wrapped her arms around her waist, took two steps forward and turned around to go back inside. But before she could walk over the threshold, a chilling voice said, "I lied. You *are* an object. You're mine. And if I can't have you, no one will."

Hermione whirled around, eyes wide. He grabbed her arms again, dragged her across the ground toward the black, metal railing. She tried fighting him off, but he overpowered her, lifted her up by her waist and flung her over the railing and off the balcony.

It all happened so fast, that it took her a second to start screaming. She watched with horror as the street came at her at an alarming speed. She covered her eyes, crying, waiting for her body to break on impact.

"Hermione."

The wind was painful against her naked skin as she fell, and loud in her ears, but she thought she heard her name being called.

"Hermione."

Her eyes flew open. Snape was leaned over her, holding his wand in the hand that wasn't supporting his weight. The tip was glowing with light. His face had many shadows on it, but she could tell that he looked concerned. She was cold and shaking and could feel that her cheeks were damp from her tears.

"Are you all right?" Snape asked her softly.

Hermione blinked several times, trying to remember where she was at. "It was just a really horrible nightmare," she said, rubbing her eyes.

"Does this happen often?"

Hermione remembered her *other* dream--the one with the snakes holding her down as... as he... had his way with her. What did these dreams mean? Why were they so vivid and so bloody scary?

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Do you remember what happened?" he asked, moving the arm that was arched over her.

She pushed herself into a sitting position. "Yes. But, I don't want to talk about the details. Just know that you were in it. And you tossed me over the balcony like a bag of rubbish."

Snape's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "I can assure you, Hermione, I would never want to throw you over the balcony. It sounds like you are associating your fear of flying with me, since I was the one to... force you to fly only a few hours ago."

"I suppose." She didn't want to mention that they were shagging, or that he claimed that she was his--it was too embarrassing. "And you didn't force me into flying. You just made it much more bearable."

He nodded.

"I'm sorry my bad dream woke you up."

Snape turned away from her and fell backwards onto the bed, lying on his back. The light from his wand was bouncing off the glass of the chandelier, creating eerie shadows in the large room. "That's not what woke me," he said quietly, flicking his wand to extinguish the light.

Then, before he rolled to face the large window, he whispered, "I also had a nightmare."

A/N: LB72 wrote me a very funny, lemony deleted scene for this chapter. It will be on my livejournal if you want to read it.

Up next: Adventure into the pyramid.

I'll Be There For You

Chapter 11 of 32

Severus and Hermione go inside a cursed pyramid.

A/N: Without Lariope, the ending of this chapter would be... well, crap. She knew exactly what I wanted to say and went back and forth with me on how to do it correctly. So, thank you, my dear. Without Lulabelle72, the middle of this chapter would have been just as bad as the ending. She told me it wasn't thrilling enough. So, a little bit of hard work and voila! Hopefully, you'll be on the edge of your seat in this chapter because LB72 pushed and pushed me. Many hugs and kisses. And lastly, to RedSkyAtNight: I know there wasn't much brit-picking to be done in this chapter, but your excitement after reading it was extremely encouraging. You really made my day. Thanks.

The early morning sun had been rising when Severus and Hermione had finally been able to lay their heads down after a long night of flying. But now, it was dusk, and it was time to get ready for their journey into the pyramid.

Snape slithered out of the bed, careful not to wake Hermione, and padded into the bathroom. He slowly and quietly pushed the door shut before lighting the sconces with his wand. Then, he looked at himself in the mirror.

And smiled as he recalled the hours he had spent next to Hermione, together in bed, in the complete darkness of the room.

It wasn't often that Snape fell into a deep sleep--always being on alert as a teacher, spy and Death Eater didn't grant him that luxury--but this time, he had been dead to the world. Perhaps it had something to do with the person he was sleeping with. In fact, he was certain that his restful slumber had everything to do with her. Severus Snape had always slept alone. He had never trusted anyone in his bed while he was not conscious. But when he had checked into the hotel and the little man behind the reception desk had lightly delved into his mind, discreetly asking him if he *really* wanted two rooms, Snape knew right then that he would finally know what having a good night's rest would feel like and had told the little man that one room would be fine. He would be with her--with his woman. In the same bed. And she was the only person he could trust to lie next to him. It was still a bit of a shock to him when he woke a few hours later as something bumped into his ribs and smothered his face.

He opened his eyes to a face full of hair. But this time, it wasn't his own greasy strings that tickled his nose. It was Hermione's bushy tresses. For a few moments, Snape lay there, inhaling her scent, feeling the soft texture of her curls as they lightly brushed across his skin. Then he noticed that her body was pushed into him. He carefully swatted her hair from his face and slowly rolled onto his side to spoon her. He tucked his right arm under his head, propping himself up.

He studied her for a while, watching her chest rise and fall with each breath, the way her eyes fluttered beneath her lids, and how her nose would twitch like a bunny when a piece of her hair tickled it.

She was beautiful, and Snape couldn't help himself.

He lightly ran a slender finger down her face, twirling around her hair, down her shoulder and bare arm. When he reached the tip of her finger, he noticed that her skin prickled with goose bumps. He did it again, wondering what other reactions he might get from his sleeping beauty. Suddenly, a low moan escaped her lips.

His heart beat faster, and his cock began to throb.

One more time, Snape ran his finger down her body, and one more time, she moaned--this time a bit louder. Not wanting to wake her, Snape carefully wrapped his arms around her, holding her close to his body, and laid his head down and closed his eyes.

He began thinking about kissing her neck, and then traveling down her back, following the curve of her spine. He wondered what it would feel like to be able to rip off those ridiculous purple pajamas to see her wearing her black bra: the one with the lace. And how he would like to tear it off her breasts with his teeth and suckle her nipples until she screamed.

All of a sudden, he had slipped into her mind--he didn't even realize that he had cast Legilimens. He knew he should have pulled out, but being able to see what she saw was too tempting. Especially since she was dreaming about herself naked and climbing on top of his lap. Snape watched as she used the tip of his cock to play with her clit. Suddenly, her dream Snape flipped her onto her back.

And even though he was in her mind, he could still feel his body grinding into her arse. He continued to watch her dream while he slid his hand beneath the elastic of her pajamas. He felt the wiry texture of the top of her curls and began to run his fingers over her mound and into her warmth when he suddenly heard a booming voice come out of nowhere.

"No! No, Hermione. It's too dangerous!"

Snape's eyes shot open as he left her mind. He snatched his hand out of her knickers, leapt out of bed, and grabbed his wand. His heart was beating madly, and for a split second, he thought that he had been caught violating her--that the fucking Weasley boy had somehow followed them, broken into the rooms and was getting ready to kill him for touching Hermione. But that thought quickly faded when he remembered where he was--that he had just been in her mind, in her dream.

He almost berated himself for entering her mind and not having enough self control to keep his hands off her, but then he remembered what she had been dreaming. And it

was suddenly all right that he had done what he did. He lowered his wand and placed the fingers that had been between her legs under his nose and sniffed. He could faintly smell her musk on him. Again, he sniffed, and this time he snaked out his tongue, wanting to taste the sweetness of her cunt.

He was broken from his delicious reverie, eyes closed as he inhaled her scent and imagined his mouth where his fingers had been, by the sound of her whimpering and thrashing around. He ran to the side of the bed and noticed that her face was scrunched up in pain, sweat was falling down her forehead, and she had gripped the sheets so tightly that her fingers were white.

"Hermione," he whispered, touching her arm.

She jerked her body.

"Hermione," he said again, sitting over the bed, leaning over her body and using his wand as a light to see her features properly.

Snape shook the memory of last night out of his head—he needed to finish dressing. He jumped into the cool shower to calm the heat between his legs.

He had told her that he had woken because he had a nightmare too. He knew he shouldn't have said that, but perhaps he hadn't truly lied to her. Thinking that Ron Weasley caught him feeling up his best friend *had* been a nightmarish experience.

But overall, sleeping with her had been exciting, dangerous, and very sensual.

Enough is enough. Keep yourself focused on this evening's task.

He stepped from the shower, quickly finished dressing, and walked into the room to wake Hermione.

It hadn't taken long for Snape and Hermione to arrive at the large pyramid. The hotel offered Side-Along Apparition, and a large, bald man took them both from northern Cairo to the Giza Plateau, located on the southwestern outskirts of Cairo. The guide had placed all three of them under a Disillusionment charm, warned them about ancient Egyptian magic, dropped them off in front of the Sphinx and then left them alone in the dark desert. Since they knew the location to the hotel, it would be easy to Apparate back.

It was surprisingly cool for a summer night, and the wind kept throwing grains of sand at Hermione's face. She pulled her wand out and whispered *Lumos!* Looking up at the enormous human head of the Sphinx, she said, "Let's get inside."

Snape also lit the tip of his wand and looked around him, head invariably tilting upward. Hermione knew he was in awe—just like she was. It wasn't every day that a person got to stand at the base of the famous Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx, at night and utterly alone.

"Which one is it?" he asked, still looking at the structures in front of them.

"Harry said it was Menkaure's Pyramid, the smallest of the three," she said, pointing to the pyramid on the left.

"That's a long walk," Snape said.

Hermione looked at him. "Perhaps you could fly us over there."

Snape's eyebrow rose, surprised by her comment. "Are you sure?"

"It would be the best way. We don't have time to waste by walking over there."

"Very well," he said, walking behind her and wrapping his arm around her waist. She laced her fingers between his and whispered, "Just stay low to the ground."

Hermione was nervous. Not only about flying again, but about being so close to his body—especially after her dream.

"It will take about two minutes to fly over there—you'll be fine," he said as he Levitated off the ground.

As the night air rushed over them, Hermione was proud of herself for not being scared while flying—she had a gut feeling that he wouldn't let anything harm her.

As soon as they landed, she headed up the steel stairs that lead to the entrance.

"Have you got a plan to get inside?" Snape asked when she stopped at the stone door.

"A simple Alohomora and Wingardium Leviosa should do the trick," she said, pulling her wand from her pocket and waving it at the door.

She smirked at him as soon as the door moved to the side, lit the tip of her wand again, and walked inside the darkness.

She held her wand straight out in front of her and carefully walked down the narrow passageway, which descended deeply into the earth. She ran her fingers along the pink granite to keep her balance and listened to the crunching of the dirt below her feet.

As soon as they entered the rectangular chamber, Hermione felt a hot breeze pass over her skin. She stood still, waiting for something to happen.

"It's the first layer of magic that was placed inside here," Snape said from behind her.

"How do you know?" she whispered, still not moving.

"So, the know-it-all doesn't know the answer to this," he teased.

Hermione turned on her heel and pointed her wand at him. "If I knew, I wouldn't have asked."

He was sneering. "I felt it. Unlike the tingling sensation that you are used to, Egypt's magic is hot—each nation's magic feels different."

"Interesting," she said, turning around and walking into another narrow corridor. Then, she suddenly stopped again. "Do you think the magic is... hostile?"

"No. If it were, I'm sure the hot breeze would feel like a roaring fire. And if that was the case, we'd be in extreme danger."

She nodded her head and proceeded walking down the passage.

They walked in silence until they reached a large room that had columns carved into the stone sides. To the right was another passageway. However, it was split in two. The top passageway had a small opening, which was mostly blocked by stone, while the bottom was the same size as the corridor that they just came from.

"Here it is. Ron said that we needed to take the 'upper' corridor. It runs over the lower, which leads to the burial chamber. The Muggle tourist guide said that it was abandoned during construction when the floor of the antechamber was lowered. However, the wizard guide told Harry and Ron that the real reason was because there had been magic and other things in the chamber that they wanted hidden."

"How are you planning to get through the opening?" It's thinner than I am."

Hermione faced him. "Are you a wizard or not?" she said, grinning.

Snape grumbled something about being a know-it-all, then walked past her and began waving his wand over the entrance.

After several minutes, Snape said, "And this is why I escorted you here--you would've never been able to break that ward."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "You know, you never give me enough credit--I would have broken it sooner or later."

"This has nothing to do with your intelligence. Only a man would have been able to remove the ward."

Hermione gawked at him. "That is--"

"Don't misunderstand me--no female would have been able to break that. It was a special ward that took a male wizard to break. It's an old tradition," he said, smiling.

"That's rubbish," Hermione said, pushing past and elbowing him in the side.

She flicked her wand and Levitated the stone wall down to the ground. She placed her wand inside the upper corridor and then pulled herself up into the passageway, struggling the entire time. As soon as she was inside, she picked up her wand, brushed her clothes off and said, "Your turn."

Snape flicked his wand and suddenly Levitated off the ground and floated into the upper corridor beside her. The implication that his way was easier was clear on his face. Hermione huffed and walked further into the passage.

It didn't take long to reach the end of the corridor. Hermione ran her hand along the smooth wall and felt the heat of the magic behind it. Snape was standing next to her, waving his wand furiously around, muttering under his breath while removing the wards.

As soon as he was finished, Hermione stood several feet away from the wall, pointed her wand at it and shouted, "*Confringo!*" The wall blasted apart, shooting debris across the passageway. She covered her face, waiting for the dust to settle.

"You could have warned me before you did that!" Snape brushed off his clothes and wiped the dirt from his face. "Do you realize how dangerous that was?"

"Sorry," she said, stepping through the hole she created. "But it was the only way to get through the stone."

Before he could lecture her any more, she pointed at the small chest and shouted, "We've found it!"

"Don't touch it!" Snape yelled as she ran over to it, falling to her knees and examining the designs around the gold box.

Snape knelt down next to her and ran his wand over the chest. "Hmmm... There don't seem to be any wards protecting it."

"So I can open it?" she asked him, her hands hovering above the lid.

He nodded.

Hermione picked the lid up and placed it on the ground. Lying on the top of the pile of items was the book she was looking for.

She slipped her hands beneath it and attempted to lift it out of the chest, but it was too heavy.

Snape put his hands beneath the book, and together, they lifted the tome out and placed it on the ground.

"How are we going to carry this back? It's too heavy, and if we Transfigure it, we might damage the magical properties," she asked him.

"We can place it under a Levitation charm--the magic shouldn't harm the book like Transfiguring would do," he said.

Hermione ran her fingers across the front of the book, feeling the ridges and valleys of the carved pictures. Then she pulled the necklace that Dumbledore let her borrow from her pocket and slipped it around her neck. The pearl was glowing teal, signifying that it was activated. Hermione looked at the hieroglyphics and instantly understood what was written.

She flipped open the book and began scanning the pages. There was so much information for her to absorb, and she couldn't read fast enough. Potions, charms, deadly curses and many other things popped out at her.

"Hermione, have you found it?"

She heard him talking, but couldn't take her eyes off the page or find her voice.

"Hermione?" he said, nudging her.

"Hermione!" he shouted as he pushed her away from the book.

She blinked and realized that she was lying on her back, in the dirt. "Why did you do that?"

"You've been reading the book for a half an hour, and you didn't answer me."

"A half an hour!"

"Yes. Did you find anything about the Horcruxes?"

"N-no. I... I was just scanning the pages. Are you sure it has been half an hour?"

She sat up and smacked her hands together, brushing the dirt off.

"Damn it. No wonder this book is so dangerous. It's just like the Mirror of Erised--if you stare at it too long, your time will waste away."

"So what do we do?"

"We will have to read it in shifts."

"Let's take it back to the hotel room--I don't feel comfortable in here," Hermione said.

"Very well," Snape said, standing up.

Hermione Levitated the book off the ground and followed Snape back through the passageway.

"You know, we have been warned about ancient Egyptian magic several times--getting this book seems all too easy, don't you agree?" Hermione asked.

Snape stopped walking and faced her. "I was beginning to think that as well."

"You don't think there is a curse on the book, do you?"

"I've checked for them--the book has nothing protecting it."

"Hmmm," Hermione said as Snape turned around and continued walking.

When they reached the antechamber, he jumped down from the upper corridor and said, "Place the book on the ground. I'll help you get down; it's a large drop."

As soon as Hermione Levitated the book to the floor, the ground and walls began to shake violently, throwing her into the wall and onto the floor. She screamed as small stones and dirt fell onto her.

"HERMIONE!"

She flipped onto her stomach and crawled to the edge of the corridor. Snape was trying to stand up, using the wall furthest from her to support himself. He had a streak of blood falling down the side of his forehead.

"Severus!"

Suddenly a thunderous sound came from behind her. The corridor was collapsing, and the cracks in the walls were bleeding a metallic silver liquid. Hermione squinted her eyes, looking closer at the fast approaching stream and realized that it was not a fluid--it was tiny, silver beetles scurrying toward her, hundreds or thousands of them, running over each other and making a horrible clicking noise.

"Oh, fuck!" she shrieked as she scrambled to her feet. Another jolt from the ground hit, and Hermione tumbled out of the upper corridor. She fell hard on her stomach, her wand flying from her hand. She felt like she would never breathe again and tried coughing and wheezing to get a breath of air. Next thing she knew, something was running over her body, and she squealed, thinking it was the beetles swarming all over her.

"Come on! We've got to get out of here! I've got your wand!" Snape said as he lifted her up from the ground.

"T-the book!" she said in a scratchy voice, looking around to confirm that nothing was crawling on her body.

"I've got it!" Snape shouted over the sound of the cave-in as he pushed her toward the passageway that led toward the entrance.

Hermione looked back at the upper corridor and noticed a glittering object hanging from a crumbled rock. And the sea of beetles was almost upon it.

"THE NECKLACE!"

"Forget it, girl!"

Hermione whipped around and pushed past him. "We have to have it!"

"HERMIONE--NO!" She felt him tugging at her arm, but her mind was on getting the necklace, and she slipped out of his grip because not only had she promised Dumbledore to keep it safe, but they needed it to translate the book.

She stumbled across the rectangular room and yanked at the dangling necklace. Three tugs and it was in her hand. As soon as she pulled it down, the small insects began falling out of the entrance to the upper corridor. Hermione screamed, throwing a hand over her head to keep them out of her hair, then turned around to run across the room and get away from the disgusting creepy-crawlies as fast as possible, but the middle of the floor gave away, creating a large hole that emptied into blackness, leaving her stranded by the bugs.

Snape was all ready in the other passageway and tried to run out of it to help her when a booby-trap was set off. One of the walls in the corridor gave away, sending darts hurling at him. "SHIT! *Protego!*" he yelled as he fell down to the ground.

Hermione tried edging her way around the hole with her back tight against the wall, to get to him, but the ground trembled again and she was thrown off balance, flipping head first into the black hole.

Hermione shrieked as she fell. Her tears burned her eyes, and she flapped her arms and legs widely. It was just like her dream--when she had been tossed over the railing, but this time, she couldn't see what was beneath her. Would she slam into the ground? Or would she continue to fall into nothingness until she died?

Intense heat enveloped her, and she smelled something burning. She realized that she was going to fall into a sea of fire--into the very core of dangerous Egyptian magic! As terror shot through her, she began to scream, but her cries were cut short by a sudden pressure around her ribs, and just as quickly as she had fallen, she was rising upward. She opened her eyes and saw Snape. His arms were wrapped around her torso as he flew them out of the hole and back into the passage.

"Use your wand to Levitate the book! I can't do both!" he shouted as they emerged from the depths of hell, a pulsing wave of heat still at their backs.

Hermione saw the book lying at the entrance of the passage, grabbed the wand from his hand and flicked it at the stone tome, lifting it off the ground, and Levitating it behind their flying bodies. She hooked her other arm around his neck, gripping the necklace tightly in her hand, and said a fervent prayer to any god that would listen to get them out alive.

But faster and faster, the passageway crumpled behind them, and her hopes dwindled. Several times, large stones hit their bodies, pushing them backwards or slamming them into the walls, but Snape kept his concentration despite every obstacle and flew them toward the entrance.

"MERLIN'S FUCKING BEARD!" Snape shouted as he stopped flying.

Hermione took her eyes off the book to see what was happening.

"Oh, my god!"

Blocking the exit, which was a mere ten feet from safety, was a small army of dead corpses. They were dusty and wrapped in old cloth, revealing their boney arms and rotting flesh. Each of them was holding a weapon--some were long spears while the others held large cutting axes. They looked positively evil with their red glowing eye sockets. In the middle, behind the protective wall of dead soldiers, stood the pharaoh, Menkaure.

His body looked as if he had never died and was as alive as Hermione or Snape. The only difference was that he had a blue-grey halo around his body, as if he were some sort of specter. His eyes were a piercing red--almost worse than Voldemort's.

The dead pharaoh hissed something in an unfamiliar language to them.

"What was that?" Hermione whispered in Snape's ear, her eyes never leaving the monsters in front of her.

"Must be ancient Egyptian. It's been a dead language for fifteen hundred years!"

"And I suppose he doesn't want us to leave with his book, does he?"

"No."

"But we need it!"

The dead guardians in front of Menkaure took a few steps forward, raising their weapons.

"I'm aware of that, Hermione," he grumbled out of the side of his mouth.

"Apparate us out of here!"

"And leave the bloody book? I can't do that unless one of us is holding the blasted thing!"

Again, the pharaoh shrieked at them. Then, the rocky floor beneath them began to crack open, and small flames began to shoot up at them.

"Transfigure the fucking book, put it in your pocket and use your wand against them as I fly us through them--"

"You said it would be too risky and could possibly damage the book!"

"It's the only fucking way we are going to get out of here with it, Hermione! Do it. Now!"

Hermione did as she was told without saying another word. After the book was safely in her pocket and her wand at the ready, Snape Levitated them well above the rising flames and took off flying at full speed toward the demons of the underworld.

"*Expecto Patronum!*" Her otter came flying out of the tip of her wand, knocking a few of the dead soldiers to the side. "*Protego! Petrificus Totalus! Stupefy! Reducto!*" she shouted, aiming for whatever was in front of her. Several of the zombie-like corpses were blasted to the side, or fell rigid, but it was the mighty pharaoh that stood his ground, casting spells toward them.

Snape dodged the flying hexes, and they were seconds from being outside the pyramid. His only obstacle was getting past Menkaure, and it was up to Hermione to destroy the evil mummy. She raised her wand, but before she could cast her curse, something cold and slimy grabbed hold of her arm and yanked her from Snape's clutches.

"Ahhhhhhh! *Severus!*"

One of the soldiers had stood up and snatched her, throwing her into the pile of dead bodies. Their hands were all over her, choking her, pulling her hair and attacking her body. Before she could scream again, a booming voice echoed through the passageway.

"SECTUMSEMPRA!"

The hands and arms that were gripping her fell to the ground like heavy stones. There was a horrible stinging across the skin of her arms, and for a moment she thought she had lost her limbs as well.

"Hermione! Give me your hand!"

Flying toward her was Snape, his arm out stretched as he reached for her.

She gripped his hand, and he heaved her upwards, grasping her tightly to his chest. As they flew out of the entrance, she noticed that the limbs and head of Menkaure had been severed from his torso and were lying scattered along the ground, burning in the flames that were jumping out of the cracked earth. The destruction of Menkaure had been like a massacre for his army. It had completely wiped them out.

The cool air from the night chilled her lungs, making it hard to breathe, but she didn't complain. They were safely out of the horrible pyramid. Snape nearly dropped Hermione from his grasp as they landed in front of the Sphinx. Then, he collapsed to the ground behind her, his energy depleted--the tip of his wand was the only light in the dark desert.

Hermione sat on her knees with her arms clutched tightly around her body, rocking back and forth and gasping the cool, sweet air. She couldn't believe she was alive. She should be at the bottom of that hole, being incinerated in that oven that had felt like the very bowels of the earth or in the clutches of the demonic mummies. She kept remembering the feeling of losing her balance and being thrown into the hole, and the frantic thoughts of never seeing her friends and family again. Not to mention, the fear of being burned alive or devoured by decaying corpses.

But he had saved her.

Snape had saved her life.

His hands came to rest on her back, and she quickly turned around and wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her head into his chest.

"I was so scared!" she cried, her heart pounding so hard that she thought it would beat right out of her chest.

"I know," he said softly as he rocked her.

She suddenly pulled back from him, draped her arms around his neck and devoured his thin lips. The force of her body against his propelled them both into the sand, but never once did she release her grip around him. He wrapped his arms around her body, squeezing her tightly into his chest, and slipped his tongue into her mouth.

"Tell me... Tell me we aren't dead," she said breathlessly in between their wet kisses.

Snape rolled her over, pressed his hard cock into her pelvis and in a low whisper he said, "Does *this* feel like we're dead?"

The rush of blood to her face was hot--her mind wanted to protest the situation. What was she doing kissing him? And what was he doing rubbing his cock against her like that? This was just the adrenaline running through her veins, through his--the desperate need to feel alive.

But he was kissing her again, and his hot breath in her mouth was connecting with the life of her own soul. She had wanted this, wanted *him*, for a while, but not until this very moment, locked with him on the cool sands of the Egyptian desert, did she decide that now was the time she could give into her wants.

To give into *this* man.

He finally pulled back so they could breathe, laying his sweaty and grimy forehead against hers. Both were panting heavily.

"I knew something was going to go wrong," she whispered. "Perhaps we should get back to the room before anything else happens."

"Indeed," he said in a soft voice. "I'll have to fly us. I can't Apparate right now--my mind is not steady. Just give me a moment to regain some energy," he said, then planted gentle kisses on her full lips.

Hermione couldn't wait. She wanted to be as far away as possible from the cursed pyramid.

And she wanted him.

All of him.

And lying on the sand in the mysterious desert wasn't going to do.

She hooked her heels around his ankles, grabbed his wand where it lay next to her, closed her eyes, and concentrated on her destination--an enormous, ebony sleigh bed covered in a pale blue duvet.

In a matter of seconds, they were back in the hotel room, lying on the bed, and bouncing a bit from their impact.

She was nervous as she opened her eyes. Would she find Professor Snape glaring down at her, upset because she went against his wishes?

No. It was Severus. The hunger in his eyes confirmed it.

"Hermione," he sighed as he tangled his fingers through her hair and pressed his erection into her groin.

As they fiercely kissed each other again, she knew at that moment that her life would forever change--she could finally admit that she had fallen in love with Severus Snape.

Well, that was a fun adventure, yes? ha ha ha.

Up next: Lemons, lemons, lemons.

Blood Sugar Sex Magic

Chapter 12 of 32

Hermione and Snape finally shag.

A/N: Many thanks to my team, Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight. Lemons are not easy to write, so without these ladies, I would have written three words: Hermione shagged Snape--and would've been done with it because this chapter drove me mad. The title is from Red Hot Chili Peppers, Blood Sugar Sex Magik, and I changed the 'k' to 'c'. I could not resist using that title. Enjoy!

Snape's breathing had ceased the moment he saw Hermione tottering on the edge of the abyss. In a second, one heart-wrenching moment, she had fallen, and he had felt his world implode upon him. He had thought he had lost her. Throwing himself into that black hole without an instant's thought, it had then taken all of his strength to catch up to her falling body and rescue her, then get them safely out of the pyramid. In fact, he had never used that much magic and will power in his life; he had thought that it was going to kill him. Kneeling on the sand, chest heaving and head splitting with pain, he had almost thought he *had* died. But her soft cries brought him up, and somehow he had found the strength to comfort her and hold her while she sobbed into his arms. And when she had looked into his eyes and kissed him, he had felt a surge of energy that lifted him, body and soul.

She had surprised him, Apparating them back to their hotel room, and now, lying on the bed with her wriggling beneath him, panting and making small sounds of desperate arousal, he knew his chance had finally arrived to show her how much he wanted her.

He growled as he tangled his fingers in her hair, zealously kissing her. His cock throbbed beneath his trousers, demanding to be released. Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, grinding her groin into his and feeding the flames of his lust. Snape placed his hands on either side of her, holding his weight just above her, and he rubbed slowly against her, though every instinct he had told him to take her, take her now.

"Severus, please. I need you," she moaned as she arched her back, pressing her tits into his chest.

She needed him.

Not just wanted him. But needed. Like her life depended on it. No one ever needed him for anything. It was always a want. Dumbledore *wanting* him to spy. Voldemort *wanting* him to kill. Not because they needed him. No, they could easily do those things without him--he was just the pawn in their chess game. But Hermione... She *needed* him. And it wasn't the spell from the Grotto that made her need him, either, because that was just a want.

The girl beneath him *needed* Severus Snape. Why? He did not have a clue. But for once in his life, he wasn't going to question it. He was just going to fall into her desire and just be.

The fears he had previously harbored were gone. He knew he wasn't worthless to her. And although he had a twisted way of showing it and admitted that at times he was an obsessive bastard, he knew he had finally found the light in his dark heart. It was because of her. Because of the beautiful creature in his arms.

It was at that moment, when she had said she needed him, that he knew he loved her. It was the same feeling he had for his beloved cat, Jynx, but even more so. He wanted to protect her, lay his life down for her, hold her, kiss her, and do anything to make her smile and her eyes light up.

Whatever horrible things he had done to her were in the past, and he would fix them later. He would confess and apologize, and she would understand. But right now he must show her how much he cared for her.

He slid off her body and onto his knees. He gripped the collar of her t-shirt with both hands and violently ripped it in half. She gasped, eyes wide, and reached a hand to her chest. She was wearing a black bra; the one with the lace.

"Fucking beautiful," he groaned as he buried his face in her chest, suckling on her skin. His teeth found the edge of her bra, and he yanked the fabric below her breasts. Taking a small, brown nipple into his mouth, he rolled it around his tongue and nipped at it with his front teeth.

Her tiny hands fumbled with his belt. Without dropping his eyes from hers, he slipped off the bed, tore off his shirt, kicked off his boots and pulled her into an upright position so that her face was near his crotch, so that she could see the bulging evidence of his arousal.

She reached behind him and grabbed his arse and started placing kisses on his stomach, following the trail of black hairs to the top of his trousers. Her soft lips were so gentle against his skin. He reached around her and took a nipple in between his finger and thumb and buried his other hand in her hair.

She began unbuckling his belt. She played with the button of his trousers for a second, then slowly pulled down the edges of the fabric, revealing his hip bones and his black underwear. She licked his stomach right above the hem of his underwear, sending chills across his body, as her fingers hooked into the waistband.

He tipped his head backward and moaned. She took the cue, pushing his trousers further down his leg and reaching into his underwear to grasp his cock.

"Oh, gods. Yes, Hermione."

The warmth of her hand around his member was something he had been dreaming about for so very long. It was a wonder he didn't ejaculate right then and there.

"Kiss it," he said in a soft voice.

Hermione looked up at him with her big brown eyes. She was so innocent. So beautiful.

She slipped his underwear over his hips and his erection. His red cock jutted out toward her, begging to be touched. He was by no means huge, average in length and width, but seeing his cock next to her face, he felt enormous and was eager to ram his prick into her mouth. Clenching his teeth, he controlled his urge and waited for her to take the lead--he didn't want to frighten her away.

Hermione parted her lips and ran her tongue across the sensitive head of his cock. She swirled her tongue around his velvety skin, teasing him. He thrust his hips toward her face. "Please... slide it into your mouth," he begged.

The warmth of her mouth encircling his shaft sent chills down his spine. She was slow as she bobbed up and down his cock, taking it in further into her mouth each time. Her teeth lightly scraped him as she began rolling her tongue over his member.

Snape gently took her hand in his and placed it on his balls showing her how to gently massage them. It didn't take her long to catch on, and once she did, Snape felt like he had been lit on fire.

"Gods, Hermione. Your mouth feels so damn good," he muttered. "Relax your throat. Let me in you all the way."

Hermione looked at him, half his cock already in her mouth, and blinked. She didn't seem to understand what he was asking. He moved her hand away from his testicles, took the back of her head with both hands and slowly pushed her into his groin.

"That's it, love. Take it all in. Mmmm... fuck... yeah," he moaned as he deeply and slowly fucked her mouth.

She whimpered, and Snape quickly released her head and pulled out of her mouth.

"All right?" he asked softly.

"Yes," she sighed, wiping her lips. She looked down, away from him, but before she did, he caught a glimpse of glossy, brown eyes.

"Turn around," he told her.

Hermione turned around on her knees, facing her back toward him. She looked over her shoulder, trying to see what he was going to do next.

He ran his fingers over the black satin fabric of her bra and slowly unhooked it. Then, he ran the palms of his hands across her back, slipping the thin straps over her shoulders. He bent over and licked the length of her neck--she tilted her head, moaning, giving him more access to the delicate skin there. He dropped her bra onto the ground and enclosed her small body in his arms, hugging her tight. She touched his forearms and leaned her head back against his chest. Snape snaked his right hand down her belly and slipped into her trousers and knickers. Her breath hitched as he weaved his fingers through her soft curls and found the nub between her wet lips.

Her body tensed as he began circling his middle finger around her clit. He clutched her tighter and set to sucking and kissing her neck, making the light hairs on her arms stand on end. As he flicked faster, she fell back into his body, finally succumbing to his touch.

"You like that?" he asked in a silky manner.

"Y-yes," she heaved.

He rubbed his cock on her hip, peppering her with kisses on her cheek and neck.

"Excellent. Because I like doing this to you," he said, pressing into her swollen clit and rubbing it harder and faster.

She moaned loudly, then began chanting, "Oh, god. Oh, god. Oh, god."

Snape was nearly humping her from behind as he played with her cunt, making her rock her hips back and forth, back and forth.

"Come, Hermione," he demanded, holding her body to his even tighter.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Gods, yes," she shouted. Her shuddering body fell limp in his arms.

Snape continued to rotate his finger on her clit, loving the feel of her pussy twitching away from him. She tried pulling away, wanting to fall onto the bed, but Snape held onto her, flicking faster and faster.

"Oh, gods! Please! I'm so sensitive!"

Snape was breathing hard on her neck, gripping her fighting body, waiting. Waiting for her to scream.

His name.

She tried to squeeze her legs shut, but realized that he wasn't going to let her go. Finally, she gave up and screamed out. "Please, Severus! Oh, gods! Please!"

He snatched his hand out of her knickers and let her drop face first onto the bed. She was breathing heavily and had beads of sweat on her naked back. She rolled onto her back, her wild hair draping across her neck and face, revealing only her sleepy eyes.

"You're evil," she said in a low voice.

"I know," he replied, smirking. He bent over and began unbuttoning her trousers.

"Lift your hips," he demanded, trying to pull them off her. She obliged, closing her eyes, and he slowly slid them down her legs, taking her knickers with them.

She was finally lying naked in front of him. And, oh, how he had dreamed of this. He stood at the edge of the bed, drinking her body in, never wanting to forget this moment. She opened her eyes, saw him staring down at her, and suddenly became bashful. She attempted to cover her chest with her arms and closed her legs.

"You will *not* hide yourself from me," he growled.

She stopped moving and looked at him with wide eyes.

"I was admiring your beauty, Hermione. And you will never try to conceal your body from me again. Understand?" He gently placed his hands on her locked knees.

"Open for me," he murmured, nudging her legs apart. "Let me see you."

Bit by bit, Hermione opened her legs, revealing her reddened cunt. She was watching him as he studied her, inhaling and exhaling slowly through her nose.

"You're glistening," he said, staring at her wet quim. He dipped two fingers into her entrance, scooping out her juices. His heart began to race as he raised them to his mouth, knowing that yet another dream was about to come true. He would taste her. And only he would ever know what Hermione Granger's cunt tasted like.

She gasped.

"Yes, Hermione, you're delicious," he said right before he gripped her ankles, yanked her to the edge of the bed. He dropped to his knees and buried his face in her sweetness, lapping her up.

His senses were over stimulating his brain. He couldn't get enough of her smell, let alone the way her full pussy lips felt when he wiggled his tongue through them and down to her opening.

As soon as she began rocking her hips, forcing his beak-like nose to arouse her clit, he knew she was ready.

"Slide up towards the headboard," he said, standing up from his place between her legs and crawling onto the bed.

She scooted backwards, resting her head on the fluffy, blue pillows. Watching her face, he couldn't detect even a hint of apprehension at what they were about to do. His knees were in between her thighs. He lay down on top of her, holding his weight mostly on his arms so as not to crush her. He ground his groin against her; the tip of his cock was teasing her warm, wet cunt.

"Mmmm... Severus," she sighed.

He kissed her again, keeping it slow and sensual.

Then, he pushed his chest off of hers, reached between their legs, and grabbed his member. He placed the head of his cock at her entrance and lay back atop her. She wrapped her legs around his waist and dug her fingernails into his biceps.

"I-I'm scared," she stated, voice wobbling.

"I know," he said, pushing into her. "It can't be helped, but it will be worth it."

"Wait!"

He looked down at his brown-eyed beauty and saw the panic flash across her eyes.

"H-have you... have you ever taken another girl's... you know... Will it hurt badly?"

"I assume there will be some discomfort. However, I have never... You're the first virgin I've been with."

"Oh. Are you... nervous?"

He stared at her for a moment, not really sure how to respond. Yes, he was nervous. Terrified, actually. Would he hurt her, and she would never want to do this again? Would she reject him?

"Are you, Severus?" she whispered again, her brows furrowed as her eyes searched his.

"Indeed. I am."

He was afraid that once he admitted that, she would want to shove his skinny arse off her body and run far away from him, far away from the man who didn't have the confidence to take her virginity as he ought. He was afraid that she would see him not as her knowledgeable, competent, skilled Professor, but as a scared man who might hurt her.

But to his amazement, she grinned, and her eyes lit up. He kissed her one last time, then with all his might, he rammed his cock deep into her, forcefully breaking past her barrier.

Hermione screamed.

A large tear trickled down her flushed cheek and was soaked up by the pillow as she turned her face into it. She bit her lower lip, holding her breath as she waited for the pain to subside.

Snape was torn between his feelings. His first instinct was to soothe her, hold her, take away her agony. He wanted to pull out of her body, head straight to his potion lab and make her a special batch of salves, potions... anything to take away the discomfort of becoming a woman. It was his job to keep her from harm--so what the bloody hell was he doing pushing into her further and making her cry out? He ran his thumb down her cheek, tracing the trail of her largest tear.

And a baser instinct enjoyed seeing her beneath him, feeling both pleasure and pain practically at his command. It was exhilarating. The many times he had brought her to tears in the past was nothing compared to seeing her scream, shudder, and whimper under his naked body. This was an altogether different power.

Only he could make Hermione Granger squirm like this, shiver like this.

"Breathe, Hermione. Just breathe," he softly instructed, gradually rocking his hips back and forth. He spit on his middle finger and reached between them, circling her clit. He hoped by stimulating her directly, she would forget about her internal pain. He wanted her to enjoy this moment with him, to give her everything he could.

"Does this feel good?" he asked softly.

She exhaled deeply and after a few seconds, she made an effort to match his movements. Finally, she lifted her chin and looked him in the eye. Voice steady, she said, "Fuck me."

Snape nearly came undone. He regained his control quickly, stamping down the urge to come, though his balls twitched with the need. Sitting back on his knees, he threw her legs over his shoulders. Her hips lifted up, he had deeper access. He immediately began to aggressively pump in and out of her.

Deeper.

Faster.

Harder.

"Play with yourself!" he commanded, thrusting into her.

She reached between their sweaty bodies and massaged her clit, groaning loudly as she did so. Her full breasts bounced with every slap of his balls against her arse.

I can't control this anymore--I can't dominate her! Just let loose. Just let it go. Take her with you and show her what it feels like to do it together!

"Hermione, come! Come with me!" he said, feeling her walls begin to tighten around the length of his cock.

"Ohhh! Ohhh! Oh, yes!" she moaned, head tipped back, eyes closed, and finger working herself furiously to the brink.

Snape shoved into her as deeply as he could, squirting into the depths of her body, shouting out and releasing years of pent-up frustration in a matter of moments.

"Gods! Yes! *Fuck!*" His legs went numb, and his member twitched, emptying inside her.

Snape collapsed onto her, letting his softening cock slip out of her. She wrapped her arms tightly around his body and gently glided her fingernails over his back, her stilted pants mirroring his.

Snape had never felt so vulnerable or exposed before, not even when his mind was being raped by the Light and Dark puppet masters. His mind raced, and he buried his face in the sheets by her neck so that she would not see his terror and anger and fear.

He had shed his clothes, broke the protective wall that surrounded him and let her into his black heart... into his tarnished soul.

Something inside him jerked in panic, and he bit the soft sheets between his teeth. How in Merlin's name did he let this happen? How did a girl, an annoying, bossy, know-it-all break *him*?

Because you let her, you fool. Because you want her--forever and all to yourself. And because she said she needs you. Yes. She admitted that she needs you, which means... No... She couldn't... Stop thinking like that, Snape! But maybe she could. She, one day, could... and will... love you.

"Hermione, I--"

"Shhh. Don't say anything," she whispered. "Kiss me."

Snape closed his eyes and leaned into her, taking her moist lips.

All he wanted to do was roll onto his back, hold her tightly and sleep, but something else must be done first.

He crawled off her body and went in search for his wand in his discarded clothes.

"Where are you going?" she asked in a shaky voice.

He ignored her and continued to look for his wand. When he found it, he conjured a glass phial and faced her.

She was lying on the bed, propped up on her elbow watching him.

"May I?" he asked, holding the bottle in the tips of his fingers.

She scrunched her brows in confusion.

He crawled back onto the bed and nudged her legs open with his knees. He stuck two fingers into her, coating them in their juices. He held up his two fingers, showing her.

Dark blood covered them.

Hermione gasped. "My virgin blood--you want to... to collect it?"

Of course he wanted to fucking collect it. It was worth a fortune!

"Yes. May I?" he asked, voice artificially gentle.

Don't make me force you, Hermione.

"Oh, yes, of course! Virgin blood is priceless. Hurry, Severus, before it soaks into the sheets," she said, lying back and spreading wide for him.

That's my girl.

He pressed the opening of the phial at her entrance, flicked his wand so that all the liquid puddled together and fell into the container. After he was finished, he placed the opening near his own groin, which was also covered in her blood, and finished filling the phial. As soon as he was done, he put a cork into it, and set it on the bedside table.

She was smiling at him when he faced her.

"You do realize I have the right to say I fucked you til you bled," he said, grinning.

Hermione rolled her eyes and ran her fingers through his stringy hair. "Yes, I suppose you can say that."

He placed his two blood-soaked fingers in his mouth and sucked them clean.

"Delicious," he said.

Hermione's grin faded, and she fell backward onto the pillows, looking up at the chandelier.

"What's wrong, Hermione?"

"Nothing... I--I just had déjà vu. I feel like I've seen you lick your fingers like that before... with the blood." She looked at him and smiled. "It's nothing to worry about. It was just unexpected."

She rolled onto her side and buried herself in his chest. He moved her into the crook of his arm and lay on his back. He ran his fingers through her hair, enjoying this--

strange and unfamiliar moment with his woman.

"I'm sore," she said.

"It will pass. Do--do you need anything?"

Her eyelashes were fluttering against his skin, tickling him.

"Just you," she said softly.

Snape rolled her onto her back and looked down at her, studying every inch of her face.

"You're so beautiful, Hermione."

She flushed. "Thank you," she said bashfully.

He kissed her forehead and dragged his slender finger down the curve of hip and waist.

For a while, they lay in the bed, touching each other's bodies, kissing, and holding one another. She inquired about his past experiences with other women, and he admitted that he had only been with a few, mostly whores. She confessed that for a while now, she had found him attractive and had been secretly hoping he felt the same about her. Without thinking, he told her that he had not only been attracted to her, but that he had feelings for her.

She had made him completely into a blubbering idiot.

But he didn't care. She was in his bed. She was holding him, loving him. Being with her had been more than what he had expected, and more than what he had lusted after.

So much more.

She snuggled close to him, her legs criss crossed over his. Her hand rested on his lower abdomen, gently twirling his black hairs around her fingers. She breathed deeply, beginning to fade to sleep.

As he closed his eyes, a horrific scorching sensation tore through his Dark Mark. He flung Hermione off of him, clutched his arm and screamed into the pillows as the pain intensified.

Voldemort was livid.

And he was taking it out on Snape.

Up Next: Hermione opens the book.

Expect the Unexpected

Chapter 13 of 32

Hermione opens the book. Severus returns from Voldemort.

A/N: Thank you to Lariope and Lulabelle72 for the charming comments about this chapter. You both have really encouraged me to strive harder and become a better writer. I look up to the both of you so very much. RedSkyAtNight, you are such a patient sweetheart. I know by the end of this, you are going to get so tired of telling me how to properly use the words: lie, lay, lain, and laid. Anyway, thank you to my reviewers--your words inspire me to keep going on this dark and twisted tale."

Euphoria.

There was no other word for the way Hermione felt as she snuggled tightly in the crook of Snape's arm, inhaling his masculine scent of leather, herbs... and sex.

Sex.

She just had sex with Severus Snape.

Oh, gods, she had just had *sex* with Severus Snape! Who would've guessed that *he* would've been the one to take her virginity--to make her feel things she never thought possible. Who knew that *she* could make *him* tremble and shake and moan and cry out her name so loudly that the echoes of that passion reverberated off her chest.

He had told her that he hadn't been with many women--mostly whores he found in Muggle Soho or Knockturn Alley, and so she presumed that she was the first to make him shudder the way he had. And she knew that she was the first woman that he had lain in bed with afterwards, holding and telling her things that Severus Snape shouldn't be telling to anyone.

Hermione grinned to herself. *Doesn't he realize the power I now hold over him?*

Hermione blinked.

Don't you realize the power he now holds over you? "Hermione, come! Come with me!" Well done, Granger. Every time you hear him say the word 'come,' you'll imagine his naked body above you, pumping in out of you, and begging you to follow him over the edge. And you'll just melt and lose all coherent thoughts, exposing yourself, exposing your weakness--for him. And because he is a devious man, he'll know...He'll know that your knickers are wet for him and him alone. And he'll taunt you. Oh, gods, I'm getting wet just thinking about it!

Her walls began pulsating, and the slickness between her legs seeped down the crease of her arse, just from thinking about having him inside her again. But as the

excitement between her legs grew, she also became conscious of the soreness inside her from when he had broken through her barrier. But just as he had said, it would pass. In fact, her entire body was sore. Her jaw from keeping her mouth held wide open while she tasted his cock... Her fingers from first gripping him tightly to her and then rapidly circling her clit with an eagerness she had never felt before... Her hips from extending past her normal flexibility, opening wide to invite him further inside her body...

But she had loved every minute of it... Well, perhaps not when the tip of his cock had pushed against the back of her throat, making her gag, but everything else was everything she had hoped for--especially when he had played with her clit.

With his tongue.

Of course, she had been a bit disappointed when he didn't lay next to her longer and, instead, immediately wanted to collect an extremely valuable potion ingredient. However, that feeling didn't last long because *that* was the person she had known--he was always thinking ahead and not letting an opportunity pass by. And of course, he had been a gentleman and asked her permission. And she could've said no, but why waste something so precious? This was why she knew that she and Snape fit together--they both had understood the importance of the situation and hadn't let frivolous emotions taint their actions.

Now, if he had accumulated the blood, then left her in the bed, she would have been furious. But he hadn't. He had climbed back into the bed and gathered her in his arms, nuzzling her neck and running his long fingers gently through her hair... He had fallen in love with her too; she just knew it. She felt it deep in her soul.

Hermione's breathing became deep and steady, and her body went very still as she began to drift off to sleep in the arms of her man, perfect contentment washing over her.

"Arrrgggghhhhhhh!"

The unexpected, agonizing scream startled her. The rough jab of his elbow in her gut and the quick removal of the arm that lay under her head sent her rolling across the bed, gasping for air.

"Oh, Merlin... fucking... fuck! Aaaahhhhh!" Gripping his left arm, he rolled to his knees in pain and buried his face in the pillows.

"Sev..." she began, coughing. "S-Severus!"

Hermione forced herself to stay calm, but her sweaty palms, racing heartbeat and the tears threatening to fall told her body otherwise. What was she supposed to do?

He flipped to one side and drew his knees to his chest. His cheeks were a deep crimson, and his eyes were squeezed shut. His knuckles were white from tightly gripping his forearm. "M-my wand!"

Hermione scrambled out of the bed, tripping over the jumbled sheets. She jumped to her feet and reached over to the bedside table that was next to him.

"Oh, shite! Where is it?" she swore, looking around frantically.

"I need my FUCKING WAND!"

Thank the gods!

She stooped over and snatched the wand from under the bed--it had been knocked to the floor when he had begun thrashing around in pain.

She leaned over him and forced the wand between his clutched hands. "Open your hand! There you go..."

Hermione cringed when she noticed a trickle of blood oozing from beneath his palm, trailing toward the crevice of his elbow--his Dark Mark was bleeding.

Hermione stepped backwards, holding both hands over her mouth in shock.

Surprised that he was still conscious despite the pain, she watched helplessly as Snape flipped out of the bed, landed on his knees and gripped the bedside table to stabilize himself as he stood on his shaky legs.

"D-dark Lord... Outraged... Trouble..." he garbled, as he gasped for air. "Never... felt him to be this... angry..."

Not once had Hermione ever heard Severus Snape sound so unlike himself, so unlike the smooth, sure man she knew who seemed in control of every situation. She wanted to hold her hand out to him and comfort him, but she was scared and unsure how he would react. "Severus--"

"Hermione, ward... ward the room! Argghhhh!" Another horrendous pain must have traveled through him because he clutched his arm to his chest and nearly crumbled. He forced his eyes open and took another unsteady step toward her.

Hermione was frozen in place. Another wobbly step and he lurched at her, wrenching her to his chest, causing her to squeal with fright.

"Do *not* leave this room until I return! It is too dangerous! Promise me!" he said roughly.

"P-promise me you'll come back safely," she said in return.

He let go of her body and gripped the sides of her neck, circling his thumbs around her cheek and looking deeply into her eyes.

"I promise," he whispered.

"Then I promise I will not leave," she said softly.

"When I come back..." He hissed and held his breath as the pain tore through him again. "Make sure it truly is me when I return," he said, struggling against his agony. A quick flick of his wand, and he was fully dressed.

He touched her lips with the pad of his thumb before he took a step back and placed his wand to his Dark Mark and disappeared.

Hermione was left standing between the wall and bed, naked and cold and frightened.

She wrapped her arms around her body and slumped to the ground in a tiny ball, sobbing. Her body was shaking, and she was sick to her stomach. Everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours came crashing down upon her. She thought she had been strong, strong enough to cope with anything. She had thought she was capable of handling stressful experiences.

But she had been wrong. It seemed that every ounce of adult strength and composure had left her, leaving a little girl who wanted to hide under her blankets with her teddy bear and let the grownups take away everything that made her hurt.

Hermione rocked back and forth, tears falling quickly over her cheeks as her wails of confusion and despair echoed throughout the silent room.

How was it possible that so much had happened to her in such a short amount of time? And how did one channel the lows and highs of these situations and not completely break?

She cried long and hard, remembering what had gone on inside the pyramid in vivid detail as though she was inside that horrible place once more, and how she had finally felt complete with Snape in her arms, and how he had then been forcefully taken away from her just as her body and mind had surrendered to his enveloping protection and love.

The worst of everything, though, was that Snape was in trouble. She recalled the night Rodolphus and Greyback had attacked him. Surely, what a wizard and a werewolf could do was nothing compared to what an infuriated Voldemort could do, and she was sickened by the thought of what would lie in store for her beloved, especially if Voldemort had been angry enough to cause Snape's Dark Mark to bleed.

Finally, all the tears had left her, and she lay crumpled on the plush carpet, stagnant and staring, as an eerie calm came over her.

She sighed heavily, blinked away the last tear, and slowly rose to her feet. She took several steps towards the pile of her clothes and found her wand. Using every single protective ward she knew, Hermione secured herself in the room.

She trudged into the bathroom, placed her wand next to the sink and stepped in the shower. The cold water shocked her body, numbing her... numbing everything. Once her teeth had begun chattering, she turned on the hot water to sooth her sore muscles and scrubbed herself with the spicy Egyptian soap.

When she was finished, she wrapped her body in the fluffy, black robe that hung on the hook behind the door and padded into the bedroom. She got some clean clothes from her luggage and dressed herself. She attempted to brush the knots out of her hair, but gave up and threw her hairbrush across the room. It bounced off the table and landed on her dirty clothes. Hermione's attention was caught by something poking out from the fabric of her trousers.

The book!

She rushed over to the pile of clothes, pulled the tome out of her pocket, sat it upon the table and flicked her wand over it, transfiguring it back to its normal size.

Hermione was slightly nervous that a curse would fly at her, but she trusted Snape. He had checked the book, and there were no curses, hexes, jinxes, or spells on it. So, she proceeded to be the curious cat that she was. She *did* need something to occupy her mind while Snape was... Well, she couldn't think like that right now. She needed to be positive and calm. He was the negative one, not her.

"Well, I might as well start reading this, looking for the information about Horcruxes," she said aloud.

She sat in one of the chairs and strummed her fingers on the table, thinking.

Let's see... I know if I start reading this, I could lose myself in it because of the effect of staring at it too long. Therefore, I need to be able to wrench myself away from the book every hour. And I'm sure I'll have to rest my mind in between sessions of reading it...

Hermione ran several scenarios though her head for over an hour until she had a plan that she was satisfied with.

It took her another hour to set the correct charms in place and test her theory. She placed a spell on the chair so that every hour it would rotate a hundred and eighty degrees, tearing her eyes off the book and yanking her out of her coma-like state. She was only able to test it once, and it worked. She just hoped the magic of the book didn't make her fight the spell on the chair so that she couldn't move her eyes from it.

She wished he were here with her.

She found the necklace that Dumbledore had given her, slipped it over her head and watched it glow teal, ready for use. She sat down in front of the book, reached out with a shaky hand, placed the bottom corner of the tome in between her thumb and forefinger, inhaled deeply and flipped it open.

Hermione had expected for a bright light to come flooding out of the pages, like some magical tomes she had come across, but there were just ordinary pages inside the book--nothing special about them.

Except for the information that was written on those pages. Once again, Hermione scanned them, looking for anything about Horcruxes or souls. But items like the many uses of brains in potions, how to sexually satisfy your mistress with magic, or how to locate the City of the Dead kept coming at her, enticing her to drop her original purpose.

She flipped another page and was suddenly jerked around. It had been an hour and the chair had spun around. Hermione's eyes were burning. She rubbed them, hoping the pain would go away, but it got worse. She opened her watering eyes and ran to the bathroom where she splashed cold water on her face, cooling her eyes. When the pain was gone, she dried off and looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked as if she had been crying.

But it was well worth it.

Before the chair had pulled her away from the book, she caught a glimpse of the next passage: Revealing Souls.

Feeling like she had accomplished something, Hermione crawled into the bed to rest so that when she tried again, she would be fresh and could concentrate better.

It didn't take long for her to fall asleep, but her mind kept wandering back to Snape and what he had to endure while she slept in a huge, comfortable bed. It didn't seem fair. But, he was the spy. It was to be expected of him.

She just hoped he was all right.

Hermione had only intended to sleep for an hour or two, but when she woke and looked at the clock, she realized that it had been over six hours. Hermione shot out of the bed.

"Severus?" she said, walking toward the bathroom, hoping he was in there. She was disappointed when she found it empty. After she freshened up, dressed, and ordered a small breakfast, which was nerve-wracking because she had to drop her wards to order and retrieve her food, she was ready to try reading the book once more.

As soon as she sat down in front of the tome, she was once again sucked into the essence of the book. And, an hour later, she was happily jerked away from it, for she had found exactly what she had been searching for.

After rinsing her burning eyes with water again, she retrieved her notebook and Muggle pencil from her bag and began writing notes. "Revealing the soul. To locate a soul that is hidden. The spell is almost like the Homenum Revelio Charm."

The passage was short. She hoped it might mention other ways to get rid of a soul, *owhat* exactly would happen once she said the spell, but the instructions were vague and finished by saying, 'You will see the light.'

Hermione had no idea what that meant, but she was excited to find out. If all went well, she would possess one of the most powerful tools against Voldemort.

She stood in the middle of the room, trying to ignore her racing heart, and did two circular swishes to the left. She then twirled the wand above her head, flicking it in an exact reproduction of the book's instructions saying the charm.

Hermione stood still for a moment, waiting. But nothing happened.

"Damn it! Well, maybe the spell *did* work, but there isn't a hidden soul in the room, so it appears as if nothing happened."

But what about your soul? The spell should reveal it, right?

Again, Hermione did the movements and incantation, but this time she concentrated harder, and enunciated her words.

Again, nothing happened.

She tried once more, but the like previous two attempts, nothing occurred. She became highly frustrated, pacing back and forth, thinking over what she had read in the book, and wondering if she had forgotten something.

"One more fucking time," she muttered as she did the spell again.

The hotel room went pitch black, all sound from the outside world disappeared, and the temperature dropped to sub-zero, arctic temperature. It was so damn cold that it stung her exposed skin and made her feel as if she were standing naked on top of a glacier.

Hermione tensed. She couldn't see anything around her. Had she done the spell correctly? Had someone breached her wards and done this to her? Was something lurking in the darkness?

She hadn't noticed that she was holding her breath until her chest restricted, forcing her to release the air trapped in her lungs. She pursed her lips and blew a stream of air out. Her breath was misty and white, shimmering even in the darkness, swirling around in a translucent cloud. She gasped, but her shock was cut short when her body began glowing a mystic, cobalt color, lighting the darkness.

What the bloody hell is going on?

Afraid that something terrible was going to happen to her, Hermione whispered, "*Finite Incantatem*," praying that it would stop the spell.

The stillness of the room was immediately gone; the dark and the freezing temperatures vanished. The sounds of the ticking clock, the low whistle of the wind against the window, and the warmth of the room flooded her senses. A rush of relief shot through her trembling body--she was happy to be back in the hotel room, if she had ever left. She scanned the room to see if anything had been disrupted. She looked at the clock and noticed that she had only been in that strange blackout for a few minutes, though in her distress, it had felt like much longer.

She grabbed her notebook and started writing down her questions and observations.

"Where did I go when I said the spell--did I stay in the room? Why did my body start glowing--was it my soul? Be sure to wear warm clothes before casting the charm..."

A thunderous pounding hammered on the door, startling her. Hermione looked up in alarm. She hadn't called for room-service. She tried to swallow away the sudden dryness in her mouth, but couldn't.

Again, the harsh knocking shook the wooden door, and Hermione leapt up, holding her wand out, ready for whatever was coming.

"Hermione, if you can hear me, open the door!"

Snape!

She dashed to the door, happy to hear his voice, happy to know he was all right. She was about to remove the wards when she remembered what he had said about identifying him as the real Severus Snape. A queasy sensation settled in the pit of her stomach when she thought the worse--what if it was someone disguised as him, trying to get her. What if he were already dead--

"Hermione!"

She removed the Muffliato Charm and the Silencing Spell so she could speak to the person on the other side of the door.

"I can hear you!"

"Let me inside, Hermione."

"No. Not until you prove yourself as the real Severus Snape!"

"That's my girl," came the satisfied reply. "What do you want to know?"

"What did you say to me in my fourth year when Malfoy hit me with a hex that made my teeth grow larger?"

"For Merlin's sake, Hermione, I don't remember."

She huffed. "Fine. What marks did I get in my N.E.W.T.s?"

"That's a ridiculous question. If anyone knows your character, they will automatically know that you got all Outstandings."

Hermione stepped back from the door, her jaw falling open. That was the wrong answer.

Oh, fuck. What do I do?

"Expect in Potions, in which you *deserved* the Acceptable that I gave you. I believe I told you that your written work was something I wouldn't even wipe my arse with."

Hermione sighed heavily and relaxed her tense muscles. *Fucking git... scaring me like that.*

"One more question. What is your Patronus?"

There was silence behind the door, and Hermione thought he hadn't hear her. Or perhaps, he really was an imposter. But before she could repeat the question, in a low voice he said, "A doe. But I wouldn't be surprised to find it had become an otter."

Hermione smiled bashfully, removed the wards and opened the door.

Snape was leaning against the doorjamb, his arms crossed in front of him, and he was smirking.

"Hi," she said, standing against the wall and holding the door open so he could walk inside.

"Good evening," he said, walking smoothly towards her.

She was about to tell him that she missed him, but he startled her when he lurched toward her, wrapping one arm around her waist, and spinning her around to the

opposite wall, slamming her back into the plaster. He pinned her against it with his body. His hand squeezed her arse, drawing her hips closer as he proceeded to grind his erection against her. His face was slightly tilted to the right as he leaned in, snatching her lips with his own.

There was a certain roughness about his kiss--it was almost as if he was in need of it, as if his life depended on it. Before she could really respond, his tongue pushed its way past her lips, snaking out to twist around hers. Hermione was thrown off guard. She hadn't expected him to nearly attack her, but she could feel the lust radiating from him.

He sharply pulled his lips off hers. Her own were puffy from his heated kiss, and she knew she was blushing.

"I can't stand being away from you."

She grinned. "I missed you too. I suppose this means that you are all right, then?"

Snape ignored her, heading for the table that had their personal items and the book on top of it.

There was something different about the way he moved--as if he was limping, but trying to hide it.

"What happened after you left? Were you... harmed?"

"If I had any intention of telling you that, don't you think I would have answered you the first time," he snapped, turning on his heel and looking sinister.

Hermione's eyes widened at this sudden change in his demeanor. She dropped her gaze to the floor, her heart thudding in her chest. Had she somehow offended him?

"Hermione, I'm sorry--I shouldn't have said that," he said, walking over to her and reaching out for her hand, bringing it to his lips and kissing the top of it. "It's been a long, tiring and extremely stressful evening,"

"I-I just want to help," she said softly.

He stepped closer to her and ran his finger down her face and through her hair. "I know. But the only thing to be done at present is getting out of here and back to Hogwarts."

"Why? What is--"

"Shhh..." he said, placing his fingertips over her full lips. "We haven't got time for questions and explanations right now, love. You must listen to me and obey. It's for your own good. Pack your belongings and transfigure the book. It's too dangerous here, away from the protection of the castle," he said in a soothing, yet firm voice.

Hermione was scared. She didn't like being out of the loop on things, and she definitely didn't like to hear Severus Snape pronounce something too dangerous, because that was *never* a good sign.

He must have noticed her anxiety because he wrapped her up in his arms and slowly ran his fingers through her hair. She was longing to feel his body so tightly around hers, and she hugged his waist, locking her hands behind him, never wanting to let go. "Don't panic, Hermione. Everything will be fine. Just do as I ask, and do it quickly." He released her and placed his hand under her jaw, forcing her to look at him. "I will never let anything happen to you--do you understand that?"

She nodded.

He kissed her on the forehead, turned away from her and began to collect their items.

They were finished within minutes, and Snape hooked his arm through hers, drew himself up to his full height and looked down at her between strands of his black hair. "Ready?"

Was it her nerves that were making her feel uneasy, or was it something else... a witch's intuition? She had Apparated with him before, and never had he looked so tense. His stringy hair curtained around most of his features, shadowing his dark eyes and brows. His skin seemed even whiter than usual against the stark black hair--he was incredibly sinister, but she put it down to his recent stress. Chills traveled through her as she said, "Yes. I'm ready."

He slowly faced forward, chin held high, and inhaled deeply. Although it was a posture of confidence, arrogance even, the hand that rested against the small of her back twitched as it stroked her. Hermione was perplexed, and the tendrils of fear continued to creep up her spine. They should've been gone by now--it was almost like he was contemplating something or clearing his mind.

Perhaps it's because we have to travel so far, and it takes a lot of energy and concentration.

Finally, the familiar sensation of Apparating engulfed her body. When she thought she couldn't take any more of the pressure and was going to suffocate, they landed on a hard surface.

As she opened her eyes, the looping tendrils of fear blossomed into near-panic. Instead of the recognizable wrought-iron gates that guarded Hogwarts, she was faced with something very wrong, very, very wrong. In place of the castle that Hermione called her second home stood a building she was all too familiar with, and a sickening sensation overtook her.

Looming before her in the darkness was Malfoy Manor.

Up Next: Hermione wants answers from Severus.

Intimidation

Chapter 14 of 32

Welcome to Malfoy Manor, Hermione.

A/N: Thanks Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight for the hard work and support.

Hermione's heart stopped beating, and her stomach plummeted to the pit of her bowels when she realized that Snape had not Apparated them to Hogwarts, but had taken her to Malfoy Manor instead. It wasn't the Manor itself that caused fear to surge through her body, electrifying her nerves--no, it was the way a single beam of moonlight cast down eerily upon the front of the brick façade, shining on the row of men who lined the stone steps leading to the heavy oak doors. Each was dressed in black robes and holding a silver Death Eater mask in their left hand.

Standing in the center, slightly in front of the men, was Voldemort. His silk robes fluttered in the breeze, and his red eyes glowed against his white skin. Lucius was on his left, a prime example of a Pureblood aristocrat--his blond hair was straight and perfect, his chin was held high, and he was using that fucking cane to hold some of his weight. To Voldemort's right was Rodolphus. His nostrils were flared, and he appeared to be irritated. Greyback was next to him, nearly salivating at the sight of her and Snape. Hermione felt lightheaded, and she didn't bother to note who else was present; it didn't matter anyway--she was in extreme danger.

She knew she had to be brave, but reflexively, she took a tiny step backwards, almost cowering away from the sight in front of her. The grip on her arm tightened, and she remembered whom she was standing with: the man she loved, the man she had made love with only hours ago.

A man who happened to be a fucking Death Eater. *Merlin's Beard, he is going to hand me over to Voldemort!*

Wait, Granger! He said that he would never let anything harm you, and you trust him--there must be a logical explanation for this!

"Severus?" she said quietly, voice wavering. She looked at him, her eyes wide, quivering lips and furrowed brows.

He turned his head slightly, cutting his eyes at her. "Do you trust me?" he asked just as quietly, lips barely moving.

Everything in her wanted to say no--he was risking her life for Merlin's sake! Voldemort was standing only a few yards from her and could kill her in a second if he so chose. Or worse. But despite her inner cry, and a desperate urge to just *run*, she said as evenly as possible, "Yes," and nodded her head.

He looked away from her and addressed Voldemort and the others. "Satisfied?"

Voldemort glided towards them and stopped halfway between her and Snape and the Death Eaters behind him.

There was the slightest twitch from Snape's hand before he squeezed her fingers. Before she could process what was happening, an agonizing twinge shot through her head, and images of her life whirled around her eyes like a Muggle film.

Do you trust Severusss, girl?

Hermione tried--oh, how she tried--to block the words that bubbled up in her throat like foul vomit. "I--I love him," she shouted, not recognizing her voice as it left her mouth, traveling over her lips and out into the dark night for everyone to hear.

Her body trembled uncontrollably, and she nearly collapsed against Snape as soon as Voldemort pulled out of her mind.

"Yesss, Severusss. I'm very satisfied," he hissed, vanishing into a black swirl of vapor.

Not knowing where he had gone was worse than seeing him standing in front of her. Hermione's breath hitched, hoping he wouldn't make another uninvited appearance in her mind. Or her body.

"We, however, won't be satisfied until we see the filthy Mudblood withering--"

Before Rodolphus could finish his sentence, Snape Apparated them, and she was being squeezed by the familiar force of magic again.

Relief washed over her as the gates of Hogwarts materialized in front of her. She wanted to fall to her knees and cry, wanted to shout at him for his unexpected surprise, but he roughly tugged her by her arm, dragging her up the rocky hill toward the metal gates.

"Get inside! Stop bumbling, girl! Walk!"

Behind her the *pops* of multiple Apparation were thunderous to her ears.

"GET 'EM!"

"Stupefy!"

A streak of red zoomed by Hermione's temple--it was so close to her face that she felt the heat radiating from the jet of light. She slipped on the gravel beneath her feet and stumbled. Snape gripped her wrist, yanking her across the ground while he used his wand to open the gates. Dirt and pebbles crept beneath her trousers and socks as she tried to find her footing. As she stood up, he gripped her forearm with his other hand and flung her through the opened gates. The magic of Hogwarts' protective wards prickled her skin as she passed through, and it felt like a blessing.

She lurched across the ground, skidding to a halt on her knees and ripping holes in her trousers, scraping her skin. She snapped her head around to see Snape slamming the gates behind him.

They were safe.

Lucius sauntered over to the wrought-iron, his cane striking the ground with each step he took. "The Dark Lord may be impressed with you, Severus, but we aren't. Stop playing these games and just hand her over to us--we'll make sure we get what we want from her." His gaze drifted down to Hermione, still panting on her knees on the ground.

"Willing to go against the Dark Lord's wishes, Lucius?" Snape snorted. "You should know better than that by now."

Another man Hermione didn't recognize stomped over to where Lucius was standing. "You think you know everything, Snape. Well, you don't. Do you honestly believe our Master cares about your plans and your fucking Mudblood whore?"

"Now, now, Yaxley. Let's not tell Snape all our secrets," Lucius said suavely, holding his arm out to block the other man from attempting to come closer to the gates.

"Watch your pet, Snape--you never know what might happen to her," Greyback growled, staring at Hermione and flicking his tongue lasciviously at her.

Hermione was horrified at watching the Death Eaters arguing. And arguing about *her*! As though she was just a bone, caught between dogs in a fray.

Snape gripped his wand, and although she couldn't see his face, she knew he was raging. "If you lay one fucking hand on her, I will--"

"Severus!" she bellowed.

Snape whipped around, and Hermione hardly recognized him. For a brief moment, she wondered if that was the look on his face before he killed. But his features changed as soon as he recognized her, changing to worry. She rose unsteadily to her feet as he marched over to her, ignoring the threats from the people outside the gates.

"Don't listen to them, and keep quiet."

"D-don't listen to them! What the *bloody hell* is going--"

Snape snatched her jaw in his hand, squeezing it tightly. "Hold. Your. Tongue," he threatened.

"Defiant pet, isn't she, Severus?" Lucius said loudly.

"Yeah, Snape! She's out of order--how are you going to punish your little slave?" shouted another Death Eater.

Snape looked fiercely in her eyes and slightly shook his head from side to side. She blinked back her tears and tried to nod her head in his harsh grip. He roughly shoved her backwards, clutched her upper arm and forcefully guided her toward the castle.

Calm down, Hermione. He is treating you like this because they are watching. He will not let anything happen to you. But what the fuck is going on? Why did he take you in front of them--what is he playing at?

As soon as the heavy doors to the castle closed behind them and they were safely in the Entrance Hall, Hermione jerked her arm out of his grip, whipped her wand out of her pocket and pointed it at his chest.

"Explain!"

"Hermione, I had no other choice." He looked coolly down at her wand.

Magic tingled through her veins and fingertips, almost throbbing--she hadn't felt this out of control since she was young and knew nothing of magic. Her hair swirled slowly, blowing in an unseen breeze, and the crackle of her magic snapped with each twitch of her enraged body.

Snape sensed her instability and took a slow step to the left, raising his hands to his chest, palms out.

"Hermione, I can explain," he said in a low voice. "Lower your wand, and let's--"

"Shut up, Severus! Y-you got *no* idea what I have been through since you left! And combined with the adventure we had less than twenty-four hours ago and us being... being together... I-I've... been through so much... and I was worried about you!"

As she shouted those last words, all her magic broke loose from the barely tenable hold she had on it within her tense body. A surge of gold sparks shot out of her fingertips, and a burst of pink magic erupted from her wand, bouncing off the wall opposite her and rebounding back towards her.

Snape dived out of the way of the exploding magic, tackling Hermione to the ground, covering their faces, and using his wandless magic as he shouted, "*Protego!*"

The embers of her magic rained down around them, disappearing once they hit the stone floor. Her body shook from releasing that much power at one time, and she couldn't help but cry, the events of the last twenty-four hours far beyond her immediate capacity to cope.

After her fit settled to small sniffles, Snape removed the protective charm and lifted himself from her. He bent over, slipped his arm beneath her neck and the crook of her knees, and lifted her off the ground, clutching her tightly to his chest.

She fell limp in his arms, drained off all energy and emotions, not caring where he intended to take her. She loosely hooked her hands around his neck and buried her face in his chest.

"Stay with me tonight," he whispered hoarsely.

"You still want me? Even after I lost control?" she whispered.

"Of course, Hermione. I want you to be with me always. Besides, I owe you some explanations, and I would not feel comfortable leaving you alone tonight." He kissed her gently on the forehead.

When they arrived in his rooms, he gently placed her on his bed and said, "Wait there for a moment."

Hermione closed her eyes and drew in several deep breaths, calming her nerves with the familiar scent of Severus on the pillowcase.

His finger tracing her brow startled her, and she opened her eyes. She was surprised to see him shirtless, wearing only his trousers and black socks. "A hot bath will do us some good," he said as he helped her sit up.

She swung her legs off the large bed, and he stood between her knees. "Raise your arms," he said, holding the bottom of her shirt. Her body ached as though she had been building pyramids, not just exploring them, as she lifted both arms above her head. He gradually lifted her shirt, slowly exposing her waist, her breasts, and finally up and over her head and arms.

The room was chilly, and she wrapped her arms over her midsection, holding herself. Snape reached behind her, clutching the strap of her bra, and with one flick of his fingers, she was unhooked. He slipped the bra off and began circling his thumbnail over her left nipple, teasing her.

"Severus... please stop."

He snatched his fingers away from her, and his thin lips tightened, as if she had offended him.

"Severus, don't be upset--I like it when you do that, but I'm just knackered."

A moment passed before the crease between his brows relaxed. He helped her stand up and finished undressing her. When she was fully naked before him, he once again scooped her into his arms and carried her into the bathroom, which was clouded with damp, hot steam.

The large bath was nearly filled to the brim with hot water and pale blue bubbles. Snape stood on the side and lowered Hermione into the water.

She hissed the moment the scorching water came in contact with her arse and feet.

"It's too hot," she said, gripping his neck tighter, trying not to fall into the pool of water.

"Your muscles need it, Hermione. Let go of my neck and submerge yourself."

She whimpered as she removed her grip around him and dropped herself into the water.

The initial shock was horrid, and she thought her skin was actually blistering off her bones. The pain didn't last long, and she began to feel like she was floating, the heat from the water enveloping her body as if a multitude of hands were on her, massaging her sore muscles.

"How does that feel?"

"Magnificent," she sighed, opening her sleepy eyes. She was surprised to see Snape sitting in the water across from her.

"It's the bubbles--I brewed it myself. It took me almost a year to find the correct combination of ingredients to get the effects I was looking for. It is the only thing that got me through the night after I... suffered from... certain punishments and tortures," he said softly.

"It's brilliant. I have never felt so relaxed. And my energy is coming back. Thank you."

Beneath the water, Snape found Hermione's hand. He tugged on it and said, "Come here."

She pushed off the bottom of the stone tub and floated over to him.

"Turn around," he said, guiding her.

She settled between his opened legs and leaned her back against his chest. He embraced her, burying his face against her neck. His erection was noticeably hard against her back, and as much as she wanted to flip around and slide his hardness inside her, she wanted answers first. But before she could ask any of her hundreds of questions, he started whispering.

She strained to hear his low mutterings.

"Severus? What are you saying?"

She felt him take a large breath of air and huff it out like he was getting ready to say something important. "You said you loved me in front of them."

Hermione lowered her head, embarrassed that she had let that happen. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

"You don't love me," he stated.

"I--I didn't mean to say that aloud. It was private." This time she was the one to inhale and exhale deeply before continuing. "I wanted to tell you when we were alone. But yes. I do love you. I'm sure you think I'm being ridiculous--"

He squeezed her closer to his body and kissed the top of her shoulder.

"You really love me," he muttered, now kissing up and down her neck.

"Yes, I do," she admitted again, smiling. She had thought it would be harder to tell the cynical man her true feelings, but it was so very easy. It was like the words just flowed out of her mouth, skipping around happily.

His cheek was pressed against the side of her head, and he was holding her very tightly against him. His lips brushed against her earlobe, and he softly breathed, "And I love you."

Through the hot bathwater, Hermione could feel the hairs on her arms standing on end as chills swept through her body. Hearing him say those words... admitting to feelings that she was positive he had never had... Well, it was mind-blowing. She had assumed he had feelings for her, but never did she imagine he would tell her so nor tell her after such a short amount of time. She tipped her head back on his shoulder, exposing her neck, sighing in relief.

He loved her.

It was an incredible feeling to be loved, to be wanted. And if she felt like this, she couldn't even imagine what it felt like for him--for a man who secluded himself from others on a daily basis. *Has he even loved or been loved before?*

Again, his cock prodded against her, and she wanted to push his hands towards the ache between her thighs, but her mind argued against her physical cries.

She sat up straight, turned around, scooted back to her side of the bathtub and said, "Severus, will you please explain what happened tonight?"

Snape locked eyes with hers. "He demanded to see you. He wanted to know how much you trusted me. If I had told you what the plan was, your reaction would have been false, and he would have seen through that."

"I understand. I must admit that it was a bit of a nasty shock. And I was terrified. But, he seemed satisfied, right?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, he was completely satisfied. Although the other Death Eaters..."

"They are envious of your rank," she said, adding, "and are disgusting bastards."

"Perhaps. But they are dangerous, Hermione. Especially Greyback and Lestranger."

She nodded her head and inhaled the salty scent of the blue bubbles.

"What--what happened when you left because your Dark Mark was burning?"

"I'd rather not say," he muttered.

"It was bleeding--I was so scared," she cried out.

"As was I. Yes, he was angry with me, but only for a while. I can't tell you any more than that."

"You've got a slight limp when you walk."

The muscles in his jaw flexed, tensing. "Indeed."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"It's for your own good."

Hermione slammed her fist into the water, splashing everywhere. "My own good?" she shouted. "Don't you tell me what is for my own good! I have had enough of other people deciding for me what I should know or not know! I will decide for myself!"

"I don't want you knowing, Hermione," he said, his voice rising, tensed.

She knew he must be embarrassed to tell her what happened to him when Voldemort was beyond angry, but she couldn't help but prod. She wanted to know what her lover endured--and she wanted him to get it off his chest. But most of all, she wanted him to understand that she was there for him now, that he could lean on her when he needed.

"I know I can't help you with that, but you aren't alone anymore. Please confide in me."

His oversized nostrils flared, and his eyes narrowed. "Why are you so damn nosy?"

"I-I just--"

"You *just* what, Miss Granger?" he growled.

The use of her surname made her heart leap out of her chest--she had pushed him too far.

"I-I--"

"Do you get some sort of thrill out of knowing that I had to fucking crawl on my sodding knees in front of him and grovel? That he hung me upside down by one ankle, shackled in a metal strap that had fucking rusty spikes on the inside of it, digging into my flesh and bone? That my fucking ankle broke because of the amount of weight and pressure on it?"

Horrified, Hermione burst into tears, covering her face with her hands, shaking her head. "No!"

The water around her was disturbed, and a wave sloshed onto her chest.

"Look!"

She peeked through her fingers and saw him holding his left ankle up, out of the water.

"Look at it!"

She removed her hands and looked at the discoloration around his ankle and down to his toes. The purple was stark against his pale skin, and there were several puncture holes pierced into his skin with dried blood crusting around the holes.

Hermione gasped. She didn't know what to say nor how to help him.

He lowered his leg underneath the water. "Happy?" he snarled. "My attempt at healing it before I came back to the hotel room is only temporary--so yes, I have a damn limp!"

Hermione imagined herself in his position, being abused. Whenever she had hurt herself when she was younger, her mother had always kissed away her tears, healed her the best way a Muggle knew how, and held her until she felt better. It was a comfort she missed. And it was a comfort that he had never had.

She moved towards him, straddling his legs. He flinched as she wrapped her arms around his neck, embracing him. She ran her fingers through his hair and kissed the top of his head. "I'm here for you," she whispered, gently rocking him.

It was all she needed to say for him to break his walls and relax in her arms. He raised his arms out of the water and clenched her body. He buried his head in her chest, trembling.

Hermione closed her eyes as she nurtured her man. This night alone, he had gone to hell and back, protected her from Death Eaters, and taken care of her when her magic had become unbalanced and she had lost all her energy. One night--how many nights like this one, or worse, had he had to endure? It was a wonder he didn't have more break downs than he did.

He became very still, and she wondered if he had fallen asleep, so she gently let go of him and tilted her head sideways to see his face. But he wasn't sleeping. His eyes were open, and a calmness had overtaken him. He slowly looked up into her eyes, and she grinned. He let go of her, slid his hands to her waist and guided her onto his lap.

She wasn't surprised to find his cock hard. She slipped her hand below the water, grasped it and slowly began stroking it.

He moaned loudly, resting his head against the tiles. She sat on her knees and leaned into him, her breasts pressed against his chest. "Do you like that?" she whispered seductively, kissing the side of his neck as she stroked him faster.

He aggressively sat up, gripped her body to his, dug his fingers in her hair and began kissing her like there was no tomorrow. His mouth was wild on hers, his tongue and lips devouring hers.

She jumped when his fingers touched her lower lips, finding their way to her clit.

She panted, "Oh, yes," between their kisses as he pressed on her nub, sending pulsating shivers through her.

It wasn't long before his deft fingers ignited a deep throbbing sensation--she wanted his cock inside her, filling her up and stretching her open.

"More... please!" she cried, wiggling her legs from underneath her and opening herself for him.

Water splashed out of the bath as he pushed her off his legs and sat up on his knees.

"Slide under the water and lie on your back with your knees drawn to your chest," he demanded.

Not sure of what was about to happen; Hermione nervously took a large breath of air and slipped below the water, lying on her back. She kept her eyes closed, and he helped push her knees to her chest. His hand was holding his cock, prodding her clit with the blunt tip of it. She could feel him slide a bit lower, teasing her. As she slowly blew a small amount of air out of her nostrils, he rammed his cock inside her.

And oh, gods did it feel good.

His thumb was on her clit as he thrust in and out of her, the water above her slopping in waves over the sides of the tub.

She began to lose control, tottering on the edge of coming. But because she wasn't concentrating on holding her breath, she began panicking under the water once her chest became constricted. She lowered her legs and reached out of the water, hooking her arms around his neck, pulling herself up and letting him slip out of her.

She took several large gulps of air before she let go of him and splashed back into the water.

"Flip onto your hands and knees."

Hermione rolled over and pushed herself to all fours, tipping slightly forward, her face skimming the water. He entered her again and leaned over her back, placing two fingers on her clit again.

"Oooooohhhh!" she moaned, the sound echoing against the stone enclosure of the bath. He pumped in and out her, his long shaft sliding deeply into her, hitting a sensitive nerve. She rocked her body into his, ignoring the water that was splashing in her face and up her nose.

Finally he groaned and plunged into her. At this angle, the sensation of his come squirting into her was greater--she felt him coating her insides. She rotated her hips as he grinded his fingers into her clit, making her cry out his name as she fell over the edge.

She collapsed in the water, her body quivering from head to toe.

Before she slipped below the surface, his strong arms lifted her up. Eyes closed, she leaned limply against him.

"Let's go to bed, sweet one," he said softly as he helped her out of the bath.

"Mmmm... I like it when you call me that--it's much better than Miss Granger," she said groggily.

Snape chuckled as he dried her off with a grey cotton towel. She loved hearing him laugh. He wrapped the towel around her hair, squeezing the excess water out, and kissed her neck. "Sweet one," he said gently.

She whirled around and kissed him, clasping her arms around his neck, and standing on tiptoe. He moaned with pleasure and lifted her off her feet, walking them to the bedroom where he gently sat her on the side of his bed.

She let go of him and climbed beneath the cool sheets as he walked to the other side and slid in next to her. He lay on his back, and she positioned her head on his chest and laid one leg over his. She rested her hand on the patch of wiry hair above his cock, swirling her fingers through it.

"I've got to go home in the morning--I need to check on my family," she said tiredly.

"Of course. I've got duties to attend to tomorrow as well. But, you *will* spend the night with me again tomorrow night."

Hermione giggled. "Of course."

Hermione's slumber was sweet, content, and filled with dreams that she couldn't remember, but that left her pleasantly drowsy upon waking. And every time she awoke during the night, no matter how brief, she only had to move a hand, a foot, and she felt his reassuring touch in return.

Several hours later, the morning light peeked through the draperies in Severus' chambers, waking Hermione. For a while she lay in bed thinking about the busy day ahead of her. And although she didn't want to be away from Severus, she was excited about going home and telling her cousin, Jezzie, about the adventure in Egypt, losing her virginity to the man she loved, and the mysterious spell that would help her locate the last Horcrux.

A/N: I wanted to do a quick Thank you to, Livvy6. Her Severus calls Hermione 'sweet one' in her fic that I am betaing and I just loved that, so I used it in here! Thanks for your inspiration!

Up Next: The reason Voldemort was angry with Snape.

The Storm is Brewing

Chapter 15 of 32

Hermione visits with Jezzie. Snape brings a surprise to Voldemort.

Hermione couldn't remember a more perfect summer morning in her life. There hadn't been a cloud in sight, allowing the sun to wash over her skin like a caress, and a light breeze had played with Hermione's hair as Severus had escorted her to the Apparition point. As they had walked, she noticed that somehow, overnight, mother-nature seemed to reflect the tentative new feelings in her heart, for everything around her had seemed to be cheerful and full of life. The forest trees rose high above them, canopying the footpaths below with their lush foliage. The lake was a vibrant cerulean and as smooth as glass. Even the birds whistling from their boughs sounded happy as the two lovers walked hand in hand to the heavy gates.

He had Apparated them directly inside her living room, his wand held out, ready for unexpected attacks. And only after he had warded her home himself had he released her hand. Her parents had already left for the day, and Hermione had an urge to make love to him in her childhood bed. But he had been strong and had told her that each of them had much to do and would have to wait until the evening. After she had kissed him longer than she needed to, he had Disapparated, leaving her by herself for the first time in days.

After she had opened all the curtains in the house to let the sunshine pour in from the windows, unpacked, showered, and dressed, Hermione had phoned her cousin, asking her to come over.

An hour and a half later, her cousin was sitting in the living room with her, munching on biscuits.

"Well, you have been a busy little witch!" Jezzie said after Hermione had finished telling her what had transpired the past few days.

Hermione smiled as she repositioned herself on the sofa, getting comfortable.

"I knew you fancied him--I believe I even *said* you had a crush on him the night you told me about your N.E.W.T.s!"

Hermione grumbled. "All right, fine. You were right!"

Jezzie smirked.

"So... What has your *lover* got to say about this spell to locate souls?"

Hermione shifted in her seat. "Well, I haven't had time--"

Green flames roared to life in Hermione's fireplace, startling the two girls.

"Hermione?"

"Harry! What are you doing?" she said, jumping from the sofa to stand in front of the fire.

"Oh, good--you're home," he said, sliding his body to the left, letting Ron stick his head through the flames as well.

"Hello," Ron said, smiling.

"Ron! Come through--"

"We can't. We've only got a few moments. We are coming home tonight--there has been some activity, and the Ministry wants all Aurors and trainees back in London," Harry explained.

"And we won't have much time when we return--we just wanted to know if you got the book from the pyramid?" Ron said quickly.

"Yes! And I have used the spell once, but I'm going to Hogwarts again this afternoon to start searching for the Horcrux."

"Brilliant! I knew you would be able to do it," Harry replied, smiling.

"Everything... went well in Egypt? No problems?" Ron asked, concerned.

"Nothing that Severus and I couldn't handle."

The boys' locked eyes with each other.

"Severus?" they said in unison, facing her with puzzled looks on their faces.

Hermione flushed. "Err... yes... you see..."

"Save it, Hermione. We will discuss this later, we have to go," Harry said, looking behind him as if someone was calling his name.

"Oh, yes, of course. Have a safe trip home," she said, relieved that she didn't have to explain why she was calling Snape by his first name.

Ron waved good-bye and disappeared in the flames with Harry right behind him.

The fire died, and Hermione turned around, sighing heavily.

"Embarrassed about telling the boys that you are shagging your former professor?" Jezzie said, grinning from ear to ear.

"No! Besides, I love him. There's a difference between us just shagging and being in love and making love together," Hermione said defensively, crossing her arms and pouting.

The fire sprang to life once more and Hermione whipped around, surprised at another Floo-call.

Harry was back.

"And Hermione, we *will* have a talk about what is going on between you and Snape--don't think you are off the hook."

Before Hermione could utter a single word in response, Harry was gone.

"You know, just because they are boys, doesn't mean they don't know when something is going on with their best friend," Jezzie said.

Hermione stalked over to the sofa. Her cousin was right. The boys were perceptive--hell, they were training to be Aurors. But nevertheless, she hated admitting that other people were right, and to have to tell her cousin twice in one day... well... she hadn't been called a stubborn arse in the past for nothing.

"That's rubbish, Jezzie."

"Hermione--"

"Rubbish!"

Jezzie began giggling and after a moment, Hermione couldn't contain her laughter and joined her cousin.

"They are just looking out for you," Jezzie said after she regained control of herself.

Hermione sighed. "I know. But..."

"It will be hard to tell them you are shagging--in love-- with Severus Snape."

Hermione nodded.

"Would you like some tea?" Hermione asked, rising from the sofa.

"If I had more time, but I need to do a few errands before I go to work. And I am sure you are anxious to try that spell at the school," Jezzie said, gathering her sack and walking to the front door.

Hermione gave her cousin a warm good-bye hug and decided to visit her parents at their surgery before she headed back to Hogwarts. As she was putting her shoes on, she wondered what sort of activity was happening at the Ministry. She hadn't heard anything from anyone in the Order and presumed that it was more of a precaution than an indication of anything serious.

Well, at least she hoped.

Snape returned to Hogwarts after leaving Hermione at her parents' home and went directly to the Hospital Wing in search of the school's healing potions. He didn't have time to brew a new batch for his ankle--he was scheduled to meet with Voldemort soon.

He sat on one of the beds in the quiet room, his foot propped up on two pillows, and attempted to properly repair his torn ligaments, set his bone correctly, and hopefully, reverse some of the damage he had done with his half-arsed Healing Charm.

"The shit I go through..." he muttered to himself, recalling what had happened the previous night.

Snape had sat unsteadily on his knees in front of Voldemort, head bowed and nerves twitching from the excruciating pain in his left forearm. He had expected to be hit with the Cruciatus Curse and had prepared his mind and body for the pain, but it had been a complete surprise when he had been magically wrenched upside down by one ankle, his robes flipping over, exposing his bare legs and crotch. Instantly, Snape was choked with humiliation, his mind rapidly flipping between his current state in a posh drawing room of Malfoy Manor and a similar one twenty years ago, on a small hill, with half the school and Lily watching and laughing. It had been a complete feeling of helplessness then as now, and Voldemort knew exactly how Snape felt about being tortured like this--his master was causing him distress, physical and emotional, on purpose.

"Clamp him inside the shackle!" Voldemort had hissed.

A metal chain with a spiked shackle on one end hung from the ceiling. Dolohov had lowered the chain so that it was level with Snape's foot, opened the jaws of the shackle, and fastened it to Snape's ankle with one horrific snap, driving the spikes deeply into his flesh, and piercing his bone.

Though he had watched the chain dropping lower and lower, Snape hadn't been able to repress the scream that shot from his trembling lips.

As soon as he had caught his breath, Voldemort flicked his wand, releasing the magic that had been holding Snape upside, dropping him towards the floor. The slack of the chain tightened as the weight of his body jerked to a harsh stop, snapping his ankle, and dragging the spikes upwards, ripping through his tendons and skin and muscle.

He had crossed his free leg over his other in a desperate attempt to keep from twisting at awkward angles. His body had been swinging back and forth like a pendulum, the boards in the ceiling creaking with each sway. He groaned, stifling his screams and blinking away the tears that blurred his vision. It was only as he tried to blink away a red haze that he realized the blood running down his leg in rivulets was spattering onto his face.

"Why were you in Egypt, Severusss?"

Snape couldn't help but gasp. He didn't understand how Voldemort found out--he had been so careful hiding his tracks. What had he missed?

Voldemort's eyes had been glowing blood red, as he was beyond livid. "You didn't think I would find out, did you? You should've known better, Severusss. I have spies everywhere!"

Who the bloody hell--

"Ah, yes, Severusss... Spies everywhere. Remember that man who Apparated you to a pyramid? He recognized you. You are one of the highest ranked Death Eaters--all my followers, across the world, know who you are."

Fuck!

"Since you failed to tell your Lord that you were leaving the country, I couldn't inform my followers that you would be visiting and order them to grant you anything you desired. Imagine his surprise to find you in his country without any forewarning! Imagine how I felt when I was told where you were. And with whom. But before I could summon you, several of our men had been ambushed by Aurors. Did you know about that Severusss?"

Voldemort loomed over Snape, his wand pointing directly at Snape's heart.

"There was a plan to attack my men in the Ministry, was there not, Severusss?"

The blood had rushed to his head, and he was feeling dizzy, but he managed to keep focused. His life, literally, hung in the balance. "N-no," he muttered.

"Of course you didn't know that--because you were in Egypt! They wounded my men, Severusss, and you were not here to heal them!" Voldemort snatched Snape by the throat, lifting him eye-level, and crushing his windpipe with his cold, skeletal fingers. "Was she worth it?" Voldemort snarled, the anger radiating from him.

"My Lord--"

Voldemort dropped Snape, the sudden fall twisting his ankle more so.

"Because my loyal followers suffered by the hands of the Aurors, you will endure the pain that was inflicted on them!"

Voldemort raised his wand, ready to attack.

"H-horcrux--she found a book to locate your last Horcrux," Snape cried, desperate to save himself from the wrath of the Dark Lord.

In a smooth slither, Voldemort had lowered his wand, stepped next to Snape, and enclosed them in a silencing bubble.

Snape was shaking--he hadn't known if mentioning the Horcrux would get Voldemort's attention.

"Explain," he said, waving his wand and unhooking Snape from the shackle.

Snape had dropped to the ground, falling onto his right shoulder.

"M-my Lord, the girl was informed of an ancient book hidden inside a pyramid. It is said to contain a spell that will locate Horcruxes. That is all I know--"

The intrusion of Voldemort in his mind was no shock to him.

"So, you have bedded the Mudblood. And she trusts you?"

"Yes. It is the only way to get my hands on the book without her alerting the entire Ministry."

"I want to see her. Tonight, at Lucius'. We will be waiting."

Snape had stayed on his knees, respecting the order of hierarchy, but feeling like fucking Peter Pettigrew, who always groveled. "Yes, my Lord."

"And don't worry, Severusss... I won't harm her."

When Snape had finally returned to fetch Hermione, he had been enraged. He had tried to stay calm and collected, but he knew he wasn't fooling Hermione--she had sensed the eerie change in him. And for a moment, just before he Apparated them, he considered going against Voldemort--how could he ever take her in front of the Dark Lord, purposely exposing her to a dangerous situation? He had fought an inner battle in those minutes before he Apparated, but staying the faithful servant and keeping his role as spy for the Order had won. And he had hated himself for it--hated that he had to play the puppet once again, and this time, bringing her along for the hellish ride.

Snape finally finished healing his ankle properly, cleaned the phials of potions and headed to the Apparition location.

Yes, Voldemort, you didn't harm her... But those fucking cunts tried to... Not for long though...

Snape arrived at Malfoy Manor an hour later and was escorted by a house-elf into a small sitting room.

Voldemort was sitting in a high-back chair, waiting for him.

Snape bowed and sat down in the wing-backed chair opposite Voldemort.

"Do you have the book? Or the spell?"

"My Lord, after you left Malfoy Manor yesterday, Lucius and the others attempted to attack me and Miss Granger. In the madness, she lost control of her magic, draining her of her powers. I had to deal with her and wasn't able to get the book or anything else from her."

"Severusss, you are trying my patience!" Voldemort hissed, slamming his palm on the arm of the wooden chair.

"My apologies," he said politely, smirking.

"Why are you smiling, Severusss? You know I find it irritating when you do that."

"Because I've got information that I know you will be satisfied with."

"What is it?" Voldemort said, sounding as if he was peeved.

Snape leaned back in the chair and crossed his legs. He snapped his fingers, and the door to the sitting room opened. A house-elf ushered a woman inside. Her eyes were blank, and she fell to her knees next to Snape, facing Voldemort.

"What is *she* doing here, Severusss?"

"Late last night, my Notification Charm on the girl was activated--it tells me when she learns useful information. After I left Miss Granger this morning, I paid this girl a visit and got the knowledge that I needed."

Snape looked at the kneeling woman, swept her hair from her shoulders and faced Voldemort once again.

"As of last night, our wonderful spy, Jezebel, has become the Secret Keeper for Beauxbatons."

Voldemort sat forward in his chair, his red eyes glowing bright red, grinning and very pleased with Snape.

"She's under the Imperius Curse, and because of the Unbreakable Vow, she is required to tell me the location when I ask for it--she can tell up to ten people. But we've only got a few moments--she was on her way to Miss Granger's when I intercepted her and brought her here. If she doesn't show, the Mudblood will alert the Order."

"I am impressed, Severusss. I admit that I presumed you were hiding something and were not being the loyal follower that I have always known--especially when you went out of the country without telling me."

"My Lord? How could I *ever*--"

Voldemort held his white, scaly hand up. "And since I believed that of you, I admit that it was my intention to let the others... take her last night after I left. But she believes that you are a loyal Order member--you are doing your job well. I should not have doubted my most trusted servant. As an apology, I will grant you one gift."

Severus had a feeling that Voldemort had suspected him of being a traitor. He also knew that by giving the information Voldemort wanted about Beauxbatons, his master would grant him anything he wanted.

Voldemort was playing right into Snape's hands.

"Thank you my Lord," Snape said, bowing his head. "You are always gracious."

Voldemort nodded.

"Greyback and Lestrage are challenging me at every turn. They have made direct threats to Miss Granger, and for now, her safety is vital. I would like you to guarantee her protection."

"If Greyback or Lestrage are preventing you of getting the information needed from the Mudblood, or if they harm her, you have my blessing to deal with them as you see fit--without any repercussions from me."

Although Voldemort didn't specifically say he would keep her safe, Snape knew that getting Voldemort's blessing to eradicate two of his higher ranked followers was a high honour. He was back to being Voldemort's most trusted, and faithful, spy.

Voldemort summoned for Dolohov, Greyback, Lestrage, Malfoy, and two junior Death Eaters. As soon as they all were in the room, Snape knelt on the floor, smoothing Jezzies' hair from her face and in a smooth, seductive voice, he said, "Jezebel, it is time. Please tell us the exact location of Beauxbatons."

The girl nodded slowly and in a monotone voice, she gave away the Secret.

"Excellent," Voldemort said.

It had taken less than fifteen minutes to retrieve the information and return her to the door outside her flat. He Obliviated her memories and left the young girl blinking and confused.

With her notebook and map tucked under her arm and her wand in the other hand, Hermione was determined to make progress on finding the hidden Horcrux.

She had Apparated herself to Hogwarts around noon, ready to work. She had skipped going to see Severus because... well... she would've become distracted. And because he would've reprimanded her to no end about Apparating alone. But she hadn't been able to wait until the evening when he was supposed to escort her--she was too excited about the possibility of locating the Horcrux and trying the spell.

For the past several hours, she had gone through every room on the ground floor, using the spell. Every time she had cast the charm, the room would instantly become freezing cold and pitch black, and after a moment, her own soul would light up the darkness.

Her heart had nearly stopped beating when she was in the Great Hall, thinking she had found the Horcrux. But the yellow tinge of light that fluttered above her\ turned out to be just an owl sitting on the rafters. She had been mildly disappointed, but now, at least, she knew the spell *did* locate every soul in the room.

Hermione now stood in the tower that housed the Grand Staircase, on a landing between the third and fourth floor, casting the spell once more. It was an extremely odd sensation to hear the complaints and shrieks of the portraits, and yet not see the walls covered in tiny colours from their souls. Again, the room stayed black, except her own soul...

What is that?

A silver, oval-shaped orb was gliding towards her, coming up the stairs from the Main floor. She rolled her eyes *another bloody owl*--and stopped the enchantment on the room. She was shocked to see Severus stalking up the staircase, heading straight for her with a scowl on his face.

"Do you enjoy putting yourself in danger, Miss Granger, or do you do it just to infuriate me?" he raged, stomping up the stone stairs.

"Severus--"

"Shall I place a tracking spell on you? Because it's obvious that you cannot follow directions and stay somewhere safe!"

Five more steps, and he would be on the landing with her. Hermione lowered her head and waited for him to continue shouting at her.

But instead of berating her further, he jerked her into his arms and held her tightly against his chest.

"Have you got any idea how I would have felt if something had happened to you?" he whispered, burying his face in her unruly hair and kissing the top of her head.

Hermione nodded.

"Next time, will you just wait for me--and do as I ask?"

Hermione nodded again.

She pulled out of his arms, ready to apologize, but he shook his head as if he didn't want to hear her excuses.

"How did you find me here?"

"After I searched your home and Grimmauld Place, I came here. You weren't in my quarters, and I used the portraits to look for you around the castle--one of them mentioned that you were on the stairs. If you weren't here, I was going to Malfoy's next."

"Oh."

"And what the bloody hell were you doing? My body was glowing silver as I walked up the stairs."

"Oh, that," she said, giggling. "That's the spell to locate the Horcrux. When you left to see... the Dark Lord, I occupied my mind by reading the book."

Snape looked at her, jaw slack. "You've already found the spell? How..."

Hermione smiled, intertwined her fingers with his, and lead them down the stairs to his private chamber, telling him about the process of finding the spell in the book and how it worked.

Snape had been a bit annoyed that she hadn't waited to open the book with him, but he was also impressed with her ability to gain access to the spell--an ancient, powerful spell--without wasting away in front of the tome.

Over dinner, she had asked about his day, and against his better judgment, he had told her that he had another meeting with Voldemort. Her meddlesome self had asked if he had been hurt again and she insisted on seeing his body in the flesh to confirm that he wasn't hiding any gruesome injuries from her. She was smothering him with her affections, caring for him the way no other had. And he had loved every minute of it.

This had led to their current situation.

Snape had stood up and stripped himself bare for her to see that he was fine and not wounded at all. He even showed her his healed ankle, which she kissed to 'make him feel better.' And that kissing had traveled up his leg and towards his inner thigh. Her kissing had turned to licking, and before he knew it, her sweet mouth was on his cock, circling his swollen head.

Once Snape had had enough of her teasing, he gripped her upper arms and wrenched her to her feet, nearly ripping her shirt and jeans off her body. Because he couldn't feel her warmth fast enough, he picked up his wand and Vanished her clothes before devouring her succulent lips, tasting the wine that lingered in her mouth from dinner.

With one sweep of his arm, he cleared the kitchen table, sending the dishes clinking to the ground and the food splattering against the rough-textured walls. He shoved Hermione onto the table top, hooked his arms under her knees and yanked her hips towards his groin.

He bent low and buried his face in her pussy, lapping up the slickness that was trickling out of her depths. He teased her, flicking his tongue out of her hole, ignoring her reddened clit.

"Severus--touch me, please!" she begged, rocking her hips, trying to get him to touch her where she ached.

Snape opened her lips wide, with both hands, exposing her nub. He massaged it with the tip of his tongue, inducing a loud moan from Hermione.

She bucked, clawing at his scalp and pushing him into her further. Snape released her lips, stood up brusquely, and thrust his cock into her pulsating quim, jabbing his pointy hipbones into her flesh.

"I love being inside you, Hermione," he groaned, driving his cock deeper inside her.

He leaned over as he pumped, suckling on her brown nipples, running his tongue up her neck and back to her mouth. She hooked her legs around his hips and dragged her nails across the cheeks of his arse, sending chills through him.

She slipped her hand between their bodies, frigging herself as he continued to sink his teeth into her nipples.

She was squeezing down on his shaft now, nearing her orgasm. She closed her eyes, her lashes fluttering on her cheeks as she circled her hips.

"Look at me when you come," he panted, raising his head to look into her brown eyes, his lips brushing her opened mouth, her hot, sweet breath mingling with his own.

Having *his* woman pinned between him and a table, trapping her like an animal catching its prey, fucking her until she would plead for him to stop, had been Snape's undoing. Hermione opened her legs in a wide 'v', crying for him to slide in deeper and harder, and he had been spellbound.

Something like a tiger's growl left his mouth as he plunged into her, biting down on her sensitive neck, wanting nothing more than to be one with her--to taste her salty skin and metallic blood. She screamed as he bit into her flesh, and Snape felt her walls tighten around him as she reached her high.

Hermione's hand shot to her neck, feeling the skin that Snape had pierced. Jagged marks were embedded in her skin, and tiny spots of blood were bubbling from the teeth marks.

"Severus..."

"I couldn't help it. I just had to taste you," he whispered.

Hermione ran her finger through a strand of his greasy hair, smiling. "It's all right. I like it rough. I like you dominating me."

"Do you?" Snape asked, smirking and peppering her lips with tiny kisses.

"Yes. But, there will be times that I want to do that to you, too."

"In time, love. For now, let's shower and have some chocolate cake by the fire." Snape straightened up, gliding off her body, and helped her off the hard table.

"I'll heal that after we shower," he said, eyeing the reddening bruise on her neck.

"If you insist," Hermione teased as she sashayed to the bathroom, wiggling her arse. Snape loved seeing her heart-shaped arse, swaying and teasing him. He groaned as he snatched her from behind, lifting her off the ground and nuzzling her neck as he walked them to the bathroom.

Hermione giggled and squirmed in his arms, and oh, how he loved hearing her laughter. She had a lightness about her, an innocence, that he had never known. And he hoped that she would never lose that--he would do everything in his power to keep it that way.

Snape ridiculed himself as he remembered how he used to treat her. He should've known better than to ever fear her or to think she wouldn't love him. He had wanted to tell her the truth about things tonight, but for obvious reasons that had changed.

A while later, after they had finished their dessert and were snuggled against each other on the sofa, reading their own books, Snape took a deep breath and was ready to tell her.

"Hermione... I--"

"Yes, Severus?" she said, shifting her body to face him.

"As much as I love you and want you... I don't deserve you," he muttered, avoiding her eyes.

"What do you mean? Because you are a Death Eater and have done some horrible things in you past? I hope you know that doesn't bother me."

Snape raised his head and faced her, reading the sincerity in her warm features.

Snape swallowed the dryness in his mouth. "Well--"

A gush of wind swept through the room as a large, silvery-white lynx zoomed through the room, sitting on its hind legs in front of the fireplace.

The Patronus startled Hermione, and she jumped out of Snape's embrace, staring down at it.

"Severus, Beauxbatons has been attacked! Please come to Headquarters immediately!"

A/N: Lulabelle72 pointed out that it was... unfortunate... that the portraits had no souls. I would like to say that I actually believe the portraits contain something of a soul (which is a long story), but for the sake of this story, I wanted the 'creepy' effect of standing on one of the staircases in total darkness, hearing the mumblings of people talking all around you and not being able to see them.

Up Next: Hermione starts to piece the puzzle together and finds herself in grave danger.

Unsettling Surprises

Chapter 16 of 32

Hermione and Severus go to headquarters to find out what happened at Beauxbatons.

*AN: To: Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight: You girls are wonderful and put up with so much of my madness, thank you. I also wanted to thank OpalJade for... using her. (You know what I'm talking about, darling. I love you!) And finally, thank you to my readers--I know this is a long and dark tale, but I appreciate you all very much and adore your reviews. *hugs**

"How did this happen?" Lupin yelled to no one in particular.

The kitchen at Grimmauld Place was buzzing loudly with people shouting, questioning, and demanding explanations.

The oak door leading to the hallway swung open, and Dumbledore stomped through the doorway with Madame Maxime towering behind him, lowering her head as she walked under the threshold.

"Silence, please," Dumbledore commanded, addressing the room. He stood at the head of the kitchen table, commanding attention.

Instantly, the room became quiet, and all eyes turned towards the man in the long purple cloak--a man who had conspicuously lost the twinkle in his eye.

Snape hovered near the back corner, leaning against the pantry cupboard, watching the scene unravel before him.

About thirty minutes previous, Snape, along with a few Aurors and Order members, had received a Patronus announcing that Beauxbatons had been attacked, and an emergency meeting would be held at headquarters. Hermione had been with Snape and had insisted on accompanying him--against his wishes. When Snape had arrived, he had been bombarded with questions from the others--everyone demanding that the Death Eater tell them what had happened. He had casually and quietly stated that he had no information and had taken his place in the back of the room as Hermione sat at the table, behaving as if he hadn't been in the room, just as she used to.

"Death Eaters raided the school a few hours ago, attacking only Muggle-borns. Two sixth years fought off a man who, when they described him, fits the description of Dolohov. Unfortunately, they were no match for him, and he... molested them and..." Dumbledore cleared his throat, "and preformed unspeakable sexual acts to them. The girls are severely injured, and both are now resting in France's wizard hospital. Nine other girls, ages ranging from twelve to seventeen, are missing. One fifteen-year-old was found dead, and a letter was tied to her wrist. It appears to be written by Voldemort, but I cannot be positive until tests are run on it." Dumbledore paused and cut his

eyes towards the Golden Trio.

"That letter was addressed to Hermione Granger."

The room filled with gasps. All eyes turned towards Hermione, who looked frightened and positively sick to her stomach. Although he wanted to comfort her, Severus stood in the back of the room, knowing what was going to happen. Hermione had been so blind when it came to Muggles--especially her cousin. She had never found the harm in telling Jezzie about her activities with the Order, because she was *just* a Muggle, and a Muggle that had no connections to the wizarding world. Oh, how she would be ashamed of herself if she only knew that her harmless chit-chat would cost her in the long run.

"What did it say, Albus?" Minerva asked, her hand over her heart and her brows furrowed.

Dumbledore's blue eyes bored into Hermione. Snape had seen that look before--the old fool was worried, confused, scared, and was taking a peep inside her mind, looking for answers.

Dumbledore opened a small piece of parchment, untied a green, sheer ribbon, and read the message out loud. "Your secret was invaluable. We shall meet again."

"I--I don't understand? W-why would he address it to me?" Hermione cried, shaking her head, her hair bouncing with each movement.

"We were hoping that you could tell us, Miss Granger. But that isn't our first concern at the moment. Right now, we need get those girls back. Everyone, you know your roles. The French Ministry and its own department of Aurors are going to help us attack Malfoy Manor as well as any other known locations that Voldemort has been spotted. Severus? Do you have anything to add?"

Snape stepped out of the shadows, disregarding the distraught girl who sat before him. "It is highly unlikely the girls are still alive. Especially if Dolohov was involved. And if they are at Malfoy Manor, there is no way inside, unless you are Marked. Or have a house-elf," he explained.

"A house-elf?" Arthur Weasley asked.

"Their magic is beyond ours--if I attack Malfoy Manor, then I will lose my position as a spy, but I do know that a house-elf will get anyone through the Dark Lord's wards."

"If you can't help us then what will you be doing, Snape?" a former student, who was now an Auror, angrily shouted.

Snape snarled at the boy. *How dare he question me?* "I can examine the letter, discuss the possible 'secrets' with Miss Granger--"

"No, Severus. I need you to take some of the Polyjuice Potion that I brought with me and help us attack the Death Eaters. We don't know if the girls are dead, and we need your help," Dumbledore demanded, pulling a phial from the deep pockets of his glittering robe.

Snape cursed under his breath. How could he possibly go into battle right now? He needed to watch over Hermione.

Because something was dreadfully wrong.

Voldemort doesn't leave fucking notes. And if he did, they would be on a large scale, such as a message written on a wall in the victim's blood--not tied up in a scroll with a green ribbon. Unless... he is tricking me into thinking that this is out of character for him. This wasn't the plan! I told him the location, to keep him off my back about the fucking Horcrux spell! He was to abduct the girls and that is all. How did this get out of hand?

The room thinned out with each person going to a separate room in the house to meet with their team members. Dumbledore handed Snape the phial, looked at Hermione and said, "If you don't mind, Miss Granger, please stay behind--I fear it isn't safe for you tonight."

In a daze, Hermione nodded her head and slowly looked at Snape, looking for any sign from him. As much as he wanted to comfort her, he couldn't. Not in front of Dumbledore. He popped the cork, tipped his head back and drank the contents.

The effects were immediate, and he felt awful, as if he might be sick, but it didn't last long, and before he knew it, he was the spitting image of Tonks. He had been Polyjuiced into a woman before--but at least she had been... plain and average, not something that stuck out like a sore thumb. Yes, he would be so helpful with his pink hair, lighting the way up a dark path at Malfoy Manor.

Fucking brilliant.

Snape glared at Dumbledore. Out of the corner of his eye, Hermione's hand shot to her mouth, suppressing a giggle.

"You must be having a laugh, old man."

"Not tonight, Severus," Dumbledore said solemnly. "If you are caught, they will not murder you right away because you are a woman. You and I both know they will try to satisfy themselves, giving you enough time to wandlessly and wordlessly defend yourself, alert us, and catch the bastards."

Dumbledore headed for the door and stopped. He looked over his shoulder at Snape. "Although it's nice to see you in a shade other than black."

Snape fumed as he followed Dumbledore out of the kitchen. As he walked by Hermione, he lightly caressed her back and whispered, "It will be all right, sweet one. I promise."

Hermione sat in the kitchen, alone, thinking about the personal letter from Voldemort. The noise from the rest of the house quickly died down as each team left in search of the missing girls.

What the bloody hell does Voldemort want with me? What if he saw something in my mind?

Hermione slammed her elbows on the table and dropped her head in her hands, trying to grasp the situation. She thought back to the night that he had looked into her mind--what could he possibly see that allowed him--

Oh, dear gods.

Hermione leapt from the table, pacing up and down the kitchen, arms clutched to her sides. "Did he see me telling anyone the location to Beauxbatons? ~~Is that~~ how he got in there? Wait. That wouldn't be right. It is a Secret Kept building--even if he looked in my mind, he wouldn't be able to hear me say it, because it wasn't directly to him."

Hermione noticed the small note from Voldemort sitting on the edge of the table. She picked it up and plopped down into a chair. With shaky hands, she untied the ribbon and unrolled the parchment.

Your Secret was invaluable.

We shall meet again.

"My secret is invaluable? What the *fuck* does that mean--my secret? My secret? Myyyy... My Secret! The 's' is capitalized! Oh, shite! He is referring to me being the Secret

Keeper! But why me? I was just the first Keeper. That changed to Madame Maxime after I told ten people!" She threw the note across the table in anger, leaping to her feet. "I don't understand! Why me?"

She bit her lower lip, chewing on the skin as she always did when she was deep in thought*What if someone that I told had informed the snakey bastard? But who? Everyone on my list was a person in authority--someone in the Order or an Official.*

Again, she paced, ticking the names of people she said the secret to. "Madamee Maxime, Dumbledore, McGonagall, Kingsley, Lupin, Moody, the French Minister, his assistant--the one with the curly mustache, Mademoiselle Lane, the Beauxbatons healer, and... and... Oh, bugger, who else did I tell? I can't remember!" Again, she ticked off the names, thinking about each occasion and conversation she had with them. Surely Mademoiselle Lane hadn't been the last person... She had conveyed the secret to someone else....

Hermione stopped walking and stared at her reflection in the glass cupboard doors.*How could the know-it-all have been so stupid?*

"Jezzie," she whispered to herself, finally understanding where her mistake had been.

I told Jezzie the location.

This means that Jezzie became a Secret Keeper. The only people who know of Jezzie are Harry, Ron... and... no."NO!"

Not Severus... Please... Oh, gods! I have to find Jezzie!

Hermione Apparated to Jezzie's pub, pushing her petite body past the groups of people socializing and the people dancing obnoxiously with beers in their hands, and headed straight for the bar. The pub offered half-priced drinks at this hour which unavoidably brought in the students at the University and the 'younger crowd.'

An elbow was shoved in her ribs as she slid in between a woman and a man snogging while waiting for their drinks. Jezzie was behind the counter, along with two other girls, rushing madly around, mixing drinks, collecting money, and taking orders.

"Jezzie!" she shouted over the loud music and chatter of the crowd, but she barely heard her own voice and knew her cousin certainly hadn't heard her.

She wanted to talk to her cousin to see if she had accidentally told someone about the location for Beauxbatons. Finally, Jezzie walked over to her and noticed her for the first time.

"What are you doing here?" her cousin said loudly, leaning over the bar, close to Hermione's ear.

"We need to talk!"

"All right! Give me forty minutes--I'll be on my break then!" Jezzie reached to her left and grabbed a chilled bottle of beer, popped the top and handed it to Hermione. "Drink this and be patient!"

Hermione seized the bottle and took a sip. And waited. Around her, the noise became louder, the gentle shoves of her body as people stood next to her at the bar became more frequent.

Those girls are hurt or worse, dead because of you, Hermione. You and your stupid blabber mouth! It's all your fault! You don't deserve to sit in this fucking pub drinking, while those poor girls... Those girls were probably raped and died terrified!

Hermione swallowed another gulp of her beer and noticed Jezzie was standing in front of her, watching her carefully. Hermione shrugged her shoulders, slid off the barstool and followed her cousin to the back room of the pub, where the sounds that had been echoing off the walls and hurting her ears were muffled.

"Remember when I told you the location of Beauxbatons?" Hermione said, suppressing a belch.

"Yes, why?"

"Did you tell anyone about the location?"

Jezzie looked at her, dazed. "Of course not--I know how dangerous it is for anyone to know about the wizarding world. Why do you ask?"

Hermione sighed. "Jezzie, Death Eaters attacked the school tonight--many young girls were hurt, and some might even be dead. The only logical explanation would be that someone I gave the Secret to informed someone who was then able to ambush the school. I told people who were in the Order... and you. Madame Maxime and Dumbledore were next in telling the location. Then it would have been you. I accidentally made you a Secret Keeper--this is all my fault, and I just wanted to know if you mentioned the location to anyone--if anyone has been bothering you... if... if you told Severus."

"Hermione, I did not tell anyone, I promise. I haven't even *seen* Severus since... since..." Jezzie furrowed her brows, as if she remembered something.

"Since?"

"Well, I just had a strange feeling that I saw him just today... sitting on one of the benches at the park across from your house... but, no. That's not possible."

"Jezzie, when it comes to magic, anything is possible. How many times have I told you that? Try to remember--was it him or not? Did he say anything to you?"

Jezzie stared at the cracked tile floor and shook her head. "I must have been mistaken. I'm sorry. Do you suspect Severus of something?" Jezzie asked, tilting her chin up, looking at her.

Hermione rubbed her palms over her eyes. "I don't know. I don't know what to think! All I know is that someone I told the location to informed the Death Eaters--Dumbledore and Madamee Maxime wouldn't have been so... stupid! So, that only leaves me!"

"Oh, Hermione..."

"And they won't even let me help search for the girls! But there must be something I can do to help the situation," she shouted, her shaky voice reverberating off the white walls.

Jezzie hugged her and walked back to the bar where she made a drink for Hermione and had her sit on another stool.

Hermione slurped her martini and slumped against the bar.*I should go back to headquarters* she thought, rubbing her temples in small circular motions.

She lifted her aching head from hand and noticed the two men on either side of her. The one on the left was a dark-skin man with a shaved head. On her right was a blonde.

The same one that she had drunk with once before--the surfer.

The blonde leaned over to Hermione and whispered in her ear, "Hello again."

A shiver ran across her spine as her heart began racing rapidly.

She shook her head, backing away from him. She remembered what had happened last time this man had talked to her.

"Leaving so soon?" he said loudly, and the bald man turned around, leaned his back against the bar, and watched her, grinning wickedly.

An uneasy emotion set in the pit of her stomach. It was the same reaction she'd had the last time the surfer had approached her.

Hermione fled.

A hand gripped her upper arm, guiding her across the room and towards green door. As soon as the door opened, and the cold night's air stuck her face, letting her breathe easy once again, did Hermione turn around.

The surfer had a hold of her arm, and the bald man was standing next to him.

Hermione tried to jerk her arm away, but the blonde man held tight.

"You know, Severus speaks so highly of your intelligence, Hermione, but you have just proven what a fucking idiot you really are. Only a Mudblood whore such as yourself would leave the safety of Dumbledore, especially on a night like tonight. Care to find out what really happened to the girls from Beauxbatons?" the blonde man said, his voice smooth and deadly as he squeezed her arm tighter, wrenching her to his body and dragging her towards the back alley.

Although Hermione was frozen with fear, she attempted to Disapparate, only to find that she couldn't. They had placed anti-Apparition wards around their bodies.

"*Finite Incantatem*," growled the bald man as they turned the corner, dropping the Glamour Charms and revealing the true identities of her attackers.

Fenir Greyback and Rodolphus Lestrange had found her.

A/N: Sorry this chapter is so short, but there is a lot happening in the fic and I felt it should be broken up.

No, I lied. I just wanted to tease you and make you come back for more. Mwhahahahahah.

"And it's so easy when you're evil. This is the life you see, the devil tips his hat to me. I do all because I'm evil. And I do it all for free. Your tears are all the pay I ever need."

--Voltaire

Up Next: Hermione dies.

Just kidding.

Severus finds out what happened to Hermione.

Do Not Touch What is Not Yours

Chapter 17 of 32

Hermione is attacked.

And Severus is livid.

A/N: Much love to my ladies: Lariope, Lulabelle72 and RedSkyAtNight. Thanks for all your help and support.

Hermione should've felt the searing pain of her knuckles cracking against Rodolphus' jaw as she punched his grinning face, but numbness and shock had frozen her nerves, sending her primitive and inborn response to fight for her survival into action.

In a swift moment, she slipped her wand out of her pocket, but before she could cast Protego, Greyback leapt at her, snarling with his pointy, brown teeth. He clawed at the front of her shirt and shoved her backwards into the brick wall. Hermione wheezed, regaining her breath. Greyback growled and backhanded her, snapping her head to one side. She groaned, blinking away her tears, and ignored her throbbing face. She waved her wand, blurry vision making it difficult to see where she was pointing, and remembering her lover's favorite spell, she shouted, "*Sectumsemptra*!"

"AHHH!! FUCK!!" Greyback crumpled to the ground, clamping filthy, meaty hands over the bloody gashes in his left leg.

Hermione bolted for the street--towards safety. But heavy footsteps stomped behind her, faster, faster.

"Stupefy!"

Stunned, Hermione toppled to the ground; her wand skidded across the stone pavement, sliding under a large, metal rubbish bin. Lestrange loomed over her with Greyback limping at his side.

"Thought you could get away from us, Mudblood? We warned you that we would meet again. Didn't you get our note?" Lestrange taunted, squatting next to her, running one ragged fingernail down her cheek.

Voldemort didn't leave the message--these bastards did!

Rodolphus Disillusioned the three of them and added another Silencing Charm.

"Do you know why we've come for you?" Greyback snapped. "No? Because of Snape. He's a traitor to the Death Eaters. He doesn't deserve the privileges the Dark Lord grants him because he is loyal to Dumbledore!" Greyback hawked the spit in his mouth and spat on her shirt.

"Hold her down--I'm removing the spell," Lestrage instructed. Greyback kneeled above Hermione's head, pulled her arms above her body and held in her place. Lestrage unbuttoned his trousers, slipped his red cock out of his pants and knelt between her legs.

"Get off me!" she shouted, struggling to kick her legs at Lestrage as he slipped his hand under her skirt and ripped the crotch of her knickers apart. As soon as his fingers grazed her lower lips, Hermione's body began shaking uncontrollably.

She screamed when he dipped two fingers into her dry cunt. Pain sliced through her body, making it impossible to see straight--her heart felt like it was being ripped out of her chest.

As Lestrage lay on top of her, forcing his cock to enter her body, Hermione began convulsing. White foam poured from her mouth, followed by vomit. She turned her head to the side, trying to let it dribble out of her mouth so that she did not choke on the contents, but her body was shuddering so badly that she felt as if she was being suffocated. She envisioned herself lying dead in the dirty alley--her clothes ripped apart because she had been raped, and the yellowish green vomit covering her face and chest. She didn't want to die like that, and she began crying, unable to stop the foam bubbling out of her mouth. What in Merlin's name was wrong with her?

"What the fuck?" Greyback shouted.

"She's having a fit! Get up! Let her go," Lestrage said, jumping to his feet and pulling his trousers over his exposed groin.

Hermione tossed back and forth on the ground, trembling, gagging on her sick, and losing the contents of her bladder.

"Disgusting... Let's get out of here! She'll be dead here soon!"

Two nearly simultaneous cracks, and the Death Eaters had Apparated away, only the sound of her retching indicating where Hermione lay on the filthy, stony ground.

Snape groaned, prying open his heavy eyes. For a moment all was a blur, but soon, the familiar face of Potter swam into view, peering over him.

"What the bloody hell is going on?" Snape croaked. The dryness in his mouth was rough, and he tried salivating, but nothing happened.

"Glad to see you awake, sir," Harry said, holding a cup of water in front of him and placing the straw near Snape's mouth.

He barely parted his cracked lips, sucking up the cool, refreshing water as he glanced around at his surroundings.

The Hospital Wing?

When the water was gone, Harry placed the cup on the bedside table and sat down in the chair next to the bed. Ron was sitting beside him, looking worn and tired.

"What's the last thing you remember, Professor?" Ron asked. Snape had never seen the Weasley boy looking so serious and concerned.

"Where's everyone else? Where's Poppy?"

"We are watching over you for now. The missing girls from Beauxbatons were found, and she's helping with them," Ron said.

"They were alive?" Snape asked, surprised.

"Half of them," said Harry. "What is the last thing you remember?"

"Stop playing these games, Potter. What the fuck happened? How did I end up here?"

"We're not sure. All we know is that there was a small battle with three other Death Eaters, and you must've been hit with a Dark curse. Lupin said that you fell to the ground, convulsing, as if you were having some sort of attack. He said you were screaming and holding your stomach... and you were being sick everywhere. They brought you here, ran diagnostic spells over you, but couldn't find anything wrong."

"That was two days ago," Ron interjected.

Two days!

"How are you feeling?" Harry asked.

"How do you think?" Snape said. "I've lost two days--what has happened?"

"That's not what I meant," Harry replied.

"Astute as ever, Potter." He sighed. He felt fine, just a bit sore in his back, but other than that, normal. "I'm fine. Nothing hurts, and I'm not ill. Now... what has happened?"

"Well, apparently Vold... You-Know-Who... wanted to attack Beauxbatons because he knew that the Order would come to their aid and rescue them. He thought he could take out a lot of the Order members and Aurors when they arrived to 'save the day,'" Harry explained.

"How do you know this?"

"We caught a junior Death Eater. Ferguson, I believe that was his name. He told us everything. Said that they learned of the location from some Muggle girl, but he didn't know who she was, or how she knew of a magically protected building."

Ferguson! What a pillock!

"The Aurors have just been questioning the people we caught. The Order has helped the students of Beauxbatons move to Drumstrang--the Headmaster invited them."

Snape nodded his head. "When can I leave? I've got things to do."

"Madam Pomfrey will want to give you a check-up before she releases you. She should be back later this evening."

Snape exhaled and leaned his head back against his pillow, eyes half-closed and gazing around the room. He noticed another body lying two beds away from him.

Snape sat straight up in the bed, eyes wide, when he realized it was Hermione.

"Why is she here?" he shouted, leaping out of the bed, ignoring the opening of his hospital gown which exposed his black pants, and ran over to her side. "What happened?" he demanded.

"We're not sure, but we assume she was hit with the same curse that you were hexed with," Ron said, placing his hand over hers. "She seemed to have the same

symptoms."

"Don't touch her!" Snape snapped possessively. He hovered over her body, hands outstretched, and began chanting under his breath.

"What are you doing?" Ron asked.

Snape ignored them. He was using old magic, a Dark spell that he had learned when he was younger, to locate her wounds. But he felt nothing. She was merely unconscious for no reason.

He brushed a thin strand of curly hair away from her cheek and drew the cover up to keep her warm.

"What's going on with you two, Snape?" Harry growled.

"It's none of your concern," Snape replied, glaring at the boy who had interrupted him while he was taking care of his Hermione.

Harry drew his wand out of his pocket. "It is my concern. Answer me."

Snape tightened his jaw. "You are no match for me, Potter. Put your fucking wand away before you have... an accident."

"Stop it. Both of you. Don't have a row while Hermione is lying there, injured!" Ron shouted, placing his hand on Harry's shoulder.

Snape cocked his eyebrow. The Weasley brat had a point, but he wasn't going to admit it. He waited for Harry to lower his wand.

"I want to know what is going on with you two--"

"And I want to know why she's in here, which happens to be more important! Start explaining."

Harry huffed as Ron began explaining. "Harry and I returned to Hogwarts after we searched Little Hangleton with Moody and some other Aurors. We found nothing and decided to go back to Grimmauld Place and check on Hermione. But she wasn't there. So, we went to her parent's house, hoping she'd be there checking on her family. Her parents were in and said that they hadn't seen Hermione for hours. So, we went to her cousin's flat, but she wasn't at home. We finally caught up with her cousin at the pub she works at. She said Hermione had been there earlier and had been upset because--"

"Because of the note that was addressed to her," interrupted Harry.

Snape noticed the way Ron looked confused, as if that wasn't what he was going to say.

"What are you hiding, Potter? And don't forget I'm a master Legilimens."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Fine. Jezzie said that Hermione had told her the location of Beauxbatons, and had thought that perhaps her cousin had told you the Secret. Which means, Hermione thinks you are the one who informed the Death Eaters--"

"Harry! We don't know if that is what Hermione thinks. That is your assumption. Jezzie said that Hermione had been a wreck. She thinks she told someone who was untrustworthy--that it is her fault that the girls were abducted. Jezzie also said that Hermione asked if anyone had been bothering her cousin, and Jezzie said she thought she had seen you earlier that day, but then said it was her imagination. That is why Harry believes that Hermione thinks you told the Death Eaters, Professor. But that's rubbish, right? You wouldn't do that--you wouldn't do that to Hermione, would you? Especially if what is going on between you is what I am guessing it to be."

When did the Weasley boy become so intuitive? But he has no idea what I have to do in order to play my role well...

Snape smirked. "Apparently, Hermione's cleverness has rubbed off on you, Mister Weasley. And yes, I admit... Hermione and I... well... you understand."

"I thought so."

Harry snorted. "You're shagging her, aren't you?" he shouted, his hands in fists next to his side.

"What does it matter?"

"She's like a sister to me, you git! I swear if you hurt her--"

"You'll what, Potter? Attempt to hex me with your mediocre Expelliarmus?"

Harry raised his wand. "You bast--"

Ron stepped in front of Harry, pushing on his chest, guiding him backwards and away from Hermione's bed.

Snape protectively placed his hand on Hermione's arm. "Your temperament doesn't surprise me, Potter. But if you raise your voice once more near Hermione, subjecting her to--"

"Both of you need to stop. Now, we can talk about this in the hall, or you can both grow up. Even though she isn't conscious, she doesn't need the bad vibes," Ron hissed, looking back and forth from Snape to Harry.

"Please continue to explain how Hermione ended up like this," Snape said with barely controlled anger, suppressing his impulse to slice both boys apart with a flick of his wand.

"Jezzie said she left unexpectedly. It isn't like Hermione not to tell her cousin where she's going, so we began to use the standard Auror Tracking Spells to locate her specific aura. We found three signs of magic, and all of them led us to an alleyway outside the pub," Harry said, attempting to be calm.

"We knew something was wrong--no one was in the alley. However, the residue signatures of the unknown magic were less than Hermione's, which meant she was still there. Harry cast a Finite Incantatem, and a Disillusionment Charm and a Silencing Spell disappeared, revealing Hermione. She was lying on the ground... in a horrible mess," Ron said, solemnly. He looked at Hermione and sighed.

"What do you mean she was a horrible mess?"

"She was shaking, vomiting, crying... She had even soiled herself," Harry said, grimly. "She had the same symptoms as you. Madam Pomfrey hasn't been able to find any curses in her. Is it Dark Magic?"

No, Weasley... not Dark Magic. It's just the protective wards of a promise made to a Slytherin. Which means she desired someone...? Fuck!

"I... I have an idea what it might be, but I will not convey that information just yet... Not without a few tests."

"That isn't all that was wrong with her, sir. When we found her..." Ron eyed Harry, who nodded his head for the other boy to continue. "Her shirt was shredded, as if it had been clawed. And her skirt was above her waist, and her knickers... Sir, we think she might have been..."

"Raped," Severus stated, his lips pursed and his blood boiling.

"Yes, but we aren't sure. Madam Pomfrey wouldn't confirm or deny it. She said it wasn't our business."

Snape gripped the white sheets on Hermione's bed, digging his fingernails into his palms through the cotton. "You said there were two other magical auras with hers--to whom did they belong?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

Harry swallowed. "Rodolphus Lestrage and Fenrir Greyback."

Snape turned away, facing the stone wall behind him. He breathed heavily through his nose, his body trembled. Fury coursed through his veins, building to a rage that tingled his nerves and narrowed his vision to one thought.

They had nearly raped her. *Those fucking cunts!* But the promise she had made in the Grotto had protected her--her body reacted as if she were trying to be with another man, causing her to fall ill and scaring them off.

Nevertheless, they had tried to take her against her will. They harmed her. They had terrified her. But most of all, they had tried to take something *oh/s* away.

They were playing with fire.

I'll fucking kill them.

"Give me my clothes," Snape growled, a murderous red haze blurring his vision.

In a shaky voice, Ron asked, "Professor, what--"

"My clothes!"

"Y-yes, sir."

There was shuffling from behind him, but Snape focused on the zigzagging cracks in the stone wall, attempting to calm himself so that he could concentrate and properly exact his revenge without hindering his position as a spy.

"Here are your clothes and wand," Ron said.

Snape whirled around, snatching the neatly folded pile out of his hands. He sat the clothes on a chair and took off his hospital gown. He knew better than to use magic to dress himself--he was suppressing too much anger and would have only have succeeded in blowing himself up with the power that would have radiated from the spell. Therefore, he put one leg in his trousers like every other Muggle, slipped on sock on at a time, and pulled his shirt over his head.

"You're going to hunt them down, aren't you?" Harry asked as Snape buttoned his trousers.

"There will be no hunting involved. I know*exactly* where they're located," Snape growled, shoving his foot into his boot.

"He's going to kill them, Harry," Ron said.

Snape cut his eyes towards Ron, waiting for the Auror in Training to attempt to arrest him. Ron gave him a slight nod of the head, signaling that he consented to Snape's actions.

"Take us with you," Harry said, watching the silent exchange between Snape and Ron.

Snape snorted and yanked on his other boot.

"Take us! She was our friend long before your... whatever she is to you..."

Snape shot up out of the wooden chair, slamming the Chosen One into the stone wall.

"You will *not* go with me, Potter! Your soul is pure and must be kept that way, you foolish idiot!"

"He's right, Harry," Ron said, coming to standing next to Snape. "You need to stay focused on You-Know-Who. But I don't have the same responsibility. Take me, Professor."

Snape released Harry, surprised at the other boy's voluntary action. He took a step back and realized that somewhere along the line, perhaps it was during their training as Aurors, these two young men had finally begun to grow up and understand about sacrifices. Both of them were willing to split their souls, to go against everything they believed in as Aurors and members of the Order of the Phoenix, just for the sake of their friend, Hermione. Snape knew that if she had been awake, she would never allow her friends to do that on her behalf. She would want justice another way.

It was now *his* responsibility to enforce what Hermione would have done--she wouldn't be happy knowing that her best friends wanted to kill, and Snape couldn't have her hurting anymore. As much as he wanted to take Weasley with him, to show him what it was like to kill for the first time, he knew better. Snape's soul was already in tatters. And once he had the chance to tell Hermione about the wrongs he had done to her... Well, this would simply be one more thing to add onto an already long and sordid list.

For the second time, Snape had thought about Hermione before something awful happened. It was just like when he had saved her cousin from the Death Eaters, except that now, he was now saving her friends from becoming cold-blooded killers.

"As much as I appreciate your... bravery, I cannot allow this. Both of you must watch over her. Protect her until I return. She wouldn't want you killing anyone on her behalf, and you both know that."

Ron sighed. "You're right..."

Snape grabbed his wand, briefly touched Hermione's cheek, and headed towards the door.

"Professor."

Snape turned around, barking, "Yes, Potter?"

"One day, the Aurors *will* come searching for them..."

"I'll leave no evidence."

"Be sure you don't. I'd really hate to have to arrest you for this. It would destroy Hermione."

Snape nodded. "Send your Patronus if her condition worsens, or if she wakes."

He swung open the heavy doors and headed towards Knockturn Alley.

A/N: See--it wasn't that bad for Hermione. She's all right. And knowing me, it could have been worse--more squicky, blood, gore, pain... I spared you all. hahahahah...

Actually, I didn't. I was just holding off for one more chapter.

Why do I say that?

Up Next: Severus Snape has his revenge.

Side note--Again, I must give special love to Lulabelle72. I have been dying to say this for a while, but SEE SEE SEE! I TOLD you that the Grotto played a HUGE roll in this story! The illness scared them off of her! Now do you understand how important this was? But also, in a few more chapters, we will see the final use of the Grotto, and I will remind everyone again, that Lulabelle72 is my saving grace. Without her idea for the Grotto, I wouldn't be here. Thanks.

Man That You Fear

Chapter 18 of 32

Severus Snape has his revenge.

A/N: Thanks for waiting for this one. Real life tends to get in the way sometimes. Many hugs to my team for helping me with this chapter--it was a doozy and had to be re-written way too many times. I hope you are all satisfied with the outcome--I am.

As Severus Snape stalked up the three flights of rickety, wooden stairs, heading towards the flat that Fenrir Greyback had rented above a shop in Knockturn Alley, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement--he had finally been given the opportunity to rid Greyback and Lestrangle from his and Hermione's life.

Snape hadn't even bothered knocking on the door before he blasted it apart, splintering the wood and knocking it off its hinges. A woman's startled scream pierced his ears.

"What the fuck?" Greyback shouted, scampering out of the bedroom.

"Stupefy!"

The force of Snape's curse sent the rugged man hurtling backwards, hitting the wall.

The woman in the bedroom screamed again.

Snape marched into the room and wasn't at all surprised to see a young woman 'spread eagle' on the bed, each of her limbs tied to one of the posts.

Muggle.

"Did he bite you?" he asked.

Wet tears painted streaks on her red cheeks, and her lip was quivering. "N-no."

Snape sulked at the thought of having to save someone tonight, but after a brief second, he decided to inform Harry and Ron of the Muggle in Greyback's flat. He thought of his cat, Jynx, and flicked his wand to cast his Patronus.

But instead of the silver doe that always burst out of the tip of his wand, a small otter glided out, flipping and flopping in the air.

Hermione...

Snape closed his eyes for an instant, remembering her smiling face, pleased that the doe, which had represented so much misery in his life, was finally gone.

A rustle from the bed brought him back to reality. The Muggle was wide-eyed, most likely wondering what he had done.

"Help is on the way," he uttered, leaving the room.

Snape strode over to the crumpled form of Greyback. "Let's go and pay a visit to Lestrangle, shall we?" he said, looping his arm through the stunned man's and Apparating them to Rodolphus' favorite wizard tavern located on the North Wales coast.

Snape magically bound and hid Greyback behind the tavern while he went inside to get Lestrangle.

After a small struggle with the other wizard, Snape took the two men to his childhood home and set their unconscious bodies on the grimy, moth eaten, yellow sofa.

After securing the wards on Spinner's End, Snape went downstairs to the cellar, where he had his private potion lab, gathered supplies, and went back to the room. He cleared the larger furniture pieces out of the tiny sitting room and brought in the wobbly table from the kitchen, setting it in the middle of the room. He levitated Greyback to the table, laying the naked man on his back and strapping him down with magical ropes. He now resembled the Muggle girl that Snape had found in his flat only a few minutes ago.

He levitated Lestrangle upstairs to the tiny bathroom, setting him inside the bathtub. "Rennervate."

"Snape! You sodding--"

Another swish of his wand and Rodolphus' body was immobilized, his senses of sight and hearing the only things left untouched by the charm.

"Be patient, Rodolphus... Your turn will come," Snape said, smirking. "Greyback is downstairs, waiting for me. I'm sure you will enjoy hearing his demise as much as I will. Or perhaps not because that will mean that you're next." Snape chuckled as he left the man and walked downstairs.

"*Rennervate!*" he said to Greyback.

The scruffy man's eyes shot open, and he jerked his body around, attempting to break the ties that bound him to a table. Nasty growls mixed with obscenities flew out of the wolf's mouth.

Snape slowly circled around the table, arms crossed over his chest. "Do you know why you are here, Greyback?" Snape asked, glaring at the growling man. "No? Well, it's because you attempted to take something of mine away from me, didn't you? You and Lestrage had every intention of raping and killing my Hermione tonight."

"It wasn't me! Lestrage was the one--"

"What do you mean, 'it wasn't me'? You were there, weren't you? You placed your filthy paws on her body--you..."

"I didn't fuck her! It was all Lestrage!"

"The only reason you didn't fuck her was because you were prevented by Hermione's illness! Don't blame everything on him!" Snape reached in his pocket and slipped out a glass phial, dangling it in front of Greyback. "Do you know what this is?"

Greyback shook his head.

"Pure silver."

Greyback's flushed-red face quickly drained, leaving him pale. "Y-you wouldn't... Snape, come on! D-don't do this to me!"

"Oh, yes. That got your attention, didn't it?" Snape taunted. "Pure silver is the most feared thing amongst werewolves. It is a certain death for any wolf that lets it get into their body. Isn't that correct, wolf?"

Greyback blink away his tears. "Please Snape--I swear... It wasn't me! Lestrage--he forced me too! I--"

"You caused Hermione pain, Greyback. You could have killed her! You should have known you wouldn't get away with that. Now, it's your turn to feel pain like nothing you could ever imagine."

Snape snatched Greyback's limp cock in one hand, startling his victim.

With his other hand, he popped the tiny cork off the phial. Using his forefinger and thumb, he pushed back the foreskin, spreading the tiny hole wide. It repulsed Snape to touch the disgusting man, but he had to push that thought out of his mind and think of this as another potion experiment. He carefully placed the mouth of the glass phial against the opening.

Greyback thrashed, desperate to break free. "NO! NOT THERE!"

"You didn't think I knew about this carefully guarded secret amongst your kind, did you? Of course I knew--it's the worst way to kill a wolf! Silver inside the urethra--a slow and incredibly painful death. Perfect for a monster such as yourself!"

Snape ignored the screaming werewolf as he poured the melted silver into the shaft of the other man's cock.

As soon as trickles of silver flowed down the wolf's member, Snape released the man and recorked the phial, slipping it back into his pocket. He sat down on the sofa, watching the other man meet his end, minute by excruciating minute.

Snape leaned against the back of the sofa, crossed his legs and sighed. "I have always wanted to do that. You should see yourself squirming--it's beautiful. It will take about a full hour for you to die. I'm sure that silver feels like molten lava, isn't that correct, Greyback?"

Snape chuckled as Greyback buck widely against the ropes. The table moved slightly, creaking under the heavy weight. Snape rose, opened a cupboard that housed several bottles of alcohol, poured a glass of scotch, and sat back down. He swirled the liquid in his glass, pleased with the way the fucking wolf was being tortured.

After several minutes of simply watching the man convulse, Snape picked up one of his mother's magazines that lay forgotten on the table next to the sofa. A thick layer of dust coated the pages. He placed his glass on the table and began flicking through the thirty year old issue of *Witch Weekly*.

"No wonder dragon's blood is scarce... Wizards used to be able to buy it in mass volumes. Fools," he chided. He glanced up. Greyback's skin was melting off his body. This was the moment Snape had been waiting for.

Snape stood up.

There was a loud *crack*, and a long, jagged slice split Greyback's chest open, breaking his breast plate in half, revealing bones and muscles. Snape took a step closer, looking for the overly large heart that werewolves were known to have. It was beating extremely fast, almost ready to explode.

Interesting...

White foam and black, thick liquid seeped out of the body cavity, eyes and mouth, draining down the table and into a puddle on the floor. Snape had read and heard about the moment just before a werewolf turned into a pile of dust; it was the moment at which one could capture the essence of a wolf, a very valuable potions ingredient. It was rarer than even virgin's blood. Snape's heart raced, ready to secure the valuable ingredient.

Just after the bones sizzle...

The smell of flesh nauseated Snape, making it difficult to stand so near the withering body, but he desperately wanted that element of the werewolf. A last horrific scream, and a hissing from the body, and all went silent as a metallic silver-purple ball of goo bubbled out of the mouth of the dead body. Snape carefully levitated the ball from the burnt flesh and placed it in a container. He quickly sealed it, stepping away from the body. Seconds later, the body dissolved, leaving only a pile of dust.

Snape siphoned the dust into a phial and corked it. He put it into his pocket along with the small bottle of melted silver and the essence of werewolf, went down to his lab, labeled the new containers, and locked all three items in his magically sealed and warded cupboard.

He headed upstairs to attend to Lestrage. He released the spell, holding him at wand-point.

"After listening to Greyback's death, are you wondering what I've got in store for you?"

Lestrage closed his eyes, and Snape could see him trembling.

"Your wandless magic can't work here. I've warded my house against that. And don't even *think* of Apparating. You'll only splinch yourself."

His eyes snapped opened. "You won't get away with this, Snape! Bellatrix will come looking for me!"

"Not likely. Your marriage is a sham, a convenience for both of you. She cares for Voldemort only--not you."

"My brother--"

"I'm not afraid of Rabastan."

"Damn you! Let me go, you traitor!"

"Don't fear the reaper, Lestrage. Your death tonight is inevitable," Snape said coolly.

"I fear nothing. Least of all, death," Lestrage said matter-of-factly.

Snape clicked his tongue in disapproval. "Everyone fears something. Even Voldemort."

Lestrage snorted. "And you Snape? What do you fear?"

"Many things, but we aren't talking about me," he said, pointing his wand at the other man's forehead. "Let's find out what you fear..*Legilimens!*"

Snape was slightly surprised that Rodolphus was trying to Occlude him. Perhaps he and Bellatrix had shared something other than their bed after all. But Snape was stronger, and he finally found the information he was looking for.

"Interesting, Rodolphus," he said, putting his wand away. "As you are a pure-blood, I should have known that your deepest fear was Muggles. You pathetic fool. That is Voldemort's problem as well--you both are afraid of something that you shouldn't be. Muggles are intelligent, Rodolphus. Because I am a half-blood, I get the best of both worlds. And I have only known one other Muggle-born who has taken the knowledge of Muggles, and the magic of Wizards and Witches and embraced both. Do you know who that is, Rodolphus?"

Rodolphus shrugged his shoulders.

"It's Hermione. She may be a Mudblood, but she is far more dangerous than you. She knows how to benefit from both worlds, just as I do. And you tried to take that away from her tonight."

"Muggles and Mudbloods are filth!" Rodolphus spat.

"No. You just can't see past your own prejudices to understand the wonders of the Muggle world, that they too have a certain... magic."

"What are you talking about? They aren't magical, you idiot. You sound just like Dumbledore."

Snape grinned. "I didn't say they were magical. I said they have a certain magic, and now, I have found an appropriate way for you to die." Snape walked to the door and looked back at Rodolphus. With a flick of his wand, Snape immobilized him once again.

He trudged down to the kitchen and found exactly what he was looking for.

"What the bloody hell are you doing, Snape? If you are going to kill me, get on with it!" Lestrage said after Snape returned and removed the spell.

"Not without teaching you a few things about Muggles," said Snape with his back turned as he set the item on the cabinet. He turned the tap on and began to fill the bathtub up to the brim with cool water.

"Ridiculous," Lestrage muttered under his breath. "You won't be able to drown me, Snape."

Snape ignored him, sitting on the toilet as he watched the water rise higher and higher.

"The first lesson is about electricity. Muggles can't survive without it. However, it can be highly dangerous and even cause death." Snape turned off the tap now that the water was high enough.

"Do you have any idea what this is?" he asked, holding the object.

Lestrage shook his head.

"This is a toaster. This piece of metal will be the cause of your death."

Snape plugged the toaster in. Who would have thought that he would ever be electrocuting another.

A quick flash of his father entered his mind, but Snape quickly snapped back to reality, sickened by the memory of his father threatening to electrocute him as a young boy as a new form of punishment. *But Rodolphus deserves this. He attacked, and could have killed, Hermione. You are not your father.*

He turned back to Lestrage. "Now, this might prickle..."

Snape dropped the toaster into the water, and immediately it sizzled, sending electrical currents through the water. Rodolphus screamed, shaking uncontrollably, his body spasming and twitching in the water. Snape could smell the hairs singeing off Lestrage's head. The dim lights flickered on and off as sparks shot out of the tub.

It had only been a few seconds, but Snape didn't want his toy dead yet, so he quickly levitated the toaster out of the bathtub and cast a general healing charm over the body.

"Being electrocuted is terrifying, hmm? *Now* you have a legitimate reason to fear Muggles."

Lestrage's head bobbed around on his neck, weak from the shock of being fried. "Fucking... bastard..." he groaned weakly, crying.

"*That* is Muggle magic. You should have listened to my warnings to stay away from Hermione. Now, your deepest fear is about to come true. A wizard really shouldn't die like a Muggle. But, you brought this on yourself."

Snape opened the cupboard below the sink and rummaged through it, looking for his mother's old Muggle electric curlers. He found them buried behind other items and pulled them out and plugged them in. As soon as they were warm, he tossed the toaster and the curlers into the water.

This time, Rodolphus' body convulsed so badly that his head slipped below the water, his eyes wide as the electrical currents burned him. The smell of fried flesh filled the small room as blue sparks danced over the water, the lights flickering. Snape could hear the electricity surging and zapping through the ancient wires.

Lestrage's body floated, the water waving over his frame and splashing against the tub.

Snape sighed heavily. Two of his most hated enemies were finally dead. It had been such a thrill to kill these two that he had almost forgot why he was doing it.

Hermione. This was for her. They will never harm her again.

He drained the tub and flicked his wand at the body, whispering, "*Incendio*".

The body burned until nothing was left but black ashes and a vile smell. Just as he had Greyback, Snape placed the ashes inside a glass phial and then placed it in the cupboard in his potion lab with the other phials.

After he finished cleaning his house of all evidence and disgusting smells, he lay down on the yellow sofa and closed his eyes, no longer able to fight his exhaustion.

A few hours later, he was being nudged awake. He opened his groggy eyes and was face to face with a silver stag. "Hermione's awake," said the voice of Harry Potter.

When Snape arrived back at the Hospital Wing, he was greeted with an extremely angry Healer.

"I told those boys to *not* let you walk out of here until I had a chance to examine you! Why do you always feel the need to go against my wishes, Severus?"

"I am a grown man, Poppy. I do not need you coddling me."

"This isn't about coddling you, and yes, sometimes you do. How are you feeling?"

Snape grunted and pushed past her, entering the infirmary. "I'd feel better once I have had a talk with Miss Granger. In private."

Madame Pomfrey huffed and left the room. Harry and Ron got to their feet when they saw him walking towards them.

"She fell back to sleep," Harry said.

Snape stood at the side of her bed, gazing down at his beloved.

"Did she say anything when she woke?"

"She asked if she was dead. She said she remembered Greyback and Lestrage throwing her against a wall, but after that, her mind was blank. We told her what we presumed happened. She started crying and said that she had deserved it, that everything was her fault. We tried to calm her down. Why would she say she deserved to be attacked?" Harry said.

"I'm not sure."

"Madam Pomfrey came in while she was upset[] and gave her a potion to help her rest. You turned up a few moments after she fell asleep," Ron said.

Snape nodded his head. "I need to be alone with her."

Harry and Ron shuffled to the door, but Ron stopped and turned around. "Did--Did you deal with--"

"Yes."

After the boys left, Snape sat down in the chair next to the bed, threading his fingers through Hermione's soft curls.

"This wasn't your fault. Can you hear me, Hermione? They came after you because of me. But don't you worry, sweet one. I dealt with them," he whispered gently.

Hermione's brows furrowed, and her eyes fluttered beneath her lids.

What the bloody hell? Why is she dreaming? Didn't that woman give her Dreamless Sleep?

She whimpered and twitched her legs. Snape stood, pushing the chair backwards with his legs. "Hermione? Can you hear me?" he asked, patting her hand.

She parted her lips and began mumbling. Snape positioned his ear over her mouth to hear her soft words, but it was all a jumble.

He stood up and went to the potions cupboard, rummaging around the bottles in search of the Dreamless Sleep bottle.

When he turned around and headed back to her with the phial in his hand, Hermione had begun to thrash. Snape rushed to her side, needing to know what was causing her fright. He slipped into her unconscious mind and watched as a swirl of images flooded her dream.

They were in the ballroom of Malfoy Manor. He saw himself talking with Jezzie in a corner, laughing. Lestrage held a crying Hermione by the throat against the opposite wall and was pointing to her cousin. Ron's voice echoed around them, "I tried warning you about him, Hermione--he's dangerous!" On the wall behind Hermione, blood oozed from the ceiling, forming a word across it: *Traitor*.

Shocked at the horrible scene, Snape quickly pulled out of her mind, forcing her to swallow some of the Dreamless Sleep potion. As soon as the liquid filled her mouth, she began to calm down, and seconds later, she was still and serene.

Snape corked the bottle, setting it on the bedside table. His hands were trembling. He didn't understand the significance of her dream, but as he held her hand, watching over her, he couldn't help but wonder if somehow she had found out about what he had done and, if deep down, she really thought of him as a traitor.

He ran the dream back through his mind, focusing on everything he could remember.

Lestrage strangling her--that was obvious. Ron's voice. Well, he was looking after her, but was he warning her against me--that I'm the dangerous one? And then there's Jezzie. Hmm. She was pointing at Jezzie. Why?

Snape thought back to the conversation that he had with Ron and Harry before he had killed Lestrage and Greyback. *Harry had said that Hermione thought her cousin told me the location of Beauxbatons. Ron said that Hermione thought it was her fault the school was attacked.*

Snape gazed at Hermione, thinking.

Her dream is telling her that she is the traitor!

"Hmph. I don't want this for you." *But if you hadn't open that mouth of yours and told Jezzie the secret, this wouldn't have happened, and I wouldn't have been put in the position to tell Voldemort!*

Snape sighed. *This is both our faults. But I won't let you take the blame. I can cope with this sort of stress. You can't.*

"You will *not* carry the guilt about revealing the Secret. Can you hear me, Hermione? This isn't your burden. If I hadn't... You see, your cousin... We were being followed... She was in danger... I had no other choice."

Snape slumped into the chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I don't even know where to start, Hermione," he grumbled. "I presume the beginning would be best."

He raised his head. "You need your rest for now. We have much to discuss when you wake. As much as I want to stay here holding your hand all night, watching over you, I cannot. I must retire to my rooms; I'm exhausted as well. Besides, Poppy will have my head if I attempt to stay here overnight," he said, standing up. He leaned over, brushing his lips over hers. "I love you," he whispered. "Sleep well, sweet one."

He tucked her in once again and left the hospital wing.

Harry and Ron were sitting on the ground outside the doors, and Madame Pomfrey was pacing the corridor, all of them waiting for him to emerge.

"She was having a nightmare, so I administered Dreamless Sleep. Since my services are not needed tonight, I'm going to bed and will be back in the morning." He faced the boys and said, "I suggest you go home as well and get some sleep until you are needed."

For a split second, Harry looked as if he was going to argue. "All right. We'll check on Hermione tomorrow," he said, heading towards the staircase.

"Goodnight, sir," Ron said, following his friend.

Snape nodded his head.

"I would like to give you a check-up, Severus," Madam Pomfrey said.

"I promise you, I am well. Just tired. If you will excuse me," he said, walking away from her.

Snape marched down the stairs, and a few minutes later, he was in his private room. He stripped naked, took an incredibly fast shower, and fell into his bed, falling fast asleep.

Up next: Hermione has a chat with a Headmaster.

You Can't Handle the Truth

Chapter 19 of 32

Hermione learns the truth of the Grotto.

A/N: Three cheers for my team! They are such awesome ladies and I appreciate all the help they give me.

The morning light danced upon the walls, and already the summer's sun was heating up the room. She tried to concentrate on the here and now and not let her thoughts drift, but that was something Hermione was never good at--she was always thinking about something. And this time, she was remembering her ordeal from last night.

How the bloody hell did I survive that?

The memories of her attack were harsh, but no matter what had happened after she had blacked out, Hermione was very thankful to be alive.

The squeaky door from Madam Pomfrey's private quarters swung open, startling Hermione, and she snapped her eyes opened.

The round woman shuffled over to her as Hermione grudgingly sat up in the bed. "How are you feeling, Miss Granger? You gave us such a fright!"

"Actually, I feel well rested. Nothing hurts, and I'm not sore. I don't remember too much..."

"Which is a good thing, deary. You were extremely ill when Mister Potter and Mister Weasley found you--"

"Harry and Ron found me? Oh, they must be so angry with me!"

Madam Pomfrey sat in the chair next to the bed, confusion dancing across her features. "What ever do you mean? They were worried sick about you, young lady--they certainly were not angry. This wasn't your fault."

Hermione was just about to privately berate herself when she remembered something Severus had said. *You will not carry this guilt about revealing the Secret...*

She couldn't place when he had said that, but she knew he had. But, she pushed it out of her thoughts for the moment and said, "So, Harry and Ron know what happened?"

"I didn't give them details, Hermione. It wasn't their business. But, they are clever boys..."

"Yes, they are," Hermione said, picking up the glass of water on her bedside table and taking a sip.

"Not only were you violated by two men, you were cursed with some Dark spell, a spell we have not been able to identify. And oddly enough, Professor Snape had been hit with the same curse--"

"What!" Hermione shouted, sitting forward and sloshing the water onto her blanket.

"Yes. He had the same symptoms. He was under the effects of the Polyjuice, so we thought it might have reacted badly, but no..."

"Where is he?" Hermione asked, looking around the room.

"Resting, I hope. He wouldn't let me look after him--he always does that though. Harry and Ron were here as well, but Professor Snape told them to go home."

Hermione set her glass down and threw back the covers.

"Miss Granger? Where are you going? I need to examine you--"

"I'm fine. I've got some things to do, so--"

"Oh, no, you don't. Professor Snape can get away with that, but you cannot. You've been through a tremendous ordeal."

"Madam Pomfrey, I am perfectly all right. Just a bit shaken up--"

"A bit shaken up? You were... raped... I--"

Hermione gawked. "Raped? No, I wasn't. Not really. He never... never got that far. I remember. I began to shake very badly, and it frightened them into stopping! Whatever happened last night, whatever illness came over me--it saved me."

The healer look astonished. "You mean... he didn't penetrate you? My diagnostic spells indicated that you had--perhaps the curse you were hit with threw off my charms."

"Perhaps. They tried. But, no one pushed themselves inside me. Therefore, it was just another Death Eater attack--a terrifying one, certainly. However, I've been attacked before. I was very lucky last night--which is more than I can say for the girl from Beauxbatons..."

Madam Pomfrey silently nodded her head.

"But I would like to know why you became so ill. Although, I should talk to Professor Snape. He says he might have an idea. Very well, let me please give you a check-up before you leave."

"All right."

The older woman stood up and ran her wand over Hermione's body. "Oh, Professor Dumbledore wanted me to tell you that when you were released from my care, he wanted to see you in his office."

Hermione felt hot, prickly needles travel through her veins.*He knows. And you're in so much trouble. Hermione, you are such an idiot!*

Hermione smiled weakly. "Of course."

Waiting for the stone statue that led to Dumbledore's office to open up was one of the most nerve-wracking experiences Hermione had ever had. She wondered if this was what it felt like for those who walked to their own execution. The inevitable consequence.

Well, no matter. Facing her fears seemed to be the story of her life, and nothing could change what she had done. Well, perhaps a Time-Turner, but that was for another Hermione Granger--the one who was a bright witch and not a foolish seventeen-year-old girl who had fucked everything up.

Hermione sighed, said the password that Madam Pomfrey had given her, and headed up the stone steps to face a man whom she hated to disappoint. She could just imagine his eyes--the sadness in them when she explained the truth.

She knocked on the heavy door and waited.

A muffled, "Enter," drowned out the sound of her racing heartbeat.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" she said, entering the room. But no one was there.

"Professor Dumbledore?" she asked louder, her eyes darting around the room. Fawkes was sitting on his perch, sleeping.

Hermione advanced several steps further inside. "Professor?"

"It's obvious that he is not here, is it not?"

Hermione whirled around, startled by the voice behind her.

But again, no one was there.

Feeling uneasy, she took a step towards the door, but stopped again when the same person asked, "Leaving so soon?"

Hermione looked at the person talking to her and huffed. "Oh. It's *you*."

"Disrespectful brat. Does Dumbledore not teach you children manners?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "My apologies, Professor Black," she said mockingly. She looked around the room and noticed that the inhabitants of the other portraits were missing, just like Dumbledore.

"Where is Professor Dumbledore?"

"As if that is any of your concern."

Hermione shook her head and turned away.

"He is out at this moment and will be back shortly. Which gives you and I plenty of time to discuss a few things," the portrait said.

Hermione arched her eyebrow. "Discuss what? And why is it that every time I am in here, the other Headmasters and mistresses are always gone?"

Phineas Black grinned, his smile as oily as his portrait.

Hermione *hated* it when the Slytherin did that.

"Because I told them to leave."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "And why would they listen to you? You are no longer the Headmaster."

"No, but I *used* to be. Being a Slytherin Headmaster has its... advantages."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione asked as she looked around the room.

"When I was headmaster, I charmed the portraits to do what I demanded... asked... even after my death. Clever, don't you agree?"

Hermione snorted. Yes, that actually *was* clever... but, she would never let *him* know that.

He leaned back in his painted chair. "But I was never as clever as Severus," he said, pausing and waiting pointedly for Hermione to ask what he meant.

Hermione was unsure what to say. The former headmaster was clearly up to something, and she didn't want to walk into his trap.

"All right. I know you've got something to say. Stop being a cryptic arse and just say it!"

Phineas smirked. "Very well, Miss Granger. I heard about your... attack. And what happened afterwards."

Hermione flushed. "How..."

"Like I said, the other portraits must do as I say and ask. They've been watching you, and they let me know when you are in the castle. And I do enjoy long strolls through the other portraits..."

"You've been watching me! Why?"

"Several reasons. But, mostly for my enjoyment."

"I can't deal with this at the moment!" she grumbled, stomping to the door to leave.

"I wouldn't leave--not if you want to know *why* you fell ill last night!" he called after her.

Hermione turned on her heel, her brows furrowed and her hands in fists.

"Only two people in this castle know what happened. And both are Slytherins."

Hermione closed her eyes, afraid to imagine what horrible things he was going to tell her about Severus. "Why are you telling me this? You hate me. You hate all students."

"For the most part, yes. But, Severus... Well, he's a fellow Slytherin... and well, you understand, don't you?"

"You look after him," she stated.

"I do what I can for him," he said, then added bitterly, "No one else will."

"But Dumbledore--"

"Is a fool. But what I have to say about Dumbledore's relationship with Severus has nothing to do with what I am going to tell you."

"Out with it, Headmaster," Hermione said, shifting uncomfortably.

"It's about the Slytherin Grotto."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Not this again. Last time you mentioned the Grotto--"

"It was different last time, Miss Granger. It was fun, then. But now, after what happened to you and Severus last night... Well, it's out of hand now. Do you remember that night that Severus took you down to the Grotto?"

"Vaguely," she said cautiously.

"Basically, you made a promise to Severus that night. And once you make a promise to someone while in the Grotto, you are beholden to keep that promise by the power of the Grotto itself. Failure to do so will cause the person to become violently ill. Sound familiar?"

"A promise? I didn't make him any promises." Hermione chewed her lip, trying to recall her memory from that night.

"Oh, yes, you did."

"I--I don't remember. That was the same night that I had a horrible reaction to the elf-made wine." She looked up at the headmaster. "What did I promise?"

"That he will be the only man you ever want, the only man you will ever be with. That you are his, and he is yours. You don't remember that? It was an intense moment. You both had been extremely, erm, excited."

"Ex--excited?"

Phineas chuckled. "Excited, Miss Granger. Just as two consenting adults tend to be when--"

"Okay, now I know you are lying! Severus and *I* never--"

"Oh, but you did. And you enjoyed it."

Hermione stared at the portrait, wide-eyed. "You're a disgusting pervert!"

"Calm down, Miss Granger. Besides, there wasn't much too see. You were both clothed, and only his fingers touched you that night--"

Hermione was furious. "Enough!"

"What's wrong? You don't believe Severus would do that?"

"Severus... Severus is a complex man. He does a great many things he probably shouldn't, or things about which he has no choice. So if he did... take advantage of me, he had a reason. Just like I am sure he had a reason for making me promise him that."

"I admit, you have surprised me. I assumed you would be infuriated and wouldn't understand the choices that he made."

Hermione began pacing back and forth in front of his large portrait. "Oh, believe me, I am furious with him! *How dare he do this!*

Hermione stopped pacing and sighed. "But, I also know him and understand that he does things, well, differently from everyone else. I can only rationalize his behavior like that, until I am able to talk to him about this matter. So, is that all you wanted to tell me?"

"For the most part. When a person breaks the promise, they fall ill, and the person who placed the spell will also feel the same effects. Some have even met death because of it. That is why I am telling you. Severus needs to release the spell. You both could have died last night, leaving me to find my entertainment elsewhere."

Hermione stopped walking. "You--you said you told me this because you were looking out for Severus! But you're a liar! You just don't want anything to happen to us because we are your bloody entertainment, and you would be bored if we died! Which is a horrible thing because this is quite serious!"

"I told you because, unlike the current Headmaster, I do care what happens to my fellow Slytherin. And if he is going to die, it should be for noble reasons, not because a

silly little promise was broken."

Hermione stumbled into the nearest chair, shaking. Not only had Severus taken advantage of her, but he placed both of them under a curse. "I promised I wouldn't want another... does this mean that the love I have for him now is false?" she asked herself quietly.

"No. The promise had nothing to do with your feelings towards each other. From what I understand, he has desired you for a while. And I have watched you react to him--I could tell you have wanted him as well. So that part of your promise is irrelevant. But the fact that you cannot physically be with another, that is where the promise will affect you both," Phineas explained.

"So, those filthy Death Eaters who tried to rape me last night... they--"

"Were not able to because your body reacted violently to their imminent physical advances upon you. He also felt the pain that you did. You may think that it is a ridiculous spell, you may be angry with Severus for placing you under it, but it saved your life."

Hermione tilted her head back, lying against the back of the chair. A wave of exhaustion traveled through her body as she tried to wrap her mind around all that had been revealed. Not only was she completely mortified that Phineas Nigellus had known all of these dirty secrets about her, she was hurt and angry with Severus.

Why did Severus have to trick me like that? What if--what if he has done other things like that without my knowledge! Oh, that bloody Slytherin! I'll make him tell me!

Hermione nervously bounced her knee up and down, wanting to do nothing more than run straight to the dungeons and blast Snape's bollocks off.

Just as she stood up, the office door swung open and Dumbledore walked inside.

"Ah, Miss Granger. I was hoping you would be in here."

Hermione tried, with much difficulty, to hide the rage that was boiling inside her.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Dumbledore walked to his desk, signaling to her to sit in the chairs opposite him.

"I wanted to talk to you about the ordeal you went through last night. However, I just finished speaking to Madam Pomfrey, and she explained what really happened. I am thankful that you were not harmed more than you were."

Hermione felt horrible. How was it that she was the one to escape the wrath of those two monsters, when countless other women and girls had not? "Thank you, sir."

Tell him the truth, Hermione. Tell him why Beauxbatons was attacked--it's your fault!

"Have you made any progress with locating the missing Horcrux?"

"Actually, yes. The spell I found from the book in Egypt works wonderfully. I just haven't had the time to search the entire castle because other things came up," she said quietly, thinking about Beauxbatons.

"I agree. I'm sure you were worried about that note that was addressed to you--"

"It wasn't from Voldemort, sir. Greyback and Lestrage wrote it to frighten me."

"I assumed as much. But the meaning of the note--it has something to do with being Secret Keeper, does it not?"

"I--yes."

"Somehow they knew you had become the Secret Keeper, and unfortunately I have to suspect Severus."

Hermione looked at the older man, confused. Jezzie had said that she hadn't told Snape anything.

"I don't understand."

"Severus is a spy, my dear. He must have known, and he had to reveal that to Voldemort. He ~~had~~ *does* have to tell him the truth about our movements every once in a while, or it would look suspicious."

Hermione couldn't believe this. As much as she was angry with Severus about the Grotto incident, she couldn't believe Dumbledore didn't understand that it was she who was the one that told the Secret. Even if Severus *had* known that she was Secret Keeper, it wouldn't have made a difference, because she hadn't told him the location.

"But Severus didn't know the location of the school," she protested.

Dumbledore lowered his chin, peering over his half-moon spectacles. "Don't let Severus fool you. He knew, Miss Granger. And I will leave you to find out ~~how~~ *how* he knew. But as I have said, it is his job to know these things..."

"Why couldn't you use Legilimency on him?"

Dumbledore sighed. "My dear, this is difficult to admit, but even I cannot use that against him anymore. But that is neither here nor there."

"Do you still trust him?" she asked softly.

"Although he will get there in his own way and by doing things I may not agree with, I trust Severus to do the right thing in the end. With the attack on Beauxbatons, I fear Voldemort will strike again soon, and we really need to locate that last Horcrux. If you don't mind staying at the castle overnight, in order to cover more ground, I would appreciate it."

Hermione nodded. "Of course, sir."

"Is there anything else troubling you?"

She shook her head and stood up. "I should continue my search," she said and walked towards the door.

So, Severus knew. Which means Jezzie must have told him--it's the only way he could have found out. But why would she lie to me? Errr! I'll get to the bottom of this mess!

Before she knew it, she was on the third floor, nearly running down the stairs towards the dungeon. But as soon as she set foot on the landing, she realized something.

Remember who he is. A Slytherin. And the only way to beat a Slytherin is to play their game, and to play it better than they do. Busting into his office and demanding answers will get me nowhere with Severus. If I want to know how and when Jezzie told him the Secret, and why he seduced me into making that promise, then I must be clever about it.

Hermione chewed on her bottom lip, pacing on the tiny landing. *Yes. That should work*, she thought to herself as she headed to her private room in order to set her plan in motion.

Severus groaned deeply as he opened his eyes and realized that he was still laid out across his bed at a diagonal, stark bollock naked. He hadn't moved a muscle all night, and his body was stiff. Forehead throbbing, he slowly lifted his head up. He was disgusted by the line of drool that traveled from his lips to the pool of spit on his covers and wiped his face with the back of his hand.

He rolled onto his back, adjusting his hardening erection, and stared up at the floating candles above his bed. He thought about the previous night, about the two monsters he had slaughtered.

Had it been enough? Had they been tortured enough? *It doesn't matter now. They will never hurt my Hermione again. My Hermione.* He gripped his cock in his hand, pumping it up and down. *Hermione. My beautiful girl--oh, Merlin, I want you to fuck me!* His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he tugged faster and faster, bringing himself to a fast climax.

"Oh--yes!" he groaned, as the last of his semen squirted onto his abdomen.

After regaining his breath, Snape padded into the bathroom to shower.

Afterwards, he dressed in black trousers and a black cotton t-shirt. Just as he sat his teacup down on the table and was about to head towards the Hospital Wing, several soft knocks drummed across his door.

He gripped the iron handle, swung opened the heavy door and was surprised by the appearance of his unwanted guest.

I bet you guys didn't see this coming, did you? Heheheheh...

Up next: Hermione has a chat with Severus.

Thanks for reading!

Shame On Me For the Ruse

Chapter 20 of 32

Hermione and Severus visit the Grotto one last time.

A/N: Thanks for reading this and leaving such awesome reviews! It really makes all the struggle and time worth the effort. And you all know I couldn't do it without Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight.

And once again, I would like to thank Lulabelle72 for letting me play with the Grotto--I had fun, LB72. Thanks.

Surprises had never been something Severus Snape enjoyed.

One summer, after his first year at Hogwarts, he had come home for lunch after spending all morning in the park with Lily. As he was making himself a sandwich, he had heard noises from upstairs, which had startled him because his parents were supposed to be working. On tiptoes, he had sneaked upstairs, his wand at the ready, prepared to catch a burglar. Following the murmurings to his parents' bedroom, he had poked his head through the opened door and was shocked to see his father and another woman shagging on the bed his mother had inherited from her favorite aunt.

In his third year, he had received a note from a Ravenclaw that he fancied, requesting him to meet her behind the Owlery. She had kissed the note, leaving a print of cherry red lipstick on the parchment. Snape had put his best clothes on and made sure he was well groomed before making his way to the location. When he had arrived, she hadn't been there, so he had sat on the ground, waiting. His mistake had been when he had begun practicing his kiss on the back of his hand. Laughter erupted behind him, and he spun around to find an assortment of students had been watching him from behind the bushes, intent on teasing him.

As an adult, a spying adult for that matter, the surprises became more frequent and each one worse than the previous. He shuddered to recall the night he had walked into the wrong bedroom at Malfoy Manor and had seen two of Lucius's whores hanging upside down with their wrists slit open, their blood dripping into black containers--containers that vampires used to store warm blood.

But tonight, when he had opened his door, he had been pleasantly surprised.

Standing opposite him was Hermione.

Snape gazed at her, stunned and unable to utter a single word. He drank in her appearance and briefly wondered if this was a dream--that he was really lying on the cold ground somewhere, drunk and passed out--because only in his dreams would Hermione show up unexpectedly at his door, looking like a siren.

Her hair was tamed, the wild curls sleek and soft. Her lips were painted with shimmery gloss, and her makeup was dark and smoky. She wore a flowing, knee-length deep purple cotton skirt and a thin, white cotton scoop-neck top which revealed her plump cleavage. But that wasn't what made Snape stare at her like a dog looking at a steak bone. No, it was what was under her white top.

The black bra--the one with the lace.

"Hello, Severus," she said, nearly purring.

Say something, you fool! Stop staring at her breasts like a bloody teenage boy!

"Good evening," he said, attempting to hide the rasp in his voice. "I--I was just on my way to come and see you. I'm surprised that you are out of the clutches of Madam

Pomfrey."

She grinned and took a step closer to him.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, trying to ignore the rising heat in his trousers.

She took two more steps and was now inches from him. "I'd feel much better if I were in your arms. All I have been thinking about is how good you feel close to me," she whispered, standing on her tiptoes and hooking her arms around his neck. As her breath danced over her lips, the smell of cinnamon swirled into his nostrils. As he inhaled, trying to commit her specific scent to memory, he wrapped his long arms around her waist and pulled her into his body, dipping his head to kiss her delectable lips.

But she pulled away, and his kiss was lost.

Before he could protest, she said, "Not here. I want to go somewhere private. Somewhere no one could bother us for some time." She rested her warm cheek against his and whispered in his ear, "Take me to the Grotto, Severus."

Snape grinned and said, "Excellent choice, my dear."

Snape released her, and she twirled around, the purple skirt whipping around her creamy legs as she trotted towards the Grotto entrance. Snape closed his office door behind him and followed her down the corridor.

Before they turned down the next hallway, Hermione threaded her fingers through his and led them down the steep corridor, smiling over her shoulder every now and again, encouraging him to hurry.

But only once they were standing inside the cold chamber, locked away in their own private world, did Snape realize that his temptress's seductive attitude had changed.

Hermione turned sharply on her heel and poked the tip of her wand into his chest.

What the fuck? Normally, if it had been any other person holding him at wand point, Snape would have already used his wandless magic and either seriously harmed or killed the fucking bastard.

"Hermione, what exactly do you think you are doing?" he asked slowly.

"Remove it," she snarled.

"Remove, what? My shirt?"

Hermione glared at him. "I am very serious, Severus Snape! That fucking spell you placed on me--remove it!"

"What spell?"

Hermione growled, turned her back on him, mumbling under her breath. It sounded much like 'fucking Slytherin.'

Annoyed, Snape said, "What the bloody hell are you prattling on about, woman?"

Hermione whipped around. "Remember the promise I made you? Here, in this bloody Grotto? *That* spell! Remove it!"

Snape's heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. He could feel what little color he had in his face disappear, and he had a horrible sense that his entire world was seconds from crashing down around him, leaving him crushed beneath the rubble.

Remaining calm, Severus asked, "How did you found out about it?"

"It doesn't matter! Remove the promise, now!"

Now was not the time for his famous storytelling skills to get him out of this delicate situation. She wasn't Voldemort or Dumbledore--she would instantly see through his lies. And he couldn't Oblivate her--well, he *could*, but he didn't want to do that anymore. Not to her. For a while now he had wanted to tell her the truth about *some* of the things that he had done to her. And this was one of them. He just wished that she hadn't found out and confronted him about it--he wanted to tell her in his own way, and in his own time.

Snape sighed. "I know you want answers. And I will remove the spell. But, I don't know where to begin."

Hermione's face was flushed and her brows were furrowed, but what was worse than seeing her so angry was watching the tears beginning to fill her eyes.

"Why, Severus? Why did you deceive me? And why did you drug and take advantage of me? I was already attracted to you! You didn't have to do that!" she shouted as pink sparks sputtered out of the tip of her wand. Snape remembered what had happened the last time she was emotionally overwrought and her magic had spun out of control--he knew he needed to keep her calm.

"I--I didn't believe you would ever..."

"Would ever what?" she demanded.

He tried the truth. "Want me," he said simply.

A lingering silence plagued the cold cave-like room as he waited for her reaction to his confession.

Hoping she wouldn't shout at him, he took a risk and continued talking. "I had planned to tell you this, but every time I tried, something came up--the attack on Beauxbatons, for one. And I am not going to feel guilty for doing it either. It may have been selfish, but that promise saved your life!"

"I know it did. And for that I am so very thankful that you were a foolish idiot."

"So, you forgive me?"

"I did *not* say that!" she snapped. "Just remove the bloody spell!"

Snape nodded his head and said, "Hermione Granger, I revoke the promise you made to me."

She narrowed her eyes. "Is that it?"

"Yes--you are now free to fuck and desire anyone you please without becoming violently ill," he snarled.

"That's not why I wanted you to remove it. You lied to me. And *that* is why I am so upset!" she said angrily, walking to the cave's exit. She attempted to push past him, but he gripped her wrist and pulled her close to his body.

"Hermione, please. I just wanted you--"

"Let go of my arm!" she said, yanking away from him.

He released her and let her walk out of the Grotto. As he began to follow her, she stopped and faced him. "And don't follow me, Snape! I need to be alone."

Turning from him, she ran up the corridor. He stood frozen in the doorway, watching her perfectly tamed curls bounce away from his grasp, tottering on the edge of chasing after her.

But he was too afraid to do so. The image of his boggart came to mind, and he slumped against the rough walls, feeling lightheaded and ill.

How did this happen? One minute, she was asleep in the Hospital Wing, the next...

Severus stared blankly at the opposite wall. He replayed the scene over and over in his mind, wondering where he had gone wrong. Well, he knew the answer to that. He should have never brought her here in the first place, but that was beside the point.

How did she find out about the promise?

He couldn't recall ever saying anything that would have given away his carefully guarded secret, so it must have been someone else. But who?

Potter? Weasley? As much as I want to blame them, they had no idea. Pomfrey? Hmmm. But where would she have found out about it? Dumbledore. Yes. That old fucking fool knows everything! He has eyes and ears all over the castle--wait. Fuck!

"Phineas Nigellus! That bloody bastard! I'll shred his portrait apart and destroy him!"

Snape scrambled to his feet and marched over to a small alcove that was hidden deep inside the Grotto. Inside, there was a long bench covered with green silk pillows--it was one of the more private areas in the Grotto. Hanging on the wall was a large, empty frame. Snape stood in front of it and said, "Phineas! Show yourself!"

Phineas Black's head and shoulder tipped in from the right side of the frame. "Yes?"

"How dare you betray your fellow Slytherin and tell Hermione about what I made her promise!"

Phineas fully stepped into the frame. "As I have told you before, Severus, you should die for a noble reason and not because of a broken promise. And twice now, your life has been jeopardized because of this foolish obsession you have with Miss Granger. You failed to listen to me when I told you to break it after the first time you fell ill, remember? And after what happened again, I knew that only Miss Granger would be able to get you to lift it."

Snape shook his head. The Slytherin headmaster was right, of course. "You should have warned me that she knew. I would have been prepared! Instead, she lured me here under false pretenses and surprised me with her knowledge!"

"Well, yes. I suppose I *could* have warned you. But you should have listened to me the first time."

Snape growled and sat on the bench, elbows on his knees and head in his hands. "Does she despise me now? Have I completely lost her? Or is she just upset? And I didn't even tell her everything that I've done, although perhaps it's best to keep quiet about the rest. She would have surely hexed me if she had known the truth about other things." He lifted his head and looked at the former headmaster. "What do I do?"

Phineas was looking over his left shoulder, eyebrows furrowed, and peering beyond the frame. "I believe you need to get back to your office. Immediately."

"Why?"

Phineas looked at Snape. "Because your little Gryffindor is in there as we speak, destroying it."

*A/N: Always remember the power a woman has over a man. *snicker**

And always remember that you don't know anything when it comes to this story. Which leads me to...

Up next: Another secret revealed.

Secrets Revealed

Chapter 21 of 32

Hermione finds something that will change everything.

A/N: Thank you to Lariope, who walked hand in hand with me on this chapter. Thanks to Lulabelle72 and RedSkyAtNight for the support!

Running away from Severus had been incredibly difficult. She had known that luring him to the Grotto in order for him to revoke the spell was going to be easy, but she had wanted to talk things over with him, calmly and rationally. Of course, her temper had got the best of her as it sometimes--always--had. And what was even worse than running from him and leaving the situation unresolved had been what she had said to him.

And don't follow me, Snape! I need to be alone!

Snape.

She had maliciously addressed him by his surname--something she had always warned the boys about doing and something that she had been sure that he had despised.

But she had been so furious with him! *It doesn't matter--you shouldn't have said that*, she argued with herself as she ran down the corridor, headed towards her private room. But as soon as Hermione was about to pass the door to Snape's office, she abruptly stopped, frozen in her tracks.

A sinister wave of magic swirled around her, chilling her spine. The magic crept through her veins, and the anger that she had raging inside her rapidly intensified.

He doesn't love you, Hermione--he just wanted you all to himself! And then lied about it!

Evil thoughts surged through her mind, and before she knew it, she had growled in frustration, broken the wards that protected his office, and burst through the door.

He used you! Even Dumbledore knows he is a liar--that's his fucking job--to lie and be deceitful!

Hermione was trembling as she stood in the middle of his office, her eyes darting around the room looking for something--for anything--to satisfy her unexpected urge to destroy Severus Snape.

She faced the bookshelves and raised her wand, ready to obliterate his entire collection.

"What the fuck are you doing, Hermione? Not the books!" she shouted at herself, turning her back on the bookshelves, as a large tear rolled down her cheek.

What's wrong with you? Why are you behaving like this?

Because he deserves to be hurt, just as he hurt you!

Hermione angrily flicked her wand at his desk, propelling it across the room and slamming it into the cabinet that housed jars and bottles. The impact instantly shattered the glass, sending shards soaring through the air.

Hermione stared at the mess she had created. It had felt so good to do that, yet...

Look what you have done.

Hermione took a step forward, as if she were going to attempt to clean up the mess, but something fell out of one of the opened drawers. It was a thin piece of paper, and it floated, almost as if in slow motion, towards the ground, swirling and flipping in the air before it landed next to her foot.

Careful to not cut her fingers on the broken glass, Hermione stooped down and pinched the edge of the paper, lifting it up. As she stood up, she flipped the paper over and was startled to see herself. It was the photo from the small ceremony when she had finished school--the one that Severus had taken of her from the waist up--the one where she was smiling, looking off to the left, then where she turned slowly, facing the camera and blinking once while her hair fluttered in the wind.

But unlike the first time that she'd seen this photo, her legs gave way, and she dropped to her knees, unable to tear her eyes away from it. She clutched the photo tightly in her hands. Something had been added.

At the bottom of the photo, the word M.I.N.E. was carved into the photographic paper.

Why--

But before she could finish her thought, seven words echoed through her mind.

"Inanimate objects are not worth my time."

The conversation she had with Severus only a short while ago rapidly played in her mind.

"I know more about obsessions than you give me credit for. That's why I mentioned yours. Because I do understand. And I can relate."

"Oh. Well, if it isn't books, then what type of fixation do you have?"

"I'm positive that you'll guess mine over time."

"That's quite a challenge--guessing Severus Snape's fascination. And you're sure it's not books? Because I've seen your collection."

"Inanimate objects are not worth my time."

At the time, she had questioned herself, wondering what he had meant by his comments, but she had pushed it to the side, forgetting about it.

He has been using you! You're nothing more than a game--something for him to conquer!

"Inanimate objects are not worth my time!" she said mockingly as she stood up, throwing the picture across the room. It fluttered wildly in the air and landed on his desk.

Hermione's browed creased, and she balled her fists, digging her fingernails into her skin.

A sense of foreboding flooded through her as whispers from behind her caught her ear. She whirled around, but all that was behind her were the bookshelves.

She took several trembling steps toward the books, and the closer she came to them, the more hatred filled her and the strange whispers became louder, but still indistinguishable.

What a fucking lying and unworthy bastard! she thought to herself.

The whispers were like a low hum in her ears, driving her mad. Hermione gripped her wand, screamed, and started casting hexes at the items in his room, just to release the built up tension in her muscles. Before she realized what spell she had cast, she was engulfed in darkness, the frigid temperature stinging her skin. She blinked several times attempting to adjust her eyes, when the familiar mystic, cobalt color of her soul began glowing, filling the room with an eerie light.

Just as she was about to withdraw the spell, she noticed a faint glow that was hidden behind several large tomes.

Again, faint whispers filled the room, except this time, she could clearly hear what they were saying:

"Move the books. Find what you seek."

As soon as Phineas said that Hermione was destroying his office, Snape took off, running out of the Grotto. The corridor was too narrow and short for him to take flight, and he cursed his height most of the way back to his office.

When he reached his office and noticed what was left of his door, he instantly knew Hermione had somehow found the thing he had been trying to keep hidden for years. As he stepped inside, the glow from his own soul lit up. *"Finite Incantatem!"* he shouted.

The chilly darkness instantly vanished. Startled, Hermione jumped backwards, whirling around and slamming her back into the bookshelves, gripping the tattered copy of

Blinded by the Light: Embrace Your Inner Darkness tightly to her chest.

Her eyes were wild, and she was obviously frightened. And angry.

"Y-you! You obsessive, fucking--"

"Hermione, calm down--"

"NO!" She was scooting across the bookshelves, shaking her head. "You're a traitor! You had the Horcrux the entire time! How *could* you look me in the eye and tell me you loved me!"

Severus was at a complete loss. He didn't know what to do or how to handle her--she was holding the fucking Horcrux to her heart for Merlin's sake! Of course she was going to be erratic!

He had to get the book away from her.

Without using magic. The Horcrux was far too dangerous for him to even think about using his powers against or around it. He took a step forward, reaching his hand out to her.

"Hermione, please. Place the book on the table. Let's talk about this rationally--"

"Fuck you," she shouted, and bolted across the room. She snatched something off his desk and held it out in front of her. "I am not an object! You cannot claim me!"

Snape's heart dropped at the site of his photo crumpled in her hand. Anger swelled inside him--this was not how he had planned this. From that first time he had caught her in his office, the first time she had rifled through his files and found the photo, he had always known that the Horcrux called to her. Every time she was in his office, she always did something she hadn't had any business doing. He had always been careful to not leave her in there by herself for too long, and once she had found that fucking spell to locate the souls, he had strengthened the wards around the Horcrux. Well, so he thought. Apparently, the magic of the Horcrux was stronger than his, and it still called to her--especially when she was emotionally unstable.

As she had been after running out of the Grotto, leaving him behind.

And with the Horcrux out in the open, it was affecting them both. He had always thought it hadn't bothered him--he'd had it since the first war on Voldemort. At the time that Voldemort placed it in his hands, he had felt an anger he had never felt before, but once he had hidden and placed the protective wards around it, it hadn't bothered him.

Until now.

Control her--she has no right to speak to you in that manner! She's going to ruin everything!

"You are mine, Miss Granger, and don't you forget that! Now, put the fucking Horcrux down!"

As if in slow motion, Hermione raised her wand and pointed it at the bookshelf. Before Snape could cast Protego, he was crushed under a massive pile of books.

The pain of large tomes hitting his head and knocking him to the ground was hard to ignore, but using all his strength and wandless magic, Snape blasted the books off himself just in time to see Hermione running out of the office. Stumbling and still a bit dazed, Snape ran after her.

Just get the Horcrux back! You can deal with her later--get the fucking Horcrux!

"Where do you think you are going?" he demanded as he headed up the stone steps, following her. She stopped at the top of the stairs and faced him.

"To do what I should have done a while ago--I'm turning myself in to Dumbledore about the Beauxbatons situation! And I'm telling him that you had the Horcrux the entire time and are a filthy traitor!"

Snape's face contorted with anger. Snarling, he said, "I am afraid that I can't let you do that, Miss Granger."

A/N: So, did you expect that? Let me tell you, I have had this and the next chapter planned from the start of this story and am so happy and excited that I am finally posting it! I have always told you to never expect anything when it comes to me. And I know it is short. Real life is beating my arse, and my writing is suffering, but thank you for continuing to read and review--it keeps me pumped up to write more!

Up next: The race to Dumbledore.

Battle of Evermore

Chapter 22 of 32

Hermione and Severus race each other to Dumbledore's office.

A/N: To all my readers: Thank you for sticking around and waiting for my slow update--it is much appreciated and I couldn't continue this story without your support. I also wouldn't have a story without my team, Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight--they are always so encouraging and patient. I also want to give a special thanks to nastygrl for her help by reading through this chapter and giving me some extra ideas.

As Severus stood at the bottom of the stairs that led from the dungeons up to the main floor, Hermione's threat echoed in his mind.

"To do what I should have done a while ago--I'm turning myself in to Dumbledore about the Beauxbatons situation! And I'm telling him that you had the Horcrux the entire time and are a filthy traitor!"

A small part of Snape knew that the exposed Horcrux was meddling with their psyches, damaging all rational thought, but there was nothing he could do to fight it. All he could think about was getting back what belonged to him--no matter the consequences.

He slipped his wand into his magical pocket, knowing that if he used his wand against Hermione, he would kill them both because of the magic surrounding the book.

"I will only say this once," he growled, hand out. "You can either hand me the book, or I can take it from you."

"Piss off," she snapped before she fled up the stairs.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he raced after her. Their steps clattered loudly as each of them ran across the empty entrance hall towards the grand staircase. Before Hermione started up the stone stairs, she whirled around, flicking her wand at him.

"Stupefy!"

Snape had half a second before the jet of magic would hit him squarely in the chest. He dived to the right, tumbling onto his side and rolling across the cold floor. He snapped his head up just in time to see her running up the stairs.

Disregarding his previous rationale for not using magic, Snape flicked his wand out of his pocket, aimed it at the stairs, and quickly transfigured it into a smooth surface. Caught off guard, Hermione yelped as she fell to her knees and slid down the ramp, landing in front of him again.

Snape lunged to his feet and headed towards her once more, his wand pointed directly at her heart, as the power of the Horcrux taunted him once again.

Turn your wand against her...

Snape's concentration faltered, and Hermione took advantage of his momentary confusion to shoot a jelly-legs jinx at him. He crumpled to the ground, cursing as she transfigured the ramp back to stairs and sprinted away from him.

"Finite Incantatem!" he shouted, putting a stop to the curse that she had placed on him.

Snarling, Snape scampered to his feet, but instead of running, he took flight and rapidly closed the distance between them, his arms outstretched and reaching for her.

"GIVE ME THE HORCRUX!" he roared, gripping a handful of her bushy hair and yanking her towards him. He landed several steps away from Hermione, who was falling backwards into his body, crying out in pain.

"Get off me!"

As he attempted to pull the book away from her, she kicked him in his shin, and he lost his balance. They both stumbled down the stairs, grunting in pain as the rough stone steps hit their bodies on the way down. Snape landed with a hard *thud* on the third floor landing, and Hermione crashed on top of him, her elbows stabbing into his ribs.

Hermione, moaning, lifted herself off his body and stood over him, pointing her wand at his chest. As she took a breath to say the spell, Snape kicked her hand, knocking her wand out of her grip. It toppled over the stair rail, and Hermione gasped in horror.

"My wand!"

Snape clumsily got to his feet and gripped Hermione's shoulders, swinging her around and slamming her into the large portraits hanging on the wall.

"H-help me! Alert Dumbledore that this treacherous man is attacking me!" Hermione shouted to the portraits behind her.

A wizard with a bright purple robe and long white beard chuckled from behind Hermione's hair. Snape looked at him, frozen in fear that he was going to go to Dumbledore. But then he realized that it was a fellow Slytherin in the portrait, and he knew at that instant he had nothing to fear.

The other portraits milled around in each other's frames, muttering to one another as they deliberated what to do. But it was the Slytherin in the purple robe who spoke. "No, Miss Granger--we are only bound to the Headmaster. You're the one who got tangled up with the Slytherin."

Snape grinned wickedly, baring his crooked teeth before he forcefully kissed her, pinning her against his body, claiming his victory. She squirmed and moaned, trying to escape him.

"You're mine," he growled as he released her lips, pulling the book from her grip. He took a few steps away from her. "As is this," he said, referring to the book.

Her cheeks were flushed, and she had a dreamy look in her eye--the same look she got after they were intimate. He knew his kiss had dazed her, and he chuckled at the power he had over her.

Tears immediately flooded Hermione's eyes, shocking Snape--he had expected her to forget this nonsense and fall back into his arms.

He was such a fool.

She whirled around, hunched over, mumbling under her breath.

"If you have something to say, face me and say it!" he angrily shouted.

Hermione instantly stopped crying and stood up straight. Before Snape knew it, she had ripped a smaller portrait off the wall, turned on her heel, and forcefully struck him across the face with it. The portrait shouted at the sudden impact, and Snape stumbled backwards, his left cheek searing with pain. Instinctively, he covered his face, trying to protect himself against the wooden frame that Hermione was hitting him with.

Furiously, Snape grabbed the portrait from her and threw it down the stairs. As he did so, she darted past him, heading towards the next floor. Just as he had last time, he levitated himself, rising off the stairs and up to the next floor. As soon as Hermione reached the next flight, he was there, waiting. Startled, she gasped and attempted to turn and run back down the stairs. Snape snatched at her hair, snapping her head backwards and stopping her from running.

"Don't touch me!"

He wrapped his hand around her upper arm tightly and flew off the ground, rising higher and higher above the stairwell. The paintings raced by incredibly fast, and he could only see blurs of colours as he flew as fast as a flying snitch.

"Please--stop! Put me down! P-please!" she begged, shouting at the top of her lungs.

The book warmed in his grip, taking a hold of Snape once more.

Drop her.

He looked down--they were at least up to the seventh floor by now, nothing was beneath him but the air between his feet and the bottom of the stone stairwell.

Drop her! Make her face her fears, just as you do everyday!

Rage bubbled inside him, and he couldn't control it--the Horcrux was too close to his body. Hermione, his light, was too close to his heart, and it was all too much for him to handle.

Snape growled in frustration as the power of the Horcrux and the love in his heart warred within him.

Not knowing what else to do to stop the madness in his mind, he released the book.

And Hermione.

As soon as he released her, Snape watched in horror as she fell. It was if she was in slow motion at first; she almost floated for a second before she began dropping like a stack of books. Her screams pierced his ears, and the look of terror on her face shattered his heart. Her hair fluttered widely around her face, and her hands reached above her head, grasping at nothing.

Not able to believe that he had allowed the Horcrux to take hold of his mind and had let Hermione fall to her death, Snape dived after her, arms outstretched, reaching for her.

But before he could grasp her, there was a flash of pale blue light from below and Hermione instantly slowed down and floated to the landing on the third floor. As he lowered himself to the ground, he realized that Hermione was curled in a small ball, crying.

Standing next to her, looking incredibly livid, was Dumbledore.

And he was holding the Horcrux.

I know, it's short, but it's action-packed, right? Can you believe he dropped her! Muwhahahahah.

Whispers of Treachery

Chapter 23 of 32

Dumbledore arrives and causes problems for Severus.

Severus Snape had witnessed Albus Dumbledore angry before. He had seen pity in his eyes more than once, had even been on the receiving end of one of those looks. But never had he found himself at the mercy of a wizard whom even Tom Riddle was frightened of, and never had he watched as the kindly twinkle in the old man's eyes had been extinguished, replaced by utter rage and pure loathing.

Of course, he knew that the storm in Dumbledore's face had to do with the way Snape had... well, handled the situation after having been caught attempting to murder his beloved.

As soon as Snape carefully landed on the ground, his mind began whirring, thinking of ways to extricate himself from the mess he had created. He knew that Dumbledore had seen everything--he had seen Snape drop Hermione to what should've been her death from over seven storeys high, and the vicious glint in his eyes told Snape that the man standing before him was not the same person for the 'light' who everyone thought they knew. If Snape hadn't known any better, he would've sworn that the man in front of him was a Death Eater, wand in hand and ready to kill.

Dumbledore's jaw was set tight, his eyes narrowed and his teeth clenched as he said, "Step into my office."

Ignoring his orders, Snape reached for Hermione, who had her faced buried in her arms, crying. He wanted to soothe her, but Dumbledore held his arm out, blocking him.

How dare the old fool keep you from her! She's yours--not his!

Snape took another step toward Hermione, but Dumbledore threw up a protective shield around her. "Leave her alone. I said go to my office*Now!*" Dumbledore snapped.

Growling, Snape turned on his heel and marched up to the headmaster's office. From behind him, he heard Dumbledore speaking gently to Hermione, telling her that she was safe now.

Safe. From him. From Severus Snape? From the one person who would do*anything* for Hermione, who would *murder* to keep her safe! Disbelief flooded through Snape as he walked up the stairs, thrusting him into a near catatonic state.

What have you done to her? She'll never want you after this--after attempting to... kill her.

The look on Hermione's face as she fell flashed through his mind--the shock, the fear...

Snape's feet had carried him, robotically, to the front of Dumbledore's large desk where he stood, staring off into the distance and waiting for the storm to arrive. He knew with a sick finality that after the events of this evening, everything that he had worked so hard for was over, gone to him.

Hermione would never forgive him; Dumbledore would have him thrown in Azkaban for his betrayal or even perhaps throw him to the fucking wolf to be dismembered limb from limb--wasn't tonight the full moon? It didn't matter. Either way, he deserved it.

How could you let this happen? How did she find that fucking book?

He vaguely noticed McGonagall stepping out of the Floo as he argued with himself in his mind. She might have said something to him, but he ignored her. A few minutes later, Lupin followed. Snape snorted when he saw the man. *Perhaps tomorrow is the full moon. Am I so rattled that I do not even know the lunar cycle? I must compose myself at once.*

The heavy wooden door slammed opened behind him. He didn't dare turn around, but he imagined that Hermione was disheveled and red-eyed. He wanted to hold her.

"What is the emergency, Albus?" McGonagall asked.

Dumbledore said nothing, heading to a hidden door that was behind a large portrait near his desk. The book was still within his grasp, and Snape noticed that his hands

were shaking, his knuckles deathly white. After a few moments in an uncomfortable silence, Dumbledore emerged from the room--the book no longer in his hand.

"Albus?" Minerva asked again.

"Miss Granger has located the last remaining Horcrux. It was that book. I have secured it until we are ready to destroy it."

"That is good news. Then why do you look so angry, Albus?" Minerva asked.

"As it turns out, a Death Eater had it the whole time."

"So? That's not surprising. Lucius had the first Horcrux, which happened to be a book, so it seems only natural for another to have one as well," Lupin said.

"Exactly. But I never expected the last Horcrux to be in the hands of someone we trusted." Dumbledore's heavy glare rested on Snape.

Snape never let his gaze drop from Dumbledore's--he had nothing to be ashamed of. He had his reasons as to why he'd had the Horcrux in his possession, reasons that could be carefully explained. The only thing Snape was concerned about was losing Hermione. He didn't care what Dumbledore or the other two fools in the room thought of him. No, Hermione's opinion was the only one that mattered. If he could only talk to her, hold her...

"S-severus?" McGonagall gasped.

Lupin shot him a disapproving look and then faced Dumbledore.

"You've had it the *entire* time! Why?" McGonagall demanded.

Snape clenched his jaw, holding his tongue. *Of course I had it, woman--who else would've been powerful enough to keep something like that hidden for so long!*

Out of the corner of Snape's eye, he saw Lupin looking fiercely at him.

"Answer me!" McGonagall demanded.

Snape cut his eyes at her and just before he could reply, Hermione viciously said, "Because he is a scheming bastard!"

The words, and the vehemence with which they'd been uttered, stabbed him through his heart. The disgust in her face, combined with the even more wrenching regret for loving him in her eyes, tore through him. The horrible image of his boggart sprang into his mind, and he remembered the words his Hermione-boggart had yelled at him.

I hate you... You disgust me... Pathetic excuse of a man...

"No one asked for your opinion, Miss Granger!"

Hermione gawked at him, and Lupin growled before he said, "Howdare--"

"Severus!" Dumbledore roared. "Do not speak to her! This is about *your* betrayal, not hers! "

Snape turned his head, glaring over his left shoulder. "My betrayal? *My* betrayal?" Snape faced Hermione. "Why don't you explain to Dumbledore about *your* betrayal, Miss Granger?"

Hermione's jaw went slack in shock.

"What is he talking about, Hermione?" Lupin asked softly.

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. "It's my fault Beauxbatons was attacked. I foolishly told my Muggle cousin the Secret-kept location, and *that's* how I believe Severus knew the Secret and told it to Voldemort. He must have seen the location in her mind..."

"Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked softly.

Snape smirked--the pressure was off him. While they focused their attention on her, he could Oblivate them and keep his secrets safe...

Dumbledore sighed. "My presumptions were correct then--Severus *was* the one who told Voldemort about the location. However, now, I'm not sure if it was out of loyalty to the Order or to Voldemort."

"He may have told him, but it was my foolish mistake--"

Lupin stepped forward. "That Beauxbatons situation doesn't matter now. The focus should be on Severus! He purposely lied; he knew that we were in desperate need of the last Horcrux, and he had it--"

"Piss off, wolf," Snape grumbled.

"Enough!" Dumbledore shouted. "We don't have time for petty nonsense. I returned here looking for Severus and Hermione to discuss information I have learned, and instead, I not only have found Severus with the Horcrux, but he nearly tried to kill her due to the power it had over him!"

Snape snorted.

"And now, I have to instead do something that I will regret doing, but in order for us to defeat Voldemort... I must."

Snape hardly noticed what Dumbledore was rambling about. He was already planning what spells he would use to escape, while bringing Hermione along with him.

Dumbledore opened the top desk drawer and pulled out a long, bronze key. He walked around his desk and handed it to Hermione.

"What's this for?" she asked, taking the key from his outstretched hand.

"Your own good," Dumbledore said, taking a step away from her.

Hermione was plainly confused, but before she could utter a word, there was a bright flash of light, and she was gone.

"A portkey? Where did you send her?" Snape demanded. His mind frantically raced. How dare the old man take her out of his presence!

Think! Where could she have gone? Hog's Head... Burrow... Grimmauld Place... Out of the country... Fuck!

"Where did you send her?" Snape demanded again, his voice low and harsh.

"To safety." Dumbledore slowly removed his half-moon spectacles and carefully slipped them inside a pocket in his robe.

Safety? How is she safe if she isn't in my arms, under my watchful eye? No one can protect her as I can!

"Bring her back. She isn't safe away from m--Hogwarts," he said, nearly snarling his words.

"I will give you only once chance to give me the truth--about*everything!* Or I shall be forced to take it from you."

"Threatening me, Dumbledore? I never knew you had it in you," Snape spat.

"If you ever want to see Miss Granger again, you will answer my questions!"

The threat of keeping *her* away from him was Snape's undoing.

A/N: Again, sorry it's been so long since I posted. However, my hours at work have changed and I am home earlier--which means... YES! More writing! Lol! Many thanks to Lariope, Lulabelle72, RedSkyatNight, and a special hug for Dari_67 for her support and cheerleading. But mostly, thanks to all of you--I couldn't continue writing if it weren't for your loyalty.

Up next: The master and apprentice duel.

Retaliation

Chapter 24 of 32

Dumbledore vs. Snape

A/N: Okay, I have been wanting to write this chapter since I started this story. Squeee! I hope you enjoy it!

With the killing curse on the tip of his tongue, Snape reached into his pocket for his wand. With a smooth, fluidic motion, he was holding Albus Dumbledore at wand point. Before he was able to cast the curse, his wand was snatched out of his white-knuckled grip, and his body slammed into a wall of shelves where several books and trinkets toppled onto his head and shoulders.

Snape moaned as his surroundings came back into focus. He rolled his neck to the side, cracking the bones before he stood on weak legs, snarling at his audience.

Lupin stepped forward, his wand jutting out in front of his body.

"No, Remus! Stay where you are. Let me deal with him. For now," Dumbledore instructed.

"Deal with me, old man? Your powers are useless against my own. Do you not remember training me to be your secret weapon?" Snape slowly crept away from the wall, keeping his eyes locked on his prey. In his most perfect Dumbledore impersonation he mockingly said, "No, Severus! Control yourself and focus--you'll never master Legilimency and be able to conquer Voldemort without it!" Snape took a breath and continued, "Get off your knees and do it again, Severus; ancient magic isn't as easy as today's! You will practice all night until you get it!"

"Severus--"

"Or how about when you dueled me? Remember that? I do! *I loathed* you for making me feel so weak as I fell to the ground, sniveling like the child I used to be! 'Get up, Severus! How will you ever face Voldemort if you are crying at his feet? Bury your pain, stand up and face me!'"

"Severus, please--"

"NO! You used me for too long, Dumbledore. Just like Voldemort. Just like my father!"

Everything Snape remembered of his father, the hatred he had of Dumbledore and Voldemort and any other person who ever wronged him, flooded his mind as a strong wave of magic, dangerous magic, boiled to the surface where Snape couldn't, and didn't want to, contain it any longer.

Aiming his wand directly at Dumbledore, Snape released the restraints on the unstable magic, violently shaking as his powers erupted from him.

Panic rushed through Hermione as soon as the Portkey Dumbledore had given her activated, bringing with it the horrible and familiar feeling of being tugged from behind her navel.

Nausea swept through her as she roughly landed on her knees, skidding across the brick footpath, grunting in pain. She ignored the warm blood that trickled down her knees as she pushed herself off the ground, standing on weak legs and surveying the structure in front of her.

A small, cottage-like home was hidden behind a wall of ivy and a canopy of trees, the cobblestone chimney the only area that wasn't covered in greenery. A faint, yellow flicker danced behind the curtain in the picture window, catching Hermione's eye. She froze in her tracks, waiting for someone, or something, to jump from the shadows, her ragged breathing the only sound that reverberated through the dark night.

Where am I?

After several intense moments in the silence, Hermione decided that she couldn't stand in front of the house forever. Taking a deep breath, she walked forward, the key weighing heavily in her hand. She knew it unlocked the door, and that she was supposed to go inside, but walking blindly into a strange location was dangerous and stupid.

However, Dumbledore had given her this key, and he had arranged for her to be Portkeyed from the situation in the office. She trusted Dumbledore.

Snape's highly volatile magic jolted out of him in multiple jets of light, each of them directed at the man opposite him. But instead of hitting Dumbledore, a glass-like wall reflected the magic, directing it back towards Snape, who instantly took flight, barely dodging out of the way of the deadly beams. The magic burst through the castle walls, exploding the heavy oak door into tiny splinters and dust, leaving a gaping hole and a pile of stone rubble.

Silence filled the room as Lupin and McGonagall stared at the destruction. Snape softly landed on the ground, his eyes still locked on Dumbledore's blue ones. The raging loss of control that he had felt only seconds before obliterating half of the headmaster's office was now filled with confidence and an authority he had never known. Finally, after years of practice, dedication, and education, he had confirmed what he had known all along: Snape would be the only person in the wizarding world who could defeat Albus Dumbledore. Voldemort, who had a single-track mind and used only Dark magic for his purposes, had nothing on Severus Snape.

"Killing me will not satisfy your thirst for revenge, Severus."

"No, but it's a start."

A rain of fire shot out of Snape's wand, but Dumbledore swirled around and disappeared before it hit him.

Ignoring the other two occupants in the room, who were now standing on guard, putting out the flames he had created, Snape paced around, his wand waving widely in the air.

"You're not fooling me, Dumbledore! Everyone who has ever seen you do this disappearing trick thinks you have the power of invisibility! But I know the truth, and if you don't want me to shower this room in a Muggle pesticide, killing these other two fools in the room, then show yourself!"

A buzzing tickled his left ear, and Snape swatted the air around him. When he was still again, he realized that sitting on the tip of his nose was a tiny bumblebee. Snape stared down at the bee. It was periwinkle-blue with silver sprinkles dusted across the furry body. Snape slowly and carefully lifted the tip of wand towards his nose. As soon as he thought the words to blast the bee into a million of pieces, a prick stabbed through his skin, stinging him. Snape stumbled backward, groaning and holding his nose. "Damn you!"

Dumbledore transfigured out of his Animagus form and quickly whispered something to Lupin and McGonagall as Snape cast a quick Healing Charm on his face. His eyes instantly stopped watering, and Snape noticed that Dumbledore had placed a protective shield in front of the other two.

Snape side-stepped to the left, his wand ready and his mind sharp. Knowing Dumbledore, his next move would be some sort of binding spell. Snape shut out the panicky whispers of the portraits around him, concentrating solely on his next move.

Dumbledore struck first, not surprising Snape one bit. *"Incarcerous!"*

"Diffindo!" Snape shouted back, his hex shredding the ropes in mid-air, falling uselessly to the ground before him.

"Pathetic, Dumbledore. Potter could do better than that."

"I do not wish to harm you, Severus. Settle down and let's discuss--"

"NO!" Snape frantically waved his wand in front of his face in an almost dance-like motion, and a thundering bang rumbled across the room as a streak of light hit Dumbledore squarely in the chest. He stumbled backwards, his mouth opening to shout in pain, but no sound escaped him. Snape grinned, casting another version of the spell before the old man could protect himself. This time, Dumbledore clutched his face, flinging his glasses off the tip of his nose, rubbing his eyes.

"It's about time you used the spells I taught you!" a voice cried out from the right side of the room.

Snape grinned wickedly, glancing at the only other Slytherin in the room. "Touché." Taking away one's senses had been a brilliant curse, but Snape had always preferred to keep that spell hidden for as long as possible.

But now was the best time to use it. Dumbledore's loss of sight and speech affected him, but it wouldn't hold him off for long. Again, Snape cast the third variation of the spell attempting to deafen his opponent.

But Dumbledore's cast a nonverbal Shielding Charm, blocking the magic.

"Remember his hearing senses are heightened, Severus," Phineas bellowed.

Dumbledore stood perfectly still as he used his new found awareness. Snape froze, knowing he was going to have to use nonverbal spells to continue. Before he could cast his favorite Slicing Spell, Dumbledore's hands jolted out in front of him, magical fire spilling out of his upturned palms. A roar filled the room as the fire twisted into thin ropes, launching towards Snape, enclosing him in a cage-like barrier.

The heat around Snape suffocated him, singeing his delicate skin. The horrid smell of burnt hair offended his nostrils. No amount of water would get rid of the fiery hell he was placed in, and no spell he cast removed the barrier, giving Dumbledore time to remove the enchantment Snape had placed on him.

Not having any other option for escape, Snape pointed his wand at the floor beneath his feet. He turned his face to the side as he blasted holes through the stone until it finally crumbled beneath him, his body falling through the floor. Rubble rained onto Snape's head as he took flight, dodging the deadly rocks. As Snape flew around the room, he realized that he was in Dumbledore's private apartment, which happened to be below the office. He noticed a wrought-iron staircase in the corner of the room and used that to head back up to the office, intent on finishing this battle.

When he landed back in the destroyed room, Dumbledore had released the other two from their protective ward. Lupin and McGonagall were repairing the gaping hole Snape had created in the floor as Dumbledore stood in the middle of the room, facing the entrance to his private suite, waiting for Snape to return.

"Enough is enough, Severus," he said as Snape softly landed.

"I agree. These physical attacks on one another are ridiculous." Snape smirked, lightly wiping his arms free of the grey dust that had powdered onto his black attire. He took a single step forward. "I prefer destroying you from inside out. *Legilimens!*"

Snape painstakingly rammed against the wall of stone that he met in the other man's mind. Dumbledore blocked every attempt Snape made as he tried to break the lock that held Dumbledore's most guarded secrets.

Over and over Dumbledore thwarted him, but Snape pressed on, determined to find the code to unlocking the old man's past. It wasn't until he used physical magic to weaken Dumbledore's concentration that Snape finally found the key to opening the hidden door that housed all Dumbledore's secrets.

Snape burst through, rapidly sorting through every hidden thought, memory, and secret that Dumbledore had filed away. He began pulling them out one by one, causing Dumbledore to relive the most horrifying pains of his life.

When Snape came across Dumbledore's memory of learning that his sister had been brutalized by three Muggles, Snape pounced, using the Dark Magic he had learned from Voldemort to place false images in the Headmaster's mind, forcing the man to believe everything Snape planted, starting with Ariana's gruesome attack.

Ariana screamed for her mother as the three young men ripped the pink satin bow out of her hair, tying her wrists behind her back with it. She squirmed when the taller boy stood behind her, gripping her shoulders and keeping her still while the other squeezed her cheeks, opening her eyelids, poking and prodding her skin, examining the unusual little girl.

"ENOUGH!" Dumbledore bellowed, his mind fighting, sending a stream of images back into Snape's. This time, Dumbledore had found the weak stone in Snape's wall, yanking out all the images of his father's abuse.

However, Snape's mind had grown immune to these haunting memories, and he found himself unfazed and even able to retaliate physically, attacking Dumbledore once more.

"Crucio!"

Instantly, Dumbledore fell out of Snape's mind, his old body twitching and convulsing across the ground. As he raised his wand, ready to end the fight, Dumbledore fought against the Unforgivable, using the last of his strength to send a stream of visions into Snape's mind. Images that Snape had never seen before, images that he had actually lived through, and worse, false images of the future, weakening Snape beyond anything he had ever imagined.

Hermione as she ran from a three-headed dog. Hermione using a mirror to peer around a corner, her body frozen by the Basilisk...

Hermione unconscious as a swarm of Dementors closed in around her...

Hermione hidden from sight as the Dark Mark lingered in the sky at the Quidditch World Cup...

Hermione chased by the Death Eaters in the Ministry of Magic...

Hermione battling Death Eaters the night Hogwarts had been attacked...

Hermione held hostage against Bellatrix's crooked knife...

Hermione Apparating in quick succession to get away from the Death Eaters...

Hermione as she fell into a pit of blackness while a horrid mummy attacked her...

Hermione thrown against the wall by Greyback and Lestrage, their filthy hands all over her...

Hermione's widened eyes as she had fallen to her death...

Hermione dancing, her arms around another man, her hips swaying too closely to his groin...

Hermione in a wedding dress, standing at an altar with a tall blonde...

Hermione on her back, moaning as the same blonde had his face buried between her legs...

Hermione looking out her bedroom window, a devious smile playing across her face as she watched Snape watching her as she fucked the disgustingly handsome man ...

Snape's legs gave out, and he fell to his knees, the shooting pain unnoticed as Dumbledore finished him off.

Not having the strength, or the desire, to fight anymore, Snape succumbed to the horrible images that Dumbledore had been showing him.

Hermione, her life, her very being, had always been his weakness. And now, Dumbledore knew it.

The older man towered over him, his brows creased and his breathing ragged. "Do you love her, boy?" Dumbledore asked, his voice gruff and hoarse.

Hermione's pain, the many times she had been on the edge of death, the thought of her disappearing from his life, overpowered his desire to rid Dumbledore. She was his entire world. The reasoning behind his actions. Did he love her? Love was such a pathetic word for how he felt for Hermione. He had no other reason in the world to live if she wasn't alive--if she wasn't his.

Snape sucked in a jagged breath, attempting to control his emotions. "Y--yes," he mumbled, mortified that he was exposing his vulnerability in front of the others.

Get control of yourself, you sniveling bastard! Show no emotions!

As he wallowed in his self-hatred, unable to gain back the drive to fight, a wicked chuckle abused his ears, taunting him. He glanced at the angry faces that were glaring at him, but no one was laughing.

Snape sighed. *Of course.*

The Horcrux had finally turned on him. After all the years of loyalty, the fragmented soul had weakened him beyond repair. Even locked behind Dumbledore's wall of magic, the Horcrux had affected them both, playing on their emotions. With a disgusted realization, Snape knew he had made a grave mistake--allowing himself to love Hermione. Because he had, the Horcrux had taken it as the ultimate betrayal. Instead of bestowing his once loyal servant the added strength to conquer his equal, the Horcrux shared its Dark magic with Dumbledore, which allowed him to overpower Snape.

"Albus, don't trust him!" Minerva shouted, interrupting the horrid laugh that plagued Snape's ears.

Snape ignored the remark, his body trembling too hard to react, his heart aching too much to care.

"I don't, Minerva. Except for this. Hermione is his life--his very reason for living. It's the only thing that matters to him."

Snape no longer cared that Dumbledore was still attempting to control him--he had given up. All he wanted was Hermione, safely in his arms. The memory of her falling to her death--all the wrongs he had ever done to her--plagued his mind, haunting him to his very core.

"Bring her back to me," Snape whispered under his breath as the others continued discussing his future. "Bring her back to me."

"Is he having a fit?" Lupin asked, breaking Snape's solemn chant.

Dumbledore knelt next to Snape and placed his arm on his back. "Ah, Severus, it seems you've kept a secret from me. Perhaps I misjudged you all these years, thinking you immune to the foolish stirrings of affection. But now I see that you *will* be of great use to us."

"J-just let me have her," he whispered. "Bring her to me."

"You can't be serious, Dumbledore! Don't let him anywhere *near* Hermione!" Lupin shouted.

"After all the lies and deception, Albus!"

"I am afraid I have done worse to him, Minerva. The only reason I will not turn him over to the Aurors is his capacity to love. It is the one magic that I have always claimed would be the defeat of Voldemort. And it's the only thing that will save Severus from the damage that he is capable of."

"Because of his love for Hermione?" the older witch asked, her voice shaky and full of confusion.

"Exactly. She will not live in a world with Voldemort. Only *she* has the power to manage him, to keep Severus on our side. I no longer am able to, as you have just witnessed."

Dumbledore sighed. "He's been right the whole time; I *am* an old fool."

A/N: Thanks to my ass-kicking, get-it-done-right-Shell-or-don't-do-it-at-all beta team. You know who you are. You girls have really made my vision of this chapter come true. Many hugs to Dari_67 for her priceless suggestions regarding taking away one's senses.

I really enjoyed having a fight between these two. It has been a long time coming, don't you agree?

Up next:

Hermione's world turns upside down.

Dangerously In Safe Hands

Chapter 25 of 32

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

A/N: This chapter is for Lariope, who is immersed in lots of RL crap. And I miss her. Thank you, Lulabelle72, for being my main squeeze... erm... I mean, main beta on this chapter, your input is always welcoming. And to my Britpicker, RedSkyAtNight, thanks.

Hermione sat in a small, wooden chair, elbows propped up on the kitchen table, her head resting in the palm of her left hand. She lazily stirred her tea, the spoon clinking loudly against the porcelain edges.

She cut her eyes towards the annoying wooden clock hanging on the wall. The second hand crept along the face of the clock, as if in slow motion, taunting her into madness.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Had she only been here for half an hour? Impossible.

Time was mocking her, forcing her to be patient when she wanted--needed--answers to the obscene amount of questions that raced through her mind.

Would Dumbledore come here? What was happening back at the castle? What had become of Severus? Why had she been sent to this cottage, which she obviously couldn't leave, sequestered from the world?

And when, for Merlin's sake, would someone turn up?

Hermione leapt from her seat. She needed to move, to satisfy the nervous twitch that crawled through her skin, demanding that she do *something* to occupy her time.

She yanked open the cupboard drawers. Finding a rag, she grabbed the kettle from the stove, emptied the contents down the sink, turned the water on and began cleaning the inside of it, scrubbing away the limescale that was imbedded into the metal finish. Not once did the use of magic cross her mind--no, this was a need to do something physical. She marched over to the table, snatching her mug and spoon, her eye momentarily darting to the piece of parchment sitting next to the milk bottle.

She had written down all her thoughts about her life over the last few weeks, attempting to analyze what went wrong, what she had missed. Her conclusion: She loved Severus Snape. And love is blind.

Disgusted with allowing herself to fall into the traps of clichés and emotionally wrought ideals, she growled and flung the mug and spoon into the kitchen sink, the ceramic shattering against the metal. *I should be furious with that man!*

Love. How could she think that she still loved him, after he had tried to kill her, after everything he had done! She shuddered as she contemplated the things she *didn't* know about the mysteries surrounding him.

She closed her eyes, massaging the back of her neck, hoping to rub away her tension. Through her closed lids, she noticed the lights inside the cottage flickered, followed by a flash of blue.

Hermione froze, her eyes flying open.

What the bloody hell was that?

Again the lights flickered and flashed blue, but this time, Hermione whipped her wand out of her pocket, slamming her back against the closest wall.

She held her breath, listening to the lock on the front door click open, the handle jiggling as the heavy door was pushed open.

"Miss Granger?"

Recognizing the voice, Hermione stepped away from the wall and walked into the next room.

Dumbledore had let himself inside, with Lupin behind him, levitating Severus' unconscious body.

Hermione was helpless against the uneasy feeling that weighed heavily in the pit of her stomach as Dumbledore moved towards her. Only seconds ago, she was anxious to see him, to be informed of the situation, but now... she could feel it in her bones that something was wrong.

Lupin floated Snape to the sofa and dropped him on the cushions. Dumbledore removed his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. She didn't want to hear what he had to say.

"Hermione, there isn't much time. I have made a grave mistake regarding Severus and his loyalty--"

"He's for Voldemort," she stated, her heart racing from mentioning the one thing that had truly frightened her.

"No, it's not such a simple tale. Nor is it mine to tell. But I will say this: you can not possibly comprehend how much he needs you. Everything he has done has been for you. I know you must be enraged with him, but please, I beg of you, Hermione, listen to him. Do not turn your back on him, as I foolishly have done. He loves you with every ounce of his being."

Pushing aside Dumbledore's desire for her to trust Severus, Hermione said, "But he tried to kill me!"

"Blame the power of the Horcrux, not him. The guilt of that is already devouring him."

"Remus?" Hermione questioned the man standing in the shadows.

"Severus has his reasons for what he has done, and he will answer to the wrongs he has committed. But somewhere in that stone heart of his, he has a soft spot for you-- don't ever question that."

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "Voldemort and the Death Eaters are searching for you. It is best if you stay here, in hiding, with Severus. This cottage is my private home. I am the Secret Keeper, and it is under wards that not even Severus can break. You will be completely safe here. A house-elf will be sent here weekly with food and other necessities."

"You're just going to leave us here, abandoned? But sir--"

"It's for the best."

"And what shall we do while we wait for the war to finish?" Hermione snapped.

"Gather anything you can from him regarding the secrets that he chooses to keep hidden from me. Miss Granger, your role in this war is research. The Order and I need certain information to succeed--information that only Severus is privy to, and only you are able to get from him."

Hermione nodded, willing her annoying habit of flushing not to make an appearance on her face. If she had learned anything from Severus, it was to control her emotions. And she refused to let Dumbledore and Lupin know that she was furious with them, with the game they wanted her to play. She had heard the message between their words: her love was the way to control Severus Snape. And they wanted to leash him, like a fucking dog. They wanted her to use him, to be nothing more than another master.

Dumbledore slid his glasses onto his face, temporarily shielding his annoyingly twinkling blue eyes. "I'll re-ward the cottage. When the lights flicker and flash blue, it signifies that I, and I alone, am removing the enchantments to enter. If they ever flash red, prepare yourself for an intruder."

Dumbledore snapped his fingers, dropping the spells placed around Snape, and he and Lupin walked towards the front door. "Oh, by the way... There's a pensieve in the cellar," he mentioned, leaving Hermione alone with Snape.

After an hour, Snape fluttered his eyes, unaware of the hell that he was waking to.

Hermione had found the pensieve and set it on the coffee table. Although she despised what Dumbledore wanted her to do, she did know that seeing his memories would be the best way for her to believe him, beyond just his words.

And so, she waited for him to fully awaken and face her.

"Hermione?" he asked, rapidly blinking his eyes, waking from his deep slumber.

"Severus."

He groaned, slowly sitting up, the bones in his knees and elbows cracking as he moved. He rolled his shoulders to loosen his muscles and massaged his forehead. He looked around the room, then back at her, drinking in her appearance as if he had never seen her before.

"I--I never thought I'd see you again," he whispered, his voice raspy from sleep. He cleared his throat. "Hermione--"

"No, Severus. I don't want to hear your apology."

"Then what do you want?"

"The truth."

"About?"

Hermione huffed. "About everything. Why did you keep the Horcrux hidden? The lies, who you're loyal to, why you used me and hurt me--you could have killed me! I want to know everything, Severus Snape!"

Snape snorted and stood up, facing the picture window, looking out into the dark forest. "Dumbledore put you up to this, didn't he? Get the truth from Severus because you are the only one able, correct? So that Dumbledore can use it against Voldemort and win the war." He whirled around. "Well, fuck that, Hermione! I'm finished being the puppet, and I *refuse* to have you turn on me as well!"

Hermione growled and leapt from her chair. "Turn *on* you? You're the one who tried to kill *me*! If anyone has betrayed the other, it is you! You lied to me, you used me knowing full well you had that fucking Horcrux. You're... you're just... a fucking typical Slytherin!"

He raised one eyebrow in response to her outburst.

She sighed. "I love you, and you broke my heart, Severus." Hermione shook her head, forcing the tears to keep away. "Do you even care? Or are you really the heartless bastard that you make yourself out to be?"

He stood stiffly across from her, his mouth barely twitching. She waited--prayed--he would say something to her question. But all he did was swallow, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

The silence was too much.

Not able to face him any longer, Hermione fled to the smaller of the two bedrooms, not in a cowardly fashion, but for the safety of herself and him.

She was seconds away from cursing him.

Hermione had cried herself to sleep, wallowing in her heartache the entire day. When the hunger became too much, and drinking the water from the tap in the attached bathroom wasn't enough anymore, she decided to leave the room. She quietly pried open the door, peering into the living room, hoping that he wasn't sitting on the sofa. She wasn't ready to face him again. She cautiously exited, tip-toeing, and just about tripped over the stone basin that lay at the foot of her entry.

It was the pensieve, and sitting inside were several glass phials of the silvery substance that were memories. Confused, Hermione squatted down, lifted the bowl, carried it to the desk in the bedroom and sat it down. She picked up a phial, rolling the cool glass between the pads of her forefinger and thumb. She turned it horizontal, reading the tiny label: For Hermione.

Forgetting about her hunger, she tipped the contents of each phial into the pensieve, eager to see what he had given her.

A/N: I know this was short, but I hope it was powerful.

I have to say, Lulabelle72 is concerned that one of you will hunt me down and strike me dead for the cliffhangers I always you leave with, but I have assured her that no one can touch this Death Eater. Mwhahahahahahah.

Luv to you all!

P.S. I wanted to mention something about the titles of each chapter. For this one, I had posted to deviantart as: Ch. 25 because I hadn't connected this chapter with a title yet. However, jeanmarie95 from deviant suggested the title 'Safety'. I wanted to use it, or a variation of it, and well... that's where the title came from. So, thanks, jeanmaire95! And I know 'dangerous' and 'safe' are opposites of each other, but that was so very intentional. Which leads me to my next point:

Each title for the chapters not only foreshadow what might be happening in that chapter, but because I write the story from both points of views, the titles relate to both Severus and Hermione. The exception is the chapters that are strictly Severus' point of view, such as "The Wicked Games We Play" (You remember that one, don't you? Death Eater reveal...)

So, for example: The title to this chapter means that they are both in safe hands now. However, it's dangerous because both Hermione and Severus are at their wits' end, under a ton of stress etc... So for the next chapter or two, things might be... heated.

Get it?

My point in telling you all this? Just wanted you all to understand that everything I do, has a reason behind it, and I think the titles are just as important as the chapter. (They're clues, people! If you still haven't got any idea where this story is going, read the chapters! Lol!)

Pieces of My Heart

Chapter 26 of 32

Hermione takes a trip inside Severus' memories.

A/N: Thank you to my team (Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight) for the insight, input, and super fast work! I loves you guys!

The flame from a single taper sitting on the wooden bedside table barely flickered in the still room. Curled in a ball, cradling a cat, was Severus. He was no more than seven. His overly large t-shirt had surely once been white, but now it was stained, dirty and so thin that she could see his bare chest through the cotton.

"You love me, don't you, Jynx?" The cat raised its head, its pink tongue delicately licking the tip of his nose. "I love you, too. Dad says you are worthless, but you're not. At least *you* love me." The cat purred, and Severus closed his eyes.

But just as he was relaxing, the bedroom door was flung open and a thin, dark-haired man stumbled in, swaying as he marched over to Severus, his arm outstretched. "Hand me that filthy creature."

"No, Dad. Please! He loves me--he's my friend!" Severus held the cat tightly against his chest, scooting backwards.

Hermione, watching the Pensieve, gasped. A horrible laugh erupted from his father. How dare he mock his son and the love he had for his pet? "Hand him to me, boy!"

Hermione covered her mouth, shocked at the cruelty Severus was being subjected to.

While his father ripped the cat from little Severus' clutches, the memory shifted, leaving her unable to see the outcome.

Hermione was still in the same room, but this time, Severus sat on a wooden chair, his head tipped back, a bloody rag held over his nose. She recognized the Hogwarts letter that lay ripped in half on the dusty floor. A woman with long, black hair appeared in the doorway. She held herself as if she were cold, rocking back and forth. Severus removed the blood-stained cloth and looked at her. Even in the weak light, Hermione could see the purple bruises under his eyes and the appalling angle of his broken nose.

"Your wand was on the table. You could've stopped him, Mother."

Her voice was soft, timid. "I--I don't want to use magic against your father--it isn't fair to him."

The chair scraped against the floor as he pushed it backwards, leaping to his feet, pointing to his face. "And this? You believe *this* is fair?"

"You must understand, Severus--he's angry. We always had a feeling that you had magic in you, but now it's official."

"Why do you put up with this? You've got more strength with a flick of your wand than that Muggle will ever have!"

"Severus, please--"

Although he was only eleven, his demeanor was beyond his years. He marched over to her, holding his hand out. "Give me your wand."

"Why--"

"Give it to me, Mother!"

"You'll harm him--"

"I want to mend my nose, damn it! Give me your bloody wand!"

She slipped her wand out of pocket, but instead of handing it to him; she pointed it at his chest. "You should watch your language with me, Severus Snape. I am still your mother and will be respected--"

"You lost my respect long ago," he mumbled, turning from her and walking towards his bed, wiping the blood that had trailed down his lips.

Hermione couldn't imagine living in a household such as his. Her heart ached for him; she felt so privileged to have lived in a home with two loving parents.

The memory disappeared, leaving a new one in its place. This time, they were outside at a park. The bright sun engulfed the memory, and Hermione squinted her eyes, barely able to see the two figures sitting on the swings, holding hands, gently swaying back and forth.

"I can't wait to leave my parents behind and board the train to Hogwarts next week. I hope we are in the same house, Lily. I'll miss you too much if we're not."

"I'll miss you too, but you'll always be my best friend, Sev--no matter what house we get Sorted in. I promise."

Just as her eyes were adjusting, the memories swirled around her, and she found herself in a familiar room: the Defense Against Dark Arts classroom. Severus stood near a desk. Across from him was the same girl from the swings, only much older.

"After everything you and I have been through, you turn against me because of Potter's influence!"

"That's not why, Severus! You aren't the young boy I was friends with--that I loved. You've changed into a... you're no better than your father, Severus!"

"How *dare* you compare me to that monster! You, of all people, know what he has done to me!"

"Yet, you behave in the same manner as he does!"

"My--my behavior? You mean because I'm not in the same house as you and aren't friends with the biggest prats in the school? What else am I suppose to do when you shun me? I keep to myself as much as possible, but it is inevitable that I am acquainted with the people in my own house!"

"Stop blaming James and Sirius! You have always been horrible to anyone I'm close with--you're jealous!"

Snape snorted. "When was the last time they ever had anything decent to say to me? Yet, it's entirely my fault! I'm not jealous of anything you have--I'm hurt that you have deserted me!"

"I never said they were perfect, Severus," she said. "You're such a typical..."

Snape's lip tightened. "Go head, Lily. Say. It."

She huffed. "Nevermind, Severus."

"A typical what? Slytherin? Yes, Lily, *I am* Slytherin and proud of it! Go on, say it! You can't trust a Slytherin, correct? They always go bad, yes?"

She averted her eyes from him, her lips pursed.

"You know, until this day, I've haven't bothered about house rivalry--I thought it foolish, but you have opened my eyes. There's no escaping the stereotypes, so from now on, I shall do the same, you arrogant Gryffindor bitch."

Tears formed in her eyes. "Do us both a favor," she snapped. "Never speak to me again, Snivellus." She turned, ready to flee from the room.

Hermione's heart broke at Lily's cruelty. She had blamed Severus for that nasty word that had spilled from his mouth--he was obviously very hurt, and Lily... couldn't care less. Hadn't she been his friend? From all the stories she had heard about Lily Evans, she had been a sweet girl, a respected woman. But in this light...

Hermione faced Severus. He was so still that his face could have been made of stone. Only the tips of his fingers moved, his fingernails digging into his palms, drawing blood.

Before Lily opened the door, he snarled, "I take back what I said in the fifth year--you *are* a filthy Mudblood!"

She faced him, her face contorted in disgust, as if dung was right under her nose. "*betest* you, Snape. Go to hell."

She slammed the door behind her, and there was a sudden shift in the memories, leaving Hermione standing near the Black Lake, breathless from everything that had transpired so rapidly.

She stood in the middle of the seventh years, and judging by the casual way they were dressed, it was the last day of school. She glanced around and finally noticed Severus sitting by himself under a tree nearby the crowd. She walked over to him, aware of the small circle of young men, whispering and glancing over to Severus.

"The Dark Lord has never shown favoritism, so what the bloody hell has Snape got that we haven't!"

"Malfoy says he's weak and won't last a month."

Hermione sneered as she passed them. If only they knew how foolish they sounded. When she reached Severus, she realized he could hear their conversation too, and that he seemed to be ignoring them, yet was listening attentively.

Always the spy, Severus? Hermione thought to herself.

She looked over his shoulder, reading the notes he was writing. There were lists of names on the paper, and under each one, descriptions of traits: weaknesses, strengths and anything else Snape felt important to write down. She followed his quill as he scribbled down his information:

Hugh Phillips--Annoyingly cocky. Weakness: Talks too much, little action. Strength: Knows how to talk himself into getting everything he wants. Asset to the Dark Lord--

able to get into places that others may not, such as inside the Ministry.

Aaron Strider--The charmer. Weakness: Women. Strength: Physical strength. Asset to the Dark Lord: Bodyguard--will lay down his life in the middle of war.

Amazed at Severus' research on his fellow Death Eaters, Hermione continued reading the page, but was interrupted when a shadow from overhead blocked the sun, clouding her in darkness. She looked up and noticed that Lucius Malfoy was standing over her and Severus.

"Severus, join the rest of your fellow brothers for a splendid dinner at my home this evening?"

"If you insist."

"Excellent. And tonight, you'll show us some of your new spells. We're all extremely fond of your abilities."

"Of course. Anything for the Dark Lord."

Lucius grinned and sauntered over to the group of boys.

Severus flipped opened the first page in his notebook. It was nearly full of his tiny handwriting, but there was no mistaking whose name was at the top: Malfoy.

She quickly read through the page, agreeing with everything she read, appalled at some of the things written about Malfoy senior, and she was satisfied that Severus had never thought of him as a friend. The old saying, 'keep your friends close and your enemies closer' came to mind as he wrote one word at the bottom of the page: *Liar*.

The scene faded away, leaving Hermione alone in a dimly lit room. She turned around, confused as to why, and how, she was alone if this were his memory.

"Severussss."

Hermione spun around. Severus walked out of the shadows of a dark corner. Voldemort sat in a suede chair in the middle of the room. Somehow, he had appeared out of nowhere. The hair on her skin stood at attention, and a chill swept through the room.

"You wished to see me, my Lord?"

"Yesss. When I revealed my plans regarding the Potters, I felt you cringe. You cannot hide anything from me, Severus. I'm a master Legilimens."

"My Lord, with all due respect... if it were possible... I might humbly--respectfully--request... that you spare her life."

Hermione briefly wondered why Severus would ask for that, considering how their relationship ended up. She assumed that although Lily had hurt him, he hadn't been able to let years of true friendship die, and it was no wonder that he was trying to protect her--no wonder that he still protected Harry. He could never really completely hate Lily, for she had been his rock when he was a child, when he needed someone to love him, and that was the only reason Hermione had as to why he wanted her safe.

"Severussss, you are a loyal Death Eater. Have I not shown mercy to you over the last few years? I have been accused of favoring you over the others. No one has the abilities that you do, Severusss. You are above all else, and for that, I have come to regard you as the most devoted. With that comes certain liberties."

"Will you grant my one wish, my Lord?"

"Absolutely not."

Severus' lips parted, surprised at his denial--the young man naive in his assumption that the Dark Lord might acquiesce. Hermione presumed that after that point, Severus' loyalty to Voldemort would be shattered into millions of minuscule pieces with no hope for repair.

"I understand. It was foolish of me to ask. Thank you for your time, my Lord."

Severus turned to leave, but Voldemort spoke up, stopping him in his tracks. "A silly girl such as herself, one who did not see what she had in front of her, is not worth your time, Severusss. She is a fault of yours that should, and will be, purged. Do you not agree?"

He slowly turned around, his face blank, cold, and hard. "Yes, my Lord. I agree. She mercilessly used me. And now, I shall do the same." Although he smirked, there was coldness, an evil, confirming Hermione's assumption regarding his broken trust in his master. A chill ran through her as she wondered what sort of things he would've written down in his notebook regarding The Dark Lord, someone who really never cared about Severus, as Lily once had.

The wait wasn't long, and the memory changed again, and Severus was speaking to Dumbledore in the headmaster's office. He clutched a handkerchief in his hands, his eyes blood-shot from stress and tears.

"Beyond your other duties as professor, you will be required to train with me nightly, to do everything I ask. Do you understand me completely, Severus?" Dumbledore sat behind the large desk, his blue eyes boring into Severus.

He nodded his head. "Yes, sir."

"Very well." His gaze softened. "I *am* glad you decided to join the Order, Severus. I have high hopes that you will turn your life around and find some sort of light in your dark soul. And I am sorry about Lily."

"If he had just spared her life..."

"Tom has no regard to anyone's feelings, Severus. Remember that. Joining him, looking for someone to care for you, is a regret you will have to live with daily. The reminder on your arm shall be enough. But instead of living in the past, look towards the future. You can cast your revenge on him by fighting with us. I promise to always be here for you, Severus."

The scene abruptly changed, just as Hermione was feeling the anger rise in her chest, for she *knew* Dumbledore had used Severus the same way, or worse, than Voldemort. Hell, he was trying to get *her* to use him as well!

"No, Severus," Dumbledore said, shuffling through his papers on his desk, averting his eyes from the man across from him.

"No? I've never asked you for anything, Albus. I *do not* want to go back into his service!"

"You knew this day would be coming, Severus. You must concentrate on your duties."

"And saving Potter is one of my duties! I swore to protect the boy, and that includes his sidekick and Her... Miss Granger! Without me following them, they'll... they'll end up in far worse trouble--"

Hermione stood very still, shocked from... *He was going to call me by my first name?*

"Severus, no. Remus, Minerva--we'll all watch them. I promise. You're the only one who can get across enemy lines. I need you there!"

Severus huffed, his eyes full of hate, yet the Headmaster never looked up at him once. "They will require me to participate in... activities that I do not wish to partake in," he said in a most dangerous voice. "The Dark Lord will surely suspect me of being a traitor. His punishment will--"

"Will be something that you cannot forgo, Severus," Dumbledore said softly, finally facing him.

Hermione bent close to the table, where the two were facing off, straining to hear the low voices, the plea that Severus made. "Albus, please..."

"I know what I'm asking of you, Severus. But it's the only way."

Knowing he wouldn't win this battle, Severus recomposed himself; speaking in his normal tone, he said, "I understand. It was foolish of me to ask. Thank you for your time, Albus."

"Severus, I'm--"

"I'm sorry, Headmaster. I have an appointment with my old friend, Lucius. He is expecting me to arrive on time. I will report back anything I learn, as soon as possible." With that, Severus turned on his heel, his robes billowing behind him. Dumbledore removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose.

The tears that Hermione had been holding back finally broke loose.

Severus, once again, had been tossed out like yesterday's rubbish.

A/N: Up next: Hermione sees herself in Severus' memories.

Come Break Me Down

Chapter 27 of 32

Hermione views Snape's memories.

A/N: Lariope, Lulabelle72, RedSkyAtNight--you three are brilliant. Thank you for your support, the excellent beta skills, and the constant spanking of my behind to get this chapter right!

Warmth enveloped Hermione as Severus' memories ended, leaving her standing alone in her dim room. She wiped her tear-sodden eyes on her sleeve, drawing in a rattled breath.

She turned around, wanting nothing more but to run to him, to hold him forever, when she realized a dark figure sat in the chair next to the door.

He had been waiting for her.

"Severus--you startled me!"

"My apologies," he whispered.

She stared at him, unable to tear her eyes away from his.

"Thank you for sharing your... life with me."

"And what is your opinion regarding the choices I've made?"

"I may not agree with some things, but I don't blame you for your decisions. If I were a stronger person, I would have done the same as you." She took several steps forward, keeping herself from rushing at him and hugging him. "I'm so sorry for--"

Rising from his chair, he pulled another phial out of his pocket and held it up, stopping her from speaking further.

"There's more I need to show you."

The memory swirled around her, leaving Hermione in a dark room. As she rubbed her eyes, adjusting to the darkness, she heard the clatter of dishes and low whispers coming from behind her. She turned around and realized she was standing inside an empty pub. Sitting at a table in the back of the pub, several men were gathered, drinking and whispering amongst themselves. She walked to the table and stood next to Severus.

She was unable to take her eyes off his face, for in this memory, he was younger and not quite as severe as she had known him. His black hair fell below his shoulders, still greasy as ever, but the harsh lines usually etched in his face were minimal.

The man to the left of Severus broke the side conversations first, demanding attention from the group. Hermione had never seen him before. Perhaps he had been a Death Eater, killed before her time. "I still can't believe that you have been a teacher at that bloody school for five years and haven't the slightest inkling to bed one of your more... delectable students."

"Come on, Snape. Tell us the truth--how many have come to your office after hours and sat under your desk and sucked you off as you marked essays?" the man across from Severus asked.

"I prefer women over inexperienced girls."

Hermione released a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding.

"You sit there and tell us that girls like the Cox sisters do nothing for you?"

Severus' face scrunched up as if he were smelling vomit. "You're fucking disgusting--they're only fourteen and fifteen"

The man next to Snape laughed. "The younger the better!"

Severus stood from the table. "It's been an interesting evening, gentlemen. Goodnight."

"Where you going?" asked the man who had started the conversation. "Hey, you aren't a virgin, are you, Snape?"

The men at the table laughed as Severus opened the door to the pub.

An inexperienced girl? Hadn't I been one? Hermione wondered as the memory changed.

The door to his office opened, and a girl entered the room, shutting the door behind her. Severus, who had been cleaning off his shelves of jars and old potions, turned around.

"Miss Hartwick?"

Hermione recognized the tall girl. She had been a seventh year during Hermione's first year. She had shoulder length blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Her shirt was unbuttoned, revealing her cleavage, and the length of her skirt was too short for Hermione's taste. A wave of jealousy washed hotly over her, and she was overwhelmingly angry toward the girl for coming into her lover's office, looking the way she did.

"Professor," she said smoothly, dropping her potions book on the table as she walked towards him, running her finger across her breasts, unbuttoning the top button.

Severus snorted at her feeble attempt to seduce him. "Miss Hartwick, what, may I ask, are you doing in my office at this hour and without an appointment?"

"I'll be finished with school by Friday. And before I leave, I just wanted--"

"Miss Hartwick, let me save you the embarrassment of finishing that sentence. I have no desire for you or anyone else. And I never have. You are not the first to come to my office, nor will you be last. I will tell you the same thing I tell all the other pathetic girls who throw themselves at a man who can barely tolerate the sight of you: Get.Out."

The girl huffed, her face flushing. But she held her chin high and said, "I suppose the rumours are true then. You *are* gay."

Surprised, Hermione chuckled. The Hufflepuff had a bit of Gryffindor courage in her.

Severus leered. "I assure you, I am not. The sight of you and every other *girl* in this castle disgusts me. It takes a *woman* to catch and hold *my* attention."

"You're such a git," the girl cried out as tears ran down her face. She turned and fled from the room, leaving her book behind.

Hermione grinned.

The scene disappeared, and Hermione was in the headmaster's office. Severus sat in the same chair as always, opposite Dumbledore. Severus' eyes were closed, and he massaged his temples in a gentle circular motion.

"It's only been a few months, Severus."

"Yes, and I've got six more years with--"

"Harry is not James, Severus. Your dislike for his father--"

"Who said I was talking about Potter?" Severus snapped, jerking his head up at the older man.

Dumbledore furrowed his brows. "If this is not about Harry, then..."

Severus growled and stood up, walking towards the door, mumbling about a certain "know-it-all."

"Ah. Miss Granger?" Dumbledore said, grinning. "Is this because she set fire to your robes during the Quidditch match?"

Severus stopped in his tracks, turning his head slightly to look over his shoulder at the man behind him. "Miss Granger is nothing more than a pebble in my shoe." He set forth once again, wrenching the door open. "A very. Annoying. Pebble."

As the memory changed, Hermione giggled, thinking back on her own memories of that incident.

Severus sat at his desk, staring at seven bottles. Hermione recognized them from her first year when she had solved his riddle in order to reach the Philosopher's Stone. Dumbledore stood opposite him.

"Severus, are you listening to me?"

Severus, mumbling to himself, ignored the headmaster. "How does a first year, *child*--not even Filius had been able to work out the answer! Clearly, it could only have been a lucky guess."

"Severus, do not blame yourself. The three of them were determined to stop, well... you, from reaching the Philosopher's Stone. The children are impressive--Mister Potter is an incredible Seeker; Mister Weasley is a genius at chess, and Miss Granger happens to be the brightest witch of her age."

"I do not blame myself, Albus! An eleven-year-old snotty little girl answered my riddle! You give them too much credit--it was all luck!" Severus stood, crossing his arms over his chest. "You had better keep a watchful eye on those three, Albus. If their first year is any indication of their upcoming years, then you're in for quite a bit of trouble."

The memory swirled around Hermione, and this time, she was back inside the headmaster's office. Severus was pacing while Dumbledore sat behind his desk, as usual.

"I knew she stole from my private stores, Albus! If she had been anyone else, we would have expelled her!"

"If that were the case, the Weasley twins would have been expelled in their first year, Severus."

Severus stopped in his track, glaring at Dumbledore. "And yet, they never were. You favour the Gryffindors, Albus."

"When, since you began teaching, have I ever expelled a Slytherin? Or anyone, for that matter, Severus?"

Severus snorted.

"As it was *my* property she stole, I should have full authority regarding Miss Granger's punishment."

"I think accidentally transforming herself into a cat was punishment enough. Do you not agree?"

Severus lifted his eyebrow. "A cat?"

"She brewed a batch of Polyjuice Potion, Severus. From what I understand, Messrs Potter and Weasley transformed into two of your Slytherins. She, unfortunately, mistook a cat hair for a human one."

Hermione had always wondered how Severus Snape had taken the news of her stealing from him.

Severus silently sat down, his voice quiet when he spoke. "A second year brewed Polyjuice Potion?"

A calm, almost intriguing demeanor had not been the way Hermione imagined him reacting.

"She's the brightest witch of her age, Severus. I've said this several times. In all your years of teaching, have you ever come across a student such as her?"

"You mean an annoying, bossy, must-always-be-right--"

"Severus," Dumbledore warned. "At that age you were just as--"

Severus jumped to his feet. "All right, fine, Albus! Miss Granger is brilliant!" He turned on his heel, his robes whirling around behind him. "But it does not excuse her from stealing!"

Dumbledore smile. "I'll speak to her about borrowing your items without permission," the older man called from behind Severus.

Another change in the scene and Hermione loomed over Severus, who was sitting at his desk, marking homework ~~her~~ essay as a matter of fact.

The fire crackled from behind her as Severus read her paper, silently marking it with his quill, dipping the tip into red ink every few minutes. Muttering to himself, he said, "It's nice to see you thinking outside the pages of books, Hermione. But your reasonings for this are ridiculous." Just as he began to cross out another sentence and add one of his famous, sneering remarks to her paper, someone knocked at his door.

"Enter."

Karkaroff slipped inside the office.

"Snape, I--"

"If you are here to speak about the Dark Lord, then--"

"I know you've seen your Mark--"

"Silence! Can you not see that I am in the middle of marking essays?" Snape pointed to Hermione's paper. "Do not bother me about that issue on your arm!"

Karkaroff glanced at her paper, reading it. "Hermione Granger. My boy, Krum, fancies her. I assume she is in the noble house of Slytherin? Krum wouldn't be so foolish to have eyes for anyone else."

Severus slowly looked up at the man above him, and for a moment, terror struck through her as she saw the evil glint in Severus' eyes. What had the other man said to make his demeanor change so drastically?

The wooden legs of his chair scraped across the stone floor as Severus stood, dropping his quill onto the table. "Miss Granger is a Gryffindor and among the most intelligent students I have ever had the displeasure to teach. I can tell you she wouldn't bother with anyone who uses their head for nothing more than a target for Bludgers--"

"How dare you ridicule my students!"

"How dare *you* assume that Hermione wouldn't be worthy of that imbecile's attention just because she's not a Slytherin! Now, if don't remove yourself from my office, I will do so for you."

Karkaroff backed away from the desk, grinning at Severus. "Hermione?"

"GET. OUT."

The gruff man left the office, and Hermione stood there, gobsmacked over the use of her first name. Severus had showed her this memory for a reason--this had been the moment that he had started seeing her not as Miss Granger, the know-it-all, but as Hermione, his potential lover.

With a jolt, she realized that all of the memories she had just viewed were the seeds of an obsession an obsession that was only now reaching its zenith.

A/N: Thank you for sticking around for this chapter. We are almost done with the story! (Maybe 4-5 more chapters????) However, I still need to write it! And real life gets in the effing way. My apologies. Now, as you may have noticed, this is NOT everything Severus needs to show her. The next chapter is the other half of these memories--the really... bad ones...

With that said...

Up Next: Severus' memories ,and Hermione finally sees the twisted side to Severus Snape.

A Curse Between Us

Chapter 28 of 32

Hermione and Severus have words.

Always eager to learn, to solve problems, to find the answers to life's tough questions, researching subjects until she was completely satisfied had always been Hermione's

forte. Never had she expected to be in a situation where receiving *more* knowledge would drive her mad. An information overload had simply never been conceivable. Until today.

Severus had given her too many memories for her to fully comprehend.

One minute, he had been the abused boy, then the man who defended her against his fellow Death Eaters, then a pawn to the two most powerful wizards in the wizarding world, and finally, a person who had no qualms about taking another's life, a person who had fixated upon, lied to, and used her, a dangerous man who frightened the living hell out of her.

Moments before, the last of the memories had flashed before her eyes, and Hermione had fallen to her knees, physically weakened by the sight of him sitting in front of his fireplace, writing inside his leather-bound journal. She had remembered that he had a similar book in which he had written detailed information regarding his enemies. She had gasped when she had noticed that her name was engraved on the front of this journal and nearly stopped breathing when he had opened to the center of the book and begun writing. Hermione had frantically attempted to read his words, and her heart had sunk into the pit of her stomach when he wrote the heading of his next chapter:

Breaking Hermione Granger.

From there, memories of everything he had done to her swirled around her, engulfing her mind and body. She felt extremely violated when the memories showed her all the different times he had stood below her window at her parents' house, watching her and writing down her nightly activities, details such as what time she bathed on Sunday nights.

She had shouted and attempted to hit the memory Snape as he had sneaked into her rooms at night, touching her most intimate areas as she slept. Even worse were the times when she had awoken during these transgressions, and he had Obliviated her after he finished holding her down so tightly that he had left bruises. And not once, but several times over the years, he had modified her memories--unexplained events such as missing articles of clothing or how her two best friends had managed to get a higher N.E.W.T. in Potions than she had finally been made clear. Almost everything that had been unexplained had been because of him.

She felt so *stupid* for not realizing that he had always been around, that he had always been watching her. Whether as a young girl, or after she had finished school, he had been there. The picture he had taken of her the day she had left Hogwarts--the one that she had found in his office--had been crumpled on the edges because he had held it in one hand while he pleased himself with the other.

He even had shown her all the things that her cousin, Jezzie, had been involved with. The memories of the Death Eater revels, especially the one at which her cousin had been an unexpected guest, had made Hermione violently ill. So much in fact, that she had nearly missed how Severus ultimately saved her cousin. She berated herself when she realized that she had told the secret to the location of Beauxbatons and he had gained that information and used it against the Order.

It was all so damn confusing. He had loathed Hermione, he had been infatuated with her, and finally, he had fallen in love with her--or what he believed to be love.

Was she expected to forgive him? After all the horrible things he had done to society, to himself, to her friends and family and to her, did he expect that by showing her how he had grown over the last few months, how he had let her into his heart, how he had nearly died while saving her back in Egypt, that it would all be enough to forgive him?

He had even shown her how he had had polite conversations with Ron and Harry, that he had held his tongue to be decent with them. For her.

The memory of him tossing his "Hermione Granger" leather journal into his fireplace was his most powerful attempt to show her that he had changed.

It had been at that point that Hermione had balled her hands into fists, digging her fingernails into her flesh.

Severus stared blankly into the darkness as he sat on the edge of his bed, waiting to hear Hermione's reaction to viewing his memories. He assumed she would storm into the room and start lecturing him, and then, more than likely, never speak to him again. He had promised himself that he would listen to her and not beg for her forgiveness.

He didn't deserve it.

A small part of him hoped she wouldn't turn from him like everyone else had. She wasn't like anyone he had known, and he knew he shouldn't compare her to others, but it was only logical that she would push him away after realizing what a bastard he truly had been.

Perhaps it had been a rash decision to show her everything.

Severus sighed and fell backwards onto the bed. *No, she needs to know who you really are.*

Just as he closed his eyes, several thumps and a crash came from her room, jolting him from the bed. He wrenched open the door, ready for her to throw something at him, but instead was shocked to find her sprawled across the floor, clutching her wrist, tears pouring from her eyes. The lamp from the bedside table had been knocked over, and a chair had fallen over, and the empty phials from his memories were scattered across the floor.

Being careful not to break the glass bottles, Severus lightly treaded towards her side, knelt down and gently placed his hand on her forehead. "Hermione?"

"Don't touch me!" she snapped, swatting his hand away from her and scrambling to her feet. "I need some fresh air," she said as she stalked away from him.

"Shit!" he muttered, moving the wooden chair and picking up the phials before slowly walking after her--slowly because he knew there was no fresh air for her to find.

Dumbledore had made sure they couldn't escape.

Hermione was pulling on the handle of the door, jiggling it in an attempt to leave. *Alohomora!* I said, *Alohomora!* Open up, you blasted door!"

"Hermione," he said gently.

She faced him, her brow crinkled and her jaw set tight.

"We can't leave Dumbledore's prison."

Hermione growled, lifted up a metal candlestick from the table and threw it into the window, hoping to break free, but it was a shock to her when it bounced off the window and ricocheted back at her, hitting her wrist.

Severus rushed to her side, reaching for her wrist.

"Just leave me alone," she snarled.

"Are you hurt?"

"Just leave," she whispered, sagging into a nearby chair.

Severus' heart broke. He hated seeing her in so much pain. But he hated himself more for being the cause. He sat on the ground next to her. "Let me see what you've done to your wrist, you foolish girl."

She shook her head, forcing the tears back.

Ignoring her, he pulled her into his arms, but quickly released her when the shock of her unstable magic surged through his body. "Hermione, you need to calm down--your magic is volatile."

"I'd calm down if you'd leave me alone." She pushed herself to her knees, but Severus grabbed her around the waist and pulled her tightly into his chest. Years of suffering the Cruciatus Curse helped him endure the fiery sting of her magic on his skin.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear. "You don't deserve to be trapped here."

Hermione turned in his arms and buried her face in his chest. Severus sighed, thankful that she was allowing him to comfort her. He tipped his head back against the side of the sofa, savoring the touch of her body next to his.

He had a horrible feeling that this might be the last time he would get this opportunity, that when she finally came to her senses, she would never want to be around him again.

And he didn't blame her.

At least I had some time with her. No one can ever take that from me.

Severus stared out the large window as he held her. The sunshine, blue sky, and the rich colours of the outdoors all taunted him. He could almost swear he heard the chirping of birds. How could it be that he and Hermione were suffering inside this makeshift hell, tucked away from the world, while life went on around them in a sick and cheerful way?

It's not fair.

Severus snorted. He could almost hear Dumbledore explaining to him, as he had done on several occasions, that *Life isn't fair, Severus. It's your choices that lead you down the paths of life...*

Severus hated that lecture.

Hermione shifted in his arms, and Severus realized that as he sulked, her magic had stabilized and she was breathing deeply now, no longer crying. Severus took the chance that she wouldn't pull away from him and slowly twisted his long finger through one of her curls and closed his eyes.

Time seems to stand still when imprisoned, Hermione thought to herself.

She briefly wondered how long she and Severus had been sitting on the ground, holding one another. Of course, it didn't really matter how long they sat there, did it? Because the moment she lifted her head and acknowledged the situation, the world as she had known it would be gone. And that was a terrifying realization.

But right now, in this present moment, no matter how angry she was with him, he was still the person she had loved. He was still her partner. And she drank every ounce of him in, simultaneously breathing in when he did and listening to the beating of his heart as he softly laced his fingers through her hair.

But Hermione knew better. They couldn't sit here forever, ignoring the future, ignoring the evil truths that Severus had unveiled to her.

Hermione's eyes fluttered opened. The room was now blanketed in semi-darkness, and she blinked her heavy-lidded eyes.

It was time for both of them to face each other.

Without lifting her head, she whispered, "Am I correct in assuming that the obsession you spoke of a while ago was ~~me~~?"

Severus inhaled deeply. "Yes," he said, his voice vibrating her cheek.

Hermione sat up, ignoring the stiffness in her neck. "A very small part of me is flattered by your fascination, Severus, but the rest..." She sighed, shaking her head.

Severus shifted his eyes downward and then slowly faced her again.

"You know, over the years, and especially quite recently, I've had very intense dreams--dreams that were basically subliminal warnings. It all makes sense now."

"Casting perfect Oblivates has never been something I've taken pride in. I'm not Gilderoy Lockhart."

"Now is *not* the time to have a laugh, Severus Snape!" she chastised him, pulling away and getting to her feet.

Using the side of the sofa as an aid, Severus gradually stood up as well. "Hermione--"

"How could you let an eleven-year-old Muggle-born girl get under your skin? It's really very creepy, you know."

"Because you were never *just* eleven! Did you not see the memories? From your first year to your fourth year, you were the exceedingly annoying, always insufferable, friend of Harry fucking Potter! Yet, you were extraordinary, and you stood out above the rest, and I couldn't help but take notice. And by the time you began shagging that fucking git, Krum, I was in over my head with anger and lust, and I *loathed* you for it."

"For your information, I *never* shagged him, you jealous arse!"

"That's beside the point, Hermione. You were fourteen years old and the only person who had ever intellectually challenged me. You're a puzzle I can never find an answer for. So, can you blame me for becoming obsessed? For hating you because you did this to me?"

"I enjoy a mystery as much as you. But I don't go around purposely trying to break someone! Besides, there are plenty of others that are even more confusing than me--perhaps one your own age," she pointed out. "That excuse is just bollocks."

"Oh, really? Who then?" he said, mocking her.

Hermione huffed. "Dumbledore? Tom Riddle? Some other witch?"

Severus straightened, looking very much like the professor she had once known. "Dumbledore's a controlling bastard, Hermione. Once you crack his code of ambiguity, he is as easy to read as a book. The Dark Lord is the same. As for anyone else, as you suggested, you are the only person who has ever driven me mad, keeping me on my toes, wondering how in the bloody hell you were able to bring down someone like Dolores Umbridge!"

"So because you could never understand me, you decided to do horrible things to me, treat me like your personal toy--"

"You intrigued me, Hermione. You still do. I didn't know how to react--you saw my past.

"Besides murder, lusting after a student has been one the worst sins I have committed. I despised myself for being so weak. You were new to me, nothing I had ever

encountered before.

"I showed you my Boggart for a reason. I feared that no one like you could possibly accept me for who I am. So I did what I did to ensure I didn't get hurt. Instead, I hurt you."

Hermione snorted. "That's pathetic, Severus," she mumbled under her breath.

He took two long strides toward her, backing her up against the wall, towering over her and glaring at her through his curtain of black hair. "Is it, Hermione? What about you? You're just as *pathetic* as I am."

Hermione's breath hitched. She hadn't been frightened of him in a long time. Her mouth was too dry to even swallow, let alone argue with the sinister man.

"You may not have committed such crimes as I did to you, but you are *far* from being innocent. You may have greatly consumed me, woman, but I have also done the same to you. You have always had the need to impress me, the need to satisfy me, correct?"

She nodded, and he smirked. "You have an obsession as well, Miss Granger."

"I *never*--"

"What do you think I am? A fool? You're not that good a liar! Afraid to admit the awful truth?"

"S-stop turning this on me, Snape. You wanted my submission! But mostly, you're just afraid of rejection."

"As are you," he whispered in her ear, burying his nose in her thick hair. Hermione's heart frantically raced. She hated him and the effect he had on her. She squirmed against the wall, the exposed brick snagging her clothes.

"Do you understand that fear can devour a person? It can make a person go nearly mad, or make them do things that under different circumstances they would probably not do? Fear changes a person, Hermione, and your fear of rejection is just as great as mine. I'll be the first to admit, I took it to greater lengths, but nevertheless--"

"Your behavior towards me is still inexcusable!"

"I agree, and for *that* I apologize. I should never have taken advantage of you in that manner. I shouldn't have been such a *coward* and tried to break you because of my fears. I can't change the past, Hermione, I can only fix the problem and look towards our future."

Anger, confusion, and hurt crowded Hermione's mind and heart. She pushed past him, and he whirled around to face her before she hissed, "We don't *have* a future!"

"Why not?" he said, his lip curling.

"You've had a lifetime to live with those memories! I've had half an hour with them--I need time to process this, Severus!" She turned away and began walking towards her room.

"So you're walking away from me, just like everyone else in my life--just like Lily," he snarled.

Hermione stopped dead in her tracks.

She turned on her heel, her lips pursed and eyes narrowed. She swiftly advanced on him, striking him with her famous right cross. "Do not *ever* compare me to *her* or anyone else, for that matter!"

Blood trickled from the corner of his lips, and already his pale skin was reddening with a bruise. Her hand throbbed, but her adrenaline was rushing high, and she couldn't have cared less about her pain.

She was ready for the fight.

But it never came.

He just stood there with a defiant stare, and Hermione was sure he was battling a private war within himself. It was obvious he wanted to strike back, but he kept his distance, trying to keep calm.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't compare you to her," he demanded, his voice low and tight with anger.

Before Hermione could answer, a thin trail of blood from his mouth traveled down his chin to his neck, splattering his white shirt. It was at that moment that Hermione realized that the person from the memories--the man who had assaulted and used her--was not the man who stood before her now. If he hadn't changed, she was positive that this treacherous man would have struck her in return. By not wiping away the blood she had drawn, by standing there, taking her physical abuse and not retorting in his humiliation, he was signifying his surrender to her.

Hermione exhaled, breathing out her anger. "Because I'm the only one who has ever loved you," she said, her voice a bare whisper in the cozy room.

Severus' jaw relaxed, and his features softened. Then, his brow wrinkled as he said, "Loved. As in past tense?"

Not knowing how to answer that, Hermione walked towards him, pulling two tissues out of the box from table next to the sofa before stopping in front him. He was extremely still as she gently patted the line of blood off his chin, and she briefly wondered if he was waiting for her to hit him again. "It's late, Severus. We should get some rest and conclude this tomorrow," she whispered. Once she was finished wiping away the excess blood, she balled the tissues up, dropping them on the table, and walked away.

Stronger as One

Chapter 29 of 32

What would Severus Snape do to get what he desires the most? Anything--no matter the consequences.

A/N: Thank you for waiting for this next chapter, dear readers--I know it's been a while, and I really appreciate that you are anxious to read what will happen next. I hope you enjoy this one. Thank you to Lariope, Lulabelle72, and RedSkyAtNight for their support and being excited that I actually had a chapter to give them! Much love!

Hermione's eyes popped opened as the horrendous smell of burnt hair invaded her nose, waking her from her deep sleep. She rolled out of the bed and glanced at the clock on the bedside table. Hermione groaned, realizing that this was the third day in a row that she had slept past noon.

She had avoided Severus for the past few days, which had been difficult to do while stuck inside a tiny cottage, but she had needed time to mull things over. In fact, the only words she had said in the last three days had been the morning after their fight. He had been sitting in the living room, waiting for her. She had thought she would be ready to talk, but she wasn't. As she had walked towards the bathroom, she had simply stated: "I'm not ready."

But it had been when that horrendous smell intruded her slumber that she realized that she couldn't stay away forever. She tumbled out of bed, rubbing the stiffness out of her neck. *Grow up, Granger. You're an adult. Hiding in your room is not the solution.*

After using the loo, washing her face, brushing her teeth, and pulling her hair into a ponytail, Hermione walked towards the kitchen, where the offensive stench was seeping from behind the closed door. She crinkled her nose as she gently pushed open the door and peered inside.

As Severus dropped six freshly diced bat wings into his boiling cauldron, the door to the kitchen swooshed open. Although his heart skipped a beat, he refused to turn around and greet her--she was just eager to see what he was up to, the nosy know-it-all. He stirred the contents, placed the spoon on the counter, and stood there, watching his potion--it would be another two hours before it was ready to be stirred again, but Severus wanted to stand his ground and ignore her as she had done him for the past three days.

Damn, woman, say something, will you?

Instead of facing her, he took two side steps to the left, placed a ginger root on his cutting board, and began slicing it. Her silence and her eyes upon him were driving him mad.

How dare she watch me, waiting for me to start speaking to her. She was the one who chose to have her space. She was--

"Severus?"

He released the breath he had been holding and calmed himself. He turned his head slightly to the right as if looking over his shoulder. "Miss Granger?"

"If you've got a moment, I would like to speak to you in the living room."

"About what--the smell? It will diminish over time," he said, turning back to his cutting board to continue his slicing of the ginger root.

"Not about the smell--at least not yet. We need to talk about us. Have you got few minutes to talk while the potion brews?"

Of course he did, although his instincts told him that he must not appear too eager to speak to her, and he longed to make her suffer as he had. But he reminded himself that he intended to show Hermione that he had changed. And so, instead of voicing the retort that had sprung so easily to his lips, he gently placed his knife on the counter and faced her, saying, "I've got plenty of time, Hermione."

Her shoulders relaxed, and he knew he had said the correct words. He followed her into the living room and sat in the chair across from hers. She fidgeted with the hem of her skirt, but her eyes never turned from his.

"You and I have made some horrible mistakes--you more than me, but nevertheless, we both have done some things we are not proud of, correct?"

Severus nodded.

"And although we have the ability to go back in time and change what we have done, it isn't the right thing to do, nor is it logical--learning from our mistakes is, though. Would you agree?"

"Very much so."

Hermione cleared her throat and nodded. "So, the way I see it, we may have some issues to work on, but it would be best to look forward and not backwards and dwell on the negatives of the past--although you mustn't forget it."

"Whatever it is you are trying to say, just say it and stop blathering."

She huffed. "To be perfectly clear, I do not agree with your actions, and so help you, Severus Snape, if you ever do anything like that again and you continue on the destructive path that you are on, it will not be You-Know-Who or Dumbledore you have to worry about."

Severus raised his eyebrow, impressed at her assertiveness. He had already promised himself he would change, and now it was time to say it aloud to her. "I will not be so foolish again, Hermione. I promise."

Hermione nodded, rose from the chair, and headed towards the kitchen. "So... What are you brewing?" she asked.

Severus quickly followed her and grabbed her arm from behind, spinning her around to face him. Her watery eyes looked up at him, and Severus knew he had done the right thing--her anger and hurt were still apparent. He tightly wrapped her in his arms and finally felt her forgiveness as she welcomed his embrace and buried her face in his chest.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he whispered before she released her tears of tension and frustration. Severus closed his eyes and kissed the top of her head. He fought against his emotions for only a moment until he finally surrendered to his own tears.

The feel of her, so small in his arms, wracked with sobs, finally brought home to him the fragility of his little lioness. He always thought of Hermione as the emotionally strong one, whereas his strength was physical and magical, but he realized with a sharp intake of breath just how vulnerable she really was, how easy it was to hurt her, and how close he had come to breaking her with his own stubborn possessiveness. His heart ached with both the possible, horrible results of his behavior and also with wonder that she could even forgive him.

It was an amazing feeling, not having to hide away his affection and hurt from her--for once in his life, he felt normal, not the awkward boy he once was and most definitely not the closed-off man that he had been his entire life. Flashes of a happy future with this woman in his arms raced through his mind, and it was at that moment that Severus, at long last, began to want, began to dream of a life outside of the darkness he knew. And it was at that moment that he vowed he would finish this fucking war on the side of good so that he *could* have those things that he desperately wanted, so that he *could* finally do the right thing. He never wanted his woman scorned like this again, and if he spent the rest of his life, no matter how short it might be, ensuring that she was safe and happy, then that was what he would do. He knew this was his last chance with her--he wouldn't fuck it up.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, committing everything about this moment in his arms to memory. She felt secure and safe and never wanted to let go. She didn't need

Veritaserum or Legilimency to know that he was truly sorry for all the stupid things he had done in the past. She loved him, and she forgave him--all that mattered now was moving forward. She would never forget, nor would she let *him*, but she could move beyond it.

She sighed, remembering that he had a cauldron full of a nasty-smelling potion, and she was eager to find out what the bloody hell he was up to. She finally released her grip on his waist and looked up at him. With the pad of her thumb, she wiped away the trail of tears from his cheek. He grinned and then softly kissed her on her forehead. Hermione cleared her throat and said, "You never answered me--what is it that you are brewing? It smells disgusting."

"Let me get this right," Hermione said as she sipped a cup of coffee. "A house-elf arrived, stating that it will retrieve anything the houseguests ask for, and you handed him a two-foot long parchment with items you wanted, and he got them all? Never mind that you didn't demand anything to help us communicate with the world outside the cottage, or ask for practical items to help us survive, or items that I might need--no, of course not, you asked for *potion* ingredients!"

Severus looked at her oddly, as if she had said something wrong. Hermione chuckled inside; that was just like him to concern himself with magic over personal needs.

"And when you asked the house-elf about what was happening outside this cottage, he lost his voice?" she asked.

"Dumbledore must have placed a spell on Zeki so he couldn't tell us what was happening," he said as he strained the thick potion into another cauldron.

"That's so unfair. Why is he treating us this way? Doesn't he know how dangerous it is to have you locked away--what happens if your Dark Mark starts burning and you can't respond to *his* demand? I remember the last time--you were in so much pain!"

Severus placed the cauldron on top of the countertop and turned around. "If I cannot answer the call of the Dark Lord, he will eventually come to me."

Hermione felt sick. Voldemort would be able to use the Dark Mark as a tracking device; she should have known...

"But we are in a Secret-Kept location--we are safe inside here," she whispered.

"The Dark Lord can pinpoint my position."

Hermione patiently stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

"What is worse, though, is that he has control over the Dark Mark and can use it to Apparate me to him. I'm not even sure Dumbledore knows about that. Until then..."

Hermione covered her face with her hands, growling into them, and then slammed her hands on the table, knocking over the sugar. "Dumbledore knows. He is counting on Voldemort to show up here in search of you--it's a fucking trap!"

Severus snorted. Of course it was a trap. That manipulative bastard had used him once again--it seemed to be the standard state of affairs when it came to Dumbledore's treatment of him.

"I know, Hermione."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You've got a plan, haven't you?"

Severus smirked. "I always have a plan."

"And it has something to do with that ghastly potion, yes?"

"Indeed," he said, turning around to stir the potion.

Hermione stood next to him, her fingers pinching her nose, and watched as he scooped the remaining glop into a glass bowl. "You know Dumbledore wants me to control you, to make sure you stay loyal," she stated.

"Yes, of course he would want that. But there is another reason he brought us here."

She crinkled her brow. "Oh, really?"

"Slice this into four even slivers," Severus said, handing her a small silver knife and a centipede. "Now, what do people such as ourselves do best?"

"People like us? What do you mean?"

He smirked and sprinkled the liquid potion with drops of spider venom. "We're researchers, Hermione."

She nods. "True. I enjoy doing that. It's my role in this war. Well, besides keeping Harry out of trouble."

Severus chuckled. "Harry Potter and trouble are synonymous with each other. But yes, that is your role. Those look excellent. Drop them into the cauldron and put the flame on low. Now, as researchers, we must find a way to vanquish the Dark Lord forever."

"But we already have that answer--eliminate the Horcruxes. That was the reason we delved into mummies and bugs and all sorts of frightening items--so I could get that book that locates all the Horcruxes!"

Severus opened a chest that was sitting on the floor. Inside, phials of potions were lined up, some powdered in fine dust, some large, some small. He removed a shelf to reveal other items such as stirring sticks and tapered candles hiding behind the phials. Severus reached for two talons and then closed the lid.

"I have a vivid memory of that adventure, Hermione. And as much as it has helped, it has also hindered us because a person has to be in a room for that spell to work. And of all the rooms in Britain--the world--how would we know which is the correct one? It could take years to locate all the Horcruxes."

Hermione huffed. "Well, as much as I may not like to admit this, Dumbledore has an idea of where they are located."

"He has ideas, but he isn't positive," Severus said as he removed a pouch that was labeled 'Banshee Hair' from a smaller trunk. He started meticulously plaiting a lock of the white hair, and from the way he was avoiding her eyes, she knew that he had much more to tell--he was just making her work her way to the answer. And she willingly obliged--she always loved to solve a mystery. But even more, she was thoroughly enjoying this journey that Severus was leading her on; she knew he was testing her and that he was pleased with her answers. But even better was that their renewed ease with one another as a result of this gave her definitive hope for their future together.

"So, if we aren't sure where all the Horcruxes are located, we could be searching for years, even decades, trying to find them. This surely must mean that you already have an idea of where to find them--no!"

Severus slowly faced her, the corner of his mouth turned upward, waiting for her to finish the last piece of his puzzle.

"You... you don't know *where* to find them. You don't need to because you know how to kill all the Horcruxes at once, don't you? That's it, isn't it?"

Severus chuckled and nodded his head once.

Hermione sat down in the chair, shocked at this revelation. "But how? And why didn't you say so? We've wasted so much time now!"

"Calm down, we haven't wasted time. It's a theory I have been working on for the past few years, but it was only a theory."

"What's been stopping you from proving your theory?"

Severus placed the lock of hair on the counter and turned around, leaning against the edge of the cupboards. "You."

Hermione shook her head, confused. "Me?"

Severus nodded and slid into the chair next to hers. "Once the Dark Lord drinks this potion that I'm brewing, in theory, it will destroy all remaining pieces of his soul, permanently damaging the object it was housed inside. Of course, getting him to take the potion will take the highest level of espionage to do, which for me, is the simple part of this process, but..."

"What's this got to do with me?"

"If I had been able to put my theory to the test, you would have never forgiven me, and therefore I would never have got the opportunity to... be with you. It's selfish, I know, but this was before--"

"What would I have not forgiven, Severus?"

"Destroying a specific Horcrux."

Hermione crinkled her brow. "I don't understand--just tell me," she said impatiently.

Severus sighed. "Potter's scar is a Horcrux. If the Horcrux had been destroyed, Potter would have been killed."

Hermione felt as if someone had punched her in her stomach, cutting off all her air supply. Her fingers were numb, and she felt the colour in her face drain away.

Harry's a Horcrux.

"H-how? I mean... it's just... Harry's scar? That's--that's..." Hermione inhaled deeply, clearing her mind. She sat for a moment, her head buried in her hands, thinking, trying to make sense of it all.

Finally, she looked up at Severus, who had been patiently waiting for this news to sink in. "Of course... it's all clear," she said. "That night when Harry's parents were murdered--his soul..."

"Yes, Hermione."

"Do you think Dumbledore knows?"

"Yes."

Hermione shook her head again in disbelief and stared at the napkin in front of her, waiting for her mind to comprehend all the secrets she was learning. Only when Severus placed his hand over hers did she look up, ready for him to continue.

"Do you understand now? If you had found out that I had made the potion and killed your friend, you would have never forgiven me. As I said, my reasons were selfish, and I have only wanted to use it at the last possible moment, if all else has failed. And when I found out that the three of you were set to hunt the Horcruxes, I knew I could have you for myself, and I would not have to test my theory and risk losing you. I knew that when it was finally time to kill the soul in his body, it would be the right timing and not my fault."

"Yes, your reasons were horribly selfish, but we've already discussed your behavior, so that's in the past. But do you know that Harry is prepared to die for the greater good? How could I blame you for that?"

"Well, seeing how you and your friends have always been quick to blame me for everything else in your life--"

"That's all in the past," Hermione said sternly.

Severus smirked. "It wouldn't have mattered, though. If Potter had simply exploded one day, or had you known what my plans were, you--of all people--would never have stood by and let it happen to him, not if you knew that there were *any* possibility of another way to destroy the Horcrux. Am I correct?"

Hermione closed her eyes. No matter what she said, her heart knew she wouldn't have been satisfied with that outcome. It was possible for her to forgive the wrongs he had committed against her because they were hers to forgive, but if he had wronged Harry in that way, she would have been unable to see past it.

"I suppose you're right. I would have been distraught."

He snorted. "Impossible is more like it."

"So now what? Harry still has the Horcrux in him. No matter what, we have to kill him, don't we?"

"Well, yes."

Hermione slouched against the back of the chair. "So what was the point of telling me all of this? The Egyptian book was basically useless; Harry is going to implode once Voldemort drinks that potion--I mean, honestly! There *must* be another way."

"The book wasn't useless. It served its purpose, and if we had more time, we could hunt down the remaining Horcruxes. But we're out of time. If we don't end this with him now--Hermione, I *assure* you that he is just days from overthrowing the Ministry, the Order... He has armies around the world. Do you understand? Without the ability to kill him for good, the wizarding world, as we know it, is doomed."

Hermione gently nodded her head. "Then I suppose we must finish this potion and kill my... best friend," she said quietly.

"Well... not exactly."

"What do you mean, 'not exactly'?"

"Because I knew that killing Potter would have devastated you, which ultimately would have stopped me from getting what I wanted, I began to research a way to stop the destruction of the object that contains the Horcrux--more specially, Potter's instant death."

"Oh, you did, did you?"

"Of course. However, once I found the answer, I was highly disappointed because I knew it would have been out of the question to create the necessary potion because of the availability and rarity of the potion ingredients that are needed. Not even Dumbledore would have been able to acquire the final ingredients."

Hermione grumbled. "Then why are you telling me this if there is no way to get them?"

Severus leaned back in his chair, steepling his hands as he always did when he was about to say something most interesting. Hermione couldn't help herself as she crept to the edge of her seat, twirling the edge of her skirt around her finger, waiting very impatiently to hear what he had to say.

"It just so happens that, quite recently, I have had the absolute pleasure of acquiring the two remaining ingredients."

A/N: Only a few more chapters left!!

Up Next:

Severus and Hermione get ready for Voldemort!

Deceitful Strategies

Chapter 30 of 32

Severus makes plans.

A/N: To all those who have waited so very long: thank you. I'm blessed to have you as a reader and I do hope you enjoy this chapter. Thank you, Lariope for the beta--you're awesome. Many hugs!

Severus leaned back in his chair, steepling his hands as he always did when he was about to say something most interesting. Hermione couldn't help herself as she crept to the edge of her seat, twirling the edge of her skirt around her finger, waiting very impatiently to hear what he had to say.

"It just so happens that, quite recently, I have had the absolute pleasure of acquiring the two remaining ingredients."

Hermione was nearly salivating as Severus seductively reeled her into his plan. He related it on his own terms, however--giving her just pieces of information at a time as he explained to her how he had always been one step ahead of the two most powerful wizards of her time.

"What are they?" Hermione said, her voice barely a whisper.

Severus grinned. "Virgin's blood. More specifically, *your* virgin's blood."

Hermione sat up, shocked, but not surprised--it was a valuable ingredient. "But why did you wait to use mine? Why didn't you purchase some?"

"Virgin blood-- at least the sort that I could afford--is not very powerful. It's usually from a witch who was forced, rather than willing like you were. Or, the blood from older witches, which over time, the strength dissipates. To get the strength I required, I needed a young, willing witch. In time, I might have acquired it with help from Lucius, but even then, it wouldn't have had the power I sought. You can only imagine how exciting it was to gather yours."

Hermione nodded her head and smiled. "I did see the look in your eye when you took my blood," she teased. Hermione sat back in the chair and crossed her legs, ready for more information. "All right then, if the blood was the first, and you said that since the rarity and availability of the ingredients were almost impossible to get, and I know that in time, you could have possibly obtained the blood, am I correct in assuming that the second ingredient is the one that is the most important?"

Severus slowly nodded his head, his smirk still playing upon his lips.

"Well, go on, then, what is it?" she demanded, her heart racing with every second ticking by. Hermione leaned forward, twirling the hem of her skirt between her fingers once again, waiting for his answer.

"Essence of werewolf."

"Essence of werewolf?" Hermione thought about that for a moment, mentally going through her massive catalog of rare ingredients that she had read about in her mind.

"You mean--the magic that makes a human transform into a wolf? You acquired that?"

"Oh, yes."

Confused, Hermione stood up and began pacing. "I've read about that only once--when you were trying to expose Remus as a wolf when I was a third year, and you had the class write that essay about werewolves. I found a book in the Restricted Section that mentioned it, but even then it was only one sentence in length and gave no valuable information. If I remember correctly, it said that the essence is nearly unattainable."

She stopped pacing and faced Severus, the answer dawning on her. "Of course. No werewolf would ever allow you to gather that of his own free will--you have to murder a werewolf to get that, correct?" She stared into his eyes, and for a split second, she saw the monster that now, hopefully, lay dormant inside him. Although she wasn't afraid, she knew she would never understand the excitement he had experienced when he killed the not-so-innocent--it was just a part of him she would have to accept.

"The essence is from Greyback," she stated.

"Indeed."

Hermione slumped into the chair, trying to imagine the horrid details of him capturing that ingredient. "When? How?"

"That's not important, and it is best I don't explain it to you--it's not for the fainthearted. What's important, though, is that with it, we can finally rid the Dark Lord of all his Horcruxes."

Hermione sighed. He was right, she didn't truly want to know the gory details, but her curiosity always seemed to get the best of her. "Please tell me," she asked quietly.

Severus huffed, then, in full detail, he told her how he had finally gained the essence of werewolf.

He didn't want to tell her, afraid she would be so horrified that he was so easily capable of murder, that she would truly throw away any relationship they had. But how could he refuse sharing his excitement with her? It even took him by surprise when, after he was finished, she quietly said that Greyback had deserved what he got. But then again, she always surprised him.

"Now explain how the blood and essence will work together," she said.

Severus cleared his throat. "As you may already know, the transformation that a wolf goes through basically changes his genetics, making them much stronger and such. No matter how much you... admire... Lupin, when he, or anyone for that matter, transforms into a werewolf, the magic is evil at its purest. Virgin's blood is the exact opposite--it's untainted and innocent.

"My theory is simple. By mixing the two ingredients into a potion, I could submerge the Horcrux. The Dark Lord's soul will attach to the essence of werewolf because the two evils will attract each other. The purity of the blood will eventually overpower it, based on the simple cliché: 'good always conquers evil.' The blood will destroy the evil soul, leaving the housing of the Horcrux intact. But the highlight of the theory is that I have created a spell that will use the single Horcrux as a conduit to kill all the remaining souls, whether the objects that contained them were found or not. The Dark Lord isn't as brilliant as everyone believes--although I suppose he never thought anyone would be able to find a fault in his plan, especially me: his most loyal and trusted follower."

"Seems like a simple theory, but why couldn't the blood overpower the Horcrux without the Werewolf Essence?"

"If the blood was used on its own, the power of the Dark Lord's soul would be attracted to it, like a magnet. For the power of the blood to work, the soul needs to latch onto something else--distract it from the good, so to speak. The essence is more powerful than the blood alone; that's why it's much more valuable. Once the two are infused together, the soul will latch onto the evil first, lessening the strength of the two and causing the dark magic to become vulnerable.

"Vulnerable because they aren't expecting the magic of virgin's blood to swoop in and destroy it. The essence is a decoy," Hermione said.

"Yes."

Severus chuckled to himself as he watched Hermione putting all the pieces together--her brain surely whirling with hundreds of questions.

"You've had this theory for a while?"

"Yes."

"And you needed the book from Egypt to locate the Horcruxes in case you couldn't get your two ingredients for your potion?"

"Correct."

She nodded, mumbling to herself. "About the spell that can kill all pieces of the soul from one source--how did you discover that?"

"A beautiful accident with a dreadfully long story, so don't ask. Just know it works--I used several fairies found in the shrubs to test my theory."

"Severus! That's awful!" Hermione snorted in disgust, and Severus shrugged his shoulders.

Hermione re-focused and began firing her questions at him again. "Were you planning on administering this potion to Harry?"

"Yes. Once he drinks it, the soul will be killed inside him and the virgin blood will help him withstand any damage to his body and will then heal him from the inside out. Of course, that part is still just a theory..."

"You never tested that?"

"I wasn't about to create a Horcrux to experiment with. The only thing I'm positive about is the spell that creates the conduit to other objects of similar matter. Everything else..."

It was disconcerting to have a theory that could never be proven until the actual moment that it needed to be used, but Severus kept telling himself he had no other choice--time was of the essence.

He gazed at Hermione for a while as she nibbled on her lower lip, deep in thought. It struck Severus that once she made her mind up to put his theory into use, this would probably be the last time he would have her to himself. After Voldemort was vanquished, Severus would either be dead, or worse, locked away in Azkaban forever, with *his* Hermione living her life. He wasn't ready to let her go just yet; he wasn't ready for the war to kill Voldemort--it was all happening too fast.

Of course, he had a plan to lure Voldemort to the cottage--after Dumbledore removed the Fidelius charm. It was a simple plan and should go smoothly, but selfishly, he needed one more night with her.

As much as it hurt, securing Hermione's happiness and giving her a life was the right thing to do. The thought of her with another man made Severus' stomach churn, but what could he do?

"Well, then? What do we need to do to get started?" she asked.

Severus smirked. "We make tea," he stated.

"Tea?"

"Yes," he said, rising smoothly from the chair. "But first, tonight is about us--once more before we end the Dark Lord." He placed his hands on the arms on either side of Hermione's chair and leaned over and captured her lips with his own.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his waist, stroking his lean back with her fingernails as she swirled her tongue around his.

Not sure if he could stand any longer after her mind-blowing kiss, Severus released her and half-dragged her to the bedroom. They fell onto the bed, Hermione on the bottom, their lips not once moving away from each other.

Finally, he settled himself between her legs and caressed her sides as he licked and nibbled her neck, enjoying the saltiness of her sweet skin. She ran her fingers through his hair and ground herself against his hardened cock while whispering how much she loved him. When he finally touched the heat of her passion with his tongue, she shouted out his name, just how he always liked it.

It wasn't long after tasting her sweet nectar that Severus moved up her body and positioned himself at her entrance, pushing deeply inside her. She hooked her legs around his waist and slid one hand between them, fervently flicking herself as he pumped into her.

Sweat and sex filled the air as Severus fell limp on top of her, his heart racing. His sporadic breathing matched Hermione's, and he could feel the wetness between them slowly drizzling onto the sheets as they slowly breathed in unison, relaxing in their bliss. It was in this peaceful moment that their souls were one, and Severus knew it was time to let her go.

"Hermione," he said quietly.

"Hmm?"

"I need you to promise me something."

She opened her eyes, and Severus leaned on his elbows, looking over. "Once all this is over, and if I make it out alive, I need you to forget me and move on."

"What? Why? How could you ask that of me? Isn't this what we want--to actually live once he's gone?" She attempted to roll over, upset of course, but he kept her pinned beneath him, forcing her to look at him.

"If I'm not dead, I'll be in prison, do you understand that? And I won't have you see me that way nor keep you from a life. You must promise me. Please," he begged softly.

Tears ran down her face, and it was all Severus could do to hold back his. He had to be strong for her.

"Why?" she whispered.

"I think you know the answer to that," Severus said, wiping away her tears. "Please just do this for me--you can't have a life with me in Azkaban, and you know that. So, for your own good and mine, stay away--no trials, no defending me... Will you promise me that?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't like that idea. You know I would stand by you, no matter what."

"Dammit, woman, don't say that. This isn't easy, asking this of you. Tomorrow is the day all of this will come to a conclusion; I need your promise to let me be."

Her lip quivered as she nodded her head. Severus could see in her eyes that, no matter how much she didn't want to admit it, she understood she couldn't have a life with him.

Severus kissed her gently on the forehead. "That's my girl," he whispered. He rolled next to her and wrapped her small body in his arms for the rest of the night.

Dumbledore sat across from Severus and Hermione at the dining table, listening carefully to the details of the plan Severus had devised. Hermione had made Severus promise to keep his temper under control while Dumbledore was in the cottage.

Though she hadn't specified what he should or shouldn't say to the old man--and so Severus had made it very clear how he felt about being locked away like an animal before he continued onto his plan.

"Very well, Severus. This is a dangerous plan of treachery, but if you're ready to betray Tom, and Miss Granger is willing to put herself in harm's way, then I, and the others, will be happy to do our part. I knew having the two of you in my cottage was the right thing to do--with both your brilliant minds working--"

"Albus," Severus warned.

"Oh, right. Of course. My apologies," Dumbledore said as he stood from the dining table. He nodded to Hermione. "The house-elf will bring everything you require. Thank you--and good luck."

Severus's hand twitched around the wand in his pocket. Save your anger for the war. He took a deep breath as Hermione walked Dumbledore to the door.

He rummaged through the cupboard, looking for a bottle of whatever kind of alcohol he could find, desperately wanting to numb his emotions. But Hermione was back before he knew it, swiping the bottle from his hand and placing it back inside the cupboard.

"You did very well, Severus," she said. "But it's time to invite Voldemort for a spot of tea and set our plan in motion. Harry and the others will be here shortly--we have much to do!"

Severus nodded. "I agree. However, we aren't going to do this the way you think, Miss Granger," he said deviously.

Hermione's brow creased. "What do you mean? And why are you calling me 'Miss Granger' again?"

Severus snatched Hermione's waist, whipping her around, pulling her tightly into his body and crushing her arms at her side. Squirming against him, she said, "Severus? Ouch--you're hurting me!"

Snape loomed over her and brushed her cheek with his own. "There's a new plan, my dear. One that will greatly benefit me and the Dark Lord." Wandlessly and within a split second, Snape had strapped Hermione's wrist into shackles, binding her mouth with a silver scarf. He levitated the metal chain to the wooden rafters above them, imprisoning her in the middle of the room.

Hermione's muffled screams of protest filled the tiny cottage as Snape removed his wand from his pocket. He glared at her through the curtains of his hair as he rolled back his left sleeve, and pressed the tip of his wand to his Dark Mark.

A/N: I can't seem to help myself with these wicked cliffhangers!

Up Next: Voldemort is welcomed to the cottage.

Living Nightmare

Chapter 31 of 32

The fight against Voldemort.

A/N: Look at me! I'm actually updating another chapter so quickly! I know you all have waited so long for the updates, so I do hope you enjoy this chapter. Thank you to Lariope for her superb beta skills.

Snape gazed at Hermione one last time before he walked away, leaving her in the kitchen, bound by her restraints. Tears streamed down her cheeks, but she made no sound. It was apparent she was mentally trying to understand why he had betrayed her. Again.

Without showing any emotion on his face, something he was a master at, he swept from the room, placing her under a Silencing Charm as he walked away. As he passed through the door to the living room, the lights flickered and began flashing blue--Dumbledore had removed the enchantments around the cottage just as planned, and within seconds, several knocks rapped against the wooden door. Snape approached the door, smirking and excited about his next plan of action. "Potter," he said, opening the door and standing aside to let the younger man enter.

"Snape," Harry replied in the same tone.

Snape shut the door and removed his wand from his pocket. With all of the protective wards lowered, Snape had about a minute to work before Dumbledore realized that he had deviated away from the original plan, placing Harry in immediate danger. Quickly, Snape flicked and swished his wand, placing the cottage under the Death Eater Protection charm--a charm that worked much like the Fidelius charm, but only allowed Death Eaters to enter a location.

"Where's Hermione?" Harry asked, looking around the room, not paying attention to Snape's actions.

"She'll be out in a moment--she's getting dressed," he said, slowly walking towards Harry with his wand at the ready.

Harry picked up a seashell on the mantle and placed it next to his ear. "Oh, okay. Do you have that potion ready for me to drink?" he said, setting the shell down and facing Snape. He quickly jumped back, startled that Snape was directing his wand at him.

"Not quite," Snape replied, swirling his wand in the air to gather the magic he needed to hex Harry.

"Fuck! What are you doing?" Harry shouted as he whipped his wand out of his pocket to protect himself. But it was too late. Snape had fired a Stunning Curse at him, knocking Harry to the ground.

Snape stood over Harry's body. "What I've wanted to do for a very long time," he said as he put his wand in his pocket and knelt down. He coiled his fingers into a tight fist and squarely punched Harry in the face. Blood from his nose splattered across Snape's knuckles, and if Harry could, he would have winced in pain. Again, he punched him, splitting his lip open this time. "You've been a problem for many years, Potter," he said snidely, standing up and removing his wand from his pocket once again. Snape magically shackled Harry, as he had done to Hermione, and bound his mouth with a silver scarf. Then, he levitated the bleeding boy to the kitchen, where Hermione awaited.

Her eyes widened as she saw what Snape had done to Harry. She struggled against her constraints, but to no avail. Ignoring her, Snape finished the potion, which had been simmering on the stove, by adding an agent that made the potion undetectable to the senses. He made a pot of tea and added three drops of the potion to it. He walked over to Potter and removed the scarf. The Stunning Hex was slowing wearing off--not enough for Potter to kick and struggle, but enough for his mouth to move.

"You fucking liar!" he shouted just before Snape snatched his jaw and forced his mouth open. Snape poured the hot liquid into Harry's mouth and held it shut. Harry screamed at the back of his throat, the hot liquid surely burning. Harry tried to spit it out, but wasn't strong enough yet, and finally succumbed and swallowed the tea. Tears swelled in Harry's eyes as Snape placed the scarf around his mouth again.

Snape placed the tea cup on the counter and stood in front of Harry to watch the potion take effect. Within seconds, Harry's eyes rolled backwards and his body began convulsing. Sweat beads bubbled up on his brow, and the blood from his nose and lip turned from red to black. The smell of burning hair filled the air as Harry's body shook uncontrollably as Voldemort's soul died. Hermione cried as she helplessly watched her best friend being tortured. Finally, Harry fell limp, his arms dangling above him from the rafters, his legs crumpled beneath him. His body swayed lightly, almost like a dead man hanging from the gallows.

Snape swallowed--this was the moment of truth. Either Harry was dead, or the soul was, and Harry was alive. Snape ran his wand through the air around Harry's body, completing a diagnostic spell. A faint yellow glow appeared, and Snape sighed. Harry was alive, but just barely.

"He's alive," he said to Hermione. "But not for long."

Just as he had thought, the lights began to flicker once again, but this time the flash of light was red--an intruder was trying to break into the cottage. But since Snape had placed his special protective ward, it wasn't the Death Eaters who were considered intruders--it was Dumbledore and the Aurors. Only minutes had passed since Dumbledore foolishly let Harry inside the cottage, and it was apparent he knew Harry was harmed.

Snape walked back into the living room, watching the second hand on the clock tick by as he waited for the arrival of Voldemort. After two minutes, a swirl of black, fine powder covered the room as the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters Apparated inside the cottage.

"Severusss," Voldemort hissed, his wand at the ready. "It's been so long since our last contact--I was beginning to believe you had chosen Dumbledore over me."

"Only in your wildest dreams, my Lord," Snape said, bowing slightly.

"Don't believe him, my Lord--this is a trap!" Bellatrix snarled.

"Perhaps, my dear Bella. But why don't we allow Severusss to show his true colors first? Well? You brought me here for a reason..."

"Yes, my Lord. I have gifts for you." Snape headed towards the kitchen, squeezing past the circle of Death Eaters that surrounded the room. He unhooked Hermione's shackle from the rafter and gripped her upper arm, half dragging her into the living room. He pushed passed the barrier of Death Eaters and shoved Hermione onto the floor in front of Voldemort. "She's all yours."

Voldemort grinned. "Let's see what her mind holds, Severusss.*Legilimens!*"

For a moment Voldemort stared into Hermione's eyes, succumbing to all the images that flooded into him. "You've greatly fooled her--she had believed you loved her. She's confused as to why you've all of a sudden turned. Amazing, Severusss," Voldemort whispered as he continued reading her mind. Then, his slit eyes widened as he realized something shocking. He quickly released her and faced Snape. "My Horcruxes are being destroyed!" he shouted.

Snape reacted quickly, having known that he would find that information out. "Don't fear, my Lord."

"How can I not, Severusss? You allowed this! Bella was right--this is a trap!"

"Before you sentence me as a traitor, I assure you I am not. Let me show you my last gift--I promise it will change your mind," Snape said. Twenty or more wands were pointed directly at him, but Snape wasn't worried. Handing a battered Potter over to Voldemort would be the ultimate proof that he was loyal, and nothing anyone--especially Bellatrix--said could change Voldemort's trust in him.

He walked back to the kitchen, aware of everyone's eyes on him. Harry was still dangling, but was now aware of his surroundings. Snape removed the chain from the rafters above and lifted Harry to his feet, but he was too weak to stand. Instead, Snape Levitated him into the living room and dropped him at Voldemort's feet. "Do you think this is a trap now, Bellatrix?" His words cut through the silent room like ice.

Voldemort smirked, his pleasure apparent on his face. "You have truly outdone yourself this time, my most trusted and loyal follower." Behind him, Bellatrix snorted in anger and jealousy. Voldemort circled Harry, curiously looking over his prey. The others lowered their wands as Severus stood off to the side near the front door, away from Bellatrix. Hermione had been dragged to the same side to allow Harry and Voldemort time alone in the center of the ring of Death Eaters.

As Voldemort taunted Harry with his words, and the Death Eaters begged their leader to kill him, Hermione looked up at Snape, finally catching his eye. Snape winked at her and cautiously flicked his wand behind his back, removing the protective ward around the property. Surprised at Snape's actions, Hermione's brows raised as she watched him, realizing that it all *had* been a trap, just as Bellatrix predicted. He mouthed 'I love you' to the watching girl just before the cottage filled with darkness and the cracking sounds of Dumbledore and his army Apparating into the cottage.

In the dark, Snape used his body as a shield over Hermione. He placed a protective ward around their bodies, defending them from the jets of red and green beams jetting across the small room. Within seconds, someone had lifted the Darkness Spell and the fighting began.

A thunderous boom deafened those in the room as the wall opposite of Snape exploded, leaving a gaping hole. Death Eaters attempted to Apparate away, but Dumbledore had prepared for this and had placed a ward around the cottage, preventing anyone from leaving. In the midst of the dust from the explosion and the curses and spells being thrown across the room, Snape noticed Dumbledore guarding Harry against Voldemort. Weasley helped Potter to his feet and allowed himself to be used as a crutch. The potion wasn't meant to last very long; Snape was sure Harry would regain his strength and power within minutes.

"It's over, Tom!" Dumbledore bellowed as Snape removed Hermione's chains from her wrists and body. Just as he was removing the silver scarf, Bellatrix, with her wild mass of black hair, came charging at him, her crooked wand held out like a dagger. Snape shoved Hermione backwards and leaped out of the line of fire. His shoulder slammed into the ground, and Bellatrix cast another hex towards Snape. "*Protego!*" he shouted.

From behind her, Hermione attacked Bellatrix with a Stunning Spell, knocking the psychotic woman to the ground. Snape pushed himself to his feet, but was instantly thrown to the ground when Kingsley attacked him with the Cruciatus Curse.

Snape's insides burned as he was slowly being tortured to death. It had been a while since he had been under this curse, and although he had been used to it from the past, it had been unexpected, and he hadn't prepared his mind and body for the direct hit. Before he knew it, though, the pain was gone, and he opened eyes to see Lucius standing above him.

"I want the pleasure of killing you myself, dear friend," the blond man snarled.

As if in slow motion, Snape picked up his wand while kicking Lucius across the back of his knees, sweeping Lucius' legs out from under him. Lucius collapsed to the ground as Snape scrambled to his feet, his wand pointing at Voldemort, who was rising in the air, attempting to fly through the mass of bodies fighting in the small room. As if it were planned, Harry, Dumbledore, and Snape shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*" at the same time.

The power of the three green jets of light bolted into Voldemort, and with the potion having destroyed all pieces of his soul, the curse killed him instantly. His body plummeted to the ground, and all was silent as everyone watched the death of Lord Voldemort. Exhausted, Harry fell to the floor, and all around, the Death Eaters dropped their wands, surrendering themselves.

Snape sighed as a heavy weight finally lifted off his shoulders. For so many years, he had been a spy and traitor. It had taken every ounce of his expertise to betray Hermione and change the plan the way he had. If he hadn't, Voldemort would have discovered the truth about his loyalties when he entered Hermione's mind--even with Dumbledore blocking her thoughts and inner secrets from a distance like originally planned. But of course, no one knew the reason why it had appeared that he'd turned his back once again, so it didn't come as much of a surprise when he found himself at Dumbledore's wand point for a second time.

"You didn't follow through on the plan, Severus. And although Voldemort is dead, I must admit, I can't help but think that your loyalties still remain with the same person they have for all these years."

Snape raised his wand to his opponent. Dumbledore held up his hand, stopping the Aurors from blasting Snape's wand from his hand and arresting him.

"As you saw, Albus, I contributed to his death--apparently my loyalties are not with him."

"I wasn't speaking about Voldemort--I was talking about yourself. You've always been for yourself."

"Can you blame me?" Snape replied, side stepping to the left as Dumbledore did. It was now Snape and Dumbledore circling each other as the Aurors held the Death Eaters captive.

"Amongst the other illegal actions, you abused Harry when he was supposed to be in your care--I suggest you lower your wand and surrender to the Aurors."

"I will when you do--I'm not the only one who has committed crimes against others for your own good. Therefore, lower *your* wand."

"I admit I have caused harm to come to several others, including you. But I have done nothing illegal, as you clearly have. Don't make me stun you--go quietly, Severus."

Snape knew this was fate--death would have been easier to face than voluntarily submitting himself in front of Hermione. He faced her, wanting to see her one last time as a free man. She stood next to Harry and grinned at him. But as Snape began to lower his wand, he realized that the Auror behind her was paying more attention to the scene with Dumbledore and himself than on keeping his captive detained.

Stretching out to reach a fallen wand lying near her body, Bellatrix took advantage of her opportunity. She gripped her fingers around the wand just as Snape turned towards her, swinging his wand away from Dumbledore and pointing directly at his nemesis, the Killing Curse on the tip of his tongue.

"Severus!"

Snape heard Dumbledore shouting his name in the background, but his focus was strictly on Bellatrix and her borrowed wand, which was aimed precisely at Hermione.

But before he could cast the curse to kill, his body stiffened, and the next thing he knew, he was falling to the ground. Just as he slipped into the black depths of unconsciousness, the last images of the scene flashed before him: a stream of light erupted from the tip of Bellatrix's wand, striking Hermione in the back, and almost gracefully, Hermione's torso bowed, and her neck snapped backwards as she fell forward.

A/N: Gee, what happened? Oh, is that another horrible, evil cliffhanger that your dear author left for you once again? Mwahahahahha.

Next chapter: The End. (I have waited almost two years to write that. *sighs*)

The Beginning is the End is the Beginning

A/N: Dear readers, I have to say that this fic is appropriately titled, for it has 'consumed me' for the past two years, and finally, I am finished. I appreciate each of you who have read this fic, and to those of you who have reviewed--your words, thoughts, and sometimes shocked outbursts of 'Shell, you're EVIL' have truly warmed my heart. I feel blessed that I was able to get this wicked, twisted, demented love story out of my head and onto the page for my fellow SS/HG lovers to appreciate. I would like to acknowledge those who have helped me in this story along the way. To Lulabelle72: You are an amazing teacher, and I have learned an incredible amount while writing this story. I know I have said this a zillion times, but without you letting me borrow your ingenious idea of The Grotto from your story, An Unreasonable Man, Consuming Me would not have continued. Thank you for your patience, friendship, beta work and excellent ideas (and additional chapters about flying). To RedSkyAtNight: Thank you for additional beta work, britpicking, and the willingness to put up with my American tendencies. I feel honored that such a talented writer as you took on a novice. I will always be grateful for that. To those who were amazing cheerleaders, especially Chivalric and Livvy6. And finally, Lariope--you were the first one to know of this story and my intentions. You have always been by my side regarding my decisions and sometimes dark and twisted thoughts, and your encouragement, support, and betaing every single chapter over the past two years will never be forgotten. Thank you.

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"Checkmate," Ron said with a hint of smugness in his voice.

Severus huffed. "One more game," he stated while replacing all his black pawns on the chessboard.

Ron repositioned his white pawns on his side. "No problem, mate. I have plenty of time to continue to win. And it's not like you're going anywhere," he said, his eyes roaming over the stone walls that surrounded the small, square room.

"Your cheekiness will not be tolerated," Severus replied as he waited for Ron to move his first pawn.

Ron grinned. "Your go."

Severus moved his pawn. "So, where's Potter? He's late. Again."

Ron shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. "He's... well, he's with... a friend."

"No need to say anymore...your and Potter's personal lives are something I certainly do not want to be a part of," Severus said.

Ron's faced reddened. "It's not what you think," he mumbled as he moved his next pawn. "Will Fred and George will be coming by Friday afternoon for another private lesson?" he asked, switching the topic of discussion.

The twins, along with Ron and Harry had been the only visitors Snape ever had. He had taken the twins under his wing because they were the only ones who had the drive he did about experiments, and Snape had always been impressed with them. Being able to oversee the twins on their business endeavors had been part of his plea bargain. As for Harry and Ron, at first, they each felt they owed Snape their respect, but it soon became apparent that outside the war and the classroom, the three of them could offer each other friendship and understanding.

"Tell them to bring the fangs of a vampire bat this time--I cannot properly aid them in their quest for a new Weasley's Wizard Wheezes product without demonstrating the extraction of its venom. And tell them to be sure to inform the guards ahead of time, before they bring any ingredients inside--we don't want what happened last time to repeat itself."

Ron chuckled. "Of course not--George's eyebrows remained blue for three days."

Severus studied Ron's expression, wondering what kind of experiment prompted the discoloration of George's eyebrows, then he realized he didn't really want to know when it came to Ron's twin brothers. He shook his head and said, "I was referring to the two of them getting themselves arrested for bringing illegal Dragon's hide to a prisoner in Azkaban."

Ron's brows shot to the top of his forehead, his knight dropping from his hand onto the chessboard. "They did~~what~~?"

"You didn't know about this?" Severus said, raising one eyebrow. "Interesting." He picked up the knight and handed it back to his opponent. "That's why you had to open the shop for them the next day--they had to spend the night here in Azkaban until the Ministry released them."

"Those prats told me they were in Germany hunting gnomes and couldn't get away!"

"Ah. Well... Just pass that message along, please. And you didn't find out from me--tell them a guard told you." Severus smirked. He didn't mean to get the twins in trouble with their brother, but it was a source of entertainment, and of course, he couldn't refuse.

"Oh, I will," Ron said grumpily, mindlessly moving his chess piece, his attention to the game apparently gone as the new information regarding his brothers whirled around his private thoughts.

Severus grinned and placed his pawn in position for a direct attack on Ron's king. "Checkmate."

Waiting for his visitor to arrive, Severus lay on his bed, reading the *Daily Prophet* from front to back. Although he was a prisoner, it was one of the few pleasures he was still able to enjoy. Footsteps echoed down the corridor, and being that he was the only inmate on the twelfth floor, he knew they were for him. He meticulously folded his paper and placed it on the rickety bedside table. He walked to the sink and splashed the cold water against his scruffy face and washed the newspaper ink from his hands.

"Hey, mate!"

Severus whirled around, confused. "What are you doing here? I thought it was Potter's day."

"Hello to you, too," Ron said as the guard let him inside Severus' cell.

"I'm sorry. I'm just surprised--we have a strict schedule."

"He couldn't make it today," Ron said as Severus opened the chessboard and placed it on the small wooden table in his room. Ron placed his hand over the box that held the pawns. "And I'm not here to play chess today, either, Severus. I... have something else in mind."

Severus rose to his full height, crossed his arms and raised his eyebrow. "What exactly is going on, Mr. Weasley?"

"Oh, here we go again with the "Mr. Weasley" nonsense," Ron mumbled, rolling his eyes.

"For the past fourteen months--every Tuesday, to be exact--you have come here to stimulate my mind in several games of chess and conversation. Every Thursday for the past fourteen months, Potter has arrived with the past weeks' newspapers and reports on my outside affairs. One Friday of the month is reserved for the twins, and every other Saturday you and Potter both come by. Now, I will not have either of you interrupting my only schedule and enjoyment in life. So I will ask you once again: Where's Potter?"

Ron looked away shyly, then down at his sneakers.

"I may not be permitted to use Legilimency anymore, but I can see you are hiding something by that ridiculous look on your face. You've never been able to lie very well, Mr. Weasley."

"He's with a friend."

Severus narrowed his eyes, wishing desperately that he could peer inside the boy's mind. "You said that last week when he never showed up."

Ron's eyes widened. "Oh, yeah." He flushed and giggled nervously. He then took a deep breath and said, "Well, to be honest, that's why I came today. It's about time we talked about Hermione and what happened--"

"Do not finish that sentence!" Severus growled. "You know my rules regarding that topic!" he shouted, turning away from the red-headed young man.

"Severus, we keep avoiding this." Ron sighed. "If she were here, she wouldn't let you get away with ignoring the subject we need to discuss."

Severus whirled around, glowering at him. His wand might have been gone, but not even the magic of Azkaban could suppress his inner magic--he was too powerful. If his mood became completely unstable, he would end up cursing the boy across the room. "Well, she's not here now, is she?" he hissed, trying to maintain his anger to an appropriate level.

"You don't scare me anymore--okay, just a bit," Ron said quickly as Severus narrowed his eyes behind the curtain of his dark hair and took a step forward. "Look, I was sent here today because Bellatrix is going to be kissed by the dementors this evening for the murder of--"

"Enough!" Severus roared, and Ron took a step backwards, lowering his eyes to the floor.

The blood pounding in his head gave Severus an extreme headache. He staggered to his bed and slumped onto it, resting his elbows on his knees and cradling his head in his hands. He didn't want to hear anything about Hermione--it hurt too much, as if his heart had been physically ripped from his body. And he couldn't care less about Bellatrix's death. He was already dead inside, and it would do nothing for him to see, or know, that Bellatrix was now a soulless shell of a body.

When he finally focused his thoughts and regained control of his breathing, he whispered, "Do you enjoy seeing me suffer?"

Severus felt the thin mattress dip down as Ron's weight settled next to him. Ron exhaled deeply. "If you would've asked me that a few years ago, I would've had said yes. But, that was before we became friends, Severus. So, no--it makes me sick to see you suffer any more than you should--you've had enough of that. I don't want to talk about Hermione for you to suffer. It's not healthy to keep your feelings bottled up. I see the pain in your eyes every time I'm here.

"You are already being punished for any crimes you may have committed, Severus. You're in Azkaban. There is no sense to continue torturing yourself by ignoring what I know you think about on a daily basis."

Severus huffed. "I--I just don't want to taint my memories of her. I see her perfectly in my mind the way she was before--"

"All right. I won't bring it up again. Or until you're ready."

"I just need some time. This was the last subject I thought I would be speaking about today--it caught me off my guard," Severus stated quietly, still refusing to look up at Ron.

"Sure, mate. Just don't say that I didn't warn you," Ron said, rising from the bed.

"Warn me about what?"

"You said you didn't want to talk about it just yet, remember?" Ron said, motioning the guard to open the door.

"Warn me about what, Mr. Weasley?" Severus asked, his interest now peaked.

Ron ignored him as he walked next to the guard down the hall. Severus stared at the charcoal-grey floor, wondering what the hell the boy was talking about. He hated being ignored.

He squeezed his eyes shut as he heard the clink of the closing door at the end of the hall. Droplets of tears threatened to stream out of the corners of his eyes as he let his memories of Hermione fade into his mind.

Being struck dead by Bellatrix Black was always the way that Severus thought his life would end. Not Hermione's. The image of her falling in slow motion and the surprise on her face kept replaying in his mind, haunting him. More than anything in the world, he wanted it to be him. He desperately wanted to steal her pain away.

Severus rolled over on his tiny bed, scraping his elbow against the rough wall. Something had awoken him from his nightmare. Slowly, he opened his eyes and grinned when he saw her standing in front of him. He always yearned to see his angel from above--it wasn't often she paid him a visit, but it wasn't a surprise she was here with him this evening, especially after the conversation he had with Ron yesterday.

He feared moving, because once he did, her spirit would usually fade and disappear. Instead, he just stared at her, tracing her features with his eyes, committing them to his memory. Sometimes he would whisper simple nothings to her, but would never dare to carry on a full conversation. Usually, her features were pale, her hair would flutter about as if a summer's breeze had just passed over her, and she always had a smile on her face, warming his dead, cold heart.

But tonight was different. She wasn't as pale--more like shrouded in dark shadows. And she looked annoyingly livid. Severus was frozen in place--what had he done to upset his angel? Was this a demon in her form coming to torture him even more than he normally was?

"Severus."

He felt his eyes widened in shock. She never spoke to him. This was most definitely a demon.

"Severus, stop staring like you've seen a ghost and pay attention."

He shot out of his bed, automatically reaching for his wand that was no longer by his side, ready to attack. That's when he realized he wasn't dreaming anymore.

His angel was real. Hermione was standing in his cell, tapping her left toe on the stone floor, arms crossed across her chest, visually upset.

"What are you doing here? I specifically told you to stay away! You've broken your promise to me, Miss Granger," he expressed, now fully awake and alert.

"Yes, I have. I sent Ron here yesterday to tell you I would be paying you a visit so you wouldn't be surprised, but because you are a stubborn arse, ~~and~~ *refused* to speak to anyone who brought my name up, I took it upon myself and demanded that I see you. Of course, that wasn't easy because you made the damn guards deny me access into Azkaban--it's a good thing the Minister of Magic is greatly indebted to me."

"You should've been a Slytherin," he muttered.

"If I didn't love you, I'd slap you. You have been a great source of stress for me these past two years," she said, pacing around his cell.

He couldn't help the smirk dancing across his face--he loved seeing her agitated. But most of all, he just loved seeing her for the first time since that night she was hit with Bellatrix's curse. Her hair was much longer, almost to her waist; her skin glowed as if she had been tanning in the sun; and she smelled of cinnamon.

He had a hard time finding his words with his beautiful siren in front of him, but when she faced him with pursed lips and slitted eyes he had no problem continuing the argument she wanted to have. "You promised to move on, so that I *wouldn't* be a 'source of stress.'"

She glared at him even more. "And I did. I've done exactly as you asked. Harry said that for the three weeks following that fateful night, you truly believed I was dead, but once I came out of the coma, he tried to tell you the truth."

"The arrogant prat turned his wand against me, held me in place, and forced me to listen--it was a rough evening, to say the least. And all he said was that you were just severely hurt, and you would eventually have a full recovery, he hoped."

"He couldn't tell you the entire story because your magic became so instable that he feared for his life!"

"Indeed," Severus whispered, smugly remembering how Harry had shrieked like a girl when Severus' internal magic overcame the power of the enchantments that were supposed to hold his magic at bay.

Hermione huffed and turned away from him. "Did you honestly *want* to believe I was dead?" she said, quietly.

Severus knew she was angry, but he also heard nervousness in her voice. He pinched the bridge of his nose as the all-too-familiar headache started to pound behind his eyes. He had been such a fool. Again. He took a hesitant step towards her. He knew better to just grab her and hold her--Hermione wanted answers first. He sighed. He always felt uncomfortable speaking about his feelings.

For a while now, he had been able to lock them away, just as he had done for so many years earlier. It had only been when Hermione came into his life that he had found the key to his innermost feelings. And once that had been taken away, he truly never thought he would have to speak of such things again.

Only Hermione could emotionally break him. She *was* the key. And with her standing in front of him once more, he knew he would behave like a babbling idiot in love. "Look at me," he stated.

She looked deep into his eyes, as if she were reading his soul.

"I never wanted to believe you were dead. But I was terrified to hear the truth, because if you had died... Hermione... I just couldn't bear it. After everything you and I had been through... to lose you to a stray curse in the end, would have been beyond comprehension. Suicide would've been my only option after that," he said, grimly.

She nodded her head slightly. "But what about after you knew I'd be okay? Why did you avoid anything that had to do with me so greatly? I mean, for Merlin's sake, Severus, you admitted guilt for two counts of negligent homicide in exchange for having me refused entry into Azkaban, if I ever woke from my coma!"

"How can the brightest witch of her age not have an answer to that question? I would have thought you would've understood my reasoning."

"Well, I don't. Explain it to me," she said, waiting for his answer.

"Just as your death would've destroyed me, being aware that you were out there in the world, living a happy life without me, devastated me. I did not want to know how, where, or with whom, you had moved on. I admit it, Hermione: I'm a selfish man. And I will not apologize for that. Once Potter said that you were on the road to recovery, I couldn't stand to hear anymore. I let you go back at the cottage, and I wanted the memory of our time spent with each other etched in my mind the way it had been--I didn't want any knowledge of your new life to spoil that."

Hermione shook her head from side to side, as if what he had said was nonsense. That angered him--how could she not understand his position! "If you cannot possibly appreciate, or even empathize with my feelings, then I suggest you leave."

"I *do* understand, Severus Snape. You have no idea how much I *can* identify with you. I should never have promised to stay away from you. Never."

You stupid man. He shouldn't have assumed she thought less of him for having that reaction to her new life. She had, and always would, surprise him--that was what he loved most about her.

"Don't say that, Hermione--it was best that you *did* stay away. Look at me, I'm nothing. Just a ghost of man living inside a dark cell. I'm no good for you, and I never have been. I refuse to be the reason you don't have a fulfilling life."

"Unfortunately, Severus, your plan didn't work out so well. You *are* the reason I haven't had a fulfilling life since that night."

Severus' brow creased; he was confused, and to be slightly honest, a bit hurt by her comment. "Meaning what, exactly?"

She motioned for him to sit across from her at the small table in his cell. "What do you remember about the night of the final battle? Specifically, the final moments when Bellatrix..."

Severus' eyes stared at the grains in the table, concentrating on a single knot as he recalled his memory. It was just as if it had happened yesterday. "I went to reach for my wand, to kill her because I saw her aiming at you. You should've seen the curse that flew right at you," he whispered. "It was a jet in midnight colour, with sparks of purple flying out of the stream. I was actually surprised it wasn't the killing curse, but then again, now that I have had time to think about it, your death would've been too easy. So, she cursed you with some very Dark magic. Other than that, that's all I remember. I have been told that afterwards, half of the Order, along with that old fool, Dumbledore, struck me with multiple Stunning Spells and that's why I blacked out. Why do you ask? Did I miss something?"

"Not much. You're right, it was Dark magic. Dumbledore didn't even know what it was--perhaps a spell Voldemort improved upon... The point of the matter is that it put me into a coma for weeks. Then once I woke, I was violently ill. And if she had been using her own wand, rather than a random one that happened to be lying next to her, it would've been much, much worse. But with some help from several Healers from Durmstrang, the curse was fully removed. I had to stay in the hospital for a while after that, just to be sure."

"After I was finally released, I had loads of questions to answer from the public, Ministry, and my friends and family. It drained me, Severus. So much, in fact, that I had to leave. I went to a University in Spain and did everything you made me promise."

Spain. No wonder she's not as pale skinned as I remember. Severus raised his eyebrow. She was trying to spare his feelings, to be tactful. But he knew he was too twisted in his own mind and needed to know specific details about Hermione's time away from the wizarding world. He didn't want her to generalize anything to protect him, even if it would hurt him.

"Go on," he stated, intensely gazing into her eyes.

She stared back, intent on holding his piercing gaze. "What is it that you want to know, Severus?" she asked, daring him to say what he meant.

"Silly witch. As if you don't know me at all. I must know *everything*."

"I do know you. You will obsess over the details if I don't tell you, and if I do, you'll become extremely jealous."

Severus snarled. "Tell me," he demanded.

"Very well." She huffed then rested her back against the chair and crossed her feet at her ankles. "I enjoyed attending classes and furthering my education. I've almost completed my degree in law. But it's just busy work to keep me from going mad. I've tried maintaining some sort of a social life, and even met with other wizards and witches in Spain's community, but all they wanted from me was information regarding Harry and Voldemort. So then I befriended several Muggles, but after a while, I missed the Wizarding world--there was never a good balance. I also began dating. I even had a steady Muggle boyfriend for a while."

"I don't want to hear this, after all," he said abruptly. She had been right about him--his jealousy was stirring within once she had mentioned the boyfriend.

Hermione shot to her feet. "You'll hear it because it's what you asked for! You were the one who wanted me to be happy and have a better life--I did everything you wanted me to," she snarled.

Severus leapt to his feet and towered over her body, looking down at her through his slitted eyes. He refused to be shouted at in his own cell. "If you're so fucking happy, then why are you here, causing an unwanted disturbance in my daily routine?" he sneered.

Silence engulfed the tiny room, and Severus realized there was a small tear trailing out of the corner of her left eye. "Who said I've been happy? Every time my boyfriend touched me in any physical way, I would compare him to you. He was intelligent, but he couldn't associate with me on a wizarding level. Intimacy was adequate, but it wasn't enough. I would cry myself to sleep afterwards because I missed your touch," she said softly. Then, she looked up at him, into his eyes. "My heart belongs solely with you."

Severus swept a strand of her hair from her cheek. "But you can't have me, my dear Hermione. I'm a prisoner and will rot in here for many years."

"I know. Which is why, for the past year, I've been working on that situation."

Severus took a step away from her. "Explain yourself."

"You pleaded guilty for petty crimes as a Death Eater, which landed you in this cell for five years. It's a damn good thing you pled not guilty for the murder charges because you would've been kissed instead of spending another fifty years in here and would've missed the new evidence in your favour that has been brought to light, thereby saving your arse."

"What new evidence?"

Hermione walked past him, taking a seat in the wooden chair at the small table. "The old evidence was all speculative, and because you are the only Death Eater in custody, besides a crazed Bellatrix, no one could prove your guilt or innocence completely. All the Wizengamot had were theories and no conclusive evidence due to all the variables that would go into proving you a cold-blooded killer, such as being under the Imperius curse, or having to do it for Voldemort while spying for the Order--the Wizengamot convicted you primarily based on the fact that you were once a Death Eater, and therefore, must have had the intent to murder. And they got away with that because there was no other evidence on your side."

Severus, still unsure of where she was going with this information, stood, crossed arms waiting for her to continue.

"I've actually been working on your appeal for a little over a year. And I won. The murder charges have been dropped, and I wanted to be the first to tell you about it."

Severus thought he had heard her wrong. Frozen in place, he replayed the last sentence in his mind. The murder charges had been dropped--he was no longer a convicted murderer? Was he dreaming?

"Did you hear me, Severus? You're nearly a free man, besides the silly five year sentence, of which you have already served two years--and with good behavior you should be out in about a year and a half."

She was practically giddy while he wrapped his mind around the thought that he wouldn't spend the rest of his life in prison.

"I'm... in shock," he said, his voice barely audible.

Hermione giggled the sweet little giggle he had missed hearing for so long. "I know you are. I was too when we won. Get used to the idea, and I'll be back at the end of the week." She gently kissed his cheek, placing her hand over his heart as she reached up to him. "And no, you're not dreaming. This is very real," she said, moving past him and signalling the guard to open the door.

The loud clang from the door closing woke Severus from his petrified state. He whirled around just as Hermione was turning to walk down the hall. "Hermione," he called after her.

She stopped and faced him. "Yes?"

"What was the evidence that saved me?"

She smiled. "A witness to your character. She proved that you were not a heartless killer and your intent was never premeditated."

"Who? Everyone I tried to use in the original trial was dismissed because of the personal relationship they had with me--it was considered bias."

"Does the name Lacy Thacker sound familiar?"

Severus racked his mind for the name, but he couldn't place it. "No."

Hermione grinned. "Sure you do. You just didn't know her name." She walked back towards him. "Remember the Muggle you saved from the abuse of Greyback--the woman tied upon his bed that night you... visited your fellow Death Eater?"

Severus nodded. As if he could forget that evening...

"Well, she wasn't a Muggle. She's a Squib. A very important Squib in the wizarding community, in fact. She helps regulate Squibs and finds them jobs and offers basic

magical training.

"Apparently, once she woke from her coma and became caught up on all the news, she stepped forward on your behalf. She found out that I was conducting your appeal and contacted me to be a character witness. You see, if you were the killer you were convicted as, you would have easily murdered her that night, just to shut her up and not have to deal with her. But you didn't. You saved her from Greyback's clutches, called for help on her behalf--for a Muggle, or so you thought. Don't you understand? Because of your selfless act, she stepped up and repaid you for saving her life--it was her testimony that overturned your sentence. They even used Legilimency and Veritaserum on her to make sure she wasn't lying."

Severus just stared at her. He was completely speechless. So many things were traveling through his mind that he became numb and motionless. He felt his life changing around him. Perhaps he wasn't always going to live a miserable existence.

Then those horrible images of what he had done to Greyback, Lestrage, and others flooded his thoughts. "But... *am* a murderer, Hermione," he whispered.

"There's no proof that you are. Your wand was destroyed that night you were blasted by Dumbledore and the Aurors. Besides, there are no witnesses to prove your witness wrong. As much as you despise Dumbledore, and I don't blame you, he has given his word that you are not a murderer. Don't you understand? They were acts of war; there was no intent on killing anyone, Severus. Of course, it's not to say you haven't done some pretty awful things, especially to me personally, but that's all forgiven. Just not forgotten."

Severus thought about that for a second. He might have been an evil bastard--and definitely murdered several other evil bastards--and even enjoyed killing a few of them, but was it all considered an act of war? Perhaps. It was frightening to think of it that way, but could he live with that?

If it gave him a new chance on life, then absolutely. And so could Hermione.

He cracked a smile. For once in his life, things were going his way. He had finally caught a break.

"So, I'll see you later in the week?" she said.

Severus began to chuckle. "You silly girl. Do you even need to ask?"

"With you? Yes." Hermione smiled, the light in her eyes filling his heart with warmth that he thought had been lost. She then turned away and walked back down the hall.

Severus whirled around and faced the small room. His eyes gazed over the stone walls that had enclosed him for over a year. He could live in this cold, damp cell for another two years or so, just to have his second chance at life. And he wouldn't screw it up this time--he vowed to be the man he always wanted to be and to make the right decisions in life.

And he would, with Hermione forever by his side.

This was just the beginning of his new life.

A/N: A final note from yours truly: I hope this ending was satisfactory. I took several liberties on how the court system, trials, and appeals operate, so please do not hold me accountable for not having it politically correct--it's just a story. I also have to admit, this fic was originally designed to be extremely dark (which it is in some chapters) and to have a not-so-happy-ending. 'Til the second to the last chapter, I could have gone either way with the ending, but for some time now--oh, probably about three quarters through--I decided (after much begging from many of you) that a happy ending, or one close to it, would be a wish that only I could give. And, after careful consideration, I obliged--I mean, I kind of had to after all those evil cliffies! But seriously, if I had read a story this long and it didn't end up somewhat decently, I would have been extremely upset, and I couldn't do that to my readers. So again, I hope you enjoyed it; please review! Much love, and I'll see you on the next story! Shell~