

Melancholy Whore

by CordyAngelSeer

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 25

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

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She thinks his thin lips would scorch her, burn and blister her fuller ones. How could they not with the venom that drips off his tongue at the slightest provocation? She questions why she is even here before him. Her vaunted courage is evaporating with every passing second under his obsidian stare. She cannot will herself to meet his gaze for fear he will pierce to the depths of her very soul.

His measured, even drawing of breath is in stark contrast to her shallow gasping, her heart thrumming a tattoo of beats... dum dum dum.

Swallowing is difficult for her cottoned mouth, lips part, no sound.

Threads of blood trickle in slow, steady streams, crisscrossing through unclenching fingers before plopping, pooling, on the cold, stone floor.

He steps closer; she recoils, eyes focusing on black, dragon hide boots.

"Get. Up."

TBC

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Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 25

She was light tainted by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

A/N: I don't own anything, that right belongs to JKR. I'm just a fan who likes to take her characters out once in a while to play. Like to give a huge thanks to my rockstar beta, SeverusLovesUs.

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## Chapter One

"That was not a request, Miss Granger. Get. Up." The Potions master's harsh, velvet growl brooked no room for argument. Hermione unclenched her hands, wiping the excess blood on the front of her school robe, and on unsteady legs, she pushed herself up from the hard stone floor. Her balance faltered slightly from the loss of blood as her knees threatened to buckle from underneath. Blindly, Hermione grasped at the tabletop of the closest workstation to keep steady, her hold weak as the flow of her crimson life force made the polished desk too slick to get a firm handle on.

The taciturn man scrutinized his pupil's progress to remain upright and on her feet. Her robe, smeared with blood, hung heavy on her fragile frame. Severus took in her bushy haired locks matted to her scalp as the ends hung limply past her shoulders.

"Tell me," he hissed.

Caramel colored eyes snapped to his then back down to the floor as Hermione shook her head in the negative.

"Tell me," Severus repeated, stalking closer to the trembling sixth-year prefect. She could feel his warm breath ghosting past her slightly bent head, smelling of lemon and Earl Grey. Hermione knew that if she opened her mouth to inhale, she would be able to taste him. Taste the acid that was threatening to erupt from his lips marred by his perpetual sneer.

Taking in a deep breath, a whimper escaped her as Hermione was assailed by the heady odor of ink, parchment, burnt myrrh, lemon, stale Earl Grey tea, and an aroma that was warm and spicy, inviting, tickling her nose. She leaned in as rough, calloused, spidery fingers seized her chin in a firm grip, forcing her face to look up to his.

"Tell me," he ordered, patience on the brink of snapping as he wrenched her closer to him, causing Hermione to bodily crash into him, her arms flailing, palms pushing against his chest, soiling the crisp white linen of his dress shirt red with small handprints. His arms wrapped around her trying to regain their equilibrium.

A mournful cry ripped from her throat, "N—no," she sobbed and flinched in Severus' vice-like clutch. His hooked nose nuzzled Hermione's sweat-soaked locks, tongue flicking out to trace the shell of her ear.

"Tell me... Hermione," the Potions master purred, causing the student in his arms to shiver.

"I—I can't... please don't..." she pleaded, sagging against his lean form. Frustrated by her impudence, Severus disentangled himself from the wayward girl, paying no heed to the sticky smudges of coagulated blood that caked his fingers.

"Strip." The order falling from his lips in a guttural snarl, Severus studied her hands partially cloaked by her robe. It appeared as if the blood flow had stemmed and begun the process of clotting. Wand in hand, he muttered, "*Tergeo*."

A shriek of agony was ripped from Hermione as she doubled over, landing on all fours, her face briefly making contact with the blood-splattered grey stone. Her soul-wrenching wail of pain echoing off the walls of the deserted Potions classroom as the smell of singed flesh wafted through the room.

"En—" Hermione convulsed. "N—n—no mag... magic," she ground out before falling under the sweet enchantment of unconsciousness.

## Chapter One, Part II

*Chapter 3 of 25*

She was engulfed by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

A/N: See Chapter One for standard disclaimer, a huge and heartfelt thanks to my wonderful beta SeverusLovesUs, and to everyone who has reviewed my little story, thank you so much. Just a friendly heads up to my readers: this chapter is dark, and some might find it disturbing.

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I've heard it said that even though unconscious, the subconscious is alert and cognizant of one's surroundings and goings on. Is that the reason I'm standing here, no breath escaping my lips, watching you watching me, in a perverse charade of voyeurism? Perhaps I'm an apparition or for the moment, existing on some astral plane; this is Hogwarts after all. The sardonic thought crosses my mind as a smirk graces my lips.

You're looking down your nose at me, and I'm frozen to the spot, watching in rapt fascination as you stoop down to rest on your haunches. You loom over me like death before gently turning me so that I might rest on my back. Your spidery fingers attached to calloused, rough, bruising hands start for my body again. I gasp, crying, "No!" For the briefest of moments, you hesitate.

"Merlin above, please don't let him." My mouth moves, but no words spill forth, hoping the gods above hear my plea. Apparently, my prayer has fallen upon deaf ears; your hands continue their macabre journey to uncover the mysteries of my flesh. Slowly, and with delicate precision that could only come from years of preparing potions ingredients, you strip away my layers. My robe, sullied, is discarded, tossed away along with my sense of well-being. I feel the blood thrumming in my ears, my heart stuck in my throat.

I'm amused that you ignore my hands, injured and bloody, the reason you gave me a detention in the first place. Instead, your hawkish gaze cuts to my chest. One by one the little, pearl-like buttons are undone. Your breath quickens with each peak of flesh your greedy eyes steal. I step closer, unable to turn away from the scene in front of me. I screw my eyes closed as you heft me into a sitting position, your hands fiddling and unclasping the hook of my bra on the second try. I exhale, my eyes creeping open

as you slide each strap down my unresisting arms. It too is tossed aside like some twisted version of "She loves me... She loves me not..." Am I a daisy to be plucked?

You lay me back down upon the cold dungeon floor, fingers caressing a pattern, beginning under my right breast, dipping down to my navel, and leaving a trail of gooseflesh as your journey continues from my navel to the vee between my breasts. Fingers walk down my abdomen; you stop in your ministrations, your head bending down, lips touching mine.

"I'm sorry," you breathe against my parted mouth as your fingers glide upward, stopping at my left breast.

I laugh, mirthless though it may be. You're sorry? You don't have the right. Anger wells up within me, my cheeks growing warm.

"Miss Granger." You hang your head, hand resting on my thigh, the other stroking my hair.

"Hermione." The moan is so soft, your voice so deep and rich—I strain to hear.

I turn away. I can't bear the sight any longer. I cover my ears as the noises descend upon me. The grunts, slurs—they won't go away. Shaking my head back and forth, I pull on my hair, trying to quell the unease of my mind.

Muggle-born.

Whore.

Mudblood.

Gryffindor.

Epitaphs rising in a cacophony of sound, whirling, swirling, getting jumbled—Muggle, whore, Mudblood. Bile steadily rising, coating the back of my throat, voices drowning out, dying in a hush, but one remains... hers... nasally, high-pitched, and as saccharine-sweet as butterbeer.

"STOP!" My voice hoarse as memories flood unbidden and unrelenting in their quest to destroy my psyche. The pain etches deeper, carving itself into my skin like the 'W' left behind by that fucking quill charmed especially for me.

W, twenty-third letter in the alphabet. Whore, five letters, me.

'My cross to bear' she called it—my scarlet letter.

My vision blurs, I'm falling, darkness.

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She blinks; a feeling of warmth floods her system; familiar, gentle fingers do not cease their caressing, his hand inching upward with every stroke, even as she stirs.

"Now you know," she states matter-of-factly, eyes closed, unwilling to move, her bearings regained. Hermione lifts a hand, flesh burnt, blistered, oozing sickly yellow puss. "Don't," she gasps, "hurts." She stills his hand with her own. He nods, unable to speak as he dumbly stares down at their entwined hands.

TBC

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A/N: Ten points to anyone who can figure out who the "she" is Hermione refers to.

Chapter Two

Chapter 4 of 25

She was light entranced by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

A/N: Rockstar thanks to SeverusLovesUs, my wonderful beta. Readers please heed the warnings as Severus is no angel.

Chapter Two

He roughly pushed himself away from her; a blind seething rage welled up within the Potions master as he gazed at the small, prone form, partially clothed and haphazardly sprawled before him. He would kill her; he would steal the last wretched breath from her body and watch with glee as the last moments of her life were ripped from her. He would smile a terrible crooked smile when her eyes would begin to dim, fading into vacant, glassy-eyed nothingness, one breath expelled before being overtaken by the cold, black embrace of the veil.

Murder was not a foreign notion to Severus Snape. Dozens of unfortunate souls had perished at his hands over the past seventeen years. Some had been merciful, the smothering of a child no more than five while she slept; if he concentrated he could still feel the nicks and pricks of small teeth upon his palm, trying to bite their way to freedom, to life. Her pathetic attempts at self-preservation were made in vain. There was ever only one way the scenario ended. Years later he learned her name was Amelia Feberstocklen. Little Amelia didn't even have the strength to break through the roughened skin before succumbing to asphyxiation. Others he had taken pleasure in, the occasional Knockturn Alley whore who knew too much and in Chaucer, a pederast, who lasted seventy-two hours, a record. Snape assumed after the castration he would have begged for a swift demise.

Hour after hour, Chaucer had screamed, pleaded for mercy; inch by inch, pink flesh was severed from bone. Blood and bits of fat and muscle tissue splattered the front of his frock coat. It was a heady feeling; Snape had become aroused. It was always the same, to know the life of another was in his hands. High on the thrill and rush of

adrenaline, he had climaxed as Chaucer's whimpers began to die, shuddering forcefully, the placket of his trousers sticky and wet with semen. That was the only murder in which Snape found sexual gratification. He preferred to lose himself in the warm and willing cunt.

His eyes unfocused, lost in memories, Severus pondered the triviality of life and how it could easily be snatched away; like birth, death was the other facet of the spectrum. He often wondered what final thoughts passed through his victims' minds: were they reminiscing about a happy childhood memory, why this was happening to them, or perhaps what they had eaten that afternoon for lunch? He wondered, but did not particularly care; he shrugged.

Breath held, her tawny eyes watched, waited.

He had taken lives, bade to by cold manipulative masters, both believing the better angels were on their side; if so where was the fabled Lucifer? For hadn't that been Satan's greatest achievement, convincing the world he didn't exist? A humorless chuckle bubbled from his throat. If he wanted to find evil, he need not look farther than his own reflection. Snape murdered, he enjoyed it, their labored breathing, pants, puffs of air, wheezing, choking on phlegm—silence. He found peace in the act, a calmness he had not attained from the other aspects of his life.

He relished the feel of a blade as it buried itself to the hilt in the cavity of an abdomen. The *slink* as thick skin, sinew muscle, and dense bone were pierced; the tearing of flesh as the blade jaggedly descended downward, innards spilling, flopping out through the peek-a-boo slit left behind as the knife was retracted. The way his hand fit around the column of a slender neck, knowing a bit of pressure and a swift jerk in the wrong direction would cause it to snap. Or that if he positioned himself correctly, weight pinning down a resistant quarry with a hand covering the neck right below the jaw, in a mere four minutes he could choke the life from someone.

Severus didn't hear Hermione call his name, didn't see her until she knelt before him apparently unconcerned with her nudity as her robe and shirt were still where he had tossed them.

"Severus," she whispered, fearful she might startle him from his thoughts, causing him to strike out. He blinked, his jaw twitched, and he stared ahead as if looking through her.

"Your bleeding has stopped," he stated, his voice rusty.

She nodded. "Yes."

TBC

Chapter Three

Chapter 5 of 25

She was light consumed by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

Done; will send yes letter and validate today.

Chapter Three

Hermione shivered, the cool, damp air of the dungeons hardening her nipples. She crossed her arms over her chest, careful not to rub against her deformity. Severus pushed himself up from the ground, his knee joints popping. Without a word, he strode over to his dais, picked up his discarded robe, and tossed it to her. She caught it deftly and slid it on. It dwarfed her as she wrapped herself in the black, woolen fabric and buried her nose in the collar, inhaling his masculine scent.

"Thank you." She smiled.

"You're most welcome," he purred.

He looked at her, his nose detecting the faint musk of her menstrual flow as he took in a breath. He released it slowly, her femininity was tangy, bitter, and he wanted to savor her essence, taste it on his tongue, coppery, red, thick.

His desire was roused, the evidence tenting his black trousers as he stood before her.

Her cheeks flushed, eyes drawn to the bulge straining to be set free. A shudder of wantonness swept through her body. Hermione clamped her thighs together, desperate to ease the ache that welled within.

"Please," she moaned, tongue darting out to moisten dry lips, teeth worrying her bottom lip, plumping it.

He reached out his hand; centimeters from her face it hovered, drawing against her warmth. Her head lolled to the side, eyes closed. "Ughh," she groaned. "Professor..." She rubbed her thighs together, the friction wonderful, worth the pain.

Snape internalized her features, the furrow of her brow, the way her lips parted just so, white teeth plucking chapped lips, breasts rising and falling in rhythm with each heaving gasp for air. He knew he was on the precipice; his hand snaked down his lithe form to stroke his clothes-hampered erection.

Harder, faster, his palm itching with every burning stroke against the coarse wool. A cry of pain stilled his movements; the haze of lust that had engulfed him began to ebb away. Hermione was hunched over, hands on knees. She had orgasmed, turned on by the sight of him masturbating.

"Fine. I'm fine," she panted, not looking up, the cauterized flesh unstitching, blood flowing anew. Taking a moment to regain her composure, she knew the flow would stop momentarily; the bleeding never lasted long when she came without physically arousing herself.

"You're still on your menstrual cycle," Snape stated, a note of disapproval in his dulcet tone. Hermione nodded in the affirmative.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, what do you know of the *Fidelitous Fealty*?" he asked, eyebrow quirked. "Or better yet, of Delores Umbridge?" He uttered the name with such malice, the very thought of the toad-like woman repugnant to his sensibilities.

She gasped, taken aback. "What I know I *can't* say, sir." The words rolled off her tongue with forced ease.

His eyes widened slightly, the only crack on his expressionless face. A chink in his impassive armor. Like a rubber band wound too tight, he snapped.

"Fucking oath!" he spat, spittle flying from his mouth. He picked up a half empty jar of dittany from his essay-covered desk and flung it against the wall, shattering it into innumerable shards.

She didn't move, transfixed by his display of controlled rage. Hermione had only ever witnessed this level of anger and unrestraint once before, three years ago in the Shrieking Shack with Sirius.

Sev—no—Snape, he was Snape now, pacing, one measured step after another, a sharp pivot, step, step, stride, pivot. Softly he expelled grumbles of profanity, uttered with every rotation. He was magnificent to behold: grace, stealth, an economy of motion, never wasted; he was purpose personified with any and everything he undertook.

If he had been wearing his robe, it would billow behind him. She bit down hard on her lip to tamp down giggles that were sure to erupt; she would not wound him with silly schoolgirl emotions.

"For is not lust the burden of innocence

Virtue tainted by the sins of the flesh

Love fleeting, a notion, carnal and sordid."

He was gone, no longer with her, but she dared not to interrupt him.

"O! Temptress be thy meek

Embrace thine body as one

Indulge in the fantasies of mortals."

Her heart fluttered a cadence, his voice rising timbre with each stanza.

"Be now sullied and wounded,

Melancholy and wretched,

Be thine whore."

Snape's movements ceased; black pools ablaze with emotion, he looked up at her.

"O! Temptress be thy faithful..." Eyes closed, he was a broken man.

Hermione sniffed and swallowed back a sob. *"Faithful shall she perish, never to know original sin,"* she finished for him.

"I didn't know you read Muggle poetry."

"I am a half-blood, Miss Granger."

"I know but—"

"Besides, is it not apropos?" He sneered and turned sharply from her, muttering, "A chúisle mo chroí," as he stepped in between the work stations, weaving a path to the small book case nestled between the wall and his desk.

"I didn't mean..." Hermione fidgeted, abashed by his harsh tone.

Fingers glided over aged tomes before settling on a dusty, worn, leather-bound, Dark Arts volume. Hermione's inquisitiveness got the better of her as she edged closer to Severus.

"Curiosity killed the lioness," he drawled.

Snape cleared his throat and squared his shoulders. Hermione knew this pose she had seen everyday for the past six years; he was in lecture mode.

"The Fidelitous Fealty or Curse of the Virgin Blood's earliest use was recorded in 918 A.D. and had been created and first cast by Humperdink Nunry (859–989 A.D.) as a preventative measure to ensure his daughter's virtue remained intact. Nunry believed when his daughter, Isabella, befell of the curse of woman, she would turn to the sins of the flesh.

Nunry, destitute, sold his daughter into an arranged marriage by providing an untouched, child bride. The Fidelitous Fealty removes the pleasure aspect of sexual congress and replaces it with unbounded pain and the mark of the Whore, a "W" magically carved into the breast should those cursed with the Fidelitous Fealty seek to engage in carnality outside the marital bed or in fornication."

Severus let his voice trail off as he slipped the marker in place and handed the book to Hermione.

"Miss Granger, I want you to read the tome and prepare two feet on the curse."

She nodded, eager to have an assignment, something to preoccupy her mind. A smirk flitted, upturning Severus' lips.

"Ever the little know-it-all, I see." Hermione grinned outright.

"Yes, sir... Thank you, Severus."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment, thoughts turning black, turning to death, to Umbridge.

A/N: Shout out to my beta,, SeverusLovesUs. The poem Snape recites is my original work. The Fidelitous Fealty as well as anything unrecognizable to JKR are my creations and original works, and last but not least the Irish quote Severus says, "A chúisle mo chroí," translates roughly to "O, pulse of my heart."

Chapter Four

Chapter 6 of 25

She was light engulfed by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

Chapter Four

Hermione was ensconced in her favorite nook of the library, the sill of a picture window between the aisle shelving books on Care of Magical Creatures and the Restricted Section. She had been poring over her essay since her confrontation with Professor Snape; the ferocity of his wrath excited her even as he had grabbed her, invading her personal space. His grip had been bruising; the pain of the curse coupled with his physical roughness kindled her sexual yearning for him. Afterward, Severus had been gentle. He always was in private, and the thought of him brought a small smile to her lips. She lifted her gauze-covered hand and gingerly caressed the imprints of fingers, black and purple, through the thickness of her spare school robe and jumper.

With a heavy sigh, she turned back to her essay, four feet already completed. She skimmed through, proof-reading her work, making sure all key points were touched upon:

"Mind over matter, pain versus pleasure, a Pavlovian response to condition virgins, children, barely weaned from their mother's breast, to associate the act of sexual intercourse as a dirty, foul activity and be forced into passivity and fidelity by domineering husbands for the sake of producing progeny."

The curse when properly cast would lie dormant in the victim until she reached the age of puberty or experienced sexual arousal by another who had not cast the curse or for whom she was promised through an unbreakable betrothal. Self-gratification, or the act of masturbation, induces physical manifestations of the curse. Tell-tale signs include:

- 1. Stigmatic blood flow from the hands*
- 2. Unbearable pain, second only to the Crucio*
- 3. The Mark of the Whore, a "W" carved into the breast of the offender, etching deeper in flesh with each assignation*

During the period of ovulation and menstruation when the chance of conception and impregnation is highest, and when it is believed that a woman's sexual appetite is at a frenzied point, the curse fully active and can only be assuaged through sexual congress with the accursed's spouse. If the woman is not yet married or denies her body, she will bear the effects of the Fidelitious Fealty without relief until the end of her cycle. The pain women undertook was so excruciating that they took their own lives; such was the case of Isabella Fitzgerber, nee Nunry. Thus, women were subjugated to the desires of their lecherous husbands, becoming nothing more than sexual slaves and vessels for offspring.

Hermione rubbed her tired eyes, calling to mind how this all started. It was halfway through her fifth year, and an Order meeting was being held at number twelve, Grimmauld Place to discuss the disarray of Hogwarts under Professor Umbridge's tenure and the prophetic visions Harry had been having about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Bored with the game of Exploding Snap Ginny and Ron were playing, Hermione made her way to the study; it was always a comfort to curl in front of the fire with a good book. The door was cracked; a muffled voice could be heard on the other side; she inched forward.

"... kissed the bastard's robes." It was Mad-Eye Moody. Hermione moved closer to the ajar door, attempting to discern the topic of discussion. The old hinges creaked; she flinched. "Sorry," she began, pushing the door open to reveal herself as she tentatively stepped into the study.

"I didn't think anyone would still be up at this hour."

Mad-Eye was leaning against the mantle, his roving eye focused on her. "Never you mind, Granger." His voice gruff like sandpaper on wood, "Constant vigilance," the old Auror harrumphed as he brushed past, leaving the room and her alone, or so she thought.

Out of the corner of her eye, hidden amongst the shadows, Hermione registered the slightest movement.

"Ah, Miss Granger, never one for subtlety, I see." The velvet richness of his voice washed over her like a warm embrace.

"Professor Snape," she acknowledged with a blush from being caught eavesdropping. He pushed himself away from the wall and slithered towards her. It was easy to see how this man was a spy: he exuded cunning, confidence, and if she scratched enough to get below the façade he constructed, she was sure he would bleed raw, intangible power. He was control, and something was bound to give.

Silence engulfed the room; it was stifling, and the roaring fire did nothing to quell the heat rising off her body. His calculating eyes hadn't moved from her face. It was like he was waiting, expecting something; he unnerved her.

"Are you going to stare at me all night like a codfish, Miss Granger, or is there something you wanted, girl?" Exasperation colored his words.

Hermione hadn't even realized she was staring and closed her mouth, her gaze turning to the fire in front of her.

"He shouldn't..." she breathed softly, words lost in the crackle of the flames.

"Speak up, Miss Granger. I cannot hear you!" Snape barked, with each word drawing closer to his prey.

She took an involuntary step back towards the door. "You...you..." she stammered,

frightened, "deserve respect."

"What we deserve and what we are afforded are two entirely different things, Miss Granger." Without another word, he excused himself from the study.

Later that night, alone in her room, she played over the events of the incident in the study with Professor Snape. He had frightened her, but fear was the farthest emotion from what she felt. Her center throbbed, dull at first, a mild hum, but with each thought of fallow man, the feeling intensified. With a shaky hand, Hermione timidly touched herself, fingers sneaking below her nightshirt and under the elastic of her knickers to rest on the dark thatch of curly, coarse hair. Her hand was stationary for minutes, unsure of her next move. Her fingers crept lower, making contact with her labia. The skin warm, she gasped at the sensation. A gentle stroke, her breathing quickened; she tingled. Experimentally, she pinched herself. Her hips jerked upward, lip worried between her teeth. She did it again. Dampness touched her fingers. Hermione stilled, swallowing against the lump that had formed in her throat.

Breath held and heart racing, she eased her index finger in, slowly, carefully, back arching, trying to accommodate the unfamiliar feel of her internal muscles clamping down on her digit. Nervousness warred with exhilaration; her body felt tight. The awareness of her body all-consuming, tentatively, she wriggled her finger, groaning loudly as every nerve ending seemed to awaken. Hermione wriggled her finger again, harder this time, pushing upward, deeper into herself; she cringed at the stab of pain.

Seemingly at an impasse, she gradually began to remove her finger; the tingle came back.

"Oh." Her eyes widened, surprised as her legs parted, knees bending up, tucking close to her body. She pushed in again and withdrew, in and out, in and out... a constant erratic rhythm.

"Gods!" Her eyes shut tight, she felt oxygen leaving her, gasping, drawing in lungful after lungful. She was quivering, desperate to quell an undeniable need that was evading her grasp with every pump of her hand. She stroked faster, her skin clammy from sweat, prickly with gooseflesh. A pounding of blood surged within her, guttural cries tore from her throat, her body tensed, and her free hand wrapped itself in her bushy mane, tugging in tandem. So close, so close. Jerking hard, hair was pulled out by the roots, strands clumped in the clenched fist. The pain pushing her over the edge, she released warmth...gushing out, seeping, dripping in thick rivets down her thighs.

Her body limp, weighted down, heavy, the only sounds in the darkened room were the inhalation of breath and pounding of her heart. Hermione was sticky; the thin, cotton shirt clung to her wet form. She was hot, unbearably so; she nudged the down quilt off her body. Gingerly, she eased her finger from within; it too was sticky, coated in white, viscous come. She brought the hand to her face and sniffed; the scent was damp and musky, not at all unpleasant. Her tongue darted out, licking the tepid remnants of her arousal. There was no taste, in her opinion, more texture than anything else.

She wasn't sure how long her mind had wandered, but she knew it must have been a bit of time as a kink had developed in her back. She shifted, standing up, working out the sore. That had been the first time she had ever fantasized about anyone in a sexual nature, let alone the most reviled professor at Hogwarts. The second time had been in the prefects' bathroom after hours, when Umbridge, on rounds, had caught her post-coital. Hermione had put up a Silencing Charm so as not to be heard, but in her haste to pleasure herself to images of the surly Potions master, she forgot to ward the door. The harridan deducted forty points from Gryffindor for behavior unbecoming a prefect and assigned her a detention. Lines with that bloody quill.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione turned her focus back toward her assignment:

"Though, the Fidelitious Fealty is considered a curse unto which only the most skilled of wizards would dare to undertake as it inhibits the magic of the witch for whom it is cast upon by preventing her magical signature from safeguarding against the threat immersed in her veins. The curse, like a Muggle virus, acts as a repellant to all magicks used for the purposes of health and healing.

Witches have been known to cast the Fidelitious Fealty, but do so at great risk to their own magical signature as the curse is feminine in nature. That being said, a conduit must be used if a witch is to properly cast the spell without depleting her own essence.

With a yawn, Hermione scanned the rest of her essay and the conclusion.

"... In 1883 A.D. the Fidelitious Fealty was informally banned by the wizarding world at large, seen as a weapon for internment. Still the archaic practice of marital servitude and bondage can still be found in remote wizarding villages in Southeast Asia, the Republic of Congo, and rural parts of the United States of America."

"Finished, are we?"

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin. When had he entered the library?

"Only just, Professor." One hand clutched her parchment, the other her chest.

"Good." He nodded.

"Professor Snape."

"Yes, Miss Granger?" He watched as she gathered her belongings, each placed with care in her rucksack.

"What are you going to do?" The question had been on her mind since yesterday afternoon.

"You needn't worry about such trivial matters, Miss Granger. Off to the Great Hall with you." He dismissed her with a wave of his hand, but there was coldness that permeated from every pore of his body.

She reached out her hand, longing to touch him. "May I see you after dinner?"

"You may." He acquiesced.

A/N: The Fidelitious Fealty and anything else not belonging to JKR are of my own imagination and creation. Big thanks to my beta SLU for her tireless effort.

Chapter Five

Chapter 7 of 25

She was light surrounded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

The Great Hall was engulfed in a cacophony of excited chirps and chatter as students from each House eagerly shared their plans for the Hogsmeade trip that was to be held the next day. Hermione tuned out the din as she focused on her cold and congealed mashed potatoes, pushing the hardened mush from side to side. She hadn't touched a bite; her stomach roiled at the very thought. Sighing heavily, she covertly scanned the High Table, her eyes briefly falling on Snape before turning back to her Housemates.

"It's a shame you can't go tomorrow."

She continued to stare at her plate.

"Hermione, I said it's a shame you can't go tomorrow." The voice got louder, disturbing the withdrawn girl from her thoughts.

"What?" she muttered absently. "Sorry, Gin. What were you saying?"

"You okay, 'Mione?" The brown eyes of the youngest Weasley were etched with concern.

Hermione shrugged noncommittally, her fork diving into one pile of potatoes and spooning it onto the other she had constructed on her plate.

"Ruffy gip avtetntion," Ron garbled. Food smacked loudly and spluttered out on the dishes before him and on Hermione's robes.

Repulsed, Hermione pulled a face at the boy sitting in front of her as she wiped her robe clean with a napkin.

"God, Ron! Swallow before speaking," she snapped. "Disgusting." She spat, pushing her plate away.

After taking a deep swallow of pumpkin juice, the boy began again, "Ruddy git gave you detention." Hermione suppressed a growl.

"I botched the potion. I deserve detention," she ground out, her anger mounting at having to hash out this discussion once again.

Hurt flashed in the redhead's eyes. "She's gone bloody mental, she has." He gulped, looking towards Harry wide-eyed for verification of his claim.

"Hermione, it wasn't your fault the knife slipped and you cut your hand. The bat's just looking for an excuse to punish Gryffindors," the Boy-Who-Lived chimed in, coming to his friend's defense, cutting daggers at the dark wizard seated next to Dumbledore.

Hazel eyes softened, Harry, ever the protector. "I'm going to the library."

"Again? You were there all afternoon," Ginny piped up.

"I'm still working on my essay for Professor Snape."

"You and your bloody books."

"Go bugger yourself, Ron." Her face becoming drawn, pale.

Ginny gasped as she watched her bushy-haired friend push herself away from the table and stalk out of the hall.

Dark eyes obscured by lank locks trailed the fleeing Gryffindor.

"Ow! What the bloody hell, Gin!" Ron rubbed his shin.

"Prat!" his sister snipped and deftly kicked him again.

"What I'd do?" He shrugged, confused.

Harry shook his head; sometimes Ron was clueless.

"You hurt her feelings," the girl said, assuming the cause for her friend's hasty departure.

"Women! Can't win, I tell you," he bemoaned. "Neville, mate, pass the potatoes."

Hermione briskly bounded down the halls, aggravated; it did not help that blood was starting to seep through the gauze covering her hands. "Blo..."

Vision blurred, Hermione staggered into the stone wall, trying to maintain some semblance of balance. Cramps seized her abdomen; it felt as if fire was singeing through her veins, threatening to incinerate her from the inside out. She trudged against the wall; Moaning Myrtle's loo was in the distance, if she could just remain upright. Nails dug into the grey stone, inching her stumbling form forward; slashes of blood marred the rough stone in her wake.

A gut-wrenching yowl broke from her constricted vocal cords, and she dropped to the ground. "Pleas... ple... pl..." Over and over, drag, rest, pull up, drag, crawl.

"*Tergeo*." Blood vanished from the wall and the runner where the girl lay sprawled, convulsions wracking her already trembling body.

The form, swathed in black, bent down and scooped up the girl, cradling her against his chest to muffle her cries. Disillusioned, long legs made haste to the safety and solitude of the dungeons.

Whispered words and coos offered little comfort to the girl who thrashed in his arms. Snape nearly dropped her on the landing to his office, his breathing labored. "Almost there, Miss Granger. Hold on."

Wandlessly, he dismantled the wards and heaved himself and his burden through the opened door before shouldering it closed. Ending his Disillusionment Charm on the both of them, he gently laid Hermione upon the floor and turned to his door, casting a Silencing Charm and erecting the wards.

The pain intensified, rifling through her weak body. "Please," she cried again to no one in particular. Snape dropped to his knees, resuming his hold of Miss Granger; never had he felt so helpless.

"Shh, it will be alright." A fucking lie and he knew it. What little dinner he ate was threatening to come up. Severus conjured a damp cloth and mopped her brow, futile in his attempts to still her form and quiet down her discomfiture. Her hands, a bloody mess, were tearing at her robe; a rattling caught his attention. He helped her out of the garment; a plastic, orange bottle clattered to the floor, rolling away from the couple.

Extending his leg while still keeping a firm hold on Hermione, he nudged the bottle towards him, plucking it from the floor as it came within his reach. The bottle was from the chemist; only a few pills remained. The prescription made out to Eugene Granger for Percoset, he recognized the medication as being a Muggle painkiller. Popping the cap using his thumb and forefinger, he dumped the little white tablets into his palm. Hermione's mouth opened on reflex, like a baby bird waiting for nourishment from its mother. He placed one pill in her mouth, which she readily swallowed. She nipped at his fingers, begging for another pill, and hesitantly, he gave into her demand.

Convulsions still seized her body as she welcomed the undertow of unconsciousness. Severus was thankful for the reprieve; she needed rest no matter how it came to her. He checked her pulse and vitals; they were returning to normal. He exhaled and scooted against the wall of his classroom, shifting to find a comfortable position for Hermione and himself.

Two hours later, and she had only moved once, and that had been to burrow closer to him. She was clutching the front of his teaching robes in her sleep. His legs were past the point of numbness. He was careful not to jostle about too much, but the loss of circulation was causing his calves to cramp. Shifting her to rest more on his left side, he wriggled his right leg, hissing at the tingling pain as sensation began to return. After a few moments, he did the same with the other.

"Mmmm." Hermione twisted, face burying deeper into that wonderful scent. Unconcerned with itchiness, she rubbed her cheek against the woolen fabric. She shifted again, eyes slowing, fluttering open. She yawned.

"Hello." She smiled sleepily, looking up into her Potions master's face.

"Sleep well?"

She nodded.

"Feeling better?"

"Much."

Yawning again, she stretched and lethargically pushed herself away from Snape and off the floor. He followed suit.

"Tea?"

"Hot cocoa?"

He nodded and gestured for her to enter his office. Once inside, he warded the door and cast another Silencing Charm; he did not want them disturbed.

He conjured a tea service for himself and a mug of hot chocolate for Hermione.

"Thank you." She blew on the beverage, taking a sip.

"You are welcome," he said, stirring a teaspoon of sugar into his cup of Earl Grey and adding a slice of lemon.

"Are you experiencing any lingering effects from the curse?"

"Not at the moment. The Percoset is doing a smashing job at alleviating my symptoms."

"I would say so." There was an edge to his tone as he handed her back the near-empty bottle.

"You've no refills left."

"I only take the pills when I need them; I just happen to need more of them on my menses."

"They are addictive, Hermione," he warned, taking a swallow of his cooling tea.

"I know," she admitted, "but it's the only way I know of to circumvent some of the effects of the curse. If I can't use magical means, I'll rely on Muggle methods."

"Fifteen points to Gryffindor for cleverness and a well-researched essay."

She smiled.

"I particularly enjoyed the pages regarding the implications of forced incestuous relationships between fathers who cast the curse upon their daughters, though those cases only numbered a small percentage of the total number of women affected."

"Still, 0.8 percent is disconcerting nonetheless, though I found if the curse was cast through familial bonds, it was done so out of greed."

He nodded, pleased with her observations and quick mind.

Encouraged by his praise, she continued, "What I find most interesting though, is that the *Fidelitious Fealty* is able to distinguish between sexual and non-sexual touch or emotion."

"Go on." He was enjoying their discourse.

"It all boils down to the intention of the one who casts it. For example, if a male family member casts it to gain monetary wealth from an arranged marriage, as in Nunry's case, then the sexual touch of any male other than the one to whom the woman is to be bonded will exacerbate the curse. Non-offensive, physical gestures of friendship, familial ties, or say bumping into a man in Diagon Alley have no bearing on the curse."

"Very astute." What could be called a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"If a husband were to cast the curse, any touch of a man who is outside the bloodline triggers an almost instantaneous reaction." Pausing for a moment, Hermione took a drink of her cocoa.

"And if it were a woman who cast the *Fidelitious Fealty*?" he ventured.

"Women tended to cast the curse on their husband's mistresses, ending any relationships outside of marriage. Then there were women who did so out of petty jealousy, which would render the woman a eunuch, for sexual touch from any man is an impossibility."

"Look at me, Hermione." Severus moved a hand under her chin and lifted her face to his. "Physical intimacy should only be one facet of a relationship, not its entire existence."

She shrugged away from him. "I know that, but I can't even share a kiss, feel a caress, become a mother... Moments in life that are taken for granted I can never experience." Hermione wiped away a few errant tears.

"It is getting late." The clock behind his desk read quarter to nine.

"The library will be closing soon; best get back to the tower before anyone comes looking." With a resigned huff, she grabbed her robe from the back of the chair and waited as he dismantled the wards for her.

"Tomorrow, noon?"

"Noon," he confirmed as he walked with her out of his office and into his classroom.

"Goodnight, Professor."

"Goodnight, Miss Granger."

A/N: SLU my wonderful beta kicks butt. I would also like to thank everyone that has reviewed my story, it means so much to me.

Chapter Six

Chapter 8 of 25

He was Darkness touched by light. He was tainted. He was a broken man.

A/N: Readers please heed my warnings, this chapter is extremely dark. My darkest yet, so much so that it unsettled me to write it. Murder is dealt with in this chapter, as well as faith/religion (Catholicism), and having a crisis of faith. If anyone has an issue with these topics, please skip this chapter and read my other author's notes at the end of the chapter. Thank You, CordyAngelSeer.

Chapter Six

Sleep was evasive. It was not as if Snape needed more than a few hours on any given night, but he despised the feeling of restlessness that consumed him as he tossed and turned. Realizing that no rest would come this night, he plodded out of bed and into his living quarters. The fire needed to be stoked. Long strides carried him to his reading chair and butler where a bottle of aged firewhisky awaited him. He decanted a snifter and downed the shot in one gulp before collapsing boneless into his worn wingback.

He set the glass down and threw his head back, eyes closed. He was so fucking tired. He could feel it in his bones: weariness, begging for resolution. He didn't know when it had happened, but eyes green that once haunted his every conscious and subconscious thought had lightened into orbs of hazel tinged with the faintest specks of amber. Eyes that were warm and inviting, honest, void of ulterior motive.

She was his innocence.

"Mo Anam," he breathed in toast, taking another shot.

The thaw had just settled upon Hogwarts. It was a late bloom this year; the weathered floorboards creaked with every step. Ivory keys yellowed with antiquity were caked with dull, listless, grey dust. He came here to contemplate his misspent youth. This place was the catalyst that drove him further into the thrall of the Dark Arts. Decrepit, and some would say beyond repair, the Shrieking Shack represented a festering pit of blackness, haunted by ghosts and sins of the past.

Snape took in a lungful of air, stale and tinged with the flavor of sawdust and cobwebs; he exhaled slowly. His fix of nostalgia, like a smoker craving his nicotine, he welcomed the bitterness and regret.

His nose twitched; sniff, faint... The scent of blossoms. He sniffed again. Cherry blossoms.

"No!" he gasped.

Memories of auburn hair and emerald eyes. Lily, his sweet Lily, who smelled of spring and sunshine, of cherry blossoms. Lily, who was now bone and earth, decayed.

"Lily," he rasped, tears leaking from ducts he had believed no longer worked.

Floorboards creaked, wand at the ready. "Who is there?" he growled, hex on his lips.

"Professor Snape?"

Snape relaxed a fraction. It was Hermione Granger, her Muggle jeans coated in a layer of filth. The girl looked as if she'd been crying, if her damp cheeks and puffy eyes were any indication.

"Miss Granger, why, may I ask, is a fifth-year prefect in this abysmal hovel instead of attending to her duties?" His eyebrow arched, awaiting her answer.

"I came here to think, sir." She looked down, embarrassed that her professor had happened upon her during a private moment.

"I like being alone, Professor. I embrace my solitude."

Snape was shaken by her response; so young and yet she spoke as if she had resigned herself to defeat and bore its burden with apathy.

His gut clenched.

Snape poured another shot. He remembered that day well; her eyes enervated, she had given up.

"Miss Granger?" The Potions master was out of his element; emotional students were not his forte. He took a tentative step toward her.

"You miss her," the Gryffindor stated matter-of-factly.

Black eyes narrowed. "Forty points for speaking of matters which are none of your concern." Venom dripped, his tone matching his eyes.

With the courage of the lion and of housemates who had come before, Hermione brazenly reached out and firmly grasped his forearm where the dark mark lay covered by layers of linen and wool.

"Miss Granger!" He pulled away, but she held firm. "Remove yourself from my person this instant, or you shall..."

"You're a good man, Professor." She released him, removing herself from his personal sphere, her legs hitting against the back of an overturned chair. A cloud of dust and dander erupted, causing student and teacher to sneeze.

"Do not presume to know me, Miss Granger. And please spare me the task of listening to you prattle on with meaningless platitudes."

Hermione shrugged, unfazed by his verbal throttling. "Yes, Professor Snape."

His eyes followed as she left the shack, not once looking back.

It was in that moment that Snape vowed to himself that he would see no harm come to the slip of a girl who had touched him, had uncovered his soul not yet completely decimated by the whims of madmen.

His fourth shot dropped to the carpeted floor. The burn; he was being summoned. Deliberate steps carried his lissome form to the mahogany chest of drawers in his bed chamber. Silver mask was removed from its velvet casing as robes austere in nature with the coloring of midnight were slung over his shoulders. Warding his room, he

vanished into the labyrinth that was the dungeon sub-chambers. Feet followed paths traveled hundreds of times. On hands and knees, he scraped through the last tunnel, pushing himself upward and out of the rotted, hollowed out tree trunk, his entrance in and out of the castle when summoned, and into the cool night. A quick *Scourgify* saw his robes free of muck and debris.

Legs hurriedly carried him to the edge of the Forbidden Forest where he Apparated with a sharp *crack!*

"My Lord." Head bowed, Snape prostrated himself in front of his lord and crept forward to kiss the hem of ruby robes.

"Rissse, Ssseverusss, and join your brothers," the Dark Lord hissed.

Snape melted into the ranks, taking his place between Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange.

"My loyal followers, what news have you?" Slitted eyes surveyed the mass of black-robed figures. Snape stepped forward, eyes locked onto his lord's, opening his mind to the inevitable infiltration.

"Dumbledore, my Lord, is growing weaker by the day. In his infirm state, his tongue has become loose. The fool fears death, fears Potter will lose."

He felt the mental gust of invasion as his lord silently entered his mind, rifling through images of the Potions master's last counsel with the headmaster speaking on mortality and Potter's short-comings concerning non-verbal spells and on the boy's unease and inability to successfully cast an Unforgivable. Flashes of Dumbledore's gnarled hand barely able to hold his tea cup and of the Golden Trio's disagreement at dinner were pulled to the forefront of Snape's mind. Snatches of the everyday were laid open, essays being graded, detentions overseen. Scenes flickered forward, staged incidents of purposely botched healing draughts that laced the Old Fool's lemon drops.

With a dull throb, he felt the tug as the Dark Lord withdrew from his mind. A feral grin crossed thin, scaled lips.

"You have done well, Severusss..." he hissed. "Dumbledore should do well to fear hisss demise. Lord Voldemort shall be victorious."

Snape stepped back into place among his brethren, a self-satisfied smirk hidden behind his mask.

"My Lord," Malfoy deferred, head bowed, "Fudge has been reticent regarding placing the initiatives of pedigree requirements for entrance to Hogwarts into place." Malfoy's breath was held; the Dark Lord did not tolerate unfavorable news or its messengers.

Wand twirled idly between skeletal fingers. "Then might I suggest, Luciusss, you line his pockets with your Galleons," Voldemort hissed in reprimand.

Abashed, "Yes, my Lord," Malfoy slinked back next to his sister-in-law, grateful to have escaped the *Crucio*.

Nagini parted the crowd, slithering towards her reptilian master; the hisses and spits of Parseltongue were shared between familiar and wizard. Rubbing the massive snake's head affectionately, the Dark Lord addressed his audience, "Nagini informs me that Pettigrew has supplied ample entertainment for tonight, my loyal followers."

A ruckus erupted, bloodthirsty, with Death Eaters keen to slate their lusts. The doors of the old Riddle Mansion's ballroom opened; Yaxley, Greyback, and Dolohov emerged. A group of women and children, Muggles by the look of them, were struggling against the bonds of their captors.

Bellatrix licked her lips in anticipation. The cheers of Snape's fellow Death Eaters grew louder.

"Fenrir has a taste for young blood," Lucius leaned over and whispered to Snape, nodding his head in indication to a girl no more than four, whose chubby, little fingers clung to the skirts of a middle-aged woman, dazed, who kept repeating, "My baby."

Out of his peripheral vision, Snape saw the girl; she was unremarkable, one in a line of many, and like the rest, she would be dead by morning... if her body held out that long.

Death Eaters had begun to section off, surveying their spoils for the night. Snape felt his stomach lurch; Greyback had claimed the little girl. There would be nothing left come morning.

Bile rose in his throat; he Disapparated. At the edge of the Forbidden Forest, he tore his mask off the metal, scratching his cheek before he doubled over in a fit of dry heaves. The women brought forth for entertainment at revels never fazed him; they were a means to an end, culmination. But, the children... Gagging, he wiped the spittle from his mouth. Removing his Death Eater garb, he made his way back to the castle to give his report.

Severus did not utter a greeting as he entered the headmaster's office. "Fourteen Muggle women and nine Muggle children." His tone was clipped and to the point.

"Tea, Severus?" Dumbledore gestured to the tea service nestled between his desk and Fawkes' perch.

"No, thank you, Headmaster." Snape remained standing. He watched as the older wizard popped a lemon drop into his mouth.

"I must say, Severus, you have really outdone yourself with this latest batch." Dumbledore offered the bowl to his Potions master, who declined with a wave of his hand.

"Fudge is dragging his feet on the pureblood mandates. It appears Lucius is not the only wizard lining the Minister's pockets."

Dumbledore shrugged, not surprised. "Interesting," he wheezed out.

"The Ministry has seen fit to send Delores Umbridge and Yaxley to begin registering all Muggle-born students currently attending Hogwarts. Safety precautions they say."

Snape's heartbeat quickened. Outwardly, he remained impassive. "I believe the Nazis deemed such 'safety precautions' the Nuremberg Laws, Headmaster."

The irony was not lost on Snape; the Dark Lord incorporating the ideologies of racial superiority from a Muggle tyrant. He wondered if Riddle kept a well-worn, dog-eared edition of *Mien Kampf* on his bookshelf.

"If that is all, Headmaster, I shall take my leave." Severus excused himself. His heart leapt with excitement; Umbridge would be returning to Hogwarts... A pity though, she would not be leaving.

Alone in his rooms, a throaty, maniacal cackle reverberated throughout his chambers; he trembled with need.

With great care, he hung up his robes and polished his mask before replacing them in his chest of drawers. Inching the false shelf from the second drawer, he fingered the bundle of green silk. Gingerly easing it from the hiding place, he unraveled the silk slowly, the *swoosh* of the material a siren's song to his ears.

The hilt of the blade was of heft, gilded and forged of Vermeil. He brought the cold metal of the blade to his palm and drew down. The twitch of pain arousing his pleasure further, the need burned within him, begging to be sated.

Globules of red leaked through the line of broken flesh. Clenching his injured hand into a tight fist, he watched as blood spilt from between his fingers and onto the blade.

"Baptized in my blood, so shall I shed blood."

As he had done hours before, Snape made his journey to the Forbidden Forest and Apparated.

The streets of London were littered as Snape emerged from an alleyway, cloaked in shadows he called home. Eyes scanning the passersby.

A woman, small in stature, perhaps in her mid-fifties, ash-blond hair grey with age, skin yellowed, wrinkled; fat hung from her midsection. He entered her mind; she moved past him, cigarette butt flicked into the gutter. He waited, watched, slowed his heartbeat. He moved, stalking forward, keeping his distance, his step nonchalant, a deliberate pace, unnoticed. A crowd had assembled at an intersection, waiting for the light to change.

He weaved his way through the throng; nicotine and rose oil offended his keen sense of smell.

The light changed.

Footfalls pounded payment; street crossed, she broke away. He melded into the dark of night. Oblivious of her predator, she continued. A street post lamp flickered, cars parked, dilapidated flats lined narrow streets.

Startled eyes, wide, hand covering mouth, thwarting attempts to scream.

"Ssh." His breath warm, tickling her ear, he pressed himself against her, shifting his prey, drawing them into an alcove between the tenements.

"Mother is the name for God, on the lips and hearts of all children." Low tones whispered into her ear, "A mother should never lay her hand upon a child." He released her; disillusioning himself, he left the alley, leaving the woman badly shaken.

He continued on his way, up the street and around the corner. St. Mary's Church called to him. Ending his charm, Severus entered, knowing the door would be unlocked. Dipping his stained fingers into the holy water, he crossed himself.

His left hand clenched the onyx-beaded rosary in his pocket. It had belonged his grandmother, Clara Snape, nee Kiernan, who had immigrated to London with her older sister when she was six years old to escape the violence after the Easter Rising of 1916.

St. Mary's was his boyhood church. Snape had longed for summers when he would stay with his grandmother. She was a kind and decent woman, nothing like his mother. She was devout in her faith, a value she passed on to her grandson as they attended Mass daily. He walked up the aisle, genuflected, and eased into the pew.

With rosary in hand, he prayed.

Snape felt a hand rest on his shoulder. "Severus."

"Father," he said, not looking up.

The priest gave the man's shoulder a squeeze.

"Would you like me to hear your Confession?"

"Please."

Father Coates had been Severus' childhood confessor and remained so to this day. The elderly priest made his way to the confessional. Snape would follow in his own time; he always did.

"Amen." Last bead prayed, he crossed himself and genuflected as he exited the pew.

He entered the confessional. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been two weeks since my last confession."

"Go on, my son."

"I've taken another life, father... God help me, but I did..." It was the same confession for each life he was bade to take. Twenty-seven in total.

"Yes, my son, go on."

Severus remained silent, guilt eating away at his soul.

"Murder is a Mortal Sin."

"I know."

"Do you repent and ask His forgiveness?"

"I do."

Father Coates assigned Severus his act of Penance and Contrition.

"I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Forgive me, Father," wand raised, "*Obliviate*."

He exited the confessional and ran from the church, Apparating back to the Forbidden Forest. The darkness was leaching into his soul, the Dark Mark... He was violently ill. Falling to his knees, head thrown back, he cried.

"What do you want from me?" Sobs wracked his body. "Am I a wizard or a Muggle? Is this my punishment for a mistake made nearly twenty years ago?"

God above, help him, but had he known that taking the Dark Mark would mean the erosion of his soul, he never would have done it. Had he known that bearing Tom Riddle's mark also meant allowing evil to course through his veins, he would have taken his life, for it would have meant others would still be alive. Men, women, and children whose lives were ended by his hand because his Lord had commanded it of him.

He was to blame though; he knew it. Fault lay heavy on his shoulders, and he would not shrink from bearing a burden he brought upon himself. Miss Granger thought him a good man. He was not a good man; he was man broken beyond repair.

"God, don't let my sickness touch Hermione... My love damned Lily... I...I can't harm Miss Granger."

A/N: To my beta, SeverusLovesUs, you are amazing for getting me through this chapter and encouraging me. I had my reservations about this chapter and its content, but your words of praise and letting me know that this was a turning point for the story that needed to be told. I thank you so much :)

A/N: This version is a heavily edited version of what I originally intended to post, but had a change of heart. In the original version Snape kills the woman. I felt exceedingly

uncomfortable with Snape's actions and decided not to post it. Thank you for your understanding...CordyAngelSeer.

A/N: The lines Father Coates recites can be found at HYPERLINK "<http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/confession>"

"Mo Anam" means "My Soul" in Gaelic. Also, I played with Severus' lineage and religious beliefs. I am Catholic, and this section of the story is not meant to be seen as a mockery of faith or to bash, disrespect, or misrepresent religion. That is not my intention for writing this chapter, so please don't take it as such. I am merely trying to show a crisis of faith and of conscience. Severus is a half-blood, so, what belief system do you adhere to when one is divided as such and following a madman, and how can you reconcile, if at all? I also played a bit with the mythos of the Dark Mark, and by bearing it, you also bear the taint of Voldemort's evil. That is not to say Severus is absolved of the heinous crimes he has committed; he is responsible for his actions, regardless of the Dark Mark or not. And Snape is trying to come to terms with this and his guilt.

A/N: The scene with Snape and the woman on the street is based on a scene from the film "The Crow"

Chapter Seven

Chapter 9 of 25

He was darkness clinging to light. He was tainted. He was a broken man

A/N: Dear readers the opening scene is a bit graphic but it is not what it seems.

Chapter Seven

The dark welcomed him, lulled him into a quiet ease, like a mother crooning a lullaby to a disquieted toddler. Cloaked in shadows, steam hissed from sewer grates...thick and heavy, clinging to him like a second skin.

He stalked his prey, unbeknownst to his victim; he relished his one-sided game of cat and mouse.

He brushed past her, long fingers caressing hers as he walked ahead, steps measured.

The fly was caught in the spider's web.

The alcove was dark and secluded, affording him discretion and privacy.

The blade of the knife caressed the meaty flesh of her throat.

Swiftly, he dragged the blade across; blood rained from her severed jugular.

Wet, wheezing, gurgling...he dropped her...fresh from the kiss of death, she flopped onto her stomach, body twitching to a halt, brain activity ceasing.

He woke with a start. Perspiration drenched the bedclothes. Heart hammering, he gasped for air. The acidic burn of bile scratched the back of his throat as he choked, swallowing down the mucous. He winced as his esophagus constricted.

"A dream," he panted, trembling with anxiety.

Blood rushed in his ears; his vision blurred; Severus flung the bedding off of him. Swiping a hand across his brow, he eased himself out of the bed. Legs uncertain, he clutched the nightstand for leverage.

"A dream," he repeated with forced conviction. On shaky legs, Severus apprehensively ventured to his bureau. Sliding back the false panel, he removed his blade, tugging at the silk in a frantic attempt to verify the truth of his words.

Holding the hilt close to his face, he inspected the rust-tinted blade. Splatters of dry crimson kissed the silver, his own blood.

"A dream," he breathed, relieved that he had not spilt innocent blood, that he was able to hamper his bloodlust.

The clock above his mantle read quarter to five; in a few hours the dunderheaded-masses masquerading feebly as students would be waking. Eager greediness alighting their eyes, wasting Knuts and Sickles not earned on frivolous, trivial trinkets. Snape's lip curled in disgust.

He had hated Hogsmeade weekends when he was a student, but he despised them even more so as a chaperone. What was there to enjoy when one was destitute? His grandmother would offer him a spare shilling or two so he could have some pocket money, but he had always refused her. She had been a widow on a government pension without a pound to spare and a stone's throw from public assistance.

"Hey, Snivellus."

Severus looked up, his lank, greasy locks, falling forward, obscuring his acne-pocked cheeks.

"What do you want, Black?" he hissed, hand on his wand. Ready.

His stomach growled loudly.

"Missed breakfast, Snivellus?" Black taunted, breaking into a raucous laughter with Potter

Embarrassed, he flushed pink.

"You know very well I did, Black." Severus, through clenched teeth, spat the name...a bitter profanity on his tongue.

The Mauraders had ambushed him coming out of the third floor lavatory. A deft Impedimenta issued by Potter had knocked him back, and tripping over his feet, he landed with a hard thud on the ground. The Gryffindors chuckled in amusement at having bested him, save for Lupin who stood on the sidelines. Glee colored Black's eyes as he, Potter, and Pettigrew warded the door to the loo, effectively locking Snape inside.

It had taken forty-five minutes to dismantle the wards they had erected and to do so while avoiding the jinxes and hexes Black, no doubt, had thrown in to torment him further. By the time Severus had made it to the Great Hall, breakfast was over, and the students were filing out, preparing to leave for Hogsmeade.

Lupin placed a hand on Black's shoulder, "C'mon, Sirius."

"Having an attack of conscience, Lupin?" Snape sneered, eyes narrowed. "Silence makes cowards out of men." Snape looked down his nose at him. "But, you wouldn't know anything about that, now would you, wolf?" The dig was below the belt, but he didn't care.

Resignation flashed in Lupins' eyes, his shoulders slumped, and he pulled Black back, trying to defuse a situation that was swiftly becoming volatile.

"James..." Lily grasped his hand in hers, tugging him away from the fray, not once sparing a glance in Severus' direction. Pettigrew, beady-eyed little rodent that he was, was still egging Sirius on, eyes showing a lust for malice.

"Boys." There was an underlying tone of warning in the Scottish brogue.

"We were just leaving, Professor McGonagall," Remus offered as explanation.

"See that you do. I would hate to deduct points when Gryffindor is close to attaining the House Cup."

"Off with you, Snape." She dismissed the dark-haired boy.

"Yes, ma'am." He nodded, eyes trained on the gang of Gryffindors until they were out of sight, dipping into Honeydukes.

His stomach growled again.

Dejected, he trudged to the Three Broomsticks, the freshly fallen snow crunching under his boots. He slipped into a chair at a vacant table against the farthest wall, his back pressed against the varnished wood paneling. From this vantage point he was able to observe the entrance and those coming to and from the loo. Book opened on his lap, quill in hand, Snape continued his amendments to his Potions book.

A half hour into his revisions, the hunger pains began, cramping his abdomen. His concentration disturbed, he covertly surveyed the students. A group of Ravensclaws, three tables down, threw a Galleon and a few Sickles on their table in payment. Patiently, he waited for them to gather their winter coats and down their last few sips of butterbeer. Anticipation buzzed in his system.

Scanning the room, the patrons all appeared to be in their own worlds, conversations abounding, gossiping about Yule Ball dates. Inhaling deeply, Snape pushed himself away from the wall and made his way to the empty table.

Bunched up paper napkins, empty mugs, a half-eaten basket of fried cod, and soggy, vinegar-drenched crisps littered the table.

Perspiration dampened his palms; tentatively, he reached for his prize.

A hand locked on his wrist. "Stealing, Mr. Snape? One hundred points from Slytherin. We will see what the headmaster has to say about this." Professor McGonagall tutted.

"Professor, please... I wasn't..." Snape silenced his protests as he noticed the onlookers starting to huddle, taking in the scene.

"Come now, it is back to the castle for you."

Head lowered, he trailed behind McGonagall back to Hogwarts.

The headmaster was looking at him over his half-moon spectacles, the infamous twinkle in his azure eyes gone.

"Mr. Snape, this is the fourth time you've been sent to my office, and the school term is only two months in. Three times for fighting and now stealing. What do you have you have to say for yourself?" Fingers steepled, he waited for his charge's response.

"I did not steal, Headmaster," he whispered, eyes and head downcast.

"Please pick your head up, Mr. Snape. I cannot hear you."

"I did not steal, Headmaster." He spoke firmly, black eyes meeting blue.

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "Please do not lie to me. Professor McGonagall caught you. Now, how about we try the truth this time, hmm...?"

Severus did not answer. He had only meant to take the discarded food. He'd had no money with which to purchase lunch and since he was forced to miss breakfast, had been unable to eat. He would let the headmaster believe what he wanted; his precious Gryffindors could do no wrong. Potter was his Golden Boy, and Black merely 'horsed-around.' Apparently, attempted murder didn't amount to anything, and why should it? He was, after all, a dark, mistrusted, and unpopular bastard of the House of Slytherin.

"Very well then." Dumbledore stood up, pushing his chair away from his desk. "In addition to the loss of house points, you will write a letter of apology to the Three Broomsticks in regards to your thievery, and you shall abstain from the evening meal. To steal money from the pocket of a man takes food from his mouth. You are dismissed, Mr. Snape. Please return to your common room."

"Yes, Headmaster." Tears pricked the corners of his eyes.

*Snape moved to his living quarters and gracelessly plunked himself down into his reading chair. A well-worn paperback of *Crime and Punishment* sat on the end table, leather bookmark holding his place.*

With a wave of his hand, he conjured a glass of warm milk to ease the burn of the bile that was surely eating away at his esophagus.

"Miss Granger, my Sonia."

A/N: The reference to Sonia comes from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. She is the the moral compass and love interest for the main character Roskolnikov, the dark and troubled main character.

Chapter Eight

Chapter 10 of 25

Light and Dark merge to create shades of grey.

Chapter Eight

"You are fifteen minutes early, Miss Granger," Snape commented, not looking up from the essay he was grading. A 'T' in red ink blotted the parchment as it slashed through the abysmal work.

She was leaning against the doorframe, rucksack haphazardly shouldered, teetering on the invisible line between the corridor and his classroom. Lower lip secured between her teeth.

"Either come in, or come back at noon, Miss Granger, but please do not darken my door with your indecision." Still not looking up from his paperwork, he moved on to the next essay.

She hadn't moved. Teeth released her abused lip, red and slightly swollen from their assault.

He was in shirtsleeves, shoulders hunched and head bent low; fine black strands of hair slick from standing over cauldrons spilled forward brushing the edges of essays as he furiously scribbled down corrections.

Hazel eyes, greedy with the initial stirrings of lust, drank in the sight of him. She bit down hard on her tongue, piercing the flesh as warm, thick, coppery blood flowed, combining with saliva. She swallowed the metallic mixture, tamping down her wayward hormones for the moment. Hermione's desire peaked while on her menstrual flow. She tended to isolate herself during that week of the month and would even forge through the pain of her curse and pleasure herself to lessen her sexual craving.

"In a bit of a snit are we, Professor?" With an eyebrow cocked, she sauntered into the room, closing the door behind her.

Snape cast a Silencing Charm, ensuring they would not be overheard.

"Your ability to state the obvious is astounding, Miss Granger."

Lips pursed in a pout, she moved to stand in front of his desk, rucksack still draped over her shoulder as she heaved it back into place.

"Petulance does not become you."

"That would be the pot calling the kettle black, sir."

"I am not ill-tempered, merely dour."

He straightened the piles of parchment on his desk, methodically organizing them by name, class, and House.

"Sarcasm: the poor man's wit."

"Misdirection. Really, I would expect more from you, Miss Granger, but, then again, Gryffindors lack the finesse for wordplay." A ghost of a smirk graced his lips as he finally acknowledged her physical presence, his eyes meeting her face, giving her his undivided attention.

"Your face..." Concern colored her voice as she motioned to the welted, red scratch raised on his cheek.

His hand reached to his cheek, tracing the line marring his face. "It is nothing. I had forgotten it was even there." The subject was closed.

She nodded, itching to sooth the mark with her fingers.

"So..." She set her bag down and rolled her shoulder, working out the kink that had developed. "Should I continue cataloging your stores?"

"Please, have a seat." He gestured to the student workbench adjacent to his desk.

"Professor?" Worry crept into her voice; their light banter forgotten at his sudden formality, she was unnerved. Hermione moved to take her seat. Apprehension settled at the pit of her stomach.

"Dolores Umbridge and Yaxley will be on grounds next week registering Muggle-borns as part of the pureblood mandates the Ministry has set into place under the guise of *protecting* those in our society who are more apt to experience discrimination."

Hermione gasped, shocked; she had assumed Hogwarts would be the last place that toad would step foot in after last year's incident with the centaurs.

"It is imperative that you remain with your cohorts, Potter and Weasley, at all times. If possible, stay close to Gryffindor Tower."

She nodded, dazed.

Severus moved from behind his desk to stand in front her, palms splayed on the small table, nails digging into the wood.

"I cannot protect you, Hermione." Anguish etched his features, the lines of his face embedding themselves deeper into the grove between his eyes and around his mouth.

"I would never ask..."

"You wouldn't have to," he cut her off. A swell of ferocity darkened his eyes, making the irises and pupils indistinguishable.

Hermione launched herself at him, knocking the bench to the floor with a noisy clatter and shoving the table away.

He couldn't breathe. Surprise choked him as did the arms tightening around his neck. Her small frame, crawling up his rigid body, lips seeking purchase his own.

Severus struggled to disentangle himself. Hands reaching behind head, he pried her arms from him, pushing her away from him. Her wrists locked in his unyielding hold, keeping her at arm's length.

"Please..." She sniffled, her emotions overwhelming her reason. The pinpricks of pain as the curse sparked only made her want to claw at him, to lose herself in the clinch of physical contact to overcome her bondage.

"Calm yourself!" The whisper was harsh as he jerked her to him, standing toe to toe. "I will not enable you to harm yourself." His tone was calmer now, soothing.

"Feel... I want to feel..." The look of abject hopelessness in her eyes seared his soul.

"You will, but not like this... Not like this." He let go of her, but remained as close to Hermione without aggravating the *Fealty*. She would do well to control her impulsiveness.

She sucked in air. Tears mingled with snot. The slimy ropes of excrement dribbled down her chin; she hastily wiped it away with the sleeve of her jumper.

"I want..." She turned away from him. What she wanted he was unable to give and she to receive.

Defeat deflated her tense stance. "What am I to do?"

Silence permeated the room.

He could not answer; it was not his place.

"I harbor tender feelings for you." Her back was still to him.

"Yes." He acknowledged her admission.

"Have you nothing more to say on the matter?"

"My silence is not a reflection of my feelings, Miss Granger."

She turned sharply, mouth parted, hazel eyes searching his face.

"Please do not read more into my statement than what was said."

Hermione's brow furrowed, her anger steadily simmering.

"Must you speak in riddles? Give me a straight answer for once." Her voice rose, hands planting themselves on her hips.

"In case you hadn't noticed," he took a menacing step towards her, "my ambiguity on certain matters is the only reason, I repeat, the only reason, Potter still breathes and you live to see another day."

He crowded her personal space. "Do not ask things of me I cannot give." Each word clipped and to the point.

"Coward," she spat.

He reared back as if slapped; nails embedded into his palms, his restraint a frayed tether.

"Leave. Now."

She stood rooted to the spot, her fallacy weighing down on her. "I..."

"Now!" he roared.

Hermione paled. Fear numbed her limbs. She couldn't move.

She flinched when he moved in on her again. He crushed the juncture of her arm and elbow in a merciless grip. His fingers spastically dug into her flesh. A wowl of pain tore from her as he flung her in the direction of the door.

Stumbling to regain her balance, she cradled her left arm close to her body. She opened her mouth to form words: trite apologies... anything.

She fled, running, unconcerned where her feet were taking her, following the impulse to run away as fast and far as she could.

The air crackled with electricity and tension, static causing the hairs on the back of his neck to rise to attention. A wave of his hand to right the fallen bench saw it exploded into countless, burnt splinters. Severus' magic was surging, dangerous for a wizard whose control was resting on a hair-trigger.

He was not a coward. How dare she mock the sacrifices he made in order to protect her precious Potter, that the last sixteen years he watched over the ungrateful ingrate making sure he scraped by. Did she know or even care that each time he intervened on behalf of her and her duo of dunderheads bought him a round of *Crucio* from the wands of Death Eaters if he was lucky, the Dark Lord's if he was not.

He paced like a wild animal, cagey and feral.

Hermione's bag lay on the floor, forgotten in their confrontation, his boot caught in the strap.

"Fucking hell!" He caught himself before he could tumble to the ground. Snarling, he kicked the offending leather rucksack away from him.

The library was her sanctuary, her calm in the maelstrom that was her life. Mindless, she let her feet carry her to the picture window. The skies were gray; rain would be falling soon.

She rested her forehead on the cool glass. A headache blurred her vision, and a dull throb worked its way from her temples to the base of her neck. Eyes closed, she struggled to keep the tears at bay.

Hermione stayed that way for sometime. Clouds had devoured the sun.

Plops of rainwater danced on the window pane. The melodic *tap tap plunk* eased the tension from her body.

A familiar shadow fell over her.

"I shouldn't have called you a coward."

Severus set her rucksack down by the sill, the sleeve of his teaching robe brushing her denim-clad leg.

"You could have struck me, and I would have accepted it gladly. I had no right to lay a hand upon you." His normally smooth and arousing voice was gone. In its place was a fragile and mournful imitation.

He was on his knees before her, his head falling forward to rest in her lap.

Her heart constricted: her poor, broken man.

"I love you," he breathed.

Pretenses shattered, he cried.

A/N: To SLU my unyielding gratitude. A heartfelt thank you goes out to all my readers, you guys keep me motivated.

Chapter Nine

Chapter 11 of 25

She'd been touched by darkness, he craved the light. She was his melancholy whore.

Chapter Nine

He felt her fingers tentatively inch forward to tangle themselves in his hair.

"Don't."

She froze, her body tensing.

"I've been too careless as it is." His head still rested on her plump thighs, and he was loathe to remove himself.

"Professor..."

"Don't, please." Snape was not one to show weakness.

"Forgive me, Miss Granger." Snape lifted himself from his prone position, his face level with hers.

"I don't under..."

"Obliviate."

He rose to his feet, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Miss Granger, I insist you wake up this instant." The growl was soft, but menacing nonetheless.

Hermione blinked, dazed. Her head foggy, she rubbed her eyes. The last thing she recalled was fleeing his classroom. In a knee-jerk reaction, she grabbed her injured arm and shrunk away from her professor, her back pressed painfully against the glass of the window pane.

"Prof...Professor," she stuttered, her tongue heavy, mouth dry.

"Do quit sputtering, Miss Granger."

"Huh?" Hermione was disoriented, her mind addled. She spotted the worn, brown leather of her rucksack. "My bag? You brought my bag?"

"It's nice to see that even if that little know-it-all brain fails you, your prowess of visional perception is keen." A smirk lifted the corner of his mouth.

"But I thought..."

"Thought what exactly?" An eyebrow arched. "That you would reveal your little school girl crush and expect me to reciprocate such foolish, fleeting notions." He paused.

"Sev..."

"Have your senses taken leave, you daft girl? You shall address me as I am due; it is Professor or Master Snape."

Hermione choked back a sob, "I'm s...I don..."

She sucked in a breath, her throat constricting. "It won't happen again, sir." Her voice was barely above a whisper as she reached for her rucksack, holding it tightly against her chest like armor, her head bent low, shamed.

Snape replied with a noncommittal grunt.

"I called you a coward. I was angry... Have you never said something in the heat of the moment?"

"That is beside the point, Miss Granger."

"No, *sir*, I do not believe it is," Hermione snapped.

"Keep your voice down, you silly girl."

"No one is here." Letting her bag fall to the ground, she extended her arms to gesture to the empty library. "The students are in Hogsmeade, and Madam Pince is at her desk."

"Impertinent..."

"Don't you dare lecture me about respect." Her chin jutted out in defiance.

"The kitten has claws," he mocked.

Hermione shook her head, saddened. "I pity you. You're a worthless excuse of a man... to trounce on the feelings of another..." She made to stand and collected her bag. "You *are* nothing but a coward."

He expected disgust or venom to coat her words, but neither emotion was present as her words rang hollow in his ears.

Three slow claps of false appreciation echoed off the stacks of books. "Thank you, Miss Granger; I was wondering how long it would take you to arrive at the inevitable conclusion. I applaud you for bearing my presence longer than most."

She opened her mouth, but closed it. Heaving her bag over her left shoulder, she maneuvered around him.

Her feet felt laden as she took step after step, debating whether or not turn around.

Severus watched as her steps slowed. How he wanted her to turn around, to meet his eyes, to know his words were lies. Know that she could never share in a part of his life other than in their prescribed roles as a professor and pupil.

She didn't turn back; she walked out of the library and out of his life, just like Lily had done so many years ago.

Posture stilted, he sighed.

"You're free, *Mo Cuishle*."

Tears brimmed in her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall. Anger was an emotion she was comfortable dealing with. Hurt, on the other hand, hurt dealt the harshest blow. He didn't want her; he turned her away like an errant, annoying child with a silly crush. She had thought there was something there, a connection; she assumed that the solace he begrudgingly at first offered then gave freely meant something more. How foolish to believe she could penetrate his cold heart and touch his blackened soul.

Someone grabbed her robe; she tensed and whirled around, wand out.

"Didn't you hear..."

Ron swallowed the remnants of his Chocolate Frog.

"I've been calling you." The redhead eased away from the witch, his eyes moving from her face to the wand that was dangerously close to his chest.

"Ron! Don't sneak up on me. I could've hexed you." She tucked her wand back into the sleeve of her robe.

"Sorry." He blushed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I... ah... I felt bad about yesterday." His ears were quickly changing from pink to red. "I bought you a Chocolate Frog." He held out the wrapped confection to her.

Hermione softened, her annoyance momentarily forgotten. She knew the Weasleys were tight for money, and for Ron... A smile graced her lips.

"Thank you, Ron. Sometimes you can be incredibly sweet." She took the chocolate from his outstretched palm.

Black eyes narrowed as he watched the scene before him unfold from the shadows. A pang of guilt coursed through him at the lost and haunted look flickering briefly in her eyes.

"How was detention with the Greasy Git?"

Tawny eyes flashed with anger. "It's *Professor Snape*, Ron."

A smirk flitted upon the Potions master's lips. Bloody Gryffindors and their sense of loyalty.

"Mr. Weasley, disparaging the good name of a Hogwarts professor? Fifteen points from Gryffindor." Snape's smooth baritone echoed in the nearly deserted hallway.

"Sorry, sir," Ron grumbled, not looking the slightest bit apologetic.

Hermione looked between the two, annoyed that Snape had been following her.

"Professor," Hermione acknowledged, an edge to her tone.

"Miss Granger." His eyes flicked to the gauze that had begun to unravel on her left hand.

She tucked her hand into the pocket of her robe. A flush burned her cheeks.

"Ron and I were just heading to dinner, sir." The excuse was lame, even as Ron's stomach grumbled, but being caught between him and Ron was making her twitchy. She saw Ginny and Dean heading their way and waved them over. "If you'll excuse us, sir."

Students had begun to filter in by the droves.

Snape turned on his heel, heading for the dungeons, robes flowing behind him.

"What was that about?" Ginny inquired.

Hermione shot a look towards Ron.

"How was I supposed to know the git was there?" he huffed. "He's a right bastard, that one."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Bad day?" she said as she looped her arm through Hermione's.

"Cleaning cauldrons without magic." The lie rolled off her tongue.

"C'mon, Harry heard it from Dobby that fig pudding is for dessert."

Hermione smiled as she let Ginny lead her to the Great Hall.

Snape paced his rooms. It was for the best. He did the right thing.

"I did the right thing." He spoke aloud, as if to utter the words granted validity to them.

Crime and Punishment still set on his end table. Sonia followed Roskonlikov to the bowels of hell. He would not allow Miss Granger to do the same.

So he took the option from her with a well-cast *Obliviate*.

He picked up the book. He'd had it since his days at Hogwarts. It had been a gift from Lily. He cherished it as he had the lock of hair he had shorn from her wild red mane as her body lay at peace, covering little Harry's.

Severus ran his fingers over the worn cover. He held the binding to his nose, inhaling the scent of paper, glue and dust. He set it back down and went to his bedroom. At his bureau, he opened the drawers and removed the paneling. Next to his blade, a tin box and Pensieve rested.

He picked the box up. Breath held, he opened it.

Inside lay the rosary his grandmother had given him on his First Communion, her rosary she bequeathed him on her deathbed, as well as the engagement ring his grandfather had given her. Newspaper clippings of his parents' obituaries, a picture of Lily and himself on her tenth birthday, and a lock of red hair bound in a bit of ribbon. He picked the lock up. It still felt like the finest silk to his fingers. He closed his eyes, remembering running his fingers through Lily's thick, fiery hair as he shared his first kiss. Both had been twelve and unsure of where to place their noses or what to do with their tongues, so they settled on openmouthed kisses.

He brought the lock to his nose, the ends tickling him as he breathed in. After all these years it still smelled of cherry blossoms.

He set the box on his bed and moved back into the living room. Picking up his book, he set the lock of hair in between the pages and tossed it in the fireplace watching the flickering flames turn his past to ash.

"Goodbye, my Lily, and may you forgive me my sins."

He padded back into the bedroom, closed the lid on the old biscuit tin, and reached for his Pensieve. His hands were trembling as he sat on the edge of his bed, the small bowl resting on his lap.

Indecisiveness warred within his gut before he plowed ahead, immersing himself in memories of his past. Severus was falling, gliding through time, through hurt, love, anger, pain, guilt. The emotions threatened to overwhelm him as scenes of his life ran before his eyes, grey muddled strands coming to life, focusing and creating moving pictures he'd rather not remember and those he could not bear to part with.

He found himself outside the library of Grimmauld Place, his memory counterpart pressed against the door left slightly ajar, listening to the Golden Trio's latest squabble.

Her hair was done up in a ponytail; wisps of golden honey-hued curls framed her face. Her hands were planted firmly on her hips.

"Ronald Weasley!" The voice was shrill and indignant. "And you, Harry, you're no better for laughing."

The dark haired boy put up his hands in mock surrender. "Mione, it was just a joke."

"It wasn't funny."

"Since when did you become the git's defender? He's a bloody Death Eater, he is."

Hermione sighed, exasperated.

Her eyes narrowed on the redhead. "You didn't see..." She swallowed back a sob. "A few nights ago, he was coming back from You-Know-Who. I was in the kitchen getting some snacks..."

"Me Mum's fig pudding, no doubt," Ron snickered.

Hermione chose to ignore the comment as she took a breath, the memory of all the blood still at the forefront of her mind. "I was walking back to my room, and they were in the study, Professors Dumbledore and Snape. I don't think they saw me; the door hadn't been closed all the way... He was hurt, badly from what I could see. His head was bleeding. Blood was everywhere... I don't know how he managed to stand..." Hermione trailed off..

Severus studied himself, his memory form, watched how his eyes closed, how the warmth of her kindness and concern washed over him. If he recalled correctly, this was the summer of their fifth year going into their sixth; Hermione had been subjected to the *Fealty*.

Images swirled, blurring; he saw snatches of his grandmother and himself attending Mass. Saw as a child his father beat his mother, the metal of the belt buckle leaving welts with every blow. The images shifted. He was in the library at Grimmauld Place; the time frame was the same as the previous memory.

"Professor Snape?" Hermione stood in the entrance of the library, book in her hands, watching with some amusement as her Potions professor, on his hands and knees, was stooped, his wand tip lit, scouring underneath the sofa.

"Not now, Miss Granger. Can you not see that I've misplaced something?" With no luck, he straightened himself and dusted his robes off.

"Can I help you, sir? What is it that you've misplaced?" She stepped into the room, closing the door behind her.

Snape stalked over to the shelves. Each book had been taken off and set in neat stacks on end tables and then on the floor when he had run out of room. He shifted through the hardbacks and paperbacks again, hoping the outcome would change it was here, that he would find it.

"A book, Miss Granger. Crime and Punishment." He went through the second pile of books. "The book is very dear to me."

Hermione worried her lip between her teeth, her palms becoming sweaty as she clenched his missing item in her hands.

"Professor, I think perhaps, I have what you're looking for." She held out the paperback to him, bracing herself for his rage.

Snape turned sharply, looking at one of his most prized possessions held delicately in her hands.

"It was sitting by my chair." She pointed to the wingback she had claimed, nestled by the fire.

"I hadn't read it before. I didn't know it belonged to anyone; no one tends to come in the library but me..." Her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

A cutting remark rested on his tongue. The girl looked as if she would burst into tears. He took the book from her hands. A leather page keeper marked her place. The binding and pages didn't seem any worse for the wear.

"You've not finished?"

"I had planned to spend this afternoon reading. It's heartbreaking, really, Raskolnikov's situation, I mean. One wonders if he was shown kindness..."

Snape held up a hand. "Miss Granger, you may finish the book on two conditions."

He placed the book back in her hands, a jolt of electricity running through him as their fingers brushed.

Hermione bit her lip at their contact. "The conditions, sir?"

"First, please have a care with the book."

Hermione nodded vigorously.

"And second, I would like to have your opinion on the matter; would you care discuss Dostoevsky's work once..."

"Like a book club of sorts," she cut him off, giddy that he would ask her opinion and that he would impart his knowledge upon her.

"Yes, I suppose a book club of sorts is what it could be considered." A flick of his wand saw the library set back to rights.

He made to leave. "Oh, one more thing, Miss Granger, the tea and biscuits are an appreciated gesture. Thank you."

He tore himself from the Pensieve. Jarred, he set it aside. Severus was back in his rooms. Never had his solitude affected him so. Miss Granger, he learned, had taken to leaving a cup of tea and a plate of butterscotch biscuits in the kitchen for him on those nights the Dark Lord would call him to serve.

His thoughtful, brave, little Gryffindor.

"Hermione," her name a prayer on his lips, "thank you."

A/N: Thank you SLU, and to my readers/reviewers, my heartfelt appreciation goes out to you.

Chapter Ten

Chapter 12 of 25

She was light, he was darkness, and together a line would be crossed.

Chapter Ten

Silence permeated the Great Hall, while confused students looked on to the Head table. The headmaster was stoic, his eyes dull and listless, the breakfast prepared by the elves left untouched.

Hermione's oatmeal had gone cold; she wasn't hungry. Her spoon was making counter-clockwise rotations as she scooped some of the wheat-colored mush up and plopped it back into the bowl. With a heavy sigh, she pushed the bowl away from her.

Her attempts to covertly catch Professor Snape's eye were futile as he appeared to be fascinated at some non-existent spot on the far side of the Hall.

Dumbledore stood and cleared his throat. "Students, if I could have your attention; the Ministry has decided to bestow Hogwarts the honor of being the first wizarding school to test a new pilot program designed to benefit those in our society who are at a disadvantage."

"What's he mean?" Ron leaned in, elbowing Hermione as Harry and Ginny huddled closer. Whispers rose from the other House tables. Dumbledore was still speaking, but Hermione all but tuned him out.

"Hermione and me," Colin spoke up from the other side of Neville, casting nervous glances around the Hall.

"Gryffindors?" Ron questioned, taking a bite of the sausage he speared off his plate. "Whafo?" the redhead said, his brow furrowing as he chewed.

"Not Gryffindors, Ron. Muggle-borns," Hermione whispered, her head ducked low so as to avoid being noticed.

"Dumbledore, I see you have begun. Pardon us Ministry officials for our tardiness; you understand, business and all that." The smile plastered to the pink-adorned weeble wobble was as false as her sincerity.

Dolores Umbridge stood in the entrance of the Great Hall. Yaxley hovered behind her.

"Yes, Ms. Umbridge, quite alright. Do come in." With his good hand, the headmaster gestured them forward.

"Students, may I introduce former professor, now Ministry official, Dolores Umbridge, and her assistant, Mister Yaxley."

The Hall was silent save for the rousing applause offered by Filch and a few of the sixth- and seventh-year Slytherins.

Snape glared at his House table, which quieted immediately rather than face the ire of the Head of House.

Hermione stooped in her seat, hoping to disappear between Ron and Neville.

"Are you okay Hermione?" Neville's brow was creased in worry.

"Fine, Neville." She nodded. "Umbridge just doesn't care much for me after the incident with Grawp."

"Taught her good though, didn't it?" Ron snorted in laughter.

The toad cleared her throat as she marched into the Hall, Yaxley at her heels. "If you have finished?" Umbridge tsked, eyes narrowed on the Gryffindor table, a small smile curving her lips as she noticed Miss Granger flinch.

Severus watched the exchange behind the curtain of inky, lank lock that had fallen forward to obscure his face.

"As the headmaster was explaining before I arrived, the Ministry is in the process of ratifying a new law, a proposition if you will." Umbridge weaved her way through the tables, the heels of her pink pumps clicking and clacking on the flagstone. She stopped next to Dumbledore, who took a few steps back to offer the usurper full breadth of the room.

Once Umbridge was satisfied that all eyes were focused on her, she continued, "This new proposition is to be called the Council on Unethical Racial Treatment, and its goal is to ensure..."

Hermione rolled her eyes. C.O.U.R.T. What a splendid acronym; was the Ministry to be the judge, jury and executioner also? Santayana was right. "Those who do not learn from the past will be condemned to repeat it."

"... that certain witches and wizards in our society are recognized under the full extent of the law. To do this, the Ministry..."

The double meaning behind Umbridge's rehearsed speech was not lost on Hermione; Mudbloods were surely to be persecuted under the full extent of the law, perhaps forced to be bear armbands embroidered with an "M"?

"... will begin to register students here at Hogwarts. There will be lists posted in each of the House common rooms. If your name is on the list, you will be excused from participating in classes for the week."

Severus' ears perked up with this new tidbit of information. He had been under the impression that this mockery would disrupt a single class period of the students', not an entire week of studies. His pulse quickened.

Hermione worried her lip, tearing at the delicate skin.

"And you will accompany Mister Yaxley and myself to the Ministry to complete the requisite paperwork and documentation."

Umbridge motioned to Yaxley, who had moved away from his sentry position near the wall to hand his supervisor a small stack of parchments.

"Heads of House, I have here the lists of students." Umbridge handed Snape, McGonagall, Sprout, and Flitwick their rosters. As expected, the Slytherin roster was blank, but the charade was firmly ensconced in place.

McGonagall gasped, twenty-nine names glittered in gold and red.

"Students," Dumbledore's calm and grandfatherly demeanor worked to defuse a powder-keg waiting to implode, "classes shall resume tomorrow. Now, will the Head Boy and Girl, as well as the prefects, escort their respective Houses back to their common rooms?"

Students began to speculate as to whose names were on the list. A few first years burst into tears.

"This day is not a reprieve from studies. Is that understood?" Dumbledore's voice echoed over the nervous chatter.

Groans followed the headmaster's pronouncement from students who were eager for a free day. Hermione and Ron stood.

"C'mon, Gryffindors, single-file line, first years to seventh years."

The students complied; the two seventh-year prefects led the front of the line while Ron and Hermione pulled up the rear.

"Ron, can you cover for me? I need the loo."

"Sure, 'Mione."

Hermione lagged behind the students.

"Miss Granger, how pleasant to see you again. It has been too long since our last encounter; do you not agree?"

Fear coiled in Hermione's gut as she slowly turned around, face to face with Dolores Umbridge.

"Miss Granger, I had assumed that even you would be able to follow a simple directive. Perhaps your know-it-all status has been fabricated?"

Umbridge, startled, jumped at the intrusion of the Potions master. "Professor Snape," Umbridge whirled around and nearly bumped into the black clad figure, "so nice to see another who appreciates order and discipline."

"Yes." He sneered dismissively.

"Professor Snape, I was merely excusing myself to the loo." She blushed, avoiding eye contact and taking a few steps back.

"Yes, well, you will excuse me? I believe Mister Yaxley requires my assistance," Umbridge noted with displeasure as her deputy ineptly handled the paperwork...pity he was all brawn and no brain.

"Certainly, Madam," Severus intoned, playing his part well.

"Miss Granger, I believe you have duties to attend to."

"Yes, Professor." The plea was in her voice. Though wounded by his earlier words and denial of feelings, she still craved him, needed him, wanted him, no matter the impossibility.

"Miss Granger," Snape whispered, leaning in close.

His breath tasted heavenly on her lips.

"Perhaps I did not make myself clear the other day, or you are in need of reminder? There is not and will never be anything between us, so I would greatly appreciate it if you would kindly refrain from including me in your childish, hormonal fantasies of flight."

To the few stragglers remaining, the exchange between professor and student appeared to be nothing more than difference of opinion, a reprimand of an errant pupil.

"Professor, I must respectfully disobey your order." Hermione's tone dared him to defy her.

"Miss Granger, this is neither the time nor place for such proclamations."

"Understood." She nodded, turning on her heel.

"Silly chit," she heard him mutter softly under his breath. A self-satisfied smirk danced upon her lips. *See how you like it to have someone under your skin, my dear professor*, Hermione thought wickedly as she sauntered away heading toward the loo.

Dumbledore and Umbridge were in conversation. "Pardon me, if I might interrupt, headmaster."

"Ah, Severus, I was just finishing up with Dolores." The headmaster turned to the woman. "All paperwork shall be submitted to the Ministry by this evening, and I would like to extend my appreciation and gratitude for such a lovely presentation."

Snape was convinced; Dumbledore had gone 'round the bend, the doddering, old fool.

Dumbledore allowed for Snape to precede him to his office. The walk to the headmaster's office was silent.

"I do grow tired of pandering to corrupt officials, my boy." Dumbledore spoke, once enclosed in the privacy of his office.

"Headmaster, I was not made aware that the students would be removed from school grounds. Yaxley is a Death Eater, and Umbridge his lover as well as a sympathizer."

"Yes, I had heard rumor of their dalliances. Distasteful. Tea?"

"Headmaster, please, this is no time for pleasantries. If those students are allowed to leave Hogwarts, I can certainly guarantee that they will not return." The urgency in Snape's voice did not go unnoticed by Dumbledore.

"Do you feel that your position amongst Tom's ranks is in question if you were not made privy to this information?"

"No, the Dark Lord has no reason to suspect my loyalties; you know as well as I his plans are pieces of puzzles, details given on a need-to-know basis."

Dumbledore popped a lemon drop in his mouth.

"The children shall remain where they are. After all, parents must consent to their underage students leaving school grounds. Pity our owls seemed to have forgotten to deliver the permission slips." Dumbledore clapped a hand on Snape's shoulder.

"Do not fret, my boy. When Umbridge and Yaxley return tomorrow to collect the children, they will see they have no choice but to submit to my will."

"What of the students who are of age?" *What of my Miss Granger?* Snape thought to himself.

"Yes, students of age shall be monitored by a professor and sent on a scavenger hunt, as the Muggles are fond of saying. The Quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw will be held tomorrow to occupy the rest of the student body."

Snape was somewhat appeased by this explanation.

"The students will be broken up into groups and assigned to the professor in whose subject they excel. Each student will be accredited accordingly and House points granted as if it were a regular assignment. Minerva and I have only just completed this task and will discuss it at length at tonight's staff meeting."

Snape pulled a face at being kept out of the loop.

"Please do not feel put out; the less you knew the better, considering the frequency at which Tom has been summoning his followers."

The Potions master nodded. "Until tonight then."

A/N: Thanks so much to SLU, and to my wonderful readers and reviewers.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter 13 of 25

The dark creeps in, ebbing away at the light.

Chapter Eleven

"Ah, Severus, thank you for finally joining us."

"I apologize for my tardiness, Headmaster." Snape took his customary seat next to Minerva. "I was handling a situation; apparently, Mr. Weasley and Miss Brown are inept at casting simple silencing charms."

McGonagall puffed up, indignant that two of her charges had been caught *in flagrante delicto*.

"Needless to say, fifty house points each and a week's worth of detention shall only bring Slytherin closer to the House Cup. It is a pity Gryffindors lack subtlety." Snape did enjoy goading the Transfiguration professor.

Clucking her tongue, Minerva took a bite from her blueberry scone.

"Minerva, would you be so kind as to pass the butterscotch biscuits?" Snape entreated.

"Yes, if we could all get to the matter at hand?" Dumbledore cast a reproachful look at his two heads of house.

"But of course, Headmaster." McGonagall straightened as she placed her half-eaten scone next to her teacup.

Dumbledore turned to Severus. "Certainly, Headmaster, forgive my interruption, but I thought it prudent to inform Professor McGonagall of the less than scholarly pursuits of her charges."

"I am quite certain, Severus, that Miss Parkinson's reputation, or lack thereof, is safe from the likes of Miss Brown." McGonagall tsked.

Snape snorted, wondering if Minerva knew of the pool circulating amongst the sixth- and seventh-year Slytherin and Gryffindor boys of "Shag the Slag." As of last count, Miss Brown, no pun intended, had a leg up on the matter.

Flitwick rolled his eyes. The petty squabbles between Snape and McGonagall, though usually in good humor, did grow tiresome.

Dumbledore drew in a breath. "If you two are quite finished?"

Both professors nodded.

"Umbridge and Yaxley will be on the grounds tomorrow to collect the students. Obviously, they will come and leave empty-handed. Our Muggle-born students not of age are safe for the time being. The Board still requires parental consent for the children to leave school grounds."

Dumbledore paused, taking a sip of his tea, "As you all have been informed, the students will partake in the Quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw."

"What of the students who are of age? Surely, the clause of parental consent is not applicable?" Professor Sprout questioned, uneasy at the thought of four of her seven Hufflepuff students being led like lambs to the slaughter. "What of Rhodes, Haze..."

"You needn't worry, Pomona, Professor McGonagall and I have anticipated such events."

The Deputy Headmistress passed out the student rosters to the assembled staff and faculty.

"The headmaster and I, based on O.W.L. scores, have placed students within the charge of a professor in whose subject they excel."

"Charlotte Pinesworth is to organize my stores?" Poppy raised an eyebrow. "Third year, she single-handedly destroyed a month's worth of Pepper-Up potion by misshelving it next to the more reactive potions; the hospital wing was rancid for weeks."

"Yes, well some students could not be properly placed, but that is beside the point; the safety of our children is first and foremost."

Severus traced the singular name on his parchment. *Hermione Granger*. Was this some sort of joke?

"While I must agree that the safety of our student body is paramount, who saw it fit to place me with the insufferable, hand-waving, know-it-all?" The sneer the Potion master displayed was genuine.

"Why, Severus is there a problem with Miss Granger's placement?" Minerva's smirk rivaled that of her colleague.

"Surely, you must know that Umbridge is not so daft as to not see through this ruse. Placing Miss Granger in the vile hands of the bat of the dungeons will only raise a red flag." His eyes narrowed.

"And her Head of House is all but accommodating; obviously, your foresight into this matter is severely lacking." Pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index fingers, hoping to stave off the impending migraine, Snape cut his glare to the headmaster.

"You of all people, Headmaster, know the situation this puts me in."

"I do, Severus, but as you said, the safety of the students is paramount. The safety of Miss Granger is paramount to Harry."

"Potter, yes, Heaven help the wizarding world if that spoiled brat's every whim is not catered to."

"Severus, perhaps this is a matter better left to be discussed at another time?" The headmaster placed a hand on the younger man's shoulder and squeezed gently.

Aggrieved, Snape acquiesced.

"If there are no other questions or concerns?" Dumbledore appraised his staff. "Good," he nodded, "I shall see you all in the morning."

Severus waited until his colleagues filed out, leaving him alone with his employer.

"You can drop the jovial demeanor, old man."

"Severus..."

"This fucking ploy is transparent," Snape spat, spittle flying from his lips.

"Language, my boy."

Snape knew the appraising look he was receiving from the headmaster meant that his mind was made up.

"Don't," he ground out harshly. "Don't you dare lecture me on the greater good." Severus gripped the arms of his chair, knuckles white with pressure.

"You could compromise my position with this stunt. You must agree that Minerva would be better suited to the care of her own cub."

"I am well aware that Minerva as Miss Granger's Head of House is more than capable of seeing to her protection, but you must agree with me, that Delores' history with Miss Granger is spotted at best." An amused chuckle bubbled from the headmaster at the understatement.

"Inform me if you will, Headmaster, what is humorous about this situation?"

"The irony of the fox guarding the chicken coop."

"Albus, Muggle adages aside, get to the fucking point." Severus' tone was clipped, his patience frayed.

"After last year, I highly doubt Umbridge would dare to venture into the Forbidden Forest."

"Yes, yes, the incident with the Centaurs," Snape huffed, urging the headmaster to enlighten him to whatever scheme his senile mind concocted.

"Well, potions ingredients must be gathered, Severus. You should really have a care to keep your storeroom stocked." Blue eyes twinkled.

Snape sent the tea service smashing into the wall. Seething with rage, he stood toe to toe with the headmaster.

"No, perhaps it is you, Albus, who should have a care." The warning was unmistakable.

"Is that a threat?" The twinkle evaporated from the kindly blue eyes, and standing before Snape was not the benevolent, good-humored man the students had come to adore, but the pragmatic, calculating, deadly wizard who defeated Grindelwald.

"My hands are stained with the blood of innocents, I don't deny it." Dumbledore admitted.

"No, you don't, Headmaster, you merely relegate those losses as acceptable causalities, the cost of doing business during a time of war. But tell me, Headmaster, how do you sleep knowing you've ordered the deaths of men, women, and children? You who stand by idly while soldiers of light carry out your whims, in the name of the greater good?"

Dumbledore visibly flinched at the accusation.

"Tell me, Headmaster, do you know what it is like to hear the cries, the pleas, the futile requests for mercy? To feel life drain away, to taste on your lips the pungent smell of excrement as bowels release?"

The headmaster was the picture of stoic silence.

"I might be your indentured servant, but I am no longer your puppet."

"Is that all?"

Snape ground his teeth at the slight and shook his head.

"Know this, Old Man, you've set this series of events into motion, knowing that whatever *He* requires of me I must comply with."

"If that is all?" Albus dismissed.

"Oh, I fear, Headmaster, it is only the beginning."

Dumbledore petted the head of his familiar, who was perched upon his stand. "My friend, I fear the war has gained a liability."

The halls were empty as Snape stalked through the corridors. He wanted nothing more than to be done with his rounds, return to his quarters, and lose himself in a bottle of single malt.

Did the headmaster truly believe that his overt protection of Miss Granger would not go unnoticed by the Dark Lord? That even protected by the guise of spy, his life would be that much closer to forfeit, and Miss Granger, if lucky, would be killed outright?

His nostrils twitched, sweet pea and parchment, his ears picking up the distinct scrape of worn Mary Janes.

He continued on, taking the spiral staircase down to his chambers two at a time.

The shuffling of the intruder came to a halt, left or right. Snape watched from the shadows.

Left, steps timidly taken in the direction of his quarters.

He followed the figure obscured by the flickering light provided by the sconces.

Adrenaline spiked his system; he was a step behind, and the distance only need be bridged in a stride. He could feel the heat of the other body through his teaching frock.

A few feet separated himself from his quarters. His hand struck out, covering the interloper's mouth as Snape hauled the body against his own.

"I am not a man to be toyed with, Miss Granger." He pushed himself and his captive through the door and into his sitting room.

"And yet you continue to disregard my warnings." He spun her around to face him, hand still covering her mouth.

Her eyes wide, heart racing.

"Tell me, what is it that you seek from me?"

She looked away.

"That is not an answer, Miss Granger," He removed his hand from her mouth, but kept her in his firm grasp.

"What is it that you seek from me, Miss Granger?" His voice was low, seductive.

Hermione continued to avoid his eyes.

"Come now, you are no shrinking violet?"

He buried his nose into the riotous mane, his lips ghosting the crown of her head, down her face, a breadth away from her lips.

She made no attempt to free herself from her professor's slackened hold.

Viciously, his lips latched onto hers, teeth clinking as his tongue plowed between her lips, seeking purchase.

His grip tightened as she struggled to pull away, hands pummeling at his chest, bloody palms smearing his immaculate robes as the curse lit fire to every nerve ending in her body.

He pushed her away from him at the dampness of her tears wetting his own cheeks.

"You've gotten what you came for, Miss Granger."

Quavering, she waited for her body to calm itself.

"Bastard," she spat.

"A fact I've never denied."

"You," she took a breath, "can wipe that smug look off your face." Anger coursed through her veins, mostly aimed toward herself, and her lack of control around the dark and elusive man before her.

"Perhaps you will think twice about using me as a tool for your own self-destruction." He did not feel the slightest bit of remorse at the pain he caused; she would do well not to test his limits.

Fishing out a Percocet from the pocket of her skirt, she popped it into her mouth and let it dissolve under her tongue.

She swallowed the gritty bitterness.

"If I wanted a tool for self-destruction, sir, I'd let Ron fuck me."

"I am not a boy, Miss Granger, nor am I prone to the petty jealousies of your childish age group."

She flinched, stung by the insult.

"Deliberate cruelty is unbecoming of you, Miss Granger."

"I know you are lying."

"About what Miss Granger?"

"You care about me..."

At her proclamation, he laughed, a deep throated chuckle. "Miss Granger, so cocksure in her assumption."

Hermione squared her shoulders. "It is not an assumption, but a statement based on fact."

"And these alleged facts are?" Though his tone was light and laced with ridicule, he allowed her to continue with this game of theirs. "I have denied your advances, repeatedly stated that your infatuation is one-sided, yet you persist. Why?" Severus waited for her answer.

"Because, sir, I know you are lying."

"You've stated that already."

She crossed her arms over her chest, determined not to let his affected disinterest deter her.

"Because we both know this game we play, this dance of never ending circular motion, is our perversion on foreplay."

His jaw tightened.

"I get too close, and you push me away." As if proving her point, she stepped closer to him, gauging his reaction; she felt emboldened when he didn't move.

"We shared something this summer."

"Yes, because a handful of chats over literature is, of course, the step preceding undying love and devotion."

"Professor, using the poor man's wit again?"

He grasped her wrist, pulling her to him, closing the gap between their bodies. "This, Miss Granger," he gestured between the two of them, "is not a game." He held up a hand. "Listen for once, and do not speak."

Hermione nodded, closing her mouth and ending the protest on her tongue.

"The liberties you have taken are foolish... Perhaps I have been remiss in my duties to allow them, but it must end and end now."

"Admit to me that you care, and I'll leave you be."

Bloody defiant Gryffindor. "I do not take kindly to ultimatums, Miss Granger."

"Tough, *Professor*. I don't take kindly to lying."

He abruptly released the girl, putting distance between himself and Miss Granger. "I would have a care, Miss Granger; you tread a fine line and have no idea what might await you after the fall."

"I'm not scared of you, nor falling... I already have fallen."

"You would do well to fear me, Miss Granger." He turned from her.

"You won't hurt me."

Her voice so full of assuredness, he closed his eyes, pained.

"I already have." He turned to face her. "It won't be the fall that kills you, Miss Granger, but the sudden stop at the end."

A/N: Again heartfelt thanks and appreciation go out to my wonderful beta, SLU and to all my readers.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter 14 of 25

Black and white are not always what they seem.

Chapter Twelve

Used to waking early, Hermione was a morning person, but chasing the dawn was not a pastime she was eager to embrace. Wiping the sleep from her eyes, she stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. Checking her watch, it was only 5:15 A.M.

Approximately forty-five students were in the Great Hall, trying to stay awake, but losing the battle. Hermione spied Justin at the Hufflepuff table, leaning against one of his mates, eyes closed, head drooping forward.

Unsuccessful in stifling another yawn, she offered a small wave to Imelda Collins, a seventh-year Gryffindor. Imelda gave a dull smile as she sat next to the younger girl.

"Do you know what's going on?" the waifish brunette whispered.

"This is not the time for idle chit-chat. Five points from Gryffindor."

Hermione felt the blackness of his silhouette seep into her before she heard his silky, baritone bark.

A knot of tension coiled between the blades of her shoulders as she feigned interest in a worn divot etched into the wood of the table. The thumbnail size groove appeared as if a student or students had dug into the sturdy oak over a period of time. Wispy scratches and cracks trailed the length of the polished wood. Idly, Hermione traced the nonsensical and destinationless route with her fingertips.

Seconds ticked by. He smelt of lemon and crisp parchment. Her tongue darted from between her lips to moisten them; fingers stilled their traveling.

Was he waiting for her reaction?

Did he expect her to react?

"Sorry, Professor Snape."

"For what, Miss Granger, are you apologizing?" When Hermione turned to face Snape, that damned eyebrow was raised, mocking her.

"Miss Collins caused the loss of house points. Or has your over-indulged self importance and desperate need to be accepted at any cost addled that know-it-all brain of yours?"

Hermione's cheeks flushed pink in anger.

"Pathetic," he spat. "Five points for displaying traits indicative of your House."

Oh, how she wanted slap that self-satisfied smirk from his face.

The ruddy bastard.

Silently, she nodded in acquiescence to his authority.

Snape turned on his heel and made his way to the Hufflepuff table, no doubt to deduct points from Justin for nodding off.

"Sorry, Hermione." Imelda mouthed, patting her arm in sympathy.

Hermione gave her a watery smile.

"Professors... students... I am glad to see you all here, in body, if not quite in mind yet," the headmaster said, taking in the bleary-eyed and half-asleep students. A few nervous chuckles followed his jest.

"Professor McGonagall and I believe there are some lessons that cannot be learned in a classroom setting and are best approached from a more hands on, practical application point of view."

The deputy headmistress cleared her throat. "As the headmaster was saying, we, as your mentors and educators, believe it is your best interest, as N.E.W .T.-level students, to be gifted with the experience to expand your knowledge outside of a classroom setting. Each of you..." she appraised the sixth- and seventh-years gathered "will benefit under the tutelage of a professor in whose subject you excel or need a bit of one on one time to perfect your skills as future graduates of this establishment."

There were a few groans and gripes concerning the addition to their already full workload schedules, but the students recognized the charade for what it was. It was no accident that every person in this room, aside from the teachers, were Muggle-born students. They were not safe, and for the time being, Hogwarts provided the only haven for protection and defense. The sand, though, was quickly slipping through the hourglass.

"When your name is called, your assigned professor will be waiting for you. Your assignment is to be completed by the end of the day."

McGonagall read through the list: Justin had been sorted with Professor Sprout and Imelda with Professor Vector. Students began a queue, each chatting amongst themselves, discussing the syllabus that appeared in front of them once they were called.

Hermione and a boy from Ravenclaw, of whose name she could not remember were the last two to be called forward. The Ravenclaw, Connor, shuffled his way to the small group of students who were milling about Hagrid, who was excitedly rambling on about the newborn unicorn foal.

Finally, it was her turn. The scroll appeared before her. She removed the ribbon that bound the parchment and unfurled the syllabus. Quickly, she scanned the page. Her breath caught in her throat, eyes darting to Professor McGonagall, Dumbledore, and back to the scroll.

"Quiet down, please," Dumbledore spoke, calling the room to order. "Students, now that you all have your assigned task and professor, you may be excused."

Group by group, students filed out of the Great Hall.

Severus observed her through narrowed eyes; Granger would begin to catch flies if she didn't close her mouth.

Damn the headmaster for this.

Damn his pathetic excuse of an existence.

And damn the fucking witch who held fast to the idealistic and naive view that goodness was an endowed trait, whose virgin eyes were awestruck and enraptured by the bleak, dark night.

"Surely, Miss Granger, as a sixth-year, you are capable of reading a simple piece of paper?"

"Yes, *Professor*," she ground out through clenched teeth. "I was simply expecting to be placed with either Professors McGonagall or Flitwick—"

"But did you not hear your esteemed Head of House?" the Potions master interrupted.

"Students are to be placed with a professor in whose subject they excel or in which they lack proficiency."

The condescending git was treating her like some... some... dunderheaded first-year.

"As of late, your performance in Potions would just marginally grade a "T."

Indignation coursed through her. "Well, if my skills in Potions are sub-par, then perhaps fault should lie with the instructor for not properly performing to task."

"Miss Granger, am I to understand that you are questioning my ability to impart the knowledge of my? field of expertise upon these lack-wit, uninspired, miscreants?" Snape queried, his aura of aloofness in place.

"Why, professor, I didn't mean to imply that I was questioning your ability. I was stating a fact." Hermione quipped, hands firmly planted on her hips.

"Miss Granger," he bent low, his lips close enough to graze her ear, "I can assure you that my abilities are not lacking in any way, shape, or form," he breathed.

The richness of his voice flooded her body with warmth. Swallowing to quench her suddenly dry mouth, she looked up at him. "Why do you enjoy goading me?" Her breath coming in small pants, his body, lean, so close, taut and strong. She felt heady.

"Because I can." Severus straightened. "Come along, there is work to be done."

His long strides carried him from the Hall, robes billowing elegantly behind him, leaving a stunned Miss Granger in his wake.

A/N: I'm back and promise not to abandon this story, though to be blunt writer's block and RL suck at times. As always with heartfelt appreciation for all the encouragement, my wonderful beta SeverusLovesUs, you rock! To all my readers and reviews, hang tight it's going to be a helluva ride.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter 15 of 25

She was melancholy and marked, her made her his.

Chapter 13

"So nice of you to finally join me," Snape snapped as he heard her footfalls closing in on him from behind. He paused in his steps.

"Now, if you have ceased your childish tantrum, there is work to be done. My stores are, regrettably, depleted and must be restocked."

"Will we be traveling to Diagon Alley...? Sir," she added as an afterthought.

Her shorter legs struggled to keep up with his pace as he resumed his brisk walk. He paused again to allow Hermione to bridge their gap.

"No, we will be foraging in the Forbidden Forest." He looked down his aquiline nose at her. "I suggest you either change or transfigure your clothing into something more appropriate."

Hermione glanced down at herself; her school robe was opened, revealing her uniform. "If I may go to my room and change, sir, I won't be but a moment."

Snape nodded. "See that you aren't."

Hermione didn't dally as she hurried to the Gryffindor dormitory. "Bertie Botts." The Fat Lady swung open before she even reached the portrait hole. The common room was engulfed in warmth from the roaring fire.

"Hermione?"

She jumped, startled. Haunted eyes turned to her as the Boy Who Lived pushed himself into a sitting position on the sofa.

"Harry, is everything okay?"

The dark haired boy took his glasses off and scrubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands before replacing his glasses.

"I can't sleep... Nightmares."

"About You-Know-Who?" she questioned, taking a seat on the ottoman.

Harry nodded. "Yeah, each dream is more terrifying than the last. There is so much pain and death." He ran his fingers through his sleep-tousled hair. "And I can't do anything to stop it."

The clock above the fireplace mantle chimed quarter to six. Hermione looked at the clock. Snape was waiting for her. She glanced back at Harry, who resembled a wounded puppy, then back at the clock. Bigger Snape. If he insisted on acting like a giant prat, he could wait. Harry needed her.

"Have you spoken with Dumbledore... Seen what he has to say?"

"He thinks I should practice my Occlumency and refine my skills more, as if it's going to help." He huffed, closing his eyes, leaning back against the headrest of the sofa. "I don't know if I can take much more of this, 'Mione." Tears pricked the corners of his eyes.

"Don't give up, Harry." Hermione itched to grab his hand, to offer some gesture of comfort. "You can't. It will get better... It has to."

"How can you be so sure?" He still wasn't looking at her.

"I wouldn't be a know-it-all if I wasn't."

Harry cracked a genuine smile. "Hermione." He turned to face her. "Never change."

"I can't promise that, but I can promise to always be here for you. And you've got to promise me something."

"What?"

"That you'll ask Ginny to the Yule Ball."

Harry flushed scarlet.

"Don't think I don't see the way you two look at each other during meals."

"Mione, the Yule Ball is more than a month away," he whined, embarrassed.

"Well, I just thought I would get the ball rolling before someone else decides to take an interest." She cheekily smiled.

"Who?" Harry's head shot up, his embarrassment seemingly over.

Hermione leaned in. "I'm not one to gossip," she whispered conspiratorially, "but I've heard Lavender and Pavarti..."

The clocked chimed six o'clock A.M. She really had lost track of time. "Harry, I've got to go; Professor Snape is waiting for me."

He nodded. "I'll see you at dinner." It was more of a statement than a question.

Hermione rushed to her room. Lavender was snoring, murmuring something or other about Won-Won. Parvarti was just beginning to stir into wakefulness. Quietly as possible, she tiptoed to her trunk. Hermione forewent modesty for the sake of time and quickly doffed her uniform for her favorite pair of denims, a blue and white-striped jumper, which she now amply filled out compared to last year, and her hiking boots. Grabbing a hair-tie from her shower caddy, she pulled her unruly curls into a high ponytail. Slinging her school robe over her shoulders, she dashed back into the common room, through the portrait hole, and into the solid and furious form of Professor Snape.

Rebounding off him, Hermione used the wall behind her for leverage. Snape didn't seem as affected, needing to only take a step back to regain his bearings.

"Professor..."

"Miss Granger!" he snapped. "Follow me *now!*" he whispered. His rage, barely concealed, caused his voice to dip even lower.

Hermione shivered, whether from fear or the sound of his delectable voice, she couldn't be certain.

Head ducked in shame, she followed him, making a conscious effort to stay a few steps behind him as they walked through the corridors of the castle to the Forbidden Forest. Hermione felt like a condemned Azkaban prisoner awaiting the Dementor's Kiss. Between his heavy breathing and the popping of his knuckles every so often as Snape clenched and unclenched his fists, the silence was deafening.

Once outside, the cold winter air whipped through Hermione's petite form, and she made fast work of the buttons on her robe.

"Professor, I am sorry, but Harry needed me."

His jaw clenched; Snape refused to acknowledge her. He didn't ask for much, just that she simply follow his directives, but the stubborn, irritating bint couldn't even do that. Didn't she know or even care that her life was in danger? No, he supposed she didn't. She was like every other fucking sycophant in the school, bowing and scraping to kiss the pompous and arrogant arse of Potter.

Snape stopped at the edge of the forest. The sun was just starting to reach over the horizon. He closed his eyes and sucked in a lungful of air, releasing it slowly.

"We've many ingredients to harvest and are behind schedule."

Hermione opened her mouth to apologize, but closed it. She doubted he would want to hear anything she had to say anyway. Snape handed her a slip of parchment with numerous potions ingredients to be gathered. There must have been thirty items on the list. Belladonna, Larkspur petals, daisy root, valerian root, nettles...

"Sir, will we be collecting all these today?" A part of her wished the answer to be yes just to spend that much more time in his presence, uncomfortable though it had become.

"No, Miss Granger."

Disappointment filled her, and though she could not see his face as his back was still toward her, she imagined his eyes rolling at the hopefulness she allowed to seep into her voice.

"If you have finished with your incessant need to question everything..." Snape gestured to the forest and for her to precede him. Sighing heavily, she trudged on, list in hand.

They worked in tension-filled and strained silence. The sun was bearing down on them through the coverage of the forest canopy. Covertly, she would watch him. The precision and grace he showed as the silver blade of his knife dislodged a plant from the earth, soil falling in clumps, was amazing. With the skill of a surgeon wielding a scalpel, he snipped roots, leaves, and petals, depositing each into labeled specimen jars.

"Miss Granger, I suggest you return to your work, unless you wish to earn a zero for the assignment."

"Yes, sir."

Hermione crossed off another ingredient from the list. She had been working diligently for hours. The slight headache that had begun an hour ago was now a migraine, and the heat of the sun, despite frigidness of winter and lack of breakfast, was becoming nauseating.

"Professor, can we rest for moment?" Hermione set down her tools and rested her head on her knees.

Snape turned to her, insult on his lips dying unspoken; the pallor of her face startled him. "Miss Granger..." He moved to her, crouching beside her.

"Migraine," she moaned, the throbbing behind her eyes intensifying.

Severus positioned himself behind her, mindful not to come into bodily contact with her. His head was bent low, close to her ear.

"Miss Granger," he breathed.

Hermione could smell the tea on his breath, smell the dirt around them, feel the heat radiating off of his body from their close proximity.

Keeping his voice low, he said, "Miss Granger, I need you to lift your head."

She did, and he moved back to accommodate himself to their new position. "Close your eyes. That's right..." he encouraged. "Now take your hair down."

Hermione complied, moving her hands behind her and sliding the black elastic from her hair. The curls fell past her shoulders.

Dipping his head low once again, he breathed gently, "Imagine a soft summer breeze."

She nodded, the ends of her curls brushing his nose.

"Feel the warmth, smell and taste the scents carried on the wind. Can you feel the warmth, feel it wash over your body?"

Hermione moaned, her head lolling back. "Feel the gentle wind as it blows through the trees, through your hair, each curl uncoiling as the tension is carried away."

Fifteen minutes, and she was drugged listening to him, cooing contentedly as he whispered to her, his voice a soothing balm.

"Open your mouth." He reached around and placed the mint leaf in her mouth. "Chew it slowly; savor the crispness, the natural oil." Hermione did as was told.

Her migraine had ebbed away, and the mint was settling her stomach. Cracking opening an eye, she no longer felt as sensitive to the light.

"I feel better... Thank you." Sincerity and gratefulness colored her words. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

Not answering her question, Snape moved from behind Hermione and to his portable potions curio. He pulled out an apple, and using a clean knife, cored and sliced the fruit, handing her the pieces.

"Eat this to settle any lingering nausea, and then we'll break for lunch."

Hermione took a bite of the deliciously sweet segment of apple. Severus watched her chew and swallow the fruit. He followed suit with his half of the apple.

"As a child, I was plagued with headaches. My grandmother was not a wealthy woman, and a visit to the chemist was a luxury we could not afford." Absently, Snape fingered the rosary in his pocket. "I would be laid up in bed, and she would sit with me. Painting beautiful pictures, rubbing my temples, she would carry on about the summer days of her youth, stories of the first time she met my grandfather until I was so distracted I forgot about the pain or fell asleep."

Hermione had stopped eating her apple, so riveted was she to this man's tale. The way his eyes would spark with light or the corners on his mouth would tug upward, forming the curve of a smile. She wasn't even sure if he was aware of it himself.

"She sounds like a lovely woman."

"She's dead," he snapped, his eyes darkening as he remembered where he was.

Hermione's heart sank, saddened at his turnabout.

"No!" She startled them both with her unplanned outburst. "Please, sir, don't..." she paused, searching for the words to continue, "don't shut down, please, not with me." She crawled to him, closing the small distance between them to kneel in front of him. "Please," she pleaded, eyes searching.

Severus closed his eyes and looked away from her, his resolve cracking. "Such a dangerous game we play... Hermione."

She gasped. Had she wheedled her way through the layers of cold, hard, black ice that shrouded his wounded heart?

"S...Severus?" Hermione tested the name, falling from her lips in quite uncertainty. Her fingers raked through clumps of upturned earth, nervousness building in her gut, her body prickling with anticipation.

"Look at me," Snape commanded softly.

"I am." It hurt to breathe. Pressure compounded within her chest. She exhaled.

He shook his head slightly, as if amused. Inky hair glistening with the sheen of oiliness fell forward. "*See me.*"

"I do," she rasped, inching forward, their knees briefly touching.

"Give me your hand."

"They're dirty." Black soil caked her fingers. Grime and grit was embedded under her neatly trimmed nails.

"It matters not."

She placed her hands in his larger ones; he turned them over so her palms were face up.

His thumb matriculated over the smooth skin.

"Be still," he chided as her hand jerked.

"Sorry... tickles."

Snape released her hands. "Keep them where they are, if you please."

Hermione nodded, confusion creasing her brow as she watched her professor draw a silken, wrapped bundle from his voluminous robes. She was drawn to the gracefulness of his movement, the delicate way he caressed the silken object resting gently upon his lap. The dedication a precision he took, slowly and methodically, unwrapping his parcel. Stray bursts of sunlight bounded off the glittering object, momentarily obscuring it from her view.

With the heft of the hilt in his hand, he held the blade up for her perusal. She blinked once, twice, comprehension of his prize creeping into consciousness.

"I said you would do well to fear me, Miss Granger." His eyes rested on his blade.

"I don't..."

"Even now?" he queried at her unfinished statement.

Wide eyes followed the movement of the dagger as Snape shifted it from his left to right hand. Hermione was unable to find her voice; she nodded dumbly.

"I warned you, Miss Granger, I am not a man to be trifled with."

Another nod of affirmation.

"Yet, you persist, seek me out despite my protestations. You claim to want me."

Another nod.

"Miss Granger..." he raised the blade to his left palm and sliced down, drawing rivets of blood to the surface. Hermione didn't flinch when he grabbed her wrist with his uninjured hand, nor when the cold silver ripped through her flesh. "You asked this of me," he solemnly stated, clasping their hands together, a river of red trickling down their arms.

"Baptized in my blood, so shall I shed blood. With my blood I offer my body."

A/N: As usual heartfelt thanks and appreciate go out to my beta, SLU, as well as to all my readers and reviewers.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter 16 of 25

He ensnared his whore only to be shattered by her melancholy.

Chapter Fourteen

"That which nourishes us also destroys us." Snape released her hand.

"What did you do?" Fear crept into her voice as she wiped away their mingled blood on the pant leg of her jeans. Hermione inspected the thin line of the flesh wound that marred her palm.

"What you asked of me."

"I don't understand."

"You wanted me, Miss Granger, did you not?"

Hermione nodded dumbly, her thumb tracing the open wound. The skin pulled apart, and fresh blood leaked out.

"You have me," he whispered, taking her hand in his larger one, "in blood and in body." Snape gauged her reaction, willing her to understand the significance of his action.

Hermione jerked her hand from his grasp, her expression blank. "I don't understand.... What did you do to me?"

Snape's eyes darkened, his pupils dilating so that his irises were almost indistinguishable from the clouded blackness.

"I thought..." He cleared his throat. Never had his eloquence failed him so, but tendrils of doubt and fear of rejection strangled his ability to wax poetic. "I thought you wanted this," he swallowed, "wanted m—"

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Her fists balled, she pounded them into the upturned soil.

Snape recoiled, her words affecting him like a physical blow.

"What the hell did you do to me?"

"Forgive me, Miss Granger. I was mistaken in my assumption." He stiffened, bitterness coating his words, self-hatred bubbling within at his show of emotion, of weakness.

"Bastard! Answer me!" Hermione spat, heaving clumps of dirt at the man before her, "you fucking bastard!" She launched herself at him, bowling them both over. Snape landed on his back with a hard *thud*, the air knocked from his lungs.

Small fists pummeled at his chest, his legs trapped between her spread thighs. Unintelligible epitaphs falling from her lips as she debased his person.

"Hate you." She was panting, "hate you," her aggression and adrenaline rush waning.

"Enough!" Snape thundered, moving to dislodge the girl.

Blindly, Hermione flayed, raking her nails across his cheek, fresh score marks raising on his pale skin as he succeeded in throwing her off.

Hermione was unceremoniously flung, falling in a heap at his feet.

Snape's breathing was ragged; he coughed, choked by breathlessness.

Miss Granger hadn't moved. She was huddled in fetal position, sobbing. He stood over her, withdrawing a monogrammed, green and silver handkerchief from his pocket and tossing it at her.

"Please desist with your petty childishness."

She turned her head to face him. "Git."

"Miss Granger, your flair for insults is astonishing," Snape mocked.

"Snivellus," she spat, her lips twisting into a cruel smirk.

"Yes, how very original. It's as if you breathe new life into a childhood taunt. Do try again."

Hermione pushed herself from the ground, looking up at him, an amused smile flittering across her lips, as they had found themselves in this position once before.

"May I inquire as to what you find so amusing?"

"I just realized something, *Professor*."

"And that would be?"

"Why Lily could never bring herself to love you. How could she love something with no soul, no—"

Hermione was yanked up by her shoulders, Snape's face mere inches from her own.

"No what, Miss Granger? Please enlighten me with your acumen."

"Heart," she gasped, wincing in pain, his hold on her unrelenting.

"I can assure you, Miss Granger, your meager physical discomfort cannot amount to the pain that you wrought upon me." He released her. "Do collect your specimens; it's time we headed back to the castle."

The persona of indifference slipped back into place.

Hermione didn't miss the brief flash of hurt in the depths of his eyes.

"You hurt me too," she whispered.

Snape turned from her and began the mundane task of cataloguing his jars.

"Miss Granger, I have done nothing but try to protect you. A task you delight in making increasingly difficult with your brashness and total disregard for my position."

"But you ignore me, turn me away. You dismiss my feelings."

"And you continue to act like a spoiled, petulant child who refuses to utilize her intellect in favor of a bleeding heart."

"My *bleeding* heart brought me to you," Hermione snapped, her pride wounded.

"Oh, yes, how can I forget? According to you, I do not possess a heart, and therefore, am incapable of understanding the intricacies of tender feelings, of love."

"I didn't mean what I said." She had never felt such shame.

"But you said it all the same. Another lesson then, Miss Granger, once spoken-words cannot be taken back."

"I'm sorry." Tears slipped down her cheeks.

"I've seen Hufflepuffs who snivel better than you." His caustic remark cut deep.

"I deserve that."

"Oh, no, Miss Granger, you deserve so much more." A chill ran up her spine at the calmness of his voice. "You deserve to have your soul laid bare, to express feelings that you've tried in vain to repress, to deny their existence."

"Look at me!" he commanded when she turned away from his unyielding gaze.

Her tears fell harder.

"To profess something so deep that you thought you never could possibly feel again."

He was on his knees before her. "To kneel before the mirage of your salvation, to symbolically offer your fealty in the form of a Muggle blood bond."

Hermione felt weak. Her knees trembled and gave as she sank to the earth, her pallor turning green with sick.

"And to have that thrown back in your face."

He was so full of loathing and vitriol; she was sure he would strike her.

"That is what you deserve."

Her stomach churned, head light and dizzy. On her hands and knees, she vomited. Barely digested apple and bile coated the ground.

"Oh, God... Oh, God... No... No... No..." She repeated a softly spoken mantra.

A wail of anguish tore from her throat; she couldn't catch her breath as the sobs began anew. Arms wrapped around her midsection. Hermione rocked herself back and forth.

"As touching as your act of contrition is, I will not absolve you."

Amber eyes sought black. She was stricken at the empty hollowness she found in the inky depths.

"I—I want you," she begged, broken.

"You had me."

A/N: As per usual thanks to my beta, SLU, and to all my readers and reviewers.

A/N: Snape's quote, "That which nourishes us also destroys us," is a loose translation of Angelina Jolie's tattoo. I saw her discuss her tattoo on an interview and thought it was a pretty thought provoking quote.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter 17 of 25

Two singular souls melancholy and broken

Chapter Fifteen

"*You had me.*" Three little words that reverberated throughout her entire being and destroyed her so utterly and completely.

She clutched his soiled handkerchief to her chest.

In silence, the darkest recesses of her mind leached toward the forefront.

"*You had me.*"

Hermione opened her mouth, but no words tumbled forth. Oh, how she wanted to speak, ramble, to think aloud, or just scream—anything to still the myriad of thoughts from overtaking her.

"*You had me.*"

"*What you deserve...*"

"*... not absolve you...*"

She clenched her eyes shut, dirt-encrusted fingernails digging into the flesh of her scalp, dragging down to her ears, scratching away. Begging the voices off, *please stop, please go away...* *please*, she pleaded, broken. Her own thoughts were drowned out by the visions and voice of the man before her. The man she had broken.

There were no more words to be spoken, nothing more to be said. In silence comes clarity and understanding.

He hadn't said a word to her or deigned to acknowledge her very presence as they labeled and stored the freshly gathered ingredients. He didn't volunteer to help her jar the more reactive specimens, and Hermione dared not ask for assistance.

She felt dazed, stifled as they trekked back to the castle. Walls of pressure within were compressing and slowly constricting in her chest. Each breath of oxygen gasped set her lungs ablaze.

Hogwarts was in the distance. Faintly, she could hear the cheers from the Quidditch pitch as the game carried on. Hermione shifted the small potions box in her arms, her fingers grasping it more firmly. The essence of juniper tickled her nose as the sweet scent wafted up from a jar whose cork hadn't been properly stopped.

Lost in contemplation, she hadn't realized they were in the castle until she bumped into him. Snape had stopped outside his classroom. Glass jars clinked and rattled against one another as Hermione nearly lost her hold on the ingredients. She mumbled an apology, flushing hot with a mixture of embarrassment and shame.

Snape didn't react; he just unwarded his door, opened it, and walked through into his classroom. He proceeded to unward his storeroom. Inside, he exhaled softly. He set the portable curio down on the trolley and began the tedious process of shelving his stores by alphabet and common usage.

Hermione's arms were growing heavy, leaden with the weight of the box cradled against her. She stood stock still, outside his storeroom unmoving.

"Professor Snape," a throat cleared.

Glass shattered, shards dancing, skittering across the flagstone as the potions box fell from listless fingers. Numbed, tendrils of fears slithered through her body, freezing her to the spot. Hermione could not force herself to move, to cross the distance between her and the open door of the storeroom, her sanctuary and last ditch effort at refuge.

Calm and collected, Snape flitted through the door entering his classroom. He snorted softly at the wasted ingredients and energy expended that now lay ruined at his feet.

"Madame Umbridge, to what do I owe this visit?" Measured steps propelled his body forward with dignified purpose as he bodily placed himself between the interloper and Granger, who had yet to move a muscle. With a slight bow and inclination of his head, Snape deferred to his guest.

The squat harpy preened at his display of courtly manners. "Official Ministry business I'm afraid." She drew breath as if the task was an imposition, menial, and beneath a woman of her self-purported stature. Snape knew differently by the quick and fleeting glint in her eyes.

"Yes, of course." He nodded, moving closer to the smaller woman. "The C.O.U.R.T. mandates," he leaned in close, "that the Ministry must do everything in its power to ensure that those of a 'lesser birthright' are protected." His tone implied anything but, and Umbridge delighted in their tête à tête

"Certainly, it hardly seems fair to persecute them based on the unfortunate blood status of their parentage." Narrowed eyes flickered past the physical barrier of Snape's imposing frame to her prey. Umbridge placed a well-manicured hand, pink polish glistening against the glittering of the blazing wall sconces, on his cloak covered arm.

"After all, we are not uncivilized." Though not spoken aloud, her implication that those not pure-blooded, or at the very least of half-blood status, were inferior filth.

"Quite right," Snape purred, the malicious glint in his eyes misinterpreted by his contemporary as camaraderie.

Hermione shut her eyes, barely breathing, the self-belief of his words leaving her cold.

"Madame Umbridge, here you are." Dumbledore entered the room. "You missed quite the rousing Quidditch match," he remarked offhandedly. "And what do we have here?" He peered over his half-moon spectacles at Miss Granger. A flourish of his wand saw the mess at her feet vanished.

"Miss Granger, you must have a care. Who knows what potentially harmful situation could have befallen you? Luckily Severus was here."

Hermione's brow furrowed; was the headmaster issuing a not-so-subtle warning behind the double entendre?

"Messrs Potter and Weasley were inquiring as to your whereabouts; I believe there is still time to catch up with them before the end of the luncheon period."

"Thank you, Professor. I am rather famished."

Smiling with grandfatherly affection, Dumbledore watched as Hermione scurried out of the room like Wormtail with Crooks hot on his trail.

Snape distanced himself from Umbridge. "Headmaster." Roles in place, he deferred to his master.

"Actually, Severus, It is Dolores I am interested in having a word with; if you will excuse us."

"But of course, headmaster." Snape paused. "Madame Umbridge, perhaps we can finish this conversation at a later date?"

"I am sure time can be arranged, Professor Snape." Heels clacked, sounds echoing off the walls of the dungeon, Dumbledore's quieter footfalls following.

Alone, Snape summoned himself a snifter of whisky, downing the shot in one toss-back. The amber liquid burned his throat on the way down to his unsettled stomach, no doubt about to wreak havoc on the ulcer yet to heal from his last reckless bout of binge drinking.

How he wanted this all to be over and done with; he was past the point of caring if he survived or not. As he felt now, death would be a welcoming embrace.

Hermione didn't seek out Harry or Ron in the Great Hall, instead she locked herself in the prefects' bathroom. Submerging herself in a scalding bath, she fervently wished she could wash away the wreck of the day as easily as the dirt and grime from her body that now floated atop the dingy, sudsy water. Taking a breath, she plunged under the water, willing the pain away, praying her soul could be sloughed off like the red and burned cells of her flesh to be grown anew.

Hermione broke through the surface. A bitter cackle of a laugh ripped from her throat. "The Brightest Witch of Her Age" was a moniker she did not ask to be saddled with; now its burden threatened to collapse on top of her. She had cocked things up beyond repair. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty. She deserved his disdain. Hermione had all but pushed him to the brink, eagerly watching and waiting for him to tumble off the precipice. And when he did, she pulled away the safety net to prevent the stop, his death. Watched him freefall, baring and mocking the beaten fragments of his soul, the glue, her constant and not always welcome presence in his life, gingerly holding the pieces together, evaporated, completely shattering the pieces just as surely as she had the ingredients they had gathered.

The seventh shot and his senses were dulled. His taste buds could no longer distinguish between the vintage or brand as he rummaged through the butler in his chambers, filling and refilling his glass with liquor from empty and half-empty bottles.

What a fucking fool he made himself to be. Not once but twice in his lifetime falling for the unattainable. Women who could or would not look beyond bonds of friendship, or at the very least lust, to see the man before them. He allowed himself to be love's errant whipping boy, relished in the delusions and misbegotten hope that he had worth, a heart, though damaged, to be given wholly without reservation.

He was thirty-six and had spent the last eighteen worthless years of his manhood remembering a dream and chasing the falsehood of redemption and grasping at the lies of innate goodness. Now, he was on his way to hell. At least he would be good and drunk when his sentence was fated upon him.

Her freshly scrubbed skin was tinged pink. She was clean, physically at least. Emotionally drained, the pair of jeans and sweater she hastily donned felt two sizes too big. Hair, still damp, was pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. Wand tucked into her back pocket, Hermione ventured through the corridors of the castle. Her feet hefting the slight weight of her body, turmoil roiling in her gut, towards the direction of the dungeon.

"Professor Snape," she called, knocking on the closed door to his classroom. No answer. "Professor Snape, it's Hermione Granger, sir." Still no answer, though she highly doubted if he was in, he would answer. Not to her summons.

The buzz felt wondrous, though what little rationale he retained knew this state was temporary. Getting pissed in the middle of the night was one matter, but to wallow in self-loathing and alcohol when it was not even two in the afternoon was another low which he had reached. He found he didn't care; the outside world be damned.

She gave up. Slightly dejected, she furthered her journey into the bowels of the dungeon.

"Professor Snape." Words hesitantly spoken, the knock on his chamber door, even more so.

The ninth shot, glass to his lips, was stilled; a staggered few steps found him at his door.

Hermione jumped back as the door was yanked violently open. The stench of alcohol pervaded her senses. The man before her reeked of liquor.

"You're drunk."

"I assure you..." he paused, "I am not," breath, "drunk, Miss Granger, but I am about..." he knocked back the shot in his hand, "five shots away from glorious oblivion." His speech was slurred ever so lightly. From what little Hermione could see, he appeared to be able to function; his motor skills and coordination didn't seem worse for the wear. For that she was frightened. If he knew his tolerance, and from the smell of him, he had been drinking for some time, she could only assume this sort of behavior occurred frequently.

"I should go." Hermione lacked the conviction of her statement.

"You will find no one here to disagree with that, Miss Granger." The biting edge was lost in the haze of whisky.

"But I don't want to. Go, I mean." Nervously, she picked at a frayed thread of her sweater.

"Yes..." He licked at liquor coating his lips. "I don't believe your wants have any hold in this conversation."

"Even if it's you that I want."

"Do not fucking lie to me," he snarled.

He was so close to her, his face contorted in anger millimeters from her own. The vapors burning her sensitive nose. She clutched at his cloak, propelling them back into his living quarters. Taken off balance, he stumbled, the traction of the soles of his boots on the area rug causing him to fall backward. Hermione, in his arms, shrieked as he landed with a hard *thud* on the floor.

He groaned in pain, choking on a cough at having the breath knocked out of him.

Hermione, unscathed, as her professor bore the brunt of the impact, pushed herself off of him. "Are you okay?"

The glare directed at her was the only response she provoked in him. A wave of his wand saw the door to his chambers slammed shut. He threw a hand over his face, covering his eyes, perfectly content to lay there sprawled out on his backside, ignoring the bloody nuisance.

"Can we please talk?" she pleaded, her fingers tracing the sliver of the flesh wound on her palm.

No response.

"You bequeathed your fealty upon me." Hermione waited, but he was still unresponsive. Perhaps she should wait until both parties were in their right frame of mind. As it were, she was running on guilt and the need for his acceptance, and he was quite possibly three sheets to the wind, despite his denial otherwise.

"How do I reciprocate?"

He laughed. This was not the reaction she had been expecting.

"Of all the fucking irony," he grouched, pushing himself into a sitting position. "You cannot."

"But I want to." She sounded almost petulant.

"Wants do not enter into this equation. You physically and magically cannot offer your fealty to another while cursed."

Her brow knitted in confusion, thought lines crinkling her forehead. "But you..."

He nodded slowly.

"But you knew I wouldn't..."

He nodded again as she began to piece together the puzzle.

"Why?" Why would he promise himself, mind, body, and soul to her, knowing that she couldn't return the sentiment, or if she so chose, could deny his sacrifice all together.

"The answer should be quite obvious, Miss Granger."

"You..." she pointed between them, incapable of proper speech.

He nodded.

"Oh..."

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A/N: Heartfelt thanks as usual goes to my beta, SeverusLovesUs, and of course to all my readers and reviewers.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Chapter 18 of 25*

She was marked as his melancholy whore

A/N: This chapter is dark and deals with violence towards another person and the implication of perpetrating violence on another person. Please skip this chapter if you are uncomfortable with such violent actions (i.e. murder and poisoning) and read my author's notes at the end of the chapter. Thanks.

Chapter Sixteen

"Would you care for a cuppa or biscuit?" Dumbledore gestured to the tea service and sweet-laden cookie tier.

"Thank you, but no," Umbridge offered with a tight smile, perturbed at the ever-jovial headmaster. A pink pump tapped absently on the flagstone, beating out a soft rhythm of annoyance.

"I've official orders, Headmaster, and your attempt at interference, aside from causing problems with my superiors, is only prolonging the inevitable. The C.O.U.R.T. mandate will pass."

Dumbledore poured himself a cup of tea. "Yes, your orders, and from whom were they given?"

"I'm afraid your implications, Headmaster, are sorely lacking in truth."

"Forgive me; I have been merely keeping abreast of the latest fodder. One does hear rumors when one keeps certain, less than savory, company. By the by, how is Mister

Yaxley?" Dumbledore brought the teacup to his lips, taking a dainty sip.

Umbridge puffed up. "I am not sure exactly what you mean, Headmaster. I do not make it a habit to consort with 'less than savory' characters, as you so eloquently put it. I'm afraid you might be more apt to associate with those prone to such habits..." a beat, "...if I were one to follow gossip." A shark's smile, feral, against coral-painted lips.

Nonplussed, the headmaster popped a lemon drop into his mouth, the candy dish nearly empty. Umbridge cleared her throat and produced a scroll. "I have here, by decree of the Ministry of Magic, a request that Mr. Justin Finch-Fletchley and Miss Hermione Granger present themselves tomorrow at noon for birth and blood right registration." Umbridge unfurled the scroll. Dumbledore quickly scanned the contents.

"Of course, we mustn't defy an official decree from the Ministry. I have but one suggestion though: as is school policy, a member of the faculty or staff shall escort the children if they are to leave school grounds."

"I can assure you, Headmaster, Mr. Finch-Fletchley will be safe with Mr. Yaxley, and I shall accompany Miss Granger."

"Yes, that is all perfectly fine and well, but I must insist that Professor McGonagall and Rubeus Hagrid be in attendance, such as school policy dictates."

The small, conniving smile dimmed on Umbridge's face a fraction at Dumbledore's request. "The safety of the children is of the utmost importance, Headmaster." She nodded in begrudging agreement, knowing she had been outmaneuvered, and acquiesced to the older wizard's well-played trump card.

"We must discuss the particulars...."

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Beyond the blood rushing in her ears, Hermione could hear nothing. He loved her? "You love me?" she whispered, unsure whether she grasped his meaning correctly or if the liquor was clouding his better judgment.

"Truth and knowledge can be found outside the pages of a book, Miss Granger." Snape pushed himself up from his prone position and sat cross-legged in front of her.

"Why?" Hermione struggled to find a foothold to grasp at some normalcy and to regain composure in a situation in which she possessed no control, struggled to seek answers to questions spoken and left unspoken.

"Why not?" He shrugged noncommittally.

"But..."

He held up an elegant hand, effectively silencing her. "Not every question posed has an answer, rational or otherwise."

She nodded, accepting his explanation for the moment. Where she was open, her emotions playing across her face, expressing her every thought and fear, he was closed off, a wall of indifference, his emotions rarely on display. This man, who prided himself on the aloof persona he cultivated with such care, was nothing more than a wounded boy. A boy whose anguish and hurt ran deep into his very essence and lay guarded by an abiding sense of self-dependence and preservation.

"Something you find interesting about my person?"

His eyebrow rose.

Hermione sucked her lower lip between her teeth and averted her eyes. "May I see your Dark Mark?"

A moment of hesitation was the only indication that her request shocked him. Snape shrugged out of his frock coat. With nimble fingers, he removed his cufflink, unbuttoned the sleeve of his oxford, and pushed the crisp linen past his elbow, the angry black tattoo, a stain on his corrupted soul was revealed.

Hermione drew her body toward his, her fingers twitching above the marred skin of his forearm. A desire to run her tongue over the Mark, to sample its darkness, to feel and taste his pain, swept through her body with a shudder. Her pupils dilated, her breath coming in short, shallow pants.

Snape shifted his body from her. "I pray that my sickness and depravity that I have willingly surrounded myself with never comes to harm you, that the darkness my soul bares and that I hold in my heart is something that you will never be privy to." He closed his eyes, tears leaking from the corners. The kiss of saline glided down his cheeks in a baptism, bathing him in the weakness of emotion.

"Sev..." the words stuck in her throat as she choked back a mournful sob.

Severus exhaled, slowly collecting himself. "Miss Granger." He paused to sort out his next thought.

Hermione knew his tone all too well. He had seemingly shifted from man to professor, the chilling coldness of the transition jarring.

"Your incompetence has cost a day of labor and needed ingredients. I am afraid you have earned another night of detention." There was no humor or playfulness to his words. "Do you understand?"

"What is my punishment, sir?"

"A roll of parchment on the ways in which the Fidelity Fealty can be removed."

Agog, "But, sir..." she sputtered, "the only way in which the curse can be removed is if the caster, without undue influence, lifts it of their own volition." Hermione caught her breath. "I cannot possibly fill an entire parchment."

Snape shook his head. When would Miss Granger realize that the darker aspects of life were seldom found between the bindings of book covers? "Then I guess you will be looking towards a week's worth of detention. Might I suggest you make use of the library, as I expect the essay to be on my desk by the first bell for dinner this evening?"

"Yes, sir, I shall get right to it." A small smile curved her lips, knowing he assigned a task which could not be completed, due to lack of information, credited source material, and time constraints.

"I have placed my absolute faith in you... Hermione."

The Potions master watched the girl leave his chambers, willing a piece of himself to follow her. "Keep her safe," he breathed, "or I shall." The cutting edge brokered a promise through any means necessary.

The Floo sparked to life. "Severus," the disembodied head of Dumbledore spoke, "if you would be so kind as to come to my office?"

"I shall be there momentarily, Headmaster."

"Good. Very well, then."

The connection closed.

Severus sighed heavily, summoning a bottle of Sober-Up Potion, which he knocked back with the same ease as a shot. Rolling his sleeve down, he replaced the cufflink and picked his coat off of the floor. A quick shake of the frock dispelled any wrinkles before he hastily donned it. He forewent the Floo in favor of the walk to Albus' office. The journey would afford him the time to clear his head and occlude any stray thoughts.

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The Great Hall was nearly empty save for the few stragglers finishing the luncheon meal. Hermione snagged a turkey sandwich and apple from the Gryffindor table. Checking her watch, she had roughly five hours before her assignment was due and the supper bell chimed.

"Hermione!"

The excited squeal made her jump. "Goodness, Ginny, you've given me a fright," she said with a hand held to her chest.

"Harry asked me out." The words tumbled forth, Ginny flushing as bright as her hair.

"Ginny, I'm so happy for you." A genuine smile broke across Hermione's face.

"C'mon, I wanna show you the flowers he gave me."

"Gin, I'd love to, but I can't." She inhaled. "I've got an essay for Professor Snape that is due before dinner."

"C'mon, 'Mione, a half-hour... please."

"Okay, I suppose a half-hour won't hurt my studies too much," Hermione relented.

Ginny clapped her hands together excitedly. "Good, now, if we can keep you clean of Snape's nose."

She laughed, looping her arm with the older girl.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Severus, please have a seat."

"Thank you, Headmaster, Minerva." Snape inclined his head in acknowledgment of the Transfiguration professor.

"I'm afraid I had a very troubling conversation with Dolores Umbridge." Weary, Dumbledore sat behind his desk, looking every bit his age of one hundred plus years. "Here." He passed the Ministry decree to Severus.

The younger wizard read over the scroll, finger flexing on the delicate parchment.

"Hagrid and I will supervise the children." McGonagall swallowed. "Safety precautions."

"Headmaster, you have signed their death certificates."

"Now is not the time, Severus."

"Now is the perfect time, Headmaster," Snape snarled, tossing the decree on the desk, disgusted. "I warned you this would happen..."

Severus shrugged off Minerva's grasp on his forearm.

"I all but begged you not to place the Granger girl in my care, but you and your fucking infinite wisdom."

"Enough!" the Headmaster boomed.

"Mark my words: you will lose more than students tomorrow."

McGonagall gasped.

"If you had placed that damned know-it-all with her head of house, I could have perhaps interceded." A sharp glare to Dumbledore silenced any rebuttal. "I cannot risk my position twice, old man. He is growing ever impatient and blood thirsty."

Minerva gazed at her employer, her gaze imploring.

"How fortunate for him to have lambs being led to the slaughter." Snape sneered.

"We must meet with the children before tomorrow," the Transfiguration professor offered in an attempt to thaw the mounting tension.

"I've already met with Mr. Finch-Fletchley and Hagrid, and was going to schedule a time to meet with Miss Granger before dinner."

"Albus, I would like to be in attendance."

"Ever coddling your cubs, Minerva. Well, the persistent and incompetent swot will be late for your meeting, I'm due an essay on the importance of properly storing potion ingredients." Dismayed, Snape pushed himself from his chair. "If that is all..." Not waiting for an answer, he moved to the door.

"Severus, please have Miss Granger send a batch of lemon drops up with her this evening." Albus gestured to the empty candy dish. With a curt nod, he bowed gracefully toward Minerva and took his leave.

\*\*\*\*\*

He was putting a stopper on a potions vial when she walked in.

"Lemon drops?" she inquired, the tin of hard candy laid open on his desk.

"You have an appointment with Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall shortly," he said, ignoring her comment.

"I know; Professor McGonagall found me in the library this afternoon." Hermione set her essay on his desk.

He gave it a cursory glance. "While I am glad to see you know your name, Miss Granger, I must inquire as to why this parchment is otherwise blank."

"You would know better than I, sir."

A noncommittal grunt, "it is a shame, is it not, that our esteemed library is severely lacking in information on the darker aspects of human nature." A glint of humor in his eyes.

Hermione perched on the vacant stool adjacent to his desk.

"Umbridge and Yaxley will be here tomorrow at noon to collect and escort you and Mr. Finch-Fletchley to the Ministry for registration."

At his words, dread settled in the pit of her stomach.

"Fear not, Minerva and Hagrid shall endeavor to aide in your protection." Sarcasm slowly dripped from his softly spoken words. "In this instance, the better angels of men will perish." Severus handed her the vial, which she uncorked and gingerly sniffed.

"What is it?"

"An antidote. Please drink it."

"An antidote for what?"

"Drink it, and I will tell you."

Cautiously, Hermione brought the vial to her lips, gulping down the mixture. She coughed, gagging. "Tastes retched."

A quiet hum, "better to be ill-tasting than suffer the effects it is meant to prevent."

Needing to get the taste out of her mouth, she reached for a lemon drop. The tin was promptly snatched from her reach. "I would not advise that."

"Why?"

"They are for the headmaster, and you are to deliver them to him."

Shifting the puzzle pieces together, "The lemon drops are why you gave me the antidote."

A smirk graced his lips. "Bright girl, correct as usual."

Realization, "they're poisoned." Hermione began to feel lightheaded. "You're poisoning Professor Dumbledore." She was horrified at notion.

"All illusion is based in truth, my dear. Albus will experience nothing more than mild discomfort, which he will assume is associated from one too many sweets." Almost to himself, Snape added, "He has built up a remarkable tolerance."

Oh, God, Hermione felt sick. Gooseflesh rose on her skin.

"It is a pity Minerva will be waylaid, such nasty affects this brew."

Hermione was chilled by his calm, almost serene demeanor.

"Nothing fatal, I assure you, only the physical manifestation of an irritated bowel."

"But how...?" Hermione spoke, regaining her voice.

"I am not an amateur, Miss Granger. Traces will not be left."

The *Irrituous Symptomous* had an efficacy of an hour and was a time-released potion. Symptoms of fatigue, cramping, vomiting, diarrhea, and profuse sweating would become present within three to four hours of ingestion. The toxin, once taken into the bloodstream, would be exhaled out of the body roughly a half-hour after consumption, leaving no trace of poison, yet the victim would still be afflicted with symptoms for five to eight hours more, depending on dosage.

"You'll be late for your meeting." Snape handed her the tin. "Partake in the sweet, but have no more than three. On your way." He dismissed her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione's mind wandered elsewhere. With glassy eyes, she watched Dumbledore pop three lemon candies into his mouth. Professor McGonagall was reaching for her second tart treat. Voices sounded muffled to her ears, the words hard to discern, even as she watched their lips move. On automatic response, she took the proffered candy and with shaking fingers placed it in her mouth.

\*\*\*\*\*

He felt the tiredness seep into his bones. The sun would be rising soon. Collapsing into his wingback, he withdrew the translucent thread of grey matter, watched as it floated in the liquid pool of his memories and deepest desire to be retrieved at a later date.

\*\*\*\*\*

*"Any particular reason you have me gallivanting across Muggle London in the middle of the night?"*

*"Lucius, you do enjoy the sound of your own voice, do you not?"*

*"There are many things I enjoy a great deal more."*

*"Then let me extend my sincerest apologies to Narcissa."*

*"I'm sure she will appreciate my presence more than your words, so if you will please hurry this along."*

*"Yaxley and Umbridge are to be escorting a pair of students to the Ministry for 'registration.'"*

*"The Council on Unethical Racial Treatment?" Severus nodded, "You know as well as I that those children will never be seen again."*

*"And why should I care about two Mud...Muggleborns?" Lucius amended off of Snape's glare. "Or should I rephrase, why do you care about two students?"*

*"Do you read history, Lucius, or did you merely play lip service to Muggle Studies?"*

*The blonde man pressed his fingers to his temple. "And what exactly should I have retained from a class I haven't been to in nearly a quarter-century?"*

*Severus snorted softly. "History is a powerful tool that should not be forgotten, lest it repeat."*

*"Ignorance aside, I am not the one with roots in the Muggle world," Lucius snapped, Severus' ever calm and complacent manner unnerving him.*

*"What do you know of the Muggle genocide called the Holocaust or of the Russian Leon Trotsky?"*

*"That Hixler fellow?"*

*Severus sighed. "It's Hitler."*

*Lucius went for his wand as he watched Severus slip a hand into his traveling cloak.*

*"Lucius, if I wanted to kill you, old friend, you would be dead. Here." Snape withdrew a package. The blonde man picked up the parcel.*

*"Mien Kampf and a biography of this Trotsky person? Tell me, Severus, am I to be quizzed like one of your students?"*

*"Spare me your sarcasm, Lucius. You've not the natural gift of vitriol."*

*"If you would please get to the point."*

*"Impatient as ever, I see." Snape swallowed the shot, black eyes surveying the smoke-filled pub.*

*"That impatience will be your downfall." Grey eyes narrowed. "Do not threaten me, Severus."*

*"It is not a threat... brother."*

*"Our Lord..." What little color Lucius possessed drained.*

*"Young Messers Goyle and Crabbe bear the Mark." Snape refilled his glass.*

*Lucius shook his head in disbelief. "He swore that Draco would not be branded until his education was completed." He swallowed in one gulp half a glass of cabernet.*

*"You know as well as I that Draco is weak in mind and in body. He won't survive the initiation."*

*Lucius nodded, the words truth. "My son," a lament.*

*"Polyjuice?" the older wizard stared at the bottle the Potions master placed in front of him.*

*"Covington." The brute of a Death Eater was second in command behind McNair and Yaxley, eager for advancement in the outer circle and nursing bad blood.*

*"Severus," Lucius hissed, "you've gone mad."*

*Severus drank another shot. "Every man has a price, Lucius. You will do this."*

*"What makes you think I will?"*

*"The life of your son is worth more to you than the fanatical ramblings of a madman."*

*All emotion evaporated from the aristocrat's face.*

*"It's a shame two Brothers will have to perish, but rogues must be ferreted out." With a nod of his head, "I bid you goodnight, old friend."*

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A/N: As usual, heartfelt thanks and gratitude to my beta, SLU, and to all my readers and reviewers.

A/N: The Irrituous Symptomatic is of my own creation. It is based on an experience I had with food poisoning a few years back and the scene with the eyedrops in the movie "Wedding Crashers". I know nothing of toxicology.

A/N: From here on out, this story will take on a very dark tone. I do not advocate or condone violence as a means to an end. Nor do I see violent actions as being the only way to settle problems.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Chapter 19 of 25*

She was his melancholy whore.

A/N: Please heed my warnings, as from here on out the chapters will be violent and dark.

Chapter 17

"Students, if I could have your attention, please. There are a few announcements to be made."

Hermione speared a piece of melon on her fork, trying her best to keep down what little food she had been able to consume. All of last night, she had tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Her mind was working over time, and her nerves were preventing her from keeping anything down. Noon would be here in a few short hours. She was scared.

Dumbledore droned on... "Professor McGonagall is feeling a bit under the weather today, so Transfiguration classes have been cancelled."

Hermione closed her eyes, nausea coursing through her gut as guilt washed over her anew.

"On a lighter note, Mr. Draco Malfoy has been accepted to apprentice under Master Emile St. Claire of the Academia of Magic in Brussels."

The blonde, looking every inch of his father, accepted the honor with an air of entitlement and arrogance. A rousing applause was issued from his housemates, a dignified nod came from his Head of House, and a few Hufflepuffs, out of politeness, rounded out the praise.

"Little ferret," Ron spat. "Thinks he's king of the castle, he does."

"You're just sore he bested you in last week's Quidditch match," Ginny piped in, snuggling closer to Harry.

The redheaded boy glared at his sister.

"Mione, when do you and Justin have to be at the Ministry?"

"Noon, Gin. Hagrid and McGonagall were supposed to be our escorts, but it looks like Hagrid will be it."

"Are you worried?" Ginny reached over to pat her friend's arm.

"Scared more than worried," Hermione admitted, pushing her food aside.

"Dumbledore won't let anything happen," Harry said.

Hermione sighed; sweet *Harry and his naïve optimism*. "You're right," Hermione agreed a little too brightly. "It's just a case of nerves." She lied with practiced ease, her shoulders slumped with fatigue.

Dumbledore continued on.

Hermione made small talk, nodded and smiled when prompted, but she desired nothing more than the solitude found in her nook in the library or in her professor's chambers. Breakfast would be over soon, and for once she was thankful a class had been cancelled. She needed time alone to gather her thoughts and collect herself.

\*\*\*\*\*

Black eyes assessed the young woman, her back still and shoulders hunched forward. It would appear that her night fared much the same as his, if not worse.

"Severus, please pass the preserves."

Absently, the Potions professor reached for the serving dish and spoon, handing it to Flitwick with a slight nod of acknowledgement.

Finished speaking, Dumbledore took his seat, unfolded his napkin, and tucked into his poached egg.

With a chance to make a clean break, Hermione slung her rucksack over her shoulder and stood, pushing herself away from the table. "I'm heading to the library to revise my essay for Charms."

She did not wait for an answer, but heard Ron's murmurings of being mental and the essay being due next week. She shuffled past the house tables, Justin catching her eye with a wave as she passed. She offered him a watery smile and picked up her pace, vacating the Hall.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her breaths were deep and panting, nausea rolling within her, its coiling burn lapping at her gut, making her nearly empty stomach queasy. Hermione rested against the stone wall, her eyes closed, body going limp, allowing the stone to support her weight.

"Dawdling in the hallway, Miss Granger? I was sure you would be halfway to the library by now."

"I am feeling ill, Professor, perhaps what Professor McGonagall has is catching?" She turned her head, eyes opening to take in the sight of the sinewy figure in black.

"Emile St. Claire was your master."

He nodded.

"My scores are better than Draco's."

Severus chuckled softly. "But your disciplinary record is abysmal."

"People will see."

"People will see the illusion and pretty lies, rather than accept the harsh reality of the truth."

"And what is the truth?"

"The coincidence of accidents."

Hermione's brow furrowed, not able to comprehend the meaning behind his words. "I need to go... to the library... Justin and I are meeting..." She fiddled with the cuff of her robe. "Dumbledore asked to speak with us before Umbridge comes." She looked up to meet his eyes.

"Professor... Never mind." Hermione looked away, choked with emotion.

"Do have a care, Miss Granger," he said, his words soft, before he turned on his heel, heading in the direction of the dungeons.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione glanced at the mantle piece: 11:45 A.M.

"Madame Umbridge, Mister Yaxley, do come in." The Headmaster ushered with a flourish of his hand at the two officials in his doorway.

"We were just discussing a slight change in plans. Professor McGonagall has fallen ill, so she will not be able to accompany the students. Professor Hagrid, though, shall be the students' representative at the Ministry."

"Oh, how dreadful. Do extend my sympathies and well wishes to Minerva."

The falsity of the toad's words irked Hermione more than the grating squeak in which they were delivered.

"Come along then, don't want to be late." Insincere smile painted on her bubblegum-tinted lips.

Hagrid positioned himself between Justin, who looked a bit green around the gills, and Hermione.

"Upon your return then," Dumbledore bid farewell. Dumbledore's words did little to ease Hermione's discomfort. If they were meant to reassure, the opposite effect was had. There was a finality about them that left her cold.

\*\*\*\*\*

She smiled and nodded when required as Hagrid yammered on about finding a mate for Fang. Justin seemed appeased for the moment.

Hermione felt suffocated. She was sandwiched in between Umbridge and Hagrid, Justin sat on the other side of the gentle giant, and Yaxley brought up the rear. She was perfectly boxed in. Tension built within her muscles, her head resting against the back of her seat. As the Knight's Bus came to jerking halt, her body lurched forward, stomach lodging in her throat.

"Come along; we're here," Umbridge commanded, smoothing out invisible wrinkles from her pink dress suit.

Off the bus, Hermione saw the Ministry as it loomed in the distance, about a block away. She idly wondered if this was how the condemned felt, taking their final steps of life toward the hangman's noose.

"Ready?" Justin whispered, his voice quavering as they were flanked by Yaxley and Umbridge. She could see the hulking figure of Hagrid in her peripheral and feel Umbridge's unrelenting glare.

A whirling whiz and a quick succession of pops before she made contact with the pavement. Her body felt heavy. Something wet and slippery was oozing and pooling around her. The blood rushing in her ears silenced the din around her. Hermione's vision was becoming obscured by blackness. Adrenaline spiked in her veins once she realized the dead weight was not her own body succumbing to mortality, but Yaxley's. It was then that she screamed for all she was worth, screamed till her lungs hurt and voice was hoarse.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Poor dears," Pomfrey sniffed as she checked in on her two young wards. She drew the curtains and closed the infirmary doors. "Shock." She shook her head sadly. "Mr. Finch-Fletchley has responded well to the mild sedative, but Miss Granger refuses. She nearly panicked when I offered to help her change into a hospital gown. She, for all intents and purposes, is content to remain as is. I do not think it prudent at this time to disagree with her."

"Hagrid and Umbridge are still at the Ministry giving their depositions?"

"Yes," Sprout offered.

"A Death Eater attack in broad daylight! What is Tom planning?"

"I do not believe He orchestrated this attack, Headmaster."

"You've something to add, Severus?"

"I do not believe the students were the intended target; Yaxley was. This attack was personal."

"There is bad blood amongst Tom's ranks?"

"Headmaster! We heard..." Snape rolled his eyes as Potter and his merry band of Weasleys barged into the hospital wing.

"Messrs Potter, Weasley, Miss Weasley," Albus inclined his head, "Miss Granger and Mister Finch-Fletchley had a bit of a scare, but I assure you, physically, they are fine."

Relief flooded through the trio, the youngest Weasley brother inching toward the sick ward.

"Mister Weasley..."

He paused in his progression. "Yes, Madam Pomfrey?"

"I do not believe Miss Granger and Mister Finch-Fletchley are in any state to receive visitors at this time. Both need their rest. Perhaps tomorrow." The matron's offer appeased the redhead.

Snape narrowed his eyes. "Headmaster, I believe the rest of our conversation is best had behind closed doors." He glared at the miscreants.

"Quite right. Poppy, if you will excuse us?"

"Certainly, Headmaster." Poppy turned to the Gryffindor students. "It's time for you three to shoo as well."

\*\*\*\*\*

Snape found the warmth of the Headmaster's office stifling. "I would not say bad blood, per se, half-blood would be more apropos."

"A half-blood murdered Yaxley?" Dumbledore pondered this information. "What purpose would this serve? Even Tom knows infighting is counterproductive to his cause."

"Counterproductive though it may be, I still feel that this was a personal matter, settled by the sword so to speak."

Dumbledore waited for Snape to continue. "Would a pureblood use a Muggle firearm, or better yet, know what one was?" Snape, frustrated, paced.

"It makes no sense at all, my boy." Dumbledore seemed bothered most by this.

"And blindly following a megalomaniac makes any more sense?"

Snape stopped mid-step as pain licked up his forearm. "I am being summoned," he gritted through clenched teeth.

The Headmaster only nodded as the younger wizard left his office.

\*\*\*\*\*

A/N: As mentioned in previous chapters, I do not condone violence as a means to an end.

A/N: Anything not of JKR is of my own imagination and creation.

A/N: Big thank you to my Beta, SLU, and to all my readers and reviewers.



# Chapter Eighteen

Chapter 20 of 25

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

A/N: Just a heads up: dark deeds and times are in this chapter and ahead. Please heed the chapter warnings.

Chapter Eighteen

Woolen Death Eater robes did nothing to protect him from the stinging chill of a late October night. The ground was damp with a light drizzle, his robes mucked. Pebbles and bits of gravel dug into his aching knees.

"My faithful followerssss," His Lord hissed, weaving a path through a throng of bowed servants while Nagini slithered dutifully behind.

"Two of your brethren are noticeably absssent thiss evening." The Dark Lord stopped his circuit behind Snape.

"Macnair. Risse."

The hulking executioner moved to stand with his head bowed in reverence.

"Covington felled Yaxley, then took hisss life. Why?"

"I—I don't know, my Lord."

Voldemort chuckled. The wizened cackle raised Snape's hackles. "*Avada Kedavra.*"

Macnair fell dead, expressionless.

"Risse, Avery." The man wasn't even on his feet when he met the same fate as Macnair.

The smell of excrement was pungent in the air as the bowels of the fallen released with an involuntary muscle spasm. In all, the Dark Lord slaughtered Macnair, Avery, Goyle, Nott, and Rookwood.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Your brethren displeased me," the Dark Lord offered by way of explanation to his still kneeling soldiers. Snape, though, believed it had more to do with systematically executing anyone in close proximity to Macnair, rather than any one man's fault or lack thereof.

"How quickly they forget that if you are to perish, it will be in the glory of battle when I am to be triumphant over Dumbledore and Harry Potter, or by Lord Voldemort's hand."

The snake-like nostrils scented the odor of bodies as thin lips curled in disgust. "Remove them from my sssight, and be gone." The Dark Lord dismissed them with a wave of his hand. "I grow weary of your presence."

Wormtail leapt, eager to do his Master's bidding.

Snape waited until his Lord retired to the confines of the Manor house before rising.

"Our Lord is most displeased, my old friend."

"Yes," Snape concurred. "But we live to see another day, Lucius," he stated matter-of-factly.

The blond nodded. "A drink?"

The two Death Eaters Disapparated to a pub in Muggle London.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Jameson holds less of an appeal than firewhisky, what say you?"

"The end result is the same, fuck should I care?" Snape grunted, taking another shot from the near-empty bottle the barkeep set on their table.

"Draco owed Narcissa. He is settling in well."

Snape nodded, chasing his shot down with another.

"All loose ends have been neatly tied together."

"My dear friend," the Potions master kept his voice low, "I fear drink has addled my brain. We shall have to continue this conversation on the morrow."

"But, of course," the older wizard responded in understanding, "when we are both clear-headed and you've remembered."

Snape bid Malfoy a good evening, made his way to the back alley of the pub, and Disapparated under the cloak of darkness back to Hogwarts.

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"My boy, you reek of a distillery."

Snape sat before the Headmaster. He hadn't bothered to change his attire upon his return to the castle. He'd only stopped briefly in his chambers to retire his mask and retrieve his memories.

"He was most displeased at the events that transpired today. Suffice it to say, there are fewer Death Eaters amongst his ranks."

"What of Madam Umbridge?"

Snape snorted. "That woman," he spat in disgust, "is a hanger-on. With her lover dead, she holds no 'in' with him, and to act otherwise would not bode well for her longevity."

"Dolores holds nothing more dear than power," Dumbledore spoke in a conversational tone, "which is what you will provide her with."

"To be hired out like a whore... How cheap I feel." If not for the drink, his words would have had more bite than slur.

"Levity? Severus, I thought you incapable of a sense of humor."

"What is more humorous than my very existence?"

"You have imbued much alcohol this night."

"Yes, well, thank you for stating the obvious, Headmaster. Surely, you would not deny your spy the pleasure of a petty vice." Snape grouched, irritated.

Blue eyes narrowed behind half-moon spectacles. "Sober up. You have classes to teach in a few short hours."

Snape left the headmaster's office without so much as a parting word or backwards glance.

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"Poppy," the dark man whispered so as to not startle the matron standing vigil over her two young charges.

"You know where the Sober-Up potion is kept," the mediwitch replied, not taking her eyes off of Granger and Finch-Fletchley.

Snape found the potion in her cabinet and drank it down, setting the empty bottle on the edge of the wash basin. "Miss Granger had to be sedated, took nearly two full doses of Dreamless Sleep." Poppy shook her head, saddened, and made quick work of tucking the Hufflepuff back in.

"She is still covered in filth, and her clothes have not been discarded," Snape observed.

"She was hysterical, in shock. Screamed like a banshee with the devil on her tail when I tried to see her properly cleaned and clothed." Poppy sighed heavily. "I have suspicions that something more untoward might have occurred. Her behavior indicates as much."

"Have you word to corroborate or confirm this?" Snape offered, knowing the reason why the girl refused to be seen nude in the presence of the school's nurse.

"I was waiting for consent from the girl," the matron snapped, gasping at her outburst.

"Forgive me, Severus," guilt laced her apology, "the children." She wept into her handkerchief.

"I know." He nodded, his joints creaking as he sank onto the empty cot.

"Poppy, take leave. You've not slept. I shall stand vigil."

"You've not slept either, Severus."

"Yes, but I am accustomed to weariness and fatigue."

Poppy made a tsking noise and with a swish of her wand saw Severus' appearance righted and cleaned. "It wouldn't do to have the children wake and see you in such a state." She smiled warmly at the man whose wounds she had tended to since he first stepped foot in this institution.

"Thank you." Severus bowed watching the matron retreat to her adjoining chambers.

Severus cast a *Muffliato* and pulled the privacy curtain closed, but not before casting a charm that would alert him if Finch-Fletchley awoke or became distressed.

"My dear girl, please know that I would not intentionally put you in harm's way." He brushed her blood-matted hair away from her face.

She looked peaked and much younger than anyone who suffered as she did had the right to look. "You must inform me as to how you can maintain innocence amidst such chaos."

He rested his hand over her blanket-covered one. "I've not a moment's peace since you and your bloody cohorts stepped foot in this damned school," Severus gently chided. "You seek knowledge with every breath, quote verbatim and ramble ad nauseam on every book you've laid your eyes upon. You seek to prove your worth and exercise your right to exist in a world that would see you labeled a deficient Mudblood..." He paused as Hermione began to stir.

"Rest," he soothed. "Rest, my dear girl." Hermione's twisting and turning settled, her breathing evening out.

"You are a complication in my life that I had not anticipated, but welcomed nonetheless. Most certainly against my better judgment, I can very well assure you." Severus chuckled softly. "Gryffindor stubbornness through and through." He sighed. "Sometimes a man can meet his destiny on the road he took to avoid it, and I hope you will not hate me for what I must do."

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A/N: The quote "Sometimes a man can meet his destiny on the road he took to avoid it," is spoken by Clive Owen's character from the movie "The International."

A/N: Heartfelt thanks to my beta, SLU, and to all my readers and reviewers.

## Chapter Nineteen

*Chapter 21 of 25*

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

## Chapter Nineteen

Snape had always been one to despise chatter, idle or otherwise. The din in the staffroom was thinning his already waning patience.

"Severus, you look like death warmed over."

"Minerva." He nodded slightly, politely acknowledging her concern for his well-being. It had been more than seventy-two hours since he had caught even a few winks of sleep. Finch-Fletchely had been released from the hospital wing the previous day; Miss Granger, on the other hand, remained infirmed due to what Poppy deemed "severe mental and emotional fatigue." The mediwitch, though, he surmised, had other suspicions.

"...untoward. What is your opinion, Severus?"

"Forgive me, Poppy. You were saying?" Snape had been lost in his own thoughts.

"In my professional opinion, I believe Miss Granger is exhibiting signs of more than just mere shock suffered from a traumatic event. She has refused any and all assistance with cleansing and dressing."

"Perhaps she is modest about her body. It is not unusual for young women of her age to have insecurities."

"Modesty and propriety aside, Minerva, she crackled with wandless magic and gave me quite the shock when I tried to remove her soiled robes and clothing." The matron clucked.

"Severus, other than Poppy, you have spent the most time with Miss Granger while she has been regulated to the hospital wing. Have you noticed a difference?" Albus inquired.

"I have seen no difference. The swot had the gall to quiz me on the ingredients of the potions I administered." Lack of sleep took the edge from his usually biting and harsh words.

The headmaster turned toward his Transfiguration professor. "Minerva, as her Head of House, have you noticed anything out of the ordinary?"

The head of Gryffindor set her teacup and saucer aside. "She has been unusually quiet, and according to Irma, has been spending most of her free time in the library." Minerva paused, considering. "But I cannot say that is out of character for Miss Granger. Fourth year I caught her fast asleep in the library near curfew. The child was preparing for O.W.L.s. I said, 'Miss Granger, the exams are a year and a half away; surely preparation can wait until next year?'" Minerva chuckled at the memory. "She looked at me as if I told her classes had been cancelled indefinitely and replied, 'Professor, that is hardly enough time to grasp the methodology, let alone the practical application.'"

Snape snorted.

"And her relationship with Messrs. Potter and Weasley?"

"A bit strained, headmaster, but still thick as thieves."

"How so, Minerva?" Albus questioned.

"With Mr. Potter's relationship with Miss Weasley and Mr. Weasley's association with Miss Brown, Miss Granger has become the proverbial third wheel." Professor McGonagall sighed heavily. "Miss Granger has never been popular amongst the opposite sex, and I believe her involvement with Mr. Krum has run its course."

Snape rolled his eyes, exasperated.

"Something to add, Severus?" Albus queried.

"I fail to see, headmaster, how the romantic entanglements and pursuits of teenaged dunderheads holds any bearing on Miss Granger's perceived condition?"

"Thank you for your input, Severus," the headmaster said dismissively, turning his attention to the school nurse. "Poppy?"

"While I cannot be certain if Miss Granger has been taken advantage of, I think it best to speak with her first before seeking out the assistance of a counselor from St. Mungo's."

Albus nodded in agreement.

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Her mouth felt cottony, her head muzzy, and the dull throb of pressure behind her eyes made Hermione wish for Morpheus' sweet kiss.

"Glad to see you're awake."

"Justin..."

She swallowed, her throat parched and her tongue thick and heavy against her film-coated teeth.

"Madam Pomfrey is in a staff meeting." He handed her a cup of water. "She gave me a clean bill of health and released me yesterday."

Hermione gulped the water, its coolness soothing and burning her constricted throat at the same time. The liquid dribbled down her chin, which she unceremoniously wiped away with the back of her hand, dried blood smearing and flaking on her chin.

"What?" she snapped, uncomfortable under Justin's disgusted and scrutinizing stare. She wrapped her robes more tightly against her body.

"Your hands." He motioned to the open and partially scabbed-over wounds covering her palms.

She looked down and offered a nonchalant shrug. "I guess they got a bit scraped up when I fell."

Justin flinched at her apathy. "Hermione, are you okay? I mean really okay?"

"Are you?" she snapped defensively.

"Well, no..." Justin faltered at her abrasive attitude, "but I don't remember much of what happened. Professor Hagrid shielded me..."

"How fortunate for you, then." Hermione sighed. "Please leave me be, Justin." Weariness overtaking her, she burrowed into her pillows.

"Kay," he managed.

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"How is she, mate? Does she want to see us?" Ron bombarded the Hufflepuff with questions as soon as he exited the hospital ward. Harry, Ginny, and Neville anxiously gathered behind the redhead.

A disapproving *tsk* drew their attention away from the door that hid their friend from view. "Off to your common rooms, the lot of you."

"Madam Pomfrey, we just want to see Hermione. Please?"

"Fifteen points from Gryffindor a piece and five from Hufflepuff," Snape smoothly replied from the doorway.

Madam Pomfrey shook her head, sighing wearily; Severus did enjoy goading his House's rival. Taking her leave, the matron went to check on Miss Granger.

"What for?" Harry demanded.

"For being out after curfew, of course, Mr. Potter." Snape gracefully pushed himself away from the doorframe and causally sauntered into the hallway. "I believe I will also confiscate that invisibility cloak you've tried in vain to hide under your robe." The Potions master indicated to the corner of the enchanted cloak dangling listlessly, peeking out from the boy's robe, brushing against his trainers. "Contraband is forbidden on school grounds." Snape held out his hand expectantly.

"Would you care to make it forty points a piece, Potter?"

"Harry, mate, give him the cloak," Ron pleaded.

"Here," the Boy-Who-Lived grumbled, shoving the cloak into Snape's hand.

"Here, what?" The dark wizard raised an eyebrow.

"Sir," Harry spat.

"Thirty points for insolence."

"C'mon, Harry." Ginny tugged on her boyfriend's hand.

"Bloody nuisances," Snape muttered under his breath once the students were out of earshot.

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"Miss Granger, it is nice to see you awake and alert."

Hermione huffed. "If he," she jerked her head in Snape's direction, "would stop plying me with Dreamless Draught..." Her eyes widened at her rebuke. "Sir, forgive me. I dislike being stuck in the infirmary and detest being treated like an invalid." Her cheeks burned in embarrassment.

"Your apology is pathetic, Miss Granger. Five points."

"Severus, really! The child meant no harm," Poppy chided.

Snape harrumphed, removing vials of potions from the inner pocket of his teaching robes. "Headache remedy and Pepper-Up potion," he explained, setting them down on the trolley at the foot of her bed. "No doubt you are suffering from a headache caused by an overabundance of Dreamless Draught in your system, which has induced lethargy."

She nodded, stiffening as the school matron performed diagnostic spells.

"Good news, Miss Granger. Physically, your cuts and bruises have mended," Poppy stated with a swish of her wand.

"But...?" Hermione prompted, feeling as if there was something she was not being clued in on.

"Professor Snape, if you would please allow us to speak in private?"

"Certainly, I shall return later to restock your stores, madam." He bowed, taking his leave.

"Miss Granger, as a medical professional, you know whatever is discussed between us is held in the strictest of confidences."

Hermione nodded slowly, not liking where this conversation was heading.

Poppy pulled a chair next to her ward's bed and sat down. "I understand that you have experienced a traumatic event, and I commend you for handling it as best as anyone could given the circumstances." The older witch smiled reassuringly.

"Does this mean that you'll release me like Justin?" Hermione asked hopefully.

"Not quite yet, my dear. Now, I do not wish to upset you, but may I ask how you are coping mentally and emotionally?"

"All right, I suppose. I'm not sure if I have really processed what happened. That is to say, when I wake up, it feels like there is a weight pressing down on my body..." She took a sip of water. "It's like I can still feel him on me."

Poppy inhaled sharply. "Whom, my dear?"

"Mister Yaxley." Hermione closed her eyes. "I remember hearing pops and screaming. He was so heavy I couldn't move.... I felt wet... I tasted copper... and I woke up here."

"You were distressed and confused. You were adamant that I not tend to you. Professor Snape had to brew an extra-strength Calming Draught to sedate you." Poppy carried on in a soothing tone, "You've not properly bathed in nearly four days. I've had to resort to Cleansing Charms."

"Oh." Hermione looked down at her rumpled and filthy robes, sniffing gingerly at her sleeve, trying to detect any odor.

"Miss Granger, I wish not to stress or upset you further, but your reticence at being examined is somewhat alarming."

Hermione worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Fear clenched in her gut. *Oh gods, if Madam Pomfrey...* "I'm not sure I understand what you mean, ma'am," she spoke, trying to keep her voice level.

Poppy swallowed. As a Healer, she had been trained to handle many types of situations a patient could befall, whether mental, physical, or emotional; but perhaps in this instance she was out of her depth and a counselor from St. Mungo's would indeed be better equipped.

Hermione's pulsed quickened the lull into silence maddening. Trepidation threatened to steal the air from her lungs. Madam Pomfrey knew. Hermione was sure she knew something.

"Many victims of abuse shy away from touch, as you have, or..."

"Abuse?" She choked on the word. *Oh!* Relief swept through her. She coughed, a nervous giggle tumbling from her lips that quickly turned to tears. She thought... not the Fealty... but...

"Miss Granger, my dear..." The mediwitch was troubled by her patient's reaction. Poppy summoned a Calming Draught. "Miss Granger, please drink. Just a few sips, and you will feel right as rain," Poppy coaxed.

Hermione violently protested, slapping the bottle away. It flew from the matron's hand, shattering on the floor, shards of crystal scattering about. Poppy summoned another bottle only to have it explode before it reached her hand. The older witch's body tingled with the force produced by Miss Granger's surge of wandless magic.

"Millie!" the frantic woman called.

"Millie's here, madams," the house-elf squeaked.

"Fetch the headmaster and Professor Snape quickly."

Millie nodded, popping out of the infirmary.

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"Headmasters Dumbledore, sirs," Millie appeared in Dumbledore's office, wringing the end of her tea towel, "Madam Mediwitch needs yous."

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Millie's summons had Snape casting a stasis over the bubbling cauldrons and hurriedly taking the steps of the spiral staircase two at a time. He raced to the infirmary, not prepared for the sight that greeted him.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Miss Granger, you must calm yourself," the authoritative voice of the headmaster boomed.

Vials of crystal and glass soared through the air, bounding off and smashing against the walls and flagstone.

"I can't breathe." As if proving her point, Hermione gasped for a lungful of air. "Pressure... hurts." She gulped for more air, scrambling from her sickbed to the floor, tangled in the dingy linens. "My heart..." She clutched at her chest, pulling at her robes.

Albus edged carefully toward the girl.

"No, no, no..." Hermione wailed pathetically, frantically pulling at her matted hair, filthy with blood and debris. "Don't touch... No touch..."

Madam Pomfrey waved for Snape to cross over the threshold.

Albus slowly continued his advance, his grandfatherly demeanor doing little to placate his student. "Miss Granger, everything is quite all right. I assure you."

"No!" The word was savagely torn from her throat, sore from crying. "*Accio* wand!" The familiar piece of wood flew from her bedside table into her waiting hand. She calmly leveled her gaze and wand at the headmaster.

"*Expelliarmus!*"

Hermione watched helplessly as her wand flew into the outstretched hand of Professor Snape.

The dark wizard took the opportunity while Miss Granger was momentarily distracted to slink closer to her, keeping his lanky form in the periphery of her vision. He waved the headmaster off, whom had begun to circle behind the young Gryffindor.

The Potions professor rummaged in the pocket of his frock, withdrawing a small vial, holding it palm up.

"Drink," he snapped keeping his voice low, as he crouched before his student, placing the potion between them.

"No touching?" she eeked out.

"No touching," he agreed, whispering softly as he uncorked the bottle with his thumb and setting it before Hermione, whose uncontrollable display of raw magic appeared to be slowly ebbing away.

He kept his dark stare level with her red-rimmed, brown eyes.

"Okay." She nodded, snot and tears dribbling down her face. With a trembling hand, she brought the potion to her lips, drinking half the bottle in one gulp. She set the bottle back down, her body swaying, as if caught by a summer breeze.

"Miss Granger," Snape kept his voice low, but his tone deliberate, as if he were lecturing a class of dunderheaded first-years, "would you like to freshen up?" He indicated to the loo's entrance behind her. Millie had freshly laundered clothing folded neatly on a trolley.

Her pupils were dilated, the tension and anxiety fleeing her body as she concentrated to the best of her ability on the man before her. She nodded, staggering a bit as she rose to her feet, slowly stumbling to the bathroom.

When she had gone, Snape broke the silence that had briefly settled over them all. "I would like to perform Legilimency on her."

Poppy squawked indignantly. "You've seen it for yourself, Severus. The girl's obviously been abused, harmed beyond the events that have recently transpired. She's traumatized."

"She will be further traumatized if we preemptively reserve the bed next to Lockhart for her." Snape pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger in a futile attempt to stave off the impending migraine.

"You're hospitalizing me? The Thick-Thickey Ward?" The words tumbled forth, heavy and matter-of-fact. Though she had scrubbed up and changed clothing, Hermione's hair was still a filthy mess.

"No, deary," Poppy cooed. "We just want to see you well again."

"If you permit him, Miss Granger, Professor Snape would like to perform Legilimency," the Headmaster explained.

Hermione nodded her consent.

"Headmaster, Miss Granger is clearly under the influence and cannot consent," Poppy protested.

"Miss Granger, are you still in possession of your faculties and capable of making an informed decision?"

She nodded.

"See?" Albus replied, setting the matter to bed.

"This is unethical!" Madam Pomfrey was brought to heel, quelled by the headmaster's reproachful glare.

"What must I do?" Hermione's speech was slurred.

"If you would please take a seat." Snape gestured to an unoccupied bed.

He patiently waited until she situated herself comfortably, sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed.

"You may feel a slight push at your mental barriers," he forewarned. "Please do not attempt to fight my presence. Keep direct eye contact, and I shall endeavor to make this encounter brief and relatively painless."

"Yes, professor," Hermione responded.

"Ready?" He held his wand at the ready.

She nodded 'yes.'

"*Legilimens*," he annunciated.

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*Severus found that Miss Granger's mind was as neat and orderly as the library at Hogwarts. All memories and emotions were catalogued in chronological order and then further ordered by whomever was involved in a particular memory. The only disruptions and chaos that he found in her mental filing system contained their recent interactions, and like an old 8-millimeter film reel, had been replayed numerous times. The relief at Poppy's incorrect assumption, her secret, for the moment, still guarded. He bypassed them quickly, grabbing hold to a glimpse of Umbridge that he spied. Severus felt her unease as the Knight Bus chugged along. The apprehension that pricked her skin as she stepped off the bus choked him.*

*He pushed ahead, bracing himself against Miss Granger's abject terror, the blow of physical pain, at Yaxley landing in a heap of dead weight atop her, and the fragmenting of mental well-being at the thought of her own mortality.*

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Snape withdrew from her mind with a visible flinch.

"Tired," the girl said, fatigued. She yawned.

"Sleep then," the matron offered, levitating a blanket and covering Hermione, who was already fast asleep. "That wasn't just a Calming Draught," Poppy looked at the Potions master knowingly.

"Half Calming, half Dreamless." He shrugged.

"Well?" Albus prompted.

"She was not assaulted, sexually, based on her reactions and the chaos of her memories. She is continuously replaying the events of Yaxley's murder." He lied, weaving truth and falsehoods into a complex tapestry of reality. "I would presume that Miss Granger is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder." He let this kernel of information sink in.

"Oh goodness!" Poppy gasped.

"It is a common malady in Muggle soldiers returning from battle," Snape explained further, "or in persons who've experienced an event so horrific their ability to process and move on is greatly hindered, or utterly destroyed."

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Severus remembered from his childhood his Grandfather Snape, sitting quietly in his rocking chair. He had been five or six years old at the time. A car backfired. He watched as his grandfather, riddled with arthritis, shoved himself out of the chair, hit the deck, and screamed orders at men who were not there, that Germans had his platoon surrounded.

Frightened, he watched his grandmother ease his grandfather from the floor, whispering to him, until he broke down and cried in her lap. His grandmother had poured his grandfather a snifter of brandy and helped him to bed.

Later, she sat with Severus in her lap. He was munching on a freshly baked butterscotch biscuit, explaining that his grandfather served in the First and Second Great Wars.

"Your grandfather saved three men that day. He was heralded a hero." Pride colored her voice. "See here," she picked up a framed photograph from World War II, "so brave he was, the Prime Minister wanted to meet him." Young Severus brushed the crumbs away from his pants, staring at the black and white photograph clutched in his hands. The picture was of his grandfather dressed in full Royal Air Force regalia, shaking hands with a portly, balding, middle-aged man. "That is Prime Minister Churchill."

"But, Grandmother, why was grandfather yelling?"

"Sometimes your grandfather gets a bit mixed up. He thinks he's still fighting in the war. He doesn't mean for it to happen." Clara Snape sighed. "But sometimes something happens to make him forget the war is over."

"Oh." Severus paused. "Like the car today?"

His grandmother nodded. "Or if I drop a dish, but don't you worry." She patted him on the head and gave him a hug. "I think," she whispered conspiratorially in his ear, "that the second batch of biscuits are ready to come out of the oven."

Severus leapt from her lap and bounded for the kitchen.

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Snape cleared his throat, coming back to the present. "Psychiatry is often the prescribed treatment."

"Yes," Albus agreed offhandedly. "Poppy, please alert Professor Snape or myself if there is any change in Miss Granger's condition."

"Of course, Headmaster," the older witch agreed.

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"Headmaster, I must strongly disagree with your assessment of the situation."

"Severus, you said it yourself. Psychiatry is the best treatment for what is ailing Miss Granger, and as you well know, wizarding kind is woefully archaic in the treatment of mental health, especially something deemed to be a Muggle affliction."

Snape paced the headmaster's office, cagey. "I am quite sure that Mr. and Mrs. Granger are capable of seeing to their daughter's well-being."

"Why worry them needlessly with details? It wouldn't do to excite them into making a rash decision," Albus offhandedly commented.

"Such as removing Miss Granger from Hogwarts?" Snape spat.

"Harry needs Miss Granger," Albus stressed.

"We are not pawns to be moved around a board, old man."

"You would refuse me?" The headmaster looked offended by the younger man's audacity. "Severus, nearly twenty years ago you came to me, begged for your life, and I requested only one small sacrifice on your part...that you serve the Light."

Snape laughed bitterly. "Request? Is that what you are calling it? I didn't know Unbreakable Vows were considered requests. I must brush up on my etiquette of polite society."

Albus ignored his employee's caustic tongue. "There is a doctor in London to whom Miss Granger can speak. She's a Squib. Agatha Morelay."

"With every step I take, I draw closer to the gallows." Snape quoted a long forgotten Muggle poet.

"Do quit with morbid platitudes, Severus."

"I shall when you cease in tightening the noose you've place around my neck."

"My boy, I'm afraid we are at an impasse, then."

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A/N: Thanks to all my readers, reviewers, and wonderful beta.

A/N: The information on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can be found at Wikipedia.org. Just type in PTSD.

A/N: I do not wish to be or come across as callous in regards to the survivors of sexual violence or abuse. Hermione's reaction to Madam Pomfrey's mistaken assumption has more to do with the relief that she feels because her secret is safe (i.e. the Fealty and her "relationship" with Severus) and not to belittle or disrespect anyone who is a survivor of such heinous acts forced upon them.

A/N: The line "With every step I take, I draw closer to the gallows," is of my creation. I suppose I am the Muggle poet, though it does borrow heavily from a quote by Robert Mitchum in the movie *Out of the Past*. His character, Jeff Bailey, says something to the effect of "Hang my gallows high, baby." It's a great film with Kirk Douglas. I highly recommend it.

## Chapter Twenty

*Chapter 22 of 25*

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

### Chapter Twenty

She had missed nearly a week of classes; it was late in the afternoon on Thursday, and Hermione wanted nothing more than for Madam Pomfrey to discharge her from the Hospital Wing.

"I think I might go mad from boredom," Hermione complained.

"Madam Pomfrey said to rest."

"I know Gin, but I'm behind in my studies; what if I miss..."

"Mione," Harry cut off his friend's near hysteric rant, "we tried to sneak your assignments in, but Madam Pomfrey wouldn't have it."

"Scolded us good," Ron said as he munched on a chocolate frog. "Said we hindered your healing." The redhead garbled, swallowing the confection. He concentrated on the chessboard in front of him, moved his rook, and waited for Harry to make his move.

"At least she's allowed us to visit," Ginny added, scratching through the latest *Witch Weekly* quiz.

"But only for an hour," the curly-haired girl huffed as a slight whine tinged her words.

"Which I believe is now up," the velvet timber of the Potion master's voice echoed from the doorway.

Three heads turned toward the direction of the dark wizard.

"Same time tomorrow?" Ginny questioned as she closed the magazine and set it on the bedside table.

Hermione nodded.

The three Gryffindors hurriedly edged past Professor Snape, epithets setting silent on their tongues. The youngest Weasley son's eyes narrowed defiantly as he dared a glance back at Hermione, waving a short goodbye.

She offered a small smile in reply.

Alone, Snape fully entered the room, measured steps bringing him closer to the young woman.

"Ten Ways to Tell if a Wizard is Interested," he snorted, an eyebrow arched as he browsed the magazine cover. "How, pray tell Miss Granger, does one tell if a boy is interested?" The question was rhetorical as he continued, "A box of Honeydukes' finest attached to a note of purple prose, or the not so subtle pulling of a pigtail?" His trademark smirk was in place.

"I would not know, sir, for a boy does not hold my fancy."

He snorted softly.

Hermione watched as he gracefully deposited himself in the chair closest to her sickbed. He was reaching into his robes; she hoped he wouldn't force her into taking any more potions. Between the Calming Draught and Dreamless Sleep, she had had her fill.

"Not a potion, I assure you," he said as if reading her thoughts. He removed from the inner pocket shrunken quills, parchment, and books, which he set to rights with a quick flick of his wand.

"Your assignments," he explained.

Hermione's eyes lit up, her gaze hungrily coveting her schoolwork, eager at the prospect to cure her restlessness and to gain the knowledge held within the leather-bound tomes.

"To be completed under the strictest supervision, of course."

"Yes, I would hate to overexert myself," she agreed, shifting closer to Snape.

"Quill to parchment only; there will be no silly wand waving."

"No wand waving," she repeated as she angled her body ever closer.

"Theory and methodology; practical application will have to wait."

"Wait..." she breathed softly, relishing in his closeness as she coveted having him all for the moments so far and few between, greedily stolen and savored.

Professor Snape licked at his lips that were suddenly dry, his tongue tracing a moist and dewy trail along his fuller bottom lip.

Hermione watched enraptured, pupils dilating as she absorbed the innocuous, yet sensual action.

Snape shifted in his seat under her lust-filled scrutiny. During his visits, an agreement that the recently transpired events would remain tacit was unspoken between them.

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"Professor Snape," the matron tutted her displeasure at the schoolwork and books sprawled across her patient's bed.

"Madam, I do not believe the headmaster himself can separate the know-it-all," he snorted, "from her studies, and besides it was at Professor McGonagall's insistence. So if issue is to be taken, fault is to be placed at her feet." Snape jested with Poppy without missing a beat.

"As it were, I am here to enlighten Miss Granger as to Headmaster Dumbledore's intentions concerning her well-being and recovery." He paused.

Hermione was perplexed; surely Dumbledore would not force her to stay in the infirmary for much longer.

"Headmaster Dumbledore has arranged for you to speak with a psychiatrist, a Squib, Dr. Agatha Morelay. She has an office in Muggle London."

Hermione's features turned ashen. "But, sir, I am fine, truly." She turned to Madam Pomfrey, imploring her to verify the claim.

The matron did not return her charge's gaze, but averted her eyes in answer.

"Sir," she said with an air of desperate pleading in her tone, "if my parents... I'll be withdrawn from Hogwarts."

Snape held up a hand to quiet her growing hysterics. "You are of age, are you not, Miss Granger?"

"Yes, sir," she responded.

"By that token, you are an adult, and informed consent of your parents need not be given, nor are they to be informed of your 'extracurricular activities' without your express permission."

Relief ebbed at the nervous tension coiling her body, tight, heart beating rapidly.

"I shall be your escort for these sessions." Snape's posture and tone belied a put upon task of which he was forced to suffer. "We will depart from Hogwarts on Mondays and Fridays at noon; your sessions have been scheduled for 1:00 PM. This schedule will remain in place until Dr. Morelay deems them no longer necessary."

"My first session is to be tomorrow then," Hermione stated matter-of-factly. "Sir, is there a possibility that my appointments can hold until next week?" She fiddled with the pages of the open Transfiguration text as she continued, "I've missed far too many classes, and surely my grades will start to suffer."

"Hand-waving, know-it-all swot," Snape muttered under his breath, the insult lacking in his usually acerbic bite. "I am afraid that is impossible as Madam Umbridge will be returning to Hogwarts to fulfill the C.O.U.R.T mandates. Fear not, though, your professors, myself included, will no doubt rejoice in this reprieve from your regurgitation of encyclopedic knowledge."

"I think that is enough excitement for one afternoon," Madam Pomfrey interjected, cutting a cross glare at Professor Snape for his deliberate taunting of Miss Granger. She conjured a tray of food as she said, "First dinner then a nip of Dreamless Sleep."

Hermione looked towards Professor Snape then back to the potion in Madam Pomfrey's hand.



"Poppy, I think perhaps Miss Granger can forego the potion lest we have a repeat performance of her uncontrolled magic."

The Gryffindor nodded hastily in agreement, eyeing the vial warily. "Please, no more potions."

Hesitantly, Madam Pomfrey nodded, wishing not to deplete what few healing potions she had left from Miss Granger's previous outburst. "Just in case then," she said as she set the bottle on the bedside table.

Snape stood, his voluminous robes whooshing in his wake as he glided to the doorway. "I shall be here to collect you, tomorrow at noon."

"Yes, sir."

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Hermione smiled to herself, glad to have been able to shower instead of using cleansing charms, and wear clothing that weren't Hogwarts-issue hospital garb. Feeling whimsical, she donned a comfortable pair of denims, a pale grey sweater, her worn trainers, and a Slytherin green scarf embellished with threads of silver.

Apprehension, though, weighed heavily upon her like a lead ball in the pit of her stomach.

"While I appreciate your choice of color, your housemates will believe you a turncoat," Snape said as he leaned against the doorframe, his posture nonchalant, one leg crossed over the other.

"Pity then that I cannot assure them that I am indeed donning Gryffindor red."

A predatory smirk graced his lips, a few quick flicks of his wand ensuring their privacy. "As I recall, you have a penchant for lace, white..." He pushed away from the door. "... Virginal."

Hermione clutched at her school robe, swallowing at the unabashed desire shown in her professor's perusal of her person, and finding herself hard-pressed to respond to his flirtation.

"And you?" she eked out with more assurance than she truly felt.

He made a show of slowly stalking her person, every circuit drawing closer, his robes barely brushing her body.

"When I am wont," he said as his breath warmed the base of her neck, wisps of fine black hair grazed the shell of her ear. "Black silk," he purred, "the sensation of the delicate material, cool against my heated flesh, like soft fingers gently caressing me to hardness..." He pushed away from her body as he continued, "... Growing damp, how the material clings; a warm mouth suckling me to completion."

Hermione was nearly panting with want, body flushed with heat, the Fealty prickling in her veins surely as the impending orgasm driving her to the brink of reason.

"I...I," she gasped, unable to articulate her need, her eyes tightly shut.

Snape was flush against her body, his oversized nose taking in a lungful of air. "I can smell you," he breathed, savoring the scent on his tongue, "musty and warm, damp and sticky." He chuckled at her whimpers. "How do you taste, I wonder: sweet like treacle, or bitter like the darkest of chocolate?" His nimble fingers made short work of the button and zipper of her jeans.

In her wantonness, Hermione fingers passed the barrier of her red cotton knickers. Dampness coated her fingers. "Yes, so sticky," she panted, pleasure mingling with pain as her clit throbbed with need.

"Touch... me..." she begged.

"No." Snape's voice was constricted with desire.

"Not enough," she whimpered, inserting a second finger. "Need more." She was rocking against her hand, keening in pleasure, and groaning in pain as the wounds from the Fealty began to open. Knitted flesh pulled, coming apart like the worn seams of a ragdoll.

He pulled her back toward him, his erection hard and pressing into her. Hermione rubbed against him, the friction scratching deliciously at the deep-seated ache within her.

Professor Snape's body moved in tandem, his breathing and pace quickened at her pleas. Her body jerkily convulsed, a guttural cry torn from her core, as she sank to her knees in pain-filled respite.

Professor Snape laid her gently on the bed; sweat drenched her skin as blood seeped through her shirt and down her wrist from the hand still buried between her thighs.

"Open your mouth," Snape ordered.

Hermione complied, her body warring between the intensity of her orgasm and searing pain enacted from the Fealty. She swallowed the Percocet he placed in her mouth.

"Open yours," she said, gingerly removing her hand that was coated with the remnants of her cum and blood. Lying on her back with her legs dangling over the edge of the bed and her jeans pushed down her thighs, she looked up at him standing above her. His hair was damp and sticking together in clumps to his face.

He brought the offered hand to his face, inhaling the scent. His tongue licked the creamy discharge from her fingers as his eyes closed to savor the tangy metallic flavor.

Hermione jerked away from him as spasms wracked her body; she breathed deeply trying to calm herself. "Am I treacle or chocolate?"

"You are an acquired taste that only the most discerning palate can truly appreciate."

Eyes still closed, she felt the flurry of magic around her.

"Madam Pomfrey is at the noon meal, and we've little more than half an hour for you to leave." His tone was clipped but not unkind. "I suggest you shower and cast a cleaning charm on your clothing, or have the elves launder them."

With great effort on her part, Hermione moved into a sitting position, her professor looking right as rain. The heat in his eyes was the only sign that he had partaken in anything out of the ordinary.

"Okay," she said, nodding.

"Are you in much pain?" A hint of regret held in his softly spoken words.

"Some." She saw no need to lie.

"For that I apologize, but your body was surging with magic, dangerous for any witch or wizard, especially one prone to fits of wandless outbursts."

"And there was not another option to alleviate this excess build up of magic?" she asked.

"Oh there was, but the conclusion would not have been so... mutually beneficial."

"And that option was?" Hermione asked, trying to focus on the conversation and not how Snape's voice became roughened by smug satisfaction.

"You could have jinxed or hexed me, but expulsion would leave such a nasty little blemish on a practically pristine academic record," he said, teasing her.

"And seeking less than scholarly pursuits with a professor is not grounds for expulsion?" Hermione playfully retorted.

"No, I daresay I would be carted off to Azkaban, if I survived the wrath of the Dark Lord and my brothers. You, if luck were on our side, would be shunned by your friends or perhaps even pitied," he paused, "at worst entertainment at a revel, and lady luck has never granted me a boon."

"Stop, you're being morbid." Uneasiness killed any levity that had existed.

"No, I am being a realist," Snape sighed, suddenly weary, "for fate shall destroy my life before she takes it. The cards have been dealt, Miss Granger; the 'when' is inevitable." He left the ward without another word.

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Hermione felt sick. She changed out of her clothing and into a hospital gown. "Millie," she called to the elf.

"Yes, Miss Hermione," the elf said as it blinked into the ward.

"I'm afraid I've made a mess of my clothing."

Saucer-like eyes lit up. "Millie cleans Miss Hermione clothes," the elf said as it took the bundle from her and popped out of the ward.

The Percocet had fully kicked in as Hermione languidly stepped under the warm spray of the shower head. The blood flow had stemmed to a slow trickle and was washed away in a pool of pink-colored suds.

Loath as she was to move, Hermione shut the faucets off and wrapped her hair and body up in towels. Her clothing, clean, lay folded in a neat pile on the countertop of the sink. Wiping the steam from the mirror, she examined the wound marring her breast. The flesh had begun slowly stitching itself back together, but it was now etched into another layer. She loosely wrapped gauze on the wounds before she dressed. Her hair, damp from the shower, had begun to dry in a frizzy halo of curls. Grabbing her discarded hair tie, Hermione wound the damp strands into a tight bun.

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When she emerged from the bathroom, she found Professor Snape chatting with Madam Pomfrey.

"Miss Granger, I see that you must be incapable of reading a clock, for we have nary fifteen minutes to Apparate to Muggle London for your appointment."

"My apologies, Professor Snape." Hermione followed behind him as they reached the Apparation point at the gates of Hogwarts. His hand was on her arm as they Disapparated with a crack.

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Hermione and her Professor found themselves behind a two-story building in a littered and deserted alley.

"We are here." Severus let go of her arm, but not before their close proximity afforded her a strong whiff of cloying scented flowers and sachet.

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A/N: Big thanks to all my readers/reviewers and my beta, Lyn.

## Chapter Twenty-One

*Chapter 23 of 25*

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

### Chapter Twenty-One

Hermione sneezed, the sickly sweet scent of gardenia and jasmine irritating her nose. She sniffed again, the fragrance familiar, like fingers clenching, wrapping themselves around her throat. The hazy shroud of déjà vu settled upon her, the suffocating sense of foreboding robbing the breath from her body.

"I don't want to be here." There was an edge of panic to her voice as she backed away from her professor.

"I'm afraid you haven't a choice in the matter, Miss Granger."

"Please, sir." Hermione backed away further from the dark wizard, tripping over her feet as she landed hard against an open rubbish bin. The force of the blow and the stench of the festering garbage had her gagging for air.

"Calm yourself," Snape hissed.

The temperature had dropped, and despite the heaviness of the Muggle-fashioned tweed coat he wore, Snape shivered.

"Calm yourself," he barked, the disturbance of the electromagnetic field whirring around them, as her magic began sparking and popping like stray flames from a roaring fire.

The magic rose within her, the raw power surging through her veins, the heady feeling of relinquishing herself to the elemental force of the lifeblood that proclaimed her Witch was more intoxicating than any magical or Muggle narcotic.

Snape closed his eyes, deeply inhaling her energy and tasting the spicy heat on his tongue. "Miss Granger, how utterly disappointing. All whistles and bells, but lacking in depth and void of substance."

Their breadth closing in, he lunged at her.

Hermione had little time to react; in a blur she was held captive in his bruising grasp. Her legs kicked apart and her body wrenched toward his solid frame, he took advantage of her perpetual momentum to brutally slam her into the bin. His forearm placed between her face and the dumpster absorbed the harsh blow. Snape had her wrists pinned behind her back, and using the length of his body, he pressed flush against her smaller frame to halt her squirming.

"I do so hate having to repeat myself," he spat.

Hermione's attempts to dislodge him from her were futile and only succeeded in drawing him closer.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" Severus mocked.

Her speech was muffled by a mouthful of tweed.

"Do speak up," he gloated.

Snape felt the pinch of blunt teeth. "What a naughty little kitten," he chuckled, the dark and rich rasp deeply disturbed her to stillness.

He loosened his hold slightly. "Will you calm yourself, or shall I be forced to bind you?" he whispered against her ear.

"You reek of her," Hermione cried out pained. "Her stench is saturated..."

"Of whom do you speak, Miss Granger?"

If she had been facing him, Hermione would have seen his brow raised in question.

"That bloody pink-trussed cow."

"Disparaging the name of a former Hogwarts professor and esteemed Ministry official—I am quite appalled, Miss Granger, at such disrespect for an elder," he tutted, releasing his hold on her.

Hermione turned to face him, her wand at the ready.

"Here, kitty, kitty," Snape drawled, amused.

"*Scourify!*" she shouted in frustration.

"Feeling better?" Mirth might have colored his words, but all the same, his wand was in hand when it hadn't been a moment before.

"You smelled like a Knockturn Alley whore," Hermione said as she crinkled her nose in distaste.

Snape sighed at such trivial matters. "I can assure you that is an insult to whores."

She opened her mouth, hurt crossing her features.

"You act as though surprised, Miss Granger. I am no virgin nor have I taken a vow of celibacy." He held up a hand to quell the indignation that he sensed bubbling to the surface. "But I have not sought emotional or physical release from another since our association began."

Hermione nodded, appeased for the time being. "You didn't smell like you," she murmured.

He smirked. "And what, pray tell, do I smell like?"

"Like a match that has burnt down to nothing, fresh and clean like lemongrass. Spicy like sage and bittersweet like a freshly brewed cuppa." Her cheeks flushed with want.

Severus swallowed thickly, her unassuming innocence and need unnerving his composure.

"We are cutting your appointment time close," he managed to strangle out.

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The waiting room was clinical in its appearance, white-grey walls adorned with gold framed pictures of flowers and seaside landscapes. An array of wooden chairs upholstered with stiff blue cushions surrounded a low-standing coffee table. Magazines and pamphlets on how to recognize signs of depression lay scattered about.

Snape took the seat adjacent to the exit, his back against the wall. He discreetly observed the other occupants of the room. A young girl of about twelve, whose emaciated form was made painfully obvious by the oversized clothes hanging from her frail frame; there was an older man, perhaps ten years older than himself, heavysset with thinning patches of red hair. Severus mused he could have been the progeny of a Weasley and Horace mating gone terribly awry.

"Dr. Morelay is finishing up with a patient," Hermione spoke.

Snape moved his coat from the seat he had been saving for Miss Granger.

"I've just to fill out these forms," she said, indicating the clipboard in her hands as she sat down next to him.

The questionnaire was six pages in length, filled with mundane items like name, date of birth, family medical history, to questions of a more personal nature such as frequency of suicidal thoughts, attempts if any, and feelings of one's body image and self-esteem. Hermione completed the pertinent information, but left the rest of the form blank.

They didn't speak, and she had not directly addressed him since entering the waiting room. To the casual observer, they seemed to be strangers, having met by chance.

"Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked up at a slender woman of about sixty with silver hair styled in a neat bob, dressed smartly in a pantsuit with glasses hanging from a chain around her neck.

"Good afternoon, I'm Dr. Morelay," the woman said, smiling.

Hermione stood, clipboard clutched in her hands, and she cast a surreptitious glance at Snape.

"If you will just follow me," Dr. Morelay said as she took the forms from Hermione and gestured in the direction of her office.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione settled into a plaid-covered loveseat, and Dr. Morelay sat opposite in a high-back chair. She glanced about the office and noticed certificates and diplomas from Cambridge hanging on the wall behind the doctor. A desk sat caddy corner against the furthest wall.

A small metronome ticked back and forth, the tempo lackadaisical, and Hermione found her breathing patterns in sync with the gentle, if persistent, tick tock.

"Some of my patients find it to be soothing," Dr. Morelay said as she gestured to the musical device, "but I can switch it off, if you would prefer."

"No, it's fine," Hermione answered.

"Do you know why you are here, Hermione?" Dr. Morelay queried in softly spoken tones.

"Do you?" the Gryffindor shot back archly.

"Yes, I do," the doctor replied as she nodded. "Headmaster Dumbledore has apprised me of your situation."

"Oh." Any confidence Hermione possessed drained from her countenance.

Silence.

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

Silence.

Fifteen minutes passed.

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

Thirty minutes.

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

Silence still.

Forty-five minutes.

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

*Tick tock.*

One Hour.

"I am afraid our session is up, Hermione," Dr. Morelay said as she set her notepad down.

Hermione stood, ready to make a beeline for the door.

"Some find it difficult to express themselves verbally after suffering from a traumatic event," Dr. Morelay said as she retreated to her desk, rummaging through a drawer. "Here," she said pulling out a grade school composition book, "I find that some of my patients view journaling as a cathartic exercise..."

Hermione accepted the notebook.

"It allows them to put their thoughts and emotions down without the fear of judgment or rejection. Perhaps, you would feel more at ease with this method, and if you like, we could discuss your writings during our next visit," Dr. Morelay suggested.

Hermione offered a noncommittal shrug, eyeing the office door.

\*\*\*\*\*

Snape was idly skimming the business section of *The Times* when Hermione reentered the waiting room. He folded the paper, tossing it causally on the table, before slipping on his coat.

"I've two appointments scheduled for next week," she said as she flashed him the small appointment card before enclosing it between the pages of the composition book.

He nodded curtly and motioned for her to precede him out of the office.

\*\*\*\*\*

He didn't speak but eyed her curiously as she chucked the notebook in the rubbish bin.

"And what offense did that book commit to warrant such punishment?"

She huffed; he could just make out something pertaining to "twit" and "bloody feelings."

"I'm supposed to share my feelings," Hermione snapped. "Journaling is cathartic," she mimicked snidely.

"From your reaction, I shall assume your first session did not go as planned?"

She felt the warmth of his body next to hers. "I'll not speak to her, mandated by Dumbledore or not."

Severus waited for her to continue.

"I am fine," she said after moments lost in her thoughts.

"Are you inquiring or stating fact?" he asked, his voice lacking in its normal sarcastic bite.

Hermione turned to him, "I don't know... both? Pick one."

"I cannot," Snape offered.

"I know," she sighed wearily. "I do not need professional help."

"Are you quite certain?" Snape softly queried as he adjusted her scarf, caressing the silver and green threads. He waited, idly watching the puffs of her breath evaporate into nothingness. The winter air tinged her cheeks pink.

Hermione was transfixed by his nimble digits. "I have you."

"Hmm," he said noncommittally.

"I cannot speak with her." She stilled his hands with her own. "I thought I was dying." She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I was sticky and wet... numb," Hermione continued in a hoarse whisper, her small hands clutching his own, knuckles turning white.

"He was heavy, I—I couldn't move," she said as she pushed away from her professor.

He would not apologize. She was safe.

"Miss Granger?" Severus noted by her vacant expression that she had withdrawn into herself.

"I am selfish." Hermione finally spoke. She toyed with the barely healed skin on her palms. The scabbed flesh tore away easily with the slightest jab of her fingernail, the pressure causing the blood to pool, welling to the surface flowing down her arm, trickling down her skin, falling the distance to plop on the ground in a steady drip.

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Stock still, he gripped his wand, eyes narrowed in calculation.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her fingers were coated red.

She painted her lower lip with a crude swipe of her thumb. Blood smearing, a jagged line on her cheek, tongue darting out, the metallic taste of her lifeblood, her eyes closed.

"I wanted to die. I want to," she murmured.

\*\*\*\*\*

He struck; spidery, callus-roughened fingers seized her. The merciless hold tightened spastically, digging into the tender column of her neck.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione's vision blurred.

Fuzzy.

Hazy.

Gray.

Choking, expelling an erratic rhythm of huffs, mucous seeping from her nostrils, unable to inhale.

Weightlessness, her feet not touching pavement.

Nothing.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Crack!*

Snape sneered, the odor of dust and mildew offending his olfactory sense. He dropped the girl; she crumpled in a heap of limbs. She did not move, but she was conscious.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione wheezed, her body trembling; the hardwood floor biting.

He was over her, crouched.

She curled into a ball, shaking uncontrollably.

\*\*\*\*\*

Severus reached to touch her but pulled away.

His hands, he had blood on his hands.

\*\*\*\*\*

She heard the pounding of retreating footsteps and cringed at the sound of pained retching.

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A/N: A big thank you to my readers/reviewers and beta Lyn.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

*Chapter 24 of 25*

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

She squeezed her eyes shut willing away the pain; tiny pinpricks of light flashed behind her lids. She flinched as she heard glass shattering in the distance. Tentatively, with measured breaths, she unfurled her body and lay upon her back, the hardwood cold and biting. Hermione exhaled, opening her eyes to the flurry of dust motes floating about her body.

She let her head loll to the right, watching as black dragon-hide boots paced in what she presumed to be the kitchen based upon slamming of cabinet doors and the dinnerware shattering from the force of impact against the wall. A litany of profanity issued from her professor's thin lips every couple of steps.

Hermione hesitantly rubbed the tender flesh of her neck. There would be bruises. His mark upon her body, the bloodlust of his possessive claim; she breathed in dust, mildew, his ire, his fear, and his love, singular in its abandon.

He ceased in his circuit of the kitchen.

Brown eyes stalked the stationary figure from toe to head. Snape's lithe form stood in the entryway, the expensiveness of his boots in contrast to the cheap, warped linoleum covering the floor.

An involuntary tremor shuddered through her body, his blackness creeping silently upon her, crawling under her flesh to invade her soul.

Snape slumped to the floor with legs outstretched and head resting against the archway.

A physical distance of feet separated their bodies.

Hermione's fingers caressed the imprints of his digits. A hum of contentment followed, and her body arched from the wood floor.

"I can still feel you upon me," she whispered, hoarse. "I ache for your burden." Hermione craved his ire.

"And the claim at your feet? Did Tuesday or Thursday come to court?" his rich baritone queried.

"I am your child," Hermione answered, remembering the nursery rhyme learned in primary school.

The sharp inhalation belied the stoic and practiced blankness that normally emanated from the Potions master.

Hermione pushed up to rest on her elbows before completely rising to sit cross-legged before him. If she dared reach out, she would be able to touch him.

His gaze fell to the slender column of her neck, marred with ugly red and darkening purple impressions. He recoiled in disgust at the violence of his actions and the acceptance he felt radiating from her.

She edged closer to him, encouraged by his inaction, though she felt his eyes trace her movements. She crawled up the length of his body to straddle him, her thighs on either side of his slim hips, effectively sandwiching him between the wall and her body.

"I forgive you," she said, *for the last time* hanging between them unspoken.

She leaned in and he flinched as she placed a kiss upon his forehead. Her body jerked in spasm, Hermione gritted her teeth and brought her lips to his in a chaste kiss as another spasm wracked her body.

Snape grasped her forearms to steady her, and he watched as rivets of blood trickled from her wounds.

"Why?" he pleaded.

"Worth it," she gasped, sagging against him, boneless.

"You, my dear, would be the lone dissenting opinion," he said mockingly with no real bite behind his words. Gingerly, he eased the girl from his lap and set her beside him.

A comfortable silence settled between them that was shattered by the mantle clock chiming the hour.

"We ought to be heading back," he said.

"But not yet?" Hermione asked.

"No, no yet," Snape answered.

No, definitely not yet, for he savored these far and few in-between moments as one would a prized vintage. He catalogued every exchange, her expressions, their intimacies, her scent and the subtle change in the notes when her arousal peaked. He coveted her articulations of devotion and love, though tempered they might be, from one's first taste of childhood infatuated desire.

Snape longed for her innocence, craved the corruption her purity would wrought upon his body, for surely her goodness would fracture his being completely, and he would lap eagerly for every stray morsel of her affection damning his soul further to the bowels of hell.

"You've gone," Hermione murmured, her trainer nudging his leg.

*I will*, he thought, but distractedly answered, "Yes," as he gathered himself to rise, his joints popping, bones weary, as if the past hour aged him decades past his thirty-seven years.

Hermione followed suit, unease settling upon her as he avoided her stare.

"Severus," she said, broken, "you are a good man."

He arched an eyebrow in challenge, snorting in disdain. A man worth his salt never laid a hand upon a woman. The image of his father drifted to the forefront of his mind.

He was so lost in his memories and self-loathing that he didn't feel the small hand reach into his pants pocket and filch his rosary.

"A good man," she repeated with hardened conviction as if all the proof needed was clutched in her hand.

"Fairy tales," he dismissed, glaring down at her.

She shrugged, handing him back the beads. Snape shoved them back in his pocket; if she noticed the dry, crusted blood on the crucifix, she didn't let on.

They stared at one another, each unwilling to make the first move in this battle of wills, each unwilling to return to the supposed normalcy of their lives.

She reached a hand out towards him, wanting to smooth his hair away from his face, but she pulled back, letting whatever was between them pass.

"I'm ready," Hermione said.

With a pop, they Disapparated from his childhood home to the gates of Hogwarts.

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A/N: Thank you to all my readers/reviewers and my beta Lyn.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

*Chapter 25 of 25*

She was light branded by darkness. She was innocence. She was his melancholy whore.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

The gentle, but insistent rap of knuckles against his supply room door did not deter him from reshelving ingredients. Snape pulled the pocket watch from his coat; he had an hour or so before he was to escort Miss Granger to her first appointment with Dr. Morelay.

"Madam Umbridge," he acknowledged, his back still towards her.

Her slight inhalation of breath made him smirk. The stench of the overly floral body oil she preferred made her presence known to him the minute she passed through the threshold into his classroom.

"Professor Snape, might we have the time to finish our conversation so rudely aborted earlier?" The low pitch of her voice and the barest hint of desire had him repressing a shudder of revulsion.

*The board had been set. Dumbledore ensured the pawns were in place, black or white; it mattered not the game had commenced,* he thought bitterly.

He turned, the sweeping of his robes adding to the carriage of elegance and air of superiority, an image he painstakingly cultivated over decades. The pauper Prince, a half-blood, possessing an intellectual depth and cunning his masters delighted in. A spy, of whom each assumed, erroneously, could be bought. One stroking the ego of a man's baser instincts, the other through, more benign tactics, guilt, a once well-played trump card; both prized the ruthlessness and efficiency for which their most valued spy undertook in the less than savory tasks foisted upon him. Snape had not survived nearly twenty years without having learned to deftly play both sides against the middle.

His black eyes leisurely dragged over her squat form. He grinned, as if the cat had stolen the cream, a predatory gleam in his eyes enjoying the flush of pink coloring her dull complexion. He absolutely savored the quickening of her heartbeat and the sudden hitch of her breath.

"I've the time," he spoke low as Umbridge pitched herself forward to catch his words. He moved toward her a step, deliberately, brushing his body against hers. He reached out to gently steady her, his hand accidentally grazing her breast.

"My apologies," he murmured with downcast eyes as he presented the perfect picture of contrition.

Snape fingered the coarse fabric of Umbridge's blazer before letting go of her. "Please," he said with a nod, to have her precede him into his classroom.

"Perhaps this conversation is best finished somewhere more..." Umbridge glanced around her surroundings.

"Private," he practically purred, finishing her thought.

"Yes," she moaned as her stubby, pink-polished manicured hand grasped his forearm, stroking the Dark Mark hidden underneath his voluminous robes.

"I would hate to be..."

A finger placed against her lips, he silenced the woman. "Walls have ears, and the portraits have tongues that wag," he said softly.

*The whore courierring unappetizing favors for clout. So eager to drop her knickers,* he all but sneered to himself. *Yes, please come closer; I shall forfeit my body for the price of your life.*

The nearness of him and the moisture of his breath against her skin caused a prickle of gooseflesh to break out over her body. Dumbly, Umbridge nodded, willing to follow wherever he might lead.

Snape chuckled, deep and rich; she was pliant in his embrace as he backed her against the nearest desk. He was keenly aware that his attractiveness was questionable in the eyes of most women. He certainly was not pretty or handsome by Malfoy standards, but the mere imposition of his physical dominance, which exuded masculinity, proclaimed him a wizard to be reckoned with. He was a draw to those seeking to taste the darkness.

Her nails spastically dug into his Dark Mark; she was panting, a bitch in heat.

Snape watched her hand trail lower, and Umbridge grasped him none too gently, flashing him a lascivious grin.

*Let's see if he can rise to the occasion. Oh, yes there is certainly potential,*Dolores thought.

He quirked an eyebrow. "My brother is not yet cold," he stated matter-of-factly.

"A woman has needs," Umbridge replied.

If coquettishness was a NEWT to be passed, the professor in Severus was sorely tempted to grade Umbridge's poorly executed ploy at seduction a 'T.'

"Yes," he said, the single syllable filled with heated promise. *Yes, my dear, and I too have needs. Such dark and delicious desires; how my ecstasy will bring you agony!*

Smiling at her supposed success, she purred, "You have influence, His ear and trust." She began to fondle him now, in earnest.

*Quid pro quo*, he thought, *the allure of absolute power, how deliciously corruptive.* Snape pressed against her more firmly, his nimble fingers undoing the mother-of-pearl buttons on her cardigan. The silk primrose-colored scarf was unknotted from her meaty neck, creases indenting the flesh.

Clíodhna and Niamh had been cruel. That thought filled Snape with a malicious glee.

Her breathing quickened as his fingers deliberately wrapped themselves around her throat, squeezing, a small amount of pressure applied. *It would be so easy just to...* His thoughts were black. With a rough jerk, Snape forced her eyes to meet his. He smelled her arousal, dampened by uncertainty and fear.

*He likes it rough; just as well since every woman deserves a good bedding,* she thought.

"In exchange for...?" he questioned, the pad of his thumb tracing the length of her neck.

"I should think that would be obvious," Umbridge said as she gasped at his touch.

"I have never had want of a willing witch to warm my bed," he said smugly. "In fact, my touch is most welcomed."

"Yaxley was never one to take his time. A woman enjoys a bit of foreplay, being touched." She moved his hand to the hem of her skirt.

*Touch me! Merlin, please!* She wanted to scream.

"No," Snape bit out, denying Umbridge such basic tactile comfort.

She sputtered, frustrated and not amused by the loss of leverage in their game. "You would deny me?" Flummoxed that he would refuse her offer, she added, "I thought Knockturn Alley would have lost its appeal by now."

Nonplussed, he put distance between them as he said, "It's a foolish witch who pries where she ought not."

*And it's a foolish witch who believes she has long to live,* he silently added.

"I forget," Umbridge said, like a shark scenting blood, going in for the kill. "You have a taste for Mu..."

"I would have a care with my words if I were you," Snape hissed, the threat implicit in his softly spoken words.

"Statement of fact, options will be limited once the Ministry passes the C.O.U.R.T. mandates..." She let that thought linger.

*I would rather live the remainder of my life a eunuch,* Severus contemplated in all seriousness.

"Dolores," he tutted, "poor, misguided, Dolores."

For the first time, she felt real fear. "You honestly believe I fucking care about the lives of a few Mudbloods?"

*He cannot harm me,* Umbridge thought as she took a deep breath. *I am Dolores Umbridge, Ministry Official.* She repeated the mantra over and over to herself.

She started to move away, but he pounced. She was yanked towards him; her wand was in his hand, the heft of his body restraining her movement. "Oh no, my dear; you've started this game, and I intend to finish it."

He was in her mind, her emotions running high, anxiety, fear, need. He caught flashes of memories; her frenetic state made it next to impossible to discern time and place.

Snape withdrew from her mind. "Our association," he whispered, his nose brushing the shell of her ear, "is not one of turns. You will do what I say because I demand it," he growled. "Are we clear?"

He took her head, forcing it to nod up and down as he said, "Yes?"

*How I could snap your neck with one swift jerk, but I need you alive... for now.*

This caused Umbridge to tremble. "If I want you on your knees," he said as he pushed her into a kneeling position, "sucking my cock, you will do it."

Umbridge's stubby fingers went to the placket of his trousers.

"You will not touch me," he snarled, batting her hands away from his trousers.

As if bored, he pulled out his pocket watch, glancing at the time. "I must take my leave," Snape said as he carelessly tossed a handkerchief on the ground. "Do clean up. You are beginning to drip on my floor." In a flourish of robes, he left the woman on his classroom floor.

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A/N: Thanks to all my readers/reviewers, and my beta Lyn.