Fate Set Right

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/10734054.

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<td>Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling</td>
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<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Time Turner, Marauders' Era, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, sorta ooc, Movie and book canon mix</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-04-26 Completed: 2018-09-18 Chapters: 74/74 Words: 531814</td>
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Summary

Time turners are dangerous devices, and awful things happen to wizards and witches who meddle with time. Or do they? For Hermione Granger, an accident that leads her back in time changes the course of nearly a dozen lives, her own included. Love where there was none before, hope where it was lost, trust where it had always been suspect. A young Gryffindor girl that wouldn’t have existed before.

For Aurora Snape, starting school when the threat against Muggleborns and the chamber of secrets makes it more difficult to be the Potion’s Master daughter. Or making Draco see that perhaps his perception of Muggleborns was wrong. And it certainly doesn’t help when one of the few Gryffindors who are nice to her is the one person who really shouldn’t know her too well: her mother.

Notes

I am a firm believer that when writing a narrative and adding someone in, things can not always progress exactly the way they had before. And while I love the stories JK has written,
I will be changing a lot of canon, especially from book 4 on.
Snape will still spy, though how that comes to be will be a mystery until later, and I hope I
still get his snark across, but I fear he will be out of character. Hell, I worry all of them will be
as this is my first time in this particular fandom sandbox.
And one last note: I try to stick to the books, but some of the additions in the movies are too
good to pass up. So they may slip in there. Just a heads up.
Prologue

September 1st, 1992

“Snape, Aurora” Professor McGonagall called out. The Great Hall was silent for only a moment before awkward, harsh whispers filled the void. The eleven-year-old girl with jet black waves and deep brown eyes looked to her father where he sat at the high table. He gave the faintest of nods as she headed toward the stool and the Sorting Hat. The pep talk was had before he left the week before.

He’d warned her that life at Hogwarts might not be as fun as she had hoped because of his reputation. His double, sometimes triple life meant he had to pretend to be the nastiest of people. He instilled fear because it was better to insure no one made mistakes in his classroom, he favored his house for more than just the loyalty he had to it. She’d sometimes heard her parents throw the house names around like insults, always with a smile or gentle aggravation.

But her father also warned her that he had to pretend to be the way he was for many other reasons, ones she was still considered too young to fully understand. Reasons that had him and her mother in such a fear over the summer that there was mild talk of sending her to Beauxbatons, or even Ilvermorney. She wasn’t sure who talked them out of it, but she was going to have to thank them.

Sitting on the stool, she clutched wooden seat in a white-knuckle grip and willed her heart rate to slow.

“Ah, now you are an interesting one.” The Sorting Hat said in her mind. “A father from Slytherin, and mother from Gryffindor. I won’t comment on the latter, you already know the tale. That of the former as well. But it’s you that we need to worry about now, isn’t it? So, let’s see, who are you more like? Father? Or Mother? Oh, and there’s the answer, deep in your heart. You are so young, yet you know exactly what’s needed to be done. I see where you’ll be needed most.” And then out load for the whole hall to hear, it shouted with absolute certainty, “Gryffindor!”

The hat was removed from her head, and she glanced back at her father.

Severus Snape gave a resigned nod, a hint of a proud smile, and was oddly the first in the entire room, staff included, to applaud for his eldest child.

It was as if his first clap was a demand, and instantly the whole room was applauding as they had the others who had been sorted before her.

She made her way down the table, eyeing the few remaining students in hopes to find the little red-haired girl whom she sat next to on the train. Ginny wasn’t looking at her. Then again, Aurora noted that pretty much everyone at her table was avoiding eye contact with her. Chewing her lip in a habit she developed from her mother, she looked about the rest of the room hoping for someone, anyone to offer her a friendly smile.

Eyes met across the crowd of students at the tables, grey locking on to her brown, and her heart sank.

Draco looked resigned, more so than even her Dad, and like everything he thought he knew was turned on its head. She could already feel him pulling away, prepared to ignore a lifelong friendship simply because she would be wearing red and gold instead of green and silver.
“Welcome to Gryffindor, Aurora.” A high, snobbish voice said. “And don’t worry about what anyone says, me and my friends will look after you. Or, I’m sure they will once they get here.”

Aurora turned toward the voice and was startled a bit by seeing who she was speaking to.

“Wow,” A round-faced boy across from them said with wide eyes. “You two sorta look alike.”

“Maybe we’re related.” Aurora said easily enough.

“No, I’m muggle-born.” Said the girl with wild hair, lifting her chin as if she dared Aurora to make a comment on it.

Aurora shrugged. “Doesn’t mean anything.” She said with a grin. She watched as a smile lit the features she shared with this young version of her mother, glad her father’s dark, thin hair made up the majority of the locks she inherited, that his onyx eyes darkened her brown ones so they weren’t so much like Hermione Granger’s.

And so, began what Aurora would come to understand as a complex life in the halls of Hogwarts, knowing that at least there was only this year and the next to get through before she didn’t have to worry quite so much about letting slip to the girl beside her all that was going to come.

----------H----------

June 9th, 1994

“We’ve got exactly ten minutes to get back down to the hospital wing without anybody seeing us. Before Dumbledore locks the doors.” Hermione warned Harry, and with that, they took off to the Hospital Wing.

Along the way, they’d had to dive into an alcove as Fudge and Professor Snape passed them by.

“The kiss will be performed immediately?” Professor Snape asked. Hermione noted that for all his desire to have Sirius in custody, he truly didn’t seem to want to have the worst happen.

Fudge blathered on, and as they passed, Hermione swore that Professor Snape’s eyes caught hers in the shadows. It had been like that since she came to Hogwarts, and with every scathing remark, ever sneering insult, there was something of regret in his endless black eyes. Quiet apologies that she didn’t understand and no one else seemed to see. She’d have justified it with her initially being one of the few Gryffindors that was kind to Rory, but that hadn’t quite explained her first year.

When he and Fudge passed, they continued on their mission. They avoided Peeves by ducking into a classroom, then ran for the Hospital Wing.

There was a moment of panic when Professor Dumbledore locked the doors, but when he turned and smiled, Hermione was sure it would be alright.

“Well?” He had asked quietly.

“We did it!” Harry beamed breathlessly. “Sirius has gone on Buckbeak …”
Dumbledore beamed, then flicked his wand. His patronus shot from the tip and hovered in the air in front of him. “Events have occurred as they should, go to the safe house, he’ll meet you there.” He said, and then the phoenix took off. Dumbledore turned back to them. “All is as it should be.” He said. “Now, get inside, I’ll lock you in.”

Once inside, Hermione and Harry returned to their beds, allowing Madam Pomfrey to fuss over them and feed them chocolate, something needed in much greater capacity than it had been hours before.

“What do you mean, gone!” Fudge’s voice bellowed through the hall beyond the door, and Madam Pomfrey frowned.

“What do they think they’re doing?” She grumbled.

“I can assure you, Minister,” Snape’s sneering tone grew louder. “If anyone knows what happened, it would be Potter.”

A moment later, the doors to the Hospital Wing were flung open, and an angry Minister followed a displeased looking Potions Master.

The latter may have accused Harry of knowing something, but his black eyes bored into Hermione as if she were the one in which all accusations would be laid on. She felt herself shrinking on the bed, absently withdrawing the time turner, though being very careful not to fiddle with it.

“You’ve caused trouble in the past,” Fudge was saying to Harry. “I forgave that business with your Aunt, and we knew full well there was something going on last summer. We know that Sirius Black was your godfather, boy, it would seem that ….”

“Cornelius, I think you’re forgetting a very important fact.” Professor Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling. “The door was locked when we came to it. From the outside, no less. How could it be that Harry helped Sirius Black if he was here under Madam Pomfrey’s care?”

Professor Snape snorted, and the Minister frowned in confusion.

Hermione clutched the time turner tighter in her hand, lest anyone notice it and figure out the whole thing.

“The Daily Prophet’s going to have a field day.” The minister began, shaking his head. “We had Black cornered, and he slipped through our fingers yet again ….”

Dumbledore placed a hand gently on the Minister’s shoulder and steered him toward the door. Hermione caught snippets of the conversation: Dementors being removed from the school, the contemplation of dragons in their place. It was all a bit barmy, really.

“Do not think for one moment that I believe a locked door would prevent you from somehow aiding in Black’s escape.” Snape said in a menacing voice. “And believe me,” He said, eyes holding Hermione’s while he was turned mostly to Harry, “There will be an extensive conversation about this later.”

He turned in a swirl of black robes and followed Dumbledore and the Minister out the door. Madam Pomfrey shook her head, a wistful sort of smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth before she shook her head and headed back to her office.

When the quiet settled, Harry got up off his bed and came to sit beside Hermione. “Why do you think …?” He started, then trailed off. He looked to her hands, easing the Time Turner out of her grip and examining it. Unlike before, she did not smack his hands away, rather letting him have a
look at the device that allowed him to save his God-father.

“Why do I think what?” She asked, looking at her fingers where they now rested on her lap.

There was another pause, and a gentle whirring sound. “Why do you think Sirius was so … awe
struck with you?”

Hermione chewed her lip, unsure what to say, and as confused by that as she had been with her first
interaction with Lupin.

“Granger, Her … Hermione.” Professor Lupin gave his first roll call, and he slowly looked up at
Hermione with wide, misty eyes. His mouth opened and closed for a few moments as he seemed to
struggle with something to say. “I had thought you looked far too familiar on the train. Named for
your mother, are you?”

Hermione frowned. “No, sir.” She replied. “My mother’s name is Helen.”

Lupin frowned as well, seeming to study her more thoroughly. “Adopted then?” She shook her
head. He nodded once more, frowned, and then returned continued to roll call.

Hermione had heard Malfoy grumble something about her wishing she was adopted, causing a few
snickers from the Slytherins, but she ignored it. Professor Lupin hadn’t asked her about her parentage
or name again, though for the first couple weeks he looked wistful and heartbroken all at once.
Sometimes, when he would catch her in passing, heading back to the tower from the library without
the boys, he would stop and look as though he wanted to say something. Hermione would stop, wait
but in the end, he would only bid her a good evening, afternoon, whatever time of day it happened to
be, and continue on his way.

She’d nearly forgotten his earlier, strange behavior until they encountered Sirius Black in the
shrieking shack.

“Harry,” Hermione had warned him when he started taunting a man who had been in Azkaban for
over a decade for murder. A man who had their friend’s wand and was likely more powerful than
the two of them combined, even if he was out of practice. “Be quiet.”

At her voice, Black turned and looked at her, his eye brows raising to his hairline.

“Kitten?” He whispered. “No, it can’t be. I’ve gone mad, alone in the dark for all these years with
my regrets and my revenge. Now I see… is it really Prongs before me? Am I imagining this all?” He
glanced at Ron. “But if I have gone mad, why would I see Lily as a boy?” He glared, taking a step
toward them.

The door had opened then, and Remus came through, taking in the scene before him, and then
turning to Sirius.

“If I had truly lost my mind,” Black had said his voice much stronger this time, “Then you would be
a lot younger, Moony.”

“I know the truth, Sirius.” Lupin had said calmly. “I saw him, on the map, and then I flooed,” He
glanced at Hermione. “Someone who would know. She confirmed.”

Sirius looked at her. “Then who ….?”

They were interrupted by Professor Snape. He’d immediately moved to stand between them and the
other two adults.
There was arguing between the three of them. All of it over whether or not Sirius was the real reason Harry’s parents were killed. Remus was trying desperately for Professor Snape to see reason, to put it all together like he had upon discovering Peter Pettigrew on the map. Professor Snape had declared there wasn’t anything Black wouldn’t say or do to get his way, murder included. Sirius had countered that he wasn’t the one who would do anything for anything. Remus had started to say something that Professor Snape immediately cut off with a hiss, something to do with where hearts really lie.

Before Hermione could stop him, Harry had pointed his wand at Snape and cast *Expelliarmus.* Incidentally, so did Sirius. It had knocked Professor Snape to the side, against the wall, and out cold.

The truth, in the end, was as Sirius had started to explain. He was meant to be the secret keeper, had tried to convince the Potters to use someone else, someone who they all knew would not only keep them safe, but would be able to hide the information from anyone who tried hard enough to find it. In the end, they chose Peter, for he was surely the one least likely to come into contact with any Death Eaters, could be trusted, and was their dear friend. And they had been wrong.

There was a binding spell, a conversation, Professor Snape rousing from his unconciousness, holding him back from murdering Pettigrew. They left the shack, emerging on school grounds. There had been another, small argument among the grown men. This time it was about Sirius’s prison sentence, and whether or not he should be held in custody at least until they could get his name cleared properly. Professor Snape swore it would be best if they brought Sirius back and held him, plead his case with the minister.

Then Lupin stiffened, and chaos resumed.

“I don’t know why he looked at me like that, Harry.” Hermione replied, the whirring soothing and hypnotic, pulling her through the night once more. “Why does Lupin, or Pettigrew for that matter.”

“Snape never does.” Harry snorted.

“Professor Snape,” She corrected automatically. “And speaking of, if tonight taught you anything, Harry, it’s that you should be able to trust him.”

“Because he actually listened to reason?” Harry countered with a snort.

“Because he stood between us and danger not once, but twice. He thought Sirius was a murderer as much as you did when he placed himself between us. And again, when Lupin transformed. Had you not gone after Sirius …”

“I know.” He agreed.

“You don’t, though. You didn’t see the panic and fear in his eyes. He was harsh with us, yes, but for a reason.”

Harry said nothing and when she looked over, she noted the whirring she heard was him flicking the Time Turner making it spin.

She snorted. “How far back are you planning on sending me?” She teased.

He grinned ruefully. “How far back can you go?”

“I was told it was only safe to go back a few hours. Wizards who meddle with time, and all. It won’t activate on its own anyway. And besides, I think I’m quite done with this thing. In fact.” She gently
took it from Harry’s hands, “I should see if Professor McGonagall will be willing to take it back before term’s end. If I miss classes, so be it.” She hopped off the bed and headed toward the doors. “I’ll only be a moment.” She threw over her shoulder.

Hermione held the device in two fingers up to her face, studying the gleam of the gold and the grains of magical sand. Such a beautiful little thing, though most dangerous things were.

She heard a warning yowl, and only had enough time to glance down to see Mrs Norris immediately in front of her feet. She tripped over her own two feet and the blasted cat, all in an attempt to avoid the animal and failing. As she moved forward, she felt another of her fingers catch on the time turner, activating the very thing that Harry Potter had been flicking and spinning, turning, for who knew how long.

“How far back can you go?” He had asked.

Before the world completely faded, Hermione glimpsed Filch rounding the corner and wondered how he would explain this to the Headmaster before the world went back.
Chapter 1

The world and time sped past her as Hermione fell forward in what felt like slow motion. She hit the ground just as the blur finished, her nose and forehead cracking on the stone floor, her fingers and elbow from her extended arm dislocating as it caught her weight in the wrong way, a sharp pain in her chest the time turner likely dug in. Her vision blurred, and she had a hard time focusing and staying awake. And she had to. There was no way she could pass out now, not knowing where or when she was. She was in muggle denims, the only school paraphernalia on her body being her Gryffindor cardigan. She’d discarded her tie when she quickly changed out of her skirt before dinner, and now she could be reappearing near a group of Slytherin purebloods who would take one look at her in her weakened state and set out to prove something.

“Oh dear,” She heard a startled gasp of someone familiar. A woman, though not one she would have had frequent contact with. “How … it’s … and she’s.”

“Help.” Hermione managed to croak, catching the sight of two robe hems before she blacked out. It was oddly comforting that one of them was such an awfully bright shade of yellow.

----------H----------

She awoke in the Hospital Wing, confused and far more sore than she imagined she should be considering all she was really being treated for was a run in with the dementors. Then she remembered Harry playing with the time turner as he sat on her bed. Mrs Norris. Falling. Oh.

Oh.

She tried to sit up, but found her right arm was bandaged and in a sling, her fingers wrapped as well. She turned her head to the right, seeing the sunlight streaming through the windows, then turned to the left.

Her heart leapt in her throat as a smile came to her face at the sight of Professor Dumbledore smiling warmly back at her.

“Hello,” He said softly. “We were beginning to wonder if you planned to wake up.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” She said automatically, her voice dry and cracking with disuse. “I didn’t mean to worry you or anyone else.” Hermione attempted to sit up again, this time using only her left arm. There was a struggle, but eventually she managed to get up right. Now, with her back against the head board, she could see the top of the beside table. It hadn’t occurred to her that her wand could have been lost or broken, yet seeing it unharmed within her reach brought a relief she didn’t know she needed.

“I would ask how you came upon this particular time turner,” Dumbledore caught her attention once more, and she whipped her head back toward him despite the mild ache that spread throughout her cranium. He was holding up the time turner by the chain, the hourglass in the center broken and the sand gone, a bit of red staining the jagged ends of what remained. “But, I suspect I gave it to you so that you would end up here.”
She cleared her throat. “What was special about it?” She asked, though her throat was still dry.

Dumbledore set the time turner down on the table nearest him, then poured her a cup of water. Handing it to Hermione, she accepted it with thanks and took a sip. The water wasn’t cold, but it still stung a bit as it wet the parched tissue within.

After she’d had a few more sips, Dumbledore nodded and took a breath. “It’s special in that it is one of the few time turners without limitations. It is thought to be one of the first of its kind, and used by a wizard or two before deemed too dangerous. Terrible things happen to wizards who meddle with time, especially when they can not return to where they came from.” At this, Dumbledore peered at her over her glasses as if to scold.

She knew this. There was a reason she always had to hide from herself throughout the year, why she and Harry had to wait out the time with Buckbeak before they could save Sirius. But having this affirmed to her moments after waking, speaking to a man whom she knew but clearly did not know her, had tears springing to her eyes.

“There’s no possible way?” She sniffed. When Dumbledore shook his head, she let out a mirthless laugh. “Then I wonder how long I need to wait before I kill Harry for playing with it.” She sniffed and looked at her hand in her lap.

“This was an accident?” Dumbledore asked, and she peeked to see his puzzled expression. She nodded, and he tilted his head toward the ceiling. “I see.” He said solemnly, sadly.

“Sir?”

He tried to give a smile, but it didn’t quite work. “You are from the future, or else, you would not be here. This is dangerous times, young lady, and I had hoped … given which house you were in, I had hoped you were sent back to provide us with some important information that could be used against Tom Riddle.”

“Tom ….” She choked the name out in confusion before she remembered something Harry had said. “You-know-who?” She whispered.

“Lord Voldemort, yes.” Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled in amusement as Hermione blushed. “I see that regardless of when you are from, fear of his name has not gone away as of yet.” She shook her head. “And you can not tell me anything?”

She frowned. “Should I?” she asked. “Wouldn’t it be dangerous to share, even with you, what I know. It’s not a terrible amount, I assure you. I imagine most of what I know happened has happened.”

“Why do you assume that?” Dumbledore asked, tilting his head to the side.

“I … well, umm.” Hermione looked around, trying to find something in the decor that would tip her off as to how far back she went. When nothing presented itself, she looked to Dumbledore. “When am I?”

“It is July third.” He answered. When she continued to look at him expectantly, he added gently. “1974.”

Her breathing grew heavy and her stomach churned, all while Hermione did her best to keep the tears back.

Twenty years. Harry James bloody-Potter had flicked and spun the blasted time turner so much she
had gone back twenty years. He obviously had a very good spin going. And the whirring she’d heard, the time turner spinning rapidly through the air with every flick … who knew how many turns he’d have gotten on one flick.

Twenty years. She’d know all the teachers, at least. All except ….

Professors Snape and Lupin. They were only in their thirties, though precisely how old, she couldn’t quite recall. But they would likely still be students themselves. With Sirius, because they all went to school together. As did ….

Harry’s Parents.

At the thought, the damn broke. Not only did Hermione barely manage to turn her head to vomit on the floor instead of on her sheets, she broke into a sob. She couldn’t meddle, she couldn’t. It was against the laws of nature. She could damage the time line, wipe herself out of it, wipe Harry out of it. And then what would happen? Voldemort would rise to power because there would be no infant Harry for Lily to protect and die for. No way for a curse to rebound if it were never cast.

“I can’t.” She choked out, sobbing as she leaned back against the bed. Her nose ached, as did her head, but she couldn't stop. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t.” She repeated, shaking her head slightly.

She had to get control of herself. This was not her. She was a Gryffindor, brave. She was Hermione Granger, logical. She was prone to bouts of panic, yes, but not like this. But so many things could go wrong now. So many things ….

“Miss …?” Dumbledore said.

“Granger.” She choked out, sniffling. “Hermione Granger.”

She turned toward him, and he held out a potion vial. “Calming Draught.” He told her, and with a nod, Hermione stopped herself from shuttering long enough to swallow it. “You’re in shock, and I believe it is quite warranted, all things considered.” He said, flicking his fingers. The scent of her sick disappeared from the air just as Hermione was able to catch her breath for good. “Now, Miss Granger. How far back did you go?”

“Twenty years.” She responded softly.

He smiled genially, “That’s quite the distance.” She snorted at this, but he made no comment on her lack of manners. “I wish I could offer some kind words, or assurances, that all would be well. But you know the outcome of the next twenty years, and I do not. Nor, I think, do I want to know. You know you can not change what you know will happen, but you are a Gryffindor. We do tend try and fix all the wrongs we perceive.”

“It won’t be easy.” Hermione agreed.

“No, it won’t be.” Dumbledore agreed. “So in the meantime, I must ask something of you.”

---------H---------

July 10, 1974
“Thank you for this, Bob. You have no idea what it means.” Professor McGonagall said to her brother with genuine gratitude. She was kind, more kind than Hermione had expected when she considered that she had no idea who the Gryffindor student was. But after Dumbledore’s ultimatum, he called in her Head of House and explained the situation.

Well, he explained after the Professor had been forced as the bonder for Hermione’s unbreakable vow.

She wasn’t sure if it were perfectly legal for her to take one underage, and McGonagall was fairly certain it wasn’t, but Dumbledore had insisted.

It was that or a very strong Obliviate that covered everything but her magical knowledge. Hermione had opted to keep her mind intact. From then, it was organizing a place to stay and falsifying records. Hermione would simply tell people that she had lost her parents in a magical accident, but was unable to say what it was for fear of repercussions. She would claim they had moved abroad a year or two before she would have started her magical education, and had attended Ilvermorny for the first three years.

“It’s no problem, Minnie.” Robert McGonagall, Jr assured his elder sister with a gentle smile, reaching out and giving her arm a squeeze. “You know how happy this will make Delia, and we don’t need to know the details of what happened.”

“Hermione?” A soft voice with a delicate brogue pulled her attention away from the siblings.

Cordelia McGonagall was a thin, dainty woman too pretty for Hermione to properly comprehend. Her clear blue eyes in porcelain skin and flawless red hair made her seem like a china doll. It was especially boggling when compared to Bob, for he shared the professor’s dark hair and gray eyes, and his skin was like leather and tanned.

“I have your room ready upstairs.” She gestured, and Hermione gave a nod and followed her up. “It’s a bit small,” She said as they traversed the stairs to the upper landing. “But I’m sure it’ll be cozy enough for you.” She pushed open the door, and Hermione peeked inside before crossing the threshold.

The bed was a twin size, with a white, metal frame, a pastel colored quilt to contrast the white sheets. There was an oak dresser and a small writing desk crammed against the fair wall, the latter under the window over looking the greenhouse and back garden. There was a small night table on the side of the bed that would take up the least among of space. There was no closet, but considering Hermione had only a school uniform and the clothes on her back, she wasn’t complaining.

“Minnie told us you lost everything, so I thought maybe we could go to Hogsmeade to get you a few things tomorrow.”

“Oh, you really don’t have to,” Hermione spun and protested, only to be waved off by Cordelia.

“We have a couple nieces, bit older than you, who do have some clothes they can give you, as well as some of their old school books. But there are just somethings a girl needs all her own.” The older witch said with a blush.

Hermione smirked, but at the same time her heart ached. Tears sprung to her eyes against her will as she recalled her mother taking her bra shopping just last summer. Despite being a dentist, and an intellectual, Helen Granger still managed to blush and sputter when trying to discuss something as
simple as basic undergarments with her daughter. Knickers had Mrs Granger claiming hot flashes
instead of discomfort.

“Did I …?” Cordelia sobered, worry replacing embarrassment.

“No,” Hermione reassured. “No, it was just a moment. You didn’t upset me, really, Mrs
McGonagall.”

Cordelia nodded and bowed her head, seemed to want to say something, and then stopped when a
pair of footsteps could be heard on the stairs.

“Well, Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said. “If you think you’re settled enough, I’ll take my
leave.”

“Thank you again, Professor.” Hermione nodded.

“It’s no trouble,” McGonagall reassured. “And I will see you Sunday for dinner?” She said, glancing
at her brother as well. It was agreed, and the adults left Hermione alone as they discussed other
things as the professor took her leave.

Hermione moved to the window, taking in the back garden. It was so different from the one she’d
looked at all her life. But then, it wasn’t as though she would ever go back to that life. She’d spent
her days in the Hospital Wing crying for her losses, for being separated from her parents and her
friends, knowing it would be at twenty years before there was even a chance of seeing them again.
She attempted to reconcile herself with the fact that, what ever she thought she knew or did know
about all the adults that had been in her magical life, she would have to set it all aside. She’d have to
start new. She’d nearly been tempted for Dumbledore to obliviate her initial opinions of people but
thought better of it.

With a sigh and a heavy heart, Hermione opened the window and let in the fresh, summer air of the
Scottish countryside and allowed a few stray tears to escape before stepping away and heading
downstairs.

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November 2nd, 1992

Aurora was not much liking Hogwarts. First, aside from her mother, Ginny Weasley, the Weasley
twins, and Neville Longbottom, most of Gryffindor avoided her. She heard whispers that nearly
everyone feared she’d rat them out to her father for whatever reason. Many hissed and wondered
why she wasn’t in Slytherin where she apparently belonged. And Draco ….

When he shouted “you’ll be next, Mudbloods” after the discovery of Mrs Norris’ petrified state, she
wanted to smack him. How stupid could he be? Couldn’t he see that his dear Aunt H was the same
person he so willingly threw the derogatory name to? They hadn’t really been avoiding each other,
but now she was purposely distancing herself from one of her oldest friends.

Well, one of her oldest friends aside from Harry Potter.
She’d grown up in the wizarding world, for the most part, but her mother had sent her to primary school in Surrey. She remembered when her father found out he thought she was being utterly brilliant, and while Aurora did like academics as much as her parents, she thought the sentiment a bit odd. She’d been considered a little strange, and knowing that none of the kids were likely magical made her feel like an outsider. She had a few girls her own age that thought her weirdness was cool, but she felt more like an accessory to them. In truth, sometimes she liked hanging around with the boy who was often alone. The boy who wore over-sized clothes and often had no one around him because his cousin was an obnoxious (and grotesque) bully. She liked him, and they had a sort of friendship.

At least until she came to Hogwarts, and he learned who her father was. From then, he wasn’t mean to her, but he kept his distance. And after Halloween …

“Miss Snape,” She heard her father’s voice behind her as she walked briskly through entry hall toward the Great Hall for lunch. She paused, turned, and despite the sneer he constantly wore these days, there was a glint of worry in his eyes. “A word.”

She nodded once, briskly, and followed him down to the dungeons and to his office. Once inside, he moved to the floo, called for lunch, and then headed for his desk. Withdrawing his wand, he turned one of the hard, wooden chairs into a plush, armed dinning chair similar to the ones they had at home.

“How are things, Rory? Better?” He asked as she sat down.

Aurora shook her head.

“I thought not.” He sighed. “How many …?”

“Too many.” She mumbled. “Since Saturday, I have been accused of being the ‘heir of Slytherin’ too many times. Harry, well, he’s tried to reason it’s Draco, and even ma-Hermione says it’s not either of us. But ….”

“You’re my daughter, and therefore the logical heir as I am the head of Slytherin house, and their stunted little brains can’t possibly imagine another scenario.”

“Are you always this mean?” She grumbled as she shifted in her chair.

“He?” Yes. You know why that is, or at least as much as you can know. Things may be a bit different year after next, when your … when Miss Granger is gone, though I make no guarantees.” He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Merlin knows the magical florists will be sad to see my business go when I no longer feel the need to send your mother an apology for every degrading comment or insult I must throw at her younger self.”

Aurora giggled as their lunch popped up on his desk between them.

He smirked as he took a cloth napkin and flicked it open, setting it on his lap. As her giggles subsided, he sobered and cleared his throat. “I want you to go to Aunt Minnie if anyone threatens you. Be extra cautious, and try not to travel alone. I mean it, Rory.”

“Yes, Dad.” She nodded.

“Good.” He said, seeming assured. He then reached for one of the bowls of soup to bring it closer to him. “Now, it’s not much of a Birthday meal, but this is only time I had. So, tell me about your classes, and then after this, we’ll have cake.”
“I’m sorry, you took how many courses last term?” Minerva asked, needing to set her teacup and saucer down at Hermione’s declaration. Cordelia, or Delia as she insisted Hermione call her, giggled at her sister-in-laws wide eyed expression before attempting to hide her amusement behind her teacup.

Hermione blushed, trying to not to smile and failing as her guardian’s infectious laugh was even starting to affect the stern transfiguration professor.

“All of them.” She repeated. “Though I admit to dropping Divination, it was a load of codswallop. And while I’m sure there are witches and wizards capable of making accurate predictions, I’m certain the woman was a fraud.”

“Well,” Minerva said, patting the bun at the nape of her neck. “You won’t be taking them all this year, I assure you.”

“Believe me, professor. I have no desire to repeat the circumstances which allowed me to do so.” Hermione replied, noticing Delia dropping her gaze to the content of her cup as she lowered it to her lap.

Over the time Hermione had spent with the McGonagalls, her muggle heritage became quite evident to them all. The McGonagall siblings were half bloods as it were, and Delia was a muggleborn from another village. She’d met Bob in school, and when the time came to settle, the youngest McGonagall decided to settle in the very village where his parents had raised them. A muggle village in which Hermione had had no problem navigating or blending in to.

Nor did she have a problem blending in with the clan themselves. While their father had passed, Mrs McGonagall still lived not far away and frequently visited her youngest child and his wife for tea. She took a liking to Hermione, and proceeded to share tales of her children and the ways their accidental magic caused humorous problems with trying to keep their secrets quite. The children of Malcolm McGonagall and his wife were no less kind, though the youngest was older than Hermione and already out of school. The girls were thrilled to find a good home for their school uniforms and old clothes, their mother never allowing them to part with them for whatever reason. Hermione imagined it was likely in hopes of a miracle occurring for Delia and Bob, as she would eye the lovely red head whenever the possibility of future needs for such items cropped up.

It was because Delia admitted to her Hermione that being blessed with a child would only be because of a miracle that Hermione, in turn, provided a half-truth as for the reason she lost her parents: the magical accident that caused her to lose them was her fault, and it was because she was trying hard to prove herself worthy of her magical education.

“Good. Now, Transfiguration, Charms, Potions, Defense against the Dark Arts, Astronomy, Herbology, and History or Magic are the core courses, but you should take another two. And only two.” Minerva had said sternly before a smirk played on her lips. “I doubt very much you would need Muggle Studies.”
“In my experience, the class is a bit of a joke.” Hermione admitted, causing both women to snort.

“Indeed it is,” Minerva admitted. “So what should I put you down for then?”

“Ancient Runes and Arithmancy.” Hermione replied.

“Good.” Minerva replied. “Delia said that you’ve been helping Bob in the gardens?”

Hermione nodded. “It started as something to do to pass time, but he insisted he pay me at least a small wage since I was technically harvesting for apothecaries and the like.”

“She’ll likely have the top marks in Herbology, and the best quality potion’s kit in all of Hogwarts.” Delia mused. “Bob’s been setting some aside for her, less she need to spend in Diagon Alley at the end of the month.”

“Keira still had all her texts, I trust?” Minerva asked, glancing between the two.

“And what she didn’t have, Malcolm Jr did. Though you can tell he had far less care for them.” Hermione replied.

“He was very quidditch driven.” Minerva said just as the clock began to chime three o’clock. She sighed heavily, setting her cup down. “Much as I hate to, I have to get back to the castle. Much needs to be done in preparation for the school year, and I’m afraid Albus will start to wonder where I have been heading off to so frequently.”

“I suppose, if you must Minnie.” Delia said as both she and Hermione set aside their tea and stood. The red head embraced her sister-in-law. “We shall see you Sunday.”

“For certain,” Minerva said, stepping back before embracing Hermione. “Let me know if there is anything else you will need for the school year, and I’ll be sure that the shop keeps in Diagon alley will have them ready for you to pick up.” She said softly.

“Oh, you don’t have ….” Hermione began to protest as Minerva leaned back and placed a finger on her lips to silence her.

“Family look out for one another.” She scolded with a smile. “And if there is one thing you have become over this month, it’s family. I will see you at dinner.” And with a wink, Minerva left.

“Well, enough of all this school talk,” Delia waved her hand as if she could clear the conversation from existence with the gesture. “Why don’t you help me with the washing up while we talk about Jane Eyre? I finished the book last night, though I think I may have kept Bob half awake with the wand light. Just couldn’t put it down!” Delia said, and Hermione happily followed her into the kitchen.
It wasn’t home, but with the McGongalls, she was beginning to think it was the closest she would ever get to the feeling again.

**September 1st, 1974**

“And you’re sure you have everything?” Delia asked Hermione for the half-dozenth time since flooing into the Leaky Cauldron.

Bob sighed and made a show of rolling his eyes. “Delia, I’m sure that even if she did we’d be able to get it to her.”

“I know,” Delia sniffled, and she dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief as they made their way to platform 9 3/4. “Just, well, I never thought we’d be doing this, you know?” She said, a watery smile lighting her face.

“Hold it together a bit longer, dear.” Bob said, gently placing a hand on her back. He then nodded to Hermione who nodded back. She turned to the wall, and took off at a run toward the wall cart first. It still never ceased to take her breath away as she passed through the barrier and emerged before the Hogwarts express. Immediately, one of the men working the platform collected her cart to load her third-hand trunk into the cargo hold.

It felt strange, not having a familiar to take with her. Crookshanks hadn’t been in her life long, but there was still a bit of an empty spot in her heart where the half-kneazle had been. She had wondered from time to time what would happen to him, but seeing as how he had a mind of his own and a thing for Sirius, she assumed he probably took off to find his own lot in life.

So this year, instead of clutching a cat carrier, she held merely her book bag.

“Alright,” Delia’s voice hitched behind her. Hermione turned to see the couple that took her in, gave her a home, and treated her as their own looked down quite forlornly at her. “Give our love to Minnie, when you can. And … and it’s been quite fantastic having you stay with us, Hermione.”

She furrowed her brow. “Oh,” She said, her heart feeling heavy. “I thought … well, I mean … it sounds as though this is more than seeing me off to school. Are you … is this goodbye, then?”

Delia and Bob looked at one another in surprise, then turned back to Hermione. “Not if you don’t want it to be.” Bob said slowly. “We assumed, once you had found a friend or two, that you would try and split your time away from Hogwarts with them.”

A lump formed in Hermione’s throat. “Oh,” She said, completely at a loss for words. Instead, she launched herself toward the McGonagalls and wrapped her arms around them as much as possible. “I promise to write.” She said. “And I’m sure if I’m not back for Christmas it’s likely because ….”

“Min,” Bob said, pressing his hand into Hermione’s back just above where Delia’s rested. “We understand that. Know that you are more than welcome to leave with her whenever you can for a family function. It’s only been a short time, but we think … well…..”

“We think of you as one of us.” Delia filled in. “If not a daughter, than a very beloved and favorite niece.”

Unable to find words, Hermione merely nodded.
“Now, go on.” Delia said as firmly as she could while sniffling. “Always easier to find an empty car and let people come sit with you than to find one full and you have to introduce yourself.”

“You might be right, there.” She said, looking to the train. She willed herself to step away from the McGonagalls, walking backward and waving until it was too hectic for her to continue to do such a thing, then quickly boarded the train.

She moved through a few cars with a spattering of people until she found an empty one. She sat close to the window, gazing out at the various students arriving, biding farewell to their parents. It was such a stark contrast when compared to her departure the year before. Everyone was worried about a murder on the loose, and there had been more adults on the platform. What’s more, even the clothing indicated a difference in decade. Robes were the main fashion, of course, but even the cuts and colors were more psychedelic than they were when Hermione had departed for her third year.

And she had been different. She had departed from her parents in new muggle clothes, and on the train would later change into new school uniform. She had been secretly smug about the possibility of taking all available classes, and felt herself above her friends because she had already read through the text books. She was certain they would have no trouble that year, for while Sirius Black was on the loose, there was no possible way any danger could come to Hogwarts.

Now she sat alone in the coach in her hand-me-down uniform, her second hand robes folded neatly beside her as she read through the battered, fourth-year charms book for the first time. She made a vow to herself to not draw attention the way she had in her previous time. She would not be the muggleborn know-it-all, insufferable or otherwise. At minimum, she would pretend to be a half-blood. She would not try to prove she was worthy of her magical education, she would simply receive it.

She wasn’t sure how much time passed before the door to the coach opened, and the sound of a girl chatting away broke through the silence along with the bustle of other students.

“And so I told Tuney that she was being absolutely ridiculous, but she just turned up her nose at me and said, oh! Sorry, umm,” Hermione looked up into familiar green eyes, and did her best to keep her face neutral as her heart twisted. She hadn’t even arrived at Hogwarts, and already the thing she was fearing the most was already happening. “Do you mind if we join you?”

“Go ahead.” Hermione said, catching a glimpse of dark hair behind the redhead. She returned to her book, not wishing to disturb the other two and their conversation.

“I … I don’t mean to sound rude, but you’re wearing my house colors and I don’t recognize you. And you’re hardly a first year. I mean, you wouldn’t have been sorted by now if you were. So, umm, do you mind … I mean, my name’s Lily. Lily Evans. I’m in fourth year.”

Hermione looked up at the earnest redhead, and couldn’t help but smile a little. “I’m fourth year, as well. Hermione Granger.”

“Hi!” Lily said again, and then as if she’d forgotten, she turned to the boy beside her. “This is Sev. He’s a fourth year, too, but he’s in a different house.”

It only took one proper look at the boy for Hermione to see that she should have known precisely who he was the moment they entered the car. His nose was a bit bigger than she remembered, and his hair was a bit longer, but it still had that dark, lank, greasy look to it. And his eyes. If none of the other factors could have given him up, his eyes were a dead giveaway.

Sending a dark scowl to Lily, he then turned to Hermione with his chin tilted up slightly. “Severus
Snape.” He said, his voice not near the deep baritone she knew it would be, but certainly deeper than Ron’s or Harry’s had been.

“Pleasure,” She said, hoping that she wasn’t about to incur his disdain in this decade already.

She noted that he eyed his eyes scanned over her and her belongings, though it was done with as much subtlety as a fourteen year-old boy could have. He did so while Lily spoke, obviously using Hermione’s perceived eye contact as a distraction.

“So how are you a fourth year and I’ve never seen you around? You didn’t get resorted or bumped ahead, did you? Well, not like you look like you could have been bumped ahead, but anyway ….”

“I’m a transfer student from Ilvermorny.” She told them. “I was sorted when the ministry brought me to Hogwarts to register me.”


Hermione nodded. “I lost my parents in an accident. I was essentially orphaned.” She said, swallowing the lump that formed each time she said the ‘o’ word.

“So Ilvermorny is … where?” Lily asked.

Hermione cleared her throat. “Massachusetts.”

“In the states!?” Lily replied with wide-eyed amazement.

“So how did you end up here?” Severus asked, eyes narrowed.

“We were here for my parents work.” She lied, and she found she couldn’t maintain eye contact as she did so. She ran her finger along her charms book, watching its progress. “They were finishing up a four year project abroad. I had come with them, and was exploring Diagon Alley by myself when something … happened.”

“What?” Lily asked as if it was the end of a long, breath taking story.

Hermione shook her head.

“Why not?” Lily pouted.

The train jolted as it began to move, and Lily scrambled over Severus to the window. She pulled it down, stuck her head out, and yelled out farewells while waving her arm about. She did that until the station was well away from the view, and Hermione felt as awkward and uncomfortable as Severus seemed to be.

Lily let out sighed in one puff of air, smiling serenely before turning back and looking between the two other people in the coach. “What were we talking about? Oh right, so you went to school in the states. A magical school in the states, how unbelievably wicked is that. So do they have houses there, too? Are their rivals? Which one were you in?”

“Umm,” Hermione said, curling her legs beneath her on the seat. “There are houses, of course. And rivalries, I mean. Quidditch, right? And, umm, I was in … the Horned Serpent.”

Severus snorted, and Lily shot him a glare before smiling back at Hermione. “Well I think it’s very interesting that you were in an entirely different magical school. There can’t be that many of them,
“Can there?”

“Well there are three in Europe.” Severus mumbled.

“About five in North America.” Hermione added thoughtfully.

“Two in China.”

“Actually I think there are about six in Asia all together.”

“And let’s not forget that there are probably a half dozen in Africa and South America.”

“Alright!” Lily shouted, stopping them. “Geez, and I thought Sev was bad for knowing everything.”

Severus blushed and looked toward the wall, and Hermione ducked her head to hide the grin threatening to erupt. *Ha! Who’s an insufferable know-it-all now, Snape!*

“Well I think you’re going to love it,” Lily continued. “Because no matter how many magical schools there are in the world, Hogwarts is obviously the best.”

“Except for the school song.” Severus mumbled.

“Hoggy-hoggy-Hogwarts.” Hermione sang under her breathe. When all that did was make Severus smirk, but Lily look upset, she sighed. “I’m sure that I will feel more at home at Hogwarts than anywhere else.” Hermione assured, reaching across the space and grasping Lily’s hand.

“And of course you will. And you’ll be with me, in my dorm. I can introduce you to Alice and Marlene. It’ll be nice to have another Gryffindor girl in our year.”

There was something about that statement that made Severus shift nervously.

Before Hermione could come up with an explanation why, the door to their car slid open, and she turned to see the spitting image of her best friend.
September 1st, 1974 (continued)

“Hey, Evans.” The boy who could only be James Potter leaned against the door frame and smiled a smarmy grin that Hermione had only ever seen on Cormac McLaggen or Draco Malfoy. Such a display on that face instantly disconnected James from her dear Harry. Harry, who was somewhat shy and didn’t want to have attention drawn to him at all, would never look at a girl the way James looked at Lily: as if she were a conquest.

Knowing the future as she did, Hermione expected only one response from Lily.

She’d been terribly surprised to see the opposite.

“Go away, James.” She immediately replied in genuine exasperation. “I was quite looking forward to a peaceful, enjoyable train ride.”

“So why are you in here with Snivellus?” A young, handsome, dark-haired boy asked with a chuckle, causing a short, pudgy blonde boy to laugh.

“That is awful.” Hermione said, glaring at the group of boys.

It, of course, drew there attention toward her for the first time. The dark haired boy, who was truly a bit too handsome, smiled broadly as he slowly looked her over. “Well, well, well. Who do we have here? I haven’t seen you around the common room before. What’s your name, Kitten?”

“Kitten?” Sirius Black had whispered upon seeing her in the shack. “No, it can’t be. I’ve gone mad, alone in the dark for all these years with my regrets and my revenge.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, not only at the audacity of it all, but at the fact that Azkaban had changed Sirius so much.

“She’s Hermione.” Lily said, much to Hermione’s displeasure. “She’s a transfer student.”

“Well,” Sirius said as he slid in the car and sidled up beside Hermione. He draped his arm over the back of the seat and grinned with an obnoxious sort of self confidence. “It’s excellent to see you were sorted in the best house in all of Hogwarts. But what Evans can’t seem to accept is that one should never hang around with snakes. Those are the Slytherins, by the way, and they always go dark. Bit obsessed with the dark arts, really. That’s what Snivellus over there is.”

There were chuckles from the boys who didn’t seem to see the way Hermione’s hair started to crackle as she tilted her chin. “I, for one, know that not all Gryffindors are good.” She spat, wanting to look to the chubby blond boy she guessed to be Peter Pettigrew, but found her heart ached at the idea of even hinting at something like that. She, instead, went the safer route. “And it’s said that Merlin himself a Slytherin, so tell me how your logic works? And quite honestly, in the very short time I have been on this train, I have found his company far superior to your own and he’s barely spoken.”
“Perhaps that’s why you think his company is superior.” James commented.

“Yes, perhaps it is. For at least he hasn’t opened his mouth and revealed himself to be a pompous, arrogant moron who honestly believes the color of the bedsheets in his dormitory somehow make him superior.” She shot back.

“Actually, I believe that’s demonstrated by the new robes and clean hair.” James retorted.

“My robes are second hand. And if you think your hair is considered ‘clean’ with the amount of products I can tell are in it, then we certainly need to find you a dictionary. Perhaps that will also help in our next conversation. By then, I’m sure you’ll understand big words and comprehend that the ones I would use to describe you in this moment would not be very flattering.” She then turned to Sirius. “Kindly extract yourself from my personal space, you were not invited nor wanted here.”

Sirius lifted his hands in surrender, standing and backing away toward a scowling James and Peter. “Alright, but don’t be surprised if in a week or two you find yourself changing your mind. I have a way with people like that.”

“I doubt that.” Hermione sneered.

Sirius merely chuckled as he turned, gesturing for the rest of them to follow. James glared at Severus before turning away. Just before the door closed behind them, Severus flinched and hissed through his teeth.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, trying to quiet the voices in her head screaming that this was not at all the story painted for Harry by Lupin.

“Nothing.” Severus scowled, tucking his left hand inside his robe sleeve.

“Did he hex you?” Lily asked, yanking Severus’ hand back out of hiding.

There was a small welt forming just below the first knuckle of his thumb.

“Of course he did.” Severus gritted. “Do you really think they would just pop in for a chat and leave without trying something?”

Hermione glared at the door before reaching for her back pack and digging through it. Once she found the burn salve Delia insisted she carry in case of a potions accident, she chucked it toward Severus without a word. He caught it with his good hand, frowning at the jar before looking at her with suspicion.

“It’s just something to heal it.” She said with a shrug.

“I didn’t ask you for it.” Severus growled, tossing it back toward her.

Hermione caught it and rolled her eyes. “I’m aware you didn’t, but I thought it would be useful.” She retorted before chucking it with a bit more force toward him.

“I don’t need your help.” He snapped as he tossed it back. It collided with the back of the seat but didn’t break or spill.

“Fine,” Hermione huffed, taking the jar and stuffing it back in the bag. “Enjoy being in discomfort for the next couple hours, then.” She grabbed her charms book and opened it, pointedly reading though not retaining a word as the car fell mostly silent.
She was aware that Lily and Severus were having a conversation, but she didn’t hear a word of it.

Instead, she mulled over what she learned.

In some ways, she instantly believed that Sirius had been like this all along. But James? She simply couldn’t understand how Harry’s parents were married, and seemingly in love, if this was how they interacted heading into their fourth year at Hogwarts. She did the math in her mind: they died at about twenty-one, and Harry had been just over a year old. Lily would have been pregnant at nineteen, meaning that, if she was turning fifteen, she’d have to have changed her mind about James Potter enough in four years to want to conceive with him. Unless, of course, it was more a marriage of honor. Hermione knew enough about sex and relationships to know they didn’t always coincide with one another. She had a cousin who was a product of a one night mishap, and his parents were merely together to raise him as a unit. But she just couldn’t help but remember the pictures she’d seen of them, of Lily and James. They truly seemed happy and quite in love. Maybe it was an act, maybe ….

“Do you find Charms that difficult? Is the material more advanced than you expected?” Severus’s jeering tone brought Hermione out of her revere, and she turned to him in surprise more than anything.

“What? No, not that. My mind just sort of wandered instead of focusing on what’s in front of me.” She admitted.

“A daydreamer, then? Typical more of Hufflepuffs than Gryffindors.”

Hermione snorted, wanting to comment on the daydreaming numpies in her own house, but her throat felt as though it would close before the words ever escaped. “Wasn’t day dreaming,” She managed to say, though her voice was a bit raspy. “Just … amazed by first impressions, is all.” She looked to him. “Why do they seem to dislike you so, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“I do.” He grumbled. “But since Lily scolded me for not being nicer to you … I have no idea. Because I exist? Because I’m Slytherin? It seems the possible reasons are endless.”

Hermione took in this thin, lanky boy with bad hair and a bad disposition. “The sorting hat initially wanted to put me in Slytherin, but wasn’t sure it was a wise decision,” She offered a truth not even her two best friends had known, getting his attention. “It considered Ravenclaw as well, but feared I would never reach my true potential within the house. Gryffindor was the only place left that I would possibly fit since there wasn’t even the remote possibility that I could belong in Hufflepuff. So, really, disliking someone simply for their house is ridiculous, as some people shouldn’t or wouldn’t fit in the any other than the one they were placed.” She glanced toward the door and frowned. “And if they dislike you simply for existing, well, it’s hardly like their presence is going to make the wizarding world a better place.”

He gave the barest of smiles, a tiny quirk of the lips, but she knew he knew she’d seen it. So she smiled back, and decided then and there that if James Potter was an arse of the biggest kind, then perhaps Severus Snape wasn’t at all the man she thought he was.

September 3rd, 1974

It took a full day of class for Hermione to notice one thing about Lily Evans: She was a bit of a flake. It wasn’t that she wasn’t smart, Lily had been quite good in charms and transfiguration, and had a decent, comprehensive knowledge of Astronomy. But it seemed the moment they arrived in the
school, Lily had taken off with the girls of their year without so much as a ‘see you later’ for Severus. Hermione had offered him a smile and a wave, but he didn’t return it. His eyes had been on Lily, sad and disappointed but not at all surprised.

She thought that maybe it was the rush of being back at school and seeing the friends she hadn’t spoken to all summer, but while Lily allowed Severus to wait for her and walk her to class, she was quick to sit beside and partner up with either Alice or Marlene. Both were nice enough, Hermione supposed, but far too interested in boys and beauty for her taste.

She sat next to Severus when it was clear no one else, not even from his own house, was going to. He’d sneered at first, especially for the first two classes. But when Lily left them for divination, and the two had Ancient Runes together, he seemed to understand at last that she sat with him because he was an ally of sorts. She didn’t really know anyone else, and the other options were far less than palatable.

Therefore, it wasn’t at all surprising that as the three of them walked into Potions the following morning Lily went to join the other girls. Hermione stayed with Severus as he made his way to the back bench. She frowned as Alice went with Frank Longbottom, leaving Marlene with Lily.

“Had Lily partnered with you before?” Hermione asked as she noted that there seemed to be an equal amount of Slytherins, and no one was on their own.

“Only in first year.” Severus replied. “I worked by myself the previous two years.” He’d said with a very pointed look at her.

She rolled her eyes. “Believe me, Severus, I wouldn’t ….” The grip on her heart prevented her from saying the rest of the sentence. *I wouldn’t dream of disrupting you in your subject.*

He frowned, noticing her abrupt and obvious unintentional stop, but was prevented from saying anything by the professor walking in.

Professor Slughorn was like day to Professor Snape’s night. Short, fat, and utterly ridiculous, Hermione could only shake her head in disbelief.

“Good morning, good morning. How have you all been? How was your summer? I hope it was all quite well. I thought perhaps we could start with a simple practical, ensure you all hadn’t forgotten how to brew a basic hair raising potion?” He smiled jovially, twitching his elbow toward a nearby Slytherin as if he was giving a ribbing.

“He’s not at all what I expected.” Hermione replied as she and Severus got out their kits before moving to retrieve their cauldrons at the back.

“And exactly what were you expecting?” Severus asked.

“Intimidating.” She replied. “Tall, perhaps, and much more … looming. I expected presence, magnetism.”

“Your previous potion’s master, I expect?” He commented as he got down his cauldron.

Hermione stretched on her toes, her fingers grazing the rim of her cauldron but not quite grasping it. It shouldn’t have surprised her when Severus reached up and grabbed hers as well, handing it down to her, but it did. He didn’t smile, and when she thanked him he merely nodded, but it was another un-Snape like gesture that reminded her that he had yet to become the man she knew. The same man that had greatly influenced her opinion of what a Potion’s Professor should be.
“Yes,” She managed to finally say. “My last potion’s professor was exactly that.”

“Oh,” Professor Slughorn said behind her, and before she could turn, she felt his arm drape around her. Hermione grimaced, turning away from him as much as she could while he held her within his grasp. “And you must be Miss Granger. I was told in the staff meeting to expect you. I was actually surprised when Dumbledore did not have you sorted with the first years.” She said nothing, feeling the eyes of everyone in the class on her as Professor Slughorn kept her beside him. He was the first teacher to draw attention to her. “Tell me, you wouldn’t happen to be a relative of Potioneer Hector Dagworth-Granger?”

Her immediate instinct was to tell the truth, but as she glanced around to see the Slytherin’s eyeing with with interest, as well as a few of the Gryffindors, she murmured. “Distantly, I believe.”

“Splendid, splendid. You should give our young Mr Snape a challenge, then, with potionerees in your family tree.” He finally let her go, and Hermione all but ran back to their work station.

“I imagine there are potionerees in many families.” She mumbled when Severus calmly joined her.

“None quite of that caliber.” He retorted as they opened their potions kit. His eyes immediately fell on the ingredients within Hermione’s inventory. “And I’m sure not all families would be so discerning.”

Hermione looked between him and the box before it clicked. Her ingredients would have cost a fortune to be this fresh from an apothecary. No student, save from those from affluent families, would have a kit like this. “One of my guardians is a Herbologist. He let me take what I needed for my kit so I didn’t have to spend what little money I was able to get on ingredients he had at hand.”

Severus’ cheeks reddened, and he immediately turned away and focused entirely too hard on his potion and making notes in the margin of his text book.

After about the halfway point for brewing, she could feel his gaze dart to her while waiting for the next step. She peeked at him, but he would immediately avert his eyes and put on an air of having little to no interest in the person next to him.

“Alright. Let’s bottle those potions and bring them up here.” Professor Slughorn called out near the end of the first hour. “And now that I am sure you are all awake, we will discuss what to expect this upcoming year, and go over some of the properties of draught of the living dead.”

Hermione had already decanted her potion, as had Severus, and before she could move, he plucked her vial and brought it up to the front of the room with his own.

When he returned, she merely nodded in thanks, and he nodded once in acknowledgment. Still, she couldn’t help but notice how his shoulders didn’t seem so tense anymore.

September 21st, 1974

_Delia,

I apologize, first and foremost, for it to have taken me so long before writing. It was not my intention, I assure you. The first week here was simply adjusting to how different things are compared to what I had been used to. While many of the professors are extremely similar to those I had before, some vastly different. Professor Slughorn, for instance, is quite lax compared to the Potion’s Master I had previously had as my instructor. Thankfully, my lab partner, Severus, is studious as I am and has no interest in slacking.

I had met him on the train, along with our mutual friend Lily. I say it like this, because I’m not_
entirely sure we’re friends yet ourselves. We are civil, and I may even go so far as to say we are kind to one another, but it is quite obvious the only reason he even bothers to have me in his company is Lily.

She and I are in the same house, and therefore is likely the reason she is my closest friend here at Hogwarts. Though, if I’m to be honest, I don’t quite feel a true connection with her. Lily is outgoing and vivacious, beautiful in a classic way, and draws people to her like a moth to flame. She is friends with all the girls in our year, and while I do find Alice Diggory to be tolerable enough, Marlene McKinnon leaves much to be desired. There had been a girl in my dorm at my previous school who I thought to be the most vapid and self-obsessed girl who ever lived. Marlene could easily have been this girl’s inspiration.

Though if I am to be honest, I don’t care much for many of those in my year and house. The boys, except for perhaps Frank Longbottom and Remus Lupin, are horrid. The former of the two I mentioned seems content enough to remain to himself until he can socialize with those in other houses, the latter … he simply needs to find other friends.

I haven’t told any of this to Minerva, as I’m sure it wouldn’t make a bit of difference. If the glares she has sent to the those I detest are anything to go by, she would likely share many of my thoughts anyway.

I wish I could give you a reason for not writing the other two weeks. I had a bit of a difficult time of it this past Thursday, and I believe I was just so caught up in my studies and adjusting to life away from the village, and Bob’s greenhouse that I merely lost track of time beforehand. Forgive me. I promise to write more often, and shall not wait until Halloween to give you an update.

Hoping the warm weather that we have had here is extended to your neck of Scotland, and to hear from you soon.

Yours, Hermione

She had finished the letter in her, for once, quiet dormitory before heading up to the owlery. The weather really was quite fantastic for late September, and despite the horrid memories it brought to mind, Hermione headed up there in her denims and Gryffindor sweater. At least she was wearing a simple t-shirt underneath and not a blouse like she had when she had her accident.

Being Saturday, most of the students were sprawled around the grounds, soaking up what may be the last of the warm sunshine before autumn set in. Therefore, her journey through the castle was met with nearly no students. She’d passed a first year Ravenclaw on her way up the stairs to the tower, but that had been about it.

Until she got to the owlery and discovered Severus sitting on a ledge that looked relatively clean. He was looking out one of the Arrow loops, eyes cast down to the ground below.

“Do you come hang around the owls often?” She teased as she entered the room, looking for a basic brown barn owl that belonged to the school and could send her post for her.

“No,” Severus said simply. After an owl fluttered down to Hermione and offered it’s leg, he added, “Lily said you would likely be up here.”

“You were looking for me?” She frowned, glancing quickly at him over her shoulder while she tied her letter to the owls leg.

Severus snorted. “No, not really.” She turned toward him as the owl took off through another arrow loop. He scuffed his foot against the stone floor, not meeting her eyes. “I had thought maybe you would be going to her after you were done here. And that, perhaps, with you, she may feel able to extract herself from the others.”

“Alice and the Harpy?” Hermione snorted as she came to lean on the wall beside him. She crossed
her arms and ankles and turned faced him. “I wouldn’t hold your breath for that, I heard the latter was quite excited to spend the day charming each other’s nails and hair and rambling about the idiot males in our house. Fourth year and above only, of course.”

“And you aren’t down there, because?” He asked without looking away from whatever had his attention.

“Do I strike you as someone who could be bothered with such inane conversation?” She asked.

“Your hair could benefit from your attendance.” He retorted, and she gaped at him in indignation.

“And yours is the epitome of perfection.” She shot back. He stiffened, and his jaw clenched, but he said nothing. “Anyway, I had no intention of joining them. I was going to head down to the library and work on my charms homework.”

“That’s funny,” Sirius’ voice came from the doorway, and Severus was on his feet, facing the four newcomers with a defensive position and his wand out. “We thought we’d do the same thing.”

“What do you want, Sirius?” Hermione sighed.

“Why, something to practice on, Kitten.” He smirked.

“You were going to come up here and charm owls?” She retorted.

Sirius, James, and Peter laughed, not moving an inch from the doorway. “Hardly.” Sirius said, and before either she or Severus could react, he pointed his wand toward the Slytherin and said, “Engorgio.”

Severus’ already large nose began to grow.

As all the Gryffindor boys began to chuckle, Hermione withdrew her wand … and hesitated. Magic in the halls was strictly forbidden. Except, well, this wasn’t really the hallway, was it? And besides, it was four against one. Well, two, really.

Before she could second guess herself, Hermione shouted, “*Slugulus Eructo!*”

She doubted the boys had heard or seen her cast it, but when Sirius was jostled from the impact, they’d stopped laughing and looked one another in confusion. A moment later, Sirius turned sallow and green tinged before doubling over and retching heavily. The amount of slugs that pour from his mouth and over James’ shoes was almost enough for Hermione to join in in empathy.

“What the hell, Granger?” James grimaced.

“I don’t need your help.” Severus snapped while clutching his nose.

“Maybe he just needs to be a bit ug-ah,” Sirius had started to say before forcefully vomiting more slugs. He coughed, sputtered, and rasped out something that began with a ‘d’.

The moment Hermione had seen him raise his wand, she bumped a stubborn Severus just out of range. It did, however, result in her getting hit with what ever Sirius came up with.

She felt her front teeth, already bigger than she’d like, growing. The sensation was uncomfortable as it was, but feeling them move along her chin was quite disconcerting. And upsetting.

“Ha! Nice one, Padfoot.” James said, giving Sirius a hardy pat on the back.
Through the tears in her eyes that Hermione willed not to fall, she could see the action caused Sirius to spew more slugs.

Severus flicked his wand, mumbling something with a ‘c’, and instantly all of James’ hair slide off his head and fell into the pile of slug sick at his feet.

He patted his head, and Hermione couldn’t help but snicker at the panic and desperation in his eyes, her tears fading just enough to make it out before it turned darkly angry.

He flicked his wand, and Severus legs collapsed from under him, his foot connecting with Hermione’s and taking her down with him. Her long teeth smacked against the stone, making her see spots as the pain filled her skull. She thought she heard the sound of bats chirping along with another retch from Sirius, and Severus hiss in pain closer to her than she thought he had been, but she hadn’t seen what happened before a commanding voice silenced everything else.

“What in Merlin’s name is going on up here?” Professor McGonagall demanded.

“We were just coming up here to send off some post,” James replied quickly.

“Yes, I see the post you intended to send.” She replied sharply. “As well as two students on the floor with some … enhancements.”

Severus snorted, and when Hermione shifted her gaze, her eye met his, “I see no difference.” He said.

“Neither do I.” She said through her teeth, the pain in her mouth and skull superseding his harsh commentary. His lips curled as he snorted, then he grimaced and held his nose again.

“Okay, Miss Granger, Mister Snape, Mister Black, hospital wing. Mister Potter, well, your hair will grow back.” Professor McGonagall stood sternly at the door, gesturing for Hermione and Severus to get off the floor and do as instructed.

“You’ll pay for this.” James threatened under his breath as they passed. Neither Hermione nor Severus acknowledged him.

-----------H-----------

“What were you thinking, Sev?” Lily scolded him as he lay in the hospital bed next to Hermione’s. He was staring down his hands where they rested on the blankets. “It’s one thing that you always have to get into it with them, but dragging Hermione into it with you? I asked you to find her and talk to her, not to ….”

“Talk to me about what, Lily?” Hermione asked, her words still muffled from the elongated teeth. Apparently vomiting slugs was considered more concerning than enlarged teeth, but not quite as serious as an enlarged nose.

Lily finally looked up to Hermione, her eyes immediately going to where her teeth were still protruding before looking away again. “Nothing.” Lily replied, her cheeks coloring. “I just thought that, well, since Sev was lonely he could go find you. Better than hanging around with them.” Lily hissed.

“They are in my house, Lily. What do you want me to do, ignore them?” Severus protested.
“Yes!” Lily snapped. “You hear what they call me, Severus. They aren’t nice.”

Hermione could hazard a guess at what, exactly. Lily was being called by the Slytherins. Severus’s eyes shifted toward Hermione but did not look at her.

After a long pause, he swallowed and said, “I can’t ignore them. I have to watch my back everywhere else in this school, I won’t do it in my own dormitory. And just because I spend time with them doesn’t mean I agree with them!” He snapped back.

“Sirius hexed first.” Hermione said, seeing Lily tensing up in preparation of saying something she might later regret. When the ginger girl turned to Hermione, the brunette shrugged. “We were just up there, talking. Just like you asked him to. He came, he found me, we were chatting. The lot of them, they were the ones who started it.”

As the words tumbled out of her mouth, Hermione could only think of the troll in the girls washroom. How she lied for Harry and Ron’s sake, and how they became friends after that. She wasn’t sure why, since she was hardly telling a fib, and Lily was hardly anyone of authority. She felt Severus’ eyes on her, and she looked at him as she continued.

“I have no idea why you’re snapping at him, especially when he didn’t get to defend himself before I blundered in. Really, my hexing Sirius probably made things worse. So honestly, if you’re going to berate someone, berate me. And don’t you dare growl at him for dragging me into anything.”

Hermione turned her gaze away from Severus once she could see he wasn’t sure how he should react.

Lily opened her mouth and closed it a few times before saying, “This isn’t the first time it’s happened, you know.”

“I deducted that for myself, actually.”

Before Lily could say anything else, Madam Pomfrey came over to the bed and smiled down at Hermione. “Alright, Miss Granger. Now, I can’t say your teeth will be back to exactly how they were after I apply the counter-charm.” She said as she placed a gentle, reassuring hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “But at least you’ll be able to talk and eat.”

“And close your mouth.” Severus said. “You’ve been drooling.”

“At least there may be an improvement when she’s done with me.” Hermione replied, forcing herself to keep the smile off her face when she noted Severus’s eyes had a twinkle of amusement when his expression remained impassive.

“Honestly, the pair of you!” Lily flung her hands in the air before dropping to her sides with a smack. She turned, growling as she stormed from the Hospital Wing.

“Yes, well, shall we get started, then?” Madam Pomfrey said with a sigh. At Hermione’s nod, the mediwitch got out her wand and began to perform the counter-charm.

It was disconcerting the feel her teeth shrinking, more so than their growth, even. Hermione shut her eyes tight, balling her hands into fists and going ridged in order not to move or flail because of the awkward sensations. She felt them move past her lower lip, then her upper, and then stop. Blinking open her eyes, she ran her tongue long the top row. Her eyes widened as she felt how perfectly even they were. Madam Pomfrey conjured her a mirror, and then walked away with a knowing smile.

Examining her reflection, Hermione involuntarily reached up and touched them.
“My parents wouldn’t let me fix them before.” She said to herself.

“Why?” Serverus asked.

She merely shook her head, knowing there was no way she would be able to explain it without
giving away that she wasn’t even a half-blood. “Doesn’t matter.” She finally managed to whisper. “I
suppose … maybe I should thank Sirius.”

Severus snorted, “I don’t think his ego needs anymore inflating.”

“Hmm, probably right.” Hermione replied. After a time, she set the mirror down and turned to
Severus. “How long do you think before James attempts the hair growth charm?”

“I think the question would be whether or not he could find someone competent enough to cast it.”
He retorted.

“I know it.”

“Of course you do.”

“And can cast it.”

“Of course you can.”

“And why do you say it like that?”

“Because you’re a bloody know-it-all.” Severus said with an exasperated chuckle. His hand then
shot in the air and waved around. “This is you, every class, without fail. Before you showed up,
people were called on, and we got a good laugh at the moronic answers. It’s only been three weeks
and I’m sure I’m not the only one who wants you to go back to where you came from.”

The moment the words left his mouth, Hermione knew he regretted it.

But it hurt. She would never get back to where she came from, and the painful reminder of turning
fifteen two days ago without anyone being the wiser still lingered.

Without a word, Hermione got off the bed and marched out of the hospital wing. Severus didn’t try
to stop her. It was probably for the best.

---------------H---------------

I’m going to have to give you detention, you understand?” Professor McGonagall’s voice pulled
Hermione out of her attempt at reading. Not that she absorbed anything, but considering she’d read
the newer edition of Hogwarts: A history more times than she could recall, it wasn’t that big of a
loss. It merely gave her an excuse to spend the remainder of the day in the library, staying there
through supper and shutting out the world.

It would seem, however, that her solitude was about to come to an end.

She set the book down on the library table and looked up at the professor as she came up beside her.

“I figured as much.” She admitted.

“I heard the story from Messers Black and Potter, and Mister Snape won’t say a thing. He never has.
But perhaps maybe you would be willing to give your account of the incident?”
“Severus was already up in the Owlery when I arrived to send a letter to Delia. We’d barely began to talk when the lot of them interrupted us. Sirius out-right said they came up for ‘practice’, as he called it. For charms. And he even confessed to not being there for owls which only makes me think they used the ma-.” She cut off mid-word with a cough, and then groaned in frustration. “Apparently I can’t tell you.” She grumbled.

“Hermione ….” Minerva began gently.

“Maybe I should.” Hermione said with a set jaw. “Maybe I should just resist the blasted Vow long enough to tell you something. Then I would be put out of my misery, wouldn’t I?”

“You don’t mean ….”

“I have lost my family, my friends, all because I tripped over a cat! And allowed … ugh! I can’t even say more than that. And really, how horrible does that sound? I lost my family due to a magical accident because I tripped over a bloody cat!” She huffed, a couple of tears escaping her.

“Five points from Gryffindor for language.” Minerva said gently. “But I do understand the frustration. I understand why Professor Dumbledore put such tight restrictions on only yourself, and he knowing what is to take place in the future ….”

“What do you mean?” Hermione sniffed.

“Well,” Minerva frowned. “You had told him, hadn’t you? There is the problem with You-Know-Who and his followers, he mentioned that you had information ….”

“He said he didn’t think he should know.” Hermione interrupted. “He said that, well, that it wouldn’t be wise. That’s why he made me take the Vow, so I couldn’t say anything about the future.”

“Well,” Minerva said, still wearing a frown of confusion as she looked around the room. She took a breath, and turned back to Hermione. “Either way, I’m sure, in time, it will be better. And I would like to think that perhaps Bob and Delia gave you a surrogate family that you felt you belonged to.”

Hermione bowed her head, watching her fingers as she caused them to knot and un-knot. “Right now, my parents are … finishing dental school. They married last year, I think. They won’t contemplate having me until it seems nearly too late. They’re out there right now, and I can’t see them. I may never see them again. The people who were my friends, by the time I lay eyes on them again, I will be old enough to be their mother. God knows I’ve always nagged them like one.

“I’ve told myself time and time again, from the moment I arrived, that this would be a fresh start. But I only just really remembered to write to Delia, and when I went to sign it … I didn’t know what to do. And I haven’t made any real friends here.”

“There’s Miss Evans and Mr Snape…..” Minerva started to list, but Hermione shook her head.

“Lily is a sort of friend, but I don’t have any patience or anything in common with the other girls. And Severus, well, he only tolerates me because Lily asks it of him.”

“I see,” Minerva said with a sigh. “Well, you’ve missed dinner, and I cannae have you avoiding meals. Delia will have my hide if she caught wind of it. We’ll head to my office, and I’ll have the house elves bring by a light tea for you.” She rose to her feet, offering Hermione her hand. “And then we’ll discuss your detention on Monday night.”

Hermione couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped, and followed the elder woman out the library.
She’d stayed out of sight for the most part for the rest of the weekend. Lily said nothing more than a “see you around” when she had left for the library.

Monday morning she rose, dressed, and went down to breakfast by herself. She ate her porridge with her head bent over a book, feeling eyes on her but ignoring them. When she’d finished, she packed up, noted that Lily wasn’t quite ready and deep in conversation with Marlene and Alice, and moved to leave on her own.

“Hermione.” She heard Remus call, and she stopped as he jogged up to her. Glancing past him, she’d noticed Sirius watching them with interest, James (whose hair was decidedly too long now) was distracted by Lily. Peter was staring beady eyed at Sirius. “Umm, about Saturday.”

“What about it?” She asked, her attention back on Remus.

“Well, umm,” he wrung his hands. “The thing is, they didn’t mean to actually get into it with you.”

“No,” She said, crossing her arms against her chest. “No, they wanted to get into it with Severus.”

“Look,” He sighed, glancing over his shoulder. She guessed she wasn’t supposed to have noticed the encouraging gesture Sirius gave Remus. “Snape … isn’t exactly a nice guy.”

“I’m well aware of that.” Hermione replied.

Remus furrowed his brow. “You are?”

“Yes.” She replied. “Since I’ve known him he finds a way to insult me at least once in a conversation, and I’m blatantly aware that he would much rather I disappear than be within his presence.” She huffed, thinking of the future Professor Snape as much as the words Severus spoke on Saturday. “But he doesn’t seek out people for the sole purpose of hexing. He doesn’t intentionally hinder others from learning. And most important in this moment, he would never send another person to make his apologies,” at this she looked purposely at Sirius who smiled smugly at her. She glared and looked back to Remus. “So forgive me if I would choose to the lesser of two evils. I will see you in class, Remus.” Hermione gave a curt nod, spun on her heel, and headed toward the doors.

“You were supposed to get her to come with us,” She heard Sirius complain, and shook her head in disbelief that he could ever think that she would jauntily join them after Saturday. But then again, he was likely in another part of the hospital wing and just out of sight on Saturday. He certainly didn’t leave before she had, so he must of heard she and Severus.

That gave her pause, but only for a moment. The marauders saw an opening, and they had merely attempted to exploit her to either hurt Severus (which wouldn’t have worked) or sway Lily (which also wouldn’t have worked).

“Bloody fantastic,” She grumbled, picking up speed and storming from the great hall.

Shortly after leaving, Severus fell into step with her. “You’re a pain in the ass.” He stated.

“I believe we’ve already covered you would rather I not exist, I don’t need further insult from you.” She said in a clipped tone, picking up pace in a vane attempt to out-pace him.

“I didn’t … fuck, would you stop?” He snapped quietly enough that no one would hear but her. She obeyed, though didn’t turn to look at him. “I apologize for what I said on Saturday, but only the part in which I said that … I meant every word about you being an insufferable know-it-all. I drives me
absolutely spare, and the Slytherins mock it constantly when they know they won’t get caught. Each of them had noticed you’ve become a favorite of Slughorn’s, and don’t want to risk getting on his bad side.” He huffed, and Hermione peeked at him to see him run his hand through his hair. She hadn’t noticed that it wasn’t quite so greasy in the mornings. Limp, yes, lank most certainly, but that greasy look wasn’t there. He glanced over, seeing he had her attention at least in part. “I may have also still been a bit defensive about the owlry. I don’t need someone defending me, and I certainly don’t need someone willing to patch them up to do so.”

“I said I could perform the charm.” Hermione said, turning a bit toward him. “I never said I would.”

Severus frowned. “He has hair now.”

“Astute observation.” She replied. “However, it’s far too long. I, as an insufferable know-it-all, would have stopped it before it had gotten to that point. What’s more, I was in the library all weekend.”

“Right.” Severus scoffed.

“And as for defending you: whether you wanted or needed my help doesn’t matter. I was there, and I certainly wasn’t going to stand by and let you get hexed by those idiots.”

“They’re from your own house.” He reminded her.

She shrugged. “So they are.”

“I’m a Slytherin. I’m a rival, and am supposedly going to turn dark and do all sorts of wicked things.”

She considered what the Vow would allow her to say. “I set a teacher on fire.” She stated, only feeling the slightest of flutters in her heart. “I also stole from one to brew polyjuice.” Nothing worse than flutters. “And I punched a boy in a rival house in the face for the sheer pleasure of shutting him up. Not as delinquent as the first two, but still not what one would call good. Other than hexing a few arseholes back in defense, what’s the worse thing you’ve done?”

As she spoke, a slight smile began to pull on his lips. “You know, I believe I’ve misjudged you. You’re more likable than I’d originally thought.”

Hermione twisted her mouth in an effort not to laugh, wondering if Professor Snape had sat at his desk after that fateful Quidditch match and realized who it was. Or if he laughed at her more than simply because she’d turned herself into a cat. Perhaps, moments after she disappeared, Draco Malfoy finally found him and complained he’d tell his father about what happened. She wondered if Professor Snape would remember it all with a certain amount of fondness, or annoyance.

-------------------S-------------------

December, 25th 1992

“Severus, pull yourself together!” Poppy scolded as she dragged him into her office, but it only made him laugh harder. He hadn’t meant to laugh in front of her, truly he didn’t.

Only, once he noticed some of his inventory starting to go missing, he remembered Hermione’s confession from back before he wasn’t sure what he thought of her. It had been brought to the surface of his mind after he returned to his office after that Quidditch match the year before and found a new set of robes with a note from his wife saying “sorry”. He knew, without a doubt, that she was the one who was stealing, and he knew what she was doing with it.
Hermione had warned him not to get too comfortable after they had the children settled, an embarrassed flush to her cheeks as she gazed into her wine and seemed to refuse to look at him. He was curious, to say the least, but knew she couldn’t say anything.

When Poppy flooed, saying there had been an accident involving polyjuice, curiosity morphed into panic. From his own, personal stores, he plucked up the antidote along with a bezoar, believing she had somehow brewed it wrong and he may have to save her life.

When he’d seen what the accident entailed, he lost it.

“You realize H is down in the sitting room right now, knowing full well what I’m up here seeing.”

“Yes, but Hermione Granger is terrified and in need of comforting support.”

“When have I ever been comforting?” He asked, wiping away a tear of mirth.

“I can think of quite a few times, actually.” Poppy countered, crossing her arms. “Be nice to Miss Granger, as nice as you can be, anyway. Get her fixed up as best you can, and then go laugh at your wife until your heart’s content. Though I imagine you will be transfiguring the sofa this evening, if that’s the case.”

“I’m afraid Miss Granger’s problem is more complex than simply giving her an antidote. There is a reason one does not use animal hair in polyjuice.”

“But you can fix her, can’t you?” Poppy asked.

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t recall being married to a furry, so yes, Poppy, I can fix her.”

“Good,” Poppy nodded once. “Although if I were you, I would avoid any phrases with your wife that involve making her ‘purr’.”

If such words had left the matron’s lips at any other time, especially with that smirk, Severus may have become indignant, and likely offended. He’d hate that what intimacies he shared with his wife were speculated on, especially so crudely.

But this was not a normal situation, and Severus immediately resumed his laughter, promptly leaving the hospital wing to start the brew to fix the girl who, in two years for her, would become his best friend. And also to put off seeing his wife as long as possible.

The sofa really wasn’t that comfortable, even when transfigured.

Chapter End Notes

No Aurora this chapter, but we see her again in the third.
“I would be more excited if there was something a bit more substantial than ‘apples’ for dinner.” Hermione told Lily, who was bouncing with glee, as they along with Severus sat out under a tree by Black Lake. They had decided to head out there after charms, seeking a bit of quiet before the Halloween feast inevitably brought everyone in the school from hyper to intolerable.

“And I suppose Ilvermorny had a Halloween feast without candy?” Lily asked. “And it is enchanted candy, after all. It’s not like you’d feel ill after eating it.”

“Digestion wise, no,” Severus said from where he sat on the ground beside Hermione. He picked up a stone, flicking it just so so that it skipped across the lake surface at least a dozen times before disappearing from sight. “But the headache, the fatigue that will set in tomorrow. You may only have to worry about listening to the proper way to muck a Thestral stall, but some of us have real subjects to study.” He teased, the corner of his lips twitching as Lily became indignant.

Hermione giggled quietly, still not sure what to think of this Severus Snape even over a month since he seemed to decide she was worthy of his getting to know. He still didn’t talk much when Lily wasn’t with them, but in a way that suited Hermione just fine. She didn’t know him like she had known Harry or Ron a month into their tentative friendship when it first began, but she had found something in Severus that she never would have with them: a study companion. Lily had found a balance between them and the girls, and when she wasn’t with them, Severus and Hermione retreated to the library. They would spend their time together pouring over books or finishing essays, and while it didn’t sound like much, to Hermione it was perfection. He never spoke a word of Quidditch, he never complained that she could spend hours in front of tomes, and he never spent the whole time sighing heavily in a demonstration of boredom.

“So you simply don’t over indulge!” Lily countered, crossing her arms and standing with her hip jutted out.

“But what if you don’t have a taste for sweets?” Hermione asked. “That wa-would be the problem I have with it. I was never allowed sweets growing up, never in the quantity beyond perhaps a square of dark chocolate a couple times a year. And perhaps a piece of cake on … well, specially occasions.” She said, clearing her throat after it had gone dry at the near slip that she’d experienced the feast beforehand.

“Why weren’t you allowed sweets?” Lily asked. “Just too expensive, or …?”

“They’re terrible for your teeth.” She replied

Severus narrow his eyes at her, but Lily spoke before he could say anything.

“I suppose, there is that. But this is the wizarding world. Surely they have a potion to fix your teeth?” Lily asked, looking pointedly at Hermione’s mouth.

Severus drew his legs up slowly, rest his arms on his knees and hiding the lower half of his mouth behind them.

“You don’t need it, Evans.” James’ voice cut in to anything Hermione would have said on the
She groaned, and Severus immediately sat up straighter. It was reflex, really. Hermione had noticed that, unless they could be incredibly discreet, and had the benefit of the doubt if caught, the Marauders never did anything to Severus in front of Lily. Or herself, now that she’d come to think of it. Not since the Owlery incident had they had the nerve. She knew they still got in some shots, now and then. There had been times when Severus had limped into class when Hermione or Lily hadn’t been able to accompany him, and she there was one night he’d spent in the hospital wing, though he wouldn’t say why. Sirius and James had been a bit too peppy that evening for it to be a coincidence.

“I was having a lovely afternoon, weren’t you?” Hermione asked Severus in a pointed manner.

“How could you be enjoying the afternoon, Kitten, if you were in the company of Snivellus?” Sirius asked, coming around from the other side of the tree.

“It’s quite simple, really. His company is infinitely more enjoyable than yours.” She retorted. Severus snorted quietly, rolling his eyes before watching James and Lily.

“No, I will not go to Hogsmeade with you!” Lily huffed, tossing her hair over her shoulder before crossing her arms. “Why would I want to be seen with a toerag like you?”

“Oh, come on,” James replied, putting on a charming smile. “You’re willing to be seen with Snivellus but not me?”

Severus sneered but said nothing as Lily glared and repeated her previous answer.

“Poor Prongs,” Sirius said with an elaborate sigh and a shake of his head. “Looks like he’ll be going solo. But, then again, perhaps Lily could be persuaded if we were to, say, double?”

“I didn’t think Severus was your type.” Hermione replied.

Severus whirled around and shot her a nasty glare that would rival his older self. Sirius seemed to be choking on air, gasping and coughing with the shock while an out-of-sight Pettigrew laughed. Hermione met Severus’ gaze and mouthed, “sorry”. It softened his glare, but only somewhat.

“I think you were a bit mistaken, Kitten.” Sirius finally managed to say.

“I can’t see how I would be.” She replied, standing up and grabbing her bag. “I can’t possibly imagine why you would think I would ever agree to such a thing.” She shouldered her bag as she noted Severus standing as well, grabbing his bag and Lily’s. The last member of their trio stepped away from James with a growl of frustration, stomped past Severus, snatching her bag from his grip along the way. He and Hermione set off after her without a goodbye to the three Gryffindor boys.

Which made Hermione pause.

“What is it?” Severus asked, glancing over his shoulder but following the aggravated red-head.

“Where’s Remus?” She asked. “He wasn’t ….” Hermione stopped as she realized why he would be missing. “Never mind.”

Severus frowned, looking around and likely trying to spot the fourth member of the marauders before calling for Lily and jogging to catch up.

As Hermione slowly moved to meet up with her companions, she wondered if maybe the other boys already knew of Remus’ condition. She supposed she would find out during the feast, or if they were
absent from the common room after.

“Of course I’d like to go with you,” Lily was saying, and Hermione stopped a few feet away from the pair. Her eyebrows shot to her hairline, though she turned her head to hide her surprise from either Severus or Lily seeing. They were still talking, probably discussing the particulars of what Hermione had guessed was a date in Hogsmeade, and but what those particulars were, she never knew. Her thoughts were drowning them out.

It had, oddly enough, never occurred to her that Lily may have dated someone else before James Potter. And it had never occurred to her that that person could have been Snape. Well, Severus, really. Harry was always going on about how Snape looked at him oddly, creepily. Wistfully. Which, well, that was weird, because there was Aurora. So it wasn’t as if Snape had hoped for children and had none. And it wasn’t as if Harry’s paternity could possibly be questioned, not with the way he was the spitting image of ….

“Hermione!” Lily shouted, and Hermione jolted from her thoughts and turned to her comrades as they wore nearly matching smirks of amusement. “Gee, where did you head off to?”

“Sorry, just got a bit side track thinking of ….”

“Something from your old school?” Lily asked when Hermione couldn’t think of a plausible reason aside from the truth as to why she was so intensely woolgathering.

“Yeah,” Hermione agreed. Without another word, she followed them back inside the castle. And if she noticed Severus standing a little taller, well, who was she to say anything?

**November 2nd, 1974**

Snow was fluttering down around her as she walked the streets of Hogsmeade and window shopped. Hermione had traveled down to the village from the castle with Lily and Severus, but promptly parted ways with them so as to not be the third wheel. She’d felt that way sometimes with Harry and Ron, and she certainly wasn’t wanting to find out what it was like with an actual couple.

Though that thought did remind her that she was wondering if there would have ever been a day when Harry would feel like the third wheel.

She hadn’t really had a chance to properly have a crush on Ron like she wanted to. It may not have been the way it worked, but after being as distracted by Lockhart as she had been, Hermione decided that she wouldn’t allow herself to feel that way again unless it was convenient. And Ron had been an utter prat last year (or would it be in 19 years?), going on about Crookshanks attacking Scabbers. He was a prat the year before as well, his complete and total stance for about a month that Aurora Snape was the ‘Heir of Slytherin’, and his subsequent hostility whenever she dared approach Ginny. Thank Merlin for the twins calling him out, and setting him straight with at least the latter part. Still, their first Hogsmeade visit, before Malfoy came and ruined it, then Harry coming and saving it, she had pretended for a moment that it was a date. The idea had been nice at the time. Now she knew that by the time she returned to 1994, she would have no romantic interest in him. Motherly, perhaps, but that was about it.

“Hermione?” She stopped at Remus’ questioning voice and turned toward him. “I’m sorry, but I seem to have lost the others, and I was wondering if you had seen them?”
“Well,” Hermione replied. “I avoided Sirius twice already, once by Zonkos not long after arriving, and then just about five minutes ago near Spintwitches. James was with him, sulking, and had tried the second time to get me to join them in hopes that Lily would eventually follow.”

“Thanks,” Remus said. He was about to leave when he stopped, turning back toward her. “Are you … are you here alone?”

“Yeah,” she said, stuffing her hands in her coat pocket.

“And that’s … I mean, I see you around with Lily and Severus, I just thought ….”

“Oh, well, they had a thing, so.” She looked to the road, watching the gathering flakes.

“Well, umm, we could always spend our day together.” He offered.

“And once Sirius and James sees you’re with me? Thank you Remus, but I will pass.”

“Yes, probably for the best.” He agreed sheepishly.

“Remus,” She stopped him as he was about to run away. “I know you don’t approve of what they do to Severus, or the other students they pick on. So why do you hang around them?”

Remus shifted uncomfortably. “I have reasons.”

“I imagine you do.” She replied pointedly. “I know what it’s like to get friends where you can get them, even if it means lowering your value.”

“You mean with Severus?” He asked, not unkindly.

She narrowed her eyes, “I meant the friends I had before coming here. They weren’t exactly rule abiding, nor where they particularly dedicated to their studies.” Remus had the decency to blush as he diverted his eyes. A tiny, niggling of guilt gnawed at Hermione, and she mentally rolled her eyes at her own conscious. “Look, what I was getting at is, well, with an apology, Severus may … well, I don’t know about forgive you, but he may at least tolerate you. And I’m fairly certain Lily doesn’t mind you, and, well, I think you may not be too bad. So if you want to … not hang around the idiots, we’re here. At least two of us are.” She added with a bit of a smile, and Remus grinned and nodded.

“I will consider it. Thank you, Hermione.” He said. “But for now, I think it best I find the id-, James and Sirius before they cause trouble.”

She waved as he did before he turned away, and she watched Remus disappear in the direction of Spintwitches before turning on her heel. She was just contemplating a more thorough browse of Tomes and Scrolls when she heard familiar laughter behind her. She turned, seeing Lily, Marlene, and Alice giggling as they came out of Curl up and Dye, all clutching bags of potions and turning down the street, possibly to head to Madam Padifoots.

Hermione furrowed her brow, eyes darting about to see if she could find the familiar head of greasyish hair following behind.

She didn’t.

Maybe the girls were walking Lily to meet Severus for lunch? It wasn’t as if she had heard all the plans the two had made, perhaps that had always been their arrangement.

In either case, Hermione decided that it might be a good idea to grab a butterbeer and warm up from
her stroll before heading to the bookshop.

She tried not to peek into the window as she approached The Three Broomsticks, but her eyes kept flickering to the panes. It was hard to see inside, and what she could see told her absolutely nothing. Entering, it felt like nearly half the Hogwarts student body was crammed within, loud and boisterous.

Hermione maneuvered her way through the crowd, and when she spotted him hunched over the table, her heart dropped. Severus’s hair was hiding his face, and both hands had gripped a mug of butterbeer like it was a life preserver.

There was a group of older Gryffindors a few tables over snickering and glancing at him, a group of Hufflepuffs shooting him pitying looks. She hoped the table of Slytherins nearby really weren’t paying attention to their lonely house mate. She honestly couldn’t imagine what Severus would be like both angered and embarrassed, but she was certain he wouldn’t be a pleasure to live with if someone brought it up.

Taking a breath, she pushed her way through the crowd with more determination.

“I am so incredibly sorry I am so late.” She declared loudly as she removed her scarf and plopped down in the chair across from Severus.

His head snapped up, and he let his confusion show for only a moment before he gave her a nasty glare. “And what bloody kept you?” He demanded.

“I was held up by Sirius and James. And then later Remus. Not to mention I got lost on my way back from J. Pippens. Honestly you should have just come with me maybe then I wouldn’t have wandered into the wrong tavern. But I suppose you had the right idea this place did fill up quite fast didn’t it?” She took a breath, having rambled without properly inhaling once.

Severus still glared at her, but behind his dark eyes was the slightest hint of gratitude. As Rosmerta set down a butterbeer in front of her, one obviously meant for Lily, Hermione’s stomach twisted further into knots. She gave a shy grin in thanks to the beautiful bar keeper as she departed, and wrapped her hands around the mug but couldn’t bring herself to drink it just yet.

“I suppose it didn’t occur to you to ask one of them for directions. Or Lily, for that matter. I imagine you’ve seen her about the village?” He asked casually with a sneer, turning his head away as he took a hearty drink.

“Trust those fools to get me here? Hardly. I’d have likely ended up going toward the shrieking shake.” Severus raised a brow but said nothing. “As for Lily, I only saw her at a distance, with Alice and Marlene.” His eyes shot to hers at this. “They were heading back toward J. Pippens, or at least in that direction, after coming out of the salon.”

His shoulders dropped infinitesimally, the curl of his sneer faltering, his eyes looking down to the contents of his drink.

“Since I was so late, how about I buy us lunch?” She offered, already mentally counting the few galleons she had earned from helping Bob over the summer. Galleons that would have to last.

“A butterbeer doesn’t cost that much.” He waved it off, but Hermione shook her head.

“At least allow me to get some pasties to share.” She insisted.

He turned back toward her, eyes harsh. “I don’t need your p….”
“Oh hush up,” She snapped, cutting him off. “It’s hardly like it’ll do you harm to eat something, and
you already bought me a butterbeer when you really didn’t have to. So shut up and let me get us
something to eat.”

He looked like he was about to argue, but instead sighed heavily. He rolled his eyes and gestured for
her to head to the counter.

With a nod, Hermione went up and ordered some cornish pasties for the two of them. Rosmerta
smiled kindly, eyes dancing between she and where Severus was, but never said a word about it.

“I’ll bring them over when they’re ready, love.” She said, and Hermione thanked her before
returning to her seat.

Severus didn’t say anything while they waited, and Hermione hadn’t the slightest idea as to what she
could say to him at this point. A dozen questions danced on her tongue: was this the first time Lily
had stood him up, or was this a reoccurring thing? If the latter, why did he keep doing it to himself?
It was obvious he had a crush on her, and really Hermione couldn’t blame him. She was absolutely
stunning. But knowing what she did of the future, she wondered how long he would keep pining
after someone who didn’t seem to see him the same way. And if, perhaps, all those years later he still
pined for Lily Evans despite being married (or at least attached) himself.

Rosemerta came by again, setting down the pasties, and leaving to return to the bar.

Just as Severus and Hermione went to reach for one of the savory smelling pastries, the doors to the
bar opened and drew their attention. Lily and the other Gryffindor girls, accompanied by a couple
others Hermione hadn’t recognized, came inside and went right to the bar.

“Do you want me to leave?” She asked Severus really quietly, but he either didn’t hear her or chose
to ignore her to see what Lily would do.

The girls ordered drinks, and once they had them, the headed to the opposite side of the bar to find a
seat.

Severus looked back to the table, his eyes darting around as if he was calculating something.
“Sorry,” he said, standing and grabbing his cloak off the back of his chair with a flourish he would
perfect in adulthood. “I don’t really have much of an appetite right now. You’ll excuse me?”

“Of course.” Hermione said, though she doubted he heard.

She refused to see if he went to Lily for an explanation, or if he left the Three Broomsticks entirely.
Instead, she ate her lunch on her own, wondering if maybe she should say something or not. She
doubted very much Severus would appreciate it, but he was obviously quite upset about it.

“Hermione!” She heard Lily call from the bar, and she looked over. “Come join us! No sense in
sitting alone.”

She stared at the ginger, probably for only a moment though it seemed like an eternity. Confusion
started to come over Lily, but nothing else clouded those clear, green eyes.

Hermione inhaled deeply through her nostrils as her lips clamped shut in an effort to not say the
wrong thing. Smashing the last half of her second pasty with her fingers, she tossed the remains
down on her plate before she stood up from her seat and grabbed her jacket. She stormed out, only
glancing toward the side of the room Lily had come from. As expected, Severus wasn’t there.

As she tromped through the streets back toward the castle, Hermione realized that one of the traits
Harry had obviously gotten from his mother was his oblivious nature.

December 10th, 1974

She could see him out of the corner of her eye while she feigned complete and utter concentration on her Defense Essay. Hermione had to admit, Severus was incredibly stealthy. If it wasn’t for the fact that the homemade candy Delia had sent her was disappearing faster than Hermione was eating them, Hermione wouldn’t have thought to see if her friend had been stealing the chocolate morsels. He would rest his hand near the bag, just out of view and, without looking, reach in with his long fingers and pluck one out. The bag being burlap, his actions had never been properly seen. And the way he would read, with his hair hiding his face, he would feign tapping his lip thoughtfully in order to sneak the candy past his lips.

By the fifth instance of this, Hermione couldn’t stop the giggle that had been threatening to overwhelm her from the first instance of her catching him.

Severus’ eye darted in her direction, just visible through the curtain of hair, and his jaw was set in just such a way that it was quite obvious he had been chewing something. It only made Hermione laugh harder.

An older student shushed her with a glare, and she blushed as she choke back on the laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Severus ground out, and the venom in his voice gave her pause.

Clearing her throat and blushing deeper, Hermione replied. “I just found it amusing that you’re sneaking candy I offered to share with you.” She’d said, and while his glare would later instill fear and obedience, the reminder of why she was laughing in the first place made her lip curl in humor.

Severus continued to glare, but it lost it’s threat. “Perhaps I merely didn’t want to draw attention to it? There are others in the room, others who were not invited to partake.”

“Is that why so much of it is gone? You’d rather there not be any there to share, so it’s best we eat it all? And since I get so easily distracted with work, you’re helping me, is that it?” She arched a brow, and while Severus continued to hold a glare-like expression, his lip twitched.

“It is the best possible solution, is it not?” He asked, plucking another candy from the bag and holding it between his long, dexterous fingers. “From my experience, these can be addictive. And if someone else was to have them, someone with less self control than myself, they may go so far as to cause you injury to gain them.”

“Are you being protective of me?” Hermione asked, grinning a little wider.

Severus scoffed. “Hardly, I’m protecting myself. Regardless of what house would attack you for these little temptations, I’m a Slytherin, I’m sitting next to you, a Gryffindor. I get in enough trouble due to the prats from your house, I don’t particularly want further detentions I don’t deserve.”

“Well, when you put it that way.” Hermione shrugged, grabbing and candy and popping it in her mouth. She could feel Severus studying her as the movement of his shifting the candy between his fingers kept catching the corner of her eye.
He’d been doing that now and then ever since she pulled her stunt in the Three Broomsticks the month before. She wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it.

When she’d seen him the next day, she had half expected him to tell her to fob off and mind her own business. But Severus pretended that nothing at all had happened.

At least with her.

With Lily it was another story altogether.

He didn’t tell her to fob off, either, nor did he draw attention to Lily’s mistake. But there was a shift that Hermione just couldn’t put her finger on.

She watched as Lily sauntered into the study hall, smiling to herself without a care in the world as she made her way over to them and plopped down in the seat across from Severus. He had noticed her walk in, and for a moment he tensed before casually placing the sweet in his mouth and looking down at his parchment.

“I’m so glad you’re still here, Sev. I still have my essay for Slughorn to write and I wanted to ask you if I had the reason why one needed dried onion root instead of fresh in the appetite enhancer.”

Severus nodded slowly. “I just need to finish my Charms essay and then I can assist you.” He said, finally lifting his gaze to hers. Lily beamed, but Severus didn’t react.

And that was what Hermione was having a hard time comprehending. She’d been friends, or at least acquaintances, of both of them for about four months now. Severus had always abandoned his work to help Lily up until about four weeks ago, without fail. And when she flashed him that perfect smile, he usually blushed a little, or smiled himself. But that had stopped, too. He was not unkind to her, and it was clear he still thought of her as a friend, but there was a shift. It was as if he was holding himself back from saying something to her, and maybe he was since their should-have-been date, but he didn’t feel it important enough to say anything.

“I can help if you want.” Hermione offered.

“Thanks,” Lily’s smile faded a bit. “But Sev is a genius at potions. No offense, ’Mione.”

Severus’ lip curled briefly at the nickname. “Must you call her that?”

“What? She said her friends at her old school called her that all the time? We are her friends now, too, are we not?” Lily argued, tilting her head up a bit before reach across the table and snatching a candy from the bag.

As Lily popped it in her mouth and started digging through her bags, Severus looked to Hermione. He raised his eyebrows and gestured to Lily as if to say “I warned you”, and Hermione snickered before returning to her defense essay.

“I may be writing this essay from memory,” She said a short time later, once Lily had her books out and was settled. “I learned about Boggarts last year.”

“So did we,” Said Lily. “But Professor Jones doesn’t seem to care or listen. He’s quite set in his ways, even though the whole school thinks he had the classes all off by a year and now just refuses to correct himself.”

“There are second years who have mastered a vanishing spell for a particular colored ink in my house.” Severus said without looking away from his paper. “I won’t say where they learned it from.”
This was said on a mumble with smirk.

“Severus!” Hermione hissed. He turned to her, arched an eyebrow, but said nothing. “You’re allowing them to cheat!”

“Is it really cheating when they’ve already done the work? And when, may I ask, have you seen me actually working on a Defense essay?”

“Well, if you haven’t been working on that when you’ve said you were ….”

“Never once have I said I was working on my Defense essay, merely my defense. If you hadn’t noticed, I am a particularly popular target.”

“They’ve stopped, haven’t they?” Lily protested.

Severus shrugged, diverting his eyes, and Hermione frowned as she saw the tension set in his shoulders. “Severus,” She said quietly. “I thought they had, too.”

He continued writing for a while before he said, “They’ve been catching me when you aren’t around, or aren’t looking. Even better, just after we’ve parted ways and it’s likely we won’t see each other the rest of the day. There are moments, after all, in which the pair of you are not with me.”

Hermione swung her head around and glared at the marauders on the other side of the room. Three of them were laughing, Sirius throwing a crumpled up paper at Peter’s head, James attempting to straighten his hair and glancing toward the door. Remus seemed to be trying to bury himself deeper in his book.

“Let it go,” Severus said quietly, and Hermione turned her glare on him. He shifted his eyes quickly from her face to her hair, and she reached up only to notice it had gotten frizzier. “They have toned it down. For now.” He conceded.

After a moment, Hermione nodded once, though she vowed to keep a closer eye on the troublemakers.

“Hey!” Lily said, getting their attention. “Did you guys hear about the Yule Ball?”

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November 8th, 1992

“Rory!”

The hissing sound of her name stopped her dead, and Aurora glanced around to make sure no one else was around. Ginny had gone off again, mumbling something about a diary that Aurora didn’t quite understand, leaving her alone to head back to the tower by herself.

Once she assured that no one else was around, Aurora turned around and headed back toward the alcove she knew he was hiding in.

“Hi, Draco.” She said quietly.
The blonde smiled, not the smarmy one she’d noticed he developed since the summer before last, but a real, Draco smile.

“I heard Creepy-Creevy became the next victim. Least he won’t be following you about because Pottie talks to you.”

“It’s not funny, Draco.” Aurora glowered, crossing her arms and looking to the floor.

“Oh, come on. You can’t really like him that much, can you?” Draco whinged. When Aurora didn’t say anything, he added in a disgusted tone. “You don’t fancy him or anything, do you?”

Aurora shot her gaze back up to Draco, scowling at the wrinkled nose. “I don’t. But if I had, what would it matter?”

Draco looked taken aback. “He’s an inferior.” He said simply. “He’s a mud-.”

Before he could finish the word, Aurora slapped him across the face with all the force her twelve year old body could muster. Draco’s head snapped to the side, likely as much as surprise as from the power of the impact. He raised a hand to his reddening cheek, turning to her with a look of utter betrayal.

“Don’t use that word.” She said.

“How can you possibly be offended by it?” He demanded.

“Use your head, Draco.” She sneered. “Think! Observe! You used to be so clever, but perhaps being the virtual prince of Slytherin has made you think you don’t need to be anymore. Daddy always said he had to be different while at school, but he never told me it was the case for all Slytherins. Or maybe that’s just you, too.”

“You’re not making a lot of sense, Snape.” Draco glared.

“And you’re being a prat, Malfoy.” She lashed out.

He seemed taken aback for a moment, and then a smug grin came over him. “Oh, I get it. You’re offended because of the company you chose to keep. Granger,” He said like her mother’s maiden name was disgusting in itself. “Blood traitor, Weasleys. And Potter, though at least I don’t see you mooning after him like the Weaslette.” He sneered.

“And who was it that went on, and on about him over the summer.” Aurora challenged. She felt her hair getting bigger as he riled her up. Her father’s genes may have helped with the bushiness of it all, but her emotions and her magic wrecked havoc over her locks much like her mother.

Draco, at least, had the decency to blush. He said nothing else as he shoved past her and out of the alcove, and Aurora watched as her childhood friend stalked down the hall in the opposite direction from where she was heading.

She had no idea how long she’d been staring when she heard a dreamy voice say, “It’s okay. He’ll get it in time. Not everyone has the sense to see what’s right in front of them. But then again, I suppose you were warned to be careful what you say for the next couple years at least.”

Frowning, Aurora turned to see a pretty little blonde girl with snap peas on her ears. She wasn’t quite sure if she should say anything about the odd earrings, or the necklace of odd shaped, plain rocks.

Seeing Aurora looking, the blonde smiled. “It’s to make sure the nifflers don’t steal them. They love
shiny things so much, they’ll take it right off your neck. I’m Luna, by the way. And you’re Aurora Snape.”

“Rory,” She corrected.

“Is it weird, seeing your mother only a year older than yourself?” Luna asked, tilting her head and worrying a rock on the string around her neck.

Aurora’s eyes grew wide, and she whipped her head around to see if anyone, even a portrait, was listening.

“Don’t worry,” Luna said, “We’re quite alone. There aren’t even any wrackspurts around.”

“Any what?” Aurora shook her head, “Never mind. How did you know about …?”

“You two look quite a bit alike, really. I’m surprised no one has thought of it sooner. But I suppose it’s hard to imagine when you’re twelve and she’s thirteen. Her accident hasn’t happened yet.”

Aurora gaped at her, blinking.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Luna said, her voice never wavering from the dreamy tone. “I won’t say anything. I quite like Professor Snape, even if he can be a bit mean sometimes, and I wouldn’t want to do anything that would hurt him or his family.” And without another word, Luna skipped off down the hall.

Aurora continued to stand in the middle of the hallway, completely gobsmacked and uncertain if she should mention anything to her parents about the seemingly natural seer in a Ravenclaw uniform.

Deciding that, at this point, if Luna was to say anything to anyone, they would think she was positively, well, loony.

Snickering to herself, Aurora continued on to Gryffindor tower. She needed a nap or a good book. Maybe both.

November 29th, 1992

“Rory!” Hagrid exclaimed as he opened the door. “What’er yer doin’ down ‘ere?”

“Hi, Hagrid. Thought I would stop in for some tea.” She said, and he stepped aside to let her into his hut.

“No Ginny this time?” He asked, glancing around outside before shutting the door.

“She’s … preoccupied.” Aurora replied, not really wanting to get into Gin’s Harry obsession or her writing hobby.

Hagrid studied her, his big, bush brows furrowing. “Ain’t seen you wit anyone aside from her.” He observed. “You makin’ friends up there, ain’t yer?”

Aurora shrugged. “I have Gin.” She replied.

“What about Harry, Hermione, Ron? Those are good people, Gryffindors ta boot.”
“I knew Harry from school.” She said, and at Hagrid’s confusion, she clarified, “Muggle School. And Hermione, well, it’s complicated with her.”

Hagrid nodded, though she knew he didn’t know. Her mother had said she made it a point to not go anywhere near Hagrid’s hut when she had joined her father’s year, and only merely offered a smile and a hello when in passing. It wasn’t until after her father started teaching at Hogwarts that her mother introduced (or reintroduced) herself to Hagrid, but as Professor Snape’s wife. And with a slightly altered appearance.

“Ron hates me.” She added with a whisper.

“Why’d ya think that?” Hagrid asked her.

“He doesn’t like me around Ginny. He gets quiet and glares when I walk into the common room, muttering things like ‘go back to Slytherin’. I swear he’s one of those who really believe I’m the heir, even if Harry is sure it’s someone else….”

“And wha’ does yer father say?” He asked, concern coloring his voice.

“Make sure I don’t wander alone. Watch my back. Reminds me in his way that not all Gryffindors are my mother, and that they can be the worst lot if they have any sorta grudge against you. And Draco, well, he certainly hasn’t been my friend these days.”

“Draco?” Hagrid asked, and then his eyes lit with understand. “That young Malfoy boy.” He nodded. “Didn’t realize you lot knew one another.”

“My Dad’s his godfather.”

“Right.” He said, his voice darkening a bit.

There was a history there that Aurora didn’t really understand, and she knew it had something to do with her Dad’s tattoo. He didn’t talk about it much, though she remembered seeing it as a young child and asking about it. It scared her, and he said there was a reason for that. What she did know is it represented dark, evil things that he didn’t really believe in, but had to pretend to.

“Like when you told Draco that you liked his toy broom when you actually thought it was quite rubbish.”

It was a very child like explanation, but an example she grasped at the tender age of three. She never asked much more about it, though as she got closer to Hogwarts age the explanation was expanded to how her father had to act around everyone else. She knew that there were children in his house that he had to pretend around more so than others, that he had to like certain people he really didn’t, and vice versa.

“Sometimes I hate it here.” She said quietly. “I wish I had gone to Beauxbatons or Ilvermorney. I wish I’d gone somewhere where it didn’t really matter who my dad was or how he had to act.”

“Yer Dad’s a good man,” Hagrid said kindly. “Brave man. It’s why yer Gryffindor, I’d wager. Got his bravery, yer did.”

“Mum was a Gryffindor.” She reminded him with a wane smile.

“Brave she was, too. Chosin’ yer Dad with all the stuff he had to do, his work for Dumbledore, gettin’ in good with You-Know-Who.”
“Getting in good with Who!?” Aurora nearly dropped her tea cup.

Hagrid blushed. “I shouldn’t’a said that.” He grumbled.

“Is that ….” She’d heard about Voldemort, though any passing mention in their home or at the Malfoys had always been done with “The Dark Lord”. She knew Harry survived an attack on him as a baby, and that that was the reason he was famous. She knew her Dad had to appear to strongly dislike him, and sometimes honestly did. She knew there was a couple weeks when her father had gone to Azkaban, but the charges were dropped and his name was cleared. Was that the reason ….

“Rory.” Hagrid said nervously. “Appreciate it if you didn’t go rootin’ for any more on that. Yer Dad’ll not like it, and yer Mum may not let yer brother come down if she’d worried I’ll tell ‘im all about the stuff he ain’t ready to know.”

“I won’t.” She said, meaning it. Though that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to learn a bit more about Voldemort where she could, and try to understand how her father tied in to all this.
Chapter 4

December 23rd, 1974

Dearest Hermione,

I am sorry to hear that you won’t be spending all of your holiday with us, but I’m glad it’s for such a good reason. I had always found it hard adjusting to home after Hogwarts, even in short periods, and it was always quite wonderful when a friend chose to stay with me. I’ve included a second bag of the candy for your friend in hopes that perhaps this one will last until you come with Minerva for Christmas eve dinner.

She had told me about the Yule Ball, so I apologize for not sending you to school with what you would need. It had slipped my mind until your letter.

I hope this dress will do. I had to go to Kiera, and where the matter was of some urgency, she didn’t have time to find a more fitting piece.

I look forward to seeing you again, Hermione. Christmas eve can not come fast enough.

Yours,

Delia.

Hermione withdrew the simple black dress from the box. There was no frills to it, no embroidery. There were no sleeves, and the sweetheart neckline wouldn’t be too low. Really, for a last minute find, it was quite lovely.

Lily had eagerly regaled to a barely interested Hermione and Severus about how the Yule Ball was a tradition at Hogwarts. As if quoting from Hogwarts: a History, Lily relayed how it had once been part of the Tri-Wizard tournament, held on Christmas night by which ever school was hosting it. Once the tournaments were canceled, the ball was moved to the 23rd of December as a send off for the Holidays for those in their fourth year and up.

Hermione wondered what she would have done for the Yule Ball in 1994. Would she have wanted desperately to go with Ron? Would she go with Neville, because he would likely ask where Ronald would not? Would she even bother, or merely spend the night in the library?

With a shake of her head, Hermione stood from her bed and gently laid the dress out where she had been sitting before.

“Oh, that’s nice.” Marlene had said, eyeing the garment. Her hair was pinned in magically heated rollers, and she and the other girls had essentially been walking around in their dressing gowns since
classes finished. “If you start now, you can possibly manage to get your hair pinned up.”

“Start what now?” Hermione asked.

Marlene rolled her eyes. “Getting ready?” She said, putting her hands on her hips. “Honestly, you have such potential, Hermione, but your hair … Well, it needs the full two and a half hours to be tamed into anything fitting enough for the ball.”

Lily walked into the room, then. Her hair was also up in curlers, and she had clearly finished doing her make up before dashing over to her bed where she’d left a book open. Plucking up her wand and tapping it against her lips, furrowing her brow in concentration. “Should I charm my nails pink, or silver?” She asked the room at large, and this started a debate between Alice and Marlene.

Rolling her eyes, Hermione stripped off her uniform and pulled on her borrowed dress. It fit nicely, Keira McGonagall having relatively the same body shape as Hermione, though slightly taller. Accioing her wand from the bed, Hermione did a quick bit of transfiguration to make the dress a little shorter.

Her hair was atrocious, though it could have been far worse if she had had potions at all during the day. Wrangling the sides back, she tied them back to keep the curls away from her face while having the added bonus of looking somewhat nice. She had no jewelry to go with the dress, but if she were being honest with herself, she didn’t really care. She was only going because Lily begged, and Severus outright refused, and somehow Hermione got dragged into going in order to keep the peace. She imagined the peace was merely silence to Lily’s incessant nagging.

Plucking up the bigger of the two bags of candy, Hermione headed for the door. “I’ll see you there,” She said over her shoulder, though the heat of the great charmed nail debate was still going strong. She doubted anyone heard her.

Hermione left Gryffindor tower without any hassle. It would seem the girls were not the only ones who decided to take to their dorms to prep. That, or most of the boys in fourth year or up had miraculously decided that studying was a perfectly reasonable option.

She made her way through the corridors, offering a smile or a nod of acknowledgment to those she passed as she made her way to a very specific abandoned classroom in the East Wing. If the Slytherin beyond had hoped to be discreet, he was failing miserably as strong scents of vegetation and smoke had wafted in the air as she neared the closed door. She didn’t bother to knock as she entered, merely moved as quickly as she could through the door.

Severus didn’t even glance up. “You aren’t going to try and convince me to go, are you?” He asked as he stirred a potion in the cauldron placed before him on the desk.

“Why would I? I barely want to go as it is. You realize I would much rather spend the evening as you are. Well, maybe not as you are. Studying, perhaps. Maybe in the library.”

“And what is possibly stopping you?” He asked with a sneer. “Or perhaps you’re afraid to let down your suitor.”

Hermione frowned. “What suitor?” She asked, crossing her arms. “Because, quite frankly, all the boys I’ve been acquainted with are exceedingly immature.”

“Present company excluded, I presume.”

Hermione snorted. “Hardly, you’re just less so and more tolerable. No, Lily was concerned with James attempting to accost her all evening.”
“And exactly what would you do to deter the idiot?” Severus asked, withdrawing the stirring rod carefully and setting it aside. He did not pull his eyes away from the potion within.

“Frankly, I’m not sure. As it is, I fear being hounded by Sirius most of the evening. I’m quite certain they will end up attempting a tag-team of some variety.”

“Humph.” Was all Severus said to that as he leaned back against the desk behind him and crossed his arms.

Hermione waited, just to make sure nothing else was to be said, before she ventured closer. “What are you brewing, anyway?”

“I believe I have figured out a way to improve the speed and strength from which a basic pain relief could be brewed. It would only take exchanging Fennel for Devil’s Claw, and stir counter clockwise eight times instead of clockwise four.”

“And you considered it wise to brew it, then? On your own? Without supervision? And how can you be sure that the changes won’t result in an explosion or poisoning yourself? You do understand that there is a reason it’s been written in the text book as it has.”

“By the book, of course. Because if it’s in a book it must be right. Honestly, Granger, have you never had an original thought in your life?” He asked, turning to look at her for the first time since entering the room.

With his hair greasier and more lank by combination of oil build up and cauldron fumes, his posture somehow commanding for a fourteen year old, Hermione immediately remembered that this was Severus Snape, who would one day be Potions Master. How would he have gotten so great, become the youngest master in a century or two, if he hadn’t started playing with recipes young? She had started to forget that those in her classes now had been adults to her not six months before. She knew at least part of all their futures, but even that would slip her mind, it seemed.

Severus looked her over, his brow furrowed as if confused. “You look ….” He didn’t seem to know what to say. “Your hair is still atrocious.” He eventually said, and Hermione couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“Because yours is so much better right now.” She replied, moving her hands to her hips, the bag of candy hitting her on the thigh.

Severus’ eyes zeroed in on it. “I don’t intend to socialize, nor would I care if I were.”

Hermione’s lips curled and puckered in her attempt not to smile. “Yes, well,” She said when she got herself under control. “I hardly see the point in doing anything with my hair. Everyone knows what it looks like, and clearly I’m not still up in Gryffindor tower fussing about what charm to apply to my nails, so it’s hardly like I properly care about the event.”

Severus looked back to cauldron, appearing deep in thought. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then frowned as though he thought better of it. He then pushed off the desk and peered into his potion, seeming to think on the contents a moment before leaning back against the desk.

“I brought these for you,” Hermione broke the silence as it seemed to have gone on too long. “I doubt very much that you will eat them while you brew, but know the whole thing is for you.” She placed the bag on the desk as far from the cauldron as she could. “I may have mentioned to Delia, my … guardian, I suppose, that you liked them.”

Severus nodded, but he seemed too far gone into his mind to say anything.
“Well, I’ll leave you to it, then.” Hermione said, and she headed toward the door. Glancing back, she could see Severus staring at the wall as if it held the answers to everything he wanted to know, and she left the abandoned classroom without another word.

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“Severus Snape, you bloody idiot!” Hermione screeched, barely keeping tears in check as she whipped his uninjured arm with the towel resting on the table by his hospital bed.

She had barely lasted an hour at the Yule Ball, having managed one dance with Remus before deciding she liked her toes and wished to keep them intact before sitting out the rest. She ignored Sirius’ attempts to lure her back out, and Lily and the girls were too popular and too enthralled by it all to stay still. So after an hour, Hermione had decided to make her way back to the unused classroom where Severus had been.

Panic filled her the second she’d stepped in.

His cauldron had been shattered, some pieces embedded in the walls and the desk that would have been at Severus’ back. It had been tipped, the other desks around it scattered. There was the iron smell of blood, and spatter on the floor big enough to inform her that he’d been bleeding profusely.

She left immediately and ran to the hospital wing, hoping beyond hope that the reason she hadn’t seen a blood trail when approaching the room was because Madam Pomfrey had been close enough to investigate and discovered him.

Severus frowned, yanking the towel from Hermione’s hands and tossed it on to the table on the opposite side of the bed. “It’s your fault.” He scowled.

“How could it possibly have been my fault if I wasn’t even there? You’re the one who had been experimenting with potion alterations.” Hermione put her hands on her hips, bending slightly toward him.

“You brought me the thrice damned candy! I got distracted because I wanted to keep eating the bloody little addictions.” He tried his best to fold his arms, but the sling holding his heavily bandaged right appendage made it difficult. “I lost count stirring which is the only reason why it didn’t work.”

“And where was your self control?” Hermione huffed, crossing her arms and glaring.

“Perfectly intact. Otherwise, I’d have abandoned the potion altogether with the temptation you brought.”

“And here I thought you two got along.” Madam Pomfrey smirked as she approached Severus’ bed. She turned her attention to her patient, “Try not to move around too much, the fracture will heal overnight.”

“Fracture?” Hermione asked, confused.

“Yes,” Madam Pomfrey said, turning to look at her over her shoulder. “Severus’ arm broke with the impact of the cauldron. He was lucky nothing more happened.” She said this to her patient with a sternness that suggested it wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation.
“It exploded a bit faster than I had anticipated.” He grumbled. He peeked at Hermione and added, “Too far gone to to vanish. I jumped the desk behind me and tipped it to use as a shield. Didn’t pull my arm away fast enough.”

“Well, either learn to be faster or speak to Professor Slughorn about what you can use to keep yourself safe when experimenting.” Madam Pomfrey suggested kindly, and Hermione and Severus both snorted and rolled their eyes.

Madam Pomfrey shook her head. “You’ve converted her to your opinion, I take it?” She asked Severus.

“Hardly,” Hermione retorted. “I’ve just noticed the man hardly touches a cauldron. He never demonstrates before the class, and, quite frankly, what ever is sitting the cauldrons for us to examine are clearly poured in from something previously brewed. And I suspect some of the more advanced potions are possible bought.”

“So you are capable of an original thought.” Severus smirked wickedly.

Just as it appeared as though Madam Pomfrey was about to scold him, Hermione replied, “How can you be certain I hadn’t overheard it from a sixth year?”

“I can’t, really, except I know most of your house are incapable of thought, period.”

“Should I inform Lily of your esteemed opinion?”

She expected him to blush or say something snappy. Instead, he merely shrugged.

“Well, Miss Granger, while I do appreciate the concern you have for my patient, if you aren’t going to be at the Yule Ball, you should head back to your dormitory.”

“Yes, ma’am,” She said with a nod. Turning to Severus, she said, “I’ll come see you tomorrow before I leave for the afternoon.”

“Spare me,” He sighed heavily, head falling back against the pillow.

Hermione stuck her tongue out at him as his eyes half rolled toward her, and he then rolled them fully with a shake of his head at the childish act.

But Hermione was quite certain she’d seen the very, very subtle upturn of his lips before she rounded the corner.

---------------A---------------

December 17th, 1992

Aurora kept looking over her shoulder to where her mother stood in the shadows of the Great Hall, Aunt Min whispering to her and trying her best not to chuckle. She wasn’t sure if it was a glamour of some kind that made her mother look different, or if the straight, blonde hair was caused by something else. Either way, when Aurora looked to thirteen year old Hermione Granger swooning to her left, she knew without a doubt that no one would ever even ponder the possibility they were the same person.
Well, except Luna, but she wasn’t here. Something about Winglebirds, it might have been.

So Aurora turned her attention on the stage created by Professor Lockhart who was, admittedly, a bit dreamy. And while she may have loved her father dearly, he was not what one would call ‘pleasing to the eye.’ They were opposites there: white and dark, blonde to black, dashingly handsome to … a charming personality around a very select crowd.

“He’s just brilliant, isn’t he?” Hermione Granger sighed, and Aurora felt nauseated as she watched Hermione’s eyes follow Professor Lockhart.

She turned slowly over to give her mother an exasperated look.

But there was yet another contrast. Her mother was biting her lip, her eyes locked on the form of her husband. It was just as stomach churning.

Aurora looked away, focused on the two, grown wizards bowing to one another and drawing wands. They separated to opposite ends of the stage.

“Oh the count of three,” Professor Lockhart said, looking to the crowd of students gathered round. “Two, one!”

“Expelliarmus,” Her dad said with as much casual composure as could be had while casting a jinx. Professor Lockhart was tossed across the stage as his wand flew toward his opposer. There was shocks throughout, including from Hermione who looked the most disappointed of all.

“Are you honestly that surprised?” Aurora asked her quietly. “After what he’d done to Harry after the Quidditch match?”

“But … he’s a best selling writer!” Hermione countered. “He’s famous for so many amazing things. And professor Snape …”

“In to pairs, all of you.” Professor Lockhart called to the room, gesturing with as much composure as he could.

“I have to go,” Hermione said, moving around Aurora and immediately heading for Mallicent Bulstrode.

“I'll pair with you,” Ginny said as she quietly came up beside Aurora.

“Alright,” She agreed, noting Ginny glancing to where Harry and Draco were starting to duel before the signal was given. In fact, Aurora noticed one by one, everyone was starting to get into it. She and Ginny moved closer to one another as if they could somehow protect one another, heads whipping around, taking in the chaos around them.

“Enough!” Aurora whipped her head toward the stage as her father’s voice cut through the room, halting everyone.

“Yes, well,” Professor Lockhart smiled nervously, eyes darting to the corner of the room where Aunt Min and Mum were standing. “Perhaps we should have another demonstration? This time between two of you? How about Aurora Snape and … Ronald Weasley.”

“Weasley's wand causes devastation with the simplest spells.” Her father cut in. Much to the Ron’s disappoint, she was sure. “Don’t believe for a moment I would allow Miss Snape to be on the receiving end. Might I suggest someone from my own house?”
“I’ll do it, Professor.” Aurora stiffened as she heard Draco volunteer.

They hadn’t been on the best of terms since the incident over Colin, and she doubted it would suddenly get better.

“She’s younger than you, and less experienced.” Her Dad countered.

“It’s fine, Professor Snape,” Aurora said with a nod, heading toward the stage in time with Draco. She put on her best copy of her mother’s chin tilt, and she caught Draco’s amusement in the corner of her eye.

“Very well,” Her Dad said, rolling his eyes and waving it off. He moved to stand off to the side with an air of utter boredom, though she knew he would be watching every little move.

“On three, disarm only.” Professor Lockhart said. “One, two, three!”

“Aculeus!” Draco shouted, and the bite lashed against Aurora’s wand hand like a hundred bee stings.

She cried out in pain, collapsing on her knees and clutched the hand to her chest. She couldn’t let go of her wand, the swelling enough to keep her fingers locked in place.

“You were supposed to disarm her, Malfoy.” Harry shouted.

“What are you going to do about it, Potter?”

“Perhaps,” Professor Snape said coldly as he came toward where she collapsed. “Mr Potter will wish to defend the honor of his house mate? We all know how much he enjoys being seen as heroic.”

The malice her father’s words was a direct contradiction to the gentleness of his actions. As he spoke, he’d knelt beside her, placing his warm hand softly over hers. Wordlessly and wandlessly, he healed her hand, his magic washing over her in a soothing, comforting way. Once healed, he helped her stand, then brought her over to the side.

“What do you say, Potter?” He asked Harry who had remained glaring at her father from his place in the audience.

It was a challenge as much as a hidden request. Her dad’s hands were still on her arms, she she felt the tensing of his his muscles as he looked to the smug face of Draco. A smugness that momentarily faltered as he met his Godfather’s gaze.

Without a word, Harry took the stage.

“Remember, disarm only!” Professor Lockhart said with emphasis, looking more and more nervous as the two young wizards merely stared at one another.

Draco barely flicked his hand as he whispered something, and a large snake shot from the end of his wand.

What happened after, Aurora blamed the after effects of pain and fear for not quite recalling clearly. Professor Lockhart, against her father’s better judgment, attempted to do away with the snake. Instead, it got larger. It turned toward her, and she shifted behind her father for the protection she knew he would always provide. A strange hissing sound made her peek out from behind him, and there was Harry speaking to the snake as it had seemed to suddenly find more interesting pray in a Hufflepuff.
It hadn’t occurred to Aurora before that perhaps the heir of Slytherin could have been in a different house. After all, the way Draco had been acting after the incident with Colin, the whispers she had heard from Harry, Ron, and Hermione when they didn’t notice her alone in the common room with no Ginny to occupy her, she’d begun to think Draco really was some kind of Slytherin Prince.

But Draco didn’t talk to snakes, at least maybe not like that. And he was terrified of Harry, much like everyone else in that moment.

Including, from what she could discern, her father.

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“Just tell me, Hermione!” She heard her father’s exasperated plea from down the hall, and the sound of it brought Aurora out of her bed in her father’s chambers to her bedroom door. She opened it softly, just a tiny bit more, so she could hear the conversation. The sitting room wasn’t far away, only three feet down the hall, and the conversation came to her clear as day.

“Severus, you know I would if it were possible.” Her mother pleaded, sounding desperate and possibly upset. “I can only tell you that you don’t have to worry about Harry.”

“He spoke to the snake! The bloody snake! Merlin knows what he told it to do ….”

“I think … it’s been ages, but if memory serves me, he told it to stand down. To not hurt anyone. And honestly, if you should be upset with anyone, it should be Draco!”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that.” Her father was clearly sneering, that tone could mean nothing else. “I’ve already had a lovely floo conversation with Lucius and Narcissa about his behavior to Rory. I’m sure he’ll put on a show for those who ask, but he’s been barred from returning home and accompanying them on their little vacation to Venice. And he’ll be getting a letter, a strongly worded one, about making amends with her.”

“You’re still convinced they’ll be discussing marriage when she’s of age.” Her mother said, more amused sounding now than before.

“Without a doubt. Three more years, and Lucius will be doing his up most to convince us it is the optimal way of raising our stature in the pureblood line.” Her father scoffed. “As if that is actually something that matters.”

“But we aren’t considering it, are we? Rory should be able to choose for herself, and I’m fairly certain that Draco ….”

“I agree, but if the Dark Lord returns, H, we’ll need to keep appearances. Dumbledore has always believed it a certainty. Though he may have had other motives for the way he wishes us, me, to proceed to live.”

There was silence, save for what sounded like soft footsteps along the carpet.

“He’s always done what he thought was necessary. With me, you, the order. And not everyone agrees, as you well know. He’s a great man, a wise man, but that doesn’t mean every decision or thought he has is great and wise. And aren’t we lucky that those who really matter see that as well as we do?”
“We are.” He said, and Aurora attempted not to cringe when she heard the smacking sound of a kiss.

“The heir of Slytherin is not in Gryffindor.” He stated. Silence. “Good. At least, for now, I can rest a little easier. Having Rory in another house is harder to deal with than I thought, even with Min being her head. Merlin help us if she’d ended up in Hufflepuff.”

“We still have another child to be sorted, you know.” Her mother teased.

“Don’t tempt fate, witch!” He scolded, and her mother laughed as though from her toes.

And then she wasn’t laughing, and Aurora’s instincts told her that the sound that took over the laughing was not one she wanted to understand. And when it was abruptly cut off, and not even the sounds of the fire or the disturbing smacks of lips could be heard, she raced back to bed.

----------H----------

January 9th, 1975

Hermione bit her lip as she turned back toward the abandoned classroom that Severus had nearly destroyed just before Christmas. She knew he would be there this evening, knew he was attempting another go at his pain relief adaptation, remembered the hints he had about not bringing him anything that may distract him while he stared pointedly at her. But she’d barely seen him all day outside of classes, and she was hardly going to slip him his present while taking notes.

Lily had told her about the day by way of accident. No sooner had term resumed had Lily complained about her birthday being on a Thursday, and how the year previous James had accidentally ratted out her own miniature party in the Divination classroom. She also mentioned how she had wanted it to be a duel celebration for Severus whose birthday was exactly three weeks before her own, but always too close to the start of term for them to have planned anything.

Basic math did the rest for Hermione.

When she was with the McGonagalls over the holidays, she’d asked Bob if there was any chance she could take some potion’s ingredients and work them off over the Easter hols. He smiled, waved her toward the greenhouse, and merely teased her about not taking too much.

If she didn’t know better, she’d wager that he knew who she was getting them for. But then again, Professor McGonagall -Minerva- had been writing them as much as she had. Perhaps they all behaved as grown-ups typically did about opposite sex teenager friendships. Merlin knew her own parents, intellectuals that they were, were always taunting her about whether it was Ron or Harry that had been her boyfriend.

The ingredients weren’t meant to be a birthday present, but she couldn’t resist the timing. But now, timing seemed to be her problem, and she wasn’t sure just when she should do it. Or how. Or if she even should at all.

“Oh suck it up, Hermione.” She scolded herself in a whisper. “This is Severus, not Professor Snape. The worst he can do is call you a mean name or berate you. And even if he does, it’s not like it should really bother you. He’s your peer, your equal. He can’t take house points.” And with that, she summoned a little Gryffindor courage and headed inside.
“I was beginning to wonder if you were ever coming in.” Severus greeted her. “Lurking about in the hallway as you were.”

“You knew I was there?” Hermione felt her cheeks color, and was thankful Severus was still focusing on the cauldron in front of him. His face was hidden behind his hair, only the tip of his nose actually visible.

“I have a warning system, yes. I need enough time to vanish everything if need be. It has not happened yet, Madam Pomfrey had long suspected I was coming here to brew and wouldn’t rat me out unless I was doing something too dangerous. Any other professor ….?” He didn’t need to finish the sentence.

“Professor McGonagall wouldn’t say anything.” Hermione said, wondering whether or not that were entirely true. She certainly didn’t get in trouble for her own recreational brewing, and what she’d done was technically illegal. Somehow she doubted the staff remained ignorant of it after the way Professor Snape - Severus in the future - laughed upon seeing her.

“Can’t take the risk.” He said, slowly withdrawing the stirring rod and setting it aside. “You actually came at the perfect stage. I merely have to wait for the color to shift so I know I have it right, and then I just need to wait for it to cool so I could bottle it.” He leaned on the desks behind him. “I doubt you want help with History or Charms, so why have you graced me with your presence?” He turned toward her then, and Hermione noticed the black eye he sported on his right.

“What happened?” She asked, staring at it as if it offended her.

“This?” He casually gestured to his face. “Merely a birthday gift from your exalted house mates. I can’t prove it was them, of course. They couldn’t be seen at the time. I was heading to dinner from the common room when I was suddenly tripped, then petrified. I imagine more damage would have been done, but then LeStrange came by. Being a Prefect, he could easily deduct points and report them to McGonagall for detention. I imagine they didn’t want to risk it. If Black hadn’t laughed at kicking me in the face, I wouldn’t have been so sure myself.”

“And you didn’t bother to go to Madam Pomfrey who is right down the hall?” Hermione asked.

Severus glared and turned away. “It’s letting them win, isn’t it? She’d report the injury to Dumbledore, and he’d sweep it under the rug, as always.”

Hermione wasn’t sure that would have been the case, but then she considered that nothing had really been done to set the marauders straight yet.

She shook her head and sighed, frustrated that her friend was getting bullied and no one was stopping it.

“Hermione,” He said, a touch exasperated. She turned, and there wasn’t any malice left in his eyes. “Let it go. You already know I can take them, so long as they don’t play dirty. And this has been going on from the moment they entered mine and Lily’s car on the train our very first year. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is going to stop them now.”

Her shoulders dropped, and she had to divert her eyes, lest he mock her for being emotional.

“You came for a reason.” He said again.

She nodded, “Yeah.” She shifted the box in her hand and gave it to him. “Happy birthday.”

He took it gingerly, glancing at her uncertainly as he turned and placed the box on the desk he was
leaning on and opened it. His eyes bulged, which had to hurt, though he didn’t show it if it had.
“Hermione,” He breathed, his hand running along the tops of jars, some sealed, others not,
depending on what was inside and how they were best preserved when being as fresh as they could be. “There are … easily … twenty Galleons worth of ingredients in here.”

She blushed again. “I have an arrangement with the herbologist who grew them.”

He arched a brow, “Do I want to know?”

She stepped forward and smacked his arm, and he smirked.

“Git,” She spat while resisting the urge to laugh. “He’s a stepfather of sorts. That’s a horrid thing to joke about.”

“You didn’t say what the arrangement was. Anyone else would assume the same thing.” He teased. She merely huffed and folded her arms beneath her breasts, knowing from their short acquaintance as equals that he could continue twisting her words to his heart’s content should she try to explain.

“Thank you.” He said after a short silence. She peeked at him, and she could see how truly grateful he was merely by the glint in his eye. “Truly, it’s … it’s honestly the most meaningful gift I’ve ever been given.”

That made her heart soar and ache all at once. For potion’s ingredients to be meaningful, despite there being only one or two more expensive or difficult to acquire fresh within the box, was both wonderful and terrible. It may reflect his passion for brewing, but it also revealed how little he’d been given.

“You’re quite welcome.” She said, meaning it deeply. Even if it meant working the entire hols without any other reward for her efforts.

———A———-

December 24th, 1992

Never would a Snape admit they were lonely, and Aurora was a Snape. That had been made abundantly clear to her.

“Exactly what do you think your doing, following us?” Ron Weasley had demanded, stopping on the stairs which led to Gryffindor Tower. Harry and Hermione stopped as well, the latter crossing her arms and glaring at Ron while Harry shifted sheepishly.

“I needed to get a book.” She replied, having forgotten her potions book in her trunk upstairs. Her very special potions book that had once been her father’s and had the very start of his corrections scribbled in the margins. And while, no, she would never, ever be stupid enough to use his notes on an essay for his class, she did like the reminder that not everything written was sacred.

“Right, so you just happened to be following us along. Waiting to see if we’re up to something to rat us out to your father about.”

“Ronald!” Hermione hissed.
“I don’t trust her.” Ron said firmly. “She shouldn’t have ever been put in Gryffindor. She belongs in the dungeons with the other snakes.”

“That’s enough, Ron.” Harry snapped. “I’ve known Rory longer than I’ve known you.”

“Yet you never talk to her. I don’t see you asking her to tag along.”

“You don’t ask Ginny, either.” Harry countered. When Ron’s flared nostrils and wrinkled bridge of his nose did not soften, Harry sighed. “Think you could give us, like, a three minute head start, Rory?”

She looked to Hermione, but her eyes were averted to the floor, her cheeks puffed as though she were ready to explode. Harry pleaded with his eyes, begging her quietly to keep the peace.

“‘Kay,” Aurora had even gone so far as backing down the stairs and waiting at the bottom.

“Sorry, Aurora.” Hermione said sincerely as the boys took off. “But, well ….” She shrugged, glancing at the boys before turning back at her.

Yeah, Aurora understood. She was a Snape, Snapes had hard times making friends, including the ones who married into the name. And while this Hermione Granger was not the witch Aurora looked up to and admired, she knew full well that those two were the only friends she had at the moment and wasn’t willing to lose them.

Aurora was sure she had some of her mother’s fierce loyalty, if only she was given a chance to show it. Ginny was nice when she wanted to socialize, but she was also the only one from their year who had made any effort to actually talk to her. Not that that mattered much at the moment with the majority of the school gone home for the holidays.

Aurora had always spent Christmas at Hogwarts, though in her father’s rooms along with her mother and brother. But they hadn’t arrived yet, and with Draco being forced to stay for the holidays, his cronies had to stay with him, and that meant her father had to appear much more available.

So no hiding there.

No, she had to stay in the Gryffindor common room, sitting by the cold window, keeping as much distance between herself and the “golden trio” as could be had. She didn’t even bother with the pretense of a book, she merely stared out the window and watched the snow fall outside.

“Not much fun over here by yourself.” Fred Weasley’s voice caused Aurora to yelp, and twin laughter surrounded her in stereo as each brother squeezed in beside her.

“Keep this up, people will think you’re a bat like your dear ol’ Dad, won’t they, Gred?”

“You said it, Forge.”

“And exactly what am I going to to do instead?” She asked.

“Play gobstones with us.” Said Fred.

“Though they may be a trick set.” George inputted.

“Much worse than putrid goo may come out.”

“You do know that my Grandmother was the captain of the Hogwarts team?” Aurora asked, feeling at once stupid for mentioning her family at all.
“All the better!” George exclaimed.

“You may take it seriously.” Fred said seriously.

“And not just think it child’s play.”

“Which it is.”

“But what’s the fun of life?”

“If you can’t act a bit childish?”

Aurora smirked. The twins had always been kind, but they had never gone out of their way to speak to her before. “Sure you wanna play with a firstie?”

“Better then playing with that git.” Fred said as he threw a thumb toward Ron who happened to glance over and glare.

“Always whinged when he lost.” George shook his head.

“And maybe Ginny might come out of her room if she knows you’re playing too.”

Aurora took a deep breath. “Alright.” She said, feeling shy and nervous and unsure all at once. “Let’s play.”

“Brilliant.” The twins said together in such a way that Aurora wondered if the whole thing was meant to be a set up.

Bully for them, she had only ever lost a couple games to her Grandmother. Aside from that, she was undefeated, and she wasn’t going to lose that title now.

----------H----------

February 14th, 1975

“It’s so pretty!” Lily exclaimed as she and Hermione entered the Great Hall.

“It’s ghastly.” Hermione replied, taking in the pink walls, the fluttering hearts that (thankfully) disappeared long before they made their way to the tables. She swore that she could hear bird song as well, chirps and tweets here and there as if it somehow made everything more … something. Romantic, perhaps? Disgusting was more like it.

“God, you sound like Sev.” Lily rolled her eyes. “Well, come on. The mail will be here sooner than we think.”

“Well, yes,” Hermione agreed as she allowed Lily to pull her along. “Though I’m not quite sure ….”

She didn’t continue as she realized why Lily was so thrilled over the prospect of the morning owl-post. Having been friends with Ron and Harry, as well as years of being ignored before, had lowered any and all expectations Hermione could have had for the holiday to nothing.

She sat at the table between Lily and Alice, both already eagerly chatting with Marlene and a a third
year named Mary about the prospect of the post. Hermione thought to wait them out, breakfast being the only time in which she really spoke to her dorm mates and fellow fourth year females. She grabbed her toast, a bit of fruit, chewed on a piece of bacon, and prepared her cup of tea, and still the conversation hadn’t changed. With a sigh, she removed her Ancient Runes text from her bag to brush up on the chapter that had been assigned for reading.

“Getting in some last minute homework, Kitten?” Sirius asked from his seat a few people away.

“No, merely refreshing my memory.” She replied between bites.

“She can’t annoy Snivellus if she doesn’t have the answer ready before him.” James added, and Hermione peered at him to see his attention was entirely on a grinning Sirius. “I think he down right hates being second best, if he was every really best to begin with. It’s the best thing about Granger.”

I’m right here, you know, she thought to herself, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. Some days the differences between James and Harry made her truly question her friend’s paternity. Perhaps Harry was fathered with someone under the Polyjuice potion? Well, no, that couldn’t be it … unless it was James who took the potion and somehow tricked Lily into sleeping with … someone. What would the characteristics be under such circumstances? She’d have to ask Severus, perhaps he would know or would be as interested to find out as she was.

“Oh, look!” Marlene gushed, and Hermione lost her appetite from the sheer sweetness of it. She hadn’t even looked up to see the various shades of red and pink fluttering down from school owls, she simply knew they were coming long before they entered her periphery. A regular post owl landed in front of her, offered her a letter, and then left.

It looked as disgruntled as Hermione felt.

“Oh! That’s a boring looking one. Did Sev make you one, too?” Lily asked, and Hermione glanced over to see the ginger resting her hand on a small pile papers.

“Umm, no. It’s a letter from Delia.” She replied, frowning. All of the envelopes beneath Lily’s hand were bright, Gryffindor red. “Did he make you one?”

“He always has, though it hasn’t come yet.” Lily insisted, a near pitying smile replacing her genuine joy for a moment. “It’s probably because he doesn’t know you well yet.”

“And your new.” Marlene added distractedly from behind a card.

“I don’t really care.” Hermione lied.

No, she didn’t care about her lack of cards with that sole exception, and why it hurt, she didn’t want to examine too closely. It was very and probably likely that it was because she was sure that she and Severus had developed a true, honest friendship. And where he and Lily were friends … well, he did have a crush on her. Probably did still. Maybe more an infatuation, even. Pretty girls like Lily were hard not to fall for, or so Hermione was sure.

“I made you one, Kitten.” Sirius smirked, pointing in front of Hermione. She looked down by her plate and noticed the single red envelope, as well as the glare from Marlene.

She picked up the Valentine and tossed it back to Sirius unopened. “I’d actually rather take Lily’s pity.”

Lily made a stammer of protest but was cut off before she could actually try and deny it.
“I’m ready to head to Runes, if you are.” Severus’ voice was more welcome than Hermione wanted to admit, and she barely held her sigh of relief.

“Oh let the lady have a day without you and you beak butting in.” James groaned. “Slither back to the dungeons, and maybe Granger could enjoy some proper company.”

“I thought that’s what I was about to do,” Hermione said as she shouldered her bag. She gestured toward the door with her head, and Severus nodded, getting ready to lead them out.

“Sev?” Lily caught his attention. He arched a brow, and Lily bit her lip, glancing toward the marauders. “Did you have something for me?”

“You can’t be worried about missing notes from Defense? It’s the same class as the year before.” He replied.

“You wouldn’t want his notes anyway.” James said, getting a scowl from Lily. “There wouldn’t be anything about defense against in them.”

Everyone except Sirius and Peter seemed to be ignoring James’ terrible shot at Severus while Lily turned back to the Slytherin.

“No, I meant … something else … pertaining to the day?”

“And what would that be?” He asked, not at all cruelly.

“Oh, please.” James slammed his hands down on the table and got to his feet, turning to sneer at Severus. Hermione noticed his wand was in his hand, and that Sirius was no longer laughing, but instead seeming to be watching for the opportune moment to do something without suspicion. “The last three years you’ve given Lily a Valentine. Cheap. Handmade. A tear of parchment with you grease prints all over it. You’d ramble on about her silken hair, and her shinning eyes, and her glowing smile.”

“James,” Lily growled, and the boy paused, hesitating.

“You’re absolutely horrid, James Potter.” Hermione sneered, taking advantage of his silence as her indignation on her friend’s behalf imploded.

“I don’t need you defending me.” Severus snapped out, but Hermione continued.

“Honestly, if you were half the man ….”

“Granger!” Severus growled, his cold, black eyes meeting Hermione’s as she turned toward him. But it wasn’t him that silenced her. Enraged by the cruelty, of how absolutely no one, not even the prefects, were stepping in to stop James, Hermione had forgotten about the vow. It had stopped her from saying anything about Harry, but her mind was in a loop even as her airway seemed to close off. It kept looping the comparisons between father and son, and yelled how much she wanted to point them out even as her heart started racing and stuttering. Her lips tried to form words that the vow prevented, and she couldn’t seem to stop it.

It was likely because his eyes were on hers that Severus was the first to notice something terribly wrong. The cold anger from her standing up for him gave way to concern, and then to fear as she clawed at his arm.

“Hermione?” He asked.
She’d seen that look in his eyes before when, while he, Sirius, and Remus had been arguing, the werewolf had stiffened under the light of the moon. As Remus’ anguished cry changed suddenly to a growl, obsidian eyes locked on hers, terrified, before he spun around and flung his arms out to the sides in an ill-attempt in making a physical shield. He was Professor Snape then, but she couldn’t help realize just how much they were the same man.

It was the last thought she had before her tunneling vision faded to complete blackness, and consciousness fell away.

----------S----------

Heart hammering, Severus lurched forward and caught Hermione before she hit the ground. Instinctively bringing her head to his chest, he turned towards the marauders. Eyes wide, nostrils flaring, teeth gritted, he hissed. “Aim a little off, now, Black?”

“What are you on about Snivellus?” Black sneered, eyes showing concern as they darted between Severus and Hermione.

“Then perhaps it was Potter?” He asked, changing his accusations. In his peripheral, he noted Lupin moving cautiously toward him as if approaching an animal in the wild. It made Severus want to hold Hermione closer, protect her from one of them when they’d already done enough damage.

Potter’s coldness in demeanor didn’t ease his suspicions that they had been the reason for Hermione’s collapse.

“Perhaps it was me … what?” Potter asked through clenched teeth.

“Cursed her.” Severus hissed as shadows came over him.

“Now, now, Mr Snape. I doubt very much that Messers Potter and Black had cursed her.” Professor Dumbledore said with that annoyingly kind smile. It did nothing but make Severus’ blood boil, that gentle, condescending grin used too often when the bullying and vicious attacks led by the Princes of Gryffindor were excused as ‘boys will be boys’ types of fun. It was always used when the Headmaster told him “you shouldn’t provoke them” or “are you sure that’s how it happened, Mr Snape?”

“But she was fine!” Lily spoke up, her voice shrill as she stared at Hermione with absolute terror. “She was perfectly fine before she started calling James out on his behavior!”

“Her pulse is erratic, Professor.” Lupin commented softly, and Severus hadn’t realized the marauder had taken Hermione’s wrist in the upheaval. It hadn’t occurred to him just how focused he’d become on Hermione and what happened to her.

He looked around him, noting now that all the Gryffindors nearby were on their feet and craning to have a look at their own. That even students as far off as his own house were trying to get a peek, though the Slytherins were sly enough not to stand on their chairs or blatantly crane their necks. Around him was Dumbledore, Professors McGonagall and Slughorn, and Madam Pomfrey.

McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey were the only ones who showed true concern, though there was something strange in the glint in McGongall’s eye that made Severus think she knew exactly what happened to his friend. Slughorn just looked confused, and had probably only parted from his
breakfast because he believed he needed to act as head of house.

“Let me take her up to the hospital wing, Severus.” Madam Pomfrey said quietly, placing a hand over Severus’ where he held Hermione’s head. He nodded, and once Madam Pomfrey conjured a stretcher, he released his hold on the bushy-haired Gryffindor so the Matron could levitate her onto it. Hermione’s hair tickled his hand as she was lifted away, and he ignored the sharp pain that clenched his heart when he noticed her pale skin and purplish lips. “You can come see her after classes.”

“She’ll be happy to get the notes she’d have missed.” Lupin commented quietly as Madam Pomfrey guided her out the door, and Severus couldn’t help the snort that escaped.

Yeah, she would be thrilled to have the notes she missed. He didn’t doubt for a moment that her first thought upon waking would be the classes she’d missed.

But the fact she was missing them in the first place reminded him that someone was responsible for her collapsing as she had. He turned back to Potter, glaring as his hands balled into fists to prevent himself from pulling his wand out. He was sure a Gryffindor was responsible for Hermione’s condition, he just wasn’t sure which one.

“I assure you, Mr Snape,” Professor McGonagall said, her brogue thickening with each word. “She wasnae cursed. Go to class, you can see ‘er after.”

He nodded once, turned, and left the Great Hall.

“Sev!” Lily called, and Severus stopped. He waited, but didn’t turn to watch Lily run toward him, bag dangling off her shoulder, scraps of obnoxious colored parchment clutched to her chest.

“Hi.” She said with a grin.

“So, “ Lily cleared her throat. “Did you miss the Owl Post?”

Severus blinked. “For what?”

“You know,” Lily bumped him in the arm with her shoulder.

Yes, he knew.

And maybe if things had been different, he would have once more waxed poetic on all of Lily’s best features, physical or otherwise. He didn’t doubt in the least that the day she’d stood him up in the Three Broomsticks that he would have forgiven her without pause, and continued to worship her as the one bright light in his life. And he would have still been quite impossibly infatuated with her.

But things were different.

Lily was not the only light in his life anymore.

Hermione Granger was one of the biggest pains in the ass he’d ever met. She had a haughty way of regurgitating text book information back at a teacher, only these days she at least waited to be called upon before pulling the answer from memory. She had an annoying habit of following things so strictly that it sometimes made Potions a bit annoying when he knew his way was better and she still mumble about the instructions under her breath. And, like this morning, and in the Three Broomsticks, she had this terrible, Gryffindor streak of barreling into a situation with a savior complex. She would defend him in any shape, way, or form she could even though he didn’t want it.
But she was also a more loyal friend than Lily had been since arriving at Hogwarts. Her sticking up for him was annoying, and often ill placed, but he couldn’t forget the tears in her eyes when she visited him in the hospital wing to yell at him after his cauldron exploded. And as much as he felt his pride was a bit wounded, he did appreciate how she merely stepped in and pretended it was actually her he had been intending to meet in the Inn. She allowed him to save face in front of the house mates he knew already thought Lily beneath him. And while he had some suspicions on Hermione’s true blood status, he didn’t care. And what the purebloods of his house didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her.

She was also more interesting to converse with, Lily becoming more what he would consider a typical teenage witch where Hermione was an intellectual. Seeing her enter the abandoned classroom looking hardly different for the Yule Ball had actually cemented for him just how little she was like other girls. Like anyone else, really.

He was determined to hate her when he’d met her, but nothing he said seemed to lessen her opinion of him. And once the insults stopped holding weight, once it was clear she wasn’t around him out of pity or strictly because of Lily, he couldn’t help but like her. Albeit, reluctantly. She was a Gryffindor, after all.

So after everything that happened, when the day came closer, Severus couldn’t bring himself to put quill to parchment for Lily’s sake. And he thought that Hermione would find the whole holiday absolutely as insipid as he did. So he skipped it entirely, hoping the former wouldn’t notice, and the latter would indeed be on his side of things.

One for two was clearly as good as he was going to get.

“You have at least a half dozen in your arms. You know what you are to me, you don’t need anything more to add to the written flattery you already have.”

She smiled coyly, chin tilting up. “And what am I to you, Sev?” She asked with a flutter of her eyelashes.

He was quite impressed that he didn’t blush. At the same time, had things been different, he knew he would have been blushing furiously and stuttering out what she had been. What he once thought they might be.

“Lily,” Lupin’s voice came from a slight distance. “You’re going to be late for Care of Magical Creatures. It’s the other way, and if you keep following Severus …”

“Right.” She said, smile fading. “See you in Charms, Sev. Remus.” She darted back the other way, and Severus tensed when he realized he was alone with Lupin.

“Couldn’t wait to get me alone so you could get in the shot you and your friends missed earlier?” Severus said to him over his shoulder, slipping his wand into his hand.

“Making sure James, Peter, or Sirius don’t try to get you on the way to class.” Lupin replied, and Severus stopped despite learned behavior telling him that it was a mistake. He turned just a bit toward Lupin, seeing his stalker stopped when he had. “I agree with you that Hermione was likely cursed.” Lupin continued. “And she looked … what ever she was hit with, it wasn’t good.” Lupin shifted about nervously. “And she’d said something to me back in November, and, well … it stuck with me.”

Severus sneered, “Was it not to follow around the Alpha idiots like a good little dog?”
Lupin tensed ever so slightly, and Severus noted it and filed it away.

“Of sorts,” Lupin grinned ruefully, and Severus actually managed not to roll his eyes.

“I’m heading to Runes. Don’t hex me in the back, I doubt you’d be able to handle me on your own.” Severus said as he turned back around.

“I don’t doubt it at all.” Lupin replied, and Severus let out a groan of distaste at the cheerfulness in the marauder’s voice.
“I can’t imagine how you’ve managed to hold this in all morning, Minerva.” Severus heard Dumbledore’s voice faintly out in the main ward of the hospital wing.

Hermione had been placed in a private room, away from anyone who would have casually come up for a sudden onset of stomach cramps or unbearable headache. From the exasperated look Madam Pomfrey had greeted him with when he arrived at the beginning of lunch, it had been happening quite a bit since she took Hermione away from the Great Hall that morning. The Matron had directed him to her room, warned him that Hermione still hadn’t regained consciousness, and seemed to promptly forget he was there. Which was fine by him as he intended to stay until he had to leave for Arithmancy later in the afternoon. And even going to that was debatable.

As a result, he doubted the supposedly omnipresent headmaster had any idea there was a student capable of hearing what was being said behind the closed door of the ward.

“I’ve been holdin’ it in ’cause you’ve been avoiding me, Albus. I agreed to the vow, but I didnae think ye’d be so vicious with it.” Professor McGonagall replied. Or shouted, really.

“Not vicious, thorough. If Riddle were to know what she does ….”

“Donae start wit that.” McGonagall cut the headmaster off. “How’d he’d ever get holda her.”

Whatever Dumbledore said after that was too soft to be heard through the closed door, but the sharp clap of a palm against skin had Severus sitting up straighter. McGonagall said something also too low to make out, but there was a hissing quality to her voice that lead Severus to believe the Headmaster was being lectured.

He was also a bit too satisfied with the thought that the Transfiguration teacher had slapped the headmaster.

Shadows blocked out the light under the door, and Severus cleared his mind as to not let on that he’d overheard part of their conversation. It always seemed to help him lie, or at least hide the truth when he did so, though he didn’t know how.

He turned his attention entirely on the Arithmancy book in front of him, blocking out the quiet grumbling on the other side of the door. It would help with the facade of not having heard a word.

A snort had his act shattered in an instant.

Turning toward the bed fast enough to pop something in his neck, he took in Hermione’s half lidded, groggy smirk with a surge of relief.

He immediately put on his best scowl. “Exactly what did you think you were doing, falling unconscious as you did?”
“Did I ruin your day?” She asked with a scratchy voice.

“Lupin had been shadowing me from a distance all morning.” He sneered, “What exactly did you say to him to get him to follow me around like a lost puppy?”

“I didn’t say anything to him.” Hermione said as she attempted to sit up.

He placed a hand on her shoulder and firmly pressed her back down. “It’s not what he said.”

“Well then I don’t remember.” Hermione replied as she weakly attempted to resist him. “Why won’t you let me up?”

“Probably because you came so close to death this morning you made my complexion look down right radiant.” He countered. “You aren’t getting up until Pomfrey says you aren’t going to keel over.”

There was a gentle rap on the door, and then it opened to reveal the twinkling headmaster and the harried looking head of Gryffindor.

“Mr Snape, shouldn’t you be in class?” Dumbledore asked.

“I have a free period, sir.” He replied, doing his best to be civil.

“Ah, well, perhaps you should ….”

“Albus.” McGonagall hissed as she went to Hermione’s side.

Dumbledore stared at her, then seemed to concede to something with a nod. He looked to Hermione. “Miss Granger, I trust you understand what happened?”

“Yes, sir.” She croaked.

“Good. Perhaps, in the future, you would be more aware of what could trigger your condition?” He arched a brow, and Severus noted something darken in Hermione’s eyes.

“Of course.” She said a bit too sweetly.

Dumbledore nodded once more, “I will get Madam Pomfrey to come and check how you’re recovering.” And with a sweep of his disgustingly bright pink robes, he left the room.

“Miss Granger, Hermione, let me assure you that if I thought, for a moment, that what was asked …."

Hermione’s hand shot out and gripped McGongall’s wrist with surprising strength. “I know.” She rasped. “But let’s not …."

“Right,” McGonagall put her hand over Hermione’s and nodded. The Professor then turned to Severus with a gratitude and kindness he’d never seen from anyone in his life. “Mr Snape, twenty-five points to Slytherin. I’d hate to think of what might have happened had Hermione actually collapsed during … her attack.”

Severus couldn’t do more than blink for a full minute. He’d been awarded house points. Outside the classroom. For merely being there for his friend.

“Thank you.” He managed to get out. It was the only thing that came to mind. And before he felt the need to search for something more, Madam Pomfrey came in and looked Hermione over.
“Whatever happened doesn’t seem to have any lasting affects.” She stated. “And I’m sorry, Minerva, but I can’t seem to find the reason behind it. I have a suspicion, but I can’t imagine the reason for it.”

“Thank you, Poppy.” McGonagall said, letting go of Hermione. “We should go to your office and have some tea. You can talk to me about your suspicions there.”

The two women left the room, Madam Pomfrey closing the door only part way before she and McGonagall disappeared.

“I assume I missed classes, did you take notes?” Hermione asked once they were alone.

Severus laughed. Out of relief, out of the having made the assumption earlier with Lupin that she would ask. He laughed that after being on death’s door, Hermione Granger was so steadfast that her studies were still her priority.

“I have notes, you bloody swot.” He said. “But maybe wait until you don’t rival the Bloody Baron in complexion before diving into your studies.”

She stuck her tongue out at him, and he merely shook his head.

And if he felt a twinge of fondness for her, well, perhaps one of those annoying flying cupids nicked him in passing.

----------A---------

February 14th, 1993

Aurora looked at the disgusting scarlet pieces of paper in front of her that she’d yet to open. If she had to guess, the majority of them were merely attempts at buying her father’s favor. Give Aurora Snape a Valentine, and maybe Professor Snape will go the day without saying anything mean or excuse a lack of homework being done. As if that would work.

“Well,” Ginny asked morosely, pushing her peas around on her plate. “Are you going to open them?”

“I’m not sure why I should.” Aurora replied.

Ginny huffed, “You’re one of the only first years who have any.

That wasn’t exactly a reason, but Aurora had noted a few of the other first years at the table glancing at the envelopes that had been following her around since the morning. She’d even tried to leave them in her father’s class in an attempt that they would suddenly find themselves in the fire, but they floated out behind her. The sheer number had him scowling upon her entrance, and she could hear the sneer in the scoff when the little envelopes followed her out the door.

Plucking the first one from the stack, Aurora looked at the writing on the front. She didn’t recognize it, nor did she recognize the next three. She thought the fifth might have been from Seamus Finnegan, though that wasn’t all that promising.
“I don’t know anyone’s handwriting.” Aurora frowned.

“Are you sorting them, then?” Hermione Granger asked from a few seats down. Aurora nodded, and Hermione gave her a swotty grin. “Move your wand like this,” She gestured, her own wand moving in an infinity like shape but with the curves having a bump like a heart. “And say amicus revelare.”

“Amicus revelare,” Aurora repeated, following the wand movement before tapping the cards. They shook, then sorted themselves out into two distinct piles: three cards, and then the rest. It didn’t take much of a guess to figure out which pile was the genuine valentines.

She plucked up the first card.

_Aurora,_

_Perhaps on this particular day, we can bury our animosities and focus once more on strengthening a union sought since our birth._

_With warmest Regards,_

_Draco._

Aurora snorted. “Honestly.” She said, looking over at the Slytherin table. Draco was laughing at something, and from the way they were carrying on, she’d wager that Ginny’s musical Valentine (One Aurora tried so hard to convince her not to send) was still being mocked. Shaking her head, she tossed the card on to the pile sent by the brown nosers.

She pulled the next one out.

_Rory,_

_Happy Valentine’s Day._

_Harry_

The boy in question wasn’t around, so she thought she would simply thank him for it later the same way he thanked her for hers: a slight grin and a nod. She quickly slipped the card in the middle of the pile before Ginny saw it and became more down trodden, or want nothing to do with her. She grabbed the last.
This day was never a favorite of your mother’s or my own during our school years, so if it fills you with a bit of nausea, know it’s a family trait.

Aurora laughed at that one, her father’s spiky hand writing a welcome sight. She knew why he did it, though he would never admit to it: he didn’t want her left out.

She glanced up at the head table and smiled fondly at her father. He was deep in a conversation with Aunt Min in which they both looked as though they spoke through gritted teeth, sending glances at Professors Lockhart and Dumbledore who seemed to smile much more broadly than need be.

She tucked the envelope in to her robes. “Anyone know a vanishing spell or can control an incendio?”

“I’ll do it!” Seamus jumped up excitedly. There was a commotion of people clamoring to get him to sit back down, and during that, the pile disappeared.

Startled, Aurora looked around for someone who could have done it. When she turned toward the head table, she noted her father wasn’t there anymore. Turning slightly, she caught him on the way out the staff entrance, a slight smirk curling his lips.

But not a second later, something in her mind clicked. It had niggled on her all day that there was something really strange about Ginny’s singing Valentine, aside from comparing his eyes to pickled toad, and the sight of her father jostled it right to the forefront.

“Ginny,” She whispered, looking around as she leaned in to ensure no one was listening. They weren’t. “Why did you refer to-to You-Know-Who as the Dark Lord?”

Ginny blushed to her roots, her brown eyes going wide. “I just read it somewhere. And it rhymed.” She added as an after thought.

A bad feeling curled in Aurora’s gut, and she averted her eyes as her mind began to stir with thoughts she didn’t fully understand, and ideas that seemed too far fetched to believe even to herself.

March 27th, 1993

Aurora watched Ginny Weasley watch Harry with an intensity that spoke more of fear than a crush. It was almost as if at any moment she thought that Harry would hex her. She wasn’t quite sure why, and Ginny hadn’t exactly open or friendly since Valentine’s day.

With a heavy sigh, she finished her homework and thought it best to head back up to the dormitory. There wasn’t anything else to do. No one to talk to.

Well, except Hagrid, she was sure he would still welcome her with open arms. And if that’s how she would have to survive her Hogwarts education, well, she supposed there were worse things than hanging out strictly with the adults.
She was heading for the main doors when she stopped quite suddenly at the sight of a blonde girl laying on her back, arms out to the side, legs splayed awkwardly. Aurora’s heart stopped and then sped up to a painful speed. She glanced around, seeing no one else around. She thought of turning back around and getting her father as he was supervising, but a little voice in her head told her to suck it up and go check things out herself. She didn’t need to run to Daddy for everything, she wasn’t a little girl anymore.

At first, Aurora was shaking when she noted the girl’s blue eyes were open, but when the girl blinked, Aurora understood that she wasn’t another victim of the monster of Slytherin. She paused, wondering if maybe she should get Aunt Poppy in case the girl was injured.

“Have you ever noticed there is a map of the stars and planets on the ceiling?” The girl suddenly asked, and Aurora suddenly recognized her as Luna Lovegood. “I imagine you spent a lot of time here as a child. Did you ever just look up at the ceiling of the castle?”

Aurora came a little closer, looking around again before awkwardly sitting on the floor beside Luna. “Umm, just in my room. I mean, the room in my Dad’s-Professor Snape’s-chambers. It, uh, well it didn’t have a map of the stars or anything.” She frowned. “It was … a raven. A glowing image of a raven and a lioness. The raven flew, making a figure eight around the lioness and she played with it, trying to bat at it or catch it in her mouth. They were always blue, like a ….”

“Like a patronus.” Luna said, a dreamy smile coming over her petite face. “That’s actually quite lovely. Likely representative of your parents.”

“Yeah,” Aurora said. After glancing around again, she decided to join Luna in laying on the floor.

She had been absolutely right: engraved in the gold stone ceiling were clear images of the solar system. It was massive, showing the sun in the center, the planets around it, the position of all the constellations.

“It’s enchanted.” Luna said. “The planets have shifted since I first noticed. I’m always too sleepy come astronomy class to really pay attention, so sometimes I come down here and look up to have a better understanding of what Professor Sinistra was talking about.”

“You would think it would be the founders up there. Or at least the symbols of the houses.” Aurora said thoughtfully.

“This is much better, I think.” Luna said in a carefree way.

Aurora heard the distinct steps long before the person making them came close. She tilted her head and shifted her eyes as much as she could to see her father looming over them with a scowl on his face.

“Miss Lovegood, Miss Snape, why are you laying on the floor?” He asked.

“We’re studying the planets and the stars.” Aurora replied, and then added a hasty, “Sir,” when her brain caught up to the fact that it wasn’t precisely her father she was speaking too.

“And how does one do that in daylight, inside, in the entrance hall?”

“The ceiling, Professor Snape.” Luna said without a care, pointing upward. “But I suppose it’s likely not best to do it when there is a potential for people to come by, is there?” She got up, and Aurora quickly moved to do the same.

Professor Snape lifted an eyebrow and scowled. “Ten points from Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor.” He
said, and Aurora’s cheeks heated at the loss. “Perhaps you can each explain to your house mates how you lost points. I imagine it would be punishment enough without adding detention on top of it.”

“Yes, sir.” Aurora said, bowing her head.

“Of course, Professor. Given what happened earlier this year, it is likely unwise to have done it.” Luna conceded, though she didn’t sound the least bit contrite. She then turned to Aurora. “Would you like to accompany me on a walk around the ground? The wrackspurts really don’t like the coolness that’s still lingering on the grounds, so when you come back in your head will be cleared.”

Aurora shrugged and allowed Luna to lead the way. At this rate, a friend was a friend.

She glanced over her shoulder to say something to her Dad, but didn’t dare to when she saw him looking up at the ceiling as though he’d never seen before. Perhaps he hadn’t.

May 8th, 1993

“Harry,” Aurora kept her voice low, not wanting to draw attention to them now that she finally found a moment where Ron wasn’t at his side. She was shaking, though did well to hide it. “I … um … I was wondering if maybe I could, umm, borrow your, ah, cloak.”

Harry frowned. “My cloak?” He asked.

“Yes,” She said, pulling at one of her loose curls. “You know the one that makes you, umm, not noticed?”

Harry’s eyes went wide, and he looked frantically around them while leaning in and asking, “How do you know about that?”

Aurora arched a brow in such a perfect imitation of her father’s that Harry visibly flinched. “Ron isn’t very good at keeping things to himself. Ginny told me about it, said she heard all about it from Ron as he was telling Fred and George. Or something like that. I didn’t tell Dad,” She rushed to add when Harry looked apprehensive. “But I just … I want to go see him.”

“Rory, it’s not safe.” Harry said, though she could tell by his tone that that was not at all the reason he was saying no. He shifted as she continued to stare at him, and then eventually sighed. He leaned toward her. “Promise me this won’t get back to your Dad.”

“Of course,” She said immediately.

“Ron and I … we’re going to go see Hagrid after it gets dark.”

“Hagrid?” Aurora frowned. “Why? It can’t be for his rock cakes. I lost my first two teeth at once trying to eat one of those.” She said, the memory of her two front teeth missing making her shift uncomfortably. The muggle kids had teased her relentlessly for that, especially as it happened so early in December when she was five.

“We think … we think he knows something about the Chamber of Secrets.” Harry said, glancing
around again to make sure they weren’t listening.

Aurora snorted. “Doubtful. For one, Hagrid was a Gryffindor. For another ….”

“He was expelled fifty years ago, around the same time the Chamber was closed last.” Harry stated hurriedly.

Aurora paled at the thought, didn’t even want to imagine it. Yes, Hagrid had a thing for “miss understood creatures”, as he often referred to them, but surely he wouldn’t unleash something that would cause so much damage. Especially twice.

“I don’t want to believe it, either.” Harry assured her. “But it’s all too coincidental.”

“Yeah ….” She nodded. A heaviness settled around her before she sucked in a deep breath. “I wouldn’t be long, an hour at most.” She pleaded.

He sighed, then smiled. “Alright. Give me a moment to get, but don’t put it on in here, slip it on outside in the corridor.”

—–A—–

She knew he wouldn’t be in his rooms. Once Aurora had the cloak in place, she ran for the hospital wing. She met no one on the way there, and while she was terrified of what could be lurking around the corner, she didn’t slow for anything. The door to the hospital wing was open just a crack, and after a quick glance around to make sure no one was there, she took off the cloak and went inside.

She wasn’t at all surprised to see her Dad sitting beside the bed with Hermione Granger’s petrified form in it.

He didn’t glance up as she approached, but he opened his arm for her to come and tuck herself into his side like she would do when she was younger.

“I can’t properly think of her as your mother’s younger self.” He said, his voice barely above a whisper as though he were worried he’d disturb the girl before them. “There’s a disconnect. This Hermione is an entirely different one from the girl I met in my fourth year. But she looks enough like you … it’s as though she’s a relative, a niece or cousin of your mother’s. But it’s moments like this ….”

“But she’ll be alright. She came to you.”

“She did, does, will.” He was quiet again. “Mr Malfoy has managed to get Professor Dumbledore fired. Avoid Draco, if you can. Between this happening to Hermione, and that, he’ll be insufferable.”

She nodded, and they remained quiet, drawing comfort from each other. “I’m worried about Ginny.” She said after a while.

Her Dad frowned, “Miss Weasley?” He asked, and she nodded. “I’m afraid I don’t really know Ginevra Weasley well. Why are you worried about her?”

“She’s always been sort of quiet.” Aurora explained. “Ron Weasley seems to like ensuring that she remembers she’s the youngest, he’s older, and friends with Harry. She sort of just … lets him do it.
The twins, well, they tease her too. Well, not tease, really, but they don’t exactly help. They’re nice, really, but ….”

“Rory.” Her father interrupted her rambling, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Right. Well, Ginny had had this diary that she wrote in every night since we came here. But I think it’s enchanted. It feels weird to me.”

“Weird how?” Her Dad asked, the glint fading as he frowned.

“Like the locked bookcase in your study.” She said quietly. “Only it’s one book that feels like all of yours.” She explained, and his frown deepened. “Well, not long after the start of last term, she got rid of it. But she wasn’t really … better. She was always nervous and distant. And she watched Harry like a hawk. I don’t know how, but it’s like she was addicted to it. She spent all her free time writing in it, and … I can’t explain it.”

“Albus, what are you keeping from me.” Her Dad mumbled under his breath. He seemed lost in thought for a moment, and then looked to Aurora. “Five points from Gryffindor, and detention with me Monday night.”

“But … but … what did I lose points for now?!”

“For leaving the tower when I know Min told you lot not to. I know you wanted to see Miss Granger, and I would wager you knew I would be here, but it’s extremely dangerous for you to be wandering the halls. Miss Clearwater was a half-blood, like you, and she is in the same state as the muggleborns. Your mother got lucky, as did every other person in this room.”

He didn’t have to say anything else, she knew what he wasn’t saying.

----------H----------

March 26th, 1975

“You know you’ve worked off what you owe for your boyfriend’s ingredients as of Tuesday night, right?” Bob asked with a smirk as he stood opposite the plant box Hermione had been working in.

“Severus is not my boyfriend,” She said absently, having already had about a half dozen veiled taunts from Delia on a daily basis since coming off the train Saturday.

“Severus is not my boyfriend,” She said abstently, having already had about a half dozen veiled taunts from Delia on a daily basis since coming off the train Saturday.

“Right. So you just give potion’s ingredients to all your friends?” He asked, the smirk pulling higher and a brow defying gravity as well.

Hermione snorted. “If my other friend had an interest in potions aside from what they can do for her hair and skin, maybe I’d consider it. As it is, I believe Lily was quite satisfied with the perfume I made her from some of Delia’s lavender.”

Bob’s shoulders shook as if he had a bit of a chuckle at that before he stopped and appeared thoughtful. He glanced down at the other end of the green house, seeing that his two apprentices were occupied and well out of ear shot. Hermione followed his gaze, curious as to why he suddenly
seemed concerned.

“Friend. Singular. So it’s just you, Severus, and this Lily, is it?” He asked.

“Yeah, for the most part. I mean, there’s this other boy, Remus. Ever since my, umm, incident, he hasn’t really hung around with us, per se, but he’s sorta hovered. With Severus and me, anyway. And it’s just in the classes he doesn’t share with the idiots he keeps company with.”

And around full moons. The days leading up to it, he typically spent them with the marauders, clinging to them a bit more. But she knew for absolute certainty that he hadn’t lifted his wand once to assist in any hexing or jinxing between them and Severus since her being sent to the hospital wing. And he’d been more vocal about them bullying in general. It hadn’t ended anything, but it was a start. She’d remembered, vaguely, saying something to him about them in November, but she hadn’t expected him to actually act on it.

But she didn’t feel the need to tell any of this to Bob as the little ridge on the bridge of his nose deepened. “And … is that alright? I mean, I know Delia would be better at this than me, but … I mean is it fine only having two friends? It’s better than none, I know, but ….”

“I only really had two proper friends before.” Hermione replied, focusing more on the moly she was attending. “It’s quite like before in that way. Dark haired boy and a ginger for best friends, and I don’t have much in common with the ginger. I get along with the others in my house, though before where it was more the boys than the girls, it’s flipped here. I’m adjusting well, if that’s what you’re worried about. Perhaps more than I originally thought I would.”

“Good.” Bob nodded. “Minnie was worried about you early on. So was Delia. But the more you wrote, the better is seemed to be to all of us.” He paused, seeming to consider something. With a heart heavy sigh, he said, “We lost another baby, just before you came into our lives. We’ve been trying since we married, and it seems nothing magic or muggle will work. She just … won’t stay pregnant. And it was hard for her, having all these nieces and nephews from Mal. So when Min said you needed a place to stay … she knew you were older. Knew you’d already had a mother and father that you’d lost, but she’d hoped for a relationship at least stronger than mere niece. And if you don’t … if you don’t feel quite as close to us, it’s fine. But we do think of you as a daughter of sorts. Been a really short time, but ….”

“I understand.” Hermione smiled. “You’re right, I do have parents, and I was really close to them. But I never had siblings, and sometimes it feels like Delia is the grown sister I would never have had. I know it’s not the relationship you hope for, and maybe in time we’ll get there. But I do feel like we have family in each other.” She lifted her chin, “I’m quite proud to be an honorary McGonagall.”

Bob grinned devilishly, “Well, perhaps we can pull you away from your Severus and convince you to marry one of Mal’s boys. They’re all still single.”

“Not a chance.” Hermione said firmly.

“Not a chance at marrying you into the family proper, or pulling you away from your Severus?” He taunted, and Hermione felt herself blush to her roots in spite herself. Bob chuckled. “You make it too easy, my dear.”

“Apparently.” She said. “Though Severus is not my anything but friend. And there isn’t anything for me to be pulled away from,” She said with a decisive nod as the greenhouse door opened.

Hermione closed her eyes and groaned, head dropping so her chin touched her chest as Bob burst out laughing.

“Speak of the Devil, as the muggles say?” He asked, and Hermione lifted her head to glare at him before taking the letter from Delia as she came up beside her.

“Oh is that from Severus?” Delia asked as Hermione stood up and brushed her hands on her jeans. “Didn’t go home for the Hols?”

Hermione shook his head, “Lily said he never goes home for any of the holidays. He spends most of his summers away from his house, too.”

Delia looked to Bob with wide, pleading eyes, and Hermione looked between the two in confusion as Bob’s amusement shifted from teasing to affectionate. He gave a nod, and Delia turned to Hermione with a wide grin, “Invite him here!” She declared.

“For part of the summer, anyway. I imagine he would like to have some time to see his parents.”

Hermione was abruptly reminded of Harry, and how much he had dreaded returning to the Dursleys. In fact, come to think of it, she wasn’t entirely sure Severus wasn’t in a similar situation. She’d never heard him speak of his family, and she knew Lily hadn’t said anything to her about it.

“I’ll ask him” She said, running her fingers over the letter in her hands.

Bob rolled his eyes. “Already said you worked off what you owed, didn’t I? Go take a break. Let Prewitt and Schamander work for once.” He said with a wink.

“Robert,” Delia warned, but Hermione could tell that even she thought Hermione’s urge to read the letter was due to some imagined romance.

“You’re both impossible,” Hermione said in a sing-song voice as she left the green house and headed across the lawn to the main house. She took the stairs to her bedroom two at a time once inside the house, and flopped down on her bed backward as to not get it covered in dirt.

As she opened the letter, a Galleon smacked her on the face.

H,

Lavender
Moly
Asphodel
Mint
Fluxweed
Thistle
Thyme
Don’t waste your time getting it all fresh if you don’t have to, I’m sure Mr McGonagall has some stores that he can sell me through you. And no, it is not for an experiment.

It’s been blissfully quiet without your constant mumbling to yourself as you go over notes or texts, and I have had more space to spread out books on the desks in the library since making your acquaintance. It has, however, been a bit dull with no one to mock for being so keen on absorbing the written word.

Until Sunday,
S. Snape

Hermione snorted as she set down the letter. She missed him too, though she would have just told him. And exactly what was he thinking, using her as an apothecary. Did he even have the slightest idea the taunting she was about to get from Bob over this?

Git.

June 1st, 1975

“Hermione, stop studying,” Lily whined, throwing the flower and grass chain she’d just made at her friend’s head. It got caught in her curls, and Severus snickered as he pulled it out of her hair.

Hermione, the panic of exams beginning the following day having been set firmly, didn’t look up once from her text book. “I can’t,” She said. “What if there is something on the exam that I didn’t know? Or had forgotten?”

“Much as I loathe to say it, if it’s something you don’t know or somehow forgotten, it won’t be on the exam.” Severus replied from where he sat beside her. It had seemed to become their position since the start of the year, but especially over the last two months. When the trio would leave the castle to lounge around the grounds in the warming weather, they would head for the birch tree beside Black Lake. The wide trunk provided a back rest for Hermione and Severus, who preferred to have the support while they read, or wrote. Lily would either stretch out on the grass before them, or sometimes sit on Severus’ opposite side.

“You don’t understand.” Hermione’s voice raised an octave. “I haven’t had a proper indication of how my magical education is proceeding in two years.” Her heart was pounding, whether from anxiety or the vow, she wasn’t sure.

“How do you not know?” Lily asked with a chuckle. “You’re passing, obviously. But are your parents not showing you your marks, or something?”

Hermione paled, the reminder of her parents causing her stomach to turn and a lump to form in her throat. It wasn’t that she hadn’t thought about them, but as time in this era had continued on, she readjusted. She knew they were alive, well, getting on with life. But the realization that she wouldn’t
share exam results with them again, that they last moment of academic accomplishment they got to celebrate was the end of her first year of Hogwarts.

“Her accident, Lily.” Severus said quietly, and Hermione was grateful he gave the reminder so she wouldn’t have to. It gave her time to ease the lump in her throat, and settle her stomach.

“Oh.” Lily blushed and bit her lip. “Right, sorry.” And then added in confusion, “But that was only last year. What about the year before?”

Hermione contemplated how to answer, knowing that when the time came Severus would know the truth even if she couldn’t say it now. “Reptile problem.” She said with a shrug. “Sort of … prevented the results from being released that year.”

“Well it couldn’t have prevented it for everyone. What about O.W.L.s. or N.E.W.T.s?” Lily demanded, “I mean, you need those, don’t you? To go on to do stuff in the Wizarding world?”

“They are important,” Severus replied. “I’m sure there were exceptions made.”

“Probably right. Oh! There’s Marlene, I wanted to ask her something about Divination,” And with that, Lily took off.

Whether he realized it or not, Severus let out a sigh that sounded dangerously like relief near the same time Hermione had. Lily had been around them more and more as of late, and while both loved her company, the loom of pending exams, and her more carefree nature of studying had grated on both of their nerves.

Hermione had expected Severus to pull his book back on his lap once their friend had taken off to talk Marlene’s ear off, but he didn’t move. What was more, Hermione could feel his eyes on her as though he were trying to read her mind.

“I won’t faint,” She said with as much mirth as she could muster. “Honestly, I get like this all the time when it comes to exams. I’m a wreck. When we’re done, I’ll have a lie-in, and you will find no book in my presence that isn’t for leisure.” She attempted a smile as she looked at him, but noticed his narrowed eyes, and curious but tentative expression. “What?” She whispered, the smile fading.

He tilted his head, eyes shifting to look to the lake while his body remained turned toward her.

“I have noticed,” He said after a pause, bending one knee and resting his elbow against it. “Since our acquaintance that there are certain behaviors of yours that is … off.”

“Oh?” She breathed, mouth going dry. Hermione attempted to clear her throat, but her voice still barely sounded over a whisper. “Like what?”

Severus seemed to debate answering, tapping his finger in the air by his leg. “You’re muggleborn.” He stated, making no mistake that he wasn’t speculating.

“Your clothes.” He started. “When my house mates began to wonder about that, I pointed out that you lived in the Americas. One of the reasons so many pure bloods stay clear of there is their living among the muggles in plain sight, at least in the more metropolitan areas. There is a magical community, of course, but the witches and wizards dress as the muggles do. There are also your turn of phrases: ‘my god’, not Merlin as most pure bloods would. Your ‘magical education’, where as even a half-blood would be more likely to simply say ‘education’, myself included.”
“So my clothes and the way I speak led you to that conclusion?” Hermione smirked.

Severus did not. In fact, he suddenly looked more nervous than he’d been before. “You mentioned, back in September, that your parents … with your teeth. I’d found that odd, as a magical parent wouldn’t think twice of letting their child change something so mundane. Also the way you speak of your … accident. You are ‘essentially’ orphaned, and placed with a magical family. You never once mentioned your parents are dead, merely that you lost them. Which makes me believe the accident was magical, it involved only you, and this nonsense of you in Diagon Alley is a cover. I’d guess an accidental obliviation, but it could be something more simple or far worse. Either way … your parents are alive, and muggle.”

Hermione stared at him, heart hammering for a reason she was sure wasn’t the vow. Severus Snape had become an important part of her life in the last nine months. From the younger version of her snarky, mean spirited Potions Professor, to snarky acquaintance, to one of her dearest friends. Her identity, as well as her proper era, were her only secrets, and only Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall knew the truth.

And here Severus had figured one out by simple observation and logic. She could deny it, lie, say she was half blood and raised more muggle. She could go with his reasoning that the American Wizarding Society were more like Muggles in appearance than the British were. She could reason that her turn of phrase were also a result of it. Or she could trust him, and let him know he was right, if she could.

Slowly, conscious of every breath and beat of her heart, she nodded.

Severus took in a deep breath and turned toward the lake. He stared at it unseeing, and Hermione’s heart dropped in her stomach.

“And now you hate me.” She said quietly.

“No,” Severus whipped his head back around, strands of hair catching the corner of his mouth as dark, cold eyes bore into hers. They weren’t cruel, those eyes. Cold they may be, the fury that tainted them was not meant for her. The desperation, however, was. “Don’t ever think I would hate you over your heritage.” He said softly, a tone that would be a warning in later years for those in the wrong to proceed with caution. “I don’t hate you.” He reiterated. “But those of my house….”

“There is a reason,” Hermione said softly, more quiet than even Severus had spoken, “Why I have never corrected anyones assumptions. I know how dangerous it is to be muggleborn. I was warned, though I already had an idea from personal experience in the past. Believe me, Severus, I don’t want the truth to get out. I’m not ashamed of who I am or where I came from, but ….”

“I understand.” He nodded. “Having even half a muggle heritage has a stigma among Slytherin. And, as much as I dislike the notion, having you as a friend has risen my worth in their mind. Granger is a very old name, and rare to hear these days, but still respected. Now that my social circles expand beyond a ….”

“Mudblood.” Hermione offered, disliking the word on her tongue as much as Severus seemed to.

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Well.”

“Indeed.”

“So it’s settled. You know the truth of my blood status, and nothing changes.” She said with a nod,
though she was still mentally crossing her finger and toes that he would agree.

Severus smirked. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” he drawled. “Because, you see, now I feel as though I have an advantage. Not on you, but dunderheads who believe themselves superior, that all purebloods are superior. It was mildly amusing before when I was making the highest grade in Slytherin house for our year. To know the truth of the most intelligent witch in Gryffindor.”

Hermione chuckled, bumping him with her shoulder. “I was the top in all the year last three years.” She said.

“You won’t be here.”

“No?”

“No.”

“There’s a Ravenclaw I can strive to out do, then?”

“Several, I’m sure, but I have a feeling they aren’t the one holding the highest marks.”

“I doubt anyone in Slytherin is, either.”

“Witch.”

“Git.”

They fell silent with similar smiles of amusement, and Hermione was pleased and baffled by just how much she enjoyed their petty bickering. How much she simply liked being in Severus Snape’s presence. How had she put up with all the quidditch talk, and the endless procrastination? How had she even been able to function without a friend like Severus in her life? A tiny bit of guilt wiggled its way in, but she would not allow it to take root. Harry and Ron were great friends, at least when they wanted to be, but she would never be able to have a relationship with them as equals again.

Severus pulled the book he had been reading before toward him, using his propped up knee as book stand. And Hermione, feeling closer to him than she ever thought she could be, shifted to lay on the grass with her head on his leg. He stiffened at the contact, but Hermione ignored him. She grabbed her text book and refocused on studying her Charms text.

“Do you find Charms that difficult? Is the material more advanced than you expected?” He teased, repeating the same words he’d said on the train all those months ago.

“Of course, it’s why I’m resting my head against you. I intend to absorb your charms knowledge through contact.”

“From my lap? I don’t believe the charms I know involving that area of the body will be on the exam, though it may make for some interesting reading for Flitwick.”

Hermione snorted a giggle, and then laughed when she noticed Severus blushing while wearing a smug grin.

That was how Lily found them. And while Hermione couldn’t properly see the ginger girl through watery eyes, she got the impression that Lily did not find it at all amusing.
July 2nd, 1975

H,

I apologize for not sending word sooner. I will be another week longer than expected arriving. Tobias has found himself in prison, lucky me, and has been there since May. He will continue to be there for another week, which means I shall have until the 5th free of him.

While I was eager to take up your offer of retreat, I feel as though I should spend sometime with my mother. It is rare to find her in such good humor, and she is showing an interest in my life for the time being.

Forgive me,

-S.Snape.

July 3rd, 1975

Hermione had been seriously questioning her sanity when she asked Delia and Bob if they would mind terribly if she took the Knight Bus to see Severus and return with him. She hadn’t mentioned that he had no idea she would be leaving to see him, or that she only knew of where he lived because of the return on the muggle post she received from him. And when they agreed, believing it would be a good idea (with plenty annoying smirks and a not-so-well-hidden bump of the elbows), she had thought herself a bit barmy for boarding the mode of transportation that Harry James Potter, boy who would dangle from a broom by his leg, called a bit rough.

And now that she stood on Spinners End, facing the row of brick, terrace houses that were stained with soot and looked like they had seen far better days, Hermione had wondered what exactly had happened to her mind to bring her there.

Thankful that the rain of Scotland hadn’t made its way to Cokeworth (though maybe it would have dulled the smell of the river), she made her way to the house that matched the post address knowing that at least she wasn’t going to be kept outside in the rain. She gripped the bag Delia had loaned her, one with an extension charm that allowed her to carry a couple pairs of clothes and basic toiletries.

She glanced around as she approached the door, noting that though she heard children in the streets and the sound of a radio, no one was in sight. She knocked, and heard nothing from the inside. It hadn’t stopped her from taking a step back, nor had it stopped her heart from pounding as though she were doing something monumentally terrifying instead of merely visiting a friend.

She was about to either knock again or turn and run when the door cracked open, and a pair of black
eyes peeked out at her.

“Can I help you?” A soft-spoken, feminine voice asked.

Hermione’s lips twitched in an effort to smile, and she wrung her fingers. “I’m actually here to see Severus. I hadn’t told him I was coming, though.”

The woman on the other side of the door frowned. “You’re here … to see Severus?”

“I’m a friend,” She said with a nod.

The door opened a bit more, and the lean woman with dark hair and pale skin looked Hermione over. She didn’t want to admit it, but the woman sort of remind her of Neville’s Boggart, just with a smaller nose and not as outrageously dressed.

“Hermione?” Severus’ confused tone came from behind her, and she turned to greet him.

Words died on her tongue just as her lips parted.

He was … nothing like she expected him to look like outside of school. Lily had confessed late one night, when it was just the two of them, that she had met Severus when he was wearing his mother’s blouse, and what might have been a man’s suit jacket. He had explained his looks by stating that Wizards wore robes, and he was a wizard. And while she hadn’t expected a fifteen year old Severus to dress the way he had when he was nine, she wasn’t quite expecting something so blatantly muggle.

He was in a worn looking black t-shirt that was a bit too loose on his thin frame, and his jeans were ripped at the knees. His hair was tied back and resting against his neck, a lank oiliness to it that hadn’t quite been so bad at school. Clutched in his arm was a paper bag of groceries, his grip growing tighter the longer she stared. His surprise had also faded off, though it didn’t look as though he was about to welcome her.

“Hi,” She said shyly. “Umm, well, when I got your letter I thought … well, now that I’m here I’m not quite sure what I was thinking.”

“Obviously,” He sneered.

“Is this the friend you’re going to be spending the summer with?” Mrs Snape asked.

“I was, yes.” Severus ground out.

“Well allow me to get to know her.” She said, and Hermione heard the door creak behind her. She turned, and while Mrs Snape was not smiling, there was a kindness and welcome to her eyes and posture that Hermione wanted to give in to.

“I don’t want to impose,” Hermione said.

“Too late for that,” Severus said, pushing past her and heading to where the kitchen must have been.

Mrs Snape made no apologies for her son, and Hermione was kind of grateful that she hadn’t. She merely gave the matriarch a nervous smile before entering the small house.

She hadn’t been sure what to expect when she came in. The house was well organized and clutter free, but there was dust coating nearly every flat surface, and the print of the threadbare sofa looked as though it had been bleached too often. It was small, and not welcoming, but it didn’t feel terribly
cramped. There was a television, and electric lights, but there was also the slightest feel of magic in
the air.

Mrs Snape gestured for Hermione to take a seat on the sofa, and then proceeded to take the arm
chair.

“So,” She said simply. “Severus has told me your name, and that is about all.”

“Oh, well, if I’m to be honest I’m surprised he told you that much.” Hermione replied, and she heard
his snort from off to the side.

Mrs Snape arched an eyebrow. “I was lead to believe by that simple bit of information that you were
close to him.”

“Umm, well, uh, we are friends. I think of him as a friend. A dear friend. One of the very few I have
here. I had an accident, you see, and it left me all alone without anyone except the people that took
me in. And I was never one to get along with others of my peer group so even at Hogwarts I hadn’t
had anyone. I met Severus on the train with Lily and while we weren’t friends right away I would
like to think that we grew closer since the term began.”

“Breathe, Granger.” Severus taunted, and she flicked her eyes to see him leaning in the doorway of
the kitchen where it connected to the living room, his arms crossed against his chest.

“Sorry,” She said, and he rolled his eyes.

“Gryffindor, isn’t she.” His mother said. He hummed in agreement. Mrs Snape’s lips twitched
slightly. “Explains her coming here uninvited. With an overnight bag, at that.” As Hermione blushed,
Mrs Snape looked over her shoulder at her son, “A ‘friend’ is it?”

Severus glared, “Don’t.” He said simply.

“I won’t.” She said, her face lighting with thought. “Had you seen that girl you went to muggle
school with? Diane, I think her name was. Due in a couple months, I think. A couple of the boys in
the neighborhood are waiting to see what it looks like.”

“Enough.” Severus said, his cold black eyes fixed on his mother.

“It’s not like I’m implying it was you. She’s due in October, you were in school when she
conceived.” Mrs Snape shifted and straightened in her chair then turned to Hermione. She looked her
over with a scrutiny that reminded Hermione far too much of the observant eye of Professor Snape.
“You’re not one for boys, at least not worrying about gaining their attention. And if Severus calls
you friend, you must be bookish. It’s the only way I can conceive of him crossing house lines. Well,
except for that other girl, the one I had seen him in the park with.”

“Umm, yes. I’m … bookish.” Hermione replied, her cheeks as red as her house color. She turned to
Severus for help, but he merely smiled smugly.

This is what happens when you show up unannounced, she could hear his voice in her head saying.

“What are your subjects of preference?” Mrs Snape asked.

“Transfiguration, Charms, Arithmancy.” Hermione replied, chewing her lip between names.

“Not Potions?” Mrs Snape arched a brow.
Hermione swallowed. “Well, I, umm, I enjoy the competency of my lab partner, but I ... I think I preferred ... the professor I had before.” She felt no affects of the vow as she replied, which was probably fine since it was unlikely Severus would take that as any sort of compliment even when he would eventual begin to teach her in fifteen years.

“Slughorn was always a good man but too interested in ‘collecting’ people.” Mrs Snape nodded as if she approved of Hermione’s thought. She then narrowed her eyes as if something had occurred to her. “Previous professor? You didn’t always attend Hogwarts, then?”

Hermione noticed Severus straighten out of the corner of her eye. “No,” She replied simply.

“I would wager, perhaps, Beauxbatons?”

“Ilvermorny.” Hermione’s voice cracked.

“Then why ...?”

“That’s enough.” Severus cut in, striding into the room. He looked to Hermione. “If you’re going to stay here, then we should figure out some sort of sleeping arrangement.”

Mrs Snape’s lips twitched. “I trust that you’ll be able to share a room without issue?”

Severus frowned, glancing at Hermione uncertainly.

“I have no problem sleeping on the floor.” Hermione offered quickly, wanting to ensure Severus knew she had, in no way, expected him to be put out.

Mrs Snape pulled out a wand from her sleeve. “Transfiguration was never my favorite subject, but I am certain Severus will not be needing his desk chair for the next couple days.” She looked to her son who appeared unsure. “He won’t be around to know it happened. And be thankful, you can only imagine what he might say if he knew you had a girl in your room.” And with that, Mrs Snape headed up the stairs.

Severus watched her with a sigh. “Come on,” He said, gesturing toward the door. “We’re leaving,” Severus called up the stairs as they passed.

“Good.” Mrs Snape called back, and while he didn’t smile physically there was one glinting in his eyes.

Severus led her out of the house and around the back, waving her along without looking over his shoulder before stuffing both hands in his pockets and walked with purpose down the street. Hermione jogged to keep up, and was thankful she had when they passed a group of rough looking boys who nodded to Severus as they passed.

He led her clear of the houses to a park where there were no children playing. Hermione eyed the swing set that Severus went to and understood why. There was more rust than paint, and the chains creaked horribly as he sat on the rubber seat that looked ready to disintegrate. She approached it with caution, choosing to sit on her hands instead of gripping the chains.

She looked out at the rest of the equipment, noting that it was all in a state that any proper committee would deem unsafe.

“You haven’t said a word.” Severus noted after several minutes. “Regret slumming it in the North?”

“I live in Scotland, I’m quite a bit farther North than you are.” She quipped back, watching a plastic
“You didn’t always. And I am willing to bet you are just eager to run back there now that you’ve seen the in between.” He sneered.

“Only because it’s quite clear you don’t want me here.” She replied, pulling her hands out from beneath her and twisting her fingers. “I am sorry. I got a bit excited about the prospect of actually spending the summer with a friend.” At this, Severus scoffed. “Mock me all you want, but I had never … never got to spend time with any of my magical friends over the summers. And I never had muggle friends.” She smiled self-deprecatingly. “I was the weird girl who liked books and whose hair did strange things when she got angry. No one spoke to me, either because they had nothing in common with me or were afraid of me. I spent my summers in the library around the corner from where my parents worked. I spent hours in the dusty research room with ol’ Mrs Noble.”

Severus didn’t say anything, and Hermione felt worse.

“I should go,” She said, getting to her feet.

Severus reached out and seized her wrist, his grip strong but not painful. He looked at her apologetically. “Where would you go?”

“I could stay at the leaky until you were ready to come.” She shrugged.

“Don’t waste your galleons,” He sighed, letting go of her wrist. Hermione hesitated, then cautiously sat back down. “Lily lives over that way,” He indicated across the park. “I wouldn’t recommend going there, though. Her sister will call you names and throw tantrums the whole time. At least the worst my mother will do is interrogate you.”

Hermione grinned at that. “I think I like her, actually.”

“Of course you do.” He rolled his eyes.

“You don’t like her, yet you were voluntarily spending more time with her?”

“I never said I didn’t like her.” He smirked for a moment before it faded. “I wanted to make sure she was alright.” He said, turning and looking Hermione in the eye. “With Tobias locked away, I wanted to make sure she wasn’t using the money she was making to work towards his bail, or his booze.”

“She doesn’t strike me as the kind of woman who would.”

“She does what needs to be done to keep him from turning physical. They hate one another, my mother for his drinking, his womanizing, his inability to support us. He her for her magic. Oh, he likes it enough when it can heat the water in the bath so he doesn’t need to pay for hot water. Or when she used a confundus to get the contractor to include our house on the renovation list so we didn’t have an outhouse anymore. But he doesn’t like that it won’t conjure money or liquor, and he certainly didn’t like that it was passed down through me.”

“Oh.” Hermione said to fill the silence.

“I scare the shit out of him, but he also knows that I can’t do magic outside of school. When it was accidental, before the trace started, he couldn’t come near me for fear of what happened the first time he tried to beat me ….”

“Severus.” Hermione said quietly.
“You can imagine why I wouldn’t want you here.”

“I didn’t think ….”

“No, you didn’t.” He snapped, turning cold eyes on her for a moment before looking away.

“You know I don’t think less of you?” She asked when the silence passed. He gave her a suspicious glance. “I can’t possibly think less of you than I already do.” She added, and he snorted.

“Don’t hurt yourself, it’s not your nature to be sarcastic.”

“And what makes you think I was trying to be sarcastic in the first place?” She asked, lips curling at the sparkle of humor in his eyes.

They were so expressive, and she wondered how she hadn’t really noticed it before. Perhaps he was better at hiding his emotions as an adult.

*Or maybe it had become habit, with you knowing his eyes were the real indicator of how he feels.*

The thought of still being Severus Snape’s friend in fifteen years gave Hermione a sort of glee she didn’t want to examine too closely. She did like this him, and she wasn’t afraid to admit it, but part of her wondered if maybe she should be.

“Sev!” Lily’s voice came from the direction he’d pointed out earlier. Hermione peeked behind him, seeing their friend dashing toward them in a blue summer dress that made Hermione’s denims and blouse appear positively frumpy. “I’ve been trying to catch you here for days, but it seems you’re never … around….” Lily slowed as she approached, her smile fading as she looked to Hermione.
Chapter 6

May 30th, 1993

---------S---------

She was the last one to have the Restorative Draught administered, and so lingered over her as the rest of the victims began to stir. He ignored the blubbering from the bed in which Argus clutched his cat and wept, the students all rising slowly, blinking in confusion. Creevy had drawn his attention for a moment because of his exclamation at his missing camera, but Severus promptly turned away with an eyeroll.

He watched as limbs grew limp, and unseeing brown eyes regained focus. His son had those eyes, and that’s what was the most annoying thing about young Miss Granger: Severus was able to see his own children in her, because she would eventually become his Hermione. But unlike seeing young James through Harry, he couldn’t see his wife through this annoying little chit. Not even the when he’d first met her had his Hermione been as irksome as this girl could be.

But when those brown eyes that were so much like Leo’s peered up at him, the nose of his daughter just beneath, he couldn’t help but give the slightest quirk of a smile.

“Welcome back, Miss Granger.” He’d whispered.

“Thank you, sir.” She mumbled back quietly.

He nodded, and stepped away.

It was only when he was out in the corridor that he could truly allow how exhausted he was sweep over him, the longest forty-eight hours of his life having fatigued him further than anything he could remember.

When Pomona announced the mandrakes were ready, he’d started the base he would need for the restorative draught. When that had been prepared, he’d readied himself to venture out of his lab to fetch the vital ingredient. Before he could leave the dungeons, Minerva demanded all students return to their dorms, and teachers to meet in the staff room.

“It has happened,” Minerva said to them, her voice shaky and her gaze averted. “A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself. The Heir of Slytherin left another message: Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber forever.”

Severus’ heart nearly stopped, and no one said a word. There were gasps, and squeals of panic, of course, but no one asked the question he was sure everyone wanted to know the answer to.

“Who?” He asked softly, gripping the back of a chair. When Minerva didn’t answer right away, his stomach churned. “Who was taken, Minerva.” His knuckles turned white as he demanded his knees not to give out.

“Not Rory,” She assured him at once. “Ginny Weasley.”
The relief was not as palatable as he’d have liked. His daughter had liked the girl, and if he were honest, she was also one of the Weasley children he actually liked as well. Percy was the terrible combination of Slytherin ambition and Gryffindor brashness, and Charles and Ronald were a bit too similar in their academic mindsets. While the twins were not scholars, they were clever and creative. They and the eldest, William, had been among his favorites. Ginevra and the twins had the added bonus of being kind to his daughter, and Snape had never been able to overlook kindness.

He’d had too little of it before he’d met his wife.

It was then that the pompous Lockhart came swaggering in.

*Perhaps this is how we lose this Defense teacher,* Severus had thought to himself without guilt. The man had vexed him from the moment he joined the staff. He’d had the job Severus had been trying to convince Dumbledore to allow him a go at for just one year since the fall of the Dark Lord. There had been plenty of professors who stepped down and not killed or wounded. But no, Dumbledore had gone through the list of experienced, knowledgeable applicants a few years back and still insisted that Severus should not step a toe away from the potions classroom. And the result was this: A pretty face who thought it was an *honor* to be the youngest professor on staff, who believed the young girls fancying him was something to brag about.

And for the love of Merlin, Nimue, and Salazaar, if he had a Galleon for each time Lockhart flirted or blatantly hit on Hermione when she happened to be visiting, they could afford to expand their personal library not just space but books as well. Thank who ever was listening that *his* Hermione had thought Lockhart an idiot. He worried when he’d noticed the ridiculous hearts and “Hermione Lockhart” written in the margins of practice Essays Miss Granger would write in study hall.

Severus would have outright murdered the idiot if he’d seen “Aurora Lockhart” written anywhere in his daughter’s neat script.

And he was an idiot, if the tales Potter told of what happened in the chambers were true. The man didn’t know his own name when they emerged. All the better.

But it was all over now, and Severus was finally able to slink off to his chambers to get some well deserved rest. A nagging, bossy little voice in his head insisted that he should thank Potter for ridding them of the Basilisk, but he ignored it. He’d not thank Potter, but give Dumbledore a good tongue lashing when he saw him again. Lucius removing him as headmaster was one of the only smart things the blonde man had done. Even if it were only temporary.

His wards recognizing him, Severus slipped through his door and into his sitting room.

It was early, or late, he wasn’t sure anymore. But when he’d seen the top of a head bearing curly, brown hair, he sighed with relief. Moving to the sofa where his wife was perched, he sat beside her heavily. She’d been reading, of course, and didn’t look up at him when he joined her.

“Where’s Leo?” Normally if their son was not in the rooms, he would be with Hagrid. But with the half-giant in Azkaban, he wasn’t sure ….

“Spending time with his grandmother. She dropped by, unexpectedly.” Hermione replied, turning a page. “She also mentioned that he’s much less cuddly at seven, and she’s not getting any younger. She’d hate to only have teenagers to visit, seeing as they are quite obnoxious at that age. I believe she was hinting she wants us to have another.”

“Not tonight, too bloody exhausted.” He said as he adjusted to lay his head on Hermione’s lap, closing his eyes. She giggled and ran her fingers through his hair. Often, he’d wondered if it ever
bothered her that it was nearly always greasy with him constantly around cauldrons. But she’d never said anything, and he knew she never would. So he kept silent, allowing her touch to graze along his sculpt in long, relaxing strokes.

“Not ever, as far as I’m concerned.” Hermione sighed, and Severus wasn’t surprised to hear the pain in her voice. “It was … too much, the years between Rory and Leo. Too much … that I don’t really want to experience again.”

He reached around and captured her hand, bringing her palm to his lips to place a kiss before setting her free. “Two is fine.” He said. “Two is more than we’d had hoped for, and so two it will be. And with all that has happened this year, two in Hogwarts at once will likely shave decades off my life when the time comes, having another one pass these halls with all that could happen will send me to an early grave.”

“Next year … well, there’s no Baslisk.” Hermione said tentatively. Severus groaned. “One more year, Love. One more year, and I will be as in the dark about it all as you are.”

“I know you meant that as a comfort, but it’s not.” He replied.

“Sorry.” She mumbled.

“Of course you are.” He grinned. “At least tell me this, if you can without dropping dead. Will next year’s defense against the dark arts professor be at least competent.”

He waited, not enjoying the silence that followed, peeking one eye open only enough to see Hermione through his lashes, he noted her smirk.

“You’ll like them more than you’re expecting to.” Was all she said, either in an effort to be cryptic on purpose or because she was oath bound.

She continued to caress his hair, and he relaxed once more before an irritation on his left arm distracted him. He stiffened, then reached for his sleeve, unfastened the plethora of buttons, and pushed it up to bare the dark mark.

Hermione stilled.

“It was darker earlier.” He said absently, running his finger along the snake. “I noticed as I was brewing, and believed it had been a trick of the light at first.”

“Darker.” Hermione repeated. “But that would mean ….”

“The Dark Lord was on the verge of returning, yes.” He confirmed their fears. “It was only a few shades darker than it is now, like a worn down muggle tattoo, but it was returning, He was returning.”

He shifted his eyes to his wife and noted her brow furrowed in concentration. So this wasn’t something that stuck out as a big event, she had to dig deep for the answer.

“I very, quite vaguely remember Harry mentioning the diary belonging to Tom Riddle, and … and that he was using Ginny to return to the land of the living. But he said he was a young man, not much older than a seventh year.” She turned to him. “He was handsome, I recall, but certainly didn’t look quite that youthful.”

Severus shook his head and frowned as well. A young, seventh year Tom Riddle, not necessarily Voldemort, had been the man Potter had faced in the chambers. That had seemed strange. And of
course, Hermione had been busy with motherhood and studies in the last year before the Dark Lord fell. He’d kept her away when he noted the man becoming more manic, not daring to put she or Aurora anywhere near him. Even Narcissa had quietly disappeared shortly after Draco’s birth, and hadn’t really returned to the social circles until after the Dark Lord’s fall. Voldemort had been changing slowly over the years, but the madness of the blasted prophecy drove him further. His eyes dark brown eyes had changed colors, became burgundy followed by deep red. They’d been narrower, too. His magic was shifting, something within him changed beyond repair. He had doubted the man who, by the time he met his end, was bald with snake like eyes, his skin growing paler, could be deem handsome.

Severus was certain he’d even win a beauty contest over that of Lord Voldemort in those last days.

“I don’t understand how he could come back. Or how he could have done it from a diary?” Hermione had said as she resumed her stroking of his hair.

Severus snorted, “I’m sure you’ll figure it out, my dear.” He said, closing his eyes again. “But I believe Rory needs to have a better understanding of things.”

“Right.” Hermione agreed. “But it can wait, can’t it? At least until summer? My innocence died my first year at Hogwarts, I would like our daughter to live in ignorance at least a little longer.”

“I believe that would be agreeable.” Severus conceded, wanting to hold on to the little girl his daughter had been for so long just a little longer himself. But he knew she was growing up, and doing so in a time that was, perhaps, far more dangerous than the one he had.

But the mark had faded, Potter had won the day, and his family was safe. Danger was gone for time being, and with that thought, Severus drifted to sleep.

----------H----------

July 3rd, 1975

Hermione grinned and gave a little wave to Lily, “Hello,” She said. She had just been feeling as though she finally hadn’t cocked things up with Severus, and now she had that same, unwelcome vibe coming from her other friend.

“Hermione,” Lily said, shaking her head a slight bit before plastering on a grin. Hermione knew that grin, she’d seen it often and usually directed at Sirius in the common room. “What are you doing here?”

“She invited herself.” Severus answered, walking himself backward on the swing and using the seat pulled taught by the chains as a leaning post. He crossed his arms, and peered at Hermione with mirth in his eyes. “Apparently she was just too eager to see me.”

“Was she.” Lily nearly sing sioned her condescension. “Well, that’s quite sweet. It’s only been a week, and September is a long way away.”

“September?” Hermione looked to Severus, seeing the mirth was gone and was replaced by the vacant stare of being caught in a lie.
“Well, I suppose you might have managed to run into us at Diagon Alley. We’ve gone the last couple years to get our school supplies, haven’t Sev?”

Severus kicked the ground with his toe. “I imagine we still may, should you inform us ahead of time when you’ll be going. Though, I imagine we won’t need to stop to Slugs and Jiggers.”

“I suppose that depends on if you’re willing to muck about in the greenhouses and garden. Bob has two set aside for the more dangerous plants, so you wouldn’t have to worry about a mandrake or venomous tentacula just to get your potions ingredients.” Hermione had said as casually as Severus was attempting to be.

She was quite certain that Lily had been around when Hermione had mentioned to Severus about spending the summer with her. More so, she was fairly certain that Lily had heard Severus say he’d merely spend a couple days at home to ditch what he didn’t need and acquire some muggle clothing before catching the knight bus.

Severus shrugged a shoulder, “I’d be willing to work daily spreading fertilizer if it meant quality potions ingredients.”

“Wait,” Lily said, lifting her hands with palms toward them. “You make it sound as if you were intending to go stay with Hermione.”

“Because I was. Am.” Severus amended. “The invitation was extended, and I accepted. You know what it’s like here, Lily. You couldn’t have possibly imagined I would have stayed when given another option.”

“But what about me?” Lily asked petulantly. “Stuck with Tuney all day, every day, rambling on about what a freak I am, and how she goes to a normal school.”

“You have other friends, which is something I can’t properly say.” Severus replied calmly. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Lily’s eyes turned cold. “And so what do you call those you hang around with from your house, Sev? Avery and Mulciber?”

“Acquaintances,” Severus sneered. “And as I’ve said before, Lily, time and time again: if I don’t make nice with those in my own house, I wouldn’t be safe anywhere.”

“They say and do awful things, Sev. To me, to other muggleborns, to anyone they don’t feel live up to their ideals.”

“And what of Sirius?” Hermione interrupted, causing both of her friends to look at her in confusion. “What of James? How are they different? They do the same things to those in the other houses. Anyone who doesn’t have the ‘Gryffindor Ideals’. They take house rivalry to an entirely different level, especially with Severus.”

“It’s not like he doesn’t fight back.” Lily protested.

“I would be surprised if he didn’t.” Hermione retorted. “Hell, look at you getting bent out of shape over who Severus has no choice but to live with. I highly doubt he has the same feelings toward Muggleborns as they do, given who he spends his time with, but that doesn’t mean he can openly contradict those who think you less.”

“But he should.” Lily stomped her foot.
“Why? So he has to sleep with one eye open at all times?”

“How did we get from my staying with Hermione for the summer to this?” Severus grit out.

“Because Lily felt as though you were abandoning her before I came along.” Hermione replied, standing from the seat of her swing and walking a few paces away before turning toward Lily. The hurt in her green eyes instantly pierced Hermione with guilt, and she glanced at Severus to see he seemed uncertain. A little niggle of something told her not to be surprised. Lily was beautiful, and smart, and wanted his attention. And it wasn’t all that long ago that he’d hoped she would, so why shouldn’t he seem uncertain about leaving her?

With a sigh, Hermione looked to the ground. “And probably thinks the same thing now. I keep throwing things out of balance.” She said. “You two have a tradition, it seems, and I’ve disrupted it.” She peeked toward Severus, seeing his wide, black eyes staring at her in disbelief. “I’ll go back to your house, grab my bag, apologize profusely to your mother, and head home. Or at least to the leaky and then home. If you wish to stay, don’t feel like you have to take me up on the offer. The invitation stands, of course, but I don’t … I don’t want to ruin your friendship with each other.” She turned, heading back in the direction Severus had led her from.

She should have known, deep down, that this wouldn’t be different. She knew full well that Harry spent at least half his summers with Ron, and that she was essentially a third wheel. She should count her luck that she even had friends in this era when it was so difficult to make the few she had before.

“How? So he has to sleep with one eye open at all times?”

“How did we get from my staying with Hermione for the summer to this?” Severus grit out.

“Because Lily felt as though you were abandoning her before I came along.” Hermione replied, standing from the seat of her swing and walking a few paces away before turning toward Lily. The hurt in her green eyes instantly pierced Hermione with guilt, and she glanced at Severus to see he seemed uncertain. A little niggle of something told her not to be surprised. Lily was beautiful, and smart, and wanted his attention. And it wasn’t all that long ago that he’d hoped she would, so why shouldn’t he seem uncertain about leaving her?

With a sigh, Hermione looked to the ground. “And probably thinks the same thing now. I keep throwing things out of balance.” She said. “You two have a tradition, it seems, and I’ve disrupted it.” She peeked toward Severus, seeing his wide, black eyes staring at her in disbelief. “I’ll go back to your house, grab my bag, apologize profusely to your mother, and head home. Or at least to the leaky and then home. If you wish to stay, don’t feel like you have to take me up on the offer. The invitation stands, of course, but I don’t … I don’t want to ruin your friendship with each other.” She turned, heading back in the direction Severus had led her from.

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“Hermione.” Severus hadn’t had to shout, and it startled her when his hand came down on her shoulder. She half turned. “You can’t bloody well come all the way over here, expect me to come back with you, and honestly believe I would drop you because Lily is throwing a tantrum?”

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed as she struggled to understand.

“Blimey you can be incredibly stupid for a such a brilliant witch.” He mumbled, but not quietly enough to go unnoticed by said witch, and she scowled at him. “Lily and I spent summers together before Hogwarts, but because she’s away most of the year, she spends more time with her muggle friends than with me. She may have been trying to catch me for days, but it’s likely that wouldn’t have lasted long. We would have gone to Diagon Alley together, yes, but mostly because her parents felt bad that my mother and I had no way into town.”

“I should go apologize for leaving.” Hermione made an attempt to move toward the playground only to have Severus’ hand keep her firmly in place.

“I think not.” He said. “For one, the moment I turned to head after you, Lily growled and likely stormed back home. Another thing, you have done nothing that requires apologies.” Here he hesitated. “Lily and I have not been as close as we were before Hogwarts. Think to how often she had simply got up and headed off with her other Gryffindor females.”

She did, and it barely took a second for her to realize Lily stepped away often.

“Come on,” He said, gesturing back to the park. “Ma’s likely to think we’ll be gone a bit longer.”

Hermione gave a nod and followed him back to the park.

To both their surprise, Lily was still there, only now she was on the swing that Hermione had occupied.

“I thought you were going back?” She asked, her voice holding no malice but her eyes were narrowed.
“I went and told her she was being ridiculous.” Severus replied, plopping down next to Lily but facing the opposite direction. “We could arrange a time at the leaky.” He said, turning toward her. “If you still want to get our supplies together, we could arrange it.”

Lily took a deep breath, her gaze shift between Severus and Hermione as if she were weighing her options. “Alright,” She finally agreed. “We can do that.”

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The afternoon spent with Lily was stiff. Hermione still had that third wheel sensation, one she hadn’t really had since before the incident at the Three Broomsticks. But at the Snape residence, with only Mrs Snape and Severus, Hermione felt much more at ease.

Eileen Snape seemed to take a liking to Hermione Granger that the young witch couldn’t quite understand. And Hermione thought the older woman the ideal Slytherin. Eileen wandlessly and wordlessly lit a wood-burning stove after transfiguring an old newspaper into proper fire wood.

“What Tobias doesn’t know,” Severus had commented, a glint of amusement in his eye.

“Tobias hasn’t ever noticed,” Mrs Snape replied.

As she went about preparing potato hash, Hermione pitched in without asking. And in turn (and true motherly fashion) Eileen Snape told tales of Severus’ childhood whether he liked it or not.

“His first incident of accidental magic happened when he was about one, perhaps just before as I vaguely remember it being the holidays. Tobias’ beer kept vanishing on him, winding up on top of the fridge where I often put things I hadn’t wanted Severus to get to.”

Severus’ eyes narrowed, “You had always said it was when I lit the the chair a flame in a temper tantrum.”

“Oh, I’m fairly certain that was your first truly intentional bit of magic.” Mrs Snape replied, a similar smirk on her face to the one Severus often wore when amused.

“Exactly what was so terrible that you lit a chair on fire?” Hermione asked him.

“He wasn’t allowed to climb the bookshelf.” Mrs Snape replied, and Hermione had to bit her lip to stop herself from laughing.

“And what was your first bit of magic, then?” Severus half snapped, his eyes narrowed and his arms crossed firmly over his chest.

“I made my dolls move about while pretending to have a tea party.” She replied. “I was about three, I believe. That was the earliest I can remember, and the only truly unusual thing my parents had witnessed.” Her smile faded. “They were petrified. I remember my mother screaming in bloody terror, and my father pulling me from the room. I didn’t understand. And of course, neither did they.”

The room was quiet but for the sounds of dinner preparation.

“I never understood why the ministry didn’t investigate those small bursts of magic where there would have been none before.” Mrs Snape eventually said. “Life would be easier, I’m sure, if
muggles knew what was going on. But no,” she sliced through a potato with more vigor than she likely intended to, the knife hitting the board with an echo. “The statute of secrecy dictates that no witch or wizard should inform the muggles what they are. You can marry them, build a family, but heaven forbid you reveal that important piece of yourself before it becomes necessary. But perhaps it’s different in the new world?” She turned to Hermione, nostrils flaring and eyes cold, but no menace to her demeanor.

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“Umm, well, uh, it’s a bit worse, actually.” Hermione said. “There is to be absolutely no hint of the wizarding world, they aren’t even allowed to marry muggles, really.”

“Then how did your parents keep you?” Mrs Snape asked.

Hermione opened her mouth to reply before dread overcame her. She glanced to Severus, and he looked truly nervous for the first time since Hermione’s arrival. His stance was slack, and his eyes darted between her and his mother. So Mrs Snape hadn’t known, not before or at least not for certain, that Hermione was a muggleborn.

“Umm,” Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat only to have it rise again. “We’re British.”

Eileen Snape raised a single eyebrow then turned back to the vegetables. “Tell me she hasn’t been passing as a pureblood.”

“We excuse it as the product of a state-side upbringing.” Severus replied causally.

She snorted, “And they buy that?”

Severus shrugged, “Most have no inclination to travel to a world where they would need to dress and act more muggle-like, and therefore have no interest in learning about its ways. And it’s not precisely common for acts of first magic to be a topic of conversation.”

Eileen shook her head. “Over dinner, I will tell you common things most British Pureblood families have or do. While you may get by on the excuse of being raised outside of society, eventually something will come up you wouldn’t have expected.”

“I-I appreciate that, thank you.” Hermione replied with a nod.

“Just don’t wave your hand about if you have questions,” Severus muttered. He caught the potato Hermione threw at his head without even looking. “Gryffindor.” Her grumbled with a smirk.

Hermione merely huffed in response.

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Hermione’s head was positively spinning by the time she went to bed. She lay on the transfigured, slightly narrow bed, studying the cracks in Severus’ ceiling, baffled by all she took in.

House elves were slaves. Willing slaves who would die if they did not serve. And they didn’t get paid! It was horrible, terrible, inhumane.

“They aren’t human,” Eileen had reminded her. “And how would forcing them to change their ways be any different than our going to another country and forcing our ways on the indigenous people?”
“But we have!” Hermione had replied.

“And how well did that turn out?” Severus had replied.

“Slaves demanded rights and wages.” Hermione retorted, “As was their rights as humans!”

“And House Elves have no desire for those rights.” Eileen had replied smoothly.

“But what if they’re abused?” Hermione had asked, vaguely recalling what Harry had said about Dobby. “What if they’re punished for something beyond their control?”

Eileen’s eyes darkened. “Only the worst kinds of wizards would do such a thing. A house elf will punish themselves over lesser transgressions, any wizard who feels the need to further an elf’s pain is detestable, and it’s often frowned on.”

Hermione had to let it go, and while she still wanted to protest for the rights of elves, a swift reminder from the Snipes that no pureblood would ever do such a thing had her kept in check. Etiquette was simpler to follow, and by the end of dinner she had the dining part down. Other things, such as courting rituals, and simple requests to escort another even just to Hogsmeade seemed unlikely to ever be used in her mind, but it was still there. There was also emphasis on lineage and marriage, told to her with a sadness in Eileen’s eye that made Hermione ache for the woman. It was obvious that she broke the “rule”, but Hermione had wondered why, and what it may have cost her.

“You think too loud.” Severus said from the mere couple feet that separated them. “It’s already unbearable in here from the heat, but adding those gears turning is makes it worse.”

“How could you possibly know that I’m thinking?” Hermione asked, turning her head toward his form stretched out on his bed.

“The way you breathe.” Severus replied. “When you’re in deep thought, like when studying or doing homework, or trying something new in class, your breaths come in short spurts. Quick, and slightly nasally as well.”

“You’re one to talk about nasally.” Hermione said with a quirk of her lips. Severus whipped his head around, frowning at her before rolling his eyes. “Ha, bloody, ha. The jokes about that particular appendage do get old.”

“Well, you know what they say about people with big noses.” She said cheekily. Severus lifted his head slightly and gave her that incredulous brow. “They have a fantastically well developed olfactory sense.” She finished with a light giggle. She noted Severus was trying really hard not to smirk, which only made her giggle grow louder.

“That had best not be some strange form of foreplay,” Mrs Snape had shouted from down the hall, which had Hermione laughing harder.

“Exactly what would be doing with the door open?” Severus yelled back.

“Same thing teenagers have been doing in the alcoves of Hogwarts for centuries.” She countered back, the amusement in her voice clear.

Severus shook his head, smiling for a moment before it faded.

“What’s wrong?” Hermione asked.
He shook his head before glancing over his shoulder as if he could see his mother down the hall through the wall. “She’s a different woman when Tobias isn’t around.” He said so softly Hermione had to strain to hear him. She shifted toward him, perching on the edge of her transfigured bed to hear him properly. “This is the mother I remember from my earliest years, before she had to go off and find work. She never smiled, not really, but there was joy in her voice. There was playfulness. At least, when he wasn’t home. We were quiet, otherwise.” Severus looked down at the bed beneath him, a long finger running along the edge of it. “He’s been locked up five or six times, all for assault, but he never learns. He was locked up once for hitting Ma, because one of the blokes down the road noticed the marks he left. Tobias was back in jail a month after getting out for beating the bloke bloody. I imagine, had I not had magic, I’d have ended up like him.”

“I don’t think that.” Hermione said softly, reaching out and stilling his hand. She held it within her own, and met his eyes when they shot up to meet hers. “You’re not a saint, and you never would have been. But you know what your father does isn’t right. Perhaps you’d have found yourself in some sort of trouble, and seeing that you do at Hogwarts it doesn’t seem unlikely. But you’d have gotten away because you’d have been determined to do so.”

He studied her in the moonlight, his black eyes more intense than she’d ever seen them. “You truly believe that, don’t you?” He asked.

“I may not know everything about you, Severus, but I know this: you do what’s right, you do what’s necessary. Even if doesn’t seem like it to everyone, even if there is no thanks to be had, even if it means putting yourself at risk. You may not like doing it, you may be bitter and angry to those you helped, but you do because it’s who you are and you are good.” She smiled at the widening of his eyes. “You would get up to all sorts of mischief, but not get caught or not go too far. And you’d have gotten away because it was the smart thing to do, and I firmly believe you’d take your mother with you.”

“Do you ever shut up?” He asked her softly.

“Only when I sleep.” She replied with a shaky grin. He was still staring at her, and those eyes were still too intense.

“We’ll see about that.” He murmured.

And did he just look at her lips? Of course he had, lips were attached to the mouth, and the mouth was where words came out, and he would quite like the words to stop. Though there were better ways of ceasing chatter than sleep, and where did that thought come from? Hermione was certain she had not really thought it, it simply came up as a logical way of ending a conversation or preventing a new one from starting. Severus Snape did not want to kiss her, and she certainly did not want to kiss him. Probably. Likely.

No, it was simple proximity and chemistry helped along by darkness and having a bed very close to his, and -

“You had best of placed a silencing charm on her or knocked her out.” Eileen’s voice warned.

“Oh would you stop!” Severus yelled back, flopping back on the bed. “Merlin, woman, just because we are teenagers of the opposite sex does not mean we will be snogging or any other such nonsense!” Severus pulled on his hair before shifting slightly away from the edge of the bed closest to Hermione. He seemed to close his eyes then, willing sleep to come or to at least signal the end of the conversation.

He was still holding her hand.
June 2nd, 1993

Aurora sat with her back to a tree beside the lake, a book open in her lap, watching the giant squid playing and splashing about. Exams were canceled, Harry had faced Voldemort again and lived, and now everything was back to normal. Except, it only served to remind her that she didn’t understand something that seemed important. Draco, she noted, had stalked the halls with a sulk. She had sworn she heard her father trying to placate Uncle Lu, though he put up a silencing spell shortly after she entered the room. She knew that there was something going on, and she would demand an explanation.

But not right now. Now, she merely wanted to relax and enjoy the day sitting sleepily in the sunshine.

Gryffindor had celebrated well into the evening, and Aunt Min had seemed to pointedly ignore the reports from Percy Weasley of what was happening and his bids for aid to get it to stop. She didn’t quite understand why he didn’t just go up into his rooms and allow the elder prefects (and for that matter, the younger ones) to supervise if he didn’t want to bother with it all. He even kept looking pointedly at her as if she was somehow going to summon her father to end the nonsense.

As if that was going to happen, the twins had brought butterbeer.

“Hey,” Ginny said as she came around and plopped down beside her. Aurora shifted slightly to give Gin room against the tree, and the ginger smiled shyly and shifted as well. They were quite for a while, both watching the squid, before Ginny spoke again. “I’ve made a bit of a mess of this year.” She said quietly. “I don’t know what was going on with that diary, but it did awful things to my head.”

“I think I know what you mean.” Aurora said, unable to shake how uncomfortable the diary had made her.

“I don’t know if you do, but thanks anyway.” Ginny bent her knees, rested her hands on her lap, and seemed to stare at them. “Can we start again? Being friends, I mean? It’s just, I bollocks ed everything up, and I haven’t really made any proper friends. I know most of our year think of me as nothing more than Ron’s sister. Not even Fred and George’s, or even Percy’s, but Ron’s. Because he’s best friends with Harry.”

“I thought you adored Harry?” Aurora smirked, and when Ginny blushed, she noticed it seemed to be more from embarrassment.

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t believe I thought myself in love with him or some such rot.” Ginny admitted. “He’s just a bloke, an average bloke. I mean, yeah, he saved me, and it was great of him, and I appreciate it, but … he was terrified. I could see it in his eyes when I woke up. And … I don’t know, I just….”

Aurora watched as Ginny struggled, seeming to get more frustrated with things the harder she tried to explain them.
“Well I do understand how it feels to be looked at as something other than yourself. After all, I’m Professor Snape’s daughter. You have to deal with being the best friend’s little sister, I have people asking if I’m half vampire.”

Ginny laughed at that, head thrown back and eyes clenched with mirth. “He’s not as bad as all that. Can be a right git sometimes, no offense, but nothing like Ronniekins makes him out to be.”

“Ronniekins?” Aurora repeated. “Oh, I quite like that.” She grinned. “Do you think I could call him that the next time he looks as though I crawled out of a hole?”

“I don’t get why he hates you so much.” Ginny sighed. “Harry’s nice to you, so’s Hermione.”

Aurora shrugged, “He can’t treat my Dad that way, so he takes it out on me.”

“It’s not right.” Ginny said. Aurora merely shrugged. “You should come to the Burrow this summer. Spend some time there where my Mum would be there to whack him when he’s being a git.”

Aurora snorted. “We could ask my Dad. Maybe he’d let you come by as well…” The words were out of her mouth before she realized what a monumentally stupid idea that would be.

“You mean now?” Ginny asked, a mix of hope and fear in her voice.

Aurora stood, determination and uncertainty warring as she offered a hand to Ginny to help her up but having no clue how her father would react.

Ginny seemed nervous as she got to her feet, but she followed Aurora back inside and down into the dungeons without a word. A couple of Slytherins seemed poised to launch an attack or snarky remark, but then kept their mouths shut when realizing who exactly was encroaching on their territory while wearing Gryffindor colors. Aurora knocked on her father’s office door, and heard him command for them to enter in the cool, controlled tone he reserved for his professorial duties.

She opened the door, and waved Ginny in first.

“Miss Weasley,” He drawled, mouth still open as if to say something else when Aurora stepped in. He seemed surprised, and uncertain, his mouth moving once as if to address her as Miss Snape, and then again as Rory. “Aurora,” he finally settled. “To what do I owe the pleasure? It’s unlike you to come during school hours.”

“I realize it could have waited.” Aurora began nervously, feeling a light prod of her father’s mind against hers. She gave a mental invitation, and he was in and out quickly. “But I was hoping I could maybe visit Ginny at the Burrow over the summer, and maybe have her visit us?”

“A visit to our residence is completely out of the question.” He replied immediately, not dropping the professor tone at all. “Your mother has research taking place in the coming months, and as it stands, your brother and yourself are not to disturb her. Having company would do just that. Perhaps next summer. As for your visit to the Burrow, should Mr and Mrs Weasley believe it acceptable and not at all a burden, you may stay for a couple weeks at the end of term.”

To Ginny, Aurora was sure she merely saw a stiff but civil conversation between father and child that was to the point and blunt. But Aurora could see the fatherly amusement in her Dad’s onyx eyes, the twitch of a smile at the relief that must have been in her own when he came up with the excuse to not return the invitation, and slightly release of the rigid posture he maintained at the school as he slipped subtly into father mode.

“Thank you Professor Snape.” Ginny said nervously. “I’ll, umm, owl my parents right away. Ahh,
meet you in the Great Hall, Rory,” and Ginny took off.

The second the door was closed, Professor Snape laughed. “Well, she certainly is living up the Gryffindor sense of bravery.”

“You aren’t that scary.” Aurora put her hands on her hips as she looked at her father.

“Not to you, perhaps, but I’m not exactly known for kindness. Especially with Gryffindors, and Weasleys in particular have been known to take a lot of my ire.” He smirked. “I am sure Molly and Arthur will welcome you with open arms. Just make sure to behave, write your mother, and return before the 31st of July.”

“Why then?” Aurora frowned.

“I have a feeling it’s when trouble will start up again.”

———H———

July 31st, 1975

Hermione absolutely, positively refused to believe that she was attracted to Severus.

They’d slept in the same room for two nights at Spinners End, though it was only the first night in which they drifted off holding hands. Hermione didn’t put too much stock into it, choosing to believe it was a combination of an overly emotional day (for Severus especially) in which their friendship was put to the test. The hand holding was merely a result of reassurance and drifting off before either of them pulled away. At some point during the night, their hands became untangled, and while they woke up facing one another, they were not touching.

And waking up with a direct view of the other person’s sleep rumpled self meant seeing one another at their absolute worse. Hermione knew she drooled in her sleep, and that her curls were always a right mess upon waking. Severus sweat in his sleep, resulting clumps of greasy hair stuck to his forehead to go along with the pillow tracks on his cheeks. They were a right mess, and yet, Hermione remembered it with a warmth in her heart, and a quiet longing to see it again.

He did look a bit improved once they made it back to Scotland. At least in the mornings and the evenings after a second shower to wash away the work of the day. But for the majority of the hours they spent together, Severus was sweaty, his hair oily and lank even swept and tied back to keep it out of his face. He’d be on the opposite side of a plant box, neither of them able to turn down Bob’s offer of earning money and the plant portion of their potion’s ingredients by harvesting in the greenhouses while he helped the apprentices with the more dangerous or important tasks. And Severus would have dirt on his cheeks and nose, under his nails. There were spots blossoming on his forehead and chin, the red a stark contrast to his pale skin. And he’d be so completely lovely to Hermione that she seriously began to question her sanity.

She knew that wasn’t what was drawing her, at least, but the little things that would make one look past the grease and the pimples. Like his crooked, sly, cocky grin as they traded barbs over the garden beds. The strength of his jaw visible with his hair out of the way. His eyes. So expressive, and magnetic like the hematite they resembled, Hermione could stare into them all day if she thought she could get away with it. And while lean, verging on malnourished, she wasn’t precisely opposed
to him going without a shirt on the worst days. Yes, she could see the shadow of his ribs, or the vertebrae in his back when he bent over, but the shape of his arms hinted at the strength he was building from lifting cauldrons ....

“I’d say you were undressing ‘im with your eyes, but he’s already part way there.” Delia startled Hermione out of her revere, causing her to give a soft yelp that thank God, Merlin, or anyone else who cared that the young men and Bob hadn’t heard.

Severus had volunteered to help he and the apprentices deal with a particularly difficult branch of bowtruckles who didn’t particularly like the idea of their home being moved. It was the hottest day of the summer, cloudless, and humid beyond reason. The men hadn’t taken long to discard their work shirts, and while Bob was still in an undershirt, the apprentices and Severus had gone bare. It was a bit distracting, and it wasn’t until Delia had arrived that Hermione realized she hadn’t finished with the mint she started a half hour ago.

“You know, Elroy and Mathew have asked about you a couple times.” Delia casually mentioned as she handed Hermione an ever-chilled glass containing pumpkin juice. As if they heard her, the two apprentices both glanced toward Hermione. Immediately, what ever conversation they were having with the bowtruckles had suddenly become much more animated. “Don’t suppose either of them have tickled your fancy?”

“None of them have.” Hermione said too quickly, too sharply to be truly believable. “It’s merely biology brought out by hormones that is causing any observation on my part. I’m entering the height of my puberty, have passed the threshold of ‘blossoming’, and terrible skin, and am settling into what I will become as a woman. Hormones are a part of that, and since I find men attractive I observe the opposite sex. Perfectly normal.”

“Never said it wasn’t.” Delia mused. “But you’d been staring at least five minutes. Pretty much from the moment it was clear you weren’t goin’ to get caught.”

“And I suppose you’ve drawn conclusions by that?”

Delia merely smiled before bringing the tray of chilled glasses to the men. Hermione watched as she handed Bob two, and he offered one as a peace offering to the bowtruckles. The apprentices were still overly animated, bowing and gesturing grandly in thanks at the refreshments Delia had given them. Severus merely took it with a nod before he turned and headed toward Hermione.

If she sat up straighter, it didn’t mean anything. And if she brushed her hands on her denim shorts, well, she was just making herself more presentable for company.

But Severus wasn’t really looking at her, focused on the thin, green creature on his arm as he came around and sat beside her. He placed his glass of pumpkin juice on the edge of the plant box, never taking his eyes off the little living twig.

“I think he likes me. I think it’s a he, anyway.” Severus said as he turned his arm so his palm was up. The bowtruckle walked to it, then looked at Severus expectantly. “This is my friend. She’s nice, even if she is a nuisance. And no, her hair is not a place for you to live in, so don’t think about it.”

“It’s not that bad.” Hermione frowned.

Severus glanced at it before looking at her, “Avoiding mirrors will not make the lie real.” He said as he brought the hand containing the bowtruckle to her shoulder.

It crawled on her, hit’s tiny feet tickling her skin as he moved over her shoulder and tucked itself
under her hair.

“I see it listens as well as you do.” Severus mused as he shifted to remove the t-shirt he’d had bunched in his back jean pocket. He pulled it over his head, nose wrinkling. “I can think of at least three house mates I’m quite thankful I don’t spend any time with during the summer right now.”

“It’s ghastly, isn’t it?” Hermione commented. “I don’t remember it being that bad last year.”

“I’m sure you had other things on your mind at the time to remember the weather.” He said before taking a hearty gulp of his pumpkin juice. “I imagine the day has come and gone.”

“It has,” Hermione acknowledged. “It was the day I showed up uninvited on your doorstep.”

Severus twisted around to look at her, studying her face. “I suppose it’s for the best I didn’t tell you to leave.”

Hermione’s lips twitched. “It wouldn’t have bothered me.”

“Liar.” Severus retorted.

“Honestly, I didn’t … I didn’t think about it at the time. I … woke up on that day a year ago. It wasn’t when it happened.”

“Does it bother you?” He asked curiously. “Your parents are out there right now and don’t know who you are. Had it been me, I wouldn’t have thought much about it. A slight pang of loss for my mother, I suppose, but if Tobias forgot my existence, I’d be happier for it. But you strike me as someone who would miss it. Them.”

Hermione furrowed her brow as she thought of a way to answer him without revealing anything. “It’s hard if only for the reason that, should there come a time they know who I am, I’ll have changed from what they knew. And I miss them. Delia and Bob are great, but they aren’t my parents.”

Severus nodded, and took another drink.

The bowtruckle took that moment to stretch and peer around Hermione’s head to look at her. She snorted at its tiny expression of worry. “I’m alright.” She told it. It reached out a hand and swiped at her cheek, bringing away a small ball of moisture. “I hadn’t realized,” Hermione said softly.

The bowtruckle examined the tear in his hand it’s tiny little tongue darting out to lick it. It shuddered, sticking out its tongue as if quietly spatting. Hermione chuckled, “Well that was a bitter lesson for you, wasn’t it? I hope you don’t get sick.” She held out her hand for it to climb on to, but it shook its head. It then looked to Severus, tapping it’s little root-like foot in impatience.

“I’m not going back over there until I have to.” He told it. “If you wish to return to the others, you can head over yourself.”

He smirked as the bowtruckle flopped on to Hermione’s shoulder as though the very idea of needing to wait filled it with despair.

Severus snorted. “I’ve didn’t know they had such strong personalities.”

“He’s quite the character.” Hermione agreed.

When neither of them made a move to get up, the bowtruckle scooted along Hermione’s shoulder
before sliding down her arm and hopping off the palm of her hand. She attempted to watch it cross the lawn to rejoin its branch, but it was difficult once he was far enough away that she couldn’t discern his movements from that of the grass.

“If you tell anyone this, I will not only deny it, but I promise retribution when you least expect it,” Severus said, getting Hermione’s full attention. He looked every bit as grave as he would in his adult years just before handing out the worst sort of punishment. “I sort of want a bowtruckle now.” He said. “I would call it Bowie.”

“Bowie?” Hermione asked, trying her absolute best to keep the smile desperately trying to escape from appearing on her lips.

“Oh yes. It would be a shame to miss out on such an obvious name, one muggleborns would question the origin of, and one that the Purebloods would believe to be lazy.”

“Wouldn’t it be more clever to name him Ziggy?” She countered.

Severus smirked, nearly smiled, and his eyes alighted with joy. “If I ever get a Bowtruckle, I’ll consider it. Just for you.”

Her heart did not just stutter. Her mind did not go blank. And she was positively, absolutely, undeniably not attracted to him.

But as Severus had pointed out, she was a liar.
Severus had debated for at least thirty minutes if he should see if Hermione was awake. Yes, it was five-thirty in the morning, and yes, it was quite likely he simply missed waking up next to her and seeing her dreadful hair and her half open mouth and was tempted to merely watch her for a moment. But regardless, he was bored, and he did miss her, and while he would never stoop to entering her room to watch her sleep, he was nearly to the point of going in and waking her up.

So he got dressed and headed downstairs. Perhaps he could run the property, or see if Bob McGonagall was already up and ready to start the day. He may have put in enough physical labor to cover the Herbology part of his potions ingredients, a new set of robes, text books, and still have more spending money than he had at any other time in his life, but he wasn’t about to stop there if he didn’t have to. He wanted the experience, knowing that working with a master Herbologist would count towards part of a Potion’s Mastery. He wanted the reference for applying for one when the time came.

And damn it, he wanted to actually stand a chance with Hermione.

He knew heading into his fourth year that he and Lily were drifting apart. She was such a Gryffindor, righteous and bold. She allowed those of her house to convince her that any knowledge of the Dark Arts instantly meant a dark wizard, that the lure of it would only be strong for one who was already down that path. And Slytherins, well, they were the worst. Never mind that the house stood for creativity and cunning, it’s trait of ambition was the focus, and that was twisted into power hungry.

It didn’t help that she was growing more beautiful where he was, admittedly, merely growing into his nose and hoping puberty would pass soon so his hair and skin wouldn’t be quite so oily. She made friends as easily as breathing, where even in his own house he was often considered nothing more than an acquaintance or merely a tutor. He was a survivor, and he was doing what he could to survive.

But he would have given it all up, everything, risked his neck every day, had Lily Evans said she wanted to be with him.

Going into their fourth year, she was everything.

And then they met Hermione.

When she had collapsed on Valentine’s day, he didn’t want to admit he was scared. When she went to the McGonagalls for the Easter Hols, he didn’t want to admit he missed her desperately. The invitation to join her during the summer felt too good to be true. He was absolutely sure he’d lose her when she showed up unannounced and was exposed to Spinner’s End. But she stayed, and she
never said a damn thing about the way he lived. There was no pity, no disgust, no … anything. She was just there, talking to his mother, sleeping in a bed next to his, allowing him to lead the way up and down the disgusting river without a word of complaint.

He knew then that she was different in more ways than he expected. He was infatuated with her. Maybe more than that, he was pretty sure he was being a complete idiot and was falling in love with her. And while she may not have been much to look at on the train the year before, he’d have to be blind not to see she was becoming a beauty in her own right. She’d never be a Lily, but that just made her better to him. And he, well, puberty wasn’t becoming his friend any time soon. Severus feared Hermione would not give him a second look, that she’d fall for Lupin, or some Ravenclaw. Maybe even one of the more attractive Slytherins.

He made sure to never intentionally introduce her to any of them.

He doubted affluence would matter to her, but he couldn’t argue that money to buy things to woo her with couldn’t hurt, even if it was only paper and parchment. Or flowers that doubled as potions ingredients.

Severus stopped short as he made it to the kitchen, seeing Cordelia McGonagall standing in front of cauldron, ingredients laid out to her left and a book to her right.

“What are you brewing?” He asked, causing her to startle hard enough she lifted off the ground.

Eyes wide, hand over her heart, Cordelia’s lips twitched in a grin. “Scared me there, Severus. Bit early for you ta be up, innit?”

He shrugged, “Early riser.”

“I’m brewing Bob some pain relief. Not as young as he used to be, and bendin’ over all day gets his back in a right twist. Takes more of it than he should, I say, but he’s too young to retire still.”

Severus smiled to himself as he came over and inspected what she had out. Cordelia was following the book to the letter, and he resisted the urge to sneer. “I know a better way to brew it.” He said as he picked up a vial of flubberworm mucus. “Faster, more potent, lasts longer, and I don’t think one would build up a tolerance to it quite so fast.”

Cordelia frowned before she seemed to remember something. “Hermione said you were a bit of a whiz. She also said you blew up the cauldron brewing something like that.”

“How so?”

“I used it after I had to pop my own shoulder back in place.” He said nonchalantly, all the while remembering the tripping jinx that caused him to fall down the dungeon stairs not long after the Easter Hols. He remembered the echo of Potter and Black’s laughter, Pettigrew’s cackling, and the searing pain that ripped through him. Had he not been meant to meet Hermione and Lily, he may have had the time to have it set properly. But as it was, knowing they would worry, eventually find him in the hospital wing, and he would have to listen to the latter go on about reporting them, and the former’s concern in general, he opted to just bite the bullet and get it over with. He’d popped it back into place against the dungeon wall, swallowed back the potion, and went off to study.

Cordelia seemed to consider it for only a brief a moment before she stepped aside and gestured to the cauldron. “Tell me what you need. Can’t believe I’m lettin’ a fifteen year old boy show me how to
brew something, but I am the one still using a book.”

Severus merely quirked his lips at that, not daring to laugh for fear of offending her.

They worked quietly, Cordelia acting like an assistant and fetching Severus what he needed, and he played Master. Brewing his own variation was exciting and nerve wrecking. He was terrified he’d mess up, prove himself just a stupid kid, but he knew in his gut that he could do this.

As the final stages approached, and the sun began to rise, Cordelia cleared her throat. “You’re good at this, altering potions?”

“I’ve been doing it since my third year.” Severus replied. “Not to this point, mind. This was my first experiment gone right.”

“But you know how to … change things? Make them better?”

Severus frowned as he watched the color shift to the slate blue hue it was meant to take on. “Yes. I started with methods of preparation, and now I look at the recipe. I wish to become a master in the field, and it’s difficult to do so without having a knack or will to experiment.”

He heard her step away, open and close a cupboard, and then return to his side. She handed him a slip of paper. “Could you see any way of making this work better?” She asked softly.

Severus read it over, and his gut twisted. A Fertility potion. He noticed on the Sunday dinners he’d gone to with the McGonagalls that there were many young adults there. He hadn’t realized until that moment that none of them were Bob and Cordelia’s. He’d assumed they had children who’d grown and left. He did notice they all called Professor McGonagall “Aunt Min”, but ….

“Fennel is frequently used in … contraceptive potions.” He said, pointing to the ingredient. “Change it for thistle, and perhaps add fluxweed as well.” He shrugged, bowing his head to hide the red tinting his cheeks behind his hair. “I could look into it more, but only if you ….”

“Thank you, Severus.” She breathed with absolute sincerity. “That simple suggestion alone ….”

“Think nothing of it.” Severus cut in, gesturing that no more need to be said on the subject as the sound of light footsteps came tromping down the stairs.

“Does potions making count as magic outside school?” Hermione asked as she stopped in the kitchen doorway.

“There’s no wand waving in potions making.” He replied, and he noted the way her eyes widened, her focus shifting as though she were seeing someone else.

“No silly wand waving.” She murmured. “Well,” She said, eyes coming back into focus and a smile playing at her lips. “I suppose you have a point there. And how exactly would they know for sure if it does count? Delia is right there.”

He smirked, holding her eye and noting the spread of the blush that started at her cheeks and traveled down her neck. Merlin, he hoped it meant something more than embarrassment.

“Hermione,” Delia said, breaking their eye contact. “Think you and Severus could pop out to Hogsmeade for me later? I’ll make a list of what I need from the apothecary, and you can floo into the Minerva’s cottage to get there.”

“I don’t believe Bob will need us.” She said, glancing at Severus in confirmation.
He shrugged, torn between wanting to work and wanting to spend a few hours away from the McGonagalls and alone with Hermione.

"Excellent." Delia beamed. "I'll get started on breakfast, and then you two can head off. And I wouldn't rush back. You're so used to exploring the village with your classmates all around ya, you should experience it without all the noise and hustle." She looked to Severus, and there was a slight twitch to Cordelia’s eye that very well might have been a wink.

Hogsmeade suddenly sounded like a much more appealing option.

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June 19th, 1993

Compared to the start of the year, when Ginny had entered Aurora’s car on the Hogwarts express and made extremely awkward small talk, this was bliss. Practicing disarming charms with the four youngest Weasleys, Hermione, and Harry. There was also the fireworks, and playing Exploding Snap, which she wasn’t very good at but was getting better with each round. And then, just as they were nearing the station, Harry’s eyes widened and he hastily searched for a quill and some parchment.

"This is called a telephone number," Harry explained to Ron. "I told your dad how to use one last summer. Umm," He looked to Aurora, a slight blush coloring his cheeks. "Does Sna- umm, your Dad know how to, ah …?"

"I went to muggle school, Harry. Remember?" She teased, and he blushed deeper.

"Right, yes. Sorta forgot since we, uh … anyway. This is how you can reach me at the Dursleys’." He said as he jotted down his number three times, ripping the paper and handing one each to Hermione, Ron, and herself. "I don’t think I could stand another two months with only Dudley to talk to."

"Won’t they be proud after hearing of all the heroic things you’ve done?" Hermione asked, completely perplexed.

"Proud? All those times I could have died and didn’t? They’ll be furious." Harry retorted, and Aurora was the only one to snort in response. Hermione had given her an incredulous look, and Ron glowered, but Aurora merely shrugged.

When the train came to a complete stop, they all filed off and headed to get their trunks. Eagerness welled in Aurora, and it had her giggling with Ginny every time they glanced at one another as the reality of the summer holidays and the time they would be spending re-connecting over the next few weeks. Having written her mother, Aurora had gotten word back from her that following Ginny right off the train was the best was to go about. And that they really didn’t need to worry about explaining why Ginny couldn’t come for a visit, she would be occupied soon enough.

Trunks loaded on to carts, the girls began to leave the crowded and head for the queue forming for students to leave.

"Rory," Harry called, causing both girls to stop. Ginny looked confused, but there was no hint of jealousy there like there had been the rare time Harry had stopped to talk to her before. The boy
looked shy, shifting from one foot to the other. “I wanted to say I’m sorry. When we were in school together before, you were one of the few people that didn’t care what Dudley and his gang thought and actually spent time with me. And, well, I should have done the same for you when you arrived. I guess, well, I didn’t think at first. And then all the other stuff happened, and ….”

“It’s okay.” She shrugged. “Fresh start next year, yeah?” She asked, and he nodded. Then he turned around and went back to fetch his trunks.

As the girls continued on, Aurora glanced at Ginny nervously, trying to look for signs that she managed to screw up her new-ish friendship already.

“Are you sure you don’t …?” Aurora started to ask Ginny as they pushed the cart together.

“Yes,” Ginny replied. “It’s … he’s … I just … I really just liked him so much when he was a celebrity whom I had built up in my mind. Like Ron with Gwenog Jones. He refuses to admit he fancies her a little bit, because she’s not a Chudley Canons player, but he does. But if he were to meet her, to see her daily life, I think the shine would wear off.”

“I don’t know how he can like that team.” Aurora commented thoughtfully. “Their terrible.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that.” Ginny snickered.

The two approached the wall, and the guard had them wait only a moment before letting them pass through.

On the other side, a woman with curly red hair and a warm smile greeted the girls. Aurora wasn’t quite sure what to think of her, though the way the Ginny seemed to head right for her let he know that this was Mrs Weasley. She’d heard of her, of course, from both her parents. But for some reason, this was not at all how Aurora had pictured her.

Her own mother dressed mostly in trousers and modern cut robes that wrapped around her torso and stopped at the knee. Her hair was always in a braid or a bun, only worn down on special occasions. She wore boots like her fathers, and all in all looked every bit the scholar she was, and the young pureblood witch she pretended to be. Mrs Malfoy was always well put together, every detail from her hair, to her robes, to the days accessories were planned just so. Her grandmother dressed similar to a wealthy muggle woman.

Aurora had never seen a witch who looked so comfortable and casual before, nor had she ever seen one so much the poster woman for motherhood.

And she instantly loved it.

“Aurora Snape,” Molly Weasley smiled, reaching out and cupping Aurora’s cheeks and looking her over. “I haven’t seen you since you were a baby. Look at how lovely you’ve grown. I’m so glad you and Ginny became friends. I’d always sort of hoped it would be you and Ron, but I suppose the age difference ….”

“Mum,” Ginny groaned, and Mrs Weasley merely gave her a grin before she turned back to Aurora.

“You’re just like your father, a bit thin. Then again, your mother was a little lean herself, best I can remember.” She frowned, but then shook her head, smiling warmly again as she looked over Aurora’s shoulder to the wall behind them. “About time you boys came through.”

“Bye, Harry.” Ron called, and Harry waved and went off to where a very fat, very strange looking man stood off to the side glaring.
Ron was striding a long until he saw Aurora, then stopped short. “What’re you doing here?”

“Now, Ronald, that’s no way to talk to our guest.” Mrs Weasley scolded.

“Guest!” Ron gaped.

“Rory’s spending the first few weeks of summer with us.” Ginny smiled.

Ron groaned. “But that means Snape! I don’t want to see the great greasy git on my summer vacation. I don’t even want to see him in the school year.”

“Ronald.” Mrs Weasley warned. “You will show respect for your teachers. And I already got a letter from Mrs Snape, she will come by the Burrow to collect Aurora when the time comes.”

“She will?” Aurora frowned.

That seemed odd even without the cover of her mother’s research. She’d noticed her mother would wander outside the rooms in the dungeons less and less as Aurora’s start at Hogwarts grew nearer. She understood now it was to prevent having to use whatever she did to disguise herself so often, and to not draw any attention to herself. So it was strange that she was willing to come to a place where so many people would recognize her.

Mrs Weasley gave her a warm grin. “Your little brother has been feeling left out, and your father has agreed to spend the few weeks you’re with us solely with him. Father/Son bonding.”

“You have a brother.” Ron gaped as the twins and Percy came up behind him.

“You have three.” Aurora pointed out.

“There are more Snapes? Bloody hell.”

“Ronald Bilius Weasley,” Mrs Weasley said through her teeth. “One more word.”

“And actually, I have six brothers.” Ginny inputed. “Charlie and Bill live away.”

“Ah,” Aurora replied, giving a nod. “I’ll remember never to complain when Leo crowds my space and never leaves me alone.”

“Probably for the best.” Ginny agreed as Molly began to lead them all out of the station.

They were all quiet until they were nearly out the front doors when Ron mumbled. “There are more of them.”

Mrs Weasley never had to say anything, one of the twins smacked him on the head for her.

July 3rd, 1993

Aurora adored the Weasleys. She loved Arthur, who upon hearing she knew Harry through muggle primary school started asking all kinds of questions about the muggle world. She loved Molly, who cooked the best meals Aurora had ever eaten and was always trying to get her to eat seconds or thirds. She could do without Ron, but the twins made up for his bad attitude, and while Percy was a prat he did keep to himself. And there was Ginny, of course, whom she understood had a lot of the
same interests as she did now that they were properly getting to know one another.

And one of the the things they both loved was Quidditch.

“My mother never lets me play,” Aurora said as she and Ginny walked to a clearing past the trees surrounding the Burrow. Each had a broomstick slung over their shoulder, Aurora her own cleansweep seven sent to her by her father not long after her arrival at the Weasley’s, Ginny her brother Charlie’s old Nimbus 1700. “She’s terrified of flying, and had an absolute fit when Dad taught me how to fly when I was three.”

“Terrified of flying? Like Hermione scared?” Ginny asked.

Aurora snickered. “Exactly.” She replied.

“So, your Dad, Professor Snape, is actually the … cool parent?” Ginny asked with a frown. “Like, he sent you your broom, but it was likely because your mother wouldn’t? And it was sorta like he was, I dunno, teasing her?”

“My Dad has always thought my mother’s fear a bit ridiculous, and teases her relentlessly with it. I remember he’d made it perfectly clear that no child of his was going to go to Hogwarts without knowing how to fly. And growing up around Draco, well, Quidditch came naturally.”

“I think you grew up in a parallel universe.” Ginny said as they maneuvered over a thick root. “Professor Snape is this cheeky bloke who likes a bit of fun, and you make Draco out to be a decent human being.”

“Since starting at Hogwarts, it’s sorta like I had left another world.” They came into the clearing, the morning dew still clinging to the grass.

They’d come out early, having rolled out of bed long before the boys even stirred. The balls they’d been using the last few mornings were damp from being left outside, which would make it harder to grip for the first little while. The two goal posts they made the muggle way with a couple hula-hoops attached to branches without much foliage around them on opposite ends were still secure.

Both girls mounted their brooms and kicked off, going as high was the top of the trees before stopping. They made laps in the blinding sunlight, getting a feel for being off they ground again.

“Think he’d let you try out for Quidditch?” Ginny asked. “I mean, not this year. There won’t be any openings. But there should be in the next couple years.”

“Dad?” Aurora asked as they came to a stop. “Only reason he wouldn’t would be because I might be better than the players in Slytherin, but I doubt that will be the case. And either way, Aunt Min would just tell him to fob off.”

“Your life is so weird.” Ginny laughed, and Aurora smirked. Then Gin frowned, her gaze in the direction of the Burrow. “Company coming.”

“What?” Aurora said, turning in time to see two heads of red hair come hurtling toward them.

“So this is what you two have been up to.” Fred said as he and George came to a stop just past them.

“You’re going to get us all in trouble if Mum catches you kicking off on the other side of the trees.” Ginny scolded.

“No muggles for miles.” George replied.
“No anyone for ages,” Fred said sagely.

“And besides, she’s too busy gushing over Percy for making head boy.”

“Of course.” Ginny rolled her eyes.

“So how about a game then?” George asked, darting down to the ground and grabbing a ball. “Us against you.”

Ginny looked to Aurora. “I’m the better keeper than you.”

“Yeah,” She agreed. “Okay.”

They turned to the twins and nodded. Matching smirks appeared, and they split off, George throwing the ball to Fred in passing.

“Ready for an easy win, Fred?” Fred called to George.

“Forget who you are?” Aurora asked, her eyebrow arching in a perfect imitation of her father’s.

“What are you talking about? I’m George.” Fred replied with a sincerity that was nearly believable.

“No, you’re not.” Aurora scoffed.

“How can you tell?” Fred asked.

“George is better looking.” Aurora stated bluntly.

Before Fred could fully get out the indignant “Oi”, she’d zoomed past him and snatched the ball, laughing as she zipped toward the actual George keeping score.

—H—

August 16th, 1975

Diagon Alley was surprisingly quiet as Hermione and Severus went from shop to shop getting what they would need for the school year. Their first stop had been new robes, both have grown enough through the school year that the previous ones needed replacing.

“You’ve grown another four inches, Mr Snape.” Said Madam Malkin as she stood upright, hands on her hips. “One can certainly not get by on lengthening charms with that big of a difference.”

“Quite,” He said as politely as he probably could.

With a flick of her wand, the robes that would fit him hovered slightly off the various racks around her shop. “Have a look, then, whilst I get your friend sized up. Not sure I’ve seen you around.”

“No,” Hermione acknowledged, though she had known the woman from her previous time. “I had robes passed down to me last year, but this year that doesn’t seem to be an option. I’m either too short or ….” She blushed, glancing at Severus and hoping he was as absorbed in choosing a new set
of robes as he appeared to be.

“I understand.” Madam Malkin replied, measuring Hermione discreetly when needed. “Alright, my dear,” She said, flicking her wand again. “The purple aura around the hovering robes will fit you with just the slightest bit of alterations.”

Hermione thanked her, and moved to the rack nearest Severus to see what was available. She glanced over at him, seeing him holding the sleeve of one robe in his hand with a slightly stunned look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” She asked. When he didn’t answer, she moved to his side. “Severus?”

His eyes were moving ever so slightly from side to side, and then he glanced at her. His cheeks went pink. “Nothing.” He said abruptly, then turned and headed to another rack entirely, one closer to the counter.

Hermione frowned, picking up the sleeve he had just had in his hand and studied it. Nothing looked off about the robe, though it was not quite as vividly black as the ones nearer the counter. But those ones were new, awaiting to be tailored, so it had made perfect sense. Shrugging to herself, Hermione allowed Severus his mood, whatever it may be, and went back to the rack she was looking at. She’d picked up the robe, pleased to see the length required little changing, though who ever owned it previously seemed to have very short arms. She could buy new robes, of course, but she would prefer to have her own books instead of the borrowed texts from the McGonagall children. That, and she wanted to ensure that she had enough for good quality quills, her habit of chewing them and her ability to wear them down not changing much in this decade. And ink, well, she went through enough pots of it, that was for sure. And while she had earned a decent sum of Galleons from Bob, she didn’t want to waste them.

The thought struck Hermione like a bludger, and she swung her head around to look at Severus before she could stop herself.

She hadn’t been the only one who earned a decent sum of Galleons over the summer, but she was also not the one frequently made fun of for her appearance. She smiled to herself as she watched him pluck three, brand new robes off the rack and hand them to Madam Malkin for tailoring. He also gestured to the white, collared shirts, and she didn’t doubt at all that a new cardigan or two would find its way into his lot.

In the month and a bit that he had been staying with them he hadn’t bulked in anyway, but he’d certainly become healthier looking. The physical labor, time in the sun, and Delia’s tendency to try and feed him more than he was probably used to outside of Hogwarts softened how much his ribs and spine showed, and helped his face fill out so he wasn’t quite so gaunt. He appeared more graceful, now. Not that Hermione would ever compare him to a dancer, but it was a near thing in her mind.

Before she got too carried away in studying his lithe form, she quickly reapplied herself to finding robes and other pieces of her school uniform for Madam Malkin to alter where needed.

“I’ll have them owled to you.” Madam Malkin had said after ringing up Severus’ purchases second.

“Actually, if you could send it to the same address as Hermione’s I would be grateful.” Severus said swiftly, and Madam Malkin altered the delivery address before they left.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” Hermione said cautiously as they reemerged on to the sunny streets, “How did you get the delivery before? From what you’ve said of your father ….”
“It would be sent to my Grandmother first, and she would use muggle means to get it to us.” He said, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his trousers and tilting his head forward. She waited, hoping he would say more, and he eventually obliged. “My mother was disowned by her father, but her mother refused to follow suit. She was, after all, their only child. She was forbidden to send any money to us, which made it difficult, and aside from helping my mother with purchasing my wand, she was unable to advance purchase any items in my name. But Tobias never bothered with the mail, so if packages started turning up for me each summer, he didn’t seem to notice.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Hermione nodded.

“And you?” He said much more softly. “Lily would have her stuff delivered, but from the way you asked you … did not?”

Hermione smirked, “No. My dad would just lug it all around. Even the cauldron. He never complained that it was a bit heavy, but his fingers were a bit purple by the time we got home.”

Severus snorted softly, the light grin still playing on his lips as he removed his hand from his pockets and lifted his head. “Speaking of cauldrons, we should, perhaps, visit the apothecary for our non-herbal ingredients.”

They moved along to Slugs and Jiggers, getting only half the Hogwarts list and thoroughly confusing the young wizard working the counter. After that, they popped into Flourish and Botts where they’d gotten lost for at least an hour before remembering that they were there to buy books for school. Hermione had selected pristine, new copies while Severus had hunted down near perfect copies from the second-hand portion of the shop.

“You know full well I will be writing in them anyway.” He’d said, smirking as she cringed at the thought.

They had left the book shop, debating stopping to get something to eat, when Severus paused. He straightened to stand taller, chin up and shoulders back, and Hermione was terribly confused for a moment until she saw why.

Having only met the man once, and only in passing, it took her a moment to discern that she was not looking at an older version of Draco, but a quite young Lucius Malfoy. He was handsome in the sense that Hermione knew logically that he was, but he held little appeal for her personally. He was dressed in a tailored suit that had far too much embroidery on it, likely in an attempt to differentiate it from Muggle attire, and his robes were elegantly cut to appear more like a very long, flowing blazer. His hair only just went past his shoulders.

On his arm was a beautiful young woman, her hair a mix of black and blonde, her eyes so much like Draco’s that there was no mistaking that this was to be his mother. She was dressed impeccably, richly, and in perfect complement to her escort. The pair were heading directly for them, and Hermione instantly became nervous.

Her dress was cut in a wizarding style, and she recalled all the pureblood etiquette Eileen Snape had mentioned during her brief stay at Spinners End. But in that moment, Hermione was sure she would be revealed as a fraud.

“Lucius,” Severus greeted, his voice going slightly deeper as he seemed to put a hint of power behind it.

“Severus Snape,” Lucius greeted with a smile. “You look well, far better than you had when I ran into you a couple summers back. How is Hogwarts?”
“Improved.” Severus replied simply.

Lucius smiled. “Glad to hear. I’m sure you remember Narcissa, though she goes by Mrs Malfoy these days.”

“Congratulations,” Severus bowed, taking Narcissa’s hand as she offered it and kissed the air above it.

“Thank you, Severus.” She replied with sincerity, her eyes darting to Hermione.

Lucius seemed to notice, and began to extend a hand toward Hermione. She robotically extended her own toward him, allowing Lucius to take it lightly in his grasp. “And who is your lovely friend?” He asked Severus while looking at Hermione.

A glance at him told Hermione that Severus seemed to be calculating something quite quickly. “Hermione Granger-McGonagall.” He said smoothly and without hesitation.

Part of her was elated that Severus had added just enough of a differentiation that in the nearly twenty years when she would start school with Draco, her name wouldn’t match up quite the same should Lucius somehow remember. At the same time, she wondered why he thought it a good idea to do so in the first place.

“McGonagall? A relation to the Professor?” He asked with an arched brow.

Hermione licked her lips and cleared her throat. “My adopted Aunt.” She said, her voice barely above a whisper.


“My parents … there was ….”

“Hermione lost her parents last year while returning from the Americas.” Severus explained easily.

“And no God parents?” Narcissa half gasped, a hand pressed to her chest.

Hermione shook her head. “I was meant to be a ward of the school, under Professor Dumbledore’s care, but Minerva, Professor McGonagall, thought it was best I was placed away from where I would spend most of my year.”

“How lucky for you that you were at least given a … different option.” Lucius’s lips curled slightly. “But Granger is an old Pureblood name, not one heard often.”

“Most of my family were in France.” Hermione replied, and it was made all the easier for it not being a lie. Her father’s family was quite French, and while he didn’t have much if any of the accent by the time she’d disappeared, all of her relations had.

“Ahh, yes.” Lucius nodded. “Purebloods from the continent do not often mingle with British society.”

She wasn’t sure if this was a Slytherin way of asking after her blood status or not, but Hermione thought it best not to be Gryffindor about it. “No, they do not.” She said, going for another stretched truth. “Had my mother not spent a few years there studying, it is quite unlikely my parents would have ever met.”

“What did they do?” Lucius asked.

“I was never allowed to know.” Hermione replied, making a conscious effort to hold eye contact.
“Oh,” Lucius said knowingly. “I understand.” He then turned to Severus. “You’ve certainly moved up in the world since last we spoke. Perhaps I will see you in the Slug Club this year? Horace has been asking old favorites to come back, a sort of Alumni venture to show those he asks just what kind of people he counts them among.”

“Perhaps.” Severus nodded.

Lucius made a gesture as though he were handing Hermione over to Severus, and she was surprised when he took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. Lucius seemed to approve highly of the gesture. “We should be heading back to the manor. Good day, Severus. Hermione.” And with a slight bow, Lucius lead Narcissa away.

“That was ….” Hermione started to say.

“Indeed.”

“You were brilliant.”

“Aren’t I always?” He said smugly.

“Shut up, you know exactly what I mean.” She gave him a playful swat, getting closer to him in the process. Her heart pounded as she realized quite suddenly that she desperately wanted to kiss him. On the lips, the nose, the cheek, the neck, anywhere. She bloody well wanted to kiss Severus Snape, and her Gryffindor sensibilities demanded she do so. Because he was brilliant, and she was grateful. Because he was Severus, and she damn well wanted to.

“I don’t believe I do,” He said in an arrogant sort of manner, an eyebrow cocking and just adding to the desire to shut him up with her lips.

*Do it. Do it, do it. Bravery, be brave, do it.*

“Shall we go to the Leaky Cauldron, then? If we don’t save at least a small amount of shopping for when we meet Lily next week, even if it is merely of the window variety, she’ll be intolerable our entire time out.”

Cowardice won out, and Hermione stepped back from him. “But not insufferable?”

“No,” Severus said with a laugh on his breath, “that title is meant only for you.”

She blushed at the half insult and couldn’t think of anything to say in return.

He was still holding her hand against the crook of his arm, and she very nearly couldn’t think.

———A———

**August 31st, 1993**

“Shit!” Her mother swore, and Aurora was so startled that she nearly tripped over her own two feet, her book bag slipping on her shoulder. She looked up and around, seeing nothing in the immediate vicinity that would have her *mother* swearing. Even Leo, the spitting image of his father at the same
age of eight years old, was staring at her with wide eyes and a slack jaw.

“Mum,” He gasped out, but Hermione Snape ignored him

Whipping out her wand, she gave it a flick and the silver wisps that preceded her beautiful, Raven patronus swirled around the Snape children before the majestic bird formed. It landed on the mantel of the fireplace they had just stepped through, its head tilted in a way that always reminded Aurora of her father.

“I need you here in Diagon Alley.” She told it, and the bird took off out a window.

“Mum, can’t we ….” Leo started to say, but he was hushed quickly.

“Do not draw attention, Leo, darling.” Her mother said gently. “I can’t be seen right now.”

Aurora frowned and peered around the corner while her mother ushered Leo behind a beam. She caught a head of red hair, and understood immediately: the Weasleys were here.

She remembered when her mother had come to the Burrow to collect her. It was early in the morning, too early for anyone but Mr and Mrs Weasley to have been up, even though the excitement of their big lottery win hadn’t died down. Molly Weasley had frowned and stared at Hermione Snape, mouth moving a little as though trying to form words.

“I know we’ve met before,” She had said. “But I swear I feel as though I’ve met you again more recently, and I just can’t put my finger on why.”

“Perhaps we’ve seen each other in Diagon Alley recently without realizing it.” Her mother smiled that knowing grin that she had whenever she encountered someone whom she’d met as a girl. Hagrid had a similar reaction, during the summer just before Aurora began at Hogwarts. Shopping in Diagon Alley for school supplies had that grin nearly permanently plastered on her mother’s face.

Aurora had watched the Weasleys and Harry for a moment before realizing that Hermione Granger was among them. And she had a cat.

Whirling around, Aurora put her hands on her hips and scowled. “You said we couldn’t have one?”

“Have one what?” Her mother asked absently as she anxiously watched the fireplace.

“A cat.” That got her mother’s attention. “You have one, right there, in the Leaky. It’s ugly and orange, but you have one so why couldn’t we?”

She instantly regretted asking as a wistful pain crossed her mother’s face. “Perhaps we will.” She’d replied just before the flames flared green.

Brushing soot off his robes, her father scowled. “I finishing a vital stage in an delicate potion, this had best be important.”

“I’m here.” Her mother said through her teeth.

“Yes, as am I. I would like to know why.”

“No, you great bloody git. I’m here.”

At this, Aurora’s father sobered, glancing in the main area before turning back to his wife with an arched brow. “You didn’t recall you’d be here the day before boarding the train?”
“It’s been twenty years, Severus. Allow me some fallacy of memory.”

“You have a cat.”

“Yes, I did.”

“It’s quite ugly.”

“Why is everyone dwelling on that?”

“It would appear as though you have a soft spot for ugly things.”

Her mother’s tension melted away, and a tender smile lit her eyes. She reached out and touched her husband’s cheek, and Aurora was overcome with the mix of romanticism and nausea that always seemed to accompany seeing her parents’ affection these days.

“You know perfectly well I don’t believe you ugly in the least.” Hermione Snape said softly before standing on her toes and placing a kiss on her husband’s cheek. His lips twitched in a facsimile of a grin, and Aurora rolled her eyes toward Leo who appeared utterly disgusted.

“Go.” Aurora heard her father say. “Take Leo to Hogsmeade. I will join the both of you for lunch there once I get our daughter through the crowd.”

“Sounds lovely.” Her mother said, turning to Leo with a hand extended.

“You said that we could go for ice cream.” He said.

“I believe they have ice cream in Hogsmeade, love.” She replied with a grin.

“Not as good as Fortescue’s.” Leo pouted.

“Perhaps not, but we’re not staying here today, and I promise we’ll come again on Friday when your sister and Dad are at the school.”

“Alright,” Leo said with an exaggerated sigh that would have been more believable had he not been grinning like a loon. He took their mother’s hand and allowed her to floo them to Hogsmeade.

When they were gone, Aurora turned to her father. “What did you forget?” He asked her once they were alone.

“I didn’t.” Aurora replied. “Mum had to have my robes resized. Apparently, I had a growth spurt in the last month. She sent them ahead to madam Malkin, but couldn’t bring me around for the fitting until now.”

“Unlike your mother to cut it so close.” He said as he put a hand on her shoulder and guided her through the Leaky Cauldron.

“She got caught up with that book ….?”

“Say no more.” He said with a smile, and Aurora couldn’t help but notice how quiet the room got.

“Oi, Snape.” She heard George call, causing both of them to stop. The ginger bloke paled a bit at the attention, and Aurora could only imagine the cold sneer her Dad was wearing. George visibly swallowed. “Rory. Rory Snape, I mean. Not you, Professor.”

“Quite.” Her Dad said.
“See you lot in a bit, yeah?” She said, returning Ginny’s little wave before her father turned her and guided her out.

“You were planning on staying here this evening? Going with the Weasleys and Potter to the train?” He asked as they neared the entrance.

“Yeah.” She said.

He nodded. “Your trunk is in my rooms, I will have the house elves take it to the tower this evening then. You have what you will need for your stay in there?” He asked gesturing to the bag on her shoulder. She nodded. “Good. If you forgot anything else, your mother will have to deal with it, damn the consequences if they recognize her.”

“You’re in a right mood.” Aurora risked a tease, looking up at her father.

“Just practicing for the coming term.” He said, and Aurora snorted, shaking her head, and tried to keep it at just that as she watched other students shift out of their way as they walked down the street side by side.

**September 1st, 1993**

“The pyramids were awfully boring, really, but watching the sunset over the village was just gorgeous.” Ginny sighed, and Aurora had a pang of jealousy at hearing about the Weasley’s trip to Egypt.

“Furthest I’ve been was Italy where my Grandmother lives these days,” Aurora replied before taking a bite of her cauldron cake.

“Hope I’ll get to go see Charlie in Romania one day. And perhaps Percy will move to France or some such place.” Ginny mused as she nibbled on her pumpkin pasty. “Though I don’t know if it would be worth visiting the Prat just to see the sights.”

“He is my least favorite of your brothers, and considering how Ron still looks at me like I’m flubberworm mucus on his shoe, that’s saying something.”

Ginny laughed, nodding her head as the train slowed down. The girls’ mirth left them, and they looked out the window. It didn’t do much good, with fog on the inside pane and the rain pelting on the outside.

Neville, whom was politely reading quietly beside Ginny looked up from his Herbology book. “We aren’t there already, are we?”

“I don’t see the lights of the village, so we can’t be.” Ginny replied. A shadow moved by their window, and suddenly the lights went out.

Panic seized Aurora so strongly, she found it hard to breathe.

“Rory?” She heard Ginny’s worried voice beside her. The day light from the window wasn’t enough, not even close, and Aurora fought back tears as she reached into her bag and grabbed her wand. It was hard to focus while nearly hyperventilating, the screaming in her head making it hard to
even think. “Lu-lu-lumo.” She finally managed to light the tip, and while it wasn’t bright enough, it eased the urge to scream out loud.

“Oh,” Ginny gasped as she caught sight of Aurora’s face. “That’s why you never seemed to mind the jar of flames.”

A blush suffused her cheeks, shame mixing with embarrassment that was only tempered by the fact that Neville likely didn’t understand what Ginny was going on about.

“Think I saw Hermione in the car next to us.” He said, getting up and heading for the door. “She always knows what’s going on.”

Yes, Hermione. She wasn’t precisely the version of her mum the little girl inside her wanted at the moment, but she was a near thing. Why hadn’t her mother warned her about ….

“I’m coming with you.” Aurora had sprung from her seat, her eyes barely adjusted in the dark.

“Wait, I’m not staying in here alone.” Ginny said, and Aurora felt her hand clutched tight in Ginny’s as they managed to navigate their way out the car and down the short corridor to the next one. There was the murmur of talk from elsewhere, and the familiar sounds of Harry and Neville guided them to where they were going.

Someone collided with Aurora just as they were rounding for the door and caused her to stumble back into Ginny.

“Who’s that?” Hermione asked.

“It’s Rory and Gin.” Aurora replied.

“Neville?” Ginny asked.

“In here.” He said, sounding winded.

“Come in,” Hermione said, and Aurora felt her hand ushering her inside.

The tip of her wand was utterly pointless to see with, and as a result, Aurora’s foot made contact with someone else’s. She fell ungracefully into a lap.

“You can’t sit here, I’m here.” Harry replied, clearly having had enough of the situation already.

“It’s not like I knew you were there.” She half snapped.

“Sorry,” Harry said, and she felt his hand guiding her into the spot next to him.

“Quiet.” A hoarse voice commanded, and everyone in the car fell silent.

There was a crackling noise, and a blue fire ball lit the room, giving ease to the tension Aurora had been repressing since the darkness fell. The man’s face was scarred, and he looked down right haggard, but there was something in his presence that vaguely reminded Aurora of her father, and she felt at ease. Perhaps it was the fact they were close in age, or the man had an authority about him, even if it wasn’t as strong as her Dad’s. Either way, despite desperately wanting to ask who he was and why he was on the train, Aurora kept her mouth shut and watched as he maneuvered around everyone’s feet toward the door. “Stay where you are,” he said as he reached for the door handle.

Before he could reach it, the door opened, and something slunk inside.
Cold unlike she’d ever felt overcame her, and a sadness weighed her chest to the point that she felt she couldn’t breathe. Ginny, for she was sure that’s who had wedged in the seat beside her, was shaking terribly, and Harry slide off his seat onto the floor.

“Expecto Patronum!” The man said briskly, firmly, and the silver wisps Aurora had seen many times in her life brightened the room before a mighty wolf emerged and gave a silent howl before chasing off whatever it was in the doorway.

Moments later, the lights came back on, and the man was panting furiously. He pushed his hair off his face before turning to take in the lot of them.

He looked at Aurora as she wrapped her arms around a sobbing Ginny, and he reached into his pocket and pulled out a large bar of chocolate. Unwrapping it hastily, he broke off a piece and handed it to her sobbing friend. “Eat that, it will help.” He instructed, eyes lingering on Aurora a moment.

“Harry!” Hermione shouted, and she was down on the floor beside him in a moment, Ron following quickly. Neville stood to stand beside the man who looked at Hermione as if he was trying to figure out how he knew her.

“Bollocks.” Aurora said under her breath as she suddenly made a connection herself.

He was her father’s age, which meant he was also her mother’s age. And here in the same cabin was the same person twenty years younger.

“Professor?” Ron had asked just before Hermione gave Harry a hearty slap.

Harry startled into awareness, and after a quick explanation from Professor Lupin, as Aurora had come to know, everyone settled in for the last leg of the journey. No one spoke, and Aurora was fairly certain Ginny had drifted off at one point. The whole time, the same thoughts circled in Aurora’s mind: the new professor likely knew her mother, and Hermione was about to enter her last year at Hogwarts in this decade. All they needed now was that crazed mass-murderer from the posters that her father constantly sneered at to come near the castle and cause mayhem, and the year would just be an absolute breeze to get through.

———S———

September 1st, 1975

“Welcome, once again, to another new year at Hogwarts!” Professor Dumbledore greeted the students at the start of the feast.

Severus tried his absolute best not to roll his eyes. Yes, welcome. Maybe if you were in one of the three other houses. As it was, while the Headmaster addressed the school, he barely looked in the direction of the Slytherin table.

“I would like to remind everyone,” Professor Dumbledore continued, “that the forbidden forest is out
“Unless you have detention,” Rookwood grumbled. “Then you get to watch the great oaf lumber.”

“That was once,” Mulciber replied.

Severus smirked as the others chuckled a bit more chummily, but his heart simply wasn’t in it. He didn’t want to be with his Slytherin brothers, no matter how much he appreciated the mockery they made of Dumbledore, the idiot Gryffindors, or anyone else.

Where he wanted to be was on the other side of the Great Hall, beside the girl whom had her back to him at the moment. It wasn’t with Lily, who kept catching his eye and smiling, though it came to amaze him how swiftly things could change over a year.

“Mr Filch has added to the list of items banned from the castle, which has been posted in all your common rooms. And also, as Professor Jones has not returned to us this year due to a change in career ….” Dumbledore rambled.

“More like from embarrassment,” Regulus chimed in, earning some snickers from the others.

“… it is my pleasure to introduce to you your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Alastor Moody.”

“Fuck.” Avery said as the school gave a welcome applaud. There were a handful of Slytherins who didn’t join in, and another handful who looked to those who didn’t and clearly wondered if maybe they shouldn’t have either.

“What is it?” Severus asked, noting Mulciber and Rookwood exchanged dark and uneasy looks.

“Alastor Moody is an auror, and a damn good one.” Rookwood replied.

“But he has a vendetta against anyone with even the slightest interest in the Dark Arts,” Avery hissed. “And he especially doesn’t appreciate what the Dark Lord is trying to do to make our world better.”

“He’ll have it out for all us Slytherins.” Mulciber stated, the other seventh years nodding. “Rumor has it that he’s a dear friend of our illustrious headmaster and puts his trust in his opinion. And we all know how Dumbledore feels about Slytherin. You most of all, Snape.”

That was all too true, and a glance at the marauders, who blissfully left he, Hermione, and Lily alone on the train this year, just reminded him exactly how blatantly Dumbledore had favored his pet lions. They were already being rowdy and obnoxious, and Severus believed he could see the tension in Hermione’s shoulder blades as she had been seated so close to them.

But as Severus glanced up at the head table, he nearly smirked at the sight of Minerva McGonagall with pursed lips and a tight grip on her fork. She must have felt eyes on her, for she turned toward him and, upon catching his eye, gave a subtle shake of her head and an eye roll before she seemed to remember herself and where they were.

Smirking, Severus put his attention on the feast. Oh yes, this year was going to be different. A competent Defense Teacher, even if he was going to have it out for the Slytherins, and an adult ally among the Gryffindors.
I found myself writing more frequently lately, which is why there is an update so soon!
“Severus!” Hermione had heard Remus shout through the closed, unwarded door from where she’d sat in her husband’s office chair. They’d had a feeling that this was happen when Albus had announced who would be joining the staff just two days before the start of term, and Severus had been beside himself for too many reasons. This was one of them.

Hermione watched the door, noted the turn of the knob, and waited.

“Severus,” Remus burst in, not yet looking to the desk as he closed the door and set up silencing charms. “I need to ask you some questions I already know you’re not going to like.” Remus turned, and froze.

“Hello, Remus.” Hermione greeted him calmly with a gentle smile.

He remained stunned, staring at her. “Hermione.” He breathed as she got to her feet. She moved around the desk, and he instantly wrapped his arms around her. She returned the embrace, though not as tightly or with as much feeling. She’d missed Remus, of course. His years after the Potters’ death was a bit of a mystery for he barely kept in touch with anyone. But to Remus, this was more, and she was aware of it.

He eventually loosened his grip and pulled back, taking her in while still holding on to her loosely. “The years have treated you well.” He said. “Though I admit I … I am surprised to see you here.”

“Yes.”

“You know I wouldn’t have left because of that. I knew the truth, and even if he was to have stayed there longer than a couple weeks, I would have waited.” She said, stepping slightly further away from Remus now that she knew what he had hoped for.

“It would have been your right to leave him.” He said not unkindly. “Azkaban does things to a wizard, and you had a small child.”

“Which, I’m guessing, is the reason you’re actually in my husband’s office.” She replied, gently extricating herself from Remus’ hold.

His eyes flashed hurt at the mention of what Severus still was to her, his empty arms hanging at his side a moment before he nodded. “I … I didn’t think you had two children.”

“I do,” Hermione said, mirth threatening to break through. “But Leo is only eight, he won’t be to Hogwarts as a student for a few years yet.”

Remus frowned, melancholy completely wiped away by his confusion.
“Leo.” He repeated.

“Yes.” Hermione nodded.

Remus’ brow furrowed further. “Aurora Snape. She’s …”

“My eldest.”

“So, then who is Hermione Granger?”

Hermione took a deep breath, feeling out her body for the physical warnings as she thought of making the confession. There was nothing more than flutters, so she answered with a simple, “Me.”

Remus laughed. “Yes, that was you. But who is this girl in my defense class who has your name and looks so much like you?”

Her lips curled. “Me.” She repeated with emphasis.

Remus opened his mouth to say something, and then stopped. He dragged a hand over his scarred face, his eyes calculating, prepared to say something else, then seemed to think better of it.

The door opened, and Severus walked in, followed by Leo. He took one look at the scene before him, and then turned to his son. “To my rooms, or Aunt Min.”

“Can I see Rory?” Leo asked hopefully.

“Only if she happens to be traveling the halls in passing. We talked about this last year, you cannot go chasing after your sister while she’s at school. Now, my rooms or Aunt Min’s. And no, you cannot see Hagrid, there was an … incident earlier, and he’s a bit occupied at the moment.”

Leo pouted. “I’ll be in your rooms.” He said sulkily before dragging his feet toward the concealed door in the office. It appeared for him, and he went through and shut it behind him, allowing the door to vanish.

“He looks exactly as you did as a child.” Remus gaped after the boy.

“Yes.” Severus said. “But with luck, my reputation and that of his sister’s will prevent anyone from tormenting him simply because he exists.” Severus smoothly moved to stand next to Hermione, and she nearly rolled her eyes as she’d felt Severus’ arm slip about her waist and clutch her possessively.

“Now, what heart felt reunion did we interrupt?”

Remus blushed, “I was inquiring about Hermione Granger.”

“I married her fourteen years ago, I’m afraid you’re too late.” Severus countered.

“No. I don’t mean … I mean the one in my third year Gryffindor/Slytherin defense class.”

“Yes, I am aware.” Severus said. “And again, I married her fourteen years ago. And seeing as how, for her, this is before she’d met us in our youth, anything you say or do will not affect the outcome of those years. After all, she’s already lived them.” He said with a tilt of his head toward Hermione.

She smiled at him, her heart swelling with gratefulness and love that her husband interceded and told Remus bluntly what she likely couldn’t. Oh, she’d played the scenario out in her mind countless times, really believing she would tell Remus the details. But unless she pictured telling him after Hermione Granger vanished from Hogwarts, there were always flutters beyond simply telling him that she was her, and vice versa. And here was Severus, her partner and best friend even all these
years later, telling Remus what she never could and what he was not bound to keep secret.

Remus stared at them as though hit by a stunner before he burst out laughing, doubling over with the effort.

“I very nearly believed you.” He gasped out, but slowly sobered when he realized they weren’t joking. “But it’s not possible. How?”

Severus looked to Hermione, and she bit her lip with indecision.

He turned to Remus. “Exactly as she’d always told us: and accident. Any more than that, and I fear your Gryffindor brashness may try to stop her using the means by which the accident occurred. If you do that, who knows what will happen. After all, bad things happen to wizards who meddle with time, even if they did not travel through it themselves.”

Remus focused on Hermione. “So, she’s really you.”

“Yes.” She replied.

“And you went back in time knowing … knowing us. Knowing everything that was going to happen.” Remus asked, a hurt coloring his voice that broke Hermione’s heart.

“You have to understand, Remus,” She pleaded as she stepped out of Severus’ hold. She placed a hand on Remus’ arm, getting him to look at her even as his eyes glittered. “I couldn’t do or say anything that may have changed an outcome I was already aware of. Lily, James, Sirius, all those things … I was bound not to say anything. I couldn’t warn them about ….” Her heart gave a might shudder, and her breath caught so suddenly her knees gave out.

Two sets of arms caught her before she’d hit the ground.

“Easy, H.” Severus said gently, “Watch what you say.”

“Right,” She gasped, seeing understanding replace pain in Remus’ eyes.

“A vow.” He said, and she nodded. “So, you couldn’t even hint.” She shook her head, and Remus nodded, stepping away. He moved in a circle as Severus straightened Hermione and held her against him, running a hand soothingly up and down her spine as her breathing evened out and her heart grew steady again. “There is still one thing that’s troubling me.” He said, and when he faced them once again, she could tell the storm had passed, and whatever he was about to say was in jest. “If you knew us all as we are now, then what in Merlin’s name made you choose Severus?”

———H———

September 2nd, 1975

She wondered if she would always feel like this at the beginning of every September, or if there would ever be a reprieve from feeling her loss so acutely. Hermione had been fine when she and Severus had met Lily in Diagon alley a couple days before, and Lily had proclaimed she’d been made prefect.

But it hadn’t sunk in, not really, not until they were on the train and Lily proclaimed she had to go to
the prefect car for a while, and then do her rounds, and then she’d be back. Until, of course, they got
to the school and she would have to ride in the prefect carriage.

It should not have made her feel as though everything she had ever done was for naught, but when
faced with the reality that she would never actually make the goals she’d hoped for in Hogwarts:
prefect, head girl, top marks for all seven years attended, Hermione crumpled. What was the point,
really? Yes, a magical education was important. But now, well, she didn’t have the reputation to give
her the titles she’d longed for from her first read through of *Hogwarts: A History*. She would have
only been considered to have started in her fourth year, and while she was in the top five, she was
not at all certain she had been so academically successful as she’d been before. Or a couple decades
from now, however one was to look at it.

And her birthday was coming again. Sixteen. But how does one plant that flawlessly into a
conversation? Lily had managed last year, but it was a bit of a self-absorbed conversation, and
Hermione could never blatantly blurt it out. She was still quite certain that Delia and Bob hadn’t
found out when it was. Not that Hermione didn’t think they cared, but it wasn’t asked of her, and
after the year before ….

“So, I was thinking since we’re the Gryffindor prefects this year,” Lily said to Remus as she tossed
her hair over her shoulder, revealing the shiny prefect badge pinned to her collar. “We should do our
rounds together. I don’t feel like we have gotten to know each other well.”

“You could always hang around with us instead of the greasy git,” James inputted without being
asked. “You know you want to, Evans. You can even bring Granger along, if you really want to.”

Hermione didn’t even have the gumption to roll her eyes at him. She’d been pushing porridge around
in her bowl, trying not to allow herself to fall prey to her own pity party and failing spectacularly.

“I’d personally love it if she came along.” Sirius said, but Hermione still hadn’t bothered to lift her
head.

Instead, she dropped her spoon, picked up her bag, and slide off the bench. Without a word or
backward glance, she left the Great Hall.

Defense was the first class of the day, and while she had no desire what-so-ever to face the grisly
looking man whom she’d heard barking at students in passing on her way to breakfast, it was better
than being surrounded by reminders of what she’d lost.

A hand closed on her shoulder, and she stopped.

“You have been moping since we got on the train. I am well aware my company is not that riveting,
so our being separated by houses cannot possibly have you so morose.”

Her lips curled involuntarily. “Actually, I quite enjoy your company,”

“Yet we both know that’s not why you’re like this.” He gently turned her toward him, studied her
face. “It’s the accident, isn’t it? Something has brought it to the forefront.” Hermione nodded sadly,
eyes dropping to the floor. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“You would think it stupid.” She said, sniffing.

“I might. But that’s a risk you’re going to have to take, isn’t it?” He said with a shrug.

She considered it, peeking at him through her lashes. “I should have been a prefect.” She mumbled,
her heart palpating uncomfortably. “I was working to it. I would have gotten it, I’m sure, but ….”
She gasped, her breath catching as her heart gave a mighty lurch. It had been so long since she felt the vow restrict her that while they were merely warning signs they still took her breath away.

“Hermione, look at me.” Severus commanded, and her wide eyes shot to his. He put his other hand on her shoulder, tightening the grip he had on them. “Breathe. It’s not worth it. All it would have done was take away the time you’d have spent in the library or with a book, all so you could go around and catch idiots sneaking food. Or, as my mother suggested, shagging in open alcoves. And yes, there is a fancy bathroom, but what of it? Would you really want to share a bathroom with twelve pubescent wizards and eleven witches who would likely spend all morning in their applying their charms? Do you really want to get stuck with firsties asking inane questions or getting lost for the dozenth time?”

She shifted, “Well when you shine such a negative light on it.” She grumbled.

“What else would I be besides the eternal pessimist?” He asked with an air of boredom.

She snickered. “Severus Snape and a positive outlook. Yes, I can see how well those two would blend.”

He quirked a brow, amusement glinting in his eyes, but he never cracked a smile.

“Hey, Sev!” Lily came up behind him quite suddenly, dropping her arm around his shoulder and startling both he and Hermione. She noticed that as his left hand slipped from her shoulder, his wand had appeared in it as if a *finite* had been cast and canceled a concealing spell. Lily hadn’t seemed to notice any of this, studying his head as she was. “Did you do something with your hair? It’s different.”

Severus side stepped away from both of them, his right hand raised slightly as if he was about to touch it before he stopped himself. “No.” He said gruffly.

“Are you sure? It looks so good.”

Hermione actually looked at it, brow furrowed even as Severus’ looked at her with a hint of panic in his eyes.

“I honestly don’t see anything too different.” She said with a shrug. “It looks like it has since ….” She suddenly understood: it looked less greasy like it had each morning while he was staying with her, Bob, and Delia. By lunch it was oily again because of the work and the summer heat, but each morning, and even most nights, his hair had a silken look to it after emerging from the shower.

“Since when?” Lily asked, reaching out and fingering a raven wing lock.

“What are you doing?” Severus hissed, stepping away from her again.

Lily looked hurt, and perhaps a little confused. “Sorry, it just looked so soft.”

“I never gave you permission to touch it.” Severus said through his teeth.

Lily laughed. “Since when I have I needed permission to touch you, Sev?” She said, stepping up to him again, bumping him with her shoulder.

“We’re going to be late for class,” Hermione interrupted. “And I’m not sure about you two, but I really do not want to begin our year on the wrong side of Professor Moody.”

“Yes, it would be particularly unwise for me to do so.” Severus said, adjusting his new, leather
messenger bag before heading off in the direction Hermione had originally been moving.

The three walked into the Defense Against the Dark Arts with more than a little apprehension. Professor Moody was a bit scary looking, if Hermione was blunt with herself. There seemed to be a bit missing off his nose, and his hair looked like he hadn’t seen a brush in a decade. He stared at the students as they filed in, and seemed to be particularly focused on the Slytherins. He narrowed his eyes particularly on Severus as he was flanked by the two Gryffindor girls.

Hermione looked around the room, noting a couple Slytherins were looking at Lily as if they’d pitied her, though Hermione didn’t quite understand why. Loathing, well, she’d seen that look directed at Lily, especially from the older Slytherins. She’d seen the looks that spoke volumes of how they thought her lesser. Hermione had had a few of those herself in her own time.

She darted her gaze back to Moody to see if he noticed. If he did, he didn’t draw attention to it.

“This is Defense Against the Dark Arts,” He said in a clipped tone. “Defense starts with knowledge. Who can tell me why the Dark Arts is so addictive?” He looked around the room, and for the first time in her academic career, Hermione had absolutely no desire to raise her hand. She could feel Severus look at her in the corner of his eye, and she glanced at him briefly.

“You,” Professor Moody said, looking straight at Severus.

Severus stiffened.

“Well?” Professor Moody snapped, staring Severus in the eye and not blinking.

“The dark arts can be seductive,” Severus replied. “Its power can lure even the strongest wizard.”

“There’s a high,” Professor Moody nodded. “Makes a witch or wizard feel stronger than they are.” His eyes shot to Hermione, and she felt a niggle in her mind as though she’d forgotten something. “So how do we stop it?”

Hermione pulled her gaze away and looked around the room. Everyone seemed riveted, awaiting the know-it-all’s answer. “We can’t.” She whispered.

“Why not?” He asked.

“Because it is ever changing.” Severus answered for her, and she turned sharply toward him. He was confident, more so than he usually exuded in class. “Once someone believes they know how to put it to rest, a great darkness comes along.”

“So how do we defend ourselves?” Professor Moody asked, a hint of intrigue to his voice.

“As you said: knowledge.”

Professor Moody smirked, and it was a sight that made Hermione squirm in an effort to get away from it.

“We will learn to think like Dark Wizards, and through that, we learn to defend.” Professor Moody snapped his wand toward the black board, and words began to appear in an unsteady looking hand.

Hermione took notes and did her best to keep her head down and not draw attention to herself. She still felt Professor Moody’s eyes on her, and she wondered what may have been said or done in the short time she’d been in his presence that drew his attention.
“Of course, Snivellus knows all about the Dark Arts,” She heard Sirius whisper behind them. “He knew more hexes and curses than most seventh years.”

Severus stopped writing, his body tensing.

“He just hopes its powers of seduction are transferable to him. Merlin knows he’d never get anyone’s attention otherwise.” James added, getting a quiet, snort-like chuckle out of Sirius and Peter.

“You lot.” Professor Moody snapped, the room startling at once. “What are you gossiping about?”

“Merely the accuracy in which Sniv-Snape described the dark arts and their … tempting wiles.” Sirius said with a roguish grin that caused a few of the Gryffindors to chuckle uncomfortably and the Slytherins looking between angered and confused.

“Oh. Believe yourself immune to them?” Professor Moody asked. Before Sirius could allow any words to escape his open mouth, the Professor plowed on. “Because let me tell you: it doesn’t matter what house you were placed in at school. Great aurors have come from every one, but so have dark wizards.” He turned about in a half circle, looking to each person in the room. “Doesn’t matter what color tie you wear, it’s what you do that matters.” He looked at Sirius, squinting. “You’re a Black.”

“I am.” Sirius replied.

“Haven’t known a Black yet that wasn’t a little dark.” Moody shot back.

“I’m also the first to be sorted in a house other than Slytherin in centuries.” Sirius countered proudly.

“Just means you aren’t sly enough to know when to keep your mouth shut.” Professor Moody, turned his back, ignoring the snickers that came mostly from the Slytherins.

Severus smirked, and Hermione did when he had simply for its infectious nature.

The rest of the class went smoothly from there, even if the man was a bit abrupt and loud at times. Hermione was eager to escape and head off to Runes with Severus when the Professor stuck out his arm and caught her before she made it to the door. “You’re Granger?” He asked, and she merely nodded. “Stay after class.” He then looked to Severus. “You can go.”

“Can he stay?” Hermione asked quickly. Lily passed, looking confused but didn’t stop. Care for Magical creatures being too far from the Defense class to risk being late for eavesdropping.

Professor Moody looked unsure for a moment and glanced at the door as the last student left. “Wait outside.” He ordered gruffly. Severus did as he asked, and once he was past the threshold, the Professor flicked his wand and the door slammed shut.

“Dumbledore told me about you.” He cut to the chase. “About your knowledge of the future.”

“Oh?” Hermione asked, chewing the inside of her cheek to prevent herself from lashing out.

“Sometimes the things in your head aren’t as safe as you want them to be.” He gave a knowing smirk. “Like how much you fancy that Slytherin friend of yours.”

Hermione blushed to her roots. “I have no idea ….”

“It’s in your head, girl. I’m a shit Legillmens, but even I could peek around enough to pick up on that.” He then flicked his wand at the door, and revealed Severus standing in the door way, arms
crossed and his eyes narrowed. “You. In.” Moody said, and Severus did as instructed. The door slammed shut again. “I was telling Granger here how her mind isn’t safe. You, though, you got some walls up. You’re a natural, and I think you might be able to help.”

“With what?” Severus asked uncertainly and seeming more than a bit off-put by the idea of someone rooting through his mind.

“Occlumency.”

September 1st, 1993

“Rory,” Harry said from a few seats down, and Aurora turned her attention toward him. “Why does your Dad seem to especially hate Professor Lupin?”

If Aurora were quite honest, she hadn’t really been looking at her Dad. In fact, she’d been trying really hard not to think of the possibility that her Dad did know Professor Lupin, and therefore the possibility of everything going sideways when it came to Hermione Granger’s presence. She didn’t want to see if there was any familiarity there.

She had to laugh when she seen what Harry referred to as hatred.

“He doesn’t, but he’s not happy about his being here.” She said, and when the confused looks of all the nearby Gryffindors were suddenly turned toward her, she chuckled again. The food appeared, but no one was going for it just yet. Apparently everyone wanted a chance to learn how to speak Snape. “If my Dad really, truly hates someone, he doesn’t even acknowledge their presence. You may have noticed last year how he just pretended Lockhart wasn’t here at all? Unless it was necessary, like dueling club.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione mumbled, looking at her plate with a light blush. Of course she noticed anything pertaining to Lockhart.

“Yes, well, that’s exactly the signs that Dad hates someone. I would say that, if anything, his presence is not as welcome as it could be. Aside from that, I don’t know.” She shrugged and started helping herself to the meal before her.

Harry and Ron looked apprehensive, but Hermione gave a swift nod as if to say it made perfect sense.

Aurora glanced up at the table, and noted her Dad poking at his food and watching Professor Lupin suspiciously. Feeling eyes on him, his gaze shot to hers, widening ever so slightly. “Come see me.” He mouthed, and Aurora nodded her understanding.

Aurora made her way through the castle toward her father’s rooms in the dungeons. It was past
curfew, but since the feast went to curfew, it was kind of hard to see her father beforehand.

She was just approaching the staircase leading to his room when someone rounded the corner, and she gave a might yelp.

“Aurora!” Madam Pomfrey clutched her chest.

“Sorry, Aunt Poppy.” Aurora whispered.

“What in the blazes are you doing out of bed and wandering the halls?” She demanded, hands on Aurora’s shoulders as if she didn’t know whether to pull her closer or shove her back in the direction of the tower.

“Dad said he wanted to see me.” She replied, keeping her voice low. “It seemed like it was important.”

Poppy gave a sharp intake of breath and frowned. She mumbled things under her breath that didn’t seem pleasant, and then let her shoulders sag. “Let me walk you to his rooms, then.”

One hand came off Aurora’s shoulder, the other gliding along Aurora’s back so that her arm was secured around her shoulders. Aurora allowed Poppy to guide her down the door and even knock for her. It was likely because of firmer pound Poppy gave that her father’s deep voice rumbled a neutral “Enter”.

Poppy gave Aurora a gentle push inside, and then followed before passing her to stand in the sitting room with hands on her hips.

“Severus Tobias Snape!” She said sternly.

Oh, well, this was going to be interesting. Even her mother never used her father’s middle name when she was angry with him. Aurora scooted to stand just inside the room.

“I know exactly why you have called your daughter down here, and I know full well you were made to not reveal that information. So, were you willing to kill yourself to tell her, or were you going to hint around it?” Poppy scolded an unaffected Severus Snape much to Aurora’s amusement.

“I was merely going to warn her to be extremely weary of our new professor, particularly around the time when it’s best to pick most potions ingredients.”

“Why do I need to be careful around Professor Lupin on the full moon?” Aurora asked with a tilt of her head as Poppy huffed and crossed her arms.

“No reason.” Her father said as he stood and moved to the bookshelf, running his fingers along the spines. “I never did take Care for Magical Creatures,” He said absently.

“Severus.” Poppy warned again.

“Dad?” Aurora said.

He turned toward her. “You’re nearly as voracious a reader as your mother. I’m sure if you were to ask her younger counterpart if you might have a glance through the third year Defense text book, she would gladly allow it. So long as you handle it with the utmost care. I think you would find a chapter in the book quite … enlightening.”

“’Kay,” She said, glancing at Poppy who still seemed annoyed but satisfied that her Dad didn’t say
what she clearly thought he was going to.

“Now, get to bed.” He said, shooing her away in a clear sign that he meant in Gryffindor tower and not in his rooms. She was just at the door with Poppy following when she heard, “And three points from Gryffindor for being out of the tower after curfew.” When Aurora stopped, whirling around to argue, he smiled. “I said come see me, I never said it had to be tonight.”

———A———

**September 2nd, 1993**

“What are they going on about?” Ginny asked as she and Aurora entered the Great Hall for lunch. Hermione, Harry, and Ron where going at it in hissing tones.

“Professor Trelawney predicted Harry’s gonna die.” Seamus replied.

Aurora snorted, “Trelawney has predicted my parents’ divorce for as long as I can remember.”

“Sorry, know he’s your dad and all, but still find it hard to wrap my brain around the fact someone actually married the great bloody bat.” Seamus said before nervously glancing at the head table.

“What else did she say?” Ginny asked as they went about getting their food.

“Said that Hermione had no future.” Seamus replied, and Aurora froze mid reach.

“She couldn’t have possibly said that.” Ginny said with a snort. “Hermione? Lauded as the brightest witch of her our age? No future.”

Aurora shifted, appetite leaving rapidly.

“Said that Hermione would not see the end of the year.”

Aurora let out a mirthless laugh, then resumed eating. While Ginny shifted uneasily, she said. “My parents have been together for something like sixteen years. Trelawney may get the odd prediction right, but for the most part she just has wishful thinking. Likely, Hermione will drop the course and, therefore, not see the end of the year.”

“Suppose that makes sense,” Seamus agreed just as Hermione slammed a book open, sending bits of food toward Ron.

“We have a free period after this.” Ginny said, pulling Aurora’s attention away from the trio. “Want to pop up to the common room? Play some Exploding Snap with me and Colin?”

Aurora groaned. “Fine, just don’t brag too much when you annihilate me, alright?”

Ginny smirked wickedly. “No promises.”

———H———
September 2nd, 1975

“‘It seems … complicated.’” Severus said as he and Hermione huddled under the birch tree by the black lake looking over the book they took out from the library. Madam Pince was not best pleased to see the loan happen, as she never was when a book left the library. But since it was them, Severus with a good report and Hermione swiftly earning one, she let it go with only half the annoyance she usually had.

“It seems nearly impossible.” Hermione sighed.

“And why does Professor Moody want you to keep your mind hidden?” Severus asked with only the slightest inflection. It was almost as if he knew the answer and was merely seeing if Hermione would tell him the truth. Which, really, she couldn’t if she wanted to.

“Probably because of my origins, and the reason I’m here now.” She answered. The mixture of truth and vagueness guaranteed her friend would not detect deceit while preventing her even the slightest symptoms of the vow.

Severus hummed in acceptance. “‘That I can believe,’” He mumbled, and Hermione’s lips twitched with satisfaction. “It will be a challenge, that’s for certain. But it will be a useful skill. Imagine being able to control your every reaction to every stimulus?’” He turned to her, his black eyes locking on to hers. “One could appear calm and in control in a situation that may have left them a stuttering, flubbering mess. You could feel deeply for someone, and they would only know if you allowed them to. Imagine never having to worry about having your feelings hurt, because they were tucked away behind a wall where no one could touch or manipulate them.”

Hermione hoped that the sun was at the proper angle for her to explain away the slight reddening of her cheeks. Her heart didn’t know if it wanted to soar or shrink, burst with the affection she’d had for him, or drop down to her feet to hide everything she felt.

“It would certainly ….” She found herself at a loss for what to say, and his not allowing her gaze to falter certainly didn’t help. “It would likely prevent a lot of heartache, I think.”

Severus snorted, finally looking away and breaking the spell he had over her. Hermione blinked rapidly, hoped he didn’t notice the slight heave to her chest as she caught her breath.

“And what are you two up to?” Lily asked as she came around the tree and sat on the other side of Severus.

Ah, yes, of course. How could she have forgotten? Who had hurt Severus the year previous by standing him up. Yes, he’d seemed to have lost his romantic interest in Lily, but if he was a natural, as Moody pointed out, he’d have already been able to control that, wouldn’t he? He’d be able to repress all the strong emotions she’d caused him, the pain of the rejection.

Jealousy welled in Hermione unchecked, and she shifted away from the pair so that her back was turned away from them.

“To you both?” Lily asked. “I thought he’d only asked Hermione to stay.”
“He did. She asked if I could join her. After a brief conference, he allowed it.”

“So, whatever it is Professor Moody is asking, he doesn’t think she can do it alone. He thinks she’ll need your brilliant mind.”

“Why are you doing this, Lily?” Severus asked with annoyance. The tone perked Hermione’s ears, and she turned her head to hear them better.

“Doing what?” She asked.

“The compliments to my looks and my mind? The latter which you haven’t done in a while, and the former which you never have.”

“Oh, well, can’t I just notice when my friend does something to make himself more … interesting?”

“Interesting?”

“Attractive.”

“Attractive?” The condescension in Severus’ tone had Hermione shifting back to where she’d been before so she could see what was going on.

Lily had stretched across the grass in such a way that she was propped over Severus’ outstretched legs at the knee. She was smiling coyly, her long hair cascading behind her and pooling on the ground.

“You can’t say that you haven’t made any effort. You look healthier, your clothes fit better.” She said, gesturing to him.

“And that makes me worth your attention, now, does it? I have come a modicum closer to the likes of Potter and Black, so now I am worthy of notice.”

“Don’t be like that, Sev.” Lily said, the smile fading entirely. “You were always worth my notice. We’re friends, best friends, and have been since we were kids. But you’ve changed a bit, and it’s for the better.”

“Well, miracles do happen when one can afford things for the first time in one’s pitiful existence.” He sneered. “And I believe the health you are referring to comes from hard work away from the slums.”

“What did you do all summer, anyway? I never got the chance to ask you on the train. You were missed, you know. It wasn’t quite the same without you around. Tuney was near impossible to deal with, and apparently she’s got a boyfriend now.” Lily smiled up at Severus, waiting as he remained silent for a while.

“I worked.” He said.

“You went to stay with Hermione to work?” Lily finally looked to Hermione. “When you have someone to your house for the summer, you’re supposed to have fun not put them to work.” She laughed.

“What makes you think it was Hermione’s choice?” Severus asked. “Mr McGonagall offered us to work for the vegetation portion of our potion’s kit, and if we did so beyond that, we were paid. It would be foolish to turn such an offer down, especially when it comes with free knowledge.”
“And a bowtruckle.” Hermione interjected.

“I was not allowed to keep Bowie, and we both know it.” He smirked.

“I thought you said you would name him Ziggy?”

“I said I would consider it if I could acquire one. I had not.”

“Alright, fine. Wait, free knowledge?” At this she spun to sit on her knees, hands on her hips.

“Exactly how did you acquire this?”

The smirk grew. “You were the one who chose to work on the flower beds and the cooking herbs. I, however, went with Bob into the more potion-oriented area. I asked, he answered. You live with him, you could have done the same thing yourself.”

“Well forgive me if I didn’t exactly want to ply him with questions about his job when he comes home to relax.” She said with put on petulance, and Severus let out a snort.

“Anything you could share with us, Sev?” Lily asked.

“I could,” He replied with a single nod. “But it was more or less ingredients or uses far beyond what we’ll have here.”

“Ah,” Lily said, a knowing glint in her eye. She smirked smugly, glancing briefly at Hermione before she got up off the grass. “I wish I could stick around, but McGonagall wanted to see Remus and me for something, so I will have to catch up with you in potions.” She looked down at Severus as she brushed off her robes. “Would you like to be my lab partner today?”

He tilted his head to meet her gaze. “No,” He said bluntly. He didn’t elaborate.

Lily turned her hurt gaze to Hermione, mouthing the word ‘please.’

Instantly Hermione understood what Lily wanted.

“T’ll partner with you, if you like.” She said while holding back the grin that tugged at her lips as Lily’s eyes widened. “Though that means that Marlene or Alice would likely have to work on their own as I doubt that Severus would be able put up with them. Or worse, one of marauders. Can you imagine one of them working with him?”

“Remus isn’t all that bad.” Lily said with a tinge of hope.

“It won’t happen.” Severus said firmly, returning his attention to the book in his lap. “We have not been lab partners for three years. I can only imagine you’re now looking for us to pair up once more because Slughorn will begin to notice that perhaps you weren’t quite the natural you seemed to be the first two years.”

Lily’s jaw dropped, “That was cruel, Sev.” She managed to say after a time.

He glanced up at her. “If you say so.”

Lily’s face pinched as her hands turned to fists. In a flash, she stormed off, red hair flapping behind her.

When she was out of hearing range, Hermione said, “It actually was quite mean.”

Severus sighed, his shoulders dropping and his body relaxing as if he’d been incredibly tense while
Lily was around. “I am … uncomfortable with how she’s been since the end of last term. The way she behaved in the park, the way she clutched my arm in Diagon Alley, her insistence on cramming into the space next to me on the train. She’d been distancing herself from me for the past two, maybe three years, and suddenly it’s as though we are first years again.”

“But …,” Hermione chewed her lip, glancing to where Lily had taken off to, debating if she should say anything. She glanced at Severus, seeing him watching her intently, and she blushed. “Never mind,” She said, losing her bravery once more.

She wanted to offer an out, to say that he could go with Lily and say she’d wanted a new partner. She wanted to offer him a chance to say no again, to affirm that it was her that he wanted to be with. But Hermione couldn’t, she simply couldn’t. The fear of rejecting her was simply too great to overcome when her feelings for him still seemed so new and raw. And he would reject her, she was sure. He’d liked Lily, was infatuated with someone so much prettier, warmer, friendlier than Hermione was.

Her only advantage was her brain, and she knew it.
Aurora stomped up to the hospital wing after supper without a single care who saw or what they had to say about it. She could feel her loose curls sparking and growing tighter, nearing a copy of Hermione Granger’s curls when she wasn’t angry. Aurora’s eyes were narrowed, the deep brown growing black like her father’s. And the scowl on her face was such a perfect combination of both her parents that even seventh years stepped aside with fear in their eyes as she passed.

Without hesitating, she entered the infirmary and marched straight to Draco’s bed. The prat was awake, a book opened on his lap, on leg propped up to help keep it open. He was angled in such a way that he wouldn’t see who was coming in.

“It’s about time dinner got here.” He started to say with that Malfoy sneer. “You what until I tell my father-”

He never finished the sentence. The very instant he turned his head, Aurora threw a punch hard enough that Draco went tumbling over the other side of the bed.

“You stupid, arrogant prat.” She spat, and Draco scrambled as best he could with one arm, pain mingling with surprise as he did his best to face her. “Do you realize what you’ve done? Has your head been jammed so far up your arse that you really have no common sense, no human decency left?”

“What are you talking about, Rory?” Draco asked, finally managing to get to his feet. It had been the first time he’d referred to her in a familiar, colloquial manner since the Colin Creevy petrification the year before. Since then it had been Snape, or Aurora.

“What I am talking about is your belief that because you’re a bloody Malfoy that you are superior to everyone and everything. I know you know that you just need to bow to a Hippogriff because of that time we ran into one in the wild. Remember? With Mum? And I know she warned you very, very thoroughly the kind of damage it can do if you don’t show it the respect you deserve. But no. No, the mighty Draco Malfoy had to risk his neck, which Buckbeak easily could have ripped open, all to show up Harry Potter. Or maybe show off for him, because frankly I’m beginning to wonder.” Draco paled at the implication, and while it registered to her, Aurora continued. “And bragging to your imbecilic house mates about how you could get Hagrid fired ….”

“What do you care about the bloody oaf?” Draco demanded, his superiority coming back to him.

“I care because Hagrid has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I practically spent the first five years of my life living at Hogwarts. I have walked these grounds more than any seventh year, and Hagrid is practically an uncle to me.”

“He’s a half blood.” Malfoy sneered, practically spitting the words.
“So am I!” Aurora shouted.

At once, it felt like all the air had left her lungs and her heart stopped. She didn’t mean to say it. She’d known her proper blood status since she was four years old and had heard the dreaded “M” word tossed around by Uncle Lu when he hadn’t realized she could hear.

Her father had noticed, though, the observer he was. He’d spotted her in the shadows of the hallway heading toward the washrooms from the playroom down the hall. He acted like nothing had happened, not giving even the slightest hint she was there. He explained after what it meant. “It’s a terrible word for people like your mother,” He had said. “Muggleborns. The people that use that word are typically of only wizarding blood and believe that they are better for it. Daddy has to pretend to like them, and even agree with them. But I do not.”

“Why do you have to pretend to hate mummy?” She had asked him, confused and a little hurt.

“I don’t.” He had said, tapping her nose. “Mummy pretends she has only wizarding parents so no one tries to hurt her, with words or otherwise. But we must not tell. Remember what I told you about secrets?” Aurora had nodded. “It is a big one. I am a half blood.”

“Because of Nana?” Aurora had asked.

“Yes. My father was a muggle. Mummy’s mother and father were both muggle. She is muggleborn, and you are a half blood, because you have magical and muggle blood.” He had explained. “But we must not tell.”

She never had to say she was a pureblood, it had always been assumed. It hadn’t really even occurred to her that her blood status actually mattered until last year, and she intended to keep it a secret.

But now she blurted it out, her emotions out of control and allowing her anger to stop common sense.

Draco was utterly confused, stammering and stammering as Aurora shook with fear and adrenaline.

“How?” Draco finally asked. “I know Uncle is a half blood, but he renounced his filthy muggle heritage. And besides, to be a half blood, Aunt H would have to be ….?” The pieces finally seemed to fall into place. “She’s a mudblood.”

“Is she?” Aurora asked with a shaky voice. “Is she really? Because until two minutes ago she was your pureblood Aunt with a great family heritage. A witch you looked up to and admired.” Draco frowned, looking away as if trying to reconcile the idea as much as he was trying to separate his Aunt into two people. “I’ll leave you that to think about.” She said in a clipped manner as she tried to keep herself together.

The Aurora Snape that made her way from the hospital wing to her father’s rooms was a much less terrorizing one. No one paid her any mind as she went down to the dungeons.

She opened the door to her father’s office, finding it empty but the doors to his rooms revealed, and opened a crack. Laughter was coming through it, but the sound didn’t register to Aurora as she approached the door and pushed it open.

It led immediately into the sitting room, the hallway to the bedrooms and the loo on the opposite end, next to the door that led to her father’s private labs.

Her brain told her she should be surprised to see Professor Lupin sitting in the arm chair, an empty
plate near him on the coffee table and a goblet of wine in his hand. She also realized she should be surprised her mother was on the couch next to her father, for they had never visited her Dad this early in the year. She noted Leo in the corner reading.

“Rory?” Her father’s deep voice cut her revere, and seeing his gentle, questioning gaze on her, the concern on her mother’s face, made Aurora’s own visage crumple.

“I made a terrible mistake.” She chocked out as the tears sprang free.

“What happened, Poppet?” her mother asked gentle, and through the tears, she noted the blurred image of her mother coming toward her. “Anything that happened, you can say in front of Remus,” Her mother said gently as she wrapped her arms around Aurora’s shaking form. “He’s a friend, and he knows at least that I am also here at Hogwarts as a student. So what ever happened, I’m sure it’s fine for him to hear as well.”

So Aurora told them, as much as she could between sobs. And while it wasn’t a long story by any means, it felt as if it were.

“I’m s-so s-s-sorry.” She hiccupped. “I d-d-didn’t mean … it’s just ….”

“Calm, Aurora.” Her father said, stern but not unkindly. Aurora attempted a deep breath that turned into a shudder. “Hermione, I think it’s time that we ….”

“Why don’t you tell her, love.” Her mother suggested. “It would be best if she heard it from you without Remus or I trying to give our perspectives or thoughts.”

“I can leave if this is a family matter.” Professor Lupin offered.

“Stay. You and H have a lot to catch up on, I’m sure. And I’m afraid Leonidas is still too young to hear this anyway.”

“I’m eight!” Leo declared, indignant.

“And your sister is older, and this is the first time she’s hearing it.” Her mother had chided with a hint of amusement while Aurora felt her father put his arm around her shoulders and guide her toward the lab.

Aurora hadn’t been in the room often, but with the exception of twice, it was never when he was brewing. He shut the door behind them and guided her toward a stool. Wood, but comfortable, likely because of cushioning charms, and always just the right height for her to see the bench once seated, but easy for her to climb on. Her father sat beside her, turning so he was facing her. The first thing he did was produce a handkerchief, handing it over so that she could dry her eyes.

With a serious, resigned sigh, he placed his left arm on the work bench with the palm of his hand facing up. Running his fingers along the buttons, he opened first his frock coat, and then the cuff of the shirt beneath. She knew what was coming as he rolled up his sleeve, but even still she flinched at the sight of the skull and snake on his skin.

“You are a very smart, brave girl.” He said. “But much like your mother, your emotions get the best of you. It’s human. It’s normal. You, I believe, do have some of my innate ability to hold things in, but even I erupt once in a while, so do not hold blame over yourself for what happened.

“But now it is more important than ever that you have a full understanding of why your mother chose to hide her muggle heritage when she fell through time, why it is still necessary for you to pretend you are pureblood, and why you should really attempt to sway Draco’s opinions while he is
away from his father’s influence, and before Hermione Granger disappears from Hogwarts forever.”

“What’s that got to do with your tattoo?” Aurora asked in a small, quiet voice.

“It’s the Dark Mark, Rory. It is the symbol of the Dark Lord, and a sign that I am one of his most valued Death Eaters, and a member of his inner circle. It is the mark of a man who believed in blood supremacy, and Dark Magic.”

“So why do you have it?” She asked.

“Because I was, am, a spy. Because when I was only a few years older than you, I’d suddenly caught the attention of all the wrong people, and someone sought to use that for the greater good. I had been swayed from temptation to even contemplate honestly joining their cause, just so I could have a place to belong, very early on in my fourth year. It’s not all good, but it’s not all bad. Are you ready?” He asked.

And after a moment, Aurora nodded.

———H———

September 9th, 1975

“Snape, Granger, stay back a moment.” Moody barked as the class began to pack up from their lecture.

Lily frowned briefly before her lips curled into a smile. “Picnic by the tree.” She said, touching Severus’ arm briefly before giving Hermione a wave and following the rest of the class out the door. Moody watched them until the last one hurried out the room, then a flick of his wrist had the door slamming shut.

“You read the book?” He asked in his typically snappy tone. Hermione and Severus both nodded. “Good. We meet after dinner, seventh floor corridor.”

“Professor?” Hermione started to say, face crinkling in confusion.

“And make sure no one sees ya.” He said briskly, then gestured toward the door. “Go.”

Hermione and Severus left.

“Why does the seventh-floor corridor ring a bell?” Hermione asked, half speaking to herself and half asking Severus.

“I’m sure at some point, in some book, you read something about it. Now that mental index of yours is running through the library you’ve not doubt absorbed and retained, trying to find the answer.” Severus glanced at her, a slight twitch of his lips.

Hermione grinned back at him, about to say something equally backhanded when she found herself suddenly falling the the ground. Her bag, open without her realizing, launched her books across the stone floors, her ink pots and quills following suit.

She felt the sensation of magic surround her just a moment before she felt Severus’ hand on her shoulder. Turning her head and shifting slightly, she noticed he had his wand out, pointed in such a
way that it made her think of hold an arm out in defense. She was about to ask what he was doing when a flash of light dispersed in front of Severus as if ….

“A shield,” She whispered, shifting around and finding her legs were stuck together. Pulling out her wand, she whispered the counter curse before getting on her knees beside Severus. “Where are they?” She asked.

Hermione noted he was indicating the direction they came from just before another blast of light flashed before them.

“Snivellus is being a bloody coward.” Peter laughed. “Hiding behind a shield.

“Come on, Snivellus. We know you’re just itching to fight back.” Sirius taunted.

“Oh no, he’s gone soft.” James jumped in on the taunting, all of them still unseen. “New robes, actually cleaning his hair? I think he’s actually attempting to assimilate being human.”

Hermione shot her wand out, sending the first hex that came to mind in the direction James’ voice came from. It hit the wall, making a loud cracking sound on impact.

“What’s going on here?” Remus’ voice came from behind, and Hermione glanced over her shoulder to see his confusion as he looked between where she and Severus were crouched.

“Ah! Moony!” Sirius cheered. “Just in time to join the fun.”

Remus’ confusion vanished, replaced by shame as he came forward and stood in front of Severus. “What sort of fun were you thinking, Padfoot?” He asked, crossing his arms and looking around the corridor.

Seeing the opportunity, Hermione reached for Severus’ hand and tugged it lightly. Eyes still trained to where Remus and the other Marauders were, he nodded once. Slowly, they got to their feet, walking backward a couple steps before turning. It was only when her back was turned that Hermione allowed the wince.

“Remus, they’re getting away!” Peter whined.

“Good.” Remus said, and then added just before they turned to corner, “Wait for me outside the class. I’ll explain to Professor Babbling why you were held up.”

Once out of sight from the marauders completely, Hermione hissed through her teeth in pain. Adrenaline and being on the ground prevented her from realizing how hard she hit her left knee when the leg-lock jink hit. Now, trying to walk on it, she was limping painfully.

Without a word, Severus shifted his messenger bag and reached in one hand, pulling out a bottle from within. Hermione took it, noting the blue color.

“I don’t think I need your extra-strength pain reliever.” She replied.

“You’re tugging my hand violently with every step. Weak as your knee may actually be, you won’t limp quite so badly if there is no pain.” He said, gesturing to the bottle. “Take it.”

Reluctantly letting go of his hand, Hermione paused and leaned against the wall so she could unstopper the potion and swallow it back. Like so many potions, it tasted vile.

“Tweaked the formula, but couldn’t make it more palatable?” She asked through a grimace.
“Adding anything to make it taste better would compromise the effectiveness.” He replied, taking back the bottle. “Bob never complained.”

Hermione snorted, about to retort, when Remus rounded the corner. He took in the scene, glancing between Severus and Hermione, then to the bottle in Severus’ hand, and the way Hermione was holding her leg.

Hands balling into fists, Remus said, “I should have done more than take away points.”

Severus snorted. “Yes, well, I do not believe there is that much power behind a prefect badge.” He sneered, offering his arm to Hermione so they could continue on to Runes. She took it, ignoring the happy lurch her heart made when she slipped her hand into his elbow and suppressing the grin that wanted to explode onto her face.

“I should talk to them.” Remus said, falling into step with them on Hermione’s other side. “Tell them they properly need to stop. And not just with you, with everyone. But especially you.”

“That may have been helpful five years ago,” Severus said. “But you were too busy silently following the lot and getting in a pot shot or two.”

Remus would have likely replied if it hadn’t been for them arriving to the classroom door.

As Severus escorted Hermione to their seats, Remus made good on his word to explain to Professor Babbling what had happened. What was more, his annoyance hadn’t faded from his tone as he spoke, causing a murmur of interest through the fifth-year class. It wasn’t just Gryffindors and Slytherins, but the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws as well. And with the marauders having picked on people from all the houses, the appearance of one breaking rank seemed to get attention.

———H———

While James, Peter, and Sirius were still busy interrogating Remus over his perceived faux pas earlier in the day, Hermione and Severus slipped out of the great hall and made their way to the seventh-floor corridor.

“How’s your knee?” He asked her as they climbed the stairs at a pace that was likely slower than he’d like.

“Well I’m still not feeling any pain,” She replied with a wry smirk. “But I can feel it’s weakened and bruised.”

“And you haven’t gone to Pomfery because …?”

“Exactly when would I have? Our day is not exactly leisurely. Runes, Potions and transfiguration after lunch. Though I suppose I could have gone up to the hospital wing during that break, it’s not as though Lily would have missed me.”

“No, I don’t believe she would have.” Severus replied, and Hermione could not tell from his tone if he was pleased or annoyed by that.

They continued up the stairs, nothing more said on other subject, and the silence continued comfortably until they reached the seventh-floor corridor. They paused and looked around before
advancing a bit further.

“I don’t see Moody anywhere.” Severus noted. “And I somehow doubt he wants us to do these ‘lessons’ in the open, as it were.”

“I swear I know something about the seventh-floor corridor!” Hermione said, annoyed at her own brain for not pulling forth the information she wanted when it mattered.

“As we established earlier,” Severus said, looking up and examining the tapestries. He did so with a scrutinizing gaze, much like true aficionados of art work while in a gallery. Hermione turned away as best she could, pounding her forehead with her fist in a pathetic attempt to bring the knowledge to the forefront. She paced, slowly, and only for a short time as her knee felt like buckling.

She looked up and saw a door that hadn’t been there before.

“Severus,” She said simply, gazing at the door as a smile pulled on her lips and the answer came tumbling to the front of her mind. “How could I have been so stupid?” She asked with a shake of her head as he came up beside her. “Hogwarts: A History. I have read it more times than I can recall, and yet I’d still completely forgotten about the Come and Go Room.”

“How could I have been so stupid?” He asked.

“The Come and Go Room.” She repeated. “Also known as the Room of Requirement. The room is supposed to pop up where it’s needed most and provide the person or persons in need exactly what they require. A bedroom if exhausted, a medical room if injured,”

“A loo when one has too much pumpkin juice at breakfast.” Severus added in a slightly mocking tone. “Can you explain anything without sounding like an utter swot?”

“Insufferable Know-It-All, remember?” She said, looking over at him.

His smirk made her chest tighten. “You make it impossible to forget.” He turned his attention back to the door. “So, do you think Moody is beyond those doors, or do you think the room has simply decided we are in need of something we hadn’t realized?”

“I say we find out.” Hermione said, limping toward the door.

“Yes, let’s just walk right into a room that popped out of nowhere, and could reappear somewhere else entirely, if it reappears at all.” Severus grumbled.

“Don’t want to be stuck in a room alone with me, Severus?” Hermione said without realizing. Her hand was on the door knob, twisting and pulling the door open before it sank in, and she blushed horribly as her mind realized how horribly it could have been misinterpreted. She was incredibly thankful, then, that Severus would not reply for on the other side of the door was Professor Moody, looking quite annoyed with being kept waiting while equally content in his big, plush arm chair.

“Took you long enough.” He said gruffly.

“It was a bit hard to locate a room that apparently pops up where it wants to.” Severus replied, stilted but not completely disrespectful.

“That’s myth.” He said, and Hermione’s face crumpled. “The Room of Requirement is always right here, seventh floor. While we’re here, no one can find us unless we want them to. We are undetectable.” He then pointed to two chairs that seemed to appear from nowhere, each turned to face Moody. “Sit.” He gestured, and Hermione and Severus both did so. “You read the book, I don’t
need to tell you the particulars of the ‘what’ or ‘why’.”

“Actually, Professor Moody, I would quite like to know the why.” Severus interrupted smoothly. “Hermione has reason, that I can understand. But why teach me such a skill?”

“You’re a natural. Would be stupid to waste a skill. More so, you’re friends with her, she trusts you. You might help her if she gets stuck.” Moody replied as casually as he seemed to be able to. “Now, both of ya, clear your mind. Picture a wall. Don’t let me break it.”

Without warning, Moody flicked his wrist and bore his stare down on Hermione.

She felt that niggle in her mind she had on the first day of his class much, much stronger. It was verging on painful as he seemed to eat away at the feeble attempt at the wall she put up. Like a damn breaking, all her thoughts and emotions of the last twenty-four hours were there for Moody to peruse.

“Knew those bastards were lying.” He grumbled before he shot his gaze to Severus.

Hermione blinked, the pain easing slowly as she watched Severus’ and Moody’s mental battle. There was a slight crease between Severus’ eyes, and his hands were in white knuckled fists. His cheeks began to pink before he grunted and turned away.

Moody chuckled. “You basically got it down.” He said, “but that wall needs to be impenetrable.”

“Why do I need one to begin with.” Severus asked through gritted teeth.

“I was just in your head, boy.” Moody replied. “You know as well as I do why it would be wise to keep what you know locked up.”

Hermione frowned, glancing between Severus, who refused to look at her, and Moody who appeared completely pleased with himself.

“Not gonna go after your mind again tonight.” He said. “Best thing you can do is meditate. Don’t scoff, boy. Not enough wizards sit in silence and focus on what’s inside. You focus on your mind, you focus on building something up, it happens.” He then hoisted himself up. There were cracks and pops as his body shifted. “Stay here, focus, no chit chat.” He limped stiffly toward the door.

“You’re leaving?” Hermione asked, glancing at Severus to see a matching, furrowed brow on him.

“Dumbledore’ll wonder where I’ve been.” And without another word, Moody ambled out the door.

They were both silent for a long while before Severus said, “He doesn’t want Dumbledore to know.”

“No,” Hermione replied.

“Why?” Severus looked to her and locked eyes with her as Moody had, though there was no niggle in her mind as though someone was trying to enter it. “Why hide this from the headmaster? Especially if it involves you. He didn’t deny that he felt you had a reason to want to hide whatever’s in that brilliant mind of yours, but why not involve the headmaster? Why bring us to an unplottable room when he was just going to leave us anyway?”

Hermione’s mouth opened as her throat threatened to close. No, she couldn’t mention the marauders map, apparently that knowledge was not meant to be shared for whatever reason. She didn’t even want to attempt the truth. So, in he the end, her shoulders sagged as she shook her head. Severus’ eyes narrowed as he turned his head away with a thoughtful tilt.
“We’re supposed to be meditating,” She said, shifting in her chair.

Severus’ scoffed. “Do you see him here to ensure we do?”

“Severus.” She warned.

But he didn’t seem to hear her. Getting to his feet, he walked over to a desk that had appeared, a stack of newspapers on one corner, and a small collection of books on another. “Meditate all you like.” He said as he shifted through the papers.

“Severus, what are you …?”

“The room gives the occupants what they need, so it should have provided me answers when this desk popped up.”

Hermione swallowed the panic that threatened to overtake her at the thought of what kind of answers the room would provide. She sat, closed her eyes, and willed her heart rate to slow before she focused on trying to build some mental defenses.

She had no idea how long she’d been in her own mind before she felt a hand gentle touch her shoulder. Opening her eyes, she took in the frustrated and thoughtful Severus before her. His tie was a skew, and his hair had a stronger sheen and was thoroughly disheveled.

“We should go,” he said. “It’s nearly nine.”

“That long?” She asked as she took the hand he offered and allowed him to pull her to her feet. “Did you find any answers?” She asked, not meaning to sound quite so snippy.

Severus smirked. “Not particularly.” He replied, dropping her hand.

“Well?” She half demanded as he offered nothing further.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “No, I believe I will keep what I learned to myself for a little bit.”

With a huff, Hermione stormed over to the desk, looking at the papers spread out before her. A quick glance at all the dates she could see revealed that none were from the future. There were quite a few from the past, around the twenties and thirties, and even a few from the fifties, but most were recent.

“And you are willing to risk the loss of house points and detention for a few articles in *The Daily Prophet*?” Severus asked in a half-teasing voice, and Hermione’s frustration mounted.

She caught a glimpse of an image of much younger (though recognizable) Dumbledore and a man on the cover of a paper, his name jumping out at her from the partly covered caption beneath. She wanted to peruse the pages, to read what Severus had, but the idea of having a detention with Filch for not making back to the dorm was not what she would call a welcome idea.

With an irritated growl, she turned and stomped toward the door, knowing Severus was walking close behind her. It didn’t matter that her left leg dipped with every step as her knee gave out, she still made her way through the door and down the corridor while radiating the frustration of not knowing.

Severus kept pace with her, saying nothing nor trying to steady her. But here was there, hovering, and Hermione did appreciate it even if she was a bit annoyed at him. How hard would have been to just tell her? To say what he read instead of keeping it to himself? Was it that important? And why hadn’t she just taken the bloody newspapers with her?
That made her stop, huffing in frustration with herself this time as she realized he distracted her with the possibilities of detention.

He came to a stop on the stop in front of her, and she still had to tilt her head a bit to look at him.

He had that calculating look to his eyes, one that brought a fleeting image of Professor Snape to the front of her mind before it faded.

“What I learned ….” He began to say, trailing off to look around. His eyes narrowed on something down the stairs and to the left, and he took out his wand. “*Muffilato,*” he whispered. A slight buzzing surrounded them before he spoke again. “What I learned is a reason why Moody doesn’t particularly want Dumbledore to know he’s training us, though I think it’s *me* in particular that could pose the problem. Given my house, and the rate in which the Slytherins seem to find questionable company post-Hogwarts, I think I have an idea as to why Moody would rather I not know more than I should. Why Moody wants to train me regardless, I’m not sure I have the answers to that. What I do know, is, the Headmaster is casting stones in a glass house when he’d ought to be coddling the Gryffindors less and supporting the Slytherins more.”

“You’re not making very much sense,” She smiled, and he quirked his lips.

“I wasn’t trying to.” When she smacked his arm, he gave a genuine grin. “I do know this: Whatever reason Moody thinks you need to have Occlumency, and I believe I have an idea as to why, he’s right.”

“And what idea do you have as to why I need to keep my mind safe?”

“I never give an answer I am not a hundred percent sure of.” He retorted.

“And you call me insufferable.” She grumbled.

Severus chuckled, and with a flick of his wand, the buzzing faded. He moved slowly down ahead of her, and then lead her back to Gryffindor tower where he stopped with her outside the portrait of the fat lady.

Hermione ignored the painted woman as she gapped between the two of them, shock and confusion making her look like a fish.

“I will see you in Potions tomorrow morning.” He said with a bow of his head before turning and leaving.

Hermione watched him, unable to pull her eyes away from him until he rounded the corner. She sighed involuntarily.

“He’s not what one would call a looker.” The Fat lady remarked. “Not to mention that I’m fairly certain he has a thing for the pretty red head.”

“Me too.” Hermione sighed, looking at the woman who regarded her with sympathy. “*Incipite Matura,*” She gave the password, and the portrait swung open.

**September 19th, 1975**
It’s just a day, just a normal day. There is nothing special about it. It’s Friday, it’s just past the middle of September. It’s a normal day. You’re just a bit older now, is all.

Hermione had been looping the inner monologue in her head from the moment she woke up. The normalcy of the last couple week had nearly made her forget. While the first day of classes had been brought a surge of sadness, the repetition of classes, meals, time spent with Severus and Lily, had pushed it away. Even the day before had been normal, and she’d nearly forgotten what the morning would bring.

But once her eyes opened to the sunshine coming in through the window, to the sounds of Lily, Marlene, and Alice getting ready for the day, she had to remind herself to not be down. She pulled herself out of bed, gathered her things, and headed for the upper-class girls’ bathroom. She showered mechanically, dressed with her average amount of care, and gathered her things to head to the great hall. The girls caught up and surrounded her, Lily being firm that they include her in their entourage even if she didn’t speak and Marlene still didn’t seem to like her all that much.

They sat down to breakfast, and Hermione chose her toast and fruit with a heavy sigh that went relatively unnoticed. Lily had glanced over, frowned, but was distracted by the marauders coming in.

Hermione, then, did what she’d always done at meals when the obnoxious trio and their friendly, shy werewolf attempted to draw attention to themselves: she pulled out a book and read.

She’d wanted to read a classic as she usually did as a treat to herself, but keeping up appearances as a pureblood, she wasn’t sure if Austen would be acceptable material. So she read her herbology text, covering the lesson she would be heading to after breakfast for the third time.

The shadows of owls passed over, and Hermione heard the squeals and giggles from her female house mates as the latest Witch Weekly was delivered, the slightly elevated chatter of fellow students receiving letters, and she turned the page before her.

“Hermione,” Remus said, and she looked up to see what he wanted. He pointed to the sweet looking, familiar little owl that was perched just in front of her toast plate next to a tawny owl that was resting on a small rectangular parcel.

Her stomach twisted as she tried to tame her excitement, the urge to smile barely suppressed as she didn’t dare to hope. No one knew last year, and she had said nothing. So why should she expect anything this year?

She took the envelope from the McGonagalls’ little owl before giving it a piece of her toast, and then gave another piece to the tawny owl who hooted happily before taking off. Just as he took off, another envelope landed on top of the small parcel, but no owl landed for a treat.

“What’s the special occasion?” Lily asked.

“Not special at all,” Hermione replied, opening the letter from the McGonagalls. A small, slim box fell on the table, narrowly avoiding juice from her fruit.

Hermione,
My darling, sweet girl. I wish I had all the excuses in the world for not having found out your birthday in time last year. It wasn’t until you returned to us for the summer that it had occurred to Bob and I that the occasion would have to be coming soon or else we had missed it. Minerva had to look into the school records, and I can’t tell you the shame we all bore for allowing it to slip through the cracks, especially given how soon after losing your family it had been.

As you were raised in the states for the most part, I am aware that sixteen is a pivotal age there as seventeen is here. Not knowing which one would have been celebrated as such by your parents, we didn’t want to fail you in the possibility that this would be it for you. Tradition, I was told, was a ring. We decided to do something a bit different.

Happy birthday, Hermione. We have loved having you in our lives and look forward to all the days together to come.

Warmest Wishes,

Delia.

PS-Bob felt horrible excluded and wanted to say he adores you too.

Hermione was trying very hard not to let a tear slip down her cheek as she finished the letter and set it aside. With deep breath, she picked up the box and opened it. Inside was a pair of tear drop earrings, silver on the stud portion and gold on the rest.

“Oh those are lovely,” Marlene said, leaning over the table for a better look. “Not overly expensive or anything, I would say. Do you have a boyfriend?”

Lily seemed quite interested in the answer, and Hermione blushed and vehemently shook her head. “No, it’s my, umm, birthday.” She barely spoke the last word out loud.

“Oh! That’s … wow, that would make you the oldest in our house for our year.”

“I think it makes her the oldest in our year, period.” Alice added in a quiet voice.

“Who were the earrings from?” Lily asked suspiciously.

“Delia and Bob,” Hermione replied automatically. At the confused looks, she added, “My foster parents.”

Lily seemed to sag with relief while Hermione moved on to the letter that had been dropped on the package.

Hermione,
Forgive me for not finding the information out earlier, not only as your aunt of sorts, but as your head of house when you were so new. September is always a busy time of year, with so many things going on as everyone gets settled. It wasn’t until Delia had asked if I’d known when it was that I discovered that I had missed it entirely. I know I had, for it stuck out in my mind that you would have just missed being in the year ahead.

I cannot make up for my mistakes last year, but I would like to this year. Have tea with me this evening in my office, if you’d like. Bring Severus and Miss Evans with you, if you’d like. You can simply let me know after transfiguration today.

Have a happy birthday,

Professor M. McGonagall.

Hermione gave a watery chuckle as she finished the letter. She looked to the head table and caught the eye of her head of house. She smiled and gave an enthusiastic nod which caused Professor McGongall’s stern expression to falter for a moment as her lips gave a quick up turn.

Finally, Hermione reached for the package on the table.

Pulling off the paper revealed beautifully bound, slightly worn looking copy of *Jane Eyre*. She ran her fingers lovingly over the deep blue leather where the title was embossed in silver before opening the cover. A tiny slip of paper was tucked into binding, barely big enough to hold the spiky scrawl of familiar writing.

*The Bronte sisters were average witches, except when it came to words.*

Thumbing through the book, she noticed it was littered with Severus’ scrawl. He pointed to passages he liked, made comments on parts he found funny or inane, and once in a while there was a herb or flower pressed between the pages. A small stem of lilac, a sprig of mint, a vanilla bean, a few other small bits that were not poisonous or would not stain the pages, but added a subtle and lovely fragrance that wrapped around her heart and held tight. In a strange way it was very Severus. She put her nose to the pages and took a deep breath, her thumb lightly caressing the edge of page where his writing rested.

“Someone gave you a used book for your birthday?” Sirius asked in mild distaste. Then he snorted, “I’m sure I know who gave you that. But then again, there are no grease marks on the pages.”

“Shut up, Sirius.” Hermione said without even looking at him.

“Well, I suppose it’s appropriate for you.” Lily said thoughtfully. “My birthday he enchanted a paper lily to smell and feel like a real one. Well, a bouquet of them.”

“How cheap,” James remarked. “But I suppose anyone who wears raggedy old robes probably wouldn’t think that a girl as lovely as yourself deserves more than paper, right Evans?”
“Severus has new robes.” Remus remarked, sounding bored. “Not that it matters either way.” He then looked up as Hermione began to rise from the table. He gave a shy smile. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Remus.” She replied as she stuffed her letters and the earrings in her bag. Once she had it shouldered, She hugged her book to her chest. “I’ll see you in herbology.” And with that, she left the great hall.

Overwhelmed she glanced around, wondering if maybe she should have seen if Severus was at the Slytherin table before she left. But if he wasn’t she’d have no idea where he would be. The library, maybe? Or his brewing classroom? He hadn’t been there yet this year, that she knew of anyway, and she couldn’t imagine what he would start before heading to classes in the morning.

She paced, a few short steps, then a couple long strides, and repeated this three times until she noted him leaving the Great Hall alone just as she turned to face the doorway. He looked morose, hands in his pockets and head down with his hair curtaining his face.

Without stopping to think as to why this was, or what the repercussions would be for doing what she was about to do, she moved swiftly toward him. Colliding with him, she wrapped her arms as tight as she could around his shoulders, holding him to her body fiercely.

“Thank you,” She said softly, her fingers caressing the stands of his hair near the nape of his neck. “Thank you so much, I cannot tell you what it means to me.”

“It’s just a book.” Severus sneered, and she pulled back to look at him. His eyes were hard, cold, with a hint of pain.

“No, it’s … it’s more than I can possibly explain.” She said, unsure why he seemed so distant. “The earrings from Bob and Delia? A lovely gesture should I ever find the occasion to wear them. But the book … It was a favorite of mine that I’d lost. And what’s more, you read it and have given me a … well I’m sure it’s riddled with comments worthy of you disposition. And yes, you wrote in it, and that normally drives me spare, but I know why you did it, and it’s wonderful, and …. ” She embraced him again. “Thank you.”

She hadn’t realized he never hugged her back until she felt his arms come around her, light at first and twitching as though he would pull back any moment. But after a moment, Severus relaxed, his arms tightening a bit more, and he very quietly said, “Happy birthday.”

“I don’t even know how you found out.” She asked as tears trickled down her cheek.

“I asked Delia one morning if she’d known. I suspect she hadn’t known for long herself, given the way she blushed.” He replied, and Hermione chuckled against his shoulder.

She didn’t want to pull away, reveling in the feeling of being in his arms for the first, and possibly only time. This in itself, the reciprocation of physical affection, even if it didn’t mean quite as much to him as it did for her, was the best thing she could have received for her birthday. Because Hermione had known herself too well from too young an age, and knew this for absolute certainty: she was in love with Severus.

It wasn’t an infatuation like with Ron. Ron had been boyishly charming and one of her first friends ever. Severus was caustic, moody, sometimes cruel in both their current past and his future. He was not what one would call handsome, though to Hermione he’d become something beautiful. And he was loyal, more fiercely than Ron ever was. He was smart, he was her equal, and he was the dearest person to her.
Hermione loved him, and she was prepared for the consequences of it.

When he stepped back, Hermione smiled genuinely, if not a bit sadly.

Severus smirked, wiped the tears from her cheeks with a caress of his thumb, his eyes darting over her face.

“Aunt Min wants me to have tea with her this evening. She said to invite you. And Lily, which I imagine you would want.” She said, her fingers caressing the pages of the book still in her hand.

Severus shrugged. “It is entirely up to you. Personally, I think it may make things a bit stilted, what with our being able to call her what we do in private, and Lily not having that same privilege. But then again, she is our friend. I don’t think it would go over too well to exclude her.”

“Likely not.” Hermione agreed.

She wanted to throw her arms around him again, to kiss him soundly, but she didn’t. “See you after you’re done charms, and I’m done Herbology?”

“I will meet you at the doors, as well as Lily.” Severus nodded. He looked, for the briefest second, like he wanted to say something else. But he turned and headed to charms quickly, his head held high and shoulders squared.

“Why are we going to Professor McGonagall’s office when we can have a perfectly fine celebration in the common room?” Lily asked from the other side of Severus as the three of them made their way to the Transfiguration Mistress’s wing of the school.

“Yes, I would be warmly welcomed in Gryffindor tower, treated as if I were a lion myself.” Severus countered without a hint of malice.

“Fine, then. We could have had a quiet one in the library, or snuck up to that classroom near the hospital wing that you ….” Lily trailed off, peeking around Severus just as Hermione glanced over.

She rolled her eyes at the knowing glint in Lily’s eye, and the exaggerated way she clamped her mouth shut.

“Right,” Hermione said, “Because Severus would want us to be around his experiments.”

Lily’s jaw dropped. “You know!”

“Of course she knows, Lily.” Severus sighed with boredom as they turned the corner. “She is my friend as much as she is yours. Perhaps more.” He said, and Lily narrowed her eyes at him. “She may be your house mate, but you spend more time with Twiddle dee and Twiddle dumb than you do her.”

“What did you just call Alice and Marlene?” Lily huffed.

Hermione snorted, “That’s actually quite brilliant, especially giving the name of the former.”

Severus looked pleased with himself as Lily huffed and shook her head.
“Right, so instead of finding a different unused classroom, ‘cause I’m sure there are actually quite a few in the castle, we are going to a teacher’s office. Yes, this will be quite wild. Are we doing homework while we’re there? Turning turtles to teapots?”

Lily’s teasing did little to lessen Hermione’s mood. She wore her earrings from the McGonagalls as a novelty for the day, and she hadn’t had a birthday tea since before she started Hogwarts. Her copy of *Jane Eyre* still clutched in her hand. She hadn’t parted with it since receiving it that morning, merely setting it off to the side during classes and when she changed from her school uniform to a simple dress. She had read it during meals, always moving the clippings Severus had placed to the previous page so that she wouldn’t lose them. She’d even read it after dinner when the three of them had met up by Black Lake. She’d read with her head resting against Severus’ leg, much like they had done just before the summer had begun. It would have been perfection if Lily hadn’t insisted on copying her position against his other leg.

“If it’s anything like Sunday dinner ….” Severus had started, a slight curl to his lips which grew when Hermione smacked him.

“I doubt very much that this will be Sunday dinner.” She replied as they came to the door. She knocked, and on McGonagall’s call to enter, she turned the knob and was the first to step inside.

“Surprise!” Came Bob and Delia’s voice along with Professor McGonagall’s, and Hermione’s heart stopped for a moment. She noted the glasses of Firewhiskey in Minerva’s and Bob’s hands.

“Not like Sunday dinner at all,” Severus mumbled quietly, and Hermione gave him a second smack before running over and embracing her foster parents.

“What on Earth …?” She’d asked after giving Bob a quick embrace before moving on to Delia.

“I may have invited them after I knew you were able to accept my invitation.” Minerva said as she opened her arms and welcomed Hermione into her embrace. “I’d have invited the clan, but I’m sure even Albus would have his limits.”

“It’s more than I was expecting.” Hermione replied as she stepped back.

“Probably best for your office that you did not.” Severus commented, moving to the small table off to the side and plucking up two goblets of what looked like wine but was likely only sparkling cider.

“Oi, watch your tongue, lad.” Minerva mock scolded before a smirk ruined it.

Severus handed Hermione a goblet, then glanced at Lily. He hesitated for a moment before handing it to their friend, turning and heading back to the table to grab the third one.

“Oh!” Hermione said, shaking herself. “I’m so sorry, I’m being terribly rude. Bob, Delia, this is Lily Evans.” She introduced her, taking Lily’s arm lightly and bringing her closer to them.

“It’s a pleasure,” Delia greeted warmly, taking Lily’s free hand. “Hermione’s spoke well of you. Severus, too, when he happens to catch part of the conversation.”

“You talk about me, Sev?” Lily asked with a grin, ribbing him when he came up beside her.

“When you are the topic of conversation,” He replied.

The door to the office opened, and all those in the room turned to look and see who was coming in.

“Min. Been wondering if maybe we could ….” Professor Moody Stopped abruptly, eyes scanning
the room. “What’s this?” He then looked to Bob. “What sorta trouble you tryin’ to cause?”

“Can’t a man come and give birthday wishes to his ….” Bob trailed off and his brow furrowed.

Before he could think of what to say, Moody looked to Hermione. “Your birthday, is it?”

“Yes, sir.” She nodded timidly.

“Explains the teacher drinkin’ in front of students.” He said, gesturing to Minerva.

“As of this moment, Alastor, I’m her aunt, not her Professor.”

“Still didn’t think to invite me, now, did ya?”

“Well yer here now. Scotch and fire whiskey in their usual spots, help yerself.” She said, waving to a simple cabinet in the corner.

“Didn’t bring a gift.” Moody said as he hobbled toward the cabinet.

“Wasn’t required.” Minerva countered. “We gave her ours this morning.”

It was then that a soft pop announced the table was now covered with food, most being Hermione’s favorites.

Moody glanced at the table, took a quick look at the mostly French cuisine, and snorted. “Thought you were English?”

“Oh hush it, Al.” Bob teased. “More to life than bangers and mash.”

Minerva went about quickly transfiguring her desk to a dining table, and various objects to the same, comfortable dinning chairs Delia and Bob had in their home. Hermione sat at one end, Severus to her right, and Lily to his. Bob and Delia took the left, sandwiching Moody near the end with Minerva.

Dinner was, much to Hermione’s amusement, like Sunday dinners. Professor Moody almost seemed to take the place of Malcolm in the banter between the McGonagall siblings. There was talk of various politics in the wizarding world, and more conversation on the Aurory than would normally happen.

“It’s the fact that the ministry won’t bloody do anything about these attacks when we all know who is causing it and why.” Moody grumbled.

“Always had a stick up their arse, and you know it,” Minerva said with a dismissive wave. “The fact you still keep goin’ back for more…”

“You just couldn’t handle the heat, could ya?” Moody teased. “Or maybe it was Urquhart that kept you away all this time?”

“Oh let’s not bring up this topic,” Bob grumbled between bites of his duck l’orange.

“What I don’t understand is what these ‘Death Eaters’ want, precisely.” Delia said, brow wrinkling. “And why they keep making shows of themselves.”

“They believe in blood supremacy.” Severus said, and Hermione watched nervously as Lily chewed her lip and Moody scowled at Severus. He, for his part, kept speaking calmly. “They think that we should not hide our nature, that the muggles should fear us. They believe anyone not of a pureblood background are weak, and need to be dominated. All rot, really, considering.”
“You don’t agree?” Moody asked darkly.

“You think I would because of my house?” Severus asked point blank.

“You’re the only non-Gryffindor here, and you seem to know a lot about them.”

“You’re the only pureblood, and one can say the same for you, Professor.” Severus countered. “However, my knowledge, like yours, comes from the nature of our life circumstances. You are an auror, teaching now though you may be, and have an understanding of their motives because of that. I am a Slytherin, I live with those who wish to join the Dark Lord. I, too, have acquired my knowledge through my position. It hardly means I agree with it any more than you do.”

Moody studied him severely for a moment before a smirk broke the sternness. “Well played, boy.”

“Shall we change the subject, then?” Delia asked after a moment of tension.

“I noticed you haven’t been indulging in spirits.” Severus said nonchalantly as he returned to his plate.

Hermione and Minerva both stared at Delia as she blushed nearly as red as her hair. “I hadn’t wanted to say anything, given the day.”

“You’re not!” Minerva said, likely harsher than she intended.

A shy grin came over Delia, and Bob beamed as he gazed at her lovingly. “It’ll be three months in two days. I didn’t … it’s the longest we’ve … and if something were to happen….”

Hermione choked back a sob, hands going to her mouth to try to contain the joy threatening to burst out, but not a moment later she was out of her chair and running around the table. She’d embraced Delia at the same moment Minerva had, both holding her loosely as if they were afraid to hurt her.

“I hope you don’t think this means you wouldn’t be welcome at the holidays, or during breaks,” Delia said as she she started to sniff.

“Of course.” Hermione said, turning then to Bob and holding him much tighter. “I’m so incredibly happy for you two.”

“Thank you, Hermione. It means the world.” He pulled back, smiling down at her before turning to Severus. “And you, boy.” He said, making Severus startle. “We will be having a discussion, you and I.” Severus’ cheeks turned red, but he merely nodded once before turning back to his plate.

Lily leaned in toward him, and began whispering toward him. Their conversation was quiet, and much as Hermione wanted to know what was going on, she was too distracted by the conversation the McGonagalls were having. As the conversation turned toward labor and such, she drifted back toward her friends.

“They’re her family, Lily.” She heard Severus hissing quietly.

“Not really.” Lily snapped back in equally hushed tones.

“Don’t.” He warned.

“But this is boring. And uncomfortable.” Lily protested.

“Then leave.” Severus countered.
“What? Are you honestly telling me you don’t want to run back to the dungeons? You really want to stay here?”

“I like Bob and Delia.” He replied, “And I would not be so rude as to walk away when he wants to speak to me. Regardless of the topic.”

“Well, yeah. But can’t you just, you know, pull him aside and ask what he wanted so you can go? Do you really want to hang around here all night? We could go out by the lake and hang out by the tree or sneak up to the astronomy tower.”

“I don’t mind.” Hermione interjected. Both parties looked slightly caught out, though Lily quickly recovered and appeared as though she’d had a victory. “I can understand if you want to go, truly. Neither of you have to stay here on my account.”

“I’m enjoying myself,” Severus said, leaning back in his chair and lightly running a long finger over the cover of the book he’d given her where it sat on the table. He looked to it as he spoke. “And I’m sure Minerva still has dessert in mind. I’d hate to miss that.”

“You’re just full of cheek tonight, aren’t ya?” Minerva said to him as Lily flushed the color of Gryffindor at Severus’ far too casual address of a teacher. “Just bear in mind that I’ll let it slide tonight, given this is a family affair.”

“Then what the blazes am I doin’ here?” Moody said as he stood up.

“You aren’t leaving before cake?” Minerva crossed her arms as she turned to her colleague. Moody made a face of utter disgust before turning to Severus and Hermione. “You two, same place as before, tomorrow at eleven.”

“Yes, sir,” They replied simultaneously. He nodded, then hobbled out the door.

“In case you lot do head out, Severus, we should have that conversation now.” Bob said, beckoning Severus to join him on the other side of the room.

Severus rose, a calm exterior while something in his face betrayed how nervous he was.

Hermione had half expected Lily to make excuses to leave, but she sat firm, watching Severus like a hawk. Hermione sat in the chair he abandoned, twisting her fingers. “I’m sorry,” She said, barely pulling Lily’s attention. “Severus didn’t think you would enjoy yourself but didn’t want to exclude you either.”

“Sev said that?” She asked with such hope that Hermione’s heart clenched.

“Yeah,” She said, unable to look at the joy in Lily’s eyes. Her gaze fell to her book, and she picked it up and held it to her chest like a shield and a safety blanket all in one.

“Cake has arrived.” Minerva announced, and Hermione shifted out of Severus’ seat and back into her own.

She kept quiet for the most part, smiling and thanking them after they sang “Happy Birthday” to her, her ear picking up on Severus’ deep, melodious voice even as he tried to make it the quietest of the bunch. Conversation was still easy, though Lily seemed to take up the mantel where Hermione was quite, speaking a great deal to the former Gryffindors about the goings on of their quidditch team and anything else that may catch their interest.
When the night came to a close, and the three students said their farewells, and headed out the office after Hermione was given another round of hugs.

“So, what did, umm … you know?” Lily asked, making circles with her hands as she raised an eyebrow at Severus.

He glanced at her, then to Hermione. “I would rather not say right now.”

“Oh,” Lily said, glancing around him to Hermione for a moment. “How about I meet you at our spot?” She said, stopping. “You can see Hermione back to the tower and meet me in fifteen minutes.”

Severus raised an eyebrow, and Lily smiled before turning abruptly and jogging off somewhere. They had paused and watched her until she disappeared around the corner.

“She’s going to land herself in detention.” He said as he continued on toward the great hall.


“It’s the tree where we all go when the weather’s nice. It is, however, nearly nine o’clock. Curfew, which she will be breaking merely by trying to get there.”

“Maybe she’ll realize and ask you to meet her there tomorrow.” Hermione asked, tightening her grip on the book in her hand.

Severus snorted. “I still won’t tell her. I don’t plan to tell either of you, not yet anyway.” He shifted nervously. “It’s merely an opportunity that a student doesn’t happen upon often, and it would be utterly foolish of me not to take Bob up on his offer. I will not, however, say what it is until it is assured to happen.”

“You do love being cryptic, don’t you?” Hermione couldn’t help the turn of her lips, for even in a somewhat glum mood she couldn’t help but enjoy banter with her best friend.

“It does have its moments of pleasure.” He said as they came to the top of the stairs leading to the dungeon. “I would walk you to your dormitory, but I don’t wish to have an encounter with Filch. Something I would assuredly have if I attempted it.”

“It’s alright.” Hermione shrugged.

He scrutinized her. “You were happier earlier, what changed?”

“Nothing.” She replied too quickly.

“You are a terrible liar.” He retorted.

“It was just something Lily said, is all. She didn’t mean anything by it. In fact, it was actually completely innocent. It had simply reminded me of something.”

Severus nodded grimly. He then reached out, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. He looked as if he wanted to say something, but didn’t know what. He turned, and the loss of him as he stopped away made Hermione panic.

“Severus!” He stopped and whirled around. Chewing her lip, she took the three steps needed to close as much distance as they could. “Would it be … I mean, would I be able to … a hug. Can I hug you again?”
He swallowed, and she hadn’t really noticed that his Adam’s apple was so predominate until she watched the movement of it. He twitched, and then shifted closer.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and placed her nose as close to his skin as she thought she could get away with. The citrus from the duck lingered, nearly covering all those wonderful Severus scents that clung to him normally: parchment and ink, herbs from potions class and his experimenting. There was also his hair, which may get greasy as the day wore on but had a masculine scent that made her heart flutter and sigh with contentment.

His arms did not hesitate to come around her as they had in the morning, and held her with exactly the same ferocity as she held him at the moment. There was a gentle, barely noticeable tug to her curls that she realized meant he was playing with them. It made her hyper aware and numb all at once.

They parted when noise from the dungeons drew their attention, laughter as the prefects were heading off to do their rounds. Neither said anything, but waved to one another. Hermione looked over her shoulder every third step, even though he was gone after the first. She wasn’t sure if she was looking to see if he would risk Filch to meet Lily, or just trying to catch a glimpse of him.

Lily hadn’t been long returning to the tower after Hermione, and was followed quickly by the marauders. She said nothing to Hermione other than goodnight and one last “happy birthday” before turning in for the night, offering a genuine smile before closing her curtains.

Hermione stretched out on her bed, reading a bit in her book before deciding to skim through. She smirked at Severus’ more acerbic commentary, as well as his humored observations, until she came across one of her favorite parts.

“Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! — I have as much soul as you — and full as much heart! And if God had gifted me with some beauty and much wealth, I should have made it as hard for you to leave me, as it is now for me to leave you.”

The passage had been underlined, drops of ink splattered and nearly blotted out the words one the edge of the page. Hermione skimmed the remainder of the chapter, sure to find a snide comment on how Jane should have known what Rochester was hiding. She was positive he would mock the strange romanticism. And yet, there was nothing through the whole proposal, nothing for Jane’s disbelief of Rochester’s strange reaction to her acceptance. In fact, the only note for the rest of the chapter had been at the end.

“The brat gets her out of bed because a tree was struck by lightning? Teaches her not to lock the door.

Chapter End Notes
So I try to keep myself a few chapters ahead so if I catch writer's block or become too busy with my mini-business, I don't feel as panicked if I can't write for a while but feel I should post.

All I have to say about the chapter I just finished writing: Yule Ball, 1975

Also, I apologize for those who like Aurora for leaving her where she was in this chapter. She'll have more bits coming up, but her Parents are more pivotal at the moment.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 1st, 1975

“Mr Snape, Miss Evans, would you mind staying back?” Slughorn asked with a wide grin, hands behind his back as he gave a little bounce on his feet.

“You don’t think?” She heard Sirius mumble to James as they gathered their stuff.

She glanced over, seeing James consider something. “No,” He said, shaking his head. Without another word, James and Sirius gathered their things, gestured for Peter and Remus to follow, and headed out the door.

Hermione glanced to Severus and was taken aback by the resignation in his eyes.

“I will meet up with you later,” he said.

Hermione nodded, gathered her things, and left just as Lily practically bounced to join Slughorn and Severus at the front of the room.

Despite knowing full well that they wouldn’t likely emerge anytime soon, she kept glancing over her shoulder for a sign of them. She noted Remus waiting alone at the end of the hall, and she found herself drifting toward him while still constantly checking.

“Slug club,” Remus said with a sad sort of smile. “It’s reasonable to assume. James and Sirius got invited a couple days ago, but you three had hurried off to transfiguration before he had a chance to say anything. Then again, they were moving rather slow. Apparently those two and Peter had cast a singing, and dancing jinx on a young Hufflepuff and was caught out by Professor McGonagall.”


Remus shrugged, shame faced. “Nothing.” He admitted. “They were bored, and their, uh, usual target couldn’t be found.” He at least had the decency to blush.

Hermione had figured where they likely had been that the marauders hadn’t found them. Though now she wondered as to why they hadn’t managed to sneak up on Severus while he’d been brewing. Either way, since her birthday, he’d been spending more time in his abandoned classroom than anywhere else. As a result, Hermione found herself, and often Lily, tucked away with him. They had transfigured a table into a somewhat comfortable, plain couch, a chair into a low coffee table. It wasn’t often that Severus wasn’t at his make-shift station, going over notes and brewing, but when he wasn’t the three of them could easily sit side by side without too much discomfort.

Of course, Hermione much preferred the times without Lily, even if she did feel bad about that. She liked being able to lay her head against Severus’ leg, the two taking up the sofa and discussing whatever tickled their fancy.
“You didn’t get invited with them? Or Peter?” She asked.

Remus shook his head glumly. “Slughorn only invites those he thinks will go places in life. Don’t, don’t look like that,” Remus quickly clarified when Hermione stopped suddenly. She could feel how wide her eyes were, her lip trembling. “What he means, mostly, is fame or prestige. Affluence plays a big part, but so does skill.”

“And Lily Evans is more skilled then me?” The incredulous statement tumbled out of her mouth before she’d really thought it through.

“Not necessarily.” Remus said cautiously. “But, well, she’s muggleborn.”

“So?” Hermione asked, trepidation pushing out the fight that had started to brew inside.

“So, as ridiculous a notion as it is, she’s a bit of a novelty to Slughorn. He has the potential to brag about her later on.”

Hermione’s shoulders sagged. Was she really so worthless in this era? Was she really seen as having no potential? It was a petty thought, but it briefly crossed Hermione’s mind that, should she reveal herself as a muggleborn, she may be suddenly as lauded and praised as Lily.

Oh, she couldn’t deny that Lily had talent in charms or transfiguration. They were probably equals in those, as well as potions. But Lily had no mind for difficult topics. Arithmancy confused her, and Runes bored her. While Hermione could concede it was actually the same way for her with Care for Magical Creatures and Divination (if that was even a proper subject), they certainly weren’t going to give Lily a life advantage. And what had Lily even wanted to do? She never spoke of a possible mastery, or what interests she may like to pursue. This was their OWLS year, and the most she’d ever hinted at was maybe trying to write for Witch Weekly on occasion. Yet Slughorn saw her as having more potential, of going somewhere in life where Hermione would not.

“Hermione,” Remus said, putting his hands on her shoulders, “You’re bloody brilliant. You are easily the top in our house, if not the year. Not being invited by Slughorn does not take that away from you. And really, do you want to have to endure James and Sirius having more reasons to swagger about?”

“I suppose not.” She said with a wry grin. “And I suppose I can’t be too jealous of Lily considering she’ll be the focus on half of that swagger.”

“Exactly.” Remus replied, stepping back slightly. “And maybe, on the nights that they’re there, perhaps we could spend it together?”

“I think I could try.” Remus replied, bashful and … blushing?

Hermione’s heart sank as it hit her what it could mean for Remus to do such a thing. After asking to spend time with her. She didn’t want to hurt him, or assume, but she wondered if maybe he fancied her a bit.

“We get to go to Slug Club!” Lily’s exuberant voice preceded her, and Hermione turned to give her friend a smile and a hug in congratulations.

“I have no idea why you’re thrilled about it.” Severus said with a roll of his eyes. “Uncomfortable dinners with people whom Slughorn believes might benefit him some day.”
Hermione glanced over her shoulder as Remus pointedly cleared his throat, and Hermione shook her head as he tilted his chin and gave a satisfied grin.

“Still,” She said as she stepped around Lily to Severus. “It’ll be good for you, though.” She didn’t dare hug him, not now, not over something he wasn’t as excited about. So, she took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I have better ways of getting where I need to be.” He replied, and she knew better than to ask what. He swiped his thumb over her knuckles twice before he dropped her hand. “Lunch is partly over, and I cannot sit through A History of Magic on an empty stomach. We should go.” And like that, the four of them headed to the Great Hall, mention of the Slug club put aside for the time being.

October 25th, 1975

Severus headed for the library trying his absolute hardest to not notice the slight churn to his stomach, or the way his hands seemed a little clammy. He did not make extra sure his hair was as clean as possible, nor did he purposely wear a white oxford untucked from his casual trousers in an effort to look nice yet not appearing to adhere to the dress code on downtime. He carried his satchel with a grip far too tight for something holding only two text books and a bit of parchment, a quill, and some ink.

Occulmency had at least taught him how to control his heart rate, so instead of having it pound out of his chest it remained steady if slightly elevated.

Hogsmeade weekend had been officially announced for next week, and he still had strong memories of this time last year. Of being nervous to ask Lily to accompany him even before James sodding Potter had attempted to do so first, of his elation when she agreed to it, of his bitter and gut-wrenching disappointment when she didn’t show up. He also remembered how he raged inside at Hermione stepping in and covering for her, for allowing all the blame, the anger to fall on her when she barely knew him. How, without her realizing, she allowed him to merely endure a good-humored ribbing from his house mates. He should have joined her like a proper wizard would have instead of leaving her to wander. None of them had realized the ruse or had noticed him leave her in the Three Broomsticks shortly after Lily entered with her insipid friends.

Hermione was not Lily, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t going to attempt to ask her to accompany him tentatively. He wanted to secure her company, and perhaps get some incite to the possibility of being more than the good friends they’d become.

He couldn’t stop reliving the hugs she’d given him on her birthday. Despite initially being jealous of the expensive gift he had assumed was given to her by Black or Lupin, he shivered when her fingers grazed the hairs on his neck. When the misunderstanding was cleared, when she hugged him tight once more to express just how much she appreciated his present, well … it was his first attempt at using Occulmency to suppress involuntary reactions. It only half worked, partly because he couldn’t help but enjoy the feel of her in his arms, the way her curls tickled his chin. And the last hug of the day, when he threw caution to the wind and twirled her curls around his fingers, he had found a level of bliss he hadn’t reached since he first started brewing in the abandoned classroom. He was not
proud of how often he recalled their physical contact, or where for that matter. But aside from the obvious stirrings, it was more affection than Lily had ever given him. She had given him half hugs, an arm around his shoulders with a light squeeze, nothing he could return. She hadn’t held his hand since coming to Hogwarts.

So, Severus was sure that if Hermione was to say yes, she would not stand him up. She may even hold his hand on occasion as they walked through the village, perhaps to pull him along to the Tomes and Scrolls or to Scrivenshafts. But whether or not she would agree to an actual date, he didn’t want to push it just yet.

He entered the library, gave a nod to Madam Pince, and headed for his and Hermione’s usual table.

Just as he was rounding the bookcase that blocked it from view, he noted Lupin heading toward Hermione. She was already deep in text books and parchment, her hair pulled back in a sensible knot that held one quill (or was the quill holding the hair?). She seemed to have absolutely no awareness of her surroundings, so it didn’t surprise Severus when Hermione startled terribly with Lupin’s quiet address.

“Yes, Remus?” She said, looking up at the marauder with a half-smile, her chest heaving from an effort to control her breathing.

“I was wondering,” Lupin began, wringing his hands while squaring his shoulders. “I was wondering if perhaps I may escort you to Hogsmeade next weekend?”

Hermione physically recoiled with surprise, her eyes wide as she blinked at him. Severus wanted to flee at first, to hide and lick his wounds, because of course Hermione would catch the eye of not one, but two of the bloody marauders. And why wouldn’t it be the most intelligent of the bunch, the one that actually stood a chance as he showed a sort of kindness as of late. But it was her still shocked visage that kept him from moving, wanting to see what she would say.

“Sorry, Remus,” She began, “but I’m going with Severus.”

What?

She … what?

It was Severus’ turn to be momentarily paralyzed with shock. Had she just …?

“Well I assumed as much,” Lupin attempted to mimic the smarmy smirk Black always had when he was sure of himself, only it was a pale comparison. “And Lily, I would wager.”

Hermione blushed. “I hadn’t actually considered Lily’s plans.” She mumbled.

“But,” Lupin continued, perhaps not hearing her remark. “I thought that maybe you wouldn’t mind leaving the two of them to their own devices for a bit. We don’t have to go the whole time together, and if you want to stay with them the whole time, we could as well, I’m sure James ….”

“Remus,” Hermione said with gentle exasperation, and Severus found himself using the break in Lupin’s tirade to round the bookcase completely.

Both of them looked up at once, both blushed, but Hermione gave him a warm, welcoming smile.

His lips twitched upward in response.

“Am I interrupting something?” Severus asked, keeping his tone neutral.
“I, umm …” Lupin fidgeted, looking at the floor before peeking at Hermione.

“She has already informed you who she was going with,” Severus replied, a frosty undertone to his politeness. “I understand that those you acquaint yourself with have a difficult time understanding rejection, so perhaps you can show them how to accept it with grace.”

Lupin scowled but nodded once before turning and leaving.

Oh, he was going to pay for that later, Severus knew. Once word got back to Black, Potter, and Pettigrew, he was going to have to have a semi-permanent shield up if he wanted to make it through the next week. But it was worth it, so very worth it, to have an upper hand on at least one of those idiots.

“So, h-how much of that did you overhear, exactly?” Hermione asked with more than one clearing of her throat.

Severus pulled his gaze away from where Lupin had disappeared, pulled out the chair next to Hermione, and sat down. “Enough.” He replied, taking out his text books.

“Right,” Hermione said, chewing on a finger nail. “I suppose I probably just … no, never mind.”

“Just what?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Hermione.” He stretched out the syllables of her name, gave a warning to it.

She sat ramrod straight, “I probably just ruined any plans you may have had, because now Remus will know I was lying when I gave my excuse.” She bit down hard on her bottom lip, and Severus was surprised he didn’t see blood.

It was funny how she did that sometimes; when he made his voice go a touch deeper when aggravated, even when it wasn’t at her, she would go to attention like she would in class. Not so often these days, at least when it’s directed at someone else or a cauldron, but with her ….

“My plans … involved you.” He said, suddenly finding the ink stain on his thumb more interesting. Whatever it was that drew her attention, there was no way he was going to be able to hold it when faced with getting to his original intent.

“They did?” She asked. And why did she have to have such a hopeful lilt to her voice? Maybe if Remus hadn’t asked first, he could trust that it was because she truly wanted to accompany him. Now, well, was she just hopeful because she didn’t have to ruin his plans in order to have a cover? Was it more?

“Indeed,” Severus replied.

He peeked at her through the curtain of his hair, his habits allowing him the cover the moment he tilted his head down. Hermione was chewing her lip, her eyes sparkling. “Well, umm, I suppose that means you were intending on Lily to join us.”

“Not … particularly.” He said, shaking his hair out of his face to get a good look at her.

Hermione was just so … happy. And why that scared him …. He suddenly remembered Lily’s expression when he asked her to go with him to the village a year
ago. She’d been happy, too. Happy for a scapegoat, happy for someone to latch on to should the girls who followed her found other things to do.

“She does come and go as she pleases.” Hermione nodded, suddenly sobering. He frowned, studying how she put on that haughty air of a strict scholar, her shoulders straight and nose pointed to her books. “So, I suppose you wouldn’t intend for her to be around, as she usually isn’t.”

“True.” He said, frown deepening.

“So just you and I, then. Almost like during the summer.” She glanced at him, and he relaxed when he caught the joy in her warm brown eyes.

“Only we will be surrounded by more dunderheads than we had been then.” He deadpanned.

And she laughed, warm and wonderful. He wished Pince hadn’t shushed her, because Hermione was downright breathtaking when she abandoned everything to her mirth.

**November 1st, 1975**

He had never felt rage like this before. At the sodding bloody marauders and their way of nearly always escaping getting in trouble, and at himself for dropping his guard. He was right, he had been a target for the trio after his comments to Lupin, who assured him he never repeated his less than kind words. He merely said that Hermione had already had plans, and who she’d had them with. The pathetic part was that Severus believed him. In fact, one time when Severus had been cornered, Lupin fought alongside him, declaring “that’s enough!” But the laughs that followed the cease fire hadn’t been reassuring for the long term.

And here he was, laying in the hospital wing with a broken leg from falling down the stairs on his way up from the dungeons to meet Hermione at Gryffindor tower. Had he not been so bloody eager, he’d have stuck with the plan to meet her in the entry hall. He’d have headed up with his fellow Slytherins, had been surrounded by too many students and teachers for them to do damage.

He could just picture it now: Hermione looking around the entry hall, straining on her tip toes to search for him. She would likely wonder if she somehow missed him, ask Lily if she’d seen him. Lily would say no, perhaps lure her out the doors with a promise to look for him in the village. And Lupin, well, he would notice and likely not ask too many questions as to how fortune somehow shone on him.

Severus sighed, pounding the hospital bed hard three time before pulling on his hair with both hands. It was greasy from being toyed with so much, and it only made him hate himself more.

“Severus,” Madam Pomfrey chided gently. “There will be other trips to the village.”

He didn’t say anything to that because he was not, under any circumstances, about to whinge over his lost chance with ….

“Miss Granger, what are you doing here?” Madam Pomfrey’s greeting had Severus sitting up and half turning to the door so abruptly that he jarred his leg. He went from wide-eyed wonder at the possibility that she had actually came, to eyes clamped shut and using every curse he learned in Cokeworth from the very tender age of three.
“That sounds promising.” Hermione said, a touch of worry to her voice.

“He broke his leg.” The Matron informed her. “He was brought up here by a quartet of young Slytherins who were quite good at levitating charms.”

“How did you break your leg?” Hermione asked, and he felt her hand on the thigh of his injured appendage, just above the knee.

“Guess,” He gritted out as the pain eased.

“I should hex them in their sleep,” Hermione said thoughtfully. “I know for a fact that the girls can make it up to the boys’ dormitories, it’s only the other way around that it becomes an issue. I could sneak up there and get creative just before dawn.”

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear any of that.” Madam Pomfrey said as she gently tapped Severus on the shoulder. He peeked, seeing her handing him a familiar flask. He grimaced.

“Must it be that?” He asked. “Couldn’t I just have the bone set and the leg in a splint?”

“It’s only one dose, Mr Snape.” She scolded.

He groaned, took the flask, and downed the bone-mender potion. Skelegrow wasn’t pleasant, but this was much worse. He quickly used his wand to conjure an *aguamenti* on the flask and rinsed his mouth.

“There. A few hours, and you’ll be alright.” The Matron said, patting his shoulder before taking the flask and leaving.

The second she was gone, Hermione gently got on the bed next to him.

“Why are you here?” He asked as she took his hand in both of hers. Her touch was warm, gentle, reassuring. Did she know she traced the space between his fingers, the movement seeming absentminded?

“Do you want me to go?” She asked quietly.

“It’s not going to be pretty.” He warned her. “My language skills get worse, and if you were ever curious if I had the Cokeworth accent, you’ll find that it is buried deep inside under all the good breeding my mother had attempted to coach me with when Tobias wasn’t around.”

She snorted, “I can only imagine. And as long as you don’t mind my being here, I’ll endure it.” She grinned, and he couldn’t help return it even as he felt the potion starting to kick in.

“Surprised you didn’t just go with Lupin.” He hissed, hand clamping around hers while the other curled into a fist.

“Why would I do that?” She asked, her voice quivering a little. “I wanted to spend my day with you.”

He growled as the pain increased. “You spend every bloody sodding day with me.” He ground out.

“I always want to spend my day with you.” She said very softly as he half screamed at the sharp, splintering pain of bones connecting. She took one hand off his and smoothed back his sweaty, disgusting hair. “It’s okay, squeeze my hand if it helps.” This she said louder, meant to be heard.

“And have your hand break? Want to suffer with …. Ahhh, fucking cocksucking mother fucker!”
He kicked at the bed with his good leg just to make sure he didn’t actually break Hermione’s hand. The vibration sent up his bad leg caused a few more words to spill out that would have lost Slytherin any chance for house cup should anyone but Madam Pomfrey had been in hearing range.

Hermione was giggling, and through the pain and the sweat he took in her smile. He was a foolish, pathetic, idiot, but if he wasn’t sure he loved her before, he did now. Her smile, a bloody upturn of her lips that involved nothing more than muscles and a trigger in her brain, had a near doping effect on him.

“Enjoying yourself?” He huffed out, managing to ignore the pain in his leg for a moment.

She giggled again, “Enjoying your pain? No. Your creative terms for the potion inventor, however, has been highly amusing.”

“I live for your amusement.” He managed to roll his eyes with the sneer, but her laugh warmed him inside and had him giddy. Or maybe that was the potion? Except he’d taken it enough over the years to know that giddy was not a side effect he had from it.

But then even her touch and her smile were not enough, and he felt nearly close to vomiting before everything went black.

He blinked his eyes, trying to will away the dry ache that was always a stupid after effect of the potion. His mouth was dry, too, as was the inside of his nose. His head ached, whether because it hurt more than his leg or there was just no pain elsewhere, he wasn’t sure. He was never sure. But he did know that water and a pain relief potion would fix him up, and he would be out in no more than an hour. Just in time for the rest of those in third year and above to be returning from Hogsmeade.

He sat up, missing the girl who had been with him as he endured the potion’s effects. Or maybe she wasn’t there at all, and it was merely a wonderful hallucination. No, he was sure she was there before he’d even taken the bone mending potion. Looking around for evidence, he was relieved to find plenty of it. The wrinkles in the blankets on only one side of the bed as though someone had sat with him, the long, curly hair on his pillow, his wand sitting neatly on top of a piece of paper with his name scrawled out in her neat hand.

Beside it was his water and a pain potion, the latter he drank before the former. He then took the note and opened it.

S,

I’m sorry I couldn’t stay. Professor Moody somehow found out we hadn’t gone to Hogsmeade, and while you were certainly in no shape for our lessons, I was. I shall try and make it back before you’re released, but I have a feeling that his intention was to keep me occupied until those who went to the village returned. You may be up by then. Either way, we can meet in the library, if you’d like. As soon as I am available, I will be there until dinner.

Yours,
He stared at that note until Madam Pomfrey came to check on him about an hour later, his fingers running over the words, fixed on the one that terrified him. Thrilled him. Gave him hope and made him so cautious all at once.

“Yours.”

September 10th, 1993

———A———

Neville Longbottom’s boggart was her father. Somehow, it was an accurate fear to have, though Aurora knew her thoughts as to why that was were not at all what other people would think. Oh, yes, he could be right mean when it came to teaching, but that was nothing compared to what else he had had to do in his life.

Her father had done horrible things, things that would send any wizard to Azkaban. Actually, he’d been to Azkaban, though she’d been too young to remember the two weeks he’d spent there while an old friend of theirs worked to get him out. Aurora now thought of him simultaneously as the scariest and bravest man she’d ever known. She knew Uncle Lu was pretty vicious as well, but somehow knowing he did it because he truly believed it was right seemed less frightening than doing it simply to keep a cover.

She’d walked through the halls of Hogwarts for the last week in a bit of a fog. It was just too much. Too much in a short amount of time. Draco knowing her mother’s truth, her knowing her fathers. Professor Lupin being a dear old friend of her parents, yet with an uneasy past.

“Rory,” Ginny said gently, putting a hand on her shoulder and getting her attention. “What’s wrong. You’re starting to remind me of, well, me from last year. You aren’t carrying around any cursed stationary, are you?”

Aurora laughed, though it was weak and hollow. She stopped poking at her lunch with her fork, turning to her friend. “I’ll be alright.” She said. “It’s just I learned something about … something that I can’t talk about.” She shrugged. “It was a lot to take in.”

“Seems so.” Ginny agreed. She looked sympathetic for another beat before brightening. “So, I heard the twins say they wanted to go up to the quidditch pitch later and have a bit of a fly. They were getting McGonagall’s permission as they didn’t really want their first go to be with Oliver Wood breathing down their neck. ‘Magine Ron and Harry might join, too. Whaddya say?’

Flying and a mini game of quidditch sounded both wonderful and terrible. But Aurora knew if she didn’t start focusing on something else, she would slowly sink into a hole of despair.

“Right. Sounds great.” She said, glancing up at the head table and spotting her father doing much of the same.
Her heart went out to him, and as had happened every time she looked at him after his story, she felt terrible for thinking any of this was about her. Affected her. Because as reality stood, no one except perhaps three people at the head table and a smattering of Slytherins would know of the mark he carried on his arm. And only those at the head table would know his true reasons for doing so.

“Snape.”

Her chest clenched when she realized that having Lupin around was likely making it worse. Or the threat of what was out there with that escaped inmate.

“Snape.”

He carried his burden for years, and with the whole threat of the possible return of the Dark Lord, and Harry right here, he was likely only going to become more stressed. More scary.

“Bloody hell, Aurora, don’t ignore me!”

Her head snapped up, and she realized that Draco had been standing on the opposite side of the table glaring at her with his teeth clenched. He checked over his shoulder, ignored the glares from Ron and Harry, before meeting her eyes.

“Yes?”

“Your father’s classroom.” He said simply.

“What of it?”

“Be there.”

“When?”

“Five minutes.”

“Alright,” she nodded once, watching him leave the great hall.

“You aren’t really going to meet with the smarmy git, are you?” Ron asked, leaning across the table a bit.

“What’s it to you if I do?” She snapped.

“He’s a Slytherin.” Ron noted.

“And you’re a Gryffindor.”

“Yeah, but Gryffindors and Slytherins … we’re enemies. House rivals.”

“My mother was a Gryffindor.” She told him.

This had Ron fall silent, his mouth working as he frowned.

“What’s it to you if I do?” She snapped.

“Was she really?” Neville asked, eyes wide.

For a moment, her eyes darted to Hermione Granger who was too absorbed in her Runes textbook to have heard what was going on. As she stood, Aurora looked to Neville. “She was the brightest witch of her age, more than any Ravenclaw. But she earned her red and gold tie by facing … the scariest thing I think could happen to anyone, and that was after getting involved with events that no student
in their right mind ever should.”

“Like fighting basilisks and following crazed teachers through puzzles?” Harry grinned cheekily, causing Ron to chuckle.

Aurora smirked, “Something like that,” she said as she turned and headed off to meet Draco.

She knew better than to go to the Potion’s classroom. It wasn’t at all what Draco had meant, and anyone who was nosy enough (like a scarred boy with glasses and his freckled sidekick) would know precisely where to go to eavesdrop.

Instead, Aurora made her way to the hospital wing, taking a rarely used staircase she’d known about since she was three that led to an area no student really bothered to venture down.

The wards from nearly twenty years ago had long vanished. When Aurora approached the door, it was like any other abandoned classroom in the castle. Except, of course, for the inside.

There were dings in the walls, and in some spots there were even bits of exploded cauldron. Any blood that was spilled would have long been cleaned up, but there was still stains from various ingredients on a few surfaces. In the corner was a sofa, greyed with age, and a low coffee table that had likely once been scattered with papers. Abandoned bottles and jars with long expired potions ingredients sat on the back tables, hiding from instant view what she knew Draco was staring at now.

As she got closer, she could see in the faded ink of her parents’ initials. There was no heart around them, like most teenagers used to declare their love, but a beautiful filigree scroll beneath the SS & HG. No plus, And. He did his initials and the scroll beneath, she did her own and the ampersand.

Draco was tracing the lines of the ampersand and scroll in a repetitive motion with his good hand, his face unreadable. Aurora waited, not daring to draw conclusions as to why he summoned her here, of all places.

“I have looked at your mother’s hand at various times throughout my life.” He started, no arrogance, no haughty tone that he spoke with here. His words were not clipped or spat but spoke in a way that made Aurora weary and hopeful at once. “My birthday cards, on her papers in the office, letters to my mother. I always thought it quite lovely, especially when compared to your fathers.” He lifted his eyes from the markings. “My father had said she came from an old pureblood family, one that most thought had died off or left Britain entirely. I never knew the name before, never thought to ask. Aunt H was a Snape, and that was that. But after the hospital wing, I thought it best I do a bit of research on her.” He smirked, and Aurora swallowed. “Funny thing about the Hogwarts library is that it has yearbooks dating back to the 1800s. Had Potter ever bothered to use his brain, he could have found pictures of his parents from when they were attending school. Though, it may have confused him, seeing Granger among them.”

Aurora took a few steady breaths, fighting for her mouth to open so she could speak. Deny or explain, whatever. Words needed to come.

“Hermione Granger. HG.” Draco continued, now running his finger over the letters. “I remember being two, attempting to call her Aunt ‘Mione because Hermione was just too large. ‘H’, Uncle Severus said. ‘Call her Aunt H. It will be easier’, though now I wonder who it was easier for.”

“Draco.” She said, but nothing else came out.

“How? Oddly enough, that is my big question right now: how. Because once I saw her horrid, bushy hair in the 1974 yearbook I couldn’t stop doing a comparison between the two versions of her and
"You grew up with her around you all the time and you never put the two together." Aurora crossed her arms and jutted out her hip, cocking an eyebrow just like her fathers as she awaited Draco’s response.

"An older version of her." He smirked boyishly like he hadn’t since before he came to school. "And, really, you weren’t even going to try and deny it? Maybe Granger had an Aunt who was a witch, maybe she was actually a half blood all this time, daughter of a squib who was tossed aside and given to the muggles?"

Aurora huffed, stiffening. "You already said you figured it out."

"I said I didn’t know the how, you could have made up a bunch of excuses or reasons why my assumptions were off the mark."

"So, what are you going to do now?" She asked him softly, her anger changing and morphing into something defensive. "You must know you can’t stop her from going back, else you rip apart existence as we know it. So, are you going to tell your father? I’m sure he would have some choice things to say about it. And you can be sure if Uncle Lu does anything to my Mum, Dad will be a fierce thing to fend off."

Draco lost his humor, sobering. "I don’t know what I’m going to do about it. I mean … it’s Granger, a muggleborn."

"And she’s your Aunt, whom you love."

"Not blood." Draco noted.

"Yes, well, you don’t know either of your blood aunts, do you? One’s rotting in prison, the other was disowned for marrying a muggleborn. Are you ready to lose your Uncle, even if not by blood, for the same reasons? Are you really that willing to toss aside your relationship with him, me, Leo?"

Draco flinched, turning away. "I said I don’t know what I’m going to do about it." He said more forcefully, whipping his head back around to look at her. "You have no idea what could be at stake. No idea what might happen if …."

"If the Dark Lord returns?" She shut him up, raising her own voice to speak over him. "You think I don’t know what they did to people like my mother when the Dark Lord lived and was gaining power? I probably know a hell of a lot more than you do. I know the meaning of that bloody Dark Mark, I know the things they did, the blood they spilled. You think you know, but you don’t! Innocent people, Draco! Killed or maimed or worse because they didn’t come from a family of inbreeds! Because Merlin, or God, or whatever higher power or trick of evolution granted them the abilities to tap into magic and use it. Do you know how much my mother has suffered for your father’s stupid beliefs? How much pain and suffering she had to endure?"

"She’s been passing off as a pureblood." Draco argued.

"And so, she wasn’t affected? Her friends, Draco. Her family. The first people who even accepted her in the era she wound up in! She may have remained physically untouched, but you have no idea what she’s suffered."

As Aurora huffed and puffed, catching her breath after her tirade, Draco frowned thoughtfully. She could see his eyes shifting ever so slightly as he processed everything she yelled out.
“Rory,” He said after she caught her breath, and hearing her nickname caught her by surprise. He turned, and there was something considerate and, dare she say, apologetic in his eyes. But before he could say anything, the door to the classroom opened.

Startled, they both whipped around and looked to Professor Lupin as he walked in.

“Am I interrupting?” He asked with a kindly smile, hands behind his back as he made his way toward them. “I’m sorry I just sm-sensed someone was down this way, so I thought I would check.”

“Everything is fine, Professor.” Draco replied with a stiff but polite grin. “My arm was bothering me, so I thought I would see Madam Pomfrey for a pain potion. I happened to see Rory on my way and thought she looked distressed. I merely pulled her in here to ensure she was alright.”

Professor Lupin smiled, though Aurora knew he wasn’t at all fooled.

“Alright, Mr Malfoy. Best go see the Matron, then, before the pain gets worse. I can speak to Aurora if she needs it.”

Draco nodded to Professor Lupin, then caught Aurora’s eye for a moment. He was stoic, but there was weight to his gaze, and a peace had settled in her soul from it. For now, all was well. She didn’t need to worry just yet. She watched as he walked out of the room, noting the swagger yet the bent head. She wished she could read minds like her father, just to have an idea what was going through Draco’s.

“Professor,” She said, turning back to him, ready to explain at least part of it. She stopped short as she witnessed Professor Lupin looking wistfully at the table where her parents’ initials lay. His hand reached out, and his fingers caressed her mother’s initials.

“What were you doing with Mr Malfoy?” He asked nearly absently.

“Talking.” She replied, “just talking.”

He nodded.

“Professor ….” She twisted her fingers.

He smiled a sad sort of smile and turned toward her. “It’s quite strange to see you and Harry.” He commented as he half leaned against the table. “Out of all of us, back then, there are only … you two. Well, I suppose Neville can be counted, because his parents were fellow Gryffindors. But out of the seven of us who were in that year, connected in one way or another, there is only you and Harry for the next generation.”

“You are counting my mother as your generation?” She snorted.

Lupin chuckled. “Well, she was to me until last Thursday. She was … your mother was just …..” He shook his head, eyes taking on a far-off look before they darted back to her. “I wasn’t as close to your father in the early years, and in the later years I was ….”

“Jealous?” Aurora offered, glancing swiftly at the SS & HG on the table.

“I may have been, yes.” He conceded with something like grace. “But regardless of what happened there, I want you to know that if there is something you would like to talk about, anything at all, my door is open. Be it what your father went through, or your mother, if you need someone who isn’t them who knows about it all.”
“Like my godmother who also doubles as my head of house?” She arched a brow much like her father’s, and Professor Lupin laughed.

“I quite forgot about that.” He put a hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “I simply feel a need to look after Harry, and you, more than I should because of my relationship with your parents.”

“I’m quite capable of taking care of myself.” She replied.

He gave her shoulder another squeeze, “Yes, I believe you are.” He replied a touch proudly.

“What is this?”

Aurora turned to the doorway where her father loomed, eyes darting from Lupin to her, to the hand resting on her shoulder. He seemed to judge the space between them, which was acceptable but a bit closer than most would be to a teacher.

He entered the room in that slow, dangerous stride she witnessed in the classroom just before he informed someone they were unwittingly making either poison or a bomb.

“I was informed by student that my daughter was meeting a questionable party in my classroom as I was leaving the Great Hall. Having wards set for when I am not there, I knew instinctively that she had not, in fact, gone for the dungeons. Few people would know the other classroom that would have been considered my own.”

“Dad.” Aurora tried to interject.

“Remove. Your appendage. From my daughter.” He ground out, ignoring her all together.

“Severus,” Professor Lupin had immediately withdrawn his hand, raising both in a sign of surrender. “I swear, whatever you think ….”

“What I think is that if you believe for one minute-”

“Dad!”

Aurora noted his wand sliding from the holster in his sleeve into his palm and panicked.

Without thinking, she produced her own wand much quicker. “Expelliarmus!” She shouted, and she watched the red beam shot at her father’s wand. Before he could register what happened, his black ash wand was landing in the hand opposite her grey Beech wood.

She’d never seen eyes so cold turned on her. “Aurora Eileen Snape.” He groaned out.

“I was here to meet Draco!” She shouted before he could say anything further. “Draco wanted to talk! He … figured things out.” Her father’s coolness changed to confusion, and she lose most of her bluster. “Honestly, if Professor Dumbledore, or anyone else in the know, really, had wanted mum’s origins kept secret, removing the yearbooks from the library probably would have been the smart thing to do.”

“They were here when I came in, Severus.” Lupin insisted.

“And how exactly did you come to this spot to look for them?”

“I may have picked up on something coming up to see Poppy about getting medicinal chocolate to keep in the classroom.” He replied, tapping his nose.
Her dad rolled his eyes before turning to her again. He extended his hand, looking down his nose at her.

Aurora shuffled forward, handing him back his wand.

“Magic on a teacher, Miss Snape, is an automatic minimum of one week’s detention.” He said. “You will start the week this evening, seven o’clock. I will inform your head of house and allow her to determine whom this will be carried out by. As such, I don’t believe I would remain an impartial party.”

“Yes, sir.” She said, eyes casting down to the tips of his dragon hide boots.

“Go.” He said, and she didn’t argue.

“Severus,” Remus said as the door shut behind Aurora.

“I have never been more simultaneously proud and pissed off at one of my children.” Severus said thoughtfully. “On one hand, she is showing the brashness her house is known for. On the other, one cannot disregard that she executed that perfectly.”

Remus laughed, and Severus allowed a slight upturn of the lips before he sobered and looked to his oldest … friend? Enemy? He was never sure what to classify Lupin as, the position constantly feeling as though it was in flux.

“Chocolate for the classroom?” He arched a brow. “I believe that almost as much as I think Minerva will be strict in her punishment.”

Remus floundered for a moment before his shoulders sagged. “I’d seen her coming this way,” He admitted. “And when I had lost sight of her, I followed her scent. Children can be funny like that, bearing signatures of both parents as well as something uniquely their own.”

“I dislike that you know my daughter’s scent more than I can say. Bear in mind, Lupin, she is not yet thirteen and she is not Hermione.”

“I am aware of that.” Remus swore. “Believe me, Severus, I am in no way tying to my feelings for Hermione to Aurora. But as I was saying to her, I feel an instinctual need to protect her as much as I do Harry.” He lowered his voice, “That part of me that longs for a pack acknowledges them as cubs that belonged to the group I once had.”

Severus stared at him for a long time, wanting to find more fault, more blame, he could shovel on the werewolf’s shoulders. But like many things in life, Remus could not be blamed for his instincts in this.

“Keep yours paws off my daughter,” He warned again, this time more calmly. “And don’t sniff her, either.” He turned, feeling his robes billow out around him as he did (he bloody loved that feeling), and promptly left his old haunt.

He was half way down the hall when it occurred to him why Aurora had been there in the first place. They were standing by the table, so when she had mentioned the things about the yearbooks ….
“Shit,” He hissed to himself, changing his mission from simply leaving to hunting. He had to find Draco, and he had to do it soon.

Chapter End Notes

So, that last note where I mentioned the micro business? I got REALLY BUSY with it in the last five days. So, I have not had much time to write, I have been picking at the chapter I'm currently working on. But, I wanted to post to give you more and a heads up. I apologize for any suffering the delay may cause.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 24th, 1975

———H———-

“What exactly do you and Sev learn from Professor Moody?” Lily asked over breakfast, and Hermione was at a bit of a loss as to what to say. Lily had never asked her, always Severus, and he always answered it in his sort of Slytherin way.

She rolled the food in her mouth around until she had enough wits about her to chew, and then used that time to try and think of something to say.

“I shouldn’t say,” She finally managed, though she knew it wasn’t going to satisfy her friend’s curiosity.

“Does it have to do with auror training?” Lily inquired. “I mean, I know Sev doesn’t want to do that, but ….”

“Oh, Merlin, can you imagine Snivellus as an auror?” Sirius said from where he sat on the other side of Remus. The werewolf blushed, turning to Hermione next to him with sheepish and regretful smile.

“I can’t imagine Snivellus contributing to society in any worthwhile manor.” James replied, snorting unattractively. “He’s likely going to be one of those Death Eaters until the good guys off him.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say, James.” Remus said, looking to his friend. “Severus is quite intelligent. I imagine he may actually do some impressive things.”

James gaze shifted briefly to Hermione, lingered a bit on Lily, then asked, “Like what?”

“I know for a fact that Severus’ ambitions don’t include the Death Eaters.” Lily said in a slightly haughty way.

“Right, because the Death Eaters don’t hold day jobs or anything.” Sirius countered. “Snivellus is dark. He knows dark magic, he is in a dark house. He is practically a Death Eater already.”

“And you lot are made of pure light.” Hermione snipped, pushing the remainder of her food around on her plate.

“And mischief,” Sirius smirked. “You can find out just how much, Kitten. All you have to do is dare to take a walk on the wild side.”

“Padfoot,” Remus grumbled, exasperated as Sirius and James laughed.

“Oh, lighten up, Moony.” Sirius said, giving Remus a firm smack on the back. “Kitten knows we tease. Well, her anyway. I’m quite serious about Snivellus.”
“And I am quite done with this conversation.” Hermione said, shifting off the bench and grabbing her bag.

“Me, too.” Lily said, doing the same and giving a nod to Hermione that she supposed was supposed to be some sign of solidarity for their friend. Hermione paused as Remus stood up, shouldering his bag.

“Moony?” Sirius asked, a smile on his face though it had lost its weight.

“I’m also done.” Remus countered. “But do continue.”

“It was just a bit of fun, Remus.” Peter said, looking more hurt than James or Sirius by their friend’s departure.

“Is it?” Remus asked. “Because I’m not finding it terribly amusing.” And then he turned, nodding to the girls and gesturing for them to go ahead.

Lily and Hermione looked to one another, and then turned and headed for the entrance of the Great Hall.

What in the blazes was happening? Severus had said that Remus had come to his aid from time to time, even stood by him in a couple of small skirmishes in the corridors when she and Lily weren’t around. She was certain, or at least she thought, well … she supposed she didn’t know what happened with the lot of them, except Peter’s eventual betrayal of them all. She frowned, trying to think back to the last year she was in her proper era. Professor Snape and Lupin were amicable. Harry was sure the former was trying to poison the latter at one point, but Lupin had merely found the idea amusing. And Professor Snape did substitute nearly every full moon, and that first lesson about werewolves had been more a hint than anything.

But the Shrieking Shack memories were the most telling, even though they were the foggiest. Professor Snape was livid until the truth came out. And Remus had whispered something to him that she didn’t think either Harry or Ron heard either. And whatever it was that Remus had said, Severus had eased the tension. From that point, they worked well together until the moon came out.

“You are very deep in your mind today.” Severus said, and Hermione startled, looking up at him and then their surroundings. They weren’t in the Great Hall anymore, but a quarter way to the defense classroom.

“I suppose I am.” She replied, shaking her head, trying to clear the thoughts racing in her head.

“Lupin,” Severus said with a cordial nod, and a suspicious eye. “Breaking off from the pack, are we?”

Hermione saw him stiffen, and she cringed at just how accurate Severus’ words had hit. He didn’t suspect already, did he?

“Yes.” Remus replied. “I wasn’t … thrilled with the breakfast conversation this morning. Or many of the mornings of late, actually.”

“You should come hang out with us!” Lily piped up enthusiastically, clutching his arm. “I’m sure Hermione would love it.”

“Would she?” Severus ground out.

“Well, she is kind of a third wheel with us.” Lily said, and Hermione blushed. Yes, third wheel.
Right. Because she really needed that reminder.

There was another Hogsmeade weekend coming up, and Severus hadn’t mentioned the possibility of going with her again. She wondered ideally if perhaps she somehow mistook the closeness they were developing for something a bit more. He didn’t push her off or say she was too close in the hospital wing after his accident, and he didn’t seem to mind her holding his hand. Or stroking his hair. But he never said anything afterward when he met her in the library. Or at all. She certainly hadn’t gotten a hug since September or a hand hold since then. Maybe he was truly only meaning to spend time with her in Hogsmeade with her as they had during the summer: as friends.

“Nothing I’m not used to.” Hermione said just loud enough to be heard by those who were around her, offering a self-deprecating smile at Severus’ frown.

“Well, I’ve often felt like a third wheel to James and Sirius, even a fourth at time. As long as no one minds, I’ll feel right at home among you three.”

“Thrilling.” Severus said, shifting his bag as they headed for the staircase.

The lot of them were quiet as they headed to defense class.

Among the first in, Hermione and Severus both gave Moody a nod as they took their seats, which the Professor returned. They had managed only two more Occlumency lessons since Halloween, and while Hermione didn’t feel she was making much progress, Severus seemed to be excelling. The nod, while a sign of a deeper level of intimacy than Moody had with most students, was also a show of respect from the old Auror.

Remus sat in the row behind them, where the rest of the marauders would join him when they made their way to class, but he sat behind Hermione instead of putting the usual three seats between them. Hermione gave him a quick grin before going about taking out her books. As she did, she noted Lily beaming at her, grinning broadly and twitching her eyebrows from the opposite side of Severus. Hermione’s nostrils flared as she quirked an eyebrow, not nearly as elegant or expressive as their Slytherin friend, but Lily still laughed as though she’d just heard the most hysterical thing yet.

People began filing in, and Moody watched them all with a critical eye. When the Marauders came in, laughing and goofing about, those sharp eyes narrowed and followed them.

With everyone settled, he took in everyone in the room.

“Why are the Dark Arts considered dark?” Moody asked gruffly.

“Because they are used by slimy gits.” James replied, Sirius and Peter chuckling as he grinned smugly.

Moody snorted, but did not smile, and said nothing.

“The Dark Arts were named because of their nature.” Severus said.

Moody’s gaze shifted to him, losing their cold gleam. “Why are they dark in nature?”

“Because they are meant to cause harm.” Severus replied.

“They are meant to cause harm.” Moody repeated, looking about the class. “Many wizards hear Dark Arts and think the most gruesome. Blood sacrifices, the Unforgivables. Why?”

Hermione chanced a peek at Severus, but he wasn’t saying anything. No one was. She raised her
“Granger.” Moody nodded to her.

“Because of limited thinking.” She replied. “The small minded are unable to take the term out of the box they have fitted it into.”

“And what’s the box?”

“Evil,” She replied. “But there is a difference between a dark wizard, and a wizard who uses dark magic.”

“No there isn’t.” James butted in. The whole class seemed to shift their intention entirely on him, and he smirked. “A wizard who uses dark magic is dark by definition.”

“Think so, Potter?” Moody asked. He looked about the room. “Who here has used a jinx? Come on, don’t be shy. Forget I’m your bloody teacher for a moment. Who’s used a jinx? Stinger? Jelly-leg?”

Hermione raised her hand first, Severus giving her a side-eye and a slight grin before he did the same. Nearly everyone around the room had raised their hands, the Marauders doing so only after a few of the more ‘goody’ types had confessed.

“Then by your definition, Potter, this whole room’s full of dark witches and wizards, yourself included.” Moody said.

“No,” James shook his head. “No, jinxes are stupid. Child’s stuff.”

“Jinxes are, by definition, dark magic.” Hermione retorted, turning in her seat to face down the pompous arse. “There are three kinds of dark magic, ranging in severity. The Unforgivables, of course, being the worse and carry an automatic life sentence in Azkaban for non-war time use. Hexes, which are considered mild to severe dark magic, are intended to cause a major inconvenience to their target or victim. And jinxes, which are considered mild dark magic, cause minor inconvenience to the person they are cast on.” She knew her voice had taken on that haughty, know-it-all quality that annoyed most people, but it couldn’t be helped. The confusion on Sirius face, the uncertainty of Peter’s, and James’s ashen expression was worth slipping back into it. “The dark arts do not equate evil. It is not the spell, but the intent behind it. A severing charm was created to help a seamstress cut fabric, but it could easily be used to remove an appendage. It is a dark magic, but only because of what it can do should the user intend for such an outcome.”

“Well said, Granger.” Moody said. “By Potter’s definition, the whole aurory would be corrupt. Your assignment, and homework, twelve inches on intent in dark magic and how it affects the outcome. Get started.”

The room was suddenly loud, a murmur through the crowd as everyone withdrew parchment, ink, quills, and text books. James hadn’t moved, Sirius was trying to get his attention, and Peter moved slowly but thoughtfully.

“Do you memorize text books, or do you just always manage to sound like one when you’re being absolutely insufferable?” Severus asked under his breath.

Heat suffused Hermione’s cheeks, “bit of both, I think.”

Severus snorted, but said nothing more as he started in on his essay.

The rest of the class passed without anyone saying much of anything.
Remus, at the end, hung back to speak to the rest of the Marauders as James still seemed to be caught in a stupor caused by the harsh blow from reality.

“You know what I realized,” Lily said as they were leaving the classroom. “This upcoming Hogsmeade is the last before Christmas.”

“Yes.” Severus said. “What of it?”

“Well,” Lily said with a coy smile, flipping her hair. “Not only is it the last chance to shop for presents without it being through owl order, but the last opportunity to find a dress for the Yule ball. I, being a prefect, was in the know of its pending approach. I’d have a few duties that night, of course. I would have to make rounds, but other than that I’ll get to enjoy the dance. Do you think you’ll go this year, Sev?”

“Perhaps.” He said, keeping his gaze straight ahead.

“Well,” Lily said, a light blush coming to her cheeks. “I should head to Care for Magical Creatures. See you at lunch?”

“We will be there, yes.” Severus said with a nod, gaze not diverting in the least.

Lily glanced to him, then to Hermione, who could only shrug. The girls waved, and Lily left them.

Hermione shifted her grip on her book bag, wanting to say something. Ask what was bothering him. Apologize if she’d somehow upset him. Crack a poorly executed joke.

“Were you intending on going to the Yule Ball this year?” Severus asked as they turned a corner to head to Runes, pausing as they had to wait for a staircase to shift in their favor.

“Well, umm, I, uh, hadn’t really thought about it. Maybe. Perhaps. I dunno, I didn’t really enjoy myself last year, but, umm, I could, maybe.” She wanted to hit herself for her stuttering. Taking a breath, she squared her shoulders, turned to Severus, and said, “I might enjoy myself if I went with someone.” It was as far as her courage would take her, her heart pounding out her chest as she watched his expressionless mask shift ever so slightly.

“Perhaps we could go together?” He said without looking at her.

Hermione’s knees nearly gave out. She was near-dizzy with giddiness and relief. “W-we, uh, could, yes.” Her voice cracked and pitched, and her blush deepened.

“Would you want to?” Severus asked conversationally, turning to face her for the first time since before class had started.

With her hair in a sensible bun, there was nowhere to hide her face. His magnetic gaze drew her in and kept her focused even though she wanted to crawl into her robes and hide. “Yes.” She said as the staircase came into place. “I would like that. Very much.”

“Indeed.” Severus said, studying her face. After a breath, he nodded. “Then perhaps when we go to Hogsmeade next week, we should part for an hour or so, allowing us each to acquire dress robes.” He said casually as they headed down the stairs. “We could meet in the Three Broomsticks from there, and afterward we could take in Tomes and Scrolls.”

“It sounds wonderful.” Hermione replied as she clutched the banister with a white-knuckle grip, her lips involuntarily turning upward despite her desperately wanting to emulate Severus’ cool calm.
“So, it does,” He agreed.

“So, Severus, Hermione.” Remus called. “Wait up!”

Severus shifted closer as he turned to see Remus coming toward them. So close, actually, that Hermione could feel a wonderful electric like aura dancing on her skin from the sheer nearness of him. As the three of them went to Runes, Severus remained close, a buffer between she and Remus, and she couldn’t have been happier.

Fuck, fuck, holy bloody shit, fuck, fucking, buggering fuck! She agreed! She bloody actually agreed!

Occulmency was by far Severus’ new favorite skill, for while he was calmly walking beside the intelligent, wonderful, beautiful, perfect Hermione, inside he was dancing. He was screaming. He was downright elated and laughing, and unsure how he had actually managed to get so lucky. The tides would turn, he was sure. There was no way a day in which James Sodding Potter sunk himself into the very category he’d been trying to place Severus in from the moment the Sorting Hat announced him a Slytherin, and Hermione Granger agreed to be his date for not just Hogsmeade, but the Yule Ball as well, without something going wrong.

But until then, he was going to ride the high.

September 17th, 1993

It took Severus entirely too long to be able to corner Draco. The little bastard had avoided him and did his absolute best to not stick a toe out of line around him so he could never assign him detention. Around McGonagall, however, he blatantly used magic on Mr Crabbe in front of her. A week for making the Malfoy heir’s muscle’s toenails grow through his shoes and have his tongue lock up so he couldn’t complain. The fact he used Severus’ spells to avoid him was something he couldn’t help but sneer at. He had hoped since Minerva was supervising his daughter’s detention that perhaps she would pass Draco off on him. Sadly, Hagrid was forced to take him.

“Mr Malfoy,” He said at the end of Potions for the day, and Severus flashed a glare at Potter and Weasley who looked a bit too gleeful at the prospect of Draco’s trouble. Granger gave them a shove as he said, “Stay.”

Draco sighed, resigned, darting looks at the trio as they left but made no sign of disdain like he normally would have.

When the last of the nosy stragglers left, Severus flicked his hand toward the door, wordless and wandlessly slamming it shut, putting up wards and silencing charms. He shifted around his desk, keeping his eyes on his godson as he stepped around. Draco didn’t move even as Severus gathered his robes and crossed his arms, trying to appear as opposing as possible. But maybe that wasn’t the way to go about it, maybe he needed to not be the Professor, but his Uncle. Not his Uncle the Death Eater, just the man he swore he’d be to Draco should anything happen to Narcissa and Lucius. The man who watched him grow up around Aurora.
“I have been informed,” He said smoothly, watching for any shift in his stoic nephew. “That you know a certain truth about my family.”

“I may,” Draco replied.

“Let’s not be subtle on this, Draco. You have been avoiding me, purposely, for a week. Aurora has confessed your knowledge. I believe we need to discuss it.”

“Right.” Draco said, then after a few seconds, he shifted forward in his seat and met Severus’ gaze with sheer befuddlement. “How could you marry Granger?”

Severus arched a brow. “I believe you are referring the one who just left the room not five minutes ago?”

“They’re the same person, aren’t they?” Draco retorted.

“Yes, and no.” Severus conceded, shifting his arms so he could unclasp his robes. He dropped them on his desk behind him, then half sat on his surface so he could stretch out his legs and cross them. “Bear in mind, Draco, that the Hermione Granger you know as a student, I did not know until you did. Not really. My Hermione was just as much of a know-it-all and could be just as insufferable. But what sent her back in time had caused her to … re-evaluate, as it were. When I had first known her, she was much more eager to not draw attention herself. Of course, she couldn’t do so completely, she was always a Gryffindor. But she was … tamer.”

“Okay, fine. I suppose that would make sense, and it’s not like you really knew what a pain in the arse she would be. But she married you. She knew who you were, I’m sure. Not any other wizards with the last name Snape. You’ve never been nice to her, and yet ….”

“I cannot be nice to Hermione Granger, friend of Harry Potter. My position is delicate, I cannot be seen showing kindness to any muggleborn, especially her.”

“What position?” Draco nearly yelled. “What is going on? Father had always said you were one of the most loyal, trusted follows of the Dark Lord, and here I find out you married a mu-muggleborn who happened to be friends with sodding Potter.”

Severus studied the boy and saw, for perhaps the first time, the beginnings of the man he would become. Like so many male teens before him, he was angry and confused, unsure if he should follow in his father’s footsteps or chart his own.

Severus had wondered, often, how many young Slytherins he had saved from following in their father’s, and sometimes mother’s footsteps and blindly believe the nonsense about blood supremacy. Not long ago, with Nymphadora Tonks, it had been easy to subtly point out how the Hufflepuff was magically superior to many in Hogwarts, despite being a half-blood. Clumsy though she may be, she was talented beyond her metemorphagus abilities. He knew there was some family brainwashing that was impossible to sway one from, but he wondered how many graduated from Hogwarts with a different way of thinking.

Draco was showing signs of change. Muggleborn? Yes, the word was clearly new on the boy’s tongue, but it was the word he chose. It was said without disdain, without condescension. Perhaps it was time to enlighten the boy, though maybe not to the degree he had done with Aurora.

“I did not know then who your Aunt H would be friends with before her … trip. Ironically, she tolerated Potter’s father at best, and loathed him the majority of the time. I did, however, know she was a muggleborn from nearly the beginning. As was our dearest mutual friend. Professor Lupin and
I did not reach the amicable levels that he had with Aunt H, but he and I share a similar blood status, and it never phased me. I was, before she came into my life, admittedly curious about the Dark Lord and what he had to offer. The other boys in my year wanted to keep their heads down and get out, but had the blood status to do so. Some of the older students: your father, Crabbe and Goyle’s, the LeStranges, among others, spoke of respect and power that could be gained in his inner circle, should you earn a spot. Being powerless and nearly friendless, it was … enticing.”

“And Aunt H changed that? What, she spouted off about righteousness and justice or some such rot?”

“No,” Severus replied with a bit more acid than he intended. “She never once said anything of the sort. As pathetic as it is, she merely showed me kindness, understanding. I did not have to give up Lily for her, nor did she demand I shove aside a topic of interest because she feared corruption.”

“That sounds disgustingly warm and fuzzy,” Draco said with a curled lip.

“Yes,” Severus agreed. “But regardless, meeting Hermione, having her take me in, as it were, opened different doors and avenues to me. Ones in which I did not have to give my life in servitude to achieve. I quite imagine that had I not had the advantages she gave me, I would’ve done anything the Dark Lord asked to have my apprenticeship. To feel even a modicum of power.”

Draco glanced at his left arm. “Yet you still gave yourself to him.” He said quietly.

And Severus couldn’t help but smile, even if it did feel like it appeared more a sneer. “That is precisely what I want everyone to think.” He said, watching confusion grow. “You have not earned the right for the story, and if I had even an inkling that you might run to your father and repeat everything you heard, I wouldn’t have even told you as much as I have. So, I will give you this: the war against the Dark Lord was not easily won, but won it was. Why do you think that is?”

“Because Potter somehow took him out.”

“That’s how he was stopped, but not how his followers were either sent to prison or forced to bribe their way out. What would it take to ensure the inner circle, and those who fanatically believed but did not bear the mark, would not be able to continue doing harm?”

Draco sat thoughtfully for a moment, and Severus nearly laughed when the puzzle pieces fell into place, and Draco’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “But you were sent to Azkaban!”

Severus’s sneer turned to a true smile. “I had been. So how could I have possibly been able to relay any information? How could the arrests of your Aunt and Uncle, of Crabbe and Goyle Sr, of any of the Death Eaters be blamed on me if I was in solitary confinement for two weeks awaiting trial? I certainly couldn’t have known what they were doing.”

Draco had always looked up to him, he knew. He was a different sort of father than Lucius, having had the perfect model of what not to be from Tobias and doing all he could to never act like him. While Lucius was cold and distant, Severus had never been to his own children or his god son. But before him, Draco’s admiration morphed and grew. His grey eyes widened in wonder, and a newfound respect was forming in those orbs. He had grown up just a little bit in this conversation and was likely to continue doing so.

“Now that you have what was undoubtably information you felt missing from your recent discoveries, it’s up to you what you wish to do with them. I am not asking in any way to go out and hug all the muggleborns, declare yourself their protector. All I ask is that you, perhaps, examine for yourself what options you really have. There may be a day yet when the Dark Lord is resurrected.
When that happens, you can either stand with those who blindly follow for a misguided and ancient notion, or ….”

“You have given me much to think about, Uncle Severus.” Draco said as he stood up, shouldering his bag with his head held high. “If you speak to my Aunt, please give her my love. Sincerely.”

“And in the mean time?” Severus asked, brow arched.

Draco merely smiled, smugly of course, but he said nothing. Severus was sure he caught a chuckle coming from the blond boy as he opened the door and left the classroom, closing it behind him.

He stared at it contemplatively for a moment, wondering what of all that might give the boy so much hope. The stomach churning realization made him groan.

“I’d had hoped he’d have better taste than that.” He grumbled to himself as he moved around his desk to retrieve his robes and attempt to have tea with Minerva.

December 6th, 1975

“Delia?” Hermione was taken aback by the presence of her stunning foster mother speaking to the proprietor of the dress and robe shop. Hermione had parted ways with Severus not long ago, he going to the opposite side of the Three Broomsticks to find his own dress robes. Lily, who’d been flanked per usual by Marlene and Alice, had joined her, excited to choose a new dress. She merely gave Delia a wave but was quickly pulled by Marlene to a rack of gowns and robes far too formal for a Hogwarts event.

Delia darted her gaze to Lily before she came up to Hermione with a bashful, guilty look. “When I got your letter, I may have been a bit … excited. My emotions get the best of me these days, it seems.” She said, her hand going to her rounded belly.

Hermione smiled fondly at the little lump. “For very good reasons.” She said, hand hovering near though she didn’t dare to touch, just in case.

Delia gave a fond, exasperated snort and snatched Hermione’s hand. She placed it on her belly just where the baby gave a firm kick.

“So anyway, given the what and the who,” She said, eye brows twitching as her tone got giddy. “I wanted to help you choose a dress. Though I suppose I should’ve thought about your girlfriends being able to give ya a hand.”

“I would love your input, honestly.” Hermione said, feeling a bit of weight lift from her shoulders as she glanced to where the girls were plucking gowns with plunging backs and giggling. “You know me better than them. You did, after all, manage to send me the perfect gown last year. And you can’t tell me it was the only one Keira had, because I have seen her closet.”

Delia gave a musical laugh and had the decency to blush. “Well, then I’m happy to help my sorta daughter.” She turned, taking the hand Hermione had resting on her belly and placing it in the crook of her arm. “What color were you thinking? Red seems a bit much, even if it is your house color. You’d look best in green or blue.”

It was Hermione’s turn to blush. “I was thinking green.” She said just loud enough for Delia to hear.
Delia hummed a happy approval, bringing Hermione to a rack near the back of the store. The two had barely been there a minute when Delia let out a soft gasp and pulled a dress from the lot.

“Whaddya think of this one?” She asked.

“Oh, that’s gorgeous,” Marlene had said, and Hermione looked over her shoulder to see the other three girls staring and nodding in approval. “It would go wonderfully with your hair coloring, and the gold will bring out the gold in your eyes.”

“It’s festive.” Alice noted with a shrug.

“It is,” Lily agreed. “And it’s dark enough that no one would think it a house color.”

“Well that didn’t take long,” Hermione chuckled. “I expected to have to really hunt one down.”

Delia brought it over to the sales witch, who then ushered Hermione in a change room where she would then be able to alter the gown where needed.

The bodice was snug and felt like satin. Off the shoulder, it emulated the sweetheart neckline she’d had the year before. Just below the waist, the material shifted. Silk, perhaps, or some equivalent that made the skirt flutter about, layers so the gold was glimpsed from beneath the green more clearly when she twisted and turned. Very little altering had to be made, and the dress was arranged to be delivered to Hogwarts by the following weekend.

“Come with us to the salon!” Marlene said after Hermione had finished paying a hefty sum of galleons. “We won’t be much longer here.”

“Oh, I can’t.” Hermione replied.

“Severus can wait.” Lily insisted. “And I’ll go meet him with you.”

*Was that how he ended up alone a year ago*, Hermione wondered.

Before Hermione could reply, Delia said, “Actually, girls, I had planned to take Hermione to The Treasure Trove, pick out a necklace. Perhaps she’ll catch up with you later?”

The girls seemed to hate how they hadn’t thought of such a thing before and waved off Hermione without much thought. Once outside in the falling snow, Hermione let out the frustration the thought had brought up.

“We don’t actually have to, ya know.” Delia said cautiously. “Just thought you’d like the excuse so you could go see your Severus sooner.”

“It’s not that.” Hermione assured. “Honestly, I’m not even sure how long dress robes take to choose. It’s Lily. Severus can wait? I know I told you about what I did for him last year.” She said, looking up to Delia who nodded thoughtfully. “Was that how it happened? She just got so self-involved that she determined he could wait, and then somehow forgot? Or decided he didn’t feel like waiting for her longer? If she had just ….”

“Hermione,” Delia stopped her, putting a hand on her shoulder and forcing her charge to face her. “I don’t know Lily well. She seems nice enough from what you’ve said in your letters, and from what I’ve seen at your birthday tea. But she strikes me as someone who is quite used being the center of attention. Knowing Severus as I do, I don’t think he’d have stood for that for long.” She smiled. “You can’t go on a crusade to defend against something that requires no aid.” Something caught her eye off in the distance, but when Hermione turned, she didn’t see anything. “Don’t you worry about The Treasure Trove. I know Minerva’s one of the chaperons, I’m willing to bet she’d be more than
happy to accompany a pregnant lady shopping. You trust me to pick something out for you?”

“You picked out my dress.” Hermione pointed out. “Just let me get you a couple galleons.”

“I don’ think so.” Delia said. “Think of it as an early Christmas gift.”

“You don’t … you don’t have to do that.” Hermione replied, not wanting to offend, yet feeling she had to protest at least some.

A mischievous twinkly came to Delia’s eye, and she leaned in just a bit. “You are likely my only chance at ever being able to buy things for a daughter.” She whispered, pulling away with a wink.

“Oh, a little man!” She gushed, putting her hands on Delia’s belly briefly.

She laughed, pure joy in the sound of a woman who had finally gotten everything she’d wanted. Draping an arm around Hermione’s shoulders, she steered her toward the end of the road, heading toward The Three Broomsticks.

Minerva was lingering near there, a knowing smile on her face as she spotted the pair of them.

“I’ll take over from here, Hermione.” She said, taking Delia’s other arm. “I’m sure our Cordelia would find it greatly amusing hindering a few liaisons at Madam Puddifoot’s with me.”

“Indeed, I would.” Delia agreed. “Give my best to Severus.”

Hermione waved as they took off, then turned and headed inside the tavern.

A part of her was quite nervous that she was too early and he wouldn’t show up, or that she would somehow find herself having greatly misinterpreted what was happening. Yet it took her only about a half a minute to spot Severus in the corner, his face a mask of indifference while he fidgeted it a pepper pot on the table. Droplets from melted snow clung to his hair, and his cloak on the back of his chair was clearly damp in spots.

She barely moved toward him when he looked up, his fingers stilling a moment before he rose from his chair. As she removed her cloak, Severus took it from her, draped it over the back of her chair which he promptly pulled out.

Oh yes, this was more than a mere meeting of friends.

Either that, or he was just practicing his etiquette.

“I had expected you to take much longer. I was under the impression that girls tend to fuss about these things.” He said as he glanced in the direction of the bar and nodded.

“Well, I was greeted by a pleasant surprise. Delia sends her regards, by the way.” She said, happy to see a quirk of Severus’ lips at the mention.

Madam Rosmerta came by and sat down two butter beers and a plate of sandwiches, winking at Hermione before she headed back to the bar.

As Hermione blushed, Severus said, “She is well, then?”

“Delia? Positively glowing.” Hermione replied, taking a ginger sip of her butterbeer. “It’s a little boy. I don’t know if they’ve thought of a name yet or not, but ….”

Severus nodded, seemingly pleased with something as he took a sandwich from the plate. He studied
it, looking it over, not taking a bite. “I wish to tell you something.” He started, and Hermione had suddenly lost her appetite. Letting go of her butterbeer, she rubbed her hands on her trousers, hiding the nervous twisting of her fingers underneath the table.

“Oh?” She choked out.

Severus nodded, remaining silent for a long moment. “I believe I had a hand in the achievement of the healthy pregnancy.”

Hermione stopped breathing. She was pretty sure her heart stopped beating as well. She didn’t blink to the point of it being painful. Time meant nothing to her in the span it took for Severus to look up, see her, and laugh. Great, loud, boisterous guffaws that actually drew attention from fellow students who appeared either perplexed or scared at why Severus Snape had made such a noise. It jump started her vitals, made her blink, but she didn’t tear her eyes away from him.

“Bloody hell, Hermione, is that really where your mind went to?” He asked as he calmed down, wiping a tear from his eye as that gorgeous, boyish smile lingered.

“Well what am I supposed to think?” She choked out.

He chuckled. “I suppose I could have phrased it more eloquently. What I mean is I made some suggested changes to Delia’s fertility potions. When you came down that morning and saw us brewing, she had asked if I could offer some insight to making it better.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, embarrassed but relieved it was not how it sounded.

“Yes,” He said. “But more than that, she obviously told Bob. And Bob, who had been knowingly taking my altered pain potion, knew my interest in potions and where I wish to take it, had informed a friend of his who is an editor for a very prominent potion’s journal. Being a student, and not an apprentice hinders my chances, but because of my youth, the editor is willing to take a look at an essay written on my improvements for pain relief, as well as a commentary on the fertility potions. I took the time and wrote it out, and only yesterday did I owl it to Bob, who is acting as a go between.”

“Severus,” Hermione half gasped. “That’s … that’s amazing. And, oh, the doors it will open to you when you do get the chance to apply for an apprenticeship.”

“I know,” He said, showing a smugness that rarely came over him.

Elated, she leapt out of her seat and moved around the table, throwing her arms around his shoulders and squeezing. His free hand came up, gripping her arm as if to hold her there, and without thinking, she planted a kiss on his temple.

He stiffened, and Hermione wanted to die. “That’s wonderful.” She managed to say, pulling away to give him space. “I’m so, so proud of you.” She took her seat, face flushed and eyes darting around to make sure no one had watched her make a fool of herself.

“Thank you.” He said quietly. She dared to peek at him and was amazed to find he was a bit red cheeked as well. Severus cleared his throat, finding his sandwich very interesting once again. “Of course, this means that I am a bit more academically advanced than you are. Even interest from an editor in a journal is better than nothing.”

Her jaw dropped. “You would think that, wouldn’t you?” She said, picking up a sandwich and taking a large bite out of it.
“I do,” He said, following suit and eating lunch with her.

They finished their meal without interruption, conversation over academic topics peppered between bites. The conversation carried as they left the tavern, emerging out onto the cobblestone that was slowly being covered by snow.

“If I could alter the bone mending potion to not be so bloody vial or painful, that would be one of my favorite, personal achievements as someone who’s had to take it more than they’d like.”

“Right, the potion you take on occasion should be more palatable over the pain potion that could help those who have developed a tolerance for the original.” Hermione smirked, looking up at his severe but adored face.

“We do not want one to become addicted to it because it is easier to take, now do we?” He countered.

“You tote that there are no-” She stopped talking with a gasp as her foot made contact with a stone that was just snow covered and trodden enough to be slippery. Before she could fall in either direction, Severus’ hand caught hers, pulling her steady.

She huffed, catching her breath before giving him a smile. “Thank you.” She said, squeezing his hand but refusing to let go until he did.

“You cannot be so desperate to determine if the bone mending potion is in fact as vial as I say. And if you are, kindly wait until after the Yule Ball to do so. Wouldn’t want to risk something going wrong, and your not being able to attend. I’d have wasted precious galleons on a set of robes for nothing.”

Hermione laughed, and Severus grinned with satisfaction before leading her down the road to the bookstore, still holding her hand as they went.

October 31st, 1993

———A———

“Rory,” Hermione called to her as she and Ginny entered the common room, and Aurora froze with panic. “Could you come here for a moment?”

Aurora glanced to Ginny who didn’t seem to be experiencing the same levels of trepidation, then turned to join the trio in front of the fireplace. Of course, Ginny would never think that tone of voice from Hermione Granger to be one to worry about. After all, she didn’t grow up with that tone and infliction, one indicating that whatever she was about to be asked, her mother already knew she knew the answer. One that usually proceeded inquires of damaged furniture, injured plants in the garden, or why the plate of cookies was suddenly half empty.

“What’s going on?” Aurora asked, clearing her throat and smoothing her trousers as she sat next to Harry on one of the sofa’s.

Ron was leaned back on the sofa beside Hermione, tucked in to the corner and looking smug.
Hermione, however, was entirely confused, and a quick glance at Harry told her nothing as he affected the appearance of a neutral party.

“You know Draco well, don’t you?” Hermione asked as Ginny squeezed in on Aurora’s other side. Aurora chewed her lip as she wondered how this was going to come back badly on her. “We grew up together.” She admitted. “He was practically a brother to me.”

“So, you could tell when he was doing something as some sort of ploy or plot?” Harry had asked. “Umm, yeah, perhaps.” Aurora replied, looking at each of the trio once more. “What happened?” She finally asked, as it was clear something had.

“Well, we were looking about the village, you see. Taking a peek at the Shrieking Shack.” Hermione started, and a wave of nausea had overcome Aurora that manifested on her face. “Don’t worry, we didn’t get close, or anything.” Hermione reassured.

“Oh good.” Aurora replied in a near deadpanned tone. An anecdote from her father’s tales regarding the Dark Mark flashed in her mind, causing a small shudder to go through from both the memory of what he did say, and the things he didn’t.

“Anyway, we were there, and, well, Draco came up to Ron and I.”

“The prat started going on about how I may be able to live in slum like that, but, and I quote, ‘Granger’s too good for that’.” Ron butted in, face going red as he spoke swiftly.

“Right,” Aurora said, eyeing Ron and wondering if he’d somehow gone a bit mad. It didn’t seem like something to get into too big a huff over.

“But why would he say something like that?” Harry asked. “How did Hermione go from ‘Mudblood’ to being ‘too good’ for something?”

“And if that was the only thing he’d said, we might have brushed it off as his mocking of Ron.” Hermione added in.

“He was mocking me, ‘Mione.” Ron insisted. “He’d wondered what we could possibly be doing hanging around just the two of us when he ‘knew for a fact’ that you preferred blokes with black hair.”

Aurora suddenly found herself choking on her spit, hacking and coughing and wondering why Draco was being so bloody obvious! Harry reached out and smacked her on the back, trying to help her regain her breath, and eventually she righted herself enough to see the looks of concern on everyone’s faces.

Waving them off, she managed to croak, “Didn’t think he was just saying that rot to egg you on? Given your best friend and the savior of the wizarding world has black hair?” She gestured to Harry.

“Maybe,” Hermione agreed, “except that, well, when Harry showed up, he didn’t go down that route.”

“Of course he didn’t” Aurora grumbled to herself.

“And we just wanted to know ….”

“Should we be worried, or something?” Harry cut of Hermione. “Is he, like, crushing on Hermione
in a sorta *Romeo and Juliet* sorta way?"

“In a what?” Ron asked.

“Oh, Merlin, don’t make me retch.” Aurora replied, feeling a lump in her throat. “Believe me, that is the very last thing Draco is doing.”

“You’re sure?” Hermione asked with a desperation that would have been funny had the very idea of Draco crushing on the girl who would be his honorary aunt hadn’t been so nauseating.

“As you pointed out, I grew up with him. Yes, I’m quite sure he does not, in any way, fancy you. You’re not his type.”

“Because I’m muggleborn?” Hermione sneered.

“No, that is very much not the reason you’re not his type.” Aurora half chuckled, and Ginny gave an unattractive snort before covering her mouth to contain the giggles. “Look, was he alone, or did he have tweedle dee and tweedle dum with him?”

“Tweedle who?” Ron asked.

“He was alone,” Harry asked, his mouth twisting in a wry grin.

“Then the Draco you encountered was the real one.” She told him. “Look, we all have parts of ourselves we hide, or parts that we create so you don’t see the truth. Draco is no different. And while he’s here, he’s sorta, I dunno, putting on a show for the other Purebloods, especially the Slytherins. It’s what’s expected of him. But the Draco I knew didn’t act like some Prince, he was a boy who liked Quidditch and camping, a good book and a hot cocoa.” Ron snorted, and Aurora flashed him a glare before continuing. “He and I have been talking recently, so if he approaches you alone, chances are ….”

“Chances are he’s up to something.” Ron insisted before getting to his feet. “Now come on, the feast is about to start, and I’m starved.”

———A———

In the crowded Great Hall, no one had seemed to notice when Draco Malfoy slipped around to be near a group of Gryffindors and one Ravenclaw. His own house, Aurora had noticed were all either packed together on the other side of the room, or dispersed casually among other houses. He didn’t speak to them, but listened intently as they discussed the slashing of the Fat Lady with Luna. Positioned as he was behind Ron, he was out of view of the one person who would object to his presence the most. The twins had been a bit perplexed, but when the rest of them didn’t seem phased by the sudden Slytherin presence, they said nothing about it.

“Maybe Mr Black was just trying to talk,” Luna offered an opinion. “I imagine it would get very frustrating having no one listen to you for twelve years.”

“He killed thirteen people, Luna.” Ginny reminded her.

“Perhaps, but there was never any real proof of that.”
“What do you mean no proof?” Hermione asked, her chin tilting and her tone condescending. Her mother could be right annoying in her youth. “There were twelve bodies and only pieces left of the thirteenth.”

Harry had glanced over at Ron just before Percy Weasley announced that the lights would be going out.

Meeting her eye from behind Ron, Draco squared his shoulders and pulled his sleeping bag around and wedged it between Aurora’s and Luna’s surprising Ron and Hermione. Just as Ron opened his mouth, Aurora quickly withdrew her wand and murmured “Muffilato.”

“Oi! You can’t be here! Go back to Slytherin, ya git!” Ron declared, pointing and gesturing in a way that must have looked funny to any prefect that was watching where they couldn’t hear what was being said.

“Would you settle down?” Aurora hissed. “He’s been behind you the whole time.”

Ron was about to say something when the candles from the great hall suddenly went out.

Aurora took a deep, gasping breath and focused on how clear the moonlight was through the windows. She forced herself to acknowledge that there were candles around the edge of the room, barely aglow, but marking the walls and doorways. The prefects were walking around with small lanterns of blue fire, allowing them to see their charges. Draco’s hand reached for hers and squeezed, but Aurora found she wasn’t as frightened as she expected. She glanced at Ginny who was looking at Draco with a new kind of respect, and Draco, she noted, kept his mask up except for a hint of understanding in his grey eyes.

“Malfoy,” Harry whispered, even though he didn’t need to. “You said before, when you were making us cut your ingredients for us, that I should want revenge on Black. You were surprised I didn’t know.”

“I would’ve thought Dumbledore would’ve told you, at least.” Draco mumbled quietly. He was civil with just a touch of the superior attitude he’d honed over the last three years. “Black wasn’t just a murderer who go caught. I’d overheard my father say once that supposedly Black was the one who told the Dark Lord where to find your parents.”

“I don’t understand.” Harry said, confused.

Aurora looked at the pillow beneath her, observing the threads fraying at the edge. It was her pillow from the dormitory, and she suspected the headmaster had somehow summoned everyone’s personally.

“There’s an album my mum keeps in our living room filled with pictures from their Hogwarts years.” She said, barely able to look at Harry. “He’s changed, Sirius Black. The wanted posters make him look scary and grotesque, but in the pictures, he was handsome.”

“Wait,” Ron said. “Your Dad was friends with Sirius Black?”

Yes, well, of course that seemed believable, wasn’t it?

“No.” She said. “But my Mum was. Sorta. She was friends with Professor Lupin and Harry’s Mum, and as a result, she knew ….”

“She knew Sirius Black,” Harry nodded. “So Black betrayed my parents to Voldemort somehow? But why did he have to tell him where they were? I thought he’d always just found him.”
“I imagine your parents used a Fidelius Charm.” Luna said. “It’s a charm in which someone keeps a secret in their soul, and no one can know where to find what’s being hidden unless the Secret Keeper tells them.”

“If Sirius Black was a friend of your parents, then they probably asked him to keep the secret.” Hermione suggested, reaching out and comforting Harry.

“And how do you know all this, Malfoy?” Ron demanded, which caused some speculative looks from the Gryffindors.

“My father works for Ministry, Weasel. And despite what he often thought, just because I couldn’t be heard didn’t mean I couldn’t hear.” He spat back, and Aurora chuckled as she remembered finding Draco in some strange spots listening in to boring conversations his parents would be having when she came for a visit. “Despite what many wizards like to think, they seem to gossip more than witches do.”

Hermione seemed to like that bit, glancing at the other girls with a knowing smile.

“We should probably pretend to sleep soon,” Luna said. “A few of the prefects have noticed we’re talking. I’m not sure what Rory did to make sure they couldn’t hear us, but their growing suspicious.”

“Probably think we had something to do with it.” Fred said.

“As if we would ever cause trouble.” George agreed.

Aurora canceled the spell, and while the nine of them settled down, and did their best to look like they were sleeping, she knew none of them were. Ron would whinge quietly about Draco being nearby and would promptly be told to hush by Ginny or Hermione. Harry would try and ask Draco what more he heard on Black, and while Draco would do his best to give what little he knew, it was never much, and it wouldn’t be long before Ron would snort and scoff. Hermione would try asking Luna a question about Ravenclaw, and Aurora could tell that she wasn’t sure how to take Luna’s whimsy. The twins would crack jokes every time something creaked or someone coughed, startling the rest of them.

Hours passed before Aurora had noted Dumbledore entering the hall, coming toward them just as Percy had begun too. After a brief counsel, Percy left, and was replaced by the greatest comfort Aurora could hope for.

“The castle has been searched, Albus. There is no sign of Black.”

“I didn’t expect him to linger,” Dumbledore replied with a sigh.

“Do you suspect how he got in?” Her Dad asked, his tone suggesting he already knew the answer.

“I suspect many possibilities, all more unlikely than the last.” Dumbledore replied.

“Quite,” Her father said. “I’m sure you don’t suspect he got in without help. And we know very well that there is someone here ….”

“Two someone’s, I would say, Severus.”

“Hardly.” Severus groaned out.

“Oh, come now.” Dumbledore said in that kindly way that always made Aurora uneasy. “You
always said you didn’t suspect …"

“I don’t. I never have. For a man who appears to know so bloody much you often miss the obvious. And while your continued fixation seems to be that Black coveted my wife, his attentions were always fixed … elsewhere. Which is why I ask again, are we certain that the appointment you made…”

“Is trusted. And as concerned about Sirius Black entering the school as you are.”

“Hardly.” Her father groaned out. “He is not the one who has a child in the dormitory that was attacked.”

Dumbledore bowed his head. “Quite right, Severus. You have a point.”

There was silence as the two seemed to have a standoff. “I will ask H.” He said softly.

“She won’t be able to tell you.” Dumbledore said gently.

“Outright? No. But marriage allows an intimacy that few people can achieve with someone not their spouse. And there have been times over these last two years, Albus, that you have kept me in the dark, and H has offered just enough light to allow me to see.”

“Well,” Dumbledore said, seeming to tense. “I suppose something can be said for that. I assume you’ll want to floo her now?”

“It’s three in the bloody morning.” Her father grumbled. “I’m not about to risk waking her, or Leo. And I can assure you, Headmaster, that in this situation I will be as much a father as I am a professor and head of house. I will stay here, in this room, keeping watch.”

Dumbledore chuckled, nodded, and left.

Aurora watched her father watch Dumbledore as the headmaster left. Once he was through the doors, her Dad looked around, judging the Great Hall, it seemed, and found it satisfactory. He then looked down, studying each of their forms, confused to find Draco it would seem, but offered a hint of a smile when he noted her looking back at him. He flicked his wrist and walked away, and Aurora suddenly realized that something had been different while he was talking to Dumbledore.

“What was that about?” Ron asked quietly.

“H is your mother?” Hermione asked instantly.

“Aunt H has always been a bit insightful.” Draco answered for her.

“What, like Trelawney?” Hermione asked with disgust.

“No,” Aurora chuckled. “She’s an Arithmancy mistress. She specializes in calculating outcome.”

“Oh,” Hermione nodded with approval.

“But why can’t she say anything?” Harry asked.

“She’s bound by an oath.” Aurora said, leaving it at that as it seemed to satisfy everyone listening.

After a pause, Draco said, “You lot realize we’re the only ones in this room, aside from Dumbledore, that heard that conversation.”
“I doubt we’re the only ones awake, Malfoy.” Hermione said.

“Maybe so. But whatever was happening, Snape wanted us to hear.”

“Why?” Ginny asked.

The question lingered, but no one seemed to know the answer. Aurora certainly hadn’t. And if there was further talk of it, she didn’t hear it before she drifted off in a contented slumber.

Chapter End Notes

Canon for third year is going to start going quite far to the left from this point on. Fair warning.

Also I can not say how much I appreciate reading all your comments.
December 19th, 1975

—S—

Severus wanted to be anywhere else. The Slug club Christmas Dinner was boring, but more importantly, exclusive. Slughorn had pulled him toward him, showed him off as a very promising Potion's student. "Can't tell you why, though. Hush, hush." He'd say in that sickening, jolly sorta way that just elevated him to new levels of sheer pompousness.

Lily was in her element, socializing with witches of high standing and speaking with them as much as she could before her eyes would glaze over in that way that always indicated the subject matter had gotten too great. Gifted as Lily was, natural with magic though she may be, she was not an academic in nature.

Not wanting to hinder his friend, Severus stayed to the sidelines where he could observe and keep out of the way.

"Severus," Lucius greeted him, and he turned from watching Slughorn dribble food down his front to the aristocrat. Lucius' smile was genuine, and his handshake friendly.

"Lucius," Severus greeted with a tilt of his head. "Narcissa could not accompany you this evening?"

A quiet sadness came to Lucius' eyes. "No. Narcissa, I'm afraid, is under the weather."

"I'm sorry to hear." Severus said, meaning it honestly, suspecting the truth. An eager voice wanted to offer Lucius the changes he'd made with Delia McGonagall's fertility potion, but he tamped it down before he could make an arse of himself.

"And you? Your Hermione is not with you this evening?" Lucius asked, eyes darting about the room and momentarily lingering on someone. Severus suspected it was Lily by the slight curl of Lucius' lip.

"Hermione was not deemed special enough by our esteemed founder of the Slug club. She was unable to accept an invitation to accompany due to previous engagement."

Occlumency lessons, as it were. Moody wanted to try and help her build better walls in an effort to get her at the same level Severus was at. And since she didn't earn an invitation from Slughorn himself, they'd all thought this would be the best night to go ahead with the secret lesson.

"I suppose it can't be helped. You must be counting down the minutes so that you can escape back to her?"

"As you are with Narcissa?" Severus quipped, and Lucius chuckled. "Unfortunately, Hermione is not in Slytherin. I will not see her until tomorrow."

"Not in Slytherin?" Lucius seemed genuinely perplexed by this.
"She is, unfortunately, a Gryffindor."

"Is she?" Lucius frowned. "Is that why she was taken in by McGonagall?"

"No. I believe that the familial assignment came before the Hogwarts House." He lied smoothly. He knew it was very, very likely the other way around. "Though she was not sorted before the school, if she was sorted upon her arrival at all."

"I see," Lucius sneered. "She was quite a pleasure to meet in Diagon Alley, I was hoping to do so again."

"Perhaps you will." Severus replied. "There will be more of these insipid dinners, I'm sure. She won't be busy through all of them."

"Too true," Lucius agreed. He then groaned, his shoulders deflating slightly. "I'm sorry, Severus. I believe I must cut one of the most pleasant aspects of this evening short. I am being waved over by the bumbling fool."

"Good evening, Lucius." Severus said with a slight bow.

Lucius returned it. "And you, Severus."

He watched the blonde man head toward Slughorn, snickering as the aristocrat cringed when Slughorn put his arm around him.

Severus scanned the room again, noting Lily off with another group of female students. She flipped her hair, and laughed with her whole body, seeming to genuinely be enjoying herself. He was glad for it, seeing as how she was so thrilled to be made a part of this. He moved along the wall, creeping closer to the door, hoping to get away from the party undetected.

He stopped when he realized that Black and Potter were near the door, groaning at his escape being thwarted. He slowed his movements, willed himself to blend in with the crowd as he crept closer. Maybe he could dart out along with someone else, he just had to stay out of sight of the bloody Marauders. Just because they had kept to themselves since Hermione's little explanation in DADA didn't mean they were going continue doing so.

"There are other girls, mate." Black was saying.

"No. It's Lily, or no one." Potter insisted. "Moony will ask Granger, and when she says 'yes', Lily'll want to stay close to her friend. If she doesn't go with me directly, I at least want to be able to be there for her every whim."

"Prongs," Black sighed. "Listen, Mate. Remus may ask Granger, but there is no saying she'll say yes."

"Why wouldn't she? She likes him, she can't be so vain that she would be bothered by the scars. She hangs around Snivellus, for Merlin's sake."

"Yes, but that's my point. She seems, inexplicably, fond of him." When Potter scoffed, Black added, "More so than Evans was. And, man, it pains me to say it, but I think Moony actually likes that Slytherin grease ball, too. I don't think he'd have stayed around Kitten if he couldn't stand the company she kept. Even Peter is worried we lost him somehow."

"No," Potter said firmly. "No, Snivellus won't be there, I know it. Moony will ask, Granger will say yes. You already have McKinnon in the bag, and Wormtail said Diggory was going to go with him,
so once Granger gets her head out her ass and accepts Remus it will be a perfect match."

Severus was openly gaping at them, though they didn't seem to notice. Was that how Potter saw the women of Hogwarts? Of Hermione, and Lily and her friends? Accessories? He shook his head, finding it increasingly hard to believe that Potter was from a rich, respected pureblood line.

"Just … try not to get your hopes too high, alright?" Black tried to say, but Potter merely chuckled.

The door opened, ushering in a new lot of people Severus didn't want to be bothered with, regardless of who they were, and took the opportunity to slip out with the dynamic duo unable to spot him.

He was nearly to the Slytherin common room when he heard a whistle. He turned around, noting a group of fourth years were heading toward the Great Hall. One of them, Regulus Black, had been the one who seemed to want his attention.

Severus headed toward them, keeping his shoulders square and his head high.

"Hey, Sev." Regulus said with a cheeky grin. "Your bird was down this way earlier."

Severus frowned. "Hermione?"

"Aye, that's the one. Was curious if you bailed out of the Slug club early and had already came back this way. I told her no dice, but she left me this to give to ya." He said as he handed Severus a folded and sealed bit of parchment. "Quite the witch. The enchantments on it, well." He threw a thumb toward one of his fellow fourth years who had blue finger tips. "Let's say that whatever she had to say was certainly staying with you."

"Thank you, Regulus." Severus said, clutching the letter tightly in his hand. "I will pass your compliments on to Hermione when I see her again."

Regulus nodded, gestured for the boys to continue, and then did the same.

Severus moved to the portrait, gave the password, and then moved as swiftly as he could without appearing to rush. No one seemed to pay him mind, which was quite typical, and allowed him to head up to his dormitory uninterrupted. Once inside, he found himself alone, and flopped down on his bed. Studying the letter, he ran his thumb over the seal, wondering how to break the enchantment.

"What's in a name? Blimey, Hermione. Shakespeare?" He sighed, why how the lot didn't figure out the bloody obvious. "Severus. Snape. Severus Tobias Snape." Nothing. At least his fingers didn't turn blue with the failed attempts, meaning the numpty likely just tried to open the blasted thing. "Hermione, Granger, McGonagall. H." He tried each one, growling as it failed. "I don't bloody know, Ziggy!"

The seal popped open.

He let out one mirthless laugh before he unfolded the letter.

Severus,

A letter would suggest that I'm unable to survive an evening without your company. However, I'm unsure if I'll be able to catch you this evening, and I would rather give you this information sooner rather than later, as the day for departure draws near. I'm aware you have signed on to stay at the school. So, have I, but I would have left with Minerva for the McGonagall family dinner on Christmas eve, just later in the day. You have been invited, and not just by Bob and Delia, but Nan
McGonagall as well.

You don't have to come. You are and have been spending so much time with me, and by extension the family that took me in. However, if you're at all indifferent to the notion, I would very much like to have you there. We all would, but I would especially.

Yours,

H.

Severus sat down the letter, feeling uneasy. He hadn't spent a holiday aside from summer away from Hogwarts … ever. The Evans' had never invited him to their home, for any reason. They were always happy to help by bringing him to the train station, or Diagon Alley for supplies, but aside from that they never bothered.

He liked the McGonagalls. He loved Hermione. He didn't really see there being a downside to this.

Except in the back of his mind he feared what would happen with the Yule Ball. What if he'd completely misread Hermione's acceptance. She may have been physically affectionate, but that did not equate a reciprocation of feelings. So, what if when the evening comes, and Hermione is surprised by … what?

"You're being an idiot." He chided himself.

So instead of dwelling on what may or may not happen, he re-read her letter, and read it again, and decided long before he put it down that he would go regardless of what happened at the ball.

—H—

December 23rd, 1975

Hermione looked herself over in the mirror one more time, nervously shaking her hands as if it would somehow make them less clammy.

She was perfect. Her dress fit and flowed exactly as it should, and her sensible flats of black would allow her to dance all night. Or flee, if the need was there. And she certainly didn't need to pretend she was taller than she was.

Her hair was far from straight, but it was now in perfect, silky curls that tumbled down her back. The sides were pinned up, held in place by emerald and gold hair clips that resembled holly. Her earrings from her birthday paired well with the simple chain and emerald drop pendant that Delia had acquired for her. Her makeup was subtle if non-existent. She was exactly how she had always hoped she would look going to her first formal event with a distinguished gentleman.

And she wanted to vomit.

"You look utterly flawless, Hermione," Marlene reassured, coming up behind her and giving her shoulders a squeeze.

"Do I?" She asked, chewing her painted lips. There was no taste of lipstick, a simple charm from Alice allowing it to stay put and be unobstructed until Hermione wished otherwise. "I wonder if flawless was the right angle."

Marlene frowned at Hermione's reflection. "You aren't going with Remus, are you?"
"What would give you that impression?" She asked Marlene through the mirror.

She shrugged, her towel wobbling enough she had to let go of Hermione to steady it. "Lily was saying as much. I thought it was weird, because Remus certainly wasn't acting like he was going to be there on a date, and Sirius kept asking if I would mind terribly if I had a dance with him so he wouldn't feel left out."

"Well, I'm not going with Remus."

"Then if you are getting this anxious over who I think you're getting this anxious over, you have nothing to worry about. If anything, he should be seriously concerned that he is out of his league, because he is."

Hermione gave a grin, for she figured it was likely meant to be some strange sort of compliment.

"Right," She said. "Well, I'm off. Have fun."

"What, really?" Marlene asked. "Lily hasn't even made it out of the prefect bath, and you're heading out?"

"I told him I'd meet him for seven." She said over her shoulder as she headed for the door. Marlene snorted and rolled her eyes, turning to her bed where she'd had everything laid out, calling something to Alice who was still in their small bathroom.

Hermione forced herself to regulate her breathing as she half ran, half skipped down the stairs. She caught a glimpse of the boys of her year near the window, James, and Sirius in their modern dress robes, Peter and Frank in something a bit more old fashioned, Remus having something in between. She had to admit, if she were to have been going with him, he'd have made for a dashing partner.

She stole through the portrait hole before anyone saw her, making sure to shut it behind her.

"You look lovely!" The Fat Lady complimented, attempting to hide her surprise behind a fan.

"Thanks," Hermione said before promptly turning and heading toward the abandoned classroom near the hospital wing.

She coached herself to calm down, to relax, and while she wasn't doing a good job listening to herself, it had helped her not properly notice anything or anyone as she made her way there. She paused outside the door, trying to collect herself, reassure herself that she was, in fact, perfect.

She opened the door, and nearly tripped over her feet at the sight.

Severus looked up at her from where he leaned against the far wall near the sofa she and Lily transfigured. His hair was pulled back, more silky than slick, showing off his strong jaw and proud forehead. His robes were immaculate, modern, cut exactly like James and Sirius' in that a muggle would mistake it for a tailed tuxedo. His shirt beneath was a near match to the green of her dress. His cravat, a choice she should have expected and was thrilled he made, was dark gray with a gold clip to keep it in place.

His nose would do him no favors, and he was never what one would call handsome. But, oh, did he take her breath away. Hermione wanted to cry for the pleasure of saying she would be on his arm.

"You look … different." He said, his eyes taking in her form for at least a half dozenth time.

"Well, it's a special occasion." Hermione replied a bit too quickly. "And … and I wanted you to be
proud. Happy. That you, umm, chose me." She cleared her throat. "And you are … so …"

He scoffed, shaking his head as he moved toward her. "You don't need to pay me a false compliment."

"I'm not." She said immediately. "Wait, was ... was that what you were doing?"

"No." Severus stiffened, stopping a few feet away from her. "No, I was … that is to say, I know I am not much to look at. You … you're …." He gestured vaguely to her again, and this time Hermione blushed when she realized what sort of state she put him in.

They stood awkwardly about for a minute until Severus finally straightened up and took in a deep breath. "I would like, very much, if we would consider this to be … more than merely an accompaniment to a school function."

Hermione went over the words in her mind. "You mean ….

"A date. Yes." He said, swallowing as he tilted his chin up more. "If you are agreeable."

Hermione blushed again. "I sorta thought that's what this was already. At least, I was hoping."

Severus's whole body sagged, and he stumbled to the side against a table. "Oh, thank Merlin." He said, and Hermione giggled as a similar relief came over her. He gave her a crooked smile. "Anyone else laughing at me might get a hex for it."

"I'm not laughing at you," She said as she came to stand directly in front of him. She took his hand and held his fingers against her palm. "It's just … for two people who proclaim to be extremely intelligent and quite perceptive, we seem to be quite oblivious sometimes."

"Indeed," He agreed, clasping her hand in his, his thumb stroking her knuckles.

"You look wonderful," She whispered.

"As do you." He replied in that same hushed tone. "I'm quite glad you didn't magic away your curls. I'm quite fond of them."

"You frequently call them horrid." She reminded him, not seeming to be able to speak at even a normal tone for fear that whatever bubble, or spell, of space in time they entered would suddenly end.

"They are," He replied, meeting her eye. "That doesn't make me any less fond of them."

They were so close, and now that she knew, now that they were certain …. They leaned in together, her nose caressing his as his eyes fell shut.

Then they sprang open. "Shit."

"What?" Hermione asked, and just as Severus straightened to his feet, the door opened.

Madam Pomfrey leaned against the door frame, an amused grin about her. "You two look quite fine, but if you don't get down to the ball instead of lingering up here like a couple of miscreants, I'll alert Professor McGonagall." At their surprise and confusion, she giggled. "I'd seen Miss Granger pass by the wing not long ago, and I'd been listening for the door since."

"We are heading down now." Severus said, giving Hermione's hand a light tug. They headed to the
door, passing by the Matron and heading for the stairs.

"Oh, you two!" She called, and they turned together just in time to be half blinded by a camera flash. Madam Pomfrey smiled approvingly. "They may take your photo as you enter, but sometimes it's nice to have a less posed reminder of the night."

Severus rolled his eyes, but he didn't seem bothered in the least.

—H—

She entered the Great Hall on his arm, stunned at the sheer beauty of the decorations. She never really took it in the year before, and perhaps it was the same, but this was the time it mattered.

There were already couples dancing, though not many, and a few of the tables had already been claimed.

"I must confess that, while I've been taught to dance, I've never had a proper partner." Severus said as Hermione had noticed a few students do double takes in their direction.

"I know how to waltz muggle, but I've only read about wizard waltzes. Well, I danced with … myself." She admitted, feeling incredibly stupid that she had not sought proper practice before now.

"Well, while there are not too many people here to make fools of ourselves in front of." He said, leading her to the dance floor.

She discovered quite quickly that he was graceful, much more than she ever would be. It made sense, a voice in the back of her mind reminded her, considering the way he moved once grown. How his hands handled ingredients, how swiftly he moved while on patrols. It was quite obviously a natural skill, and while she had moments of feeling awkward or clumsy, his confidence and nimbleness guided her through and masked any blunder.

When the song ended, he led her through into the next, the corner of his mouth rising higher with each minute. When the second song ended, it was clear the band was going to be taking a break. She was pleased he didn't seem to want to stop nearly as much as she didn't.

"Shall we … get a refreshment?"

"Sounds lovely." She paused, glancing around. "So long as James and Sirius haven't shown so far. I heard they planned to spike the punch."

Severus snorted. "They wouldn't be the first to try. I heard a couple of the older Slytherins hinting as much. Supposedly there are enchantments to prevent such a thing, but in case there is not." He reached into the inner pocket of his dress robes. "A drop of this in our drinks and it will neutralize the alcohol."

"I've never heard of such a potion." She commented.

"It's a master level." He replied with a pleased gleam to his eye.

Hermione just smiled up at him, allowing him to lead her to the table of refreshments while he held her hand in his. He thumbed open the bottle and added a drop of the potion into two glasses.

"And what exactly do you have there?" Moody asked, snatching the bottle from Severus' hands quicker than it seemed possible for the older wizard to move. He eyed Severus critically before taking a sniff. "Not much fun, are you?" He asked as he handed the bottle back to Severus.
"Would like my wits about me." Severus replied. "As well as hers."

"Know any reason why a simple monk fruit punch might take em' away?"

"I've heard rumors it might. From multiple houses." Severus replied.

"Good to know. Carry on." Moody turned and hobbled a few feet away, keeping a keen eye on the students.

Severus shook his head before he went ahead and ladled the punch into the cups. "We spend more time with that man than any student outside detention, and I still have no idea what to think of him."

"I kind of like him." Hermione said thoughtfully as he handed her a glass. "He's gruff, and abrupt, and sometimes terrifying. But I feel like I'm learning from him, truly learning, which is more than I can say about any Defense teacher I've ever had. Even the last one I had before I came here. He as nice enough, practical, by the book, but I didn't feel challenged."

"By the book and he was not your favorite professor?" Severus asked as he collected his glass. "No wonder you accepted me this evening. Clearly, I'm in some alternate world, or you're not the Hermione I intended to accompany."

She laughed, maybe a bit more than necessary, but she was riding a high from the reminder that this was everything she hoped for and he was enjoying himself.

"Sev! Hey, Sev! Over here!" Lily called from halfway across the room, nearly standing on the chair and waving him over. Remus was with her, looking like he wanted to crawl under the table and hide. The table next to them held Sirius and Marlene, Peter and Alice, and James. The latter was glaring sullenly at Lily, rolling a glass of the punch between his hands.

"We should probably head over there." Hermione sighed, her mirth fading as the gorgeous ginger smiled broadly and continued to wave them over. "And so, you know, if you wanted to dance with her, well, it's okay, you can."

"Is this your way of saying you wish to have a turn with someone?" Severus asked as he started to slowly head toward their friend.

"No," She said, squeezing his hand. "But I know … I know you fancied her at one point. And, well …"

"No." He said firmly, gently squeezing back. "This night is yours. Entirely."

"Wow, look at you!" Lily said as they got near the table, running around it and standing before Severus, seeming to ignore Hermione all together.

She was so beautiful, that Hermione felt the old insecurities bubble up inside even though Severus had just affirmed for her she had nothing to worry about.

Lily's dress was dark gold, cut similarly to Hermione's. Her ginger locks were pinned up into a chignon, gold pins holding it in place, braids fitting along the side of her head leading into the roll. Her makeup was soft, noticeable but tasteful. It was obvious she was wearing heals.

"You're quite dashing, Sev. Would you dance with me when the band starts again? I just missed them before." She said, starting to reach for his lapels.

Severus took an abrupt step back. "I'm afraid my dance card is full this evening." He said through his
teeth. He took a deep breath. "However, I will pay you the same compliment: you look lovely this evening."

Lily blushed, bowing her head in a demure way. She glanced at Hermione, then really took her in. "That dress looks even better on you. It was an excellent choice."

"Thank you, Lily." Hermione replied quietly. She offered a similar platitude, and Lily likely would have tossed her hair about her shoulder if she'd left it down.

"Would you like to sit before the next set?" Severus asked, lifting their joined hands and bringing them near his chest.

"Sure." She agreed and thanked him as he promptly pulled out the seat next to Remus before taking the next one over. He retook her hand beneath the table immediately, and she had to fight the blush from completely over taking her. She glanced at Remus. "You came alone?"

Remus gave a quick, sad grin. "There was no one available that I wanted to ask."

Hermione frowned. "Not even Lily?" She asked, the ginger hearing her name and finding interest in the conversation.

Remus glanced at Lily, then slightly over his shoulder before shaking his hand. "I wouldn't have dared."

"And why not?" Lily asked, hands on her hips as she twisted in her chair toward him.

"Would you have said 'yes'?" He challenged kindly.

"Well … no," Lily admitted. "But that's only because I expected Severus to ask me."

"Why on Earth would I do that?" He asked her.

"Well you said you might go. I just figured it was on the condition of a date." Lily replied.

"It was." Severus replied.

A quiet kind of awkwardness fell around them, seeping into the table next to them. Remus shifted nervously while Lily sat with her jaw dropped, staring at Hermione as if she somehow had done a great wrong. James was keenly listening, and Sirius was ignoring his date entirely as he glanced between James and the table, clearly having missed what was said and was not sure if the reactions were valid.

"I see." Lily finally said.

"Lily …," Hermione started to apologize, but Severus had stopped her with a tug on her hand. He shook his head ever so slightly.

After another beat of silence, Severus set his drink down. "Perhaps we should find a spot on the dance floor." He said. Hermione nodded, and allowed him to pull her to her feet. But where before she'd felt light and happy, now she was unsure what to feel.

Severus took her into position just as the band started to play and began to lead them through the dance. She looked to the floor, watching their feet, noting absently that he was wearing dragon hide boots. He was watching her, she could feel it.

When the song ended, he stopped. She'd been expecting him to carry on into the next, and in her
confusion, she'd forgotten how she wasn't sure she wanted to allow him to see the chaos of her thoughts as they played out on her face. She looked up.

"Would you take a walk with me?" He asked, gesturing to an exit that wasn't normally part of the Great Hall's structure. Beyond was a garden alight with fairy lights gleaming from Rose bushes and a few non-whomping willow trees that likely were not a part of the grounds.

She nodded, and he once more took her hand as they followed a few other couples outside.

The noise from the ball sounded as though it was much farther away the moment they crossed the threshold. It was also clear that whomever created the garden ensured it was blanketed with a warming charm as one would think it was a June evening instead of near the end of December.

Severus followed a path straight from the doors, not deviating as the other couples had, giggling as they were as they headed off to who knew where to do who knew what. He didn't speak until they were practically beneath the branches.

"I did fancy Lily," He cut to the chase. "Though I haven't held that sort of regard for her for about a year. In that time, she's merely reverted back to the childhood friend, perhaps with a touch of sisterly affection."

"She seems to be going in the opposite direction." Hermione noted.

Severus shrugged. "I don't believe that's what it is. I believe that, until you came along, she was the sole focus of my attention. She feared my growing acquaintance with those in my house and lashed out in a strangely protective way. And when you and I started to grow closer," He said, stepping closer to her, making her grin. "I think she just assumed everything was going back to right. But then …"

"Then suddenly you're spending your summers with me, and know my family, and wish to spend more time with me than her."

"Indeed," He nodded. He took a deep breath and reached a slightly shaking hand up to cup her cheek. "I didn't want to be here with anyone else."

"And if this hadn't been a date?" She asked playfully.

"I'd have been surly company, admittedly." He said, and she giggled. "But I would have respected your decision. And more so, as long as I didn't think it would ruin us in anyway, I'd have simply tried again."

Hermione didn't even get a chance to reply before Severus was forcefully torn away from her and hurled into the air upside down. His wide eyes went from surprise to livid, but before he could get his wand, it was taken away in a flash of red light.

Before the same could happen to her, Hermione's was in her hand from a hidden holster at the back of her dress and a shield was around her. The spell bounced off of it, and she likely just caught it in time. Turning, she saw James Potter marching down the path not far from where they were, wand out, fury and righteousness in his eyes. Sirius was following behind, eyes darting from Hermione to Severus to James in quick succession. And just up the path, the rest of those from both tables hurrying toward them.

"Look at Snivellus." James said, tilting his head as if he were trying to see Severus properly while he dangled him upside down. "All dressed up and trying to look like he actually belongs among humans."
"End the spell, James." Hermione demanded.

"No." James said. "He made Lily cry."

"James, you're being ridiculous!" Lily shouted, coming around them and standing by Hermione. "Let him down, he didn't mean to! He didn't even know!"

"You really think he went with Granger because he wanted to?"

"I did." Remus said, wand out, calmly joining his fellow Marauder. "I wanted to go with her, so why wouldn't he?"

"Because Snivellus has been panting after Evans for ages."

"Like you?" Remus asked, stepping away and standing on the other side of Hermione. He flicked his wand, and Severus fell a little roughly to the ground.

Shock and surprise would have to be processed later, because as much as Remus' gesture took her aback, she needed to focus her shield a bit wide, protect all four of them now that Severus was free from the incantation.

"Moony, you've changed." James whined.

"Yes." Remus replied. "It's called growing up."

"It's just a bit of fun, Remus." Sirius said, hands out to the side. He was not as pompous as he normally was, nor as confident. Marlene was hanging in the back with Alice, the pair looking perplexed as to what was going on and why their dates were suddenly pitted against their friend.

"No. It's not." Remus sighed. "I'm a prefect, I can't keep looking the other way for you two. And what's more, one day, if you don't stop, one or both of you will do something monumentally stupid that could ruin you. And what's more, you risk taking Peter and myself down with you. You are my brothers, and I love you, but this ends."

"That scum hurt Lily." James roared.

"I hurt myself, you toerag." Lily ground out, fresh tears forming in her eyes. "I am the one who started thinking things that weren't there. Severus did nothing! If I had asked, I would have known he was with Hermione, and I would have been happy for them."

"But …." James deflated. "You wanted to date him? You wanted to date him over me?"

"No," Lily sniffed. "I didn't want to date either of you. I just wanted to have a nice night with my friends."

Remus nudged Hermione, and when she looked over, he gestured behind them.

Severus was gone.

"You ruin everything, James Potter!" She growled out. "Everything! You're an evil, awful boy!"

"Kitten, that's cruel." Sirius said, though all the fight had left him.

"So's he." Lily spat.

There was a silent standoff, Peter looking ready to hex the first person that twitched, when James
suddenly shook his head and turned away.

Peter looked at Remus, then to Sirius, confused.

Sirius came up to Remus, eyes locked as he gave Severus' wand to the prefect. "Come on, Wormtail." He said, turning and waving the fourth marauder toward him. They were rejoined by their dates as they headed back inside the Great Hall.

"I'm going to report this to McGonagall." Remus said, head bowed. "I should have done from the beginning." He handed Hermione Severus' wand. "Give this to him when you see him again. Hopefully it will be before the night's out."

"Do you want to come in with me?" Lily asked her, putting a hand on Hermione's shoulder.

Hermione shook her head, numb as the adrenaline ebbed from her body. "I think I need the air." She said without looking at her friend. A moment later, Lily's gold gown shifted through her peripheral vision, and she heard two sets of footsteps heading toward the school.

A tear slipped out as she tried to understand what had happened. They were just talking and then James, and then Remus, but then Severus left. He just left. She wiped at her face roughly, a stray thought about smear free charms and how no one would really know if she fell to her knees and wept her heart out. She shuddered, forcing herself not to give in to emotion, to raise her damn occlumency walls that Professor Moody had been trying so damn hard to have her build.

The touch on her hand had her gasping and rearing back, both Severus' wand and her own drawn and pointed at whoever dared came near her.

A resigned, pained, slightly disheveled Severus raised his hands. "I wasn't gone." He said, voice wavering. "I was on the other side of the tree. The blood pounding in my head, vertigo, I would have been useless even with a wand. I don't want to think what they would have done if Lupin suddenly decided his friends were more important, or if Lily decided she wasn't as supportive as she thought. I didn't want to have you hurt trying to defend me. I don't need you defending me."

She took her time to catch her breath, quell the heart ache and the anger, and focus on what he had said. She stepped forward, re-sheathing her wand as she handed him back his. He put it up his sleeve, straightened his robes, and looked to his feet.

"I suppose this means our date is over. If you don't object, I'd like to escort you back to Gryffindor tower."

Hermione swallowed, the lump in her throat barely dissipating. "Does it have to end now?" She asked quietly.

"I would very much like it not to." Severus said, a touch of hope in his voice. "I… I would have liked it to be the first of many. But if tonight's events have led you to reconsider-"

"Shut up, Severus." She said, and he did just that, affronted by it though he may be. Her lips twitched, and the lump was suddenly gone. "I'm fairly certain I started fancying you before the Easter Hols last year. I'd be a bloody idiot to pass on the opportunities to exploit your stupidity."

"My what?"

"What else would you call a fondness for hair like mine, and a willingness to put up with my bossy, insufferable personality."
"Oh, the bossy I can handle. Nothing says I have to listen to you." He said, daring to come closer to her. "And you've been insufferable right from the beginning. It's one of your less charming personality traits, but one I knew of beforehand. And your hair …. There are no words for it. Except, perhaps, that while it gets all over everything unless you tie it up, and anyone with Polyjuice would have a field day, it is probably one of my favorite textures in the world."

"Your favorite texture?" She asked, tilting her chin so she could keep looking at him.

He hummed. "Yes. Silk, new grass, and your curls between my fingers." He threaded his fingers through the strands at the nape of her neck, and her breath caught. "Wait," He said, breath against her mouth as her eyes shut.

The first peck was very, very tentative. The second was a solid though brief press of lips on lips. The third was a true, equal merging that had Hermione's knees buckle a bit before her arms went around his neck. His other hand came up and touched her back between her shoulder blades very lightly.

"As I thought," he said as they parted. "Another favorite."

"How old are you again?" She asked him.

"I'm an old soul." He smirked.

"Right. I suppose that would explain your silver tongue."

"We haven't gotten that far yet." He said and laughed as she stepped back a bit to smack him playfully on the chest. She couldn't fight the grin coming over her, and she didn't want to. "Shall we start this night again? Or pick up from where we left off?"

"Did you have any intentions of kissing me before?" She asked, already knowing the answer.

"Long before this evening," He replied.

"Well," Hermione said, putting on her best haughty tone and chin tilt. "I suppose, then, if it had always been your intention to, then -"

She was cut off very abruptly by Severus' mouth on hers.

"Can I get away with doing that more often?" He asked when they parted a brief time later.

"Perhaps on occasion. You can't always interrupt me."

"I wouldn't want to," He said, and Hermione knew he meant that sincerely. "May I have another dance with you?"

"All of them." Hermione affirmed.

Arm in arm, they returned to the Great Hall.

**December 24th, 1975**

There was a shift that took place in which Hermione could feel on the air as tangible as the cold.

Not long after they returned to the Great Hall, Severus had spotted and pointed out that Remus and Lily were dancing together. Perhaps not properly, but it appeared they were having fun nonetheless. When breaks were had, the four had them together, eventually being joined by Alice who said Peter had essentially abandoned her for following a bitter and mopping James. Frank Longbottom joined
Severus had walked her back to the tower, as was his intention before, but it was near sun up when
he had. The ball, it turns out, does not end until there is no one left, or the band is too tired to go on.
Hermione suspected the band had used a few illicit-but-not-illegal potions to keep them going
without any sleep, and she and Severus were on the dance floor with another couple from
Ravenclaw, and a Slytherin and Hufflepuff duo.

"I'd noted many of my house were not here." Severus had mentioned quietly so only she could hear.
"There was talk of having a party in the common room strictly for the purebloods and upper class,
those who didn't want to mingle with … lesser bloods."

"You can't be the only half-blood in Slytherin." Hermione had whispered back.

"I'm not, but he is one," Severus gestured to the other couple, "and the other two that I know of are
too young to even be in the common room at the hour they'd have been. A few fourth years were
here early on, but likely only came to see what the Yule Ball was about."

It was the last of their conversations aside from inquiring if the other needed to retire, which resulted
in them not doing so at all. It was only because they would need to return to their dorms to change
and grab what might be needed to go with Minerva that they parted at all. And they did so with
kisses, quick or slightly drawn out, murmurs of how ridiculous they were being said on one another's
lips until the Fat Lady cleared her throat and glared at them with too much amusement to be taken
seriously.

As Hermione entered the common room, she was startled by seeing Professor McGonagall coming
from the stairs leading to the girls' dormitories.

"Ah, Hermione. There you are." She said, coming toward her. "The girls said they hadn't seen you
since last night, so I was just going to check …." She paused, looked Hermione over, and was
seeming to be fighting a smile. "You had a pleasant evening?"

Hermione touched her hair, feeling it had lost a bit of its silky smoothness. Her lips felt swollen from
her parting with Severus, and she remembered that his own thin lips were a bit puffier than normal.
"I did." She admitted, blushing.

"Not too pleasant, I hope." McGonagall chided.

"What sort of witch do you take me for?" Hermione asked, grinning as the older witch shook her
head with an affectionate grin.

"I didn't think you would, but one never knows with the drinks that were being passed around.
Which reminds me as to why I was here looking for you in the first place. You and Severus will
have to take the train back to London, as I'm not going to make it to dinner until quite late. I already
owled Bob, he'll meet you two there. Aside from the drinks being spiked while at the tables, and a
couple inappropriate encounters, I have two very serious matters to deal with as head of house."

Hermione was sure she knew what one of them were, but instead of asking about it she simply
nodded and allowed McGonagall to head back to her office.

She hurried upstairs and grabbed a change of clothes, scurrying to the bathroom.

She didn't do so unnoticed.

"Did you two stay at the ball all night?" Lily's demand came just as Hermione closed the curtain to
"We may have," She said, unfastening her dress and letting it fall to the floor. She barely had her feet out of it before Lily's hand darted beneath the curtain and snatched the dress, causing Hermione to yelp. "Oh, sneaking back in in the clothes she wore the night before!"

"We know what that means!" Marlene sing-songed.

"It means we were there until the band stopped. I assure you nothing untoward happened." Hermione said as she finished undressing and darted into the shower stall. She turned on the water, hearing the outer curtain being yanked open as she did.

"I don't exactly picture Sev being the party all-night type." Lily said.

"You mean you can picture him as the shagging type?" Marlene asked with a hint of disgust.

"He's a male, of course I can." Lily replied. "Well, was that what you were really doing?"

Hermione huffed as she lathered her hair. "We did not shag, we danced! We talked. We ….

"You what?" Marlene asked.

"Might have …." Hermione started to say but found putting it into exact words felt wrong. "Well we didn't shag, but there are a few early steps to getting to that level of intimacy. One does not simply approach the person they fancy and …."

"They kissed." Alice's voice joined them, but she was much farther away. "Frank said he'd seen them by the willow tree around the time Peter stalked off with James."

"Hey, could you guys give us a minute?" Lily asked as Hermione rinsed her hair and started cleansing her skin. She wasn't sure if they girls agreed, though they must have as Lily began to talk. "Why didn't either of you say anything to me? You fancied him, he fancied you, and yet neither of you said anything and let me carry on flirting with him like a twat."

"I didn't want to." Hermione confessed. "It was nothing against you, I just didn't see the point in it."

"Hermione," Lily said, sounding a bit unsure. "If you told me you fancied him, I maybe would have backed off."

Hermione shut off the water, and after a shuffle on the other side, a Gryffindor red towel was thrown over the top of the curtain. Hermione pulled it down and wrapped it around herself before opening the curtain and seeing a forlorn Lily on the other side.

"I didn't think he would see you like that," She said. "He's changed since you've come around, I just didn't think it was because of you."

"I'm not sure it's only about me," Hermione confessed. She wanted to tell Lily about thirty-four-year-old Severus, or at least the things she knew about him. But how to explain it, even if she could. Especially when Lily wouldn't see thirty-four herself.

And that thought made Hermione's heart heavy.

"I haven't known him as long as you have, I know. But I don't think he's really changing at all. I think that Severus is just Severus, perhaps with new clothes and a slightly brighter outlook. Like, perhaps, it's now a medium grey instead of the pure black of awful."
Lily chuckled. "Maybe you're right." She nodded. "I know, though, that if you hadn't have come along, Sev would have just drifted off with those awful Death Eater wannabes. And I guess that's sorta my fault. Sirius and James, they said something on the train our very first day: Slytherin's the house of evil. If a witch or wizard knows any kind of dark magic, they were going to be bad. I never thought of it the way you said it, about hexes and jinxes, and I don't think I ever would have. But I think that, despite their not being the most pleasant, their words sort of stuck with me."

Hermione nodded, though she couldn't think of anything to say.

Lily nodded, too, seemingly satisfied with how things had gone, and left Hermione to finish getting ready.

After grabbing what she would need for a couple days with her foster family, Hermione hurried down to catch the train.

Severus was waiting for her in the Great Hall, seeming to have gotten the message as he had his bag slung over his shoulder. In his basic trousers, and a dark sweater, his hair still wet from a recent shower, he was a contrast from the put together Severus he was the night before, though no less a welcome sight.

"Ah, there she is, with her hair once more atrocious." He said in a bored tone. "Am I to be suffocated with it on the train?"

"Yes," She replied as she took his arm. "I intend to use you as a pillow, bony and lumpy though you may be."

"Wonderful, smothered and suffocated." He said, and she peeked up to see that all telling glint in his eye.

"You adore the thought." She mumbled to him.

"I do." He confessed, pulling her closer to him.

They boarded, finding a car to themselves, figuring that Lily and maybe Remus would find them later if they wanted to. Severus tucked away their bags and then sat in the corner against the window, turned slightly with a bit of a recline. Hermione sat beside him, tentatively half-laying so her head rested on his chest. It was the correct move, for his arms came around her and held her to him.

That sense of change niggled at her again, as though something was whispering to her that things would have been so very different. A distant thought whispered that the Time Turner was the catalyst, as though there was a whole other time and place in which none of what had happened took place. Or that maybe some of the things that did happen were done differently.

But it made no difference, for as much as Hermione could tell, she was always meant to be there. On the train, in Severus' arms, near the end of 1975, four years before she was actually born. And if she had somehow altered the universe, she did it in a way that Hermione strived to do everything: for the best.

Chapter End Notes

No Aurora this go, she will be back next chapter. And later chapters, I am certain there
will be Hermione-and-Severus-less moments.
YULE BALL!!!
In case anyone is interested, I listened to Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" pretty much on repeat the whole time I wrote those scenes. May have been other songs in there too, but that was pretty much the song of the chapter.
Chapter 13

November 3rd, 1993

—S—

Severus Snape felt old.

He was stiff, injuries from his youth causing his body to ache because of the dampness of Scotland. Plus, there was the stress of having had a mass murderer so very near the dorm of the boy he swore to watch over and protect, and his own beloved off-spring.

And it was that off-spring that was causing him to feel exceptionally old, for he did not feel within in his soul far enough down life's path to be the father of a teenager.

He could no fathom his little girl was thirteen years old today.

Severus was not the type to be maudlin. He did not sit in his desk chair and stare at the top of her curly head as it was bent over a cauldron and think of her days as a babe. He did loathe how much she was like her mother in that she was far too mature for her age, though he doubted his having told her about what he did helped with that any. And he did miss the days when she was small, brave and wise, but quite cunning. Her five-year-old self brewing a simple first year potion with only minimal assistance from himself, or her first solo flight on a real broom at six when Hermione was too busy with toddler Leo to have realized what he was doing. It had been a down the line, fifty-fifty chance between what two houses she was likely to be sorted in, both he and his wife agreeing that there were no other options, and no way to tell for sure. She could easily have them nearly convinced she hadn't eaten the cookies on the plate despite crumbs on her face, and yet was willing to dive head long into something that would give Draco paused.

And here she was, thirteen, in a red and gold tie, still brave, wise, cunning, but no longer small. There would be boys trying to court her now, in just three years they would need to discuss what she wanted to do after Hogwarts. There were talks of possibly having a revival of the Tri-Wizard tournament next year, and with it a Yule Ball for the first time in fifteen years. She would be a year too young to go on her own, but she'd likely be asked even if it were merely by a student from another school as a way of showing some disgusting form of unity.

"Professor Snape," He daughter's voice brought him out of his revere, and he realized he had gotten a bit maudlin, after all. She was handing him a bottle of her completed potion, the first in her class, as always.

"Thank you, Miss Snape." He said as he collected her bottle and set in the wire basket with the others. She'd been brewing sleeping draught since she was nine, he already knew it would be perfect.

Standing abruptly, he swept the room, inspecting the contents of her classmate's cauldrons.

It was the ill looking shade of green in one young Slytherin male's that had him pause. Green meant that the lavender hadn't been put in at the right time, and it was nearing too late to mend. Severus looked from the cauldron, to the boy, then followed the boys half-glazed gaze right to ….

He snatched the boy's book from the table top and boxed him on the ears with it.

"Ow," The boy whinged, rubbing his ear as the class gave a quiet, unsure giggle.
"Pay attention, Mr Devon, or you will find that instead of a Sleeping Draught, you merely have creating a disgusting, foul smelling potion that would likely put you in a coma from poisoning. Either way, you will be taking a sample of it tonight before bed. Hope you will merely find yourself well rested in the morning rather than haunting the common room.

He swept away, noticing another Slytherin and the Creevy boy both suddenly springing into action. He rolled his eyes and shook his head. Idiots, the lot of them. If they really thought he'd actually allow them to drink poison than at least he knew his momentary, wistful remembrance was not about to ruin his reputation. It would make them ill, of course, and wish they'd followed instructions, but nothing fatal.

He sighed to himself, realizing that one of his greatest fears as a father of a pretty girl was already starting. At the same moment, he felt his right knee buckle.

Old. He felt way, way too old.

November 6th, 1993

—A—

"Rory," Draco greeted as he came up beside her in the Quidditch stands. He glanced around her, taking in those who were watching the match with her. "Luna, Weasley, Granger, Weasel." He said with a grin, and while the girls were amused, Ron glared. "Where's Longbottom? Don't you typically find him hanging around you lot? Or does Weasel prefer the girl chat?"

"Bugger off, Malfoy," Ron retorted. "Slither away, now."

"Don't be rude." Ginny chided before leaning behind Rory. Draco smirked. "Neville is off with Seamus and Dean in the main Gryffindor stands. We wanted to watch with Luna, so…"

"Third wheeling, is he?" Draco commented, making a face as if he was impressed by the idea before adjusting his cloak to better shield him from the storm.

"Whaddya mean, third wheel?" Ron asked before getting distracted by the game.

"And exactly what are you doing over here, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, having so little interest in the game aside from Harry playing that she honestly seemed to find the prospect of talking to Draco appealing.

"I gave Crabbe and Goyle the slip. Thought a change of scenery would do me good, not to mention the level of intelligent conversation. Well, when I don't factor in Weasel."

Ron flipped him off, but was caught up with quaffles and points to really give it proper feeling.

There was silence in the stands for a moment, and as the Weasley siblings shifted closer to the rail to watch the action, Hermione shifted away from her spot between them and weaved behind Rory to stand next to Draco.

He was watching the seekers, following their paths as they zigged and zagged in the air above.

"I want to know something," Hermione asked him.

"Not surprising." Draco retorted, keeping his eyes on the sky.

"What are you doing? I get being nice to Rory, you grew up with her. I even understand being kind
to Luna and Ginny as they are her friends. But why are you being nice to me? And Harry. You haven't said a rotten thing about either of us all week.

At this, Draco looked at her, sizing her up. He glanced briefly at Rory, but the movement was so swift that Hermione would likely have missed it.

"I was informed my opinions and beliefs may need a re-evaluation. You and Potter were the people I was told to hate, as was Weasel. So far, the latter has been about what I expected, but aside from that I believe there may be something off to what I've been told."

"About purebloods being superior?"

"Among other things." Draco conceded. "I can't say I won't mock Potter or you if the situation seems to call for it. People are watching, I need to maintain a certain image. But the words I will use will be chosen more wisely. I've thrown around terms and insults in the past that are too vulgar to be repeated. I disgust myself with the way I was using them." He sniffed, turning his attention fully back to the game. "Where the blazes did Potter and Diggory go?"

"Oh, bloody hell!" Ron gasped out, and Aurora put her attention back on the game in time to watch Harry fall lifeless from the clouds with no broom beneath him.

She noted a half dozen teachers, her Dad and Aunt Min among them, throwing their hands out in time with Dumbledore. They had all shouted something, and as they did, Harry stopped with a mighty jerk before slowly being lowered to the ground.

"What happened?" Ginny asked.

"Dementors." Hermione said, looking up and pointing to the sky.

The shadows of them high above could just be made out through the rain storm. A chill ran down Aurora's spin, and she not Luna putting an arm around Ginny as she shuddered.

"Tell Potter I'm sorry." Draco said.

"Why?" Hermione asked.

"Because I believe I'm going to need to make fun of him for this." He said with great regret, and Aurora got the distinct feeling that the change in the wind wasn't merely caused by the Dementors moving further away from the school.

December 6th, 1993

"Hello, Rory." Aunt Minnie greeted her warmly as she closed the door. A beat later, she was wrapped in the older woman's arms. "I see you all the time, and yet I never get to spend much time with you. I think I saw more of your mother in a personal capacity when she was a student."

"Something tells me that life at Hogwarts wasn't quite as eventful in the seventies." Rory replied with a cheeky grin, earning a chuckle from her great aunt.

"Perhaps in a different sort of way. Now, what has brought you to darken my doorstep as opposed to your father's?" Her smile faltered, and worry came over. Despite being alone in her office, Aunt Min lowered her voice. "He told me you know. Is there something you want to discuss? I doubt many have, but he and I have noticed Draco Malfoy hanging around you and Miss Weasley, and Miss Lovegood as of late. Including when you're near Mr Potter and, well."
Aurora shifted about, unsure how to ask. "Well, there is something I want to discuss. And it does have to do with Draco and the lot of us, but it's not in relation to … that. Not really. Maybe a bit in the greater repercussion stand point, but hardly anything …." "Rory." Aunt Min cut her off, a softness to her stern scowl that gave away the tender affection she'd always had when her niece rambled.

"Right. So, Draco came to you today to say he was staying for the Christmas Hols. Dad may or may not have hinted that he is essentially the only Slytherin not going home, except for a few seventh years who he says never causes trouble. So, I was wondering, in the spirit of Christmas, and House Unity, and maybe trashing the notion of Slytherin baddies, perhaps Draco could find himself in Gryffindor tower for the break?" She hadn't realized until the end of her speech that she'd barely breathed through it.

Aunt Min looked thoughtful, a bit put out, and yet extremely intrigued. She gestured for Aurora to sit, and then took her own seat on the other side of the desk. She folded her hands on the top, looking more interested in the stack of papers than her niece, though Aurora knew better. She also knew that this was not the time to talk, so she patiently waited for her aunt to come to a conclusion.

"Rory, the argument you put forth is a noble one. Admittedly, no Gryffindor during my tenor ever asked me if a student from another house could stay within the tower. It is a wonderful suggestion, and because I know you as I do, I also know it comes from an honest want for inclusion. But, I cannot simply house a student from another house. However," Here she gave a cat like grin. "If Mr Malfoy were to find himself in the tower after curfew, and his Head of House is not demanding he need be in his proper dormitory, the house elves may find need to place an additional bed in the tower for him to stay in with the other third year boys. After all, in the spirit of the holiday, we can't allow Mr Filch to catch him, can we?"

December 18th, 1993

As Aurora came around the corner near the hunched witch, she was brought up short by a sight that would surely have Argus cursing: the Weasley twins snickering. She moved slowly, quietly, glancing about to ensure no other students were coming, and then attempted to sneak up behind them. She was her father's daughter, after all, and if he was a spy ….

"What are you two doing?" She asked, though neither twin seemed particularly worried that she'd caught them.

"Giving a good friend some valuable information," Fred replied.

"To which he will sure to repay us for." George added.

"He had better." They nodded to one another, sobering as much as the mischief makers could.

"And you're missing out on Hogsmeade to do this?" She arched a brow.

"Bit scary when you do that." Fred pointed at it.

"Look like your father." George nodded.

"Only not as beak like."

"Or greasy."
"No offense." They said together.

Aurora shook her head and crossed her arms.

"And what you doing up here?" Fred asked.

"I was looking for Luna," Aurora admitted. "Gin has to catch up on some homework for potions, and I was bored. I asked a few Ravenclaws if she was in the tower, but she wasn't. Sometimes I find her just wandering about."

"Bored, are you?" George asked.

"Anyone else up there bored to tears?" Fred followed.

"Why?" Aurora asked slowly. "What did you have in mind?"

—A—

The wind was cold, biting, but exhilarating. The quaffle tucked under her left arm, right hand gripping her broom, she zipped off toward the opposite goal posts where Colin Creevy was practically shaking on his broom. She doubted he wanted to be anything like Harry at the moment, her coming toward him with the twins zipping up behind her.

They couldn't play with all the balls. Her father, when asked if this little game of quidditch could be allowed, would not permit the use of a snitch or the bludgers. He didn't want the game to last forever, doubting anyone among them could catch the little gold ball (and he did include her in that. He was a realist), and he also didn't want to have to answer to Poppy as to why there were broken bones to attend with when no quidditch match was scheduled.

He watched from the stands, along with Professor Lupin, though she was sure both were more concerned with the papers they'd brought with them to mark, the end of term being the following day.

It was quite amusing how the twins had managed to round up a good number of second years who happened to have brooms, and then went around and asked the other houses if there were any youngings wanting to play a game, and yet were too scared to ask one of the only available teachers to be allowed to use the pitch and balls. Seven Gryffindors, two Hufflepuffs, three Ravenclaws, and two Slytherins, and the only one who dared to ask was the Potion's Master's daughter, and she didn't chalk that up to bravery.

Still, despite his (put on) snarl, grumbling about wasting time and the lot, he permitted the use of the quaffles. Professor Lupin, who'd wandered down toward her Dad's office just as they were having the conversation, suggest transfiguring a couple of items into soft rubber balls that could be charmed to act like bludgers. Her Dad sneered at that but did it anyway.

They rounded up a Hufflepuff fourth year they didn't go to the village to act like a snitch. He had to be tagged three times in order for it to count as a win.

So far, he'd only been tagged once. By the girls. It was the twins who insisted on a battle of the sexes.

"Bludger's coming your way." She heard Fred warn in a teasing manner.

"You aren't going to get me with it." She'd called back, keeping her eyes on Colin as he weaved about, unsure where to go.
She shifted her arm, gave the quaffle a mighty toss, and watched as sailed past Colin and one of the Slytherin boys who wanted to try and catch it. A moment later, the soft, springy ball bounced against the back of her head. Turning, she'd seen Fred give her a cheeky grin and a wink before turning back around and following his brother.

She shifted, unease and something else making her want to crawl out of her skin in the best way possible. She hated it.

"Rory!" Ginny, who'd rushed to finish her homework at the talk of a game, called to her from above her head. "What're you doing!? You can't let the boys catch up! We're only up seventy points. No, make that sixty."

"Right, sorry." She called back, darting off to try and get the quaffle back from the pour little Ravenclaw who had no idea his twin sister was about to hit a pink, soft rubber ball toward him.

**December 25th, 1975**

—S—

They walked through the thin forest on the edge of the property of Nan McGonagall's home, pinky fingers linked. The house was too full for either his or Hermione's liking, and the talk centered too much around babies. Two of the oldest McGonagall grandchildren announced their expecting arrivals, and Delia's was still a fawned over and celebrated thing. The fact that either she or Bob had gladly told the entire family that his suggestion to change the potion may have been the reason for their success was obvious, and Severus was quite done with being patted on the back for pointing out the obvious.

So, when it was clear that no one was going to miss them, all involved with one thing or another baby, he and Hermione left the house.

It was lightly snowing, the ground covered and the trees lightly dusted. The sun was cutting through the clouds for once, and alone as they were, Severus was almost willing to call the whole scene romantic.

"We haven't really had a chance to talk since the train," She'd said when the house was growing small in the distance.

No, they hadn't had a chance to talk, even then. But he wouldn't trade having her fall asleep against him, in his arms, for anything. No one had ever trusted him like that, and he wasn't sure anyone else would.

"Was there something you wished to discuss?" he asked, not allowing his nerves to show.

There were so many things she may want to discuss. As in, perhaps, she no longer wished to have the physical intimacy they reached during that night to be repeated. It may have been nothing more than kisses, but perhaps she was caught up in the night, in the wonder of it all, and fell prey to hormones as many a teenager had been known to do. Maybe she feared the idiots, and what they would do in retaliation for all that took place.

"Well," She said, stepping away from him and turning to her back was resting against a thick, slightly curved tree. "If I'm to be honest, I'd like to know your thoughts."

"On?"

"Us."
"Us?" He didn't want to assume he knew what she meant by that.

Hermione wrung her fingers and chewed her lip, and he had to stop himself from taking her hands and kissing her senseless to stop the nervous habit. "You see, I mean. I know you said you were hoping for further dates, and, well, there were kisses. Lots of kisses. But I suppose, I wanted to know where we stood." She paused, likely wondering if he was paying attention.

As it was, Severus had been distracted, forcing himself to look away lest he spring himself on her when it wasn't wanted. He heard everything she'd said, but what was growing on the tree just feet above her head caught his eye, and the topic had him wonder if tradition would be acceptable.

"I mean," She continued. "Are we merely friends who are experimenting in the usual way that teenagers do? Or are we more?"


"Yes, as in, are we -"

"No, the answer was more. So long as you are agreeable, Hermione Granger, I wish to court you."

He pulled his eyes away from the plant and locked them on her wide, surprised brown eyes. "I will not adhere to the tradition that dictates doing so would end in marriage. It's archaic, really. I would never want to hold you to a promise you made when we didn't know how this would go. But, in all other aspects ….

"Every school event, every Hogsmeade weekend, is automatically you and me. And if one or the other is invited somewhere requiring a guest," She replied.

"Yes."

"Then I am very much agreeable." She beamed. "Though I'd have been happy just knowing we were more than friends."

Severus smirked and stepped closer to her, putting one hand on the tree beside her head. "There is another thing about a courtship, or whatever term you wish to use, that is an absolute guarantee."

"And what would that be?" Hermione asked.

"I am the only one who gets to kiss you under that."

She looked up, blushed, and gave a sort of elated giggle. Reaching for his cloak, she took the lapels in her fists and pulled him closer. He tried to keep distance between them, but eventually it became very hard to maintain any form a space with his arm propped on the trunk. He relaxed his arm, allowing his body to fall closer, and found Hermione's arms going around his neck, bringing him closer still. Slowly, tentatively, Severus allowed his hands to slide down the trunk and land on Hermione's hips. She responded by putting her fingers in his hair.

Logically he knew they had only been somewhat together for two days, that there was no way anything was going to happen or should happen. But logic was being pushed aside by teenage hormones and was very quickly silencing all other thoughts and reasons.

Hermione took a small breath, her mouth remained open just a bit, and he couldn't resist.

She pulled him a bit closer when his tongue lightly touched on hers, a noise coming from the back of her throat.
They sprung apart in an instant at the sound of twig snapping, Hermione not having anywhere else to go but around the tree. Severus had his wand in hand, no magic outside of Hogwarts be damned, and had it trained on the area where the noise came from.

A bunny hopped out and froze, nose twitching and its head darting about, looking for the danger.

Severus relaxed, and a beat later, Hermione was giggling nervously as he sheathed his wand.

"I suppose it could have been worse," Severus said as he moved a step toward her and reached for her hand. "It may have been Bob, or one of the other McGonagalls. Then we'd never hear the end of it, as I'm fairly certain they are just waiting to catch some hint as to where the ball has taken us."

"I suspect Minerva already has a guess, but it being quite nice as to not reveal too much," Hermione agreed as she took his hand.

"So, we will not show anything." He said, ensuring his face gave away none of the amusement the idea of sneaking around like a proper teenager was giving him. "Merely remain mysteriously unreadable for the next few hours until we can get back to the school."

"Agreed." Hermione said with a nod, and they continued making their way around the property. "And when we're back at school, we'll be on our best behavior. Honestly, snogging in alcoves is ridiculous. Not to mention hardly the place for privacy as everyone knows about them."

"I agree." Severus nodded, his lips twitching with the urge to smirk. That sofa in the lab was ridiculously comfortable, and if Moody left them in the room of requirement to meditate, well, he certainly found a form of inner peace.

**January 9th, 1976**

—H—

There was a sense of deja vu as Hermione stood outside the Great Hall after finishing her breakfast, impatiently waiting for Severus to come out. She wanted to meet up with him before breakfast but found Lily had somehow beat her to it. He didn't look thrilled by their ginger friend following him up from the dungeons, the glower he wore until he'd seen her reminiscent of his older self. And it only softened a tiny bit when she smiled at him.

That was actually the main reason she was waiting, worried that she'd somehow made him angry or upset.

She couldn't imagine how, but she didn't want to chance it. And when she noticed he'd gotten owl mail, that just made her more nervous.

He emerged with a group of the younger Slytherins, Sirius' younger brother and his mates, and they waved Severus off as they headed toward the stairs, leaving just he and she alone in the corridor. He turned in her direction, as he would need to for Runes, and gave her a near smile as he came toward her.

She put her arms around his neck as he got closer, pulling him in for a hug that he returned instantly. "Happy birthday," She said, placing a kiss just under his jaw as she gave a slight tug on the hairs at the nape of his neck. He tightened his hold fractionally.

"Thank you. Thus far, it has been truly happy indeed." He said, pulling back to gaze at her. His smile faded to something thoughtful the moment their eyes met, and then there was a slight bit of distaste. "Well, except for, when informed there was a Gryffindor waiting for me in the dungeon
"I'm sorry." She said instantly. "I wanted to meet you, and I did notice Lily was gone when I woke. But I had thought she'd just gone to the prefect's bathroom."

"Yes, well, after recent events, she was at least safe being down there. Aside from that, there was absolutely nothing about the experience that gave me even a modicum of joy."

The reminder of too recent events and everything that surrounded them loosened her smile, bringing to mind the war that was silently being waged outside the walls of Hogwarts, and was only going to get worse.

Donovan Mucilber was expelled, though did not lose his wand. At some point during the Yule Ball, he and a few of the other Syltherins had left the dungeons in search of a laugh. Mary McDonald had apparently wound up the source of their humor. A compulsion charm was placed on her in the worst way, and while no one would say what she was made to do, she looked a mess when it was all over with. Since Mucilber was the one caught out in the compromising position, he was the one given the strongest punishment. His friend Avery, as well as a few other sixth year Slytherins, were suspended and only permitted to return to the school under heavy restrictions.

Severus had informed she and Lily the evening of their first day back while he worked on improving the recipe for blood replenishing potion, having heard the details in the common room. Dumbledore had given a very brief summary and had followed it with a stern warning about malicious magic in the school and the consequences of such. She hadn't missed the disappointed gaze he'd shot the marauders.

Well, the marauders minus one.

There was an influx of noise from the Great Hall that had she and Severus parting, and as Severus stepped out of her line of sight, she caught Lily and Remus coming toward them.

"Lily has informed me it is your birthday. Many happy returns." Remus said with a smile.

"Spare me." Severus sneered. "I'm older, not much more than that."

"Sixteen, Sev!" Lily exclaimed.

"Yes," He said. "Though technically will not truly be such until six this evening."

Lily sighed, huffed, and shook her head with a grin as she stomped off past the lot of them toward her class.

"Not one for birthdays, Severus?" Remus asked.

Severus slipped his hand into Hermione's, one of the only displays of public affection they allowed anyone to really witness blatantly. "No more than I am for any other day, to be honest. It's merely easy to get Lily in a huff; she feels everyone should want attention and such on the day marking their birth."

"Yes," Remus smiled, "I do recall that."

They didn't say anything else on their way to class, nor did they discuss anything aside from the work during. Severus walked Hermione (and Remus by proximity) the side door leading out to the green houses for Herbology, and that was the last she saw of her boyfriend until lunch.
He'd been the one waiting outside the Great Hall this time, and while Lily and Remus had followed Hermione toward him, he didn't seem terribly perturbed by it. He looked Remus up and down, sizing him up.

"If where I'm about to take you ever gets invaded by your little friends, know that I will find a way to do absolute terrible things to you after I've relocated everything, are we clear?"

Remus frowned. "Yes?"

Severus nodded, shifted his bag, and took Hermione's hand. He guided her and led the other two up to his abandoned classroom, avoiding Madam Pomfrey's hospital wing entrance.

Remus had paused in the doorway, momentarily stunned as he looked around the room. Lily went over to the sofa and immediately plopped down, patting the spot next to her with a smile at Severus.

"Don't gape," Severus said over his shoulder to Remus before pulling out his wand and transfiguring a chair into a second sofa. He then plopped down in it, looking expectantly at Hermione. Before she moved, Lily had leaped across the space and sat next to him.

"Oh, this is much more comfy than the other one." She said as she wiggled into the corner a bit more. "Did you bring lunch?" She asked Severus as she folded her hands on her lap.

Instead of arguing, Hermione moved to the other sofa, dragging it closer so she could keep some form of proximity to Severus.

He surprised her, and really, she didn't know why it had, by getting up and moving to sit beside her the moment she sat down.

"Yes, I did." He said as he began to pull sandwiches wrapped in paper from his satchel.

"So why the impromptu lunch away?" Hermione asked him, her knee bumping his as they adjusted their seating position.

Severus looked to Remus for a long moment. "I received a letter from my mother this morning. She sends her warmest regards, by the way, and says you looked lovely at the ball."

Hermione blinked. "You sent her a photograph?" She asked in disbelief.

"No, I sent it to my grandmother." He replied before taking a bite of his sandwich, likely knowing his pause in explanation would drive her spare. "The letter from my mother was twofold, one clearly having been sent by partial muggle means, the other having traveled far faster by owl only. The first, slower to come one simply said, 'don't go home.' If it was meant to be for Christmas Hols, it was moot, for I've never gone home for the holidays. However, the second has led me to believe it was a general warning. My grandfather, Severus Prince, had passed away."

"I'm sorry for your loss." Remus said, Lily nodding.

Severus waved it off. "I didn't know him, he having disowned my mother and never acknowledging my birth. But his passing was a blessing for my mother, as it allowed my Grandmother to welcome her back home." He turned to Hermione, meeting her eye. There was such pride in his black eyes, as well as joy, and relief. "She left Tobias. My mother waited until he was blackout drunk, packed everything of value to her and myself, and left him and Spinner's End all together. She never has to go back."
Hermione's sharp intake of breath was all the warning he had before she launched herself at him, holding him tight and laughing with him as he gripped her tight.

"I'm so happy for her, for you." She said into his shoulder.

"I don't understand." Remus said.

"Does this mean you aren't going to be around during the summer?" Lily's voice was the one that ended the mirth.

Slipping apart, Hermione and Severus both looked to the slightly petulant ginger who stared at Severus and ignored a very puzzled Remus.

"Yes," Severus replied. "Though I doubt I would have been around at all unless Tobias had ended up in prison once more."

"Who is Tobias?" Remus asked Hermione.

"His father." She replied.

"Oh," Remus said, nodding. In a near chilled tone, he added, "I can understand that sort of joy, then."

Severus shot Remus an intrigued glare before returning his focus to Lily.

"So, you're just going to leave me, then? Alone with Tuney."

"Don't start." Severus said sharply.

Lily turned away, facing the wall and pressing her cheek into her own hand.

Remus cleared his throat. "We should consider heading toward Defense." He said, getting to his feet. "I hear Professor Moody is much less tolerable in the afternoons."

Nothing more was said as they all got up and left the room, and Hermione wondered why Lily had acted so selfish.

—S—

He decided to wait for her on the sofa, facing the door, going over the letter in his hand once more.

Dear Mr S. Snape,

After reviewing both your academic commentary in regards to the Fertility Potion, as well as your essay on improvements in both technique and quality of the basic pain relief, we wish to inform you that your work has been accepted into our periodical: Potion’s quarterly. Your commentary will be featured in the spring edition, your essay for the summer.

We thank you again for your interest and look forward to seeing more entries from you in the future.

Sincerely,

-L. Hicklepunk, Editor

P.S. - Severus, Robert and I have filled out the forms and have placed a patent in your name on the new recipe.
He hadn't lied to Hermione about the letter from his mother, nor the contents. But they were two of four, the third being the one in his hand, the fourth being one from Bob and Delia, wishing him a happy birthday. He imagined the patent registration fee was likely meant to be a gift, and he'd already written and owled his sincere gratitude.

But this letter was everything, this letter was his golden ticket to being able to gain his apprenticeship with a master. He may even be asked by one or two, if he were lucky enough. He'd duplicated it a half dozen times and hid them away in his trunk, but the was the original.

He was just about to reread the short missive once more when the door opened briefly and closed promptly.

There she was, his Hermione. His. The letter in his hand, the smile on this girl's face, he'd never had luck like this in his life, and he was partially terrified of the moment when the other shoe dropped.

"I feel awful not giving you your present earlier in the day." She said in way of greeting, coming around and joining him on the sofa with a small, slim box.

He eyed it suspiciously. "I expect nothing, and you bloody well know it."

She smirked, "Well, I would have gotten you something anyway, and you bloody well know that." She said as she handed him the box. He dropped his letter in his lap to take the box in hand.

"Not another sweater?" He raised his brow and allowed a crooked smile just to see the way she blushed for it.

"You like that sweater." She grumbled.

He did. She'd given him an expensive feeling black, soft sweater. Warm, and one of the nicest things he'd ever owned, he wore it whenever it was appropriate. Most of the Christmas Hols was spent with that sweater on his person or near him. It was certainly better than the quill and ink set he'd gifted her, and he had immediately vowed to gift better at the nearest opportunity.

He'd forgotten she'd have the chance to give him something else so soon.

He pulled on the deep green ribbon that held the lid on to the black box, and his heart stuttered when he'd read *Rowl and Sidney's Fine Instruments* embossed in silver on the top. He took a moment to take in the magnificent sight and braced himself for what might be a terrible joke. Removing the cover, his breath was taken away.

A pure copper stirring rod. It was not one of the most expensive pieces of equipment she could have bought, but it was top of the line, and worth more galleons than she ever should have parted with. He ran his fingers over it, back and forth along the length, when he felt a flaw near the top of the handle end. Rolling the rod with his fingertips revealed *S. Snape* engraved on the surface, slightly blackened.

"Do you like it?" Hermione asked tentatively. "I know I got you ingredients last year, and it nearly seems like I can't think of anything else you may want, but ….""

"I am … speechless." He said, putting the cover back on the box and setting it on the nearby table. He shifted toward Hermione and took her hands in his. "It matters little to me what the gift is, I feel privileged to have even entered your thoughts enough for you to go through any effort. But that is … much more than I deserve."

"I'll be the judge of that." She said with a touch of superiority. She smirked, but it faded as she
spotted the letter on his lap. "Is that from your mother?" She asked.

"No, it was what I was going to share with you, and perhaps Lily, this afternoon had Lupin not followed us." He said, handing it to Hermione for her to read.

He found it annoyingly adorable that her lips moved silently as she read the letter, and he was charmed by the way her eyes lit up even though she couldn't pull her eyes away from the letter until each word was read.

"Severus!" She gasped joyfully. "I'm … this is amazing. I'm so proud!" She said grabbing his shoulders and half pulling him and half propelling herself until her warm, soft lips were pressed against his for a brief moment. "Admittedly, I'm also a little jealous, but mostly proud." She'd said, and he chuckled as he put his hands on her waist.

"You will do great things as well, I'm sure. Perhaps not as quickly, or with as much brilliance."

He chuckled again, deep in his throat, as she used his tactic of kissing to end any talking on him.

And soon the simple kiss became an outright snog.

Oh, he loved snogging, though he'd never admit it to anyone but the girl in his arms. Since Christmas they'd done so nearly every day, though this first week back to the routine of school had certainly caused the sessions to be much, much shorter.

He felt Hermione pull on his shoulders, and he followed her, only realizing half way down that they were far from upright. But since she was doing the leading, and he was willing to follow here where ever she wished to go, he was merely careful to keep as much of his weight off her as possible. She shifted her hands so that one was around his neck, and the other rested on his back, holding him exactly where he wanted to be. As it always did when he was with her, time slowed and sped at once. It was though they'd been snogging for hours, and yet when his hips accidentally shifted and caused her to moan softly, they'd barely been at it five minutes.

Something primal in him awakened, and he forced it to shut up and get behind his occlumency shields. He was not an animal, and he did not want to be quick to jump at the first opportunity like he'd witnessed too many young men do.

Growing up in Cokeworth gave Severus a sex education from an age in which most should still consider babies to have spontaneously formed inside a womb. He remembered seeing a couple about the age he was now rutting in the alley on his way home from school. It was a morbid fascination that had him half watching, not quite understanding what was happening. His mother had explained it, and so he had known how that girl had gotten what most children perceived as fat, and then suddenly was a mother herself. Most of the boys he'd gone to school with had lost their virginity before their third year of secondary, and many were already fathers.

Hogwarts was much the same in some ways, though magic helped with the possible consequences. He knew he was considered behind the other boys in his year in that respect, but he had no desire to conform.

Well, he did. But it wasn't as though he was going to rush things with the one girl he felt actually understood him. The one person he was terrified of losing.

His hips flexed just as hers seemed to, and her whimper stopped him, allowing him to take a moment and clear his head. To get blood flowing back to his brain where it belonged.

"I'm … I'm not …." Hermione panted.
"Nor am I," He clarified.

"Good. I mean, the chemical cocktail of hormones and endorphins are certainly trying to make a persuasive argument to go ahead, and I certainly care for you a great deal in the emotional respect. Certainly, enough that, were we to do … that, I wouldn't regret it and it would be a valued and cherished moment, but …"

"Hermione," Severus half huffed, half panted. "I'm in agreement. No need to explain."

"Well," She blushed. "I wasn't exactly objecting to what was happening. It was quite pleasant, actually, and I admit I would like to continue doing that. But, when it comes to … engaging in …"

He smiled as she stammered. "I'll keep my hands out of your skirt if you keep them out of my trousers until such a time where we are both ready to explore that aspect of our relationship." He said confidently. *Just hope you last long enough to get to that stage*, that pessimistic voice in his head grumbled, but he took that and shoved it farther behind his shields than the caveman urge.

"Good." Hermione sighed. "Now, shall we resume the snogging, or are you planning on … no, that would sound completely wrong given our conversation."

"What were you going to say?" He asked, too curious and with too little blood in his brain to stop him from keeping it in.

Her blush deepened. "Planning on playing … with your rod."

Severus took a moment to process what she'd said before throwing his head back and roaring with laughter. She giggled beneath him before laughing outright herself, and when they settled, he stroked her cheek before kissing her again. And then the snogging resumed.

He wanted to experiment with the rod, he knew the perfect potion in which to test it on, too. But he had so little time with Hermione like this and would likely not find time with her again in this capacity for a while, that he said "sod it" to himself and allowed what was really the best thing he could have gotten for his birthday to carry on.

Her leg snaked around his, keeping their bodies pressed together in a pleasant way. She made soft mewling noises in her throat that were going to drive him spare and stay in his dreams that night. His fingers were grazing her ribs, happily coaxing more pleasant sounds from her, when a tickle in the back of his mind told him he ought to move away. Physically still engaged, he tried to reason with so little cognitive processing why he should pull away from his Hermione.

The door opening made it click as to why.

"Sev! I brought - Oh! Oh, my, well." Lily stammered.

He didn't exactly scramble to get off of Hermione and seeing as how they weren't precisely doing something too unseemly, he felt no need to be embarrassed. Not to mention it amused him that Hermione seemed more annoyed than flustered by the interruption.

Lily cleared her throat. "I didn't mean to intrude." She ground out. "I thought I would bring Sev his gift. Also thought he'd be brewing."

Severus glanced at the clock on the wall. An hour. They'd been entwined for roughly an hour, which was longer than any session they had during the Hols.

He cleared his throat, "I will be, in a moment."
"Distracted?" Lily asked in a sickly-sweet voice that dripped with disdain. He caught the glare she flashed Hermione, though he wasn't sure if he was meant to. But why did it happen in the first place?

"Momentarily." He said. "I meant to merely thank Hermione for my gift. My gratitude got out of hand."

"Oh, that wasn't your gift?" She said, gesturing to the sofa.

"We're sorry you had to see that," Hermione said, straightening out her top and skirt before standing. It hadn't occurred to him that she was so disheveled, and he wished he'd had a chance to actually appreciate the state. "It is as Severus said, we merely got out of hand."

Lily scoffed, and Severus glared.

"Do not think for one moment that you can claim any sort of moral high ground. Your escapades last year with a Ravenclaw seventh year are not secret." Severus said, noting Hermione's eyes going wide. "Just because it didn't get back to Gryffindor tower doesn't mean that no one knows. I believe it was a Slytherin prefect who caught you and he in the west corridor?"

Lily gapped like a fish. "He told you?" She managed to get out.

Severus shrugged. "The story was told with a few choice words that don't bare repeating."

Lily had the decency to blush and look at her feet. "Well, enough comparing experiences. I did, after all, come bearing a gift. And cake, though I don't think it's big enough to split three ways." She said, gesturing with the small bag dangling from her fingers and the cake resting in her palm.

"It's fine," Hermione said as she returned to the sofa. "I don't have much of a sweet tooth, anyway, more for you two."

Lily seemed pleased by this, though Severus didn't understand why. He took a seat on the sofa, and then had to budge up to make room for Lily as she leapt to sit next to him.

They spent the rest of their time, until Lily had to leave for rounds, making stilted conversation. Lily's gift of a journal was thoughtful and useful and placed next to the stirring rod which earned a bitter compliment from the ginger. Being polite, Severus stood with her when she rose to attend her duties and was caught off guard by a full-on embrace in which Lily had not bestowed upon him ever. It was awkward, her having not released him even after a brief pat on her back.

She pulled back and blatantly kissed his cheek. "Happy birthday, Sev!" She said, then turned and skipped to the door without so much as a 'see you later' for Hermione.

"What in the bloody hell was that?" He asked when the door was closed, furiously rubbing his cheek to remove the uncomfortable sensation of her mouth on him.

"I believe she thinks I'm a slag and that all it took to get your attention was physical affection." Hermione said, tilting her head thoughtfully. "What did she get caught doing with a Ravenclaw seventh year?"

"The sum of it was that Lily wasn't precisely standing, nor fully clothed. And considering said same seventh year Ravenclaw was found bound with antlers a few days later, I highly doubt it was kept as quiet as she seems to think."

"I hadn't heard of it." Hermione countered, crossing her arms and tilting her chin.
"It was around exams, I'm surprised you had attention to spare for anything but notes. You likely sat in the room while it was openly discussed and had been none the wiser." He said as he threw himself on the sofa. He watched her face change from thoughtful to concern, her teeth digging in to her kiss swollen lips. "What is it?" He asked softly.

"Is that why you lost interest in her? She was a touch promiscuous and was willing to meet with boys outside her house, just not with you?"

Severus quickly weighed the possible cons to revealing a small bit of truth to Hermione and knew that perhaps it was worth the chance of looking a fool.

"By the time I was made aware of Lily's explorations, I had well lost my interest in her. By then, I was already trying to figure out how to … mask what I felt for you."

"Why?" Hermione asked. "Why mask it? I certainly wasn't."

Severus gave a tiny grin. "The best mask of all, for I had a hard time believing it would ever be possible."

She smiled contentedly, then snuggled up against him before summoning her arithmancy text to read the next chapter.

Severus took a moment to marvel at her. A small part of him still worried that whatever Lily was up to might end up breaking him off from the best thing that had ever happened to him. But that worry paled in comparison to the way Hermione reacted. Her lack of cattiness, her failing to fall for the bait, made her even more attractive than he already found her. She could have easily lashed out in jealousy, Merlin knows he had and likely would if the tables were somehow turned, but she didn't.

Was it possible to fall deeper in love with someone? He was willing to find out. Though maybe not tonight, he had a new potion to analyze if he wanted to test out his new birthday gift. And if Hermione thought Severus would leave this slight bubble of contentedness, she'd be wrong.

December 25th, 1993

-A-

"Rory!" Aurora heard Draco's voice from the boy's dormitory, and she glanced to Hermione and Ginny. "Get up here."

She rose from her chair, hearing the girls follow her as she made her way up to the dormitory.

Draco had made a bit of a nuisance of himself in the best way possible. It had driven Ron mad, his being so present since the students left for the holidays.

It started with surprising the trio by tagging along with them, Aurora, Ginny, and Luna down to Hagrid's hut. When the gentle half giant had allowed them in, and told them why he was so upset, he surprised everyone by apologizing for his part in the mess. He had since dedicated himself to assisting in putting together Buckbeak's defense, including a written statement taking the blame for the hippogriff's actions.

"I doubt father would allow it," he had confessed when Hermione read it over for him, but he merely shrugged and continued aiding her with the legal books.

And since then he had spent every night in the Gryffindor tower, conveniently staying past curfew when it would be a terrible idea to try and wander the halls. Rumor was that Filch was waiting right...
outside the portrait for Draco's emergence.

When she and the girls entered the dormitory, the boys were still in their pajamas, some of their gifts still not open, and a fire bolt resting in Harry's lap.

"Blimey!" Ginny gasped out.

"That's impressive." Aurora admitted, a pang of envy in her heart as she knew there was no way her mother would ever allow such a broom to enter their home unless her father snuck it in.

"Have any idea who might gift Potter this?" Draco added, a hint of jealousy in his tone.

"Why would I know?" She asked, only to have the idea enter a moment later. "There is no way it's who you're thinking."

"Positive?" He asked.

"Why would Rory know?" Harry asked, caressing the handle mindlessly.

"It wasn't, Draco." Aurora insisted.

"So, you have no idea who sent you a broom like that?" Hermione asked. "It's supposed to be quite good, isn't it?"

Draco eyed her suspiciously. "The best." He said.

"Harry, can I have a go? After you of course." Ron asked a bit too eagerly, and then trying far too hard to appear calm.

"I don't think anyone should ride that broom yet," Hermione said immediately.

"It's not that cold out," Ginny protested, eyeing the broom like she eyed Harry the year before. "And the snow will actually add more cushion."

"Granger's right." Draco said, causing the entire room to fall silent, the rest of them turning to the sole Slytherin in the lion's den. Draco shrugged, then looked to the confused and put out Harry.

"You don't know who it's from. What's more, it's not as though you haven't been bucked off a broom before. Some might find that suspicious but most may just think you don't know how to handle anything with speed."

"That was Quirrell." Harry retorted, looking down at his broom and frowning. "So, you think someone may have jinxed it?"

Draco shrugged, appearing to look bored as he glanced at his own pile of presents.

"He just doesn't want to have to fly against you in the next match." Ron grumbled.

"Potter will need more than a new broom to beat me." Draco shot back, and Aurora caught the smirk Harry tried to hide. "But before he goes for a spin on that thing, someone ought to look it over."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I agree with Malfoy." Hermione said, glancing at the door as Crookshanks came sauntering in. "We should turn it in to McGonagall."

"Or Professor Snape," Draco offered.

"Right, 'cause it's not gonna come back worse or anything." Ron countered as Crookshanks weaved
his way between his mistress's legs, then Rory's, rubbing himself up against her before stopping and starring at Ron.

"He's not going to do anything, your git." Aurora snapped.

"Right, says you." Ron said before noting Crookshanks with a sneer. "Bloody evil thing. Get him out of here, Hermione." He said just as Crookshanks started hissing at Scabbers on Ron's shoulder.

Pandemonium ensued. Crookshanks dove for Ron, which caused the ginger numpty to try and kick the half-kneazle and wound up nearly breaking his toe on Harry's trunk. Something fell, tumbling out a pair of old, awful socks when the trunk tipped. It made an awful noise that had everyone in the room frozen, hairs raised and ears covered.

"I forgot about that," Harry said as he picked up whatever it was and stuffed it back into the socks. He righted his trunk, and piled everything back in.

"What the bloody hell was it?" Aurora asked as the deafening silence took the place of the piercing shrill.

"It's a sneakoscope," Ron said as though she should have known. "Let's you know when someone is untrustworthy?" He said, giving Draco a pointed glare.

"I'm the most trustworthy person in this room." He countered.

"You?" Ron snorted.

"Slytherin's are not liars or cheats. We have better means of getting what we want." Draco said with a haughty air.

"Right," Harry said as he finished packing away the last of the trunks contents. "Well, if Hermione and Malfoy both think it might be jinxed, we'll take it to McGonagall. Sorry, Rory, but while I don't think your Dad would actually put a jinx on it, I wouldn't put it past him for holding on to it well past our next match with Slytherin."

"I already told you, Potter." Malfoy said as Harry grabbed the broom and started to lead the lot of them out the room. "You're going to need more than a fast broom."

"Dream on, Malfoy." Harry said, flashing the blonde a grin over his shoulder.

Aurora said nothing when she saw the faint blush color Draco's cheeks, and if anyone else saw it, they kept quiet as well.
“Why don’t they just cast a patronus?” Adrian Brown asked Professor Moody as they discussed Azkaban in their lecture period. The class turned toward him, and he went red as he tried to sink into his seat.

“Did you just ask me a stupid question, Brown?” Moody asked, and Hermione felt the second-hand embarrassment as strongly as if it had been her own. Hermione heard Severus snicker beside her and resisted the urge to shoot him a scowl.

“Well,” the young man said with a shrug.

“Because if ya think anyone in Azkaban has a wand aside from a guard, you got some brains missing. A Patronus charm is a highly advanced magic. Not even taught here, something you learn on your own or as part of a mastery. More so, you’re in Azkaban ya likely aren’t pure enough here to cast it.” He explained, pounding against his chest in a way that probably hurt. “Anyone know what happens to a wizard or witch who tries to cast a patronus who isn’t pure enough?”

The room was quiet, and no one seemed to be moving. Just before Hermione raised her hand to offer the answer, a tiny, timid voice said, “maggots.”

“Speak up, Pettigrew.” Moody spat gruffly.

Peter cleared his throat, “They get eaten by maggots. My mum used to tell me the tail, of a little mouse patronus that scared off a dark wizard’s hoard of dementors. And when the wizard was angry, he tried to chase it away with his own patronus. Only, well, that’s not how they work.”

Moody nodded once, satisfied with the answer.

“Gotta use your happiest, purest memories for a patronus. Yer a dark wizard, your happiest memory isn’t likely pure.”

“How hard do you think it really is?” Remus asked before popping a crisp in his mouth. He was sitting sideways in a chair with his back propped up against a desk, half slouching which was driving Hermione nuts.

Severus had had three potions resting in his make-shift lab and didn’t want to risk anything at all messing with them where any controllable factors were involved. And since Lily seemed to be glued to them, and Remus was a frequent fixture, Hermione and Severus gladly found another abandoned
classroom to spend some time in when the other two insisted they all spend it together.

“Advanced magic? Mastery level?” Hermione snorted from where she sat against the wall on a desk next to Severus. “I would say it’s likely pretty difficult.”

“And what constitutes a pure, happy memory?” Lily asked. “What is considered pure?” At this she shot a side long glare at Hermione.

Cold, unfiltered annoyance with just a touch of anger shot through Hermione, and she ground her teeth from commenting.

Lily had actually made an attempt at spreading a rumor about what she found Hermione and Severus doing on his birthday. It hadn’t really bothered her that much that Lily had walked in on them. If anything, Hermione was a little miffed that Severus hadn’t stopped in time considering he was the one who set up the warning system for his potions. She let it slide, though, wondering if maybe he allowed it on purpose to send Lily a message of how things were. Unnecessary, she had thought, until the next morning when Marlene had cornered her.

“So, Lily said you finally caught some action.” She had said, blocking Hermione’s exit from their dorm.

“I don’t believe snogging is what most call action, and I highly doubt it’s anyone’s business but mine and Severus’.” She made to move past, but Marlene shifted.

Eyes narrowed, she studied Hermione as if her normal school style would somehow indicate a change. “Lil said she caught you two doing much more than snogging.”

Hermione blushed. “It went a bit horizontal, but that was it. Nothing even remotely of interest.” She forced memories of the pressure of Severus against her in just the right spot, and how very, very close she’d gotten to something she certainly wasn’t ready to explore by any common mutual means.

Marlene scoffed, shook her head and looked to the ceiling, “the little bitch.” She had said and turned and stormed out of the dormitory.

As the day had progressed, Hermione understood what Marlene meant. She doubted it made it beyond Gryffindor tower, but the looks of disgust and intrigue that were strong at the start of the day had progressed to boredom for Hermione, shifting to pity for Lily. At one point, Remus had seemed to try and ask something, but was blushing and stuttering so terribly he hadn’t been able to speak. It was just before heading down to lunch when Marlene yelled, “Oh would you stop! You’re a bigger slag than she is, and even if she did do what you keep trying to tell everyone, at least she did it with her boyfriend.” Lily had gone very, very red, looking about the room until her eyes landed on Hermione. All she did was raise her eyebrows at the ginger girl, but it was enough to send Lily running up to the dorm where the door slammed.

Her heart had been pounding, blood roaring in her ears, and she was a mix of rage and devastation, but Hermione had managed a cool, “Well, if nothing else, I suppose I should be happy most of you hadn’t thought me so bookish for a few hours.” She had earned a few chuckles and stuck around long enough to make it seem as though she wasn’t fleeing before she’d found Severus in his lab and sobbed against his back as he hasted as much as possible to finish the brew he was working on.

If Lily had known the kinds of things Severus had called her as he held Hermione once he was able, she doubted Lily would have wanted to be around him, let alone vie for his attention.

They allowed her presence as both a way of keeping the peace, and to give her a safe haven as
Marlene, Alice, and the rest of their click in house and out had given Lily the cold shoulder. Marlene had confided to Hermione that Lily was terrified of what would happen to her reputation if word got out about what had happened with the Ravenclaw. And if she had so little consideration for another girl’s reputation when she feared for her own, what kind of person did that make her?

“Pure, as in it’s not a happy memory brought on by blood lust. If you’re happiest memory is causing someone pain, it’s hardly pure, is it?” Severus said levelly, but Hermione felt him tensing beside her.

“What’s your happiest memory, Severus?” Remus asked.

“Tell you mine, if you tell me yours,” He countered.

Remus hesitated, then bowed his head. “Hogwarts, I think. Coming to Hogwarts for the first time. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to.” He said the last part softly.

Severus remained silent, looking at his feet.

“Mine is Severus telling me I’m a witch.” Lily spoke up. “We were, what, eight? Nine? He’d seen me doing magic. My sister always called me a freak, but he showed me it was just another kind of normal.” She flashed him a warm, tender smile that he merely glanced at. “What about you, Hermione?”

“Yes, Kitten,” Sirius’ voice came from the doorway, and Severus hopped off the desk and stood between she and the marauders before she could blink. “What is your happiest memory? Meeting me, isn’t?”

Hermione gave a loud, “Ha!” As she recalled vividly when she actually met Sirius Black.

James came into the classroom and leaned sullenly against the wall, and it was only then that Hermione realized that he, Sirius, nor Peter had wands in hand. It seemed Severus noticed this, too, as his stance relaxed.

“Mine is when the four of us went to the Quidditch world cup a couple years back. You remember what it was like, the four of us?” This he said to Remus, who turned away and said nothing.

“Mine, too, likely.” James said glumly. “I know what mine would be, but it hasn’t happened yet.” He then turned his attention to Severus, who tensed again. “I’d have said I knew what yours was, but I’ve been informed it was a lie. Which makes sense, since I doubt even Granger would allow you to make it up her skirt, let alone her shirt.”

“Watch your tongue, Potter.” Severus said through clenched teeth.

“Don’t let the blow hard get to you, Severus.” Remus said roughly. “See, he’s just annoyed that you’ve found a form of happiness he hasn’t yet. And being watched so closely, he can’t get joy the pitiful way he had before.”

James’ nostrils flared as he turned his head away from the focus of everyone, hands going into fists. “Not like he’d be able to conjure a Patronus, anyway.” He spat out. “After all, you heard what Wormtail said. He’d be maggot meal, Moody even said so.” He looked to Severus then, cold, calculating, and daring.

Hermione knew in her gut that he would never be the worst-case scenario, knowing that regardless of why he was the way he was as a teacher in his later years, he was full of good intentions.

Severus stood taller, shoulders squared. She watched his wand arm extend, the three marauders
making to draw their own as Severus’ hand moved in circles.

“Expecto Patronum!” He said in a booming voice so very near the deep baritone she’d known before her accident that the two versions of him were interposed for a moment. With his back turned to her, she could picture the older version, though slightly less careworn, full of confidence that his age and experience granted him.

Silver wisps came out of the end of his wand, and she knew she wasn’t the only person in the room watching in wide eyed wonder. Legs seemed to form from the wisps, and while not completely there, it was easy to determine that had his patronus been fully corporal, it would have been a large feline. A panther, or perhaps …。

“There is no way your patronus is going to be a lioness.” Sirius said in shock, and Hermione thought she detected a bit of panic in his voice.

“Of course, it is,” Lily said as she flipped her hair. “They are supposed to be guardians, aren’t they? And who looks after him better than lions?”

“It’s true,” Severus said in a bored tone as the not-quite corporal lioness circled him, rubbing against his legs like a proper cat. “In the last year, I have had three, strong Gryffindor ladies take me in, as it were.”

“And you’ve had one from our first year, too, right?” Lily said.

He spared her a glance, “Perhaps.”

“So, what’s your happiest memory?” Peter asked.

“I believe that’s personal, and hardly something I would share with those who have supplied me with nothing but the worst.” He said as he sheathed his wand up his sleeve. He hopped up on the table beside Hermione, and she flinched when his arm went around her only because it had taken her by surprise. He had been far more conscious of when he touched her since his birthday, and she hadn’t expected the open affection or possessiveness. She leaned into him, allowing him to know it was welcome without being too obvious.

“So, Kitten,” Sirius said. “Are you going to share?”

“I have too many happy memories to choose just one.” She said smoothly.

“Are you three here for a reason, or do you merely wish to antagonize us?” Remus asked.

“Not you, Moony,” James said.

Sirius looked to his foot, to James, a glance at Peter, James again, then took a deep breath and headed toward Remus. “Well, we can change the topic of conversation, can’t we? How about ….”

“You can. I have something that needs attention.” Severus said as he slid off the table.

“Is it Hermione?” Peter asked with a snorty chuckle.

Severus glared. “No.” He said simply, heading for the door after only a moment’s hesitation.

“Did you two argue, Kitten?” Sirius asked, frowning as he looked to where Severus disappeared. Lily perked up, turning to Hermione.

“No,” She said. “He’s simply still irritated over the discovery that someone he trusted was lying
about him and myself.” Lily ducked her head, much to Hermione’s pleasure. “If you’ll excuse me, though, gentlemen, I have an assignment for Professor Moody that I need to finish.”

“What is it you two do with the guy?” James asked, fidgeting. “Gives me the willies, hate to spend more time with him than I need to.”

“It’s to do with how I lost my parents,” Hermione said as she headed to the door. “Severus is helping.” She gave them no more, leaving the room and heading toward the seventh floor.

Professor Moody had said, “You two, seven, usual,” in a grumbled voice upon their passing him on their way out of class that morning. She understood Severus’ hesitation, as they were just going to end up going to the same place, but with the marauders around she could understand him not wanting to follow. After all, there were so few places that were not on the map, and she’d like to keep it that way herself.

She didn’t get very far before a hand yanked her into an alcove, then covered her mouth as she was about to yelp. When she saw who had grabbed her, she frowned. “I didn’t think we were ‘hiding in the alcoves’ kind of people?” She asked when Severus removed his hand, crossing her arms.

“We aren’t.” He said. “I merely wanted to see if …” He paused, and Hermione watched as five shadows passed by, two splitting off in a separate direction. A beat later, when they were far enough past to be seen, the three marauders were glimpsed before they went off toward Gryffindor tower. “As I thought, you left, Lily would follow, as would Lupin. The other three would go their merry way. I wanted to ensure that they could assume Lupin and Lily would go one rounds, not try to find us.” He then took her hand and led her out of the alcove, heading toward the stairs to the seventh floor.

They were alone in the corridor, not a soul to be seen, and it gave Hermione to courage to ask in a quiet voice, “What is your happiest memory?”

Severus’ grip tightened for a moment, and he looked down at her briefly. “Christmas day, when you said you were willing to court me. Before that, I’d have said the Yule Ball, and before that, when you hugged me on your birthday.”

Hermione smiled. “That’s mine, too. I was so terribly worried I was just someone safe to … pass the time with, I suppose.”

“You are, but that is hardly why I … why I chose you. Pursued you.” Severus replied before frowning. “Your happiest memories aren’t with your family?”

Hermione shook her head. “I am fond of the memories I had from my old life, but I can never get back to it, and that certainly dampens the joy. Here, with my new life, I do have happiness with the McGonagalls, and those I’ve met for the most part. But the most surprising bit of perfection has come from knowing you.” She confessed, her heart fluttering in contentment and warning, causing her adrenaline to rush for ill and good. Still, she pressed on. “I hadn’t expected to like you, let alone care so deeply for you. Yet you have been nothing like I expected.” She left it at that, her heart fluttering harder in warning that she was on the cusp of saying too much.

“I am glad,” Severus said sincerely. “For a while, as I’ve confessed before, I had little intention of liking you, what has become of us is something I would not give up for anything.”

Hermione smiled brightly at him, but it lost some body as she got lost in her thoughts.

It was utterly foolish to drift down the paths of what could be when she was still young, and there
was still so much to come. So many things could happen, but she still mused at the possibility of actually never breaking it off with Severus. Many youths made such promises, it was natural to feel your first love was your only love.

Only, it wasn’t really their first love, was it? Infatuation is so close to the true emotion that she figured that it was usually what a first love was. Hers was Ron, she knew. It would always be Ron for despite how much he disgusted her at times, and what an utter git he was, she found other reasons to be attracted to him. And it wasn’t like Severus was an angel, now or then. It comforted her to know he had fancied Lily beforehand and was likely as infatuated with her as she had been for Ron.

So, wondering in idle moments or flights of fancy if she was the future Mrs Snape, mother of the bright, beautiful girl she barely got to know, wasn’t utterly ridiculous. After all, Draco had referred to his Aunt as H. Never would she have thought it possible, even after arriving in the past, that it could have been her. But knowing that Severus was so utterly serious about them, despite his promise he would not for the courtship to end in marriage, a wave of giddy crept through her at the possibility. It didn’t offer many surprises (though she wished she could remember what it was they said this ‘H’ did as a career), but she could live with that.

But why was Severus always so callous and cruel, though admittedly not as cruel as he was with others. And there was always a touch of regret in his eyes after saying awful things.

“Are you still with me here, or have you gone adrift?” Severus asked, and she realized that they made it to the seventh floor while she was utterly awash in contemplation. He smirked. “You’re becoming more Hufflepuff as of late. Best be careful.”

“It’s your fault, you know.” She said as the door came into view.

“Oh no, you cannot put this on me.” He countered as he stepped ahead to open the door. She snickered as he waved her through, seeing he was amused despite his stoic appearance.

Moody watched as they came in and took their seats, giving him a nod as they did so.

He studied them, and Hermione felt the tickle in her mind as he tried to get in. She knew what he was looking for, and she put a few more recent memories to the front, making sure to hide all the moments alone she and Severus had shared. Moody gave the tiniest smirks of approval before going to Severus. Within seconds, he gave a snort.

“noticed that, did you?” Moody asked, much to Hermione’s confusion.

“He has been attempting to poke around in my mind since the holidays.” Severus said, sounding bored. “I’ve never seen the headmaster so often in all my years at Hogwarts.”

“He’s using Legilimency on you?” Hermione asked in a huff.

“Trying,” Severus replied, no humor at all even in the depths of his eyes. “I imagine he wants to know what has been happening with Potter, Black, and Pettigrew. After all, Lupin has suddenly turned them in, and a trio of Gryffindors are brought forward with a list of evidence that may have had them suspended or expelled along with a group of Slytherins.”

“Yer keeping him out, though. Both of you could, I think, at this point. But yeah gotta keep it up. Never know when someone will try and slink in there. Constant vigilance is key.”

“Yes, sir.” Hermione said as Severus nodded.

“Now, you, boy. You’re a natural at Occluding, wanna try your hand at Legilimency?” Moody
asked, getting up from his chair and shuffling about.

“I doubt there would be any point,” Severus replied. “I hardly think I could get in your mind, or even want to see what’s there.” He said, and Hermione gawked at the rudeness.

Moody barked a laugh, “I wouldn’t let you in. I was thinking Granger.” He smiled a nasty sort of smile that was actually meant to be teasing. “All wizards wish they could read a witch’s mind, especially their witch. Granger don’t want you seeing something, she’ll just have to keep it to herself, won’t she.”

There was eagerness and trepidation in Severus’ eyes, and Hermione wasn’t sure which one was winning out. Or if she should allow it. She trusted him, of course, but there were things she hadn’t said yet. There were plans she hadn’t discussed with him and desperately wanted to when the time was right. But if she were truly skilled at occluding, he wouldn’t see any of it, would he?

Taking a breath, she turned fully to Severus, meeting his eyes with a tilt of her chin and her shoulders straight.

He was taken aback, eyebrows shooting for his hairline. He unsheathed his wand with a flick of his arm, fingering his wand by rolling it back and forth between his fingers. He would still have that wand eighteen years from now, but she tried not to think about that.

“Legilimens.” He said, and she felt him enter her mind.

It was different than Moody doing so, very different. Stronger, more pleasant. She could feel his reactions, though only distantly, and tried to school how heady it was to have him in her mind. She didn’t need his ego getting big.

She felt him pull on strands of memories, things that she had allowed Moody to see. Boring class moments, spending time with Remus and Lily, simply being together in the abandoned classroom. He moved, swiftly it seemed, to the memory she recalled as her happiest, and watched it for a moment from her perspective. Suddenly he was back in the room they had just left, watching as he cast his patronus.

That’s when it began to go terribly, horribly wrong.

He saw himself. Only, he didn’t see himself as he was there in the room, with his Slytherin tie and cardigan, complete school dress code except for the robes. He saw how she pictured him: the older him. That proud, intimidating, powerful wizard he would become in such a short time. Her heart lurched, both from fear of what he would think and the vow. Before she could stop him or herself, a memory slipped out from behind her wall, linked as it was to her impression of older him, and he latched on. His back to them, arms spread out, blocking them from a fully transformed werewolf. She was thankful his face was never revealed in the memory, but it did show her latched on to his robes, glancing at Harry in the middle and Ron to the far end. She sensed his curiosity at the green-eyed boy who looked like James Potter, but she felt her breath stop suddenly, her brain screaming for oxygen immediately.

Those weren’t yours to see! She screamed in her head, trying to push him out with the little strength she had. Something else slipped by, a cat’s howl, and pain, but she was blacking out and the memory became intangible.
Severus yanked himself from her mind so abruptly it felt like his brain split in two. Ignoring his own pain, he slid off the chair and crawled on his knees to get to her in the chair even though Moody had moved faster than Severus had ever seen him to Hermione’s side.

He was giving her cheeks a gentle smack, listening to the breathing. “What happened?” Moody asked gruffly.

“I-I don’t know, exactly. I did as I had read once, I found a memory and followed a string, a pattern. I hadn’t intended to look at anything she didn’t want me to see, but … there was something laid over a memory she must have thought safe. That I thought was safe.”

Moody stood back, pointed his wand at her, and barked, “rennervate.”

Hermione took a breath, but that was all.

“Albus, you didn’t.” Moody grumbled under his breath.

“A vow.” Severus said without thinking, terrified over what just happened. “Last year, she was lashing out at Potter,” He swallowed, “And she collapsed. I was in the infirmary with her, waiting for her to wake. I heard Minerva mention something about a vow.”

“Fuck,” Moody swore, hobbling away from Hermione a moment.

“She needs Madam Pomfrey,” Severus said immediately.

Moody looked at him, to Hermione, swore again, then nodded. He pointed his wand and began to levitate her. He said nothing as he walked Hermione out of the room, and Severus couldn’t bring himself to follow.

He remained slumped beside the chair that had been Hermione’s, his head pounding and reeling. She’d known a boy who looked like James Potter, nearly exactly like James Potter. She had been friends with him, which would somewhat explain why she had lashed out at him last year over the mess that was Valentine’s day. At least, it fit his theory as to why she had, his suspicions about her and how she came to be with no family.

He saw him, or what Hermione perceived him to be. Was it him? An … no, he didn’t want to think on it. Impressive as the idea was, he wasn’t pleased with how little he would change if it was what he thought it was. But what if ….

Those weren’t yours to see!”

The memory of her mental voice, strong despite her weakening state, screamed at him with such vehemence and fear that it helped propel him out of her mind even when he was already trying to escape. He could feel how she was fading, and yet she was so bloody angry with him for the slip.

Or was it his greed?

He was curious why her happy memories hadn’t included her past, one she was never able to talk about. He could see that somehow the thought she had of this different Severus was overlaid and mixed with how she saw him. He couldn’t have been satisfied with just sensing the awe and attraction, he had to dig deeper, he just had to keep pulling threads to feel validated in his deep love for her.
And he nearly killed her in the process. Put her in a coma, for certain, and pissed her off and broke her trust in a way he wasn’t sure he’d be able to repair.

“What have I done?” he said to himself, looking around the room, feeling it spin as he began to hyperventilate. A month, it had barely lasted a month, and he had thrown away the one good thing that happened to him because he was so starved for what he had to offer he glutted himself on it the first chance he got.

Absently, he was impressed that the room provided a bucket for him to vomit in exactly where he turned his head. But as the agony of his head and heart overwhelmed him, he found he would have rather been covered in his own sick just to have the reminder of what an utter failure he was, and how much he deserved to suffer.

January 21st, 1976

It took a moment for Hermione to understand why she was in the Infirmary and not her bed in Gryffindor tower when she awoke. Even without opening her eyes, she knew precisely where she was because of the smell, and the likely time of day as the sun attempted to get through her closed lids. Her head was pounding, and her chest hurt, the symptoms much worse than any near breaking of the vow she’d experienced before.

Except you didn’t nearly break the vow, it was broken in a way. He saw, he saw himself, and Harry, and Ron.

Rage washed over her a moment, at him, at Moody, at her. At Dumbledore. She rubbed her eyes, though whether to stem the tears or pain she couldn’t tell.

“It’s good to see you made it through the night, Miss Granger.” She heard the headmaster’s voice and chose to keep her eyes closed until she was able to restore her mental shields.

“Was there really a chance I wouldn’t?” She asked, her voice raspy.

“It was questionable, according to Madam Pomfrey.” He replied, and she could just picture that damn twinkle.

“Sir, if you don’t mind, I have lived. I understand my vow, sir, and it was an accident.”

“Was it?” he asked, and she could detect a hint of condescension in his tone. “Professor Moody said that he has, in fact been teaching you and Mr Snape Occlumency. I think it’s actually a brilliant idea for you, and I do wish he had told me sooner.” He took a deep breath, “But I must say that I am not thrilled that he allowed Mr Snape access to your mind as he did.”

“Severus knows everything about me he is able to.” Hermione groaned out, rubbing her forehead. “And now, I suppose, a bit more than he should.”

“Yes, well, I may need to selectively obliviate him.”
“No!” The very idea had Hermione shooting upward, opening her eyes and glaring furiously at the headmaster. Her walls were up, though there was no elegance to them, no distracting thoughts to make it seem like she was hiding nothing. Her fury eased her agony long enough to tear in to the surprised headmaster. “His mind is brilliant, and you will not tamper with it! He had not meant to do what he did, and angry as I am with him, I do not blame him his curiosity. Anyone with feelings for someone who has to keep so many secrets would do the same if given the opportunity.”

“Are you sure that’s why he did that?” Dumbledore asked her gently. “He was curious? It wasn’t because, perhaps, for another reason?”

Hermione had to repeat what he said to herself a few times before his words landed. “What other reason could he have?”

“He is a trouble young man, Miss Granger, who has, in the past, associated with the gentleman who was recently expelled.”

“He has also associated with a muggleborn Gryffindor.” She retorted. “And by turns, any Gryffindor currently in Hogwarts has associated with a trio that purposely sets out to do harm to others.”

He gave a heavy sigh. “Miss Granger, Hermione, if I may. You have a unique advantage of knowing what’s to come, at least for a certain amount of time. Think of the man Mr Snape will become. For while I did not have a good look, it is, admittedly, a habit of mine to slip in a mind from time to time. I may have glimpsed that you know Mr Snape when he is an adult. I do not believe he had kind words or feelings toward you.” Hermione went to protest, but he raised a hand, smiling once more. “Think on it, Hermione. You know there are other upstanding young men whom treated you well in the future. Think on them, and maybe allow Mr Snape his freedom. And, perhaps, remember that you yourself have a brilliant mind, and it would be a waste to lose it because someone ‘accidentally’ snooped around when they shouldn’t.”

He got up from the chair next to her bed and headed toward the room, giving a nod and kind greeting to Madam Pomfrey as she passed him on her way to Hermione.

“You must be in agony.” She said in a soft voice. She produced a pain potion, and Hermione was suddenly hit with a wave of sadness when she realized it was the basic, and not the one Severus brewed.

“Has he …?”

“No.” The matron said softly, shaking her head. “No, he hasn’t been by, but it’s still early yet. I would like you to stay here for the day, then you can go down the hall and see if he’s there.”

Hermione nodded and took a swig of the potion she was handed. “He didn’t mean to.” She said, as much as to herself as it was to the matron.

“No, I don’t think he did.” She agreed, and while Hermione wasn’t sure if Madam Pomfrey knew what she was agreeing to or not, she felt a bit better for it either way.

January 23rd, 1976

Severus had come to see her on the twenty-first with an entourage and didn’t speak the whole time her homework was delivered or Lily, Remus, and Sirius chatted with her. She noted he was avoiding
eye contact with her, sitting closer to Lily than he had in a long time, and it tore her up inside.

Madam Pomfery announced after an hour they needed to go, and when Hermione went to get up, she shook her head. “I think it may actually be best if you stay longer. You’re not as strong as I would have expected you to be by now, and I can tell you still have a headache.”

She had been right, and much as Hermione had hated to admit it, it was likely best that she had stayed in the infirmary at least another night.

The following day she had barely seen Severus, and noticed he put more distance between she and him and less between he and Lily in the classes they did share together. He watched her, she noticed, and she had wanted to believe it was out of concern but he never asked about her health. He never touched her. He barely spoke to her.

She’d have gone to the lab before Astronomy, but she wasn’t sure if she’d be welcome.

Oh, she was still angry he went in her mind where he shouldn’t have, but it was an accident. She was just as angry at herself for not pushing him out.

And now he saw ….

She couldn’t imagine what he thought of her now.

The end of Defense had come about, the last class of the day, the start of the weekend. Severus rose, looked as though he were about to say something, then fled. Lily looked at her with a glare, gathered her books, and chased after him.

Sighing, Hermione rested her head on her desk, certain that Moody would at least find enough humanity to allow her a moment.

“Hermione,” Remus said gently, a hand on her elbow. “Are you alright?”

“As much as I can be.” She replied.

“Did you and Snape split?” Sirius asked, startling her enough to lift her head and see he was on the other side of her. She glanced around, noting that they were the only three left in the room, James and Peter long gone with the rest of them.

“Not officially,” She said, picking at her index finger with her thumb. “Though I suppose it’s merely a matter of time.”

“What happened?” Remus asked. “I had thought that, well, I thought you two were getting on well. Especially with what Lily had been saying.”

“We were, but …. He found out something about my past that I don’t think he particularly liked. It wasn’t much, in fact it was barely anything at all. But it seems it’s just enough that he’s already regretting me. We haven’t spoken since.”

“Kitten, if I may make an observation, I think he’s scared.” She looked incredulously at Sirius, and he smirked in a devilish way that highlighted how commonly handsome he was. “You don’t believe me?”

“There was nothing … well, I suppose there was something terrifying to it, but nothing that should stop him speaking to me.”
She turned to Remus, catching him looking to Sirius with uncertainty. “You could try and talk to him.” He offered, voice heavy with doubt. “But know, should … just know I’m here. We both are, really. If you need someone to talk to, let us know.”

“I’m quite certain that if the wind shifts in the way you believe it will, we’ll not want to be around James over much. Nor, do I think, you’ll want to confide in Lily.” Sirius said, giving her arm a squeeze before getting up in time with Remus and leaving the room.

She sat for a long while at her desk, wanting to just get up and face it all, yet also wanting to remain in the bubble in which she and Severus were both still together and entirely through. Schrödinger’s bubble, as it were.

Severus would have probably understood the reference.

She wasn’t sure how long she’d sat in the classroom before she got up and moved toward the kitchen. She gave the pear a tickle, and kindly requested a meal from the house elves who happily obliged her. She ate at the small table in quiet contemplation.

You don’t do this. You don’t not get answers. You have to know things. So, go talk to him. You are not Ronald Weasley, and neither is he. You will not allow this silent treatment. If he wants to end it, he should face me, properly. And I’m a Gryffindor, I’m supposed to stand for bravery, chivalry, nerve. I can face the end, I can give him the end he wants. If he wants it.

After her supper, she left the kitchen and headed with determination toward the third-floor abandoned classroom.

She turned the corner and nearly smacked into Lily. A disheveled, pleased looking Lily with a smug grin.

“I was just popping over to Gryffindor tower.” She said, flipping her hair over her shoulder.

“Right,” Hermione said. “He’s there then?”

“Should be exactly where I left him.” Lily replied with a nod. “Though I’m quite certain he wasn’t expecting you.”

———S———

He should just suck it up and find her, face her, and get it over with. Her words circled in his head on an endless cycle for the last three days, fueling the inner monologue over how much he didn’t deserve Hermione Granger. He nearly killed her, for Merlin’s sake, so if his blatant invasion of her privacy when he’d already had an instinct of going deeper than she wanted to wasn’t enough, she would surely end it over that.

She just kept looking at him in the hospital wing while she was more than willing to talk to the idiots who followed he and Lily around.

It drove him spare to see the spark of hope in Lupin’s eye, though he was still kind and polite to Severus. It grated on the young Slytherin, knowing that the former marauder saw an opening. And, if Severus was honest with himself, that Lupin had more to offer Hermione than he did. He looked put together, properly cared and provided for, and he had a modicum of intelligence to satisfy her
intellectual side. Lupin may have had a few unsightly scars, but he was still leaps and bounds more handsome than Severus ever hoped to be. So, what if he always seemed a bit sickly? Severus was skinny, ugly, and often fouled tempered. Plus, Lupin hadn’t almost killed Hermione. Chalk one up for Moony, as the idiots called him.

He sighed heavily, looking down at the sleeping potion in the cauldron, perfectly brewed with a half hour shaved off the normal time, and knew he’d likely be swigging it back tonight to stave off the nightmares.

“Why the long face?” Lily had asked even though she really couldn’t see what expression he was making. If she had, she’d have seen him roll his eyes.

She insisted on being glued to his side from the moment she heard of Hermione’s ending up in the hospital. He found he couldn’t bring himself to admitting he was the cause, merely saying she wound up there after an attack like the one she had the year before.

When it was clear Hermione wasn’t speaking to him, or coming around, or bothering with him at all, Lily seemed to keep a sort of vigil over him. Or, as he was beginning to wonder, was hovering over him like a predator over an injured animal.

“Just tired.” He said. “The fumes of this particular brew would do that.”

“Really?” She asked, and he looked to the heavens and hoped that this phase of teenage stupidity would leave his oldest friend, and soon.

“Oh yes,” He said, turning to face her where she was sprawled out on the couch. “Fumes from any potion can affect your brain. Doesn’t matter how long after they were brewed.”

“Really?” She asked, frowning as she sat up a moment.

“No.” He sighed.

She chuckled and flopped back with her transfiguration text. He noted her skirt was sliding dangerously close to her waist line, but she made no move to fix it. Her tie was on her bag, and her shirt was a bit more open than it needed to be.

“Have you been seeing anyone as of late?” He asked her.

She smirked wickedly at him, seemingly pleased by his question. “I’m not. I’ve been interested in someone, but they were taken.”

“Were?” Severus frowned.

“Ummmhm. I don’t think that’s the case anymore. I’m just waiting for the official word to get around before I make my move. I don’t want it seem like he left her for me.” She said, wiggling into the cushion.

He shifted uneasily, not knowing what to say and not liking where this particular topic seemed to be going.

“Crap,” Lily said, the book flopping down on her stomach as she turned to him again. “I should probably go grab my divination text. I need to read a couple chapters before Monday, and this can wait another day.”

“Can’t you just divine what the text will say? Is that not the point?” He quipped.
She laughed more than was called for, hopping up from the couch and bouncing toward him. She touched his arm. “I’ll be back.” She said.

“I wait with baited breath.” He deadpanned, but she still smiled like he spoke poetically and dashed from the room.

The reality of his life grated on Severus, and he rubbed his hands down his face as he moved to sit on the sofa in Lily’s absence. He didn’t believe for a moment that Lily had been pining away for him all this time, or even truly had an interest in him now. He didn’t want to understand why she was attempting such a farce, but if this was the end of Hermione, he wanted to make sure Lily understood that it did not mean he was going to go crawling after her.

His magic was tripped, and in his misery, it took him a split second for his brain to comprehend that it was Hermione who was coming, and not Lily already on her way back. He removed his hands from his face and sat on the edge of the sofa, watching the door with anticipation. Hope mixed with fear as he wanted desperately for her to walk through the door and yet was terrified as to what she would have to say.

It opened, and she slipped in. She seemed surprised and then resigned to seeing him where he was, nodding once before coming toward him but stopping by the tables. “I passed Lily on my way by.” She said, her voice quivering. “I just came to say ….”

He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. “Go on, say it. I know whatever it is, I deserve it.”

“I hope you can forgive me one day.” She said quietly, tears welling in her eyes.

“Forgive you?” He asked in a rush of breath. “What for?”

She sniffed. “For ever even allowing this.” She said, wiping at her face. “I wish I could explain, I wish I could say anything about what you saw in my mind, but I don’t … I can’t, and.”

“I nearly killed you,” He said. “And for that I can completely understand why you would want nothing to do with me. But why in Merlin’s name would you need my forgiveness?” He asked, inching closer to her. He nearly had her within his reach when she stepped back.

“I can’t explain.” She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and tilted her chin. “I’ll leave you be. Lily won’t be long, and ….”

“What does she matter?” He asked.

“She hasn’t kept things from you, and she’s brought you comfort.” Hermione said, looking him in the eye for the first time since entering the room. “I’ve left this room wearing a similarly disheveled look before, and I remember quite clearly how I got it.”

“If you think … if you believe it possible that I would ….” He said, nostrils flaring as his hands balled into fists at his side. ”Do you really believe that I would find any sort of comfort, physical or otherwise, from anyone but you? After what I did? I nearly got you killed, I…..” He huffed, finding his knees giving out, his arms dropping against legs like a puppet with its strings cut. “I deserve … nothing. I deserve every hateful, vile thing you can possibly come up with. I knew, in some way, what I was doing, and did it anyway. But I swear I had no idea…..”

She took a step closer, and he closed his eyes and tilted his head up, awaiting the impact of her palm to his cheek. When it came, a strangled sort of sob escaped him as it was not at all what he was expecting. Instead of the harsh, hard sting of her skin on his, her touch was gentle, tender, her thumb stroking his cheek and brushing away a stray tear.
Despite the overwhelming sense of shame at his weakness, Severus reached up and covered her hand with his, pressing just enough to silently beg her to keep it there, yet allowing her to pull away should she not wish to touch him. Her other hand threaded in his hair, and the shame increased as he realized how little he cared for himself in the last few days. It was more lank and greasy than it should be.

“Severus,” She said quietly, and he sensed her moving to be on her knees as well. “Please look at me?”

He willed his eyes open and taken aback by the pain and fear in her warm, whiskey eyes.

“You deserve better than me,” She said, and when he went to argue, she quickly pulled her hand from his hair to place a finger on his lips. “You saw that I have secrets I can’t tell you, and more so, I can’t even explain why I have them in the first place. There are nearly fifteen years of my life that I can’t share with you, not as one should with their love. And you … I can only imagine what you must think, how your opinion of me has changed. And I can’t even explain or justify what you’ve seen.”

Her voice broke with grief and wanted to hold her to him but didn’t dare. He satisfied himself with taking a curl between his fingers. “You were angry with me.” He said as her finger slid away, hand resting on his tie.

“Yes,” She said, sniffing again.

“Are you still?”

“No,” She choked out, shaking her head. “But does it matter?”

“Entirely.”

“You wouldn’t speak to me. You avoided me.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want to face the end,” He confessed, refusing to be a coward now. “I wanted to be able to say, for just a little longer, that you were mine.”

“After what you saw, I’m surprised you want me anywhere near you.”

He snorted, “Considering what I saw, I’m baffled by the notion you’d bother in the first place.”

“Well, you certainly….” She stopped short, gasping as her eyes went wide. He quickly held her head in a gentle grasp, a flutter of panic and warning in his mind.

“Don’t,” he said firm but quiet. “Whatever you think you need to say, it’s not worth it.”

“You deserve an explanation.” She said in a raspy voice.

“No, I don’t. Hermione, I ….” He stopped, realizing that there was someone listening at the door. The warning inside not alarm or panic from before, but of magic saying someone was coming near and stopping right outside. Lily? Lupin? Either way, he didn’t want to risk Hermione in anyway, nor have a rumor of his suspicions to circulate. It was bad enough most people hated him for merely existing, he didn’t need to add crazy on top of it. “Point your wand at me. Please,” he said when she...
hesitated. She dropped the hand on his chest down and allowed her wand to appear in her hand. She shook as she lifted it, pointing it at him just as he asked. “Look into my eyes.” He asked of her, and when she did, he could see she was starting to understand. “Say it.”

“Legimens.” She whispered, but he felt her enter his mind very tentatively.

He quite liked it. It was very different from Moody, more gentle and caressing, and nothing at all like what he’d come to know as the headmaster’s needling attempts.

When he sensed her confusion and mild amusement, he offered her the aftermath of his being in her head. He allowed the theories that had swam through his mind to overlay on the scene, and then the agony of realizing that he inadvertently broke her vow. When he sensed her surprise at his knowing, he scoffed and showed her inside her hospital room the year before, and the conversation he’d overheard the headmaster and McGonagall have.

She slipped from his mind and shut her eyes tight. He stroked her cheeks, startling as a broken, pained sob escaped from her before she collapsed against him. She grabbed his shirt, fisting it in both hands as she sobbed on his shoulder. He took his hands from her face and wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight while his heart pounded.

What was happening? Why was she crying?

After a moment, she sat back on her heels and gave the tiniest, relieved smile. “I can’t explain.”

“I know.” He said.

“And you’re okay with that? There is so much you didn’t see, and ….”

“It doesn’t matter. If you still wish to have me, I am yours.”

He remained perfectly still as she leaned in, partly pulling him by the shirt she was still grasping. Severus sighed with relief, the air rushing through the nose he would never grow in to, as her warm, soft lips pressed to his thin, dry ones. She asked for more with her tongue alone, and he gave her anything she wanted.

“Was that a clear enough answer?” She asked against his mouth.

“No,” he replied. “I think you’ll have to try again.”

“Slow on the uptake, are you?” She asked, and she was still close enough that he felt her brow arch.

“I merely wish to ensure I have a thorough understanding. This is not the time for assumptions.”

She hummed happily before kissing him again, deeply, making a pleased sound as he threaded his fingers through her awful hair and held her firm against him. At least until it became impossible to hold her and follow her lead as she encouraged him further onto the floor.

By the time Severus had declared himself thoroughly educated, their ties were missing, shirts untucked, and he was certain the sensation of the skin of her torso would constantly tingle against his fingertips. Her hair had to be tamed in a knot at her neck, and he had to flatten his as his lack of care made it stay stuck in awkward angles around his face.

It was near curfew, and if he wanted to escort her back to Gryffindor tower, they wouldn’t have been able to stay for too much longer.
He left the sleeping potion in the cauldron untouched.

And if Hermione had noticed the door was already opened when they made to leave, she didn’t say.

January 15th, 1994

“I can’t believe I’m rooting for Slytherin,” Harry said as he watched Cho Chang and Draco search for the snitch. “I can’t believe that I am standing here, hoping for Malfoy to win.”

“I can’t believe you are, either.” Ron grumbled from the other side of Harry. “Ravenclaw flattened Hufflepuff, and so did Slytherin. We’re down because of … well, you know. And if Slytherin wins this match, they’ll be up a lot. Make it really hard to win against them.”

“It will be hard either way,” Aurora pointed out, much to Ron’s displeasure. “Ravenclaw is our next match, and if they win this one, they’ll be up a lot as well. Either way, the chances of us winning are quite slim. We can strive for second overall, if nothing else.”

“Shut it, Snape.” Ron growled as Harry looked increasingly down trodden. “You’re supposed to be rootin’ for us, not your boyfriend and the snakes.”

Ginny snorted. “If you think Draco’s Rory’s boyfriend, you need your eyes checked.” She said, earning a musical giggle from Luna.

“What’s that mean?” Ron demanded of his sister, leaning over the rail to look past Harry and Aurora to face her. “He only hangs ‘round us ‘cause a her. And why Harry’s insistent that we stick ‘round her-”

“Ron,” Harry warned, and Ron stopped his tirade. After a few seconds, Harry looked to her with his face screwed up in thought. “Why does he hang around you?”

“Same reason you come by these days, I’d imagine. I’m one of his oldest friends.”

“You’re not his best friend, though.” Ron got in just before getting distracted by a Ravenclaw goal. He and Luna were the only ones thrilled about it.

“She’s tailing you, Malfoy!” Harry shouted just as the two seekers zoomed past overhead, though whether or not Draco had heard him, she couldn’t tell. From the teacher’s stands, she noted her father staring at them instead of the game. She doubted Harry’s voice carried that far over, so she assumed it was merely the assembly they formed and whom they appeared to be cheering on. She gave him a wave, smiled, and turned back to the game.

“Do you mind it?” Aurora asked.

“Huh? Mind what?” Harry asked, barely taking his eyes off the game to glance at her.

“Draco? Hanging around us?”

“No. It’s a bit weird, mind. And the fact that he still mocks me from time to time when he’s surrounded by the other Slytherin’s makes me wonder.”

“It’s because he’s not really ready to break off on his own yet,” Luna said in a serene manner with a
gentle smile. “He is starting to see that what he’s always believed is quite ridiculous, but he fears what will happen if he separates from his house too much. He’s terrified we’ll reject him, and he will have nowhere to go.”

“Good.” Ron said bluntly. “Smarmy git deserves it.”

“Did he tell you that?” Harry asked Luna.

“No, it’s obvious, really.”

“To you, maybe.” Ginny said. “Have you thought of going into divination next year?”

“I don’t believe Professor Trelawney would want me to. She never liked my mother. They were cousins, you see.”

Aurora hadn’t, and a quick glance around told her that she wasn’t the only one who hadn’t.

“I can’t believe ‘Mione’s missing this,” Ron said as Slytherin scored just as Draco and Cho did a dive for what might have been the snitch.

“She’s happier in the library,” Ginny said. “You know that.”

That was true even to this day. Just before Draco started at school, the last world cup had been in Germany. Uncle Lu had brought her, Leo, and her Dad along, Aunt Cissy and her mother both passing for want of something more entertaining for themselves. She was fairly certain Aunt Cissy found less academic means to pass the few days the tournament had taken.

There was a large uproar coming from the stands containing mostly Slytherins, Aurora spotted Draco in time just to see him snatch the snitch.

“Wooo!” Harry yelled and applauded just as Draco flew past, catching his attention.

“Merlin, don’t do that,” Aurora said; “You’re just giving his ego a stroke.” She turned to her father who now looked positively disgusted. She snickered, glancing at Draco to see him glancing back at Harry, then to her father in time to see him shake his head and place his face in his palm. Aunt Min looked like she was laughing as she gave him a pat on the back.

“Maybe next time, show your support a bit less exuberantly.” She suggested to Harry, her amusement at her father’s expense still present as she turned to him. Harry blushed just a smidge but chuckled.

“Yeah, what Snape said.” Ron said with a scowl before going pale. “Blimey, that sounds weird.”

“What do you think Draco’s dad would do if he found out he’s been hanging around us? He hates my family.” Ginny asked thoughtfully, shifting to loop her arm with Aurora’s while everyone prepared to leave.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” Aurora said as the crowd began to disperse.

She wondered if there was anything he would actually do with Draco being his only child. He certainly couldn’t disown him, it would be the end of the Malfoy line. Punishing him was a possibility, but she had a feeling that Draco was already down an irrevocable path that led to a different view than Uncle Lu, and no amount of lost privileges would sway him. And if Harry kept showing him positive attention, it was nearly a promise that nothing anyone said was going to pull Draco from his side, Weasleys or no Weasleys.
“Just remember, the lot of you, that he’s the reason Hagrid is being brought before the board. That Buckbeak might get killed. He’s the reason ‘Mione’s holed up in the library researching legal stuff.”

“And you’ve never done anything stupid in your life.” Ginny countered.

“What have I ever done that’s stupid?” Ron asked as they emerged on to the grass behind the pitch.

“Lots of things,” George said, boxing him upside the head.

“Like cursing yourself with slug vomit,” Fred said, ticking it off on his fingers.

“And flying dad’s car from London.” George added.

“Believing me that the sorting hat would hurt.”

“Believed you could turn Scabbers yellow.”

The twins went on for a bit longer, Ron’s face turning more and more red before he finally burst, “Never nearly got myself killed by a Hippogriff, though!”

“You didn’t dare go near it,” Harry countered with a smirk.

Ron paused. “You did not just … just … Malfoy is a stupid git and screamed like a girl in the forest.”

“You would, too, if you saw Voldemort drinking blood like a vampire.” Harry countered.

“Don’t say the name.” Aurora said softly just as Ron half screamed. Harry didn’t seem to pay the warning any mind, and she doubted that Ron had a full understanding of how dangerous it could be. She looked over her shoulder, seeing her father and Aunt Min having what appeared to be a good-natured conversation far enough away that she doubted that the casual use of the name had any effect on his mark.

“Come on,” Harry said to Ron, “‘Mione’s probably wondering where we are.”

Aurora watched them head off with a sad smile, wondering what the pair would do come June when ‘Mione magically disappeared.
“Hermione,” Marlene said with a blush as they crossed paths in the common room. “Umm, I was, uh, on my way up to see you.”

“Your way up?” Hermione asked, brow furrowed as she glanced at the clock on the mantle. “At seven-thirty in the morning?”

Marlene blushed deeper, “Well I may have just been getting back in myself. Anyway, doesn’t matter. Snape was by, asked me to give you this.” She said, handing a piece of parchment to her by holding it with the very tips of her fingers. Marlene had held it as far away from herself as she could, and tried as she might, Hermione caught the slight rub Marlene gave her hand against her thigh when she was relieved of it.

“Thanks,” She said, barely able to hide her annoyance at Marlene’s action. She took the parchment and unfolded it, smiling as she took in his harsh scrawl.

\[ H, \]

\[ I \text{ will not be to the Great Hall this morning. Being the weekend, I do not have to, nor wish to deal with the sickening display of red and pink parchment fluttering in by owl. I’m taking my breakfast in the lab.} \]

\[ Yours, \]

\[ S \]

She rolled her eyes, smiling fondly at his hand writing before tucking the note in the front pocket of her messenger bag and left the common room. She heard the Fat Lady giggle but chose not to say anything and instead headed straight for the lab. She had a book for him tucked in with her cloak,
hat, and scarf in her bag. Nothing terribly special, just a collection of short stories she thought he might enjoy. They swore to one another that they wouldn’t go overboard, that it was a merely a day like any other, and there was no need to shower one another in ludicrous gifts. It was Hogsmeade weekend, and there was already the promise of butterbeer and sandwiches, Tomes and Scrolls, and perhaps a stop by Honeydukes. With something already provided as a date, and neither feeling the need to lavish over much, it made facing their first Valentine’s as a couple palatable.

Coming up to the lab, she stopped and groaned, rolling her eyes as Lily’s voice came through the crack in the doorway.

“She broke your heart, Sev!” Lily argued impatiently. “She dragged you on for three days, left you in utter misery, and then decided that she wanted to keep you after all. I thought you were better than this, stronger.”

“You know not of what you speak,” Severus’ voice spat, and it was another moment in which, without the visual reminder of his only being sixteen, she could easily picture his older self. She honestly didn’t mind the reminder, having started to see the older version as equally attractive before she’d even realized she was doing it. Would she have had a crush on him if she remained in her previous time? She wasn’t quite sure, and it didn’t really matter anymore.

“I know that no matter how good a show you put on, you were miserable.” Lily countered, and Hermione came close enough to the door to be able to see their friend fold her arms and shift her stance as if there was no way she could be wrong.

“I was absolutely miserable, but that was because it was I who brought on the attack that sent her to the infirmary. It nearly killed her. I don’t exactly imagine anyone could feel a modicum of even contentment after nearly killing the one they … care for, deeply.”

“Right,” Lily scoffed, not seeing or hearing Hermione enter the room.

Severus’ eye shot to her immediately, and they softened a fraction. Lily finally turned, her face draining of color before she straightened herself and shifted her casual clothes about.

“Morning,” Hermione greeted as though she heard nothing. “Marlene said you were looking for me.”

“I wasn’t.” Lily started.

“I’m pleased she gave you my message,” Severus cut her off, moving toward Hermione. “I feared by the way she tried with great effort not to touch me that she would merely drop the parchment on your head and risk it getting lost in the sheets.”

“Why would it do that?” Hermione asked as his hand fell into hers.

“I know how you sleep, and it certainly isn’t with the elegance of an angel. Nor the beauty, you drool.”

“You sweat, copiously, and you snore.” She countered, tapping him playfully on the nose and causing him to scowl.

“And these don’t nearly suffocate you in your sleep?” He asked, giving a tug on one of her locks.

“I’m immune.” She countered with a tilt of her chin, pleased by the way his black eyes seemed to grow darker.
“So Hogsmeade, will you two be going?” Lily asked, leaning against a table. “Or are you going to take advantage of a near empty castle?”

“What would possibly be advantageous about it?” Severus asked.

“Empty library,” Hermione answered immediately. “Much like Quidditch matches.”

Severus hummed in agreement before turning to Lily. “Leave.”

“Seriously? You’re kicking me out of your lab, but letting her stay?”

“I invited her here, the invitation did not extend to you.” And then much more gently, “Lily, please. I appreciate your concern, but it is not needed. The incident we spoke of truly was entirely my fault, we have worked it out, and agreed to move past it.”

“Fine,” Lily said with a nod before heading for the door. She slammed it behind her, and Hermione’s heart sunk.

“I feel terrible.” She said, turning to Severus as she chewed her lip. “I’m tearing you two apart.”

“No, she is.” He replied. “Don’t worry about her, it’s not worth your time. You haven’t eaten, have you?” he changed the subject as gave her hand a tug and brought her to the sofa.

“Shall I remind you how early in the morning it is? I doubt you and Lily had been in here very long before I got here.”

“You’re correct,” he said as he pulled a small basket out from behind the sofa. Clearly packed by the House Elves and not Severus himself, there was a small dish of berries that would not be anywhere near in season for a muggle, a plate of crepes peeking out from beneath a bowl of creme anglais. There was a thermos of what Hermione would have guessed to be coffee, and a small pitcher of pumpkin juice. As Hermione took in the lovely spread, Severus continued explaining as he transfigured a napkin into a picnic blanket.

“I imagine Lily was on her way back from the Owlery, considering the direction she had accosted me from. I had just given McKinnon my note and had barely gotten to the stairs when she started following me, believing at first that I had been looking for her for whatever reason.”

“We both know the reason,” She said as she followed his lead and sat on the blanket.

He started unpacking their breakfast. “We do.” He agreed. “But she can’t go on like this forever.”

“She won’t.” Hermione said as she stole a strawberry from the dish. Severus’s eyebrow twitched, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly, but he said nothing. “Is it awful of me to say that this is very much not something I would expect you to do?”

Severus snorted. “No. And in the interest of honesty where possible, I will confess that the idea was given to me by Lucius Malfoy.”

Hermione stiffened, “You write to him about me?”

“No,” Severus replied as dishes and cutlery were brought out. “When I was a first year, I was present in the common room while Narcissa Black regaled the tales of Lucius’ picnic in the courtyard where he proposed. I recalled seeing the girls in attendance swooning at the tale. It stuck with me as an example of romance, as I have little to draw on.”
“You hardly need to romance me.” She retorted.

“No? I’ll bare that in mind for the future.” He said with a smirk. He then poured her a glass of pumpkin juice, then himself, raising his in toast. “To a romance-less courtship, as the lady requests.”

She laughed, lifting her glass to his. “I’d expect nothing more from such a grumpy git.”

The breakfast was delicious, though perhaps eaten much more messily near the end as the playful side Severus had exclusively for her came out. He also thanked her for the book, his appreciation much greater than Hermione had anticipated.

They were nearly late to leave for Hogsmeade. Their first stop, however, was not The Three Broomsticks, nor Tomes and Scrolls. After all, not even Severus could brew a bruise paste in less than an hour, and both agreed it was completely unseemly to have visible hickeys at any time, let alone Valentine’s day.

February 12th, 1994

———S———

“So, allow me to understand,” Severus said with annoyance, exasperation, and just a touch of disgust. “When Messiers Crabbe and Goyle claimed to have seen Potter’s head in Hogsmeade, you say that they had eaten something of questionable quality from Honeydukes?”

“Actually, Sir, I believe I said it was from Zonkos.” Draco replied smoothly, so much so that had he not seen Potter near the humped witch he may have actually believed him.

He had the bloody map, confiscated from Potter the moment he brought the boy into his office. He knew the boy had been to Hogsmeade, he was sweaty from the run it would take to get back before anyone would suspect he was gone. And if Severus were honest with himself, he may have been willing to pretend he hadn’t known about the witch, or the tunnel, or even about the bloody map if it weren’t for Black getting closer and closer to Potter while he was supposed to be safe in the school.

And this, Severus thought, was not the time for Draco to start making excuses for Potter. It was not the time to prove in some twisted way that he wanted to make friends with the boy.

Warning Potter ahead of time about the foolish Dementor prank was one thing. He’d seen Draco slip a parchment to Potter, even if the boy was too bloody obvious and opened it before the Slytherins were even three feet away. But this, this was just ….

“And what, pray tell, was the questionable item consumed from a joke shop that would cause two young men to both claim a view of Potter’s head floating in the village? While admittedly filled with so little, I doubt it could wander off on its own. So, either Potter’s whole self was in the village, or I will need to assign Messiers Crabbe and Goyle a most foul detention. Which is it, Mr Malfoy?”

House loyalties, or this new one forming with Potter? He hated putting Draco in this position, for as much as the boy-who-lived-to-drive-him-mad could use a Slytherin influence, he could use his life more. Supposedly, they all could.
Draco took a deep breath. “I’m not sure if you’ve ever been to Zonko’s, Sir. Quite frankly it’s filled with common rubbish, but there is a section that is supposed to be for those of age. Crabbe and Goyle had seen a seventh-year purchase something from the section, then pilfered a little sample. Diamond Drops, I think they were called. Clear little balls that they said tasted a bit like grass. Among Potter’s head, they also claimed to see a big, black dog lurking around and following Weasley, as well someone looking remarkably like Hermione Granger with a red head and a little boy.”

Severus took a deep breath, gritted his teeth, and tried very hard not to rip into the little shit.

Diamond Drops were a popular hallucinogenic the Death Eaters had partaken in during some of the supposedly sophisticated and classy gatherings. Lucius, he knew still brought them out from time to time when he and their acquaintances from the old days got together. Draco, ever the little eavesdropper, had likely seen and heard what they were at one point. And Severus knew from incidences past that some seventh years did purchase them and sneak them in despite them being banned from the school. He also knew that Hermione was supposed to meet Delia in Hogsmeade at some point with Leo, though it had slipped his mind to warn her to change her plans with the attack from Black the previous weekend.

Had he not known that Draco was lying through his teeth, Severus would have likely given him the benefit of the doubt.

“There is still the matter of this suspicious bit of parchment that Potter was carrying around.”

“Just a bit of scrap,” Potter said, appearing nonchalant except for the tension in his face.

“Well, then, I suppose I could just burn it then.” He said, moving slowly toward the hearth.

“No!” Potter shouted, and Draco flinched, likely at how desperate his companion sounded.

“Ah, something of sentimental value, then? A secret, perhaps? Well, perhaps it just needs a little coaxing,” Severus had desperately wanted to shock the little git by using the proper pass phrase. But revealing too much too soon may be a bad idea. Dumbledore, as far as he knew, didn’t realize how much the sharp barbs and taunting phrases were in good humor near the end of the first war. Well, Severus had thought they were. “Reveal your secrets.” Nothing. Damn. Well, if there was one way to get a reaction, anything, to get Lupin in here and explain it…. “Severus Snape demands you reveal yourself.”

Words appeared slowly.

*Mr Moony would like to congratulate Severus Snape on his great display of idiocy.*

*Mr Prongs is in agreement with Mr Moony and wishes to inform him he is still a great, greasy git.*

*Mr Padfoot is astonished that an intelligent little Kitten would find her way on to such a moron ’s lap.*

*Mr Wormtail would also like to remind Severus Snape to wash his hair, the slim ball.*

Well, good humor with the exception of Pettigrew. They never did make peace.

“So, we’ll see about this.” He said for affect, Potter having gone sickly pale and Draco only slightly better. Severus activated the floo and called for Lupin, who promptly appeared.

“You called, Severus?” He said, darting a confused glance to Draco and Potter.
“I did,” he said. “After receiving a distressing report, I asked Potter to my office where I asked he turn out his pockets. Aside from a bag of tricks from the joke shop, he had this.” He showed Remus the original marauders map, and saw his eyes widen a fraction before they went cold and closed off. “This bit of parchment if clearly full of dark magic, which is supposedly your area of expertise. Where do you think Potter would have gotten this from?”

Lupin glanced at Draco. “Perhaps it was given to him for the purpose of getting him into trouble.” Lupin suggested.

“By Mr Malfoy? A worthy attempt to blame a Slytherin for a Gryffindors foolish endeavor. However, Mr Malfoy had come to Potter’s defense. He claims that those who reported having seen Potter in Hogsmeade were not seeing things clearly. Have you ever seen this parchment before, Mr Malfoy?”

“No,” Draco replied, glancing quickly at Potter suspiciously. Ah, so not so close that Potter would let him in on his father’s legacy.

“So, what do you think, Professor. Where would Potter have gotten such a trinket?” Severus turned back to Lupin. “Direct from the manufacture, perhaps?”

Before Lupin could reply, Weasley came bursting into the room with little regard for who might be on the other side of the door, or even the simple politeness of knocking first. Through his wheezing and huffing, he claimed to have purchased the joke bits for Potter, stopping short when he saw Draco standing beside his friend. He glared at the Malfoy heir, and Severus didn’t bare an ounce of the amusement he felt tickling inside him at the sheer animosity between the ginger numpty and Draco.

“Very well,” Severus said through his teeth. “It would seem that you are in the clear this time, Potter. However, I will remind you that your head, or any other part of your body, is not permitted off the castle grounds. And should they be discovered floating about again, the consequences may be worse than merely detention, am I clear?”

“Yes, Sir.” Potter nodded.

“Mr Malfoy, I ask you pass along a warning to Messiers Crabbe and Goyle that the products they sampled this afternoon are detrimental to their health, and they have little in way of mind to waste away on such things.”

“Yes, Sir.” He said with a nod, the tiniest of smirks playing on his face before he gave Potter a nudge, and they both headed for the door. Weasley was still pouting and glaring all at once, likely upset that he hadn’t been the one to save the day, and the strange trio left for who knew where.

When the door closed, Severus turned back to Lupin who looked terrified. “How did he get this?” He asked in a shaking voice.

Severus studied him. “I assumed from you.” He replied.

Lupin shook his head, “Filch confiscated it from Peter our seventh year. Hermione and I were able to make up a replacement, but I believe it was burned after we graduated.”

Severus sighed. “And what name did our darling H choose for her pseudonym?” He asked, the familiar pang of regret hitting his heart at the reminder of the year he’d missed out on with her, Lily, all of them.

“Prince.” Lupin replied. “Messiers Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs, with Misses Prince and Petal, are proud to present …. She wanted you included in some way, and while Sirius had argued
for Kitten.”

Severus sneered. “That would have been atrocious. Miss Kitten? Sounds like someone you would find in Knockturn alley.”

“I think I said the same thing.” Lupin replied wistfully. It was replaced by sadness “In a way, it was fortune telling. She took your name then, she took it again later.”

“Yes, she did. But we aren’t here to discuss Hermione. I need to know how Potter got a hold of this.”

“I wish I knew. And given that Neville had left the list of passwords lying about.”

“I had heard of that. Min was utterly furious. I hadn’t heard her brogue come out that deep since … it was a McGonagall event. ‘89, I believe?”

Lupin became thoughtful. “Has Hermione said if she intends to see her actual parents when the time comes?”

Severus nodded. “We have discussed it, and while she claims she is undecided, I suspect I will be meeting my proper in-laws by the summer.”

Silence descended upon them for a moment before Lupin cleared his throat. “I will keep this with me in my office.”

“Can I trust that it will not find its way into the wrong hands?” Severus asked

Lupin looked at him with severely. “He killed our friends, Severus. James and Lily by betrayal, Peter in cold blood. I promise you, if I see Sirius, I will not hesitate to do what it takes to stop him.”

“Will you not? Given everything?” Severus arched a brow.

“None of it matters.” Lupin said. “I’m not sure it ever did.” And with that, he left Severus alone in his office.

He itched to floo the cottage, to call on his wife and ask for a hint. To bring her to his rooms and look into her eyes as he stated things and see if he could detect what was what. But he wouldn’t. He told himself from her first day in Hogwarts that he would not rely on Hermione’s knowledge to give him an advantage, especially when her time as a student under his tutelage was drawing near its end.

———A———

She, Ginny, and Luna had come across them bickering in the corridor just down from her father’s office. Draco and Ron looked to be squared off at each other, and Hermione and Harry unsure what to do.

“What’s going on?” Ginny asked tentatively, looking between her brother and Draco. “Who said what now?”

“Buckbeak is being executed.” Hermione explained. “I’d received word from Hagrid. And, well.”
“It’s this great git’s fault!” Ron spat.


“And how do we know you didn’t switch it out from what ‘Mione saw?” Ron challenged. “Maybe you went on in on with the great sob story of yours. ‘It killed me, it killed me’. You cry like a girl, Malfoy.”

“Oi!” Ginny and Rory snapped together, Hermione glaring at Ron’s head though he seemed to pay little mind to it.

Draco smirked, “Is this another way of trying to make yourself look good for Granger. She throws her arms around you in gratitude for something you should’ve done from the start without whinging, and now you want to seem superior to me?”

“Alright, enough, both of you.” Hermione huffed. “The only way we’ll know what happened it to ask Hagrid. And we can’t go down to his hut because of all the security measures in place.” At this she eyed Harry critically, and Malfoy snickered.

“We could just ask someone to escort us.” Luna suggested.

“What Professor is going to walk us down to see Hagrid, and then wait for us to walk back?” Harry asked. “I’m fairly certain Lupin won’t do it, as I think he’s already covered for me once today. And I know Professor Snape is just looking for a chance to accuse me of breaking the rules.”

“Which you did do,” Hermione chided.

Harry ignored her. “So, who else would be around that we could ask?”

At that moment, Professor Trelawney came swaying down the hall, looking confused as she seemed to have suddenly forgotten where she was.

Aurora looked to Draco, who smiled charmingly and approached her.

“Professor,” he said with his best worried voice. “I’m afraid I need your help. You see, I was drinking tea this morning, and when I’d gotten to the bottom, I thought I saw a hippogriff in among my leaves. Professor Hagrid had his hearing today, you see, involving my accident. I’m terribly worried that they relate, and I want to confirm that all was as it should be. But with the restrictions on, well….”

Professor Trelawney blinked rapidly behind her overlarge glasses before becoming solemn. “Yes, I foresaw such a need would be had of me. Come, come, I will bring you to Professor Hagrid, as the spirits foretold I would.”

Aurora glanced to Luna and Ginny who seemed amused and completely on board with following the quartet and the sloshed professor out on the school grounds to the hut. Trelawney obviously had no idea where she was going, starting to wander down a different path before stopping suddenly, putting her hand to her forehead, and half stumbling to be in front of the others where they made the familiar trek. On occasion, the professor would look over her shoulder and scowl at either Aurora or Luna, depending on which way she turned her head at the time.

When they got to the hut, she nearly fell into the pumpkin patch when Hagrid opened the door quite suddenly.
“Thank yer, Preffesser,” He said in a shaky voice. Much appreciate yer bringing the lot o ‘em.”

Trelawney nodded but said nothing, and started stumbling back up the path to the castle as Hagrid waved the seven of them in.

It was a tight squeeze inside, and after the awful tea and rock cakes were offered, Hagrid got into the sad tale.

“S’all my fault. Got all tongue tied.” He explained. “Kept droppin’ my notes, and forgetten’ all ‘em dates ya looked up her me.” He sighed, “An’ then Lucius Malfoy stood up, said his bit.”

“What about my letter?” Draco asked.

“Oh, they had tha’, too, Draco. But yer father, he jus’ waved it off. Said it was a sign a proper breedin’ that ‘is boy took the blame. Said he didn’ think you wanted to make the family look bad. But ‘cause you did say Buckbeak attacked ya, even if ya said ya provoked ‘im.” He sniffed. “Pointed out how I got kicked outta Hogwarts, he did. Said I don’ know when a creature’s a danger or not.”

“Father played them right in his hands, didn’t he?” Draco sneered.

“’Fraid they did do exactly what he told ‘em.” Hagrid sighed.

The room was quiet for a moment before Ron growled, “Proud of yourself?”

Draco turned toward him, tensing as Ron got up.

“You think you’re so great, better than anyone, then anything. Ignore Hagrid when he says what ya need to do and get yourself mauled. But no, no not your fault. Not the great Draco Malfoy’s fault, is it? It was Buckbeak’s. And now that you went running off to daddy before you developed a tiny bit of a conscious, it’s all Dad’s fault Buckbeak’s getting executed!”

“I never said that it wasn’t my fault, Weasel.” Draco shouted back.

“Yet you’ve never said it!” Ron yelled.

“Fine! Want me to say it, Weasley? Can’t use your brain to figure it out? It’s my fault. For a moment in my life I went barging in like a ridiculous Gryffindor and acted like I had less brain cells than you do!”

_Crack!_

The room went still and silent as everyone seemed to process what just happened. Aurora didn’t think anyone had noticed Hermione get up at any point during the yelling match, as it looked like the two wizards were about to do some serious damage to one another in the small, crowded hut. It certainly took everyone by surprise when her first landed on Draco’s nose, the sickening sound of cartilage snapping ending the shouts.

“Don’t insult the house of Gryffindor in a room full of them.” Hermione said, seeming stunned that she’d actually just did what she had.

“I’m not a Gryffindor.” Luna pointed out, a gentle smile on her face. “We should probably heal Draco’s nose before it sets crooked. The wiggumworts will be particularly drawn to it, and he’ll feel the need to sneeze constantly.”
She got up, fixing his nose with a quick tap of her wand and a soft “Episkey.”

As Draco got to his feet, he gave Hermione a crooked smile. “You land a good hit, Granger. Muggle, but effective.”

“Maybe one day I’ll teach you to fight like that.” She said, blushing as she shifted uneasily.

“Maybe one day you will.” He said, glancing to Aurora with a slightly wider grin.

April 16th, 1994

It was early morning, and while most Saturdays Ginny would gladly sleep in, the Quidditch crazed did not comprehend such a notion with the biggest game of the year was about to take place. And when it was essentially between two very tentative friends, and the Quidditch cup is at stake, it’s apparently exciting enough for her to drag Aurora out of bed as well.

They were eating with the team, the Great Hall sparse with barely a soul aside the two teams, the heads of house for those teams, Professor Hooch, and a small smattering of followers.

“Remember, Harry, don’t catch the snitch unless we’re fifty points up.” Oliver reiterated for what easily had to be the seventh time since they’d all sat down, and a glance at Harry told Aurora he was about to lose his mind.

“Yes. I know.” He said through his teeth.

“We all know,” Fred said before taking bite of his breakfast.

“Sure, even the Slytherins know by now,” George nodded.

“And the little blondie hasn’t even been over here to see his girlfriend.” Fred pointed out.

“Not his girlfriend,” Aurora said absently.

“We know.” George smirked.

“Wasn’t talking about you.” Fred said with an equally self-amused smile. His eyes flickered down the table, but since the trio was there, Aurora didn’t know if he was saying that Draco’s infatuation was obvious, or if they all thought he was around for Hermione.

Word of his punch out had made it around Gryffindor tower, though with a slight change to the location (the court yard). Many thought it was stupid of him to confront the trio alone, others found a new respect for Hermione and was quite careful not to antagonize her in anyway. If it had escaped to the rest of the student body, the Slytherins made no note of it. Only the teachers seemed to have an idea of it happening, as any time Draco came anywhere near them while in view of a professor, there was a slight tensing. In any case, those who had seen Draco around the trio had all thought that maybe when Hermione’s hand had made contract with his face, he somehow found her suddenly attractive. Few seemed to know better.

“I just want to make sure Harry understands how important this is.” Oliver said. “Gryffindor hasn’t won the Quidditch cup since your brother Charlie was the seeker.”
“What if the snitch appears before Harry as soon as the game starts?” Luna’s dreamy voice came from behind, and Aurora turned in time to see her sliding onto the bench between she and Harry, the seeker having budged up a bit to make room. “Or, perhaps, if luck is on Draco’s side and the snitch goes to him directly.”

No one said anything, and because she had grown up with such a mix in her own home that it took her a moment to realize that Luna was sitting at the Gryffindor table wearing a Slytherin scarf.

“What do you think you’re doing wearing that here?” Ron demanded.

“Oh, this?” Luna said as she fingered the scarf. “I wore it out of solidarity, of course. Most of our friends are in Gryffindor, so it’s not as though you lot will suddenly be sporting green and silver. I had had the idea of a matching head piece, but I couldn’t get the snake to coil just right. Shame, really.”

The table seemed utterly baffled.

Except, it seemed, for Ron. “So, go and slither over there if you want to support them over us.”

“Oh, I had planned to, but when I was going over Draco gave me a slight shake of the head. I don’t think he’s quite ready to admit he’s got real friends outside of Slytherin. And they can be a bit cruel in their taunts, far worse than some of the other houses, including my own. He doesn’t like it when people call my Loony, and I think he was afraid of me hearing what other names they could come up with.

Harry looked slightly shame faced, as did Hermione. The twins just sort of shared a sad smile and went back to their breakfast.

It wasn’t long later that the Slytherin team got up from the table, Draco lagging behind just a bit as they approached the Gryffindor tower.

“See you out there, Potter.” He spat, making it sound like the heaviest insult.

“No, you won’t, Malfoy.” Harry smirked. “I’ll be too quick for you.”

Draco scoffed, eyes crinkling and his mouth twisted in effort not to smile. He left, nothing more said, glancing over his shoulder one last time before he followed his teammates out the door.

“Right, you lot. If Slytherin are on their way out, we should be, too.” Oliver declared, and the lot of them got up and headed out.

With nothing else to do in the meantime, the other five followed, figuring it better to be around the pitch than waiting for the game to start inside.

June 9th, 1994

In the morning, during breakfast, Aurora found a strange sight: her mother’s owl heading to her father. He took the parchment from the beautiful bird, scratched its head and gave it a good-sized portion of bacon before it took off. She watched him read the note, frowning. He raised his head, but instead of looking at her, he took in the sight of Hermione Granger. He stared for an abnormally long time before he rose to his feet. Instead of heading out through the teacher’s entrance, he walked
down the length of the Gryffindor table, silencing everyone as he passed.

He stopped before her, glancing at Hermione briefly before he met his daughter’s gaze.

“Good luck, Aurora.” He said simply, patting her shoulder.

She felt something slip under the shoulder of her robes but did her best not to react.

“Thank you, Professor Snape.” She said, and he gave her the closest thing he ever gave to a smile in the view of the student body.

She waited until she and Ginny got up to head to their exam and made the action of adjusting her bag cover for her retrieving the slip of parchment from beneath her robes. She kept it clenched in her fist until they made it to the transfiguration exam. Before she had to tuck everything else away, she unfolded the note.

In her mother’s hand, it read, “It’s time to say goodbye, but I think goodbyes are sad and I’d much rather say hello. Hello to a new adventure.”*

She looked up to Professor McGonagall as she walked into the room, and watched her slow her step as she, too, read a parchment of paper. She came to a stop, put her hand on her mouth, and froze. She seemed to think on something, much like her father did, except she smiled as the glint of joyful tears lit up her eyes.

“You’ll have one hour.” She said, a slight catch to her commanding voice. “Begin.”

June 10th, 1994

Aurora couldn’t sleep. Hadn’t slept, she supposed, now that she noted the sun was coming up.

There was a tangible absence she hadn’t expected when she realized Hermione Granger was gone. She figured that it had happened at some point last night after her father bolted from the sitting room after looking out the window, demanding she remain where she was. When he returned, he was exhausted, annoyed, and was mumbling about flooing her mother over what she could have possibly been thing three hours and twenty years ago. She took that as her cue to leave.

But in the common room, waiting for a sign of anyone or anything to mark the first real revelations that she was gone, she sort of wished she’d stayed with her Dad. She never knew what they had planned to tell people, if anything.

“Rory?” Ginny said as she came down stairs, rubbing her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

She shrugged.

“Have you seen my brother, or ‘Mione or Harry?”

She shook her head.

Ginny shrugged as well and then plopped on the sofa beside her. “At least we don’t have exams today. I imagine your Dad will be really busy, marking and all. Probably wouldn’t want to supervise a match or anything, do you think?”
“Ever feel like all we ever do is school work and play quidditch?” Aurora remarked.

“Sometimes. But who knows, maybe next year will be better. I mean, I wasn’t possessed by a book, and we didn’t almost bring back You-Know-Who. Gotta be a record for Harry.

Aurora gave a snort at that, and then agreed to a game of wizard chess with Ginny once the latter was showered and ready for the day.

Time passed quicker than Aurora was expecting, her mind already adjusting to the fact that she no longer had to watch everything she said about her mother. She was near smiling when the portrait hole opened and revealed Harry and Ron, looking about the room with worry and confusion.

“Has anyone seen Hermione?” Harry asked. “We haven’t seen her since last night.”

———H———-

It was just past midnight when she heard the thud outside, the strange squawk of a Hippogriff and the pleases of silence outside the back door. Some safe house, Hermione had thought, considering it was in a muggle neighborhood. How did Albus really think he could explain a convict wanted for murder riding on the back of a giant horse like bird? She rolled her eyes and shook her head before taking a sip of her tea.

She waited for the door to open, adopting a bit of her husband’s flair for the dramatics, and then wandlessly and wordlessly lit the candles in the kitchen.

Sirius froze, taking the stance of a duelist despite not having a wand, and appearing too weak to be able to do much than shoot sparks. Hermione took another sip of her tea as she allowed Sirius to process what he was seeing. He frowned deeply, a ‘V’ forming on the bridge of his nose. “Kitten?” He asked.

“No one’s called me that in thirteen years.” She replied, getting to her feet. “Or, some four hours ago. Hard to recall, precisely, and I doubt Severus is going to want to go into details. He’s quite cross, though I’m not sure why. It’s been about twenty years since I did what he’s accusing me of.” She smiled, feeling a freedom she hadn’t in so long. Speaking about what ever to whomever was wonderful, even if there were still slight flutters.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for the explanation. It’s been … there’s been too much that’s happened tonight.”

“Sit,” She said, moving toward him. “I have food for you, that should-”

Sirius cut her off by throwing his arms around her and holding her tightly. “It’s good to see you.” He said, placing his head on her shoulder.

“You’ve looked better.” She smirked.

“Perhaps,” Sirius said as he leaned back. “But I still look better than your husband.”

“And you still won’t win me over.”

“And I still have no interest in you in that way.” He said with a wink before hobbling to the table.
“So, Severus still believes I tried to kill him back in the day?”

Hermione shook her head. “Probably not at this point. He didn’t truly believe it until … well, when you were sent to Azkaban, and they all thought you had been the secret keeper all along.”

“And you didn’t?” He asked as she opened the ice box and brought out a plate of leftovers from her own meal with Leo earlier in the day. “You knew it was Peter and not me?”

“I knew a lot of things,” She said, putting the plate in front of Sirius and casting a quick warming charm over it. “You must recall the ‘attacks’ I would have now and then? I was oath bound not to say a word of what I did know.” She said at Sirius’s nod of acknowledgment, too busy shoving food in his mouth to speak properly.

He was nearly half done in record time before he asked, “And now you’re not?”

“No,” She said. “At least as far as I know.”

“So, you could tell me how I saw you in the shack, but you’re here all grown up and still lovely?”

“Yes,” She said, “but you already said you weren’t ready for it tonight.”

“That I’m not.” He said, taking another few bites. “So, what happens now?”

“Now,” she said with a grin, “now I do something for you and for Harry. And, truth be told, for Lily and James as well.”

“Which is?” Sirius asked as he finished his meal.

Hermione smiled wickedly. “Now, I do a bit of paperwork, make things official, and insure that Harry Potter never steps foot in the Dursley’s home again.”

June 12th, 1994

“I’m worried.” Harry said as they sat under a tree, staring out over the black lake. “It’s been three days since anyone has seen or heard from her.”

“But didn’t Dumbledore say not to worry? That she was right where she needed to be?” Ron asked.

“Do you trust everything the old codger says blindly?” Draco asked, lobbing the grass he’d been plucking absentmindedly picking at Ron. “Where she needs to be almost sounds like a threat, considering what you knuckleheads were up to.”

“That’s right! I didn’t see you going to see Hagrid when he needed friends.” Ron countered.

“Probably because I wasn’t able to leave the Slytherin common room.” He shot back. “Post-exam party going on, would have looked odd if I chose not to partake.”

“He has a point,” Ginny said.
“How so?” Ron countered.

“We all knew you three were up to something when you didn’t come by for our own party last night.” She countered. “Neville sort of just rolled his eyes when asked where you were. ‘End of the year, some out doing something dangerous,’ I believe were his exact words.”

“He wasn’t wrong,” Harry mused.

There was a chirp from an owl, and all of them looked up to see a small, brown bird, followed by an equally small grey one, land by Harry’s feet. The brown one looked quite pleased with himself as he held out his foot for Harry to take the letter. The grey one waited patiently beside the brown one, then took off when Harry gathered its bit of parchment from him. The brown one remained.

“This one’s from Sirius,” He said, a mix of happiness and disappointment in his voice as he unrolled the scroll. “Harry, it will be out in the prophet soon, but with the help of a few, old friends, I was cleared of the murder charges against me. They are considering the twelve years I spent there as time served for the crimes I could not be absolved from. I will not be able to walk the world in quite the manner I had before, but to know I can, that I do not have to look over my shoulder, it wonderful.

“There is another aspect of my freedom that I think we’ll both enjoy: my guardian ship over you. I will must be honored where ever possible, and since Lily and James had said I was to take you in the event of their death, and raise you with the help of … I don’t think you want to know, but the point is, as I am no longer considered a criminal under the eyes of the Wizengot, that will is being honored. Your Aunt and Uncle have been informed, and upon your arrival at the station, you will come home with me.

“I look forward to seeing you under better circumstances, and to hear how you like the Firebolt I sent you.”

When Harry finished reading, he was beaming.

“Who would be helping Sirius that he wouldn’t want you to know about?” Ron asked. “Lupin? ‘Cause, yeah, he’s a werewolf, but he’s also a great guy otherwise.”

“Does it matter? I never need to go back to the Dursleys again. Brilliant!”

Aurora looked to Draco, seeing the ghost of a smile on the blonde’s lips.

“Well, what about the other one?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t know. But there’s a PS, here, Ron. He says you can keep the owl since, well, you know.” Harry said. The little bird hopped over to Ron.

“Is it actually a bird, though?” He asked, eyeing him up.

“What are the chances it’s another animagus?” Harry countered.

“We’ll know if that mangy orange cat that Granger had starts trying to kill it.” Draco had said as he laid back on the grass, hands behind his head. He tensed a moment, glancing to Aurora. She looked to the others, Ginny, Harry, and Ron all looking uneasy again, sad and worried.

No mentioned how Crookshanks was still lurking about the castle, and only Aurora knew he was essentially a resident in her father’s chambers. The sight of the half-kneazle only reminded the others of what was missing.
“Well, what was your other letter?” Ginny asked, trying to lift the melancholy with forced enthusiasm. “I mean, it’s great you get to be with Sirius, but still.”

Harry set aside his missive from Sirius and took up the other. He stilled, staring at the address with something near panic. Ron looked over his shoulder, and his eyes widened.

“‘Mione! It’s from ‘Mione!” He exclaimed, half reaching for the letter.

Harry shifted it out of the way. “It is,” He said, “but the writing is a bit different”. He opened it up, scanning it before reading it out loud. “Harry, I assume you’re with the others when you read this, so please feel free to share it.

“I am well. I understand that I likely gave you lot quite a fright having disappeared so suddenly. You see, when I turned in the Time Turner to Professor McGonagall….”

At this, Draco bolted up, looking at the letter with something akin to horror, and perhaps annoyance that of all the reasons he could have come up with, he never would have expected that was how she went back in time.

Harry kept reading.

“…. there was someone there from the Ministry’s department of international relations in her office. It seems my parents were being relocated to the States, and since I am underage, I had to go with them. They’ve arranged for me to attend Ilvermorny and were simply waiting for me to finish my exams before being told. My parents didn’t wish for me to have the added stress.

“I am sorry I could not inform you sooner. It was all such a rush, packing my things and having to leave so quick. I will write often, as much as I can. Hedwig will know where to find me, so you can keep me informed of everything.

“Tell Draco that, if he’s serious about this tentative truce and possible allegiance, he’ll need to be the brain I once was. Don’t look like that, Ron. I know you’re reading over Harry’s shoulder. While you can both be quite intelligent when you try, you need someone more logical. And, someone who will not allow you to copy their homework. Tell Gin, Rory, and Luna I will miss them, and they can write me when they need to as well.

“I will miss you dearly but do hope to see you again soon.

“Sincerely, Hermione.”

There was silence among them, no one seeming to know what to say.

It stayed that way until Ron’s stomach grumbled, and the five of them went back to the school for some lunch. And, perhaps, a trip to the library, because that’s what Hermione would do.

*Quote by Ernie Harwell
The Headmaster’s office had never been the headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix, or even one of its meeting places. But what was left of the original group was crammed in there none the less.

Molly and Arthur sat on a sofa with Minerva beside them. Sirius was in a chair with Lupin standing behind it, the former still not quite as strong as he ought to be after the dementors and eating too little over the years, and the then the months of his escape. Alastor Moody stood by the window, his back to it, walking stick in hand.

It always broke Hermione’s heart just a bit to see the fierce wizard being so patched together, but it only proved how much of a survivor he was.

Her husband stood at the mantel, turned away and appearing bored, but listening attentively. Just beside him was Kingsley Shacklebolt, looking as though he felt he had no need to be there, and he likely didn’t. But there were so few of them left after the first war….

“Mrs Snape,” Albus said in his kindly way that was always a form of condescension. “While I think it’s fantastic that you’ve managed to get Sirius down to, what did you call it? ‘Time Served’? As brilliant as that is, Harry cannot be allowed to go to Grimmauld Place when the school year is done.”

“Sirius is Harry’s legal and rightful guardian under the eyes of the Ministry.” Hermione argued, fighting the urge to pull the papers from her bag and shoving them in the old man’s face. “And since he is a wizard as opposed to a muggle, it’s actually considered for the best to have Harry relocated to be with him.”

“For the best, but not the greater good.”

“How so?” She countered. “Sirius has done no wrong except to try and avenge his friends. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that I am not the only one in this room who knew Sirius had not been secret keeper before Lily and James were killed.”

All eyes went to Severus, and he seemed to sense it.

“I believed Black to be the reason they perished as much as any of you. I think who my wife is referring to is actually our esteemed leader.” He said casually, and Hermione was quite close to snickering.

The room looked to Dumbledore who had the good sense to change the way he grinned and appeared to look contrite. “I confess, Lily and James did admit to their wanting to change their secret keeper, going with the suggestion Sirius made of Peter. However, I did not feel the need to inform the order of the status change, as their location was to be unknown by all.”
“And yet with a bit ‘o disclosure, Sirius coulda had a proper trial.” Minerva pointed out. “He’d have
gone to Azkaban still, but not for so long.”

“And maybe Harry could have gone with him when he was released?” Molly had added.

Dumbledore shook his head. “No, I’m afraid. It is imperative that Harry always returns to the home
of his Aunt.”

“And why is that?” Sirius asked bitterly.

“Peter has escaped us, and is no doubt already trying to find a way to bring back Voldemort,”
Dumbledore explained, and Severus hissed at the mention, clutching his left arm. “Pardon me,
Severus. Tom.” Severus rolled his eyes, massaging his arm, as he drifted closer to his wife.

“I hate to point this out,” Remus stared, “But there were others who tried before him. In this very
school. I must confess that Harry has told me much during our evening chats, and it seems this was
his only year in Hogwarts not facing down You-Know- Who in some way or another.”

“Thank you,” Severus murmured from over her shoulder, and Remus gave the slightest of nods.

Dumbledore sighed, “It is, unfortunately, true. But that was not what we were discussing. It is
imperative for Harry to return to the Dursley’s because of the blood ward, the protection Lily Potter
cast when she jumped between Harry and Tom.”

“Blood ward?” Severus said condescendingly. “As in the bond of blood?”

“Indeed, I do.” Dumbledore said.

“Then you’re a fool if you think that was protecting Potter all these years later. It was likely the fact
that he was in the muggle world that kept him safe, and now that he has been reintroduced to our
world, it’s null.”

“Severus, you know that magic like that cannot be broken easily.” Dumbledore said as he glanced to
Severus’ arm. “The bond of protection is carried through the sister, in this case, Petunia Dursley. She
took him in, and so the charm took.”

“But she did so unwillingly.” Hermione said, feeling the attention back on her.

“He was her sisters child, and left on her doorstep, she took him in willingly.” Dumbledore said with
certainty.

“No, I’m quite sure she didn’t,” Hermione retorted.

“I’d have to agree with H, Albus.” Minerva said. “I was there, much as you told me not to be. I
watched her open the door, shriek, curse as she realized that the milkman had already been by.”

“But she took him in.” Dumbledore said with that twinkle in his eye.

“Just because we do something does not mean we do it willingly.” Remus noted.

“Petunia Dursley has always been about her image.” Severus said. “In fact, I believe the only season
she let me in her door was because the sight of me on the doorstep would have had the neighbors
talking.” He said, catching Hermione’s eye as she frowned. “Yes, Dear?” he asked.

“When did you got to the Dursleys?” She asked, partly amused by her husband’s antics, but more
curious as to why she never knew this before.
He bowed his head. “It was … after the funeral.” He said softly. “I’d taken Aurora, as you were ….”

“I remember,” she said softly, recalling how James and Lily were not their only losses that night.

Severus nodded. “She was not pleased to see me, less so that I hadn’t come for Potter, and that I had my own child with me. I’d gone to warn her that Potter had best arrive at Hogwarts healthy and well cared for. I doubt she listened, considering he was as small as I was when I started.”

Molly was gearing up to rant on Harry’s need for a good filling out when she was cut off by an eerily calm, “How did you get in?”

Everyone turned back to Dumbledore. There was no glint in his eye, no smile twisting his lips. His hands were flat on the desk instead of folded, his back straight in his chair.

“I knocked, she answered.” Severus replied.

“Your Dark Mark shouldn’t have allowed you near the threshold.” Dumbledore said, his voice going deeper with rage.

“Ah, he finally gets it.” Severus said, taking one step away from Hermione’s chair. “Blood wards, unless laden with Dark Magic, are not guaranteed. They rely a great deal on intent, and Petunia Dursley had no intent on keeping Potter within her home.”

“There was a letter left with Harry, explaining it all.”

“And that was your way of sneaking him in the house? A letter? And did you think your words were suddenly going to soften that cold heart and have her embrace him as one of her own? She despised her sister because of a fluke in nature that gave her magic. Lily and I were freaks at every turn, and she refused to attend her Lily’s wedding because she was marrying a wizard. She’d have been surrounded by them.” Severus suddenly calmed, a thoughtful look replacing the bitterness. “Has anyone asked Potter what his home life was like. He looked to Hermione. “You can speak freely now, can you not? Do you remember?”

“Why do you think I was so intent on working Sirius’ case?” She asked, not wanting to test her newfound freedom in front of the man who took it away for twenty years.

“The boys had said that they were starving him, putting bars on his windows.” Molly said, wringing her hands. “And last year, when we met up with him in Diagon Alley, I overheard him telling the children why he ran off.”

“Best that we go through with H’s plan, Dumbledore.” Alastor said, nodding in her direction while he looked to Albus. “Grimmauld’s secret kept, and it woulda kept working for the Potters if Pettigrew weren’t the rat he is.”

“Literally,” Sirius grumbled.

“And I trust, Albus, that you aren’t going to share its location with anyone of questionable nature?” Minerva asked, and Hermione nearly giggled at the way she arched her brow and crossed her arms, staring down the much older wizard as though she were his mother.

“No, my dear, on that you can trust.” Dumbledore’s placid smile returned, and he eased back in his chair. “It seems that I have been overruled, as it were. I will concede that, perhaps, the blood bond was not as strong as I thought. Harry may go with Sirius so long as it is kept to those in this room.”

“No,” Arthur said. “I believe it is best his friends know as well.”
Dumbledore hesitated.

“What’s the matter?” Alastor asked.

Severus growled, “Why it’s the same issue he had twenty years ago: a snake among the lions.”

“Oh,” Remus said with a hint of darkness, Sirius looking between the two men before looking at Hermione with confusion.

“A snake?” Arthur asked.

“Draco Malfoy has been making nice with Potter since the beginning of the year, when he can, anyway.” Severus replied.

“You realize that Harry’ll tell them anyway.” Sirius said. “Regardless who they are, he’s going to tell his friends he’s living with me. How else will he be able to keep in touch with them over the summer? And wouldn’t his Aunt and Uncle give up the snitch the second one of them tried to contact him? That will just lead to panic among them.”

“And without Hermione’s influence, it’s likely they’ll charge off in search.” Molly sighed. “I’m going to miss that girl, she was good for them.”

“Can’t miss her too much.” Sirius remarked, receiving a cuff on the head from Remus.

“With Grimmauld place being secret kept, and only those who know where it is are able to find it, so long as the exact location is not disclosed to the children, would that suffice?” Severus asked the room in general. “Letters addressed to Harry Potter, Grimmauld Place, will still arrive, and he may floo to and from the Burrow without issue, I’m sure.”


Severus smirked, “He’s not foolish enough to extend or request an invitation.”

“Then I think we’ve settled it.” Alastor said.

“I believe we have, so long as those in this room are completely comfortable with the changes? I would hate for something to happen and come to find out someone was not on board with the changes we’ve made to Harry’s life.”

Blissfully, no one said anything. No one even flinched. Hermione was pleased to know that Harry’s choice in friends was not going to overshadow or sway the popular opinion that he needed to be away from the Dursley’s.

“Then since we are all in agreement, we should have some refreshments. The elves made a splendid lemon cake for dinner, I’m sure there should be plenty left over.”

April 4th, 1976
“We should schedule it,” Hermione said thoughtfully as she sat on the floor with her head against Severus’s leg. She was surrounded by parchment, text books, her planner, and various colored inks, her disaster far too great to be contained to the couch where he was pleased to simply sit and make notes in his books, his ink floating off to his left, a second textbook doing the same near his head.

“Schedule what?” he asked absently, trying to see a downside to crushing a sopophoros bean rather than slicing it.

“The day you take my virginity,” Hermione said, and he nearly struck through the entire page with his green ink. He gaped at her, seeing she was carrying on her exam prep as if she merely asked him when he’d like to stop for tea.

“Shall we color code it as well?” He asked, seeing if she would realize how absurd she was being.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” She said before huffing. “No, I can’t study Arithmancy at the same time as runes.” She said to herself, making a quick scratch with her quill over her schedules’ first draft.

Severus continued to stare at the back of her head, wondering if maybe the pressure of exams was already starting to get to her head.

Admittedly, they had been getting closer to such an event than either of them had anticipated. While time alone was scarce with not just Lily, but Lupin and Black always seeming to find their way to where they were, the time they did have together was used well. Hogsmeade was always a date, and there were times when Severus would rather brew, or Hermione would rather read. But when they were feeling very much like normal teenagers deeply in love (though it had yet to be actually said), they were quite physical. It was about two months after Severus’ birthday when the first article of clothing was removed, and two weeks after that when they mapped one another’s bodies with a full view of the landscape.

He’d hated the experience, and hoped he never had to do it with anyone else again. Not because he didn’t like what he saw, he was pretty sure that there was nothing better in the world than the sight and feel of Hermione. It was his baring to her that he loathed. She may have seen him without a shirt over the summer, but it had been hot and miserable and he didn’t much care when he was certain she had no attraction to him to begin with. But fearing losing her attention when he bore himself, the scars on his legs and back from a rough childhood, had had him ruin most of the moments they had together. They would get to his disrobing and he’d find himself hiding behind his occlumency shields. An argument would always ensue, same things said on both sides, and then they would redress and focus on scholarly things while pointedly not speaking to one another.

It was always during these moments the others would find them, Black only gaining access to the lab when he swore he wouldn’t breathe a word to the other two.

But after each first baring, the second was easier, and now if they were naked he no longer thought of what she might think, he merely thought of her.

And intercourse was the last thing they had yet to broach, and while he admittedly initiated some of the activities beforehand (by her agreement only), he wasn’t about to ask for that. He was perfectly content with all the other stuff they were doing.
Severus tried to understand why she was being the way she was, and when he simply couldn’t understand, he said. “Hermione, I’m not sure I understand you.”

She looked up at him, a wicked smirk coming to her face. “I wish for you, Severus Snape, to make love to me. But we should decide the best time in which to do so.”

“Why?” he asked, still not sure he understood where it was coming from. “All the other moments of intimacy we’ve had have been spontaneous.”

“I’ve received dozens of letters from Delia since Oliver was born,” She said, throwing him for a loop. “She carries on about how wonderful he is, and beautiful, and how she is so pleased to finally be a mother. But there are moments where she seems to have spaced out or dozed off. Lines on the parchment or blots of ink. And she tends to repeat herself. As wonderful as I’m sure motherhood is, I’m hardly ready for it. I am, however quite ready to express my affection to you physically. As talented as you are, I need more.” She said with a blush.

Severus smirked, straightening his tie and sitting a bit taller.

“I could ask Madam Pomfery for the charm, but I’ve researched the best methods of contraceptive in the wizarding world, and the potion in considered the most reliable.”

“And you want me to have adequate time to brew it.” He said with understanding.

She smiled, “I have no doubt that it’s not coincidence that the fourth through seventh year potion kits have all the ingredients to make the potion. And to find the recipe would be easy enough.”

“I could just brew it ahead of time.” He said. “It keeps for six months, I believe.”

“I suppose that could work,” She said thoughtfully. She sighed, and then looked at the papers spread around her. “But it would be quite nice to know. I mean, what if we decide to do so in the middle of exam time?”

Severus gave a loud “Ha” which earned him an angry yet confused glare from his love. “Hermione, I am already aware that there likely won’t be so much as a hug during the exams. It is our O.W.L.S., after all, and seeing as how you were a terror the year before with just basic end of year testing, I am fairly certain I will not find you attractive in that fashion for first two weeks of June.”

“Thank you for that, Severus.” She grumbled, her voice going high as it often did when she was miffed with him.

He loved it. He loved provoking her in small little ways, and it didn’t take him long to realize he always had. From their earlier, barely existent friendship, he loved goading Hermione just enough to see her flustered. It was far too early to think such things, but he thought it anyway: he wanted to fluster her for the rest of their lives.

There was a loud knock on the door. “Clothes on! We’re coming in in Five,” Black shouted through the door, and Severus waved his wand at it before the idiot could get to four.

Black took in the scene around them and sighed. “Blimey, you two are the most boring people in a relationship I have ever encountered. You’re always so proper. Where’s the fun?” Black asked as he hopped up on to a table top, grinning mischievously.

“Not everyone feels the need to be naked all the time, Sirius.” Lupin said with a sigh, offering an apologetic smile to Hermione before sitting by Severus.
He looked at the door. “Lily’s not coming?”

“She, umm, had a date.” Lupin said, glancing at Black.

“Did she finally accept a date from James?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Lupin sighed.

“Which is precisely why I’m here with Moony and not tagging around with the much more exciting two. James is in a snit, Lily is currently wandering the grounds with a Hufflepuff. Don’t know his name, think he’s a seventh year. Looks ….” At this Black got noticeably uncomfortable.

“He looks like you, Severus. With glasses.” Lupin said.

“And clean hair.” Black inputted swiftly.

“Unnecessary, Padfoot.” Lupin sighed.

“Do I dare ask why you are called such foolish names among yourselves?” Severus asked, seeing Hermione tense out of the corner of his eye. So, there was something significant about the names. Did she know them, too?

“Just names we came up with. Some have deeper meaning than others.” He sized Severus up. “If I were to give you a name, something no one would relate to you, I would pick….”

“Padfoot,” Lupin said in warning.

“Snake.” Black said with what Tobias would refer to as a shit-eating grin.

“How original.” Severus sneered.

“Well, let’s see you come up with something better.” Black sat straight, folding his arms.

“Prince.” Hermione said. “For your mother.”

“Well I would never associate ‘Prince’ with you.” Black said. He then frowned. “Wait, Prince. That’s an old wizarding name. You’re half-blood?”

“Yes. A half-blood Prince, if you will.” Severus rolled his eyes. “Though only if my mother sheds her husband’s name and reclaims hers.”

“Huh,” Black said. “Interesting. Wormtail thought you were muggleborn.”

“Did it make a difference?” Severus asked, feeling Hermione’s hand snake up his pant leg in a sign of comfort. “The four of you thinking I was less than all of you? Is that why you were so keen on making my life hell? I existed?”

“No,” Black said vehemently.

“Yes,” Lupin said. “But not in that way. It had nothing to do with blood status.”

“Social status, then.” Hermione spoke up. “After all, I boarded the train in hand-me-downs as well, but from a middle-class family. I didn’t bare a muggle name, but a wizarding one that hasn’t been heard in Britain for some time. It never occurred to you lot that I might be poor, or -.” She was cut off abruptly, and Severus was on his knees turning her head to look at her. Her eyes locked on his and soothed her back until she breathed easier.
“Blimey, are you alright?” Black asked, he and Lupin having gotten up at some point.

“She’s fine,” Severus said as Hermione ducked her head and rested it against his chest. “An attack is all.”

“What is causing that?” Lupin asked. “This is the second one she’s had this year.”

“It’s nothing.” Hermione managed to say, lifting her head to wave off the Gryffindors. “I get them from time to time. Always have.”

“And there’s no cure for it?” Lupin asked.

“Only time,” Hermione replied, and he held her just a bit more snugly. He wondered to himself how much time she would need, the image of himself he glimpsed fuzzy at best and fading from his own memory. He knew he was older, he just didn’t know by how much. He just hoped she wouldn’t have to wait too long.

June 13th, 1976

He just needs time, Hermione thought to herself. He just needs time to processes, and then things will be fine.

And she really, really wanted to believe that.

It had been three days since the fateful event that should have been one of the most special days of their lives, of their relationship, and Hermione hadn’t heard a word from Severus since.

They had planned, in the end, for the day of their last exam to be the day that there was nothing left between them. Hermione had no reason to believe that Severus and she would be a permanent fixture, and sometimes the thought of his sneer or the insults he made as a professor filled her mind and had her doubt that he would ever look back on their time together fondly. Doubt that whatever his assumptions, he would come to hate her for all she knew. Yet she could honestly not picture her life without him, she didn’t want to. So, the decision to throw caution to the wind and give Severus all her firsts was an easy one. She loved him, she was very certain he loved her, and when she looked back on the moment of her first time, that was what she wanted to remember.

But they hadn’t actually gotten that far.

In fact, they hadn’t even gotten undressed.

They met in his lab, pleased with how exams went and took the time to share what they thought of them. He kissed her, and she kissed him, and before anything else could happen, he handed her the potion. Pink, slightly glittery, smelling of mint and perfectly brewed. She swallowed the whole thing in one gulp and smiled with nerves and giddiness at what was expected to come next.

Then things got fuzzy. The room spun, and Severus panicked.

She had remembered the sensation of something small and hard being shoved down her throat right
before he picked her up and ran to the infirmary. In the daze, two Madam Pomfrey’s told three
Severus’ that Hermione was having an allergic reaction. There was another potion, and that helped
wash down the bezoar, and the world slowly began to right itself.

Severus left shortly after seeing she was okay and didn’t return.

“He brewed it perfectly,” Madam Pomfery had told her. “Which, sadly, is more than I can say for
most. Many just end up coming to me because they’re too worried of what might happen otherwise.”
She sighed. “But I’m afraid that there’s no alternative for you, potion’s wise. Something in the potion
you’re allergic to. You’ve had pain relief, Pepper up, and a calming draught with no side effects, so
I’m going to guess it may be the laserwort you’re allergic to. The only thing that I can do is teach you
the charm. It has to be done before hand, and only lasts three hours at most. If not done right, it won’t
work at all.”

She was released from the hospital wing after the Matron had been assured she got it right, and
Hermione had returned to the lab only to find him missing.

She went back the next morning, and again in the afternoon, and hadn’t found him. She knew he had
been there, as there was a cauldron simmering low with something inside that smelled sort of like his
pain potion, but with something else she couldn’t quite place. He had his books lying about, and his
notes, and on one of the desks he’d penned and SS on the surface. She took her quill out,
adding &HG to it. She then took a bit of blank parchment and drew and arrow, making it point to
their initials before she left.

Hermione had spent the next twenty-four hours with the girls from Gryffindor, Marlene and Lily
finally making peace. When she returned to the lab, he still wasn’t there, but beneath their initials was
a filigree scroll. Beside it, written on the back of the parchment with the arrow was a simple Sorry in
Severus’ hand. She replied with Don’t Be and left.

Now she was out beneath the tree by the lake, watching as the marauders, Lily, and Marlene tried to
coax the Giant Squid up to play. She had been to the lab, found no more notes, nor their missives
from the day before, and still no Severus. She wanted to head to the dungeons and seek him out, but
she knew better.

Part of her raged, much like she had after their failed venture into Legilimency with Moody. Another
part had rationalized that Severus just had to work through it on his own. He had disappeared after
Lily had hurt him and seemed as though that had been his plans before she encountered him on her
birthday.

Instead of trying to find him, or join the others by the lake, she took out her copy of Jane Eyre,
picking up where she left off. The scent from the pressed flowers and herbs still lingered in the
pages, and if she put her nose to the crease and breathed deep, Hermione could gather them all in a
single sniff. She got comfortable, diving into the story, getting lost in Jane’s plight rather than her
own.

She had no idea how much time passed, but she eventually sensed Severus beside her.

She knew it was him without even looking up, having the advantage of knowing him longer than he
had her. But instead of talking, she turned the page and kept reading, albeit only with partial
attention. She spoke first last time, he would be the one to bridge the silence this go.

He sat beside her, and Hermione nearly vibrated with having him so near yet refusing to touch him.

“It seems,” he started, hands reaching for the grass and plucking. “That, be it my intention or not, I
keep trying to kill you.”

Hermione snorted, then chuckled while still trying very hard not to look at Severus.

“You’re not to blame this time, you know.” She said to the pages of her book.

“No? It was my potion.”

“Which you brewed perfectly.” She countered.

“How could that be if your eyes were rolling in the back of your head, and I had to shove a bezoar down your throat?”

“Allergy,” She finally looked at him, seeing the dubious expression on his face and nearly laughing at it. “It’s true. Madam Pomfery figures it’s the laserwort seeing as how I have no complications with so many other potions.”

He furrowed his brow. “Which means that there is no known contraceptive potion you can take.” He said thoughtfully.

“She taught me the charm,” She said, earning a hum of assertion, but she could already see that his mind was focusing on ingredients and recipes. She shook her head, a swell of adoration and admiration washing over her. Hermione scooted on the grass, saw he was still too far into his mind to really notice what she was up to, and decided resting against his leg was in order.

She settled with her book, content with the closeness that she’d missed for these last three days, wondering idly to herself if she would understand the workings of a Slytherin mind. Or, at the very least, Severus’. Eventually she was focused on the story again, noting absently that Severus had gotten something from her bag, that he shifted the leg she was not using as a pillow.

“Oh, Merlin, they’re made for each other,” Sirius’ voice teased. Hermione peeked over, seeing his shaking his head. Remus was smirking, Lily a little forlorn, and Peter and James utterly neutral.

She went to look to Severus but was distracted by the book and inkwell floating above her head. He was jotting things down on parchment propped against his leg, tapping his ink stained finger against his lip as he frowned in thought.

“Perhaps we are,” She mused, returning to her book. She felt Severus’ fingers in her hair, then tangle in them.

“Atrocious,” he muttered under his breath, but even as he managed to get them out of his curls, he dove right back in. And while it was, perhaps, not a conventional way to make up, or reconcile, or whatever it was they needed to do, Hermione was pleased with how they were going about it.

July 3rd, 1976

———S———

Severus vaguely wondered what his mother would say if she knew where he was at the moment, considering a year ago she hounded him relentlessly from down the hall when he and Hermione
were in separate beds. He was, after all, sleeping in a tent enchanted so the night sky could be seen through roof. Hermione was curled against him, head on his bare chest, wearing his t-shirt and not much more. He wasn’t fully clothed himself, and it had nothing to do with the heat of summer for it wasn’t all that warm.

In the distance, coming from an open window in the house, was the cries of a colicky Oliver McGonagall. It was because of him Delia had recommended he and Hermione sleep outside when they could, and also why he wanted to be absolutely sure Hermione knew the charm that would prevent his needing to deal with that sound on a regular basis before he was mentally prepared to do so. He was putting his trust in his loves abilities until he himself could figure out how work a potion that wouldn’t send her straight to the hospital wing. At least, Severus thought, he knew she was a capable witch and he could trust her with such matters. After all, her future would be too bright and brilliant to miss out on because of pregnancy, and his was looking pretty good as well.

In fact, it was looking so well, he was often filled with a sense of foreboding when it came to mind.

He was in love, and was loved, by a beautiful witch. They never said the words outright, though he was sure they’d both allowed them to slip out in heated whispers earlier when they made love for the first time. That morning, among the owl mail, was the journal containing his essay on pain relief enhancements. In said same journal, were two notes from Masters in the field praising such insight into fertility potions and wondering how such an adjustment hadn’t made its way through the community beforehand.

Severus had friends, even if one pined for his Hermione, and the other pretended to do the same over him. The bullies that once made his life miserable were not at least at peace with him.

It was only a matter of time before the other shoe dropped.

He knew it was coming. As sure as the nose on his face, Severus knew that the tide was about to turn against him. Life was too good, too fair at the moment. If there was one thing Tobias taught him, it was that life was not fair.

June 17th, 1994

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Hermione stood nervously outside the brownstone she hadn’t seen in twenty years. In a park down the street and around the corner, her husband and two children waited for word as to whether or not it was a good idea to come over. At her side, Minerva attempted to reassure her with a squeeze of her arm, but Hermione couldn’t settle. She was near hyperventilating, terrified of what was to come, but knowing it had to.

“Are you ready?” Min asked, and Hermione shook her head. Minerva laughed, “Can’t put it off, dear. Tomorrow they’d go to the station and expect to find you as you were. You’ll cause them more grief if you don’t do it now.”

“I know, I know.” Hermione said, shaking out her hands as if it would make a difference. She huffed a breath, then tried to inhale deeply. “I’ve known you longer than I’ve known them at this point. And Severus. It’s just … I don’t know how this is going to go, and you know how much I hate not knowing.”
“Get used to it dear,” Minerva said as she rang the doorbell. “For the first time in twenty years, you’re as clueless as the rest of us.”

There was movement inside, and Hermione held her breath as a silhouette appeared behind the frosted window, and Hermione turned around before the opened door could reveal her mother to her.

“Professor … McGonagall, wasn’t it?” Helen Granger’s polite voice asked. “What can I do for you?”

“Hello, Dr Granger. I wish I was here with some pleasant news. I’m afraid there’s been a bit of an accident with Hermione.”

“Accident?” John Granger’s voice joined the fray, and Hermione shut her eyes at the pain the familiar worry caused. “What sort of accident?”

“Hermione?” Her mother asked, and she lifted her head in response, though didn’t turn around. “Hermione, what happened? Poppet?”

A choked sob stuck in Hermione’s throat as tears tickled her eyes. She had forgotten that her mother would sometimes call her that and realized quite suddenly that that was why she had called Rory the same.

Wiping at her face, Hermione had one last sniff before she turned to face her parents.

They didn’t look so old anymore. But then again, they were physically just over a decade her senior now. In some ways, it shocked her that her perception of them would change so sharply, even though the memory of them was not far off.

They stared, terror and shock splayed over their features.

“It’s a bit of a long story,” She said, trying her best to smile even just a fraction. “You may want to sit down for it.”

It was her father that nodded first, waving them in as Helen remained stunned for a few seconds longer before running off to the kitchen to make tea.

As John brought them into the living room, Hermione took in her surrounds. It was all very much the same: neat, minimal, near show room in design. But, she supposed, they were never really home, and she no longer (and would never again) took up residence with them. She wandered, for a moment, to the mantel to see the pictures on top. Seeing her younger self, she could say that Aurora was a true blend of she and Severus and had been right from birth. She also knew that the only thing Leo had inherited from her was his eyes.

“So,” Helen said as she brought a tea tray into the room and set it on the coffee table. She brushed her hands on her trousers and took in the sight of Hermione.

Hair down, dressed in a thin sweater and trousers, she could pass for muggle if it weren’t for the dragon hide boots.

“It’s a long story,” Hermione said again, gesturing for her mother to join her father on the sofa. She then sat down in a chair next to Minerva’s as Helen went about preparing the tea. “And I should warn you now that … that in no way does it end with me … I won’t be coming ….” She took a deep breath, trying to gather her wits. “I’m thirty-four.”

“So … so this isn’t some accident where you, I dunno, drank a potion you shouldn’t have and are
It had been a long, draining hour. She told them what happened, when she ended up, and of who took her in. She told them a little of her life at Hogwarts in the seventies, and of her master’s and career in Arithmancy, but she noted that they were quite focused on glaring at Minerva.

“So, you knew.” Her father said when she stopped, having waited to broach the subject of Severus and the children when she noticed their attention only half on her. John Granger stared at Minerva with a coldness she didn’t remember him ever having. “We let you into this house nearly four years ago, and all the while you’re telling us about Hermione’s magic, and the school, you knew she was … that we would lose our daughter? Why didn’t you stop it from happening?” He demanded.

“Doctor Who,” Hermione supplied quickly, earning confused looks from her parents. “You don’t change time, remember? One of your favorite bits about the show was always how they couldn’t destroy history. I am history to Hogwarts now, from this stand point. There were, are, people who knew me as I am now when I entered.” She took a deep breath, “Including my husband.”

Helen visibly deflated. “You’re married?”

Hermione nodded. “To a wonderful, brave man whom I love dearly. But … but when I first met him, he was my … professor.”

Her father’s eyes widened, though he didn’t pull his eyes away from Minerva. “You allowed a professor to marry a student?”

Minerva gave a rude chuckle. “When I watched the two wed, they were the same age.”

“It’s not like he knew it was going to happen that way. Nor I. He was just … he wasn’t how I thought he would be when he was my peer, and we….”

“So, you ….” Her mother frowned. “So, it’s not this Professor Lockhart, or even Professor Lupin?”

Hermione felt sick at the thought. “No, it certainly wasn’t either of them. Professor Lockhart is actually a bit younger than I am now. And Professor Lupin … it’s just best not to go down that road.”

Minerva rolled her eyes at Hermione before turning back to her parents. “Hermione was friends with Remus Lupin, but I can assure you after watching them all interact, Severus is much more suited to her. And while Professor Snape is not most student’s favorite teacher, he does his job well. We have had fewer potion’s related accidents since he joined us than at any other time in the last century.”

As recognition of the name, and likely a recollection of how often Hermione complained about him, started to color her parent’s features, she blurted, “Would you like to meet him?”

It stopped cold any words either of them had started to say. Her mother blinked.

“I … I suppose.” She stuttered.
“And … your grandchildren. Would you like to meet them as well?” Hermione asked tentatively.

Her father dragged a hand down his face before he stood up and walked over to the fireplace mantel. He stood there, bracing himself against it, staring at a photo of Hermione. “Children?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied. “I have a son and a daughter.”

“How old are they?” he asked.

She wrung her fingers. “Eight, almost nine. And thirteen.”

“Ha,” John said, not taking his eyes off the picture. “Thirteen. Same age you were when we sent you off for the year. And now look at you. You’re in your thirties now. My grandchild was born a year after my daughter.”

“I think … I want to meet them.” Helen said, causing John to spin around and look at her as though she were mad. Helen shrugged. “You heard Hermione. She can’t change what happened. Nothing will get back the time we lost, but how much would we have had anyway? She was already begging us to send her to a private secondary, she’d have gone off to University afterward. Really, we … we wouldn’t have had much time. Yes, we missed out on things. Her wedding,” Helen’s voice cracked. “Her graduation. But she’s alive. She’s here. She has a family.”

John shook his head and left the room. Down the hall, the door to the study shut roughly, and Helen bowed her head. “I would like to meet them.” She repeated.

Hermione nodded, reaching up for the pendant around her neck, and tapped her wand to it. The response was near immediate as the pendant burned in her palm.

*Be right there.*

“He’s on his way over.” Hermione said, trying to offer a smile.

Helen nodded. “Did you … did you have a crush on him when … when he was your professor? I only remember you saying that he could be cruel and demanding.”

“He is, but I suppose I have a better perspective as to why that was now. Severus’ subject is quite dangerous, and sometimes the only way to ensure all will do as they should, he must come across as quite strict, and often mean. There are other aspects as well, which I will tell you and Dad about another time, when … when this is all settled and it’s not quite so overwhelming.”

The doorbell chimed, and Hermione, Helen, and Minerva all stood.

“As much as I think of Severus and Hermione as family, I believe I will take my leave now.” She extended a hand to Helen, and whatever pleasantries or condolences were to be passed on, Hermione didn’t hear. She went to the foyer and greeted her husband and children.

Severus had claimed repeatedly that he felt no need to give a good impression. He reminded her that they had been married for near fifteen years, and the opinion of her parents were moot at this point. She knew it was all bullocks and refrained from pointing out that she was right when she took in the sight of him.

He was in a muggle suit, black of course, with a dark green shirt and a silver tie with fine, green pin stripes. His hair was immaculate, clearly having been washed the moment she left the cottage to meet up with Min. And if she wasn’t mistaken, she could smell the subtle scent of sandalwoods wafting from him. He only wore that cologne on special occasions.
Leo looked uncomfortable in his trousers and buttoned shirt, usually preferring to run about in corduroy and t-shirts. He grimaced as he pulled on the collar of his blue shirt, fidgeting a bit.

Rory was just Rory. Her hair was pulled back, and she was in denims and a nice sweater. She knew from the glance Severus gave their daughter, the way she avoided eye contact with him, and the exasperated look Severus than gave Hermione, that Rory had a moment of teenage rebellion.

“You all look lovely,” Min said as she passed Hermione, pausing to place a hand on her arm. “Your mother is back in the sitting room. Your father hasn’t returned yet.”

“Thanks, Min.” Hermione said, giving her Aunt a half hug before she left the brownstone, and Severus and their children entered.

Hermione brought them in to the sitting room, where her mother had snapped out of what was likely a sad and wistful daydream to stand and greet them.

"Mum, I’d like you to meet my husband, Severus Snape. And our children, Aurora Eileen, and Leonidas John. Rory, and Leo, for short.”

In an instant that Hermione knew everything could go sideways, she was greatly relieved when her mother gave a tearful smile as she approached Severus and gave him an awkward hug. Hermione sucked in her lips as her husband’s eyes flashed to hers, begging for help as he stiffly put an arm around his mother-in-law.

“I wish I could have gotten to know you through your courtship,” Helen said as she pulled back and cupped her son-in-law’s cheek. “But I have no doubt Hermione would only pick the best, and while it is much earlier than I would have ever wanted or thought, you gave me some beautiful grandchildren.”

“I can see where Hermione got her penchant for physical affection.” He quipped, and thankfully, Helen laughed.

“She overwhelmed you, did she?” She asked, glancing at her daughter with knowing fondness

“She broke down walls with a single touch,” He countered. “I will be honest with you, Mrs Granger, if you had known me as a teenager, you would have not liked me hanging around your daughter. I grew up in the wrong part of the north, and my temperament was a product of my upbringing. But I will say this, if it were not for your daughter, I would have had a very different, much less happy life. So, forgive me my saying I am grateful you did not get to know me then, but I am looking forward with possibly making a connection now.”

“You treated her well?” John Granger’s voice pulled everyone’s attention to where he stood in the hall, tall and as imposing as possible. Which, for a middle-aged dentist who had trouble carrying a four liter of milk from the car to the house, was not very much.

Severus, in turn, stood taller as well. “As well as I could, but never as well as she deserved.”

“You provided?”

“Dad.” Hermione hissed but was ignored by both men.

“We were, and are, equals. My inheritance gave us comfort, though it was never something we had counted on.”

“And now? I remember there being more female professors on Hermione’s roster than men. I doubt
all of them are aged well above you. You’re at that school most of the year, do I need to worry about your commitment to my daughter?”

“Ha!” Aurora said, and she blushed deeply as the adults looked to her. “Sorry,” she said.

Severus took a deep breath, “You don’t need to worry. Hermione, and Leo, spend many evenings in the castle with me. Aurora had as well before she became a student herself, and often finds her way down to my rooms despite having a dormitory in Gryffindor tower. My devotion to your daughter, Mr Granger, is absolute. It is unwavering. A great man tried valiantly to sway both of us away from one another, but it would not take. A powerful man attempted to have my loyalty be his above all others, it would never have been. You are seeing if I am worthy of your daughter, I can tell you now that I am not. But the fact of the matter is that she chose me, foolish of her as it was, and then proceeded to make a home, life, and family with me. That will not change, and while I am unworthy of her, and everything she has given me, I will attempt to be with every breath I have until I leave this mortal coil.”

John Granger studied his son-in-law for a few heartbeats before appearing to be satisfied. He stepped forward, offering his hand to Severus.

Hermione nearly cried with relief, knowing that the worst of the storm was over, and all she had to do was rebuild the bridges that broke, and encourage her parents’ tentative acceptance of reality.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I wanted to give you an update, and ask your preference. First, update: If I don't update in a week or so, please don't think I've abandoned the story. I have lots of inspiration for it, but not enough time. I have had a lot of commissions as of late, and working on those while being a stay at home mom usually leaves me exhausted come the evening when I would normally do my writing. So bare with me, please, while I work through it. Second, preference: Do you all want shorter chapters? If you have read any of my Doctor Who stuff, you may notice I have a habit of writing long chapters. If it is better for everyone to have shorter ones from this point, please let me know! I don't mind if the popular opinion wants smaller bits. Until next time, whenever that may be!
“We’re here to see Alastor Moody,” Hermione told the nurse at the reception desk of St Mungo’s. Severus clutched her hand, and the two did their best to not seem overly concerned with the wellbeing of their former professor.

It had been so close. They were so very certain that maybe Alastor Moody would be the one to break the trend of a new Defense teacher every year. When the term concluded, and they all boarded the train to return home, he was among the teachers. He had even had a small smile for them, telling them he’d see them next year. Not to let the Occulmency fall to the wayside.

Then the report came in the Prophet on Thursday. Dark wizards, it had said, had terrorized a village outside Wales where many muggleborns lived. There were five casualties, three being the Dark Wizards all baring a mark on their arm the Prophet did not disclose. One had been a muggleborn witch who was hanging on to life, though it wasn’t looking good. Moody had been the last.

The nurse nodded, then frowned as she looked at the pair.

“It says he had no living relatives.” She said.

“We’re former students of his. Proteges, if you will.” Severus offered, and while the nurse still looked a bit uncertain, she stood and waved them to follow her.

They were brought to the curse damage ward, then led down the hall, away from many of the closed doors. She knocked and didn’t wait for an answer before opening the door. “There are a couple of kids here to see you.” She told him.

“Who’re they?” He asked.

The nurse blushed, clearly not thinking to ask, and turned to them. “It’s Severus and I, Professor.” Hermione offered.

Moody barked a laugh. “Not your professor, anymore, Granger.” And then when the nurse hadn’t moved to let them through, he added, “Well, let’em in. They’re gonna see worse than this if they go where I think they will in life.”

With a sigh, the nurse stepped aside and waved them through, mumbling something about needing something stronger than tea.

The pair entered the room together, disconnecting their hands to pass through the doorway. They stayed close to one another as they came to approach their mentor in mental magic, though did not make to show their affection, as they tried to take in his injuries without gawking.
His face had obviously taken a spell directly. The red jagged lines along the left side of his face were harsh, angry. There seemed to be a bit of his nose missing, and the way his eye was bandaged, Hermione would guess he lost that as well.

“Take a good look,” Moody said calmly. “This is what happens when Dark Wizards get the drop on you.”

“Constant vigilance,” Severus said with a nod.

Moody nodded back, “You, especially.” He said to the young Slytherin. “Keep your head down, don’t make a show of being around the Gryffindor lot.”

“What’s wrong with Gryffindors?” Hermione asked, crossing her arms.

Moody smirked. “Nothing. I’m a lion myself. But Gryffindors tend to be favorites of Dumbledore, and Dumbledore is very much the enemy of the Dark Lord.”

“Like he was the enemy of Grindelwald?” Severus challenged, confusing Hermione.

Alastor gave a smirk of approval, but it took on more of a grimace. “Glad you did your homework. But the Dark Lord, he’s doing what Grindelwald started, and taking it beyond.”

“But Dumbledore was aligned with Grindelwald in the beginning.” Severus said with a furrowed brow, and Hermione’s eyes went wide as she whipped her head back and forth between the two wizards.

“Which just goes to show that Gryffindors have a tendency to dive into something head first, damn the consequences. Might not take much for one of those lot to challenge one’a your housemates, then ya have to choose. Pick your fellow Slytherins, ya loose the Gryffindors, and you’d have ta fight to regain the ground you gained in the last year. I noticed, don’t think I didn’t. But you pick the Gryffindors, you’re sleeping with more wards around you than the castle has protecting it, and that’s with your eyes open.

“Constant vigilance. Constant, constant vigilance. Keep your eyes open for everything and anything.” With that, Moody closed his eye, and fell right to sleep with a loud snore.

The pair stared at their mentor for a moment before quietly leaving the room.

“You’re going to need to explain what you two were talking about. And why the greatest light wizard I have ever known was once in agreement with one of the worst Dark wizards before You-Know-Who came into the picture.”

“I will,” Severus said. “But not here. Tonight, once we leave Delia and Bob to try and settle Ollie.”

August 25th, 1994

As Aurora followed Draco and Uncle Lu up the stairs to where their seats were, she actually felt
The invitation for her to join them at the Quidditch World cup had only been that morning, and only for her. Leo had thrown a fit, understandably.

"Why does she get to go!" He shouted while twitching in an effort to not scratch. "Rory always gets to do things, and I never do."

"Leonidas, stop." Her father had said while reading the paper. "Your sister is older, which tends to lead toward her being allowed to do more. Also, you are ill. Even if Uncle Lucius had extended the invitation to include you as well, you would still not be permitted to go."

Leo growled, thrashing about on the couch, his hands attempted to make contact with his skin and not succeeding. "It’s not far! Why do I have a muggle sickness? I’m a wizard."

"You’re a half-blood." Her father had turned the page of the Prophet. "You will get muggle illnesses while you attend a muggle school. Just as I had, just as your mother had, and just as your sister had. The advantage of being a wizard is you are able to take potions to combat the worst of the symptoms and ease the length of it. So, settle, and as soon as it is cool, you can have your first dose of potion."

Aurora had tried to give her brother a sympathetic smile, but he sneered at her and mouthed ‘I hate you’ while trying not to scratch through the magical barrier their mother had placed on him. She had stopped feeling bad about getting to go after that point, but as the day went on, her Leo was less temperamental with the worst of his symptoms taken care of, she started to wonder if she should have stayed home.

They had made it to the top, and before they could follow Uncle Lu completely into the box, Draco stopped short in front of her.

"Shit," He whispered, and Aurora peeked over his shoulder to see what the matter was.

The Weasleys, Luna, and Harry were all in the front row, and they’d all noticed them coming in.

"Ah, Lucius," A man greeted as Draco finally moved into the box and slowly came up by his father. Aurora joined him, folding her hands in front of her as her eyes darted to the others watching them carefully.

"Fudge," Lucius greeted, clasping the man’s outstretched hand. "Have you met my son, Draco? And this is Aurora Snape, she’s an honorary niece of mine."

"Snape?" Fudge inquired after shaking Draco’s hand. "Mistress H. Snape, the Arithmancer? And I suppose you would also be Severus Snape’s daughter, then?"

"Yes, sir." Aurora replied with a slight bow.

"Good Portioner, your father. What he’s doing wasting his time teaching, I will never understand." Fudge said.

"Telling me." She heard Ron grumble, followed by the sound of a smack, and his whiney, "Ow!"

"You know Arthur Weasley, I’m sure," Fudge continued the introductions, and there was a tight tension between the two grown wizards that Aurora thought to possibly ask about, later. As some bloke who looked as though he lost half his brain cells to a bludger ran upstairs, Draco nudged Aurora toward the empty seats nearest to the youngest Weasleys, Harry, and Luna.
With Uncle Lu safely seated on the other side, chatting to the Bulgarian Minister and Fudge, it seemed little if any attention was going to be paid to them.

Still, Draco leaned forward and, in the most superior tone he could muster, said, “And how was your summer, Potter?” It wasn’t terribly loud, but she was sure that if Uncle Lu heard it, it would merely sound as a form of antagonizing.

“It’s been great, Malfoy.” Harry said, sounding partly sarcastic, thankfully seeming to catch on to the game while Ron glared. “Best one I’ve ever had.”

“Really?” Draco countered. “Living with your Godfather is actually a good thing.”

“Shove off, Malfoy.” Ron grumbled.

Harry looked quite exasperated, and Aurora snickered. She’d been writing to Harry and knew from his responses that living with Sirius Black was everything he’d hoped for. Harry wrote paragraphs on his and his Godfather’s cleaning the house alone, which was nothing on all the little things they did together. He also wrote how Professor Lupin was a frequent visitor, and essentially lived there with them. Regardless there was never a mention of his missing the Dursleys.

She also knew letters that Draco was well aware of how great things were for Harry, as the two had been writing. Draco had regaled her with tales of how utterly amusing it was for his father to hand him a letter from his “little friends” and not realizing the parchment had once been in the same hand as the boy he so loved to loathe.

“I don’t think I will,” He said shifting to sit taller in his seat. “I think I will stay here, Weasel. Especially as it seems to bother you so much.”

The match proceeded, and they were all on the edge of their seats with anticipation. She remembered the galleons Uncle Lu had laid down betting against Ireland, and while Draco and She both refrained from reacting with the same exuberant joy that their mates had with each Irish goal, there was always a twitch of a smile, or a tensing meant to replace a leap for joy.

It felt like it wasn’t long enough before the match ended, and while the Weasleys, Harry, Luna, and even the Minister filed out, Uncle Lu remained as he was.

He held his walking stick aloft, the serpent looking ready to strike anyone who disturbed him, and he looked out over the stadium as though he were wistful over his lost galleons. The sneer one his lips was both malicious and anticipatory, and it had the hairs on Aurora’s neck standing on end.

“Draco,” He said, just as someone entered the box but remained in the shadows. “Take Aurora and entertain yourselves.”

“Yes, father,” he agreed, taking Aurora’s hand and tugging her along. The shadow made Aurora’s skin crawl, though she forced herself not to look back and find out who it was.

She and Draco moved down the stairs, the last stragglers from other boxes not far ahead of them. Once on the ground, Draco pulled out his wand, laid in his palm, and said, “Point me.”

Aurora gapped. “There’s no magic outside Hogwarts! The trace!”

“We are at the world’s biggest sporting event, surrounded by thousands of wizards and witches from around the world. Tell me, how are they going to know it was me and not you, or some other under age rebel using a ‘point me’ spell. One that I might be using to find my neglectful father.”
“But you aren’t.” Aurora pointed out as he took her hand once more and lead her through the crowds in the direction of a camp ground.

“And are you going to rat me out?” He asked with a smirk as they moved through the crowd.

Aurora had thought she glanced Cedric Diggory by a neighboring tent to the one Draco was pulling her too, but she didn’t get a chance to have a good look before she was being pushed through a flap.

“Aurora,” Arthur greeted warmly, the chants and shouts from the Weasley clan and guests quieting. Arthur’s smile faded to confusion as Draco followed behind.

“Hi Malfoy,” Harry greeted.

“What are you doing here?” Ron demanded.

“Forgive my barging in, Mr Weasley,” Draco said to the head of the family, and Arthur seemed genuinely taken aback. “I was able to slip away with Aurora, and we thought it best to come and find out friends.”

“Friends?” Ron sputtered.

“He’s my friend,” Harry said with a shrug.

“Mine, too.” Ginny said as she raised her hand.

“Mine as well. It’s wonderful to see you, Draco.” Luna said with a smile.

Arthur gave a befuddled grin, “Well, it seems Ron’s a bit outnumbered here. Welcome, then, Draco. Help yourself to some snacks and such. You too, Rory.”

They went together to where Ginny and Luna were sitting not far from the wireless, a review of the match and commentary still going on, the sounds of cheers in the background of the commentators. The girls were sitting on cushions on the floor, Harry and Ron having taken up the actual sofa and chairs along with the twins. Percy was off in the corner, seeming to ignore the rest of the Weasleys, including the two older ones in the kitchen area who seemed to be quietly conversing among themselves.

“Fizzy drink, Malfoy?” Harry offered, the glass bottle with the dark contents extended out.

Aurora nearly wanted to roll her eyes at the way they all seemed to wait with baited breath, anticipating whether or not Draco would take the Muggle beverage. No, the Snapes never had it on hand, but how prejudice did they think Draco actually was? Even at his worst, she doubted he would have thought much about the beverage.

Draco frowned as he took the bottle, examined it before twisting of the cap. He took a swig, the coughed and sputtered after swallowing, rubbing at his nose a bit.

“Interest.” He choked out.

“Muggle.” Harry said with a cocky sort of smile.

“Really?” Draco asked, arching a brow and looking at it. He took a more gingered sip this time, making it seem as though it were the finest wine and he was about to analyze the bouquet. “How do they get it to fizz like that?”

“Science,” Harry said, and as Malfoy’s frown deepened, he laughed. “Muggle magic, in a way.”
“I’ve heard of science, Potter.” Malfoy snapped back.

Harry merely shrugged. “Krum was impressive out there,” He said, and that had the two seekers off on a conversation, one in which Ron half included himself in.

“Surprised Dear Ol’ Daddy Malfoy let you two come see us,” Fred said as he took a drink of his orange fizzy drink.

“He technically didn’t.” Aurora replied, accepting the crisps bowl from Ginny. “He just said to go entertain ourselves.”

“And you two came down here to find us?” Ginny frowned. “How did that work? There are hundreds of tents.”

“Bet one of you used magic outside of school,” George said, wagging his finger. “Naughty, naughty, Snape. Ten points from Gryffindor when your dad finds out.”

“He’s not going to take points from her,” Ginny rolled her eyes.

“Even if he did, the one of us that used magic wasn’t a Gryffindor, so we don’t need to worry about the point loss even if Dad does do something like that.” Aurora said as she plucked up a crisp and munched. “How did you two do on your OWLs?” She asked.

“Mostly ‘Es”, George replied.

“Except an ‘O’ in charms,” Fred said.

“And an ‘A’ in Runes.” George added.

“But overall, not bad.” Fred shrugged.

“Mum’s been going on and on about it,” Ginny said with a smirk. “The first Weasleys not to get Prefect twice over. But Ron’s marks are what really got her. Only As, really, with a couple Es.”

“My father didn’t really look at my marks,” Luna commented. “He said the talent and power of a witch or wizard can’t actually be marked, so there was really no reason to look.”

“Speaking of powerful, that reminds me. Rory, did you hear-

“Quiet!” Arthur cut of Ginny, as well as an animated discussion between Draco, Harry, and Ron. The tent was silent, and outside, there were the horrified gasps and screams of others. Arthur popped outside with the two older Weasley boys, and within a minute, ran back in. “All of you, go. Run, hide in the woods. Come on, up you get. Your brothers will be out there, they’ll keep you safe, go.”

“What’s happening?” Luna asked.

“Dad, what’s going on?” Ron asked.

“Don’t worry about it, just run.” Arthur said, pausing as he looked to Aurora. He then darted his eyes to Draco. “Young Sir Malfoy, I trust you will take care of Rory?”

“I can take care of myself.” She frowned.

“She’s like a sister to me, Mr Weasley.” Draco replied.

“Good, because I think it may be best that the pair of you aren’t seen with the others. Just in case.”
And with that, he left the tent along with the last of the stragglers.

“What do you think?” Aurora asked, but Draco grabbed her hand and gave her a tug before they could contemplate anything further.

Outside, the screams grew louder, and something near a stampede surrounded them, causing Draco to pull her closer and put his other arm around her protectively as they looked around for some clue as to what was going on. She thought she’d heard Harry call for each of them once, but since the occurrence didn’t repeat, Aurora chalked it up to the sounds of witches and wizards calling for loved ones.

There were explosions and fires, causing more mayhem and chaos.

And then, before they could move to the woods, they saw it.

Death Eaters.

They knew the mask, Draco’s father having had it in his study, her father having had his in a trunk which once sat at the end of her parents’ bed at the cottage. It was now relocated to Hogwarts.

And between the half a dozen of those masked, hooded terrors were four people, two being children.

A pained expression came over Draco as he watched the scene, laced with confusion and utter disappointment.

“We’re supposed to be better than muggles,” he said quietly. “Above them. We were supposed to … to be able to teach them why we were superior. But this… this is not ….”

“Let’s go.” Aurora tugged on his arm, and when he didn’t move, she hissed, “Your father is very likely among them. If he sees us here he’s going to figure out why we came. Are you ready to explain making nice to the Weasleys and Harry Potter?”

He looked back at her as if he suddenly realized where he was and who he was with. Just as he had them going, after only getting a few feet away from the Weasleys campsite, the Death Eaters stopped and looked to the sky as the atmosphere grew colder, and the world was tinted green.

Up in the sky, just below the clouds a large skull appeared, and a snake slithered out of its mouth, curling and twisting.

“The Dark Mark.” Aurora said, barely louder than a whisper.

“You don’t think … it’s not possible for him to be back. Potter wiped him out.” Draco said.

And Aurora looked at her friend, confused at first, until she finally understood. “He’s already nearly returned twice.” She told him, and Draco looked ready to be sick. “We should go, now. We’ll let Harry and Gin and Luna know we’re okay when we can. But we can’t stay here.” She watched as the Death Eaters apparated away to where ever they came from, leaving the Muggle family a traumatized heap on the ground.

Draco gave a nod, and started heading toward the entry of the stadium. He glanced over his shoulder and after a second, nodded.

Aurora glanced over as well, Seeing the twins and one of the older Weasley boys give a nod and a wave. They’ll tell the others, and when they all saw one another again in a few days, they could hash out what happened then.
Aurora had heard of Alastor Moody countless times growing up, had even seen a photo of him at her parents' wedding. But there was something about seeing the grizzled looking man in person that had a shiver shoot through her spine. He was quite terrifying to behold.

It was only really Hagrid and Dumbledore who greeted him, her father and Aunt Min both taking in the ex-Auror as though they couldn’t quite place what was off with him.

When the disruption his sudden appearance caused died down, Dumbledore turned back to the Great Hall with a smile. “As I was saying, we are to have the honor of hosting a very exciting event over the coming months. And event that has not been held for over a century…”

Aurora tuned out for a moment, having already known this bit.

Her father had ranted and raved about how ridiculous it was to hold the Tri-Wizard tournament, given the rat that was out and about. She knew from what Harry had said that this “mad, murderous man who was always too willing to be a follower” her Dad shouted about was this Pettigrew person. With all the things that had already happened to Potter, why do something like this where it would be a prime opportunity, so on and so forth.

She rolled her eyes just thinking about it all.

Her mother had sat down and started doing the Arithmancy calculations as a side project, trying to conclude what the outcome might be, and that seemed to placate her Dad.

“I’m going for it,” Fred said, a glint of determination in his eyes that George didn’t quite share.

“Are you now?” Aurora asked, and he turned that intense gaze on her.

“Damn right I am, Snape.”

She smirked, already knowing something the other didn’t. The one thing that her father did like about the whole, blasted thing.

“The heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age, that is to say, seventeen years or older, will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration.” Dumbledore announced, and she snickered as both the twins, along with many, many others, looked positively offended.

“They can’t do that!” George said after Dumbledore finally dismissed the hall after a last note on the arrival of the other schools. “We’re seventeen in April! Why can’t we have a shot?”

“They’re not stopping me entering,” Fred swore.

“And how, pray tell, are you going to do that?” Aurora asked as the lot of them finally moved to stand up.

“A few drops of Aging Potion might do it.” Fred said as a smirk crossed his face. “I bet you’re right
good at brewing potions.”

“And you think Rory’s going to help you fool Dumbledore?” Ginny asked as they headed up toward Gryffindor tower, the rest of them quite some ways a head, and growing further away still as the Weasley siblings, Harry, Neville lingered further behind.

“Technically we don’t need her to. We can do it ourselves,” George gave his input, getting a nod from Fred.

“Think about it. The champoins’ll get to do all sorts of stuff you’d never be allowed to do normally.”

“And yet these things once led to the deaths of many students.” Aurora reminded.

“You knew ‘bout it all ahead of time, didn’t you?” Ron asked her with a frown, and she merely shrugged. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“And spoil the surprise? I don’t think so. Besides, like Dumbledore said, there’s a minimum age. I wasn’t about to tell the lot of you anything when I knew none of you would be able to enter.” She countered.

“But you know who this impartial judge is, then.” Fred elbowed her, and Aurora was terribly disconcerted when she actually felt herself blush.

“Not precisely, no. But I heard it was … not what you would expect.” She said.

“Oh, come on. Give us a hint.” George teased, copying his brother’s earlier motions.

She huffed. “Think along the lines of the sorting hat.” She said.

“Brilliant.” The twins said as one.

“How is that brilliant?” Harry asked, more amused by all of it than anything.

“It’s not a person,” Ron said as if it were completely obvious. “The judge might not realize we’re quite so young if it doesn’t have eyes. What do you reckon? Be cool to enter wouldn’t? But I suppose they might want someone older. Dunno if we’ve learned enough.”

“I definitely haven’t,” Neville spoke up, startling the twins as they seemed to have forgotten he was there. “Though I expect my Gran would want me to try. She’s always going on about how I should be upholding the family honor. I’ll just have to….”

Neville lurched as though he was about to fall but stopped, his foot having got caught in a trick stair. Aurora reached out and grabbed his arm as Harry joined her on the other side, and the pair of them hailed an embarrassed Neville up from the step while Ron yelled at the laughing suits of armor.

“If it makes you feel better,” She said as she held on to Neville arm for a few steps while he got over the worst of his embarrassment. “When I was five I missed that one, too. I sunk up to my waist.”

“Yeah, but … you were a kid.” Neville tried to argue.

She smirked, “Maybe so, but at that point I’d lived here most my life. I knew about the step, and still didn’t think to avoid it.”

Neville gave a small grin but seemed unconvinced.
I bet Hermione would have known plenty to enter the tournament.” Ron said wistfully.

“Bloody hell, she’s not dead.” Ginny grumbled as they approached to portrait. “And Hermione would never do something as stupid as to try and enter a tournament that she wasn’t old enough to try for.”

Aurora couldn’t argue that, tilting her head and giving a nod as she thought back to some of the things her mother had told her about her first year after her trip. How utterly uneventful her fourth year was. And fifth.

It was her sixth, she knew now, when things began to get … complicated.

September 3rd, 1976

As they walked to their first potions class of the year together, side by side, hand in hand, Hermione couldn’t keep the hint of a smile off her face. Severus hadn’t been this openly affectionate before summer began. Their wonderful, blissful summer.

Days spent helping Bob in the gardens, earning a few galleons and learning things they would never get to in Hogwarts. Evenings spent with McGonagalls, sometimes giving Delia a break and watching Ollie while she and Bob went out just the pair of them. Even if they only ever went as far as the woods for a walk. Nights were spent in their tent, talking about anything and everything, and making love to one another before falling asleep against one another despite all the flaws they constantly teased one another about.

It had been a lonely couple nights, Hermione had to admit. She’d gotten so used to having him near that she tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable in the luxurious four-post bed in her dorm.

And by the amount of coffee she’d seen him drink the last couple mornings, not to mention his less than sunny disposition to most, she was willing to bet Severus was the same.

“And how are the grump levels today, Sev?” Lily asked as she came up beside him.

Severus merely turned and looked at her, and from the way Lily laughed, Hermione would guess he’d given her a glare worthy of his future self.

“Was he this bad over the summer?” Lily asked.

Before Hermione could answer, Severus gave a snort. “Why would I be? I was not waking up in a dank dungeon after spending the night trying to sleep without being suffocated by a mass of curls.”

Lily stopped so suddenly that Remus ran into the back of her, having to hold her shoulders to keep them both from toppling over.
“You … you slept in the same space. Bed?” Lily stammered.

“Tent, actually. It is nearly impossible to sleep with a five-month-old baby down the hall, screaming at every hour.” Severus said all this as though he were bored, not waiting for Lily to get her wits about her and move again. She did so quickly, clutching her books ever tighter to her chest.

“So, you two just….”

“Lily,” Sirius chided as he came up on the other side of Hermione, wiggling his finger at the ginger. “You should be a good friend. A supportive friend. And given the things you’ve done….”

“Why does everyone bring that up?” Lily said, her face heating. “Sex is different. It’s not so intimate.”

At this, Severus stopped dead.

When Lily noticed, she waved her hand about as she explained. “Well, I mean, yeah, your naked and, well, sort of … connected. But sleeping with someone? Actually sleeping? You’re vulnerable. You are putting so much of your trust in this other person that you are willing to fall unconscious around them.”

“A person who is also unconscious?” Severus asked in a deadpan. He then turned to Sirius, “You should let Potter know that Lily might be easier than anticipated.”

“Sev!” She shrieked.

He said nothing as they continued to class, and neither did Lily, though she still had her mouth open in offense to his comment. She only snapped it shut when James and Peter rounded the corner from the other side, coming to join them as they waited outside the door for Slughorn to let them in for class.

A wave of memories crashed over Hermione as she took in the utterly cold glare Peter had given first Severus, and then Sirius before it turned to neutral as James’ was. It was often easy to forget that Peter was the same man who, in just a few years, sell out his friends and get two of the lot killed before changing into a rat for more than a decade.

At the sight of the pair, Sirius snickered, elbowed Severus, and then moved to join them. Sirius whispered something to James that had him perk up, then smile. Just as Lily started hissing under her breath, James threw his head back and laughed. Sirius then whispered to Peter who shook his head and turned away from the other two, appearing to be suppressing a smile. Or, perhaps, a grimace.

The door opened, and Slughorn waved them all in with a wide grin and a wink for Severus that had Hermione do a double take. She felt Severus’ hand tighten around hers as they moved to their usual table.

Lily plopped down at the table next to Severus, still scowling and earning a confused look from Marlene and Alice. James quickly sat down next to Lily, giving her a smile that caused her to roll her eyes and set her books on the table. She then proceeded to bury her face in arms.

“Where am I going to sit?” Peter asked as Sirius joined Remus on Hermione’s side.

“Frank could always use a competent partner.” Sirius replied, looking over at their classmate. “How Longbottom got in this class, I will never know.”

“Fine,” Peter grumbled before going over to join him.
Once everyone settled, Slughorn looked around at them with a tilted chin and a proud smile. “NEWT level potions. I’m pleased, very pleased you have all made it here. The best and brightest of the lot.”

Sirius snickered at this, and Remus elbowed him in an attempt to get him to stop.

“Now, down here I have four cauldrons. I want you all to come down here and examine the contents, take a whiff, and return to your tables to discuss your findings. We will start from this side of the room.”

It was a pair of Ravenclaws first, then a third Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff. Sirius and Remus went ahead, and then she and Severus got up.

The first cauldron had Hermione smirking to herself, glancing up at her boyfriend who very clearly remembered that she’d brewed it in her second year, though didn’t know the reason for it. His eyes glinted with the upturn of his lips, but he said nothing as the moved on to the next cauldron. Clear, odorless, they moved on to the third in sync, Remus and Sirius both grumbling bickering over what it smelled like.

From the way the steam rose in spirals from the cauldron, Hermione already knew what it was. She was also oddly worried about what the scent would be.

Taking a whiff, she smiled and nearly shuddered with pleasure. Herbs, Earth, ink, parchment, and the heady, masculine scent that clung to Severus’ skin.

She glanced at him, and found he was already staring at her. He seemed nervous, and it suddenly hit her that she should have been more worried about what the scent would be for him.

They stepped around Remus and Sirius (which Slughorn found quite amusing), each glancing in the last cauldron before heading to their seats.

“That was terribly easy.” Severus grumbled. “Really, you brewed the first one when you were twelve.”

“And everyone should know what potion is clear and without scent.” Hermione added, Severus nodded.

“And, speaking of scents. Parchment, lavender, earth, tea, and your hair.”

“Herbs, ink, parchment, earth, and your skin.” She said softly, relief washing over her as it seemed to him.

He then shifted toward Lily who had just flopped down in her seat and attempted to ignore James. She brightened immediately when Severus turned to her. “Tell me, Lily, what was it you smelled in the third cauldron?”

“That one is giving people a lot of trouble, isn’t it? I thought it smelled like fresh air, grass, and butterbeer. Maybe something else.”

“Interesting,” He said, tapping his lip as he narrowed his eyes at her.

“What?” She asked, paling. “What does it mean? Sev?”

“Okay!” Slughorn prevented Severus from possibly giving an answer, but judging from the smirk he wore, Hermione doubted very much he would have given Lily one. “Now that you all have had your
guesses, how about we have someone who seems well on his way to a mastery give his answers. Come now, Mr Snape. What was in the first cauldron?"

Severus cleared his throat, his face becoming a mask of indifference. “Poly juice.”

“We all know what Poly Juice does, don’t we?” Slughorn rolled on his feet as he fingered his lapels. “Now, the next one?”

“Veritaserrum,” Severus replied.

“Yes, which does?”

“A mere drop or two, and the person who ingested the potion would be unable to tell anything but the truth until it wore off.”

“Excellent, excellent. Now, the third?”

Severus sighed. “Amortentia. A love potion, strongest in the world, and bares only the scent of whatever attracts the person smelling it.”

“I won’t ask what you smelled,” Slughorn mused with a chuckle. “And the last, Mr Snape. I know it’s a tricky-

“Felix Felicius. Liquid luck.” Severus replied.

“Quite right, Mr Snape. Good show. Now, I have a bit of a contest in mind for the lot of you. Draught of the living dead, whoever can brew it perfectly within the next hour will receive a small vial of Felix Felicius. Bit of a tradition I do with my first NEWTS level. Now, if you are the lucky winner, bear in mind that it cannot be used for exams, nor for quidditch. And, please, let’s keep this all between us, shall we? I do like the surprise of it each year. Prepare your stations, and … begin!”

On one hand, brewing next to a man she knew was going to become a great potion master was a tad bit daunting. On the other, Hermione couldn’t help but smile at the thought of such a challenge. And wouldn’t it be something to out-do Severus Snape?

He glanced at her with a knowing smirk, and she understood the silent challenge he was setting her.

They began working, not in tandem, but in something sort of synchronized. The started, worked through, and completed nearly every step in time with one another. At least until they got to the sopophoros bean. The tricky thing was tough, smooth, and incredibly hard to put a knife through. She noticed, out of the corner of her eye, that Severus was crushing it. She smirked, giving her head a tilt and feeling superior. He was taking a short cut, experimenting with something he likely shouldn’t. And besides, there was likely a reason it was instructed to be cut and not crushed. It didn’t matter to her that his methods seemed to put him a couple steps ahead of her, Hermione was sure that this would be the time she could beat Severus at his own subject.

She brewed, worrying about her own potion, ignoring the way her hair was growing bigger by the moment, and was three steps away from the end when Severus said, “Complete.”

The room seemed to stop at once, and Hermione glanced around to see many people looking at Severus in confusion. Slughorn even seemed uncertain as he came over to inspect Severus’ cauldron.

“IT’s …” Slughorn smiled. “Perfect. Well done, lad. And in less time. Really, you must…..”

Slughorn trailed off as thick, black smoke grew from Frank’s cauldron, sending Peter a few steps
back before he seemed to disappear altogether. Hermione quickly put a bubble head charm over her and turned to Severus and applied the same when he was merely staring at the cauldron spewing smoke like he couldn’t understand how it happened.

It took a few moments for Slughorn to get the smoke cleared away, and most of the class were coughing from the inhalation. Peter, Hermione noticed, wasn’t one of them despite his standing so close to Frank.

“Alright, alright, those of you coughing, head up to the hospital wing. The rest of you can clear out. Oh, Mr Snape, come see me first.”

Severus nodded before he placed a hand on Hermione’s shoulder.

“I’ll wait for you outside,” She said, and he nodded.

Lily came up beside her as they exited the classroom, and Hermione noticed James was joining Sirius and Remus in the group heading to the hospital wing.

Hermione smirked, “You cast a charm on yourself, but not James?”

“Git had it coming.” Lily said as she tilted her chin a bit, a smug smile coming across her face. “He kept trying to smell me, and nearly made me ruin my potion twice.”

“Smell you? Oh, yes. Severus’ explanation. He wanted to see if you smelled the same as the potion.”

Lily waited with her despite needing to go off to her Magical Creatures class. She shifted from one foot to the other, playing with a lock of her hair. “What did … I mean, did you and Sev?”

“Yeah,” Hermione said, nodding slightly.

Lily deflated. “I was a bitch last year.” She said. “I just didn’t like the idea that maybe Sev would … I always sorta knew he had a thing for me. And I knew it faded. I just didn’t want to admit it. I wanted him all to myself. But he’s better with you. And as much as I don’t like it, I can see that at least. He’s better with you because you can give him something I can’t. Or wouldn’t.”

Severus came out then, eyes locking on Lily in suspicion as he claimed Hermione’s hand.

“I was just leaving.” Lily said, straightening and heading to her class.

“See you and lunch?” Hermione called, stopping her.

Lily smiled, not quite as bright as it would normally be, but it was lacking the condescension and superiority she had over Hermione the year before.

“What … was that about?” Severus asked as they started to head to Arithmancy.

“She was apologizing.” Hermione said, laughing when she glanced at Severus. “Don’t be so suspicious.”

“Pardon me for not really trusting a Gryffindor.” Severus retorted.

“Excuse me, I’m a Gryffindor.” Hermione snapped.

He smirked, “I’d say you’re the exception, but I’m fairly certain that when the McGonagalls gave us a tent to sleep in, they didn’t mean for you to take my virtue.”
“Your virtue!” She gasped out, seeing his smirk grow wider and knowing he was doing it on purpose. “You’re awful, Severus Snape.”

“And you love it,” He said, tensing as soon as he finished the sentence.

Swallowing her heart back down to her chest and summoning all of the bravery she was supposed to poses, Hermione haughtily replied. “Perhaps it’s one of the reasons, but certainly not the one I’m most fond of.”

She yelped, when he gave a sharp tug on her hand, pushed her up against a wall, and gave her a hard, quick kiss.

Severus smiled, and neither said anything as they headed up the stairs to their class. They took their seats just as those from the hospital wing were coming in, Severus sitting just a touch closer than normal, and Hermione felt like she was flying without a broom. And she liked it.

Chapter End Notes

I don't have another chapter even close to ready, so please forgive the delays.
“Have you discovered anything in your calculations?” Severus asked as he gave Hermione a large plate holding a bowl of soup and crusty bread brought to his rooms by the elves.

“There should be nothing for you to worry about, Severus.” She replied, taking the plate and casting a charm to allow it to hover over her lap. “With Harry not being old enough to enter the tournament, there should be no cause for alarm. It looks as if the year should proceed, unusually, as normal. Well, except for having a bunch of foreign witches and wizards, but that’s hardly going to affect any possible poor outcomes.”

“Good,” He replied as he discarded his robes. He began to work on the buttons of his frock coat when he realized Hermione was watching him very attentively. He cocked an eyebrow, his lips barely stopping the smirk. “Yes, wife?”

“Just enjoying the show.” Hermione replied casually.

“I was your professor dressed like this.” He reminded her, slipping the top few buttons out.

“You were my professor twenty years ago. And not for all that long. You’ve been at least my lover most of the time I’ve known you. And the buttons are quite sexy, considering I know what they conceal from the rest of the world.”

“Awe, yes,” He said, pausing in the buttons to loosen his collar and cravat. “Curse and battle scars, the ultimate in sex appeal. The wizarding world is missing out, aren’t they?” He glanced to his wife as she gave a snort of a giggle, just beginning to wonder if maybe soup could wait for something far more satisfying, when the wards around his office tripped. “Bloody hell.” He said, re-tightening everything, and re-doing his buttons as he headed for the door to his office. “Start without me,” He called, hearing Hermione say something though not catching what it was as he was already through the door.

As he entered the room, so did Moody and Draco.

“Alastor, this had best be bloody important.” Severus snapped, looked at Draco sternly.

“Got a date or something, Snape?” Moody hissed.

Which was … odd. Really odd, now that he thought about it. Alastor was never the teasing sort, per se, but he always did have a knowing twinkle and a touch of innuendo to his voice when he spoke of Hermione to Severus. Always had. And he knew that Draco was friends with Harry, so the need to act like the auror who caught him was entirely unnecessary.
A tingle like spiders crawling up the back of Severus’ neck reminded him of a time nearly thirteen years ago, when it was absolutely critical to wear many masks while walking the tightest of ropes. Something wasn’t right.

“My wife has come to have lunch with me.” He said simply. “What is it?”

“This one attempted to curse Potter in the back. No greater coward, I say. McGonagall reminded me I needed to speak with you ‘bout it.”

“He turned me into a Ferret!” Draco screeched, his voice cracking.

“Hush.” Alastor snapped.

McGonagall. It was never McGonagall. Min or Minnie, maybe Minerva, but never anything less than casual. Student or not.

“Interesting.” Severus said slowly, eyes darting between the two. “Thank you, Moody. I’ll take it from here.”

“A word later, Snape?” Alastor asked, a coldness to his tone that made Severus narrow his eyes.

“We shall see.” He said. It took a moment for Alastor to leave, be he did so, and closed the door behind him.

Severus took out his wand and immediately cast wards, silencing charms, and a few spells he created in his spying days to misdirect anyone trying to break them.

He then turned to Draco who looked utterly petrified.

“I was under the impression that you and Potter were friends.” He asked his godson while crossing his arms.

“We are!” Draco screeched. “But I can’t exactly shake the blubberworms off first day in! I need to distract them first. So I had handed Harry a not in Hagrid’s class saying I was going to be a foul git to him and Weasley at lunch time. It was pre-planned, a show. I mean, Weasley took it a bit serious, but I think the first five off spring likely got all the male brain cells and only left him brawn, anyway.”

Severus arched a brow and demanded his lips not to twitch.

“So they knew. They knew I was going to get into it with them. I was going to miss them, and even if I didn’t, it was a bloody jelly-leg jinx. Worse that would happen is Potter’d fall on his face, and Rory or Luna would need to fix it. Then Moody showed up and turned me into a bloody ferrat! Then proceeded to bounce me all about.”

Severus nodded, finding that a bit odd, too. Even if Moody had got after Draco for show, he’d have pulled the boy aside and asked what was going on. Moody was mad after everything that had happened to him, and a more than a bit paranoid, but he wasn’t as bad as the rumors led people to believe.

“Draco,” Severus asked slowly. “First of all, are you injured in any way?” When Draco shook his head, Severus nodded. “Second, do not let that man even get a hint that you and Potter are close. Be weary. I don’t trust that all is well.”

“Unc-Professor, what … does this have to do with …?”
“The revel you and Aurora ended up witnessing? I don’t know. Nor do I know if it has anything to do with why Arthur had to go assist Moody. Just keep a cautious eye out, trust no one.”

Draco nodded, and headed for the door.

“Oh, and Draco.” Severus stopped him. “Should anyone ask, you’ll be having detention with me this Saturday evening in my classroom.” He said the word heavily, hoping the hint would drop, and it would seem it had.

When Draco was out the door, Severus headed back towards his rooms, checking his pocket watch on the way. Plenty of time left, thankfully.

Hermione was on the sofa, still, a book in her lap, soup untouched.

“Didn’t take quite as long as I was expecting.” She remarked, not looking up from her book right away.

Severus came toward her, kneeling at her feet, waiting for her to finish and mark her page before speaking.

“I may need you to run another equation.” He said as her warm, brown eyes met his.

“I expect you’ll have me doing so frequently, and was already prepared to try a few with different factors. What do you need this time?”

“For you to run the equation factoring in Alastor Moody not being quite himself.” Severus said as he reached up and began to undo the buttons on his frock coat once more.

He allowed the smirk when Hermione’s eyes darted to his hands. “How so?” She asked.

“I will explain later. However, first, I need to devour something quite decadent. And then, time permitting, enjoy the lunch that was brought to us.”

“Well if it wasn’t the soup you planned to devour, then what was … it….”

Hermione didn’t get her answer, but Severus was fairly certain she understood precisely what he was thinking of by the time she headed back to her office at the cottage. Her soup was taken with her.

Severus barely had time to finish his.

September 5th, 1994

“Bloody psychopath, is what he is,” Draco ranted, and Aurora, Ginny, and Luna allowed him to as they took a stroll through the grounds on a decently fine day. “That thing could have bitten and killed any of us. And then to show us the bloody curses. If my father hears about this-”

“Are you really going to tell him?” Luna asked.
Draco shrugged. “It’s against the ministry, isn’t it? Showing the curses.”

Aurora could hear the uncertainty in Draco’s voice, the old habit of wanting to run to daddy so he could fix everything, and the broken trust that took place when he realized his father had been among the men to torment a family of muggles, children included, and burn the tents of witches and wizards for merely staying on muggle grounds.

“Maybe so,” Ginny said. “But remember the whole Buckbeak thing last year.”

“Shove it, Weasley.” Draco said with a grin, elbowing Ginny for good measure.

They continued on talking about classes in general, walking about when Aurora noticed Neville sitting by the black lake, seeming to be staring off into the distance. She paused, frowning, glancing around to see if Dean and Seamus, or even Harry and Ron were anywhere nearby, and found Neville alone.

“Rory?” Ginny called, and Aurora looked to see the other three had paused.

“You lot go on, I’ll catch up.” She waved them off, then headed over to the bench Neville sat on. She came around, plopped down beside him, and studied him before he really snapped out of his stupor.

Prior to realizing she was there, he looked … sad. Pained. When he noticed her, he still did, but now his cheeks were turning as red as his tie.

“Hi.” He said quietly.

“Hi,” She said back. “You alright?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He said, sounding automatic in his response.

He started to look distant again. “Draco told me about the lesson. It sounded horrible.” She added.

“It was.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” She asked, and he looked at her as if she were a Cerberus. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to….”

“You know your dad is my boggart, right?” He said suddenly.

“I’m … yeah, I did.” She said, face pinched in confusion. “But what has that to do with me?”

“You aren’t … you aren’t going to tell him so he can use it against me in class?”

At this, her jaw dropped. “Why would you think I would do anything of the sort? I don’t exactly tell him every little detail of everything I hear. I hardly talk to him throughout the year of anything but my studies and asking if he’s heard from mum. You can trust me, Neville. I promise, I’m not some sort of spy for him.”

She felt her face color at the phrase, and vaguely wondered if he ever would have asked it of her. She doubted it.

Neville nodded sheepishly, looking out to the lake again. “It was … it was the cruciatus curse.” He said quietly. “My Gran, she told me that’s how ….” He darted his eyes to her a few times before he spoke the words barely louder than a whisper. “It’s how they lost their minds.” When Aurora frowned, Neville cleared his throat, and seemed to find some courage. “They were aurors. Went into
training together, got married, had me. She always said my mum working while pregnant was what made me not be so magical.”

“What rubbish,” Aurora smirked, seeing a very faint smile pull on Neville’s lips at her opinion.

“Not so sure about that. An Uncle tossed me out the window just to make sure I wasn’t a squib. Anyway. They were … they were rounding up the last of the Death Eaters when … when they found some. The worst ones, those who were really loyal to You-Know-Who and really believed he was still out there. They were outnumbered. And ….

“How Moody showed it to us. You said Malfoy told you about it, so I won’t go in the details. He showed … showed Harry how his parents died. And, I was actually jealous of him. His parents didn’t suffer. His parents were given an end. Mine? They don’t speak. They don’t do anything. I doubt they remember anything. I’m not even sure they know who each other are, let alone me.”

She wasn’t sure if he realized he was crying through his anger, and she didn’t want to draw attention to his tears. But Aurora still acted on the overwhelming need to hug him, wrapping one arm around his back and clutching his shoulder while she wrapped her other arm around his front in a vain attempt to reach her other hand.

Neville half surprised her when he reached up and clutched her arm, holding it tight.

“I get it.” She said softly. “I can’t understand, but I empathize.”

She allowed Neville the comfort, which he didn’t seem to need as long as she expected him to. Eventually, he let go of her arm, allowing her to withdraw.

“How Moody gave me this fascinating book.” He said, gesturing to the one on his lap. “‘Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean. It’s quite an interesting read, really. It’s got a whole section on -”

“Neville,” Aurora cut him off. “Much as I don’t mind lending you an ear for your woes, I’ve had quite enough Herbology for the day.” She said as she got up, satisfied he was calm.

Neville frowned. “But herbology and potions … they go together.”

“So?” She asked, and when he sat silent a moment longer, she rolled his eyes. “Just because I’m Professor Snape’s daughter doesn’t mean I like potions, you know.”

“What do you like, then?” Neville asked, turning to watch her as she backed up the slight slop.

“I quite like Transfiguration. And I’m very interested in Charms and Runes.”

She left out the part that included how she actually did like Potions. It was hardly the point, was it? And it was worth the tease, seeing Neville brighten up. She could almost get used to it, putting a different idea to the name of Snape. Maybe they would all think warm and welcoming and cheerful instead of dungeon bat.

But, then again, her father’s reputation preceded her. Perhaps she’d settle for just expanding her circle of friends.

September 18th, 1976
He sat on the step, caressing the broomstick. His broomstick.

Severus had nearly bought himself one the year before, spending money such a foreign concept that he wanted to purchase just about anything that would make him one of the purebloods. But he withheld, a hope in his chest that maybe he would need new dress robes, and counting all the opportunities there would be to possibly impress Hermione or turn his favor with a gift.

He should have known she wouldn’t have been materialistic, though he’d never have guessed she’d have barely required much pursuing. Admittedly, her mutual attraction to him had certainly aided in boosting his confidence.

But after knowing her heart was as much his as his was hers, that Hermione wouldn’t need to be kept with gifts like he noted many of the girls in Slytherin were, he spoiled himself.

Was the broom top of the line? Hardly. A Cleansweep five, it was significantly cheaper than most of the others to make way for the newer model. But it was brand new, black and silver, and everything Severus dreamed of having when it came to a broom. It had arrived at breakfast, just after Hermione had came (nervously) toward the Slytherin table to inform him she had to go deliver a couple letters to the owlery, and she’d meet him in the courtyard nearest the lake as soon as possible. She had no idea he had it.

Which reminded him.

Reaching in his cloak pocket, he pulled out the small vial of shimmering gold liquid. Oh he would love to be able to brew it, and Slughorn had actually offered to allow him the opportunity if he so chose. But there was something about the glimmer in Slughorn’s eye that made Severus weary enough to decline, citing never having a social life should he attempt such a long term and monumental project while still a student.

He watched the gold liquid roll around inside before glancing about, ensuring no one else was around to see, and taking three drops on his tongue. After all, he knew he needed a small bit of luck for his plan, but certainly not enough for a true dose.

He’d just recapped and tucked away the vial when he sensed her coming toward him.

He liked that, that since their first becoming physically intimate, he could sense Hermione when she was relatively near.

Hermione wrapped her arms around his shoulders, her curls tickling his skin as she frowned at the broom on his lap. “Is that yours?”

“It is.”

“When did you get it? It seems like this is something I would remember you carrying about.” She smirked.

“You had slipped into a more … feminine shop.”

“Ah,” Hermione said with a nod. “So ….” She chewed her lip, looking distrustfully at the broom.

“Have you ridden with someone else before?” He asked.
“Well … not a broom.” She mumbled.

Severus reared back a moment, grinning slightly, “Not something I can know about, I take it?”

“No.” She smirked.

He stood, something telling him to assert some authority in this case. He held out his hand to her, and Hermione took it, first as leverage to get to her feet again, and then to hold on to as they headed toward the quidditch pitch.

She made no protest, and he was sure that, with the Slytherin try outs to take place in an hour, no one would really question why a Slytherin sixth year was heading that way.

“Did your friends play quidditch?” He asked, curious if she would be able to answer. He shifted the broom slung over his shoulder as he took in the rings peeking over the walls of the pitch.

“Two of them were seekers.” She said, taking a deep breath. He squeezed her hand, and she pressed on. “Two were beaters,” She added easier. “The rest were just hopping to get on a team eventually.”

Severus nodded. “And you were not one of them.” He smirked.

“I am ashamed to say that flying was likely my only merely acceptable grade ever.”

“Well,” He said as they came to the field. He swung the broom down, mounted, and kicked off.

Oh he did so love to fly. He was a natural at it, and from time to time, the young flying instructor had taken pity on the poor half blood and allowed him to fly about and escape, well, everything. He hadn’t done so much in fourth year, and even less last year.

He darted around the pitch, feeling the wind rush through his hair, against his face, wanting to close his eyes for the pleasure of it. But there was another sort of pleasure he sought, so he darted down, and hovered near Hermione.

“You want me to ride, don’t you?” She asked in a half whine.

“With me. I’ll hold you, or you can hold on to me, but I would prefer it the other way around, if I am to be frank.” He said with a grin, holding out his hand toward her.

“Severus.” She groaned.

“Where’s that Gryffindor bravery now?” He taunted, knowing it would be precisely the thing to incite her indignation enough to get her to come up with him.

She groaned, stomped her foot, but held her hand out to him. He hoisted her up and on to the stick in front of her, allowing Hermione to hold on to the handle with both hands, and for him to put his arms around her.

There was a bit of extra direction needed of course, but the balance was pretty much there. He took off a bit slower than he had before, and he could feel how utterly terrified she was merely by the stiffness of her spine, but she never made a peep of fear.

In fact, he had thought flying with Hermione would have been heady for the physical aspect. He never would have expected that the greatest pleasure he would get from it was from how much it showed that she trusted him. Eventually, after about the fourth lap around the pitch, she even relaxed a fraction.
He almost said it up there, just after making a quick divergence, Hermione yelping before letting out a peel of laughter as they flew through the center ring on the far end of the field. He almost told her he loved her. That he wanted to marry her. That sixteen or not, he was never going to want to be with anyone else. It would have been simple, but he couldn’t.

The liquid luck had left his veins, and he no longer felt like he could do anything.

October 31st, 1994

Aurora, Luna, Ginny, and Neville were perched on the floor next to a pillar in the Great Hall, watching the comings and goings of those putting their name in the Goblet of Fire.

“It’s really quite interesting to see, isn’t it?” Luna commented. “I thought the Durmstrang lot looked quite fierce, confident. And all of the Beauxbaton contestants were quite graceful. Hogwarts doesn’t seem to have either.”

“Except Cedric,” Ginny said with a sigh. “Did you see the way he smiled? He was confident, fierce, graceful.”

“I sense a crush,” Aurora noted as blasé as she could while Ginny smacked her on the arm.

“I do not have a crush on Cedric Diggory.” Ginny grumbled.

“I would have thought you had,” Luna said. “You were swooning an awful lot when we joined he and Mr Diggory at the port key.”

Ginny turned red and glowered at Luna while Aurora laughed. Neville merely smiled, remaining silent as he had been most of the morning.

Aurora had noticed he hung around quite a bit as of late, especially if Draco wasn’t around. Well, unless Draco wasn’t around or he was, but so was Harry and Ron. Ginny had teased him from time to time, saying he was the honorary Hufflepuff of the group as he had more of their traits than Gryffindor’s most of the time. He didn’t seem to mind.

“Anyone put their name in yet?” Ron asked as he and Harry came up to them.

“All of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons.” Aurora replied. “There’s only been a couple from Hogwarts though.”

“Bet some of them put it in last night after we’d all gone to bed,” Harry said as he leaned on the nearby pillar. “I would’ve if it had been me. Wouldn’t have wanted everyone watching.”

“’Magine you wouldn’t,” Aurora agreed. She then frowned. “Would you have entered? If you’d been old enough?”
“No,” Harry replied with a snorty kind of laugh. “Had enough attention to last me a lifetime. Famous enough for a scar on my head, don’t need to be famous for anything more.”

Aurora had to agree with that.

“Would you have? I mean, would your Dad have even let you?”

“If I were old enough, it wouldn’t really be a matter of ‘let’ would it? I’d be of age. And to be honest, I’m not sure.”

“I would.” Ginny said at the same time Luna and Neville said, “I wouldn’t.”

Laughter drifted down the corridor, and Aurora turned her attention to it just as the Weasley twins and Lee Jordan came around the corner. The twins looked pleased with themselves, and when Fred caught her eye, he looked just a little bit smug, “Done it.” He said.

It took her a moment to remember their ploy. “It’s not going to work.” She countered, smirking and shaking her head.

“Have faith, Snape.” George teased.


“We took an aging potion, dung brains.” Fred said to his brother.

“We discussed it before.” George nodded.

“But you were obviously too busy day dreaming to hear the scheme.”

“Which we hatched. One drop each, only need to be a few months older.” George nodded.

“And we’re going to split the galleons if one of us wins.” Lee said. “We ready, gents?”

“Ready!” The twins said together. As one they jumped over the age line, and raised their hands in triumph as they stayed there. The onlookers around them applauded, and when Fred caught her eye again, tilting his head as though to say, “I told you so” Aurora merely smiled and shook her head.

She watched with baited amusement as, just as the twins were about to put their names in the Goblet of Fire, they were violently expelled from the circle. As they landed on their arses, the twins grew a set of long, white beards.

“I did warn you,” Dumbledore said as he laughed from the other end of the hall, sending the twins and their fine beards off to the hospital wing before entering the great hall for breakfast.

Aurora and the others did the same, waving to Luna as she skipped off to the Ravenclaw table. Aurora noted Harry catching Draco’s eye and giving him a slight nod in greeting, and Draco turned to her and offered her at least a small smile before pretending he was above the Gryffindors.

“I heard Warrington got up early and put ‘is name in,” Dean said as the five sat down near him.

“Can’t have a Slytherin champion!” Ron protested immediately.

“Depends on who it is.” Harry countered.

“Don’t start,” Ron frowned. “And even if that were a possibility, I’d still say no.”
“All the Hufflepuffs are talkin’ about Diggory.” Seamus grumbled. “Surprised he’d have wanted to risk his good looks.”

Whether she meant to or not, Ginny blushed again. “He’s above that,” She said. “He doesn’t exactly strut around like he knows he’s pretty.”

“Like Professor Lockhart?” Aurora suggested, and Ginny nodded emphatically.

As breakfast passed, Angelina Johnson, a beautiful girl who was one of the best chasers Aurora had ever seen on a school team, had come to the table with the backing of cheers as she’d put her name in the Goblet.

There were a few more cheers, each heralding a different member of each house as they’d returned from submitting themselves as champions, and for once, no one seemed worried about house rivalries. Well, except Ron, who refused to applaud for any Slytherins.

“Do we want to hang around and find out who all the possible champions are?” Ginny asked after Harry and Ron declared they were going to meet up with Draco (with much grumbling from Ron) and visit Hagrid.

“No,” Aurora said, shaking her head. “We’re going to find out tonight who’s selected, and I would rather not spend the whole day inside if it can be helped.”

“We could walk the lake,” Neville suggested.

“Sounds great! I’ll go get Luna.” Ginny said, bolting over.

“What was that about?” Aurora asked, finding it odd how quickly her friend took off.

“No idea.” Neville said, eyes shifting about as he fidgeted. Weird.

There were so many emotions bubbling and raging through Severus that only years of occlumency had kept him appearing completely calm.

Fear was the most predominate. Potter was not that much older than Aurora, and he looked utterly terrified. Anger, because he doubted very, very much that the little twerp got past the age line on his own. That meant he either got someone else to put it in, or Albus decided the Chosen One should appear so powerful that he could override anything. Confusion, for his wife’s calculations were never wrong, and he knew now that the low possibility of danger for Potter she predicted was very, very off. And then there was unease, because really, he knew this was a bad idea.

As soon as the boy disappeared through the side door, the Great Hall erupted in protest. Not only were the Hogwarts students rightly pissed off that Potter was stealing Diggory’s spotlight, but the guest students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang were indignant over not having a second champion themselves. Let alone a younger one.

“Silence!” Albus called out as Barty Crouch slunk toward the door to the anti-chamber where the champions were waiting. “Your Heads of House will escort you back to your dormitories, where you will remain for the rest of the evening. The house elves, I’m sure, will be very willing to arrange
some refreshments.”

As soon as Albus turned to him, Severus was ready with a sharp remark, but it died on his tongue. Albus was … scared. Oh he still had the placid smile of a loony old man who was not quite all there, but his eyes had always bore his true emotions, and right now, the fate of Potter was not at all one he designed himself.

“As soon as you have your Slytherins where they need to be, join me in my office, please, Severus.”

“Yes, Albus.” He said, appearing all the world like he was utterly calm and not at all affected. He turned to the Slytherins, mixed with the Durmstrang students.

He beckoned as he came off the dais, marching down the length of the table in long strides that demanded compliance. He caught Draco’s eye briefly, and knew the young man wanted to speak to him once they were all in the dungeons. He’d likely have a moment before Albus would require him, and he didn’t doubt for a moment that Minerva would want to have a say in whatever they were about to discuss.

Once down in the dungeons, he stood by the entry to the common room, watching as the Slytherins and Durmstrang students filed in together.

“Prefects,” He said, silencing the room before it hardly got started. “Kindly show our guests to their quarters.” He made no other remarks as he turned to leave, noticing Draco out in the corridor. He arched a brow.

“Harry didn’t …” He said very, very quietly. “I know he didn’t.”

“How are you so sure? He seeks attention and fame, much like his father.”

“He doesn’t,” Draco snapped, and that had Severus raise both eyebrows in surprise. Draco took a breath, and then used that voice that grated Severus the most. “Potter is actually quite boring. You would think a wizard who had that much fame and recognition attached to him would bask in it. Instead, when asked if given the chance, he said he’d gladly let someone else have a go.”

“And you believe him?” Severus asked.

“He’s a bad liar.” Draco countered.

Severus nodded once. “In.” He pointed over his shoulder, and Draco obeyed without another word.

With Draco among the other Slytherins, Severus made his way to the Headmaster’s office.

Much as he hated to admit it, Severus was starting to think that maybe Potter wasn’t like his father after all. Oh, he and James may have gotten along in the end, a necessity for the order as much as it was for the fact that he was Lily’s husband. But James had always been pompous, bragging how he was wanted for a professional quidditch team, how he was an heir to something that wasn’t blood stained, old galleons of old blood purists. He would always smirk and put his arm around Lily when he was near as though they were still fourteen, and Lily was still the girl Severus longed for.

Yet Hermione, Aurora, and now even Draco boasted Harry was nothing of the fame seeking sort. Hermione had said he had always just tried to keep his head down and escape his life with his aunt. Aurora had said he was actually less arrogant than Draco on a good day.

He didn’t like the shift in perspective. He didn’t want to hate Potter when he first arrived at the school, but when he opened his mouth, his personality too much like James and not enough like Lily,
and with all the excitement and attention swirling around him…. He tried, subtly, of course, but it seemed that no matter what he did, Potter was set on despising him.

Perhaps this will be the year it changed.

He gave the password, and took the steps two at a time, and opened the door to find Albus appearing pensive by the pensieve.

He waited, quietly, watching Albus as the frown deepened, and then relaxed on his old face. He noted Alastor creeping in, and noted how he seemed to stay in the shadows, watching them both.

Minerva did not come in quietly, nor did she hold back, not that Severus had expected it.

“This cannea go on, Albus!” She declared, coming to stand by Severus. “First the dark mark, now this!”

“What do you suggest, Minerva?” Albus asked, seeming more exhausted than Severus had seen him in a while.

“Put an end to it, don’t let Potter compete.”

“Barty said the rules are absolute. The name emerging from the Goblet of Fire is a binding, magical contract.”

“The devil it is,” Minerva hissed. “He didnea put his name in there, and ye cannea convince me he did.”

“Albus, while I agree with Professor McGonagall, if we are to truly discover the meaning of these events perhaps we should, for the time being, let them unfold.”

Minerva looked at him like he’d just announced that not only would he offer Potter up for bait, but he’d sell Hermione and the children for potions parts in Knockturn Alley. Flabbergasted, she looked rapidly between all three wizards in the room.

“Do nothing!” She finally managed. “Offer him as bait? Potter is a boy, not a piece of meat.”

“I agree with Severus.” Albus said, and Minerva physically recoiled. “Alastor, keep an eye on Harry, will you?”

Alastor agreed, and Albus made some remark while pulling threads of memory from his mind and flicking them into the penseive. Severus felt nails digging through his layers of cotton and wool, attempting to pierce his skin through his shield, and he turned a bored gaze to the very angry witch beside him.

Without a word, he swept from the room, Minerva being kind enough to remove her grip as he made his exit clear, and she followed with a hard click of her shoes.

They just left the stair case when she started in on him.

“You are like a son to me, Severus Snape, so donea think for one moment I won’t tear you limb from.”

“Something’s not right.” Severus cut her off instantly, quietly, and all her anger washed away. “Alastor is not himself, I know he isn’t. That, and Potter’s name being added? There is something going on, and with Pettigrew out there…..”
“You think he could be Alastor?”

“I believe we need to be suspicious. Hermione was kind enough to run numbers, and had none of this happened, Potter would have had a relatively uneventful year. Factoring in Alastor not being himself, the rate of trouble and danger increased. When she hears of this…..”

“It will likely come out that Potter is in grave danger indeed.”

“Isn’t he always?” Severus half quipped before sighing. “Until we know who Alastor Moody is, if there is something wrong with him, then I believe we need to … be less familiar in his presence.”

“But Hermione….,” Minerva started while Severus shook his head.

“He didn’t seem to remember I was even married.” Severus said quietly. “And what’s more, should he be imperiused, or someone in disguise, it was believed that Hermione was … glad to be free of her guardians. To what extent anyone would know or remember.”

“Right, yes,” Min said, eyes down cast as she began to wring her hands. “And Aurora, should I…?”

“No, let Aurora be treated the same. At best, she is merely a student keeping out of trouble and has the respect of her teachers. At worse, they will believe Hermione likely left me during my stint in Azkaban, and my daughter does not know me.”

“And when Hermione comes as your companion to the Yule Ball?” Minerva challenged, her mood brightening a fraction.

Severus grumbled. “Bloody hell, I’d forgotten the resurrected that nonsense.”

“That nonsense earned you your wife.” She challenged.

“No, I won her before hand. It simply afforded me a safe way to engage her feelings. Now I have a daughter to deal with.”

“Who is in third year.”

“Who would be permitted to go if she is asked and accepts.” He ran a hand down his face. “I will need to think of a plan to handle the brown nosers and opportunists before it’s announced.”

“You’re juggling again.” Minerva noted.

“Yes,” Severus said. “Though I don’t know if I ever truly stopped. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have guests to attend to.” He sneered at the word, earning a chuckle from his sort-of in-law, before he headed down to the dungeons.

It was all wrong, all of it wrong, and he was so uncertain as to how things would play out, a letter to Black was looking very much like a good idea. A note from a guardian had to be worth something.

Chapter End Notes
Until next time :)

“Where are you taking us, Black?” Severus demanded as he, Hermione, and Lily followed the Marauders through Hogsmeade toward the residential areas.

“Wait,” Sirius said, turning and walking backward with a mischievous grin on his face. “You’ll see, Snape.”

“I’m not sure this is a good idea.” Remus said, standing more with the trio than his fellow mischief makers. “The chances of us getting caught ….”

“Relax, Moony.” James said over his shoulder. “Slughorn and Baxter are chaperoning, and they never actually pay attention to who left and who came back.”

“Not to mention that no one seems to have noticed we came out this way.” Peter chipped in.

“But where are we going?” Lily asked, looking around at the cottages with a frown.

“Peter’s Aunt left not long ago for Italy.” James said.

“And my parents are away in France.” Sirius said with a twitch of his eyebrows.

“And what does all this have to do with where we are going?” Severus asked.

“Because, Flooing doesn’t count as magic.” Sirius said as if that explained everything.

“Because Peter’s Aunt had a home here in Hogsmeade, and Sirius’ parents live in London.” Remus explained, eyeing Sirius in warning, though of what Hermione didn’t know.

“So, wait. You want us to floo to London!” Lily asked, quickening her step to grab James’ arm and pull him to a stop. “Why? What’s the point?”

“Why not?” James asked, his smile brightening. “It would be fun, wouldn’t it? Getting away from the school? Properly away?”

“And what if we get caught?”

“We won’t, Evans.” James reassured, moving so quickly to take her hand that Lily wouldn’t have had time to pull away. She looked surprised by the maneuver, but only attempted to pull away slightly. “Come on.” And with that, James gave her hand a firm tug and pulled her at a quicker pace toward a house on the left, Peter rushing to keep up.

“If you want to turn back now, it’s probably for the best.” Remus said sheepishly.

“You’re a prefect, Remus.” Hermione said, watching as Sirius took off after James, Lily, and Peter.
“You can follow them all you like, but I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Much as the idea of getting away from the castle appeals, I believe Hermione is right. While Slughorn and Baxter do not pay much attention to those who come and go, I’m afraid there are other professors that do. And while not in the village themselves today, I believe they may notice if a group of students commonly seen around the school are nowhere to be seen.”

“Not to mention that London is not exactly small, and it’s quite easy to think you’re only going to be a short while and then find yourself three hours gone on the other side of the city.” Hermione offered. “And with the trace still on all of you, should something happen.”

“Sirius is only a few days off of his seventeenth.” Remus hedged.

“And a few days still matter!” Hermione countered, letting go of Severus’ hand and going up to grasp Remus by the shoulders. “Please, go get them, bring them back.”

“I doubt I can convince them to come back.” Remus sighed, rubbing his forehead. He seemed so unsure, torn, and it broke Hermione’s heart. “I can’t … I put too much distance between myself and James and Peter, and I need them. I … I’m going. I’m sorry, I have to.” He then reached into his pocket, pulling out a thick bundle of parchment. “But having you stay behind is good, in case something does happen. If we aren’t back by, say, six o’clock, and hour after we should have been, let McGonagall know.”

“And how will we know? What if we don’t see you?” Severus asked.

“You will with this.” Remus said, pulling out his wand and placing it against the parchment. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

“What is this?” Severus said with intrigue and a touch of lust, taking the parchment from Remus as the magic formed the map.

“Our way of causing mischief and mayhem all over Hogwarts. And, admittedly, for being able to find you in our younger days. Your lab has never made it on there, as being near the hospital wing, it was always assumed it was just a part of it. A private room we’d never been in.”

“We’ll take care of it.” Hermione said, shifting from foot to foot. “Are you sure you want to go?”

“No,” Remus grinned. “But I think I need to.”

With that, he took off toward the house, and from the chorus of cheers that erupted the moment he disappeared, it was safe to say they were waiting for him. She doubted they’d have waited for them, though Hermione wasn’t sure she minded.

Severus ran his hand lovingly over the map, his face contorted somewhere between awe and pain. Putting her hand on his shoulder, her chin against his arm, Hermione asked, “What’s wrong?”

He said nothing for the longest time.

“It’s a wonderful piece of magic,” He said quietly. “Think of the work that went into this, the charms that needed to be done. Loathed as I am to admit it, Potter and Black were always good with charms. But this … this is how they tormented me for so long. Why I had to find refuge in the lab or my own dormitory. They thought I was in the Hospital Wing, Hermione. I was left alone for the sheer fact they thought I was already a kicked dog. All those times I avoided Madam Pomfrey, healed myself, just so they wouldn’t feel like they’d won, and they did so anyway. All these years I thought that nothing would make them stop, and all these years … it might have.”
She hugged him and heard him groan in displeasure.

“Bloody hell, Witch.”

“You’re having a moment.” She countered.

“I’m having a revelation, not an emotional break down.”

“For you they’re often one in the same, or at least closely related.”

“Would you desist?”

“No, you like it.” She smirked against his sleeve.

“Whether I do or not is beside the point.” He grumbled, and Hermione chuckled before kissing his cheek and letting him go.

He shifted his gaze to the side and studied her. “You knew about this beforehand, didn’t you?” he asked, gesturing with the map. She knew how guilty she must have looked, because his whole demeanor softened. “I am not angry that you did. I know you wouldn’t have been able to tell me. Unless, of course, you could?”

“I knew about it,” She said carefully. “But not … not because they showed me.”

“Interesting.” Severus said more to himself. He then gave a mighty huff and straightened. “Well, we find ourselves in Hogsmeade sans entourage. What would you like to do?”

“I’m not sure.” She said, gently removing the map from his hands and withdrawing her wand. “Mischief Managed.” She said, and the map disappeared.

“Oh, you have intimate knowledge of this.”

“First time really handling it myself, though.” She said with a smirk. She then tucked the map into her bag and took his hand. “Let’s just walk about. I have no real desire to be anywhere but with you.”

“You’re just full of sentiment, aren’t you?” Severus said, giving her hand a tug as they headed away from the residential areas and back into the village proper.

“I do have my moments, you know. Which, I believe, are perfectly acceptable.”

“In moderation, I suppose.” Severus smirked.

“Did you slip yourself some Syrup of Snark or something today?” She asked, and he threw his head back and laughed, loud and boisterous as they rounded the corner toward the shops.

“If I ever invent a potion, regardless of what it does, I will name it that just for you.” He said.

“Will this be before or after Ziggy the Bowtruckle?” She asked.

“We’ll see what comes-”

“Severus!” Lucius cut him off, and Hermione paled at his voice. She managed to put on a smile just as she caught his attention, and he smiled back warmly in return. “And your lady. Hermione, a pleasure to see you again. I had hoped to encounter you again at one of Slughorn’s parties, but you were apparently snubbed.”
“Well,” Hermione shrugged, blushing as she tried to think of something. “I suppose I simply wasn’t interesting enough. Nor, I suppose, did I seem particularly skilled in anything.”

“It is an utter shame, considering the … lessers he invites for the show of it.” At this Lucius glanced around. “Come, I had hoped to see you, at least, Severus, considering it was a Hogsmeade weekend.”

“How were you informed?” Severus asked as he squeezed Hermione’s hand as he started following Lucius.

“Old Sluggy himself, actually. He mentioned his chaperoning this weekend in a letter when he was inviting me to the dinner to take place in a couple weeks.”

Severus said nothing, and Hermione was too terrified of saying the wrong thing to comment.

Lucius led them towards the Hogs Head, stopping a few feet from the door.

“How, Hermione, my dear, are you of age?”

“Y-yes.” She said.

Lucius smirked. “Good.” Without another word, he led them into the pub nearly never populated by the Hogwarts students.

It was dark inside with hardly anyone else around. A young man, gaunt and pale, tended the bar and merely nodded at the trio as they entered and headed for a corner table, tucked far away from the entrance.

“I do hope I am not taking away from your plans,” Lucius asked.

“We had none as it were.” Severus replied. “Merely wanted to escape the confines of the castle.”

“I heard you have an American professor this year. That must make you feel quite at home, Hermione.” Lucius commented as the bartender came around and set three fire whiskeys on the table.

“To be quite honest, I never really felt at home stateside.” She said while looking at the slightly smoky liquid with apprehension.

Severus, much to her surprise, picked up the tumbler and took a swig.

Lucius seemed to approve of both of them. “Yes, I heard they are indecently muggle there. But it’s good to see at least their influence hasn’t tainted your good breeding too badly.” He said, gesturing to her outfit.

When the marauders had initially asked them to join their mischief for the day, they did so with a warning to dress muggle. Severus, having no real muggle clothes while at Hogwarts, had donned trousers and a green oxford, untucked, sleeves rolled up, in an effort to look casual. They had teased them at first for showing up similarly dressed, as Hermione had chosen trousers and a blouse, though her top was blue and worn beneath a plain, brown cardigan.

It was young, and perhaps quite modern for wizarding wear, but not considered out right muggle in origin.

“I can’t say I was one for the fashion in the Americas.” Hermione said smoothly, causing Lucius to
Smirk before turning his attention to Severus.

He lifted his tumbler to his lips, grey eyes locked on black. “Your article is gaining attention.” He said smoothly.

Severus frowned, “I had no idea you read such things.”

“Normally I do not. However, it was brought to my attention by a member of my … circle. He was quite annoyed, having been dabbling in potions and working to achieve a Mastery himself. He’s a couple years older than you, Bulgarian, I believe. A fine gentleman, I must say, but he seems to be lacking something. Either way, he brought it to all our attention, and, of course, none of us thought anything of it until your name was mentioned. Really, I couldn’t help myself and had to mention that you were only sixteen. *That*, dear friend, raised some eyebrows.”

Severus remained impassive in appearances, but Hermione had noticed the spark of pride in his eyes.

“I’m in talks, Severus. I know a couple masters personally who are quite interested in the talent you’re showing.”

“Much as I appreciate the sentiment, Lucius, I’m afraid I can’t afford it.”

“Who said anything about your affording it?” Lucius smirked. “I am, after all, quite wealthy.”

“I cannot ask for you to sponsor me.”

“And you wouldn’t be.”

“Nor do I wish to be in debt to you.” Severus replied, and Lucius chuckled.

“Perhaps the debt wouldn’t be to me.” The blonde said before taking a drink of his whiskey. He turned his attention to Hermione. “Do you often stay with Severus during the holidays?” he asked.

“Umm, well, in a way, yes. We’re together for them, if that’s what you mean.”

Lucius bowed his head. “I will be hosting a party before the New year. A ball, if you will. I was hoping to extend the invitation to Severus, and by extension, you. I would have hated for you to have to choose between him and … what do you call them? Certainly not your parents.”

“My guardians.” Hermione swallowed the panicked lump in her throat.

“Excellent. I hope to see you both there,” he said as he checked his pocket watch. He scowled. “I am afraid I have to cut our visit short. It was a pleasure to see you again, Hermione. You are exactly as exquisite as I remembered. Severus, I will see you at Slughorn’s soiree.”

“Until then, Lucius.” He said with a nod as Lucius got to his feet. He bowed once before turning with a sweep of his robes and headed out the doors.

The second he was gone, Severus grabbed his tumbler and downed the liquor, grimacing and groaning as he slammed the glass down on the table.

“My sentiments exactly, though I’m afraid I can’t quite be as demonstrative.”

Severus said nothing for a long time, breathing heavy as he seemed to stare at nothing.

“I know the kind of circle Lucius is in.” He said quietly. “I know, and while just about anyone with any knowledge of it would give there left arm to be in it, I … I haven’t …” He bowed his head. “I
was right there with them, wanting in, until I started to hang around you. For once, someone thought I was worth something just being myself. And it only grew, and I had nothing to do with them, not beyond what I had to.”

“And you don’t have to.” Hermione assured.

Severus scoffed. “Yes, well, that would be easy for you to say, wouldn’t it? You have your eye on Arithmancy Mistress, or Transfigurations. The former is ready to retire and would jump at the chance of having you replace him after taking you one as an apprentice, the latter is practically your bloody aunt. You don’t need to worry about a sponsorship, as either one will take you and have the school cover your costs. Whereas I would never stoop to study under Slughorn, and only have options abroad. I don’t have the galleons, Hermione. I would need to work with Bob for years to come.”

He had a point, and she hated that he did.

Before they could discuss it further, a man who looked disturbingly like the headmaster came in. He moved sharply toward the bar, had just gone behind it, when he saw them.

“You two better be of age.” He growled, sounding nothing the genial man she knew.

“We are, but don’t trouble yourself. We were just leaving,” Severus said, rising to his feet and waiting for her to do the same. He made no move to hold her hand as they left, and Hermione looped her arm through his as he shoved his hands in his pockets instead.

After a few aimless steps, Hermione stopped him.

Kissing him on the cheek, she said, “I’ll give you space.” And then withdrew the Marauder’s map and gave it to him. “I’ll head back up to the castle. Find me if you want to talk.” She gave his arm a squeeze before she headed back to the castle.

Lonely, down trodden, and feeling like maybe the end to this wonderful thing between them was much nearer than she thought.

Severus hadn’t waited that long after Hermione left before heading back to the castle himself. In the quiet of his dormitory, he watched her marker in the library, knowing when she was relocating or likely finding a book by the way she moved.

It was a day with too many revelations, first with the map, and then with the thought of an apprenticeship being so closely in his grasp. And yet, would it be worth involving himself with the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters? Even if Lucius was his sponsor, he had a feeling deep in his gut that the man expected he join him. He would have to pretend he truly believed their blood supremacy, which was difficult to swallow. He may have hated his muggle father, and not been fond of muggles in general, but that didn’t mean they were all awful. And he’d seen enough from Hermione, Lily, and others that muggleborn certainly didn’t mean less powerful.

He growled, seething, raging inside as his ambition whispered assurances he didn’t want. Hermione may be muggleborn, but very few if any knew that truth. And it wasn’t like Lily wasn’t about to ditch him before Hermione came into their lives. How close had he gotten to walking this path anyway? And at least now he did so with more credit than before. The power he could have, the
success, and with much less effort.

But was he willing to stoop that low? And what would Hermione think? He knew he shouldn’t base his decisions on her, she could up and leave him at any time for someone better.

Yet there was a fleeting image in the distance that he desperately wanted to grab hold of. Of seeing her in her best dress robes while bonding their hearts, souls, and magic until the end of their days. Of bringing a horde of children to platform 9 3/4 before returning to their home where they could spend their days in academic bliss.

Severus yanked on his hair, wishing he had an easy answer, when a dot on the grounds near the gate caught his eye: Alastor Moody.

Snatching up the map, Severus tucked it into his back pocket before practically running out the dorms, and through the empty common room to try and meet the auror at the doors.

There were no upperclassmen to see him, no younger student would dare say anything, and something told him that he was exactly who he needed to hash this out with.

He got to the entry hall just as the doors opened, and he was momentarily taken aback by the replacement eye rolling around Moody’s face.

The Auror smirked. “Interesting bit of enhancement, this. Knew you were on the other side before I even opened the door.” He hobbled over, using a walking stick to support himself, and clapped Severus on the shoulder. “How ya doing lad?” He asked.

There was a niggle in Severus’ mind that he knew was Moody testing him. Instead of resisting, he arched a brow and showed Moody the conversation in the Hogs Head.

Moody’s smile faded a bit. “Interesting.”

“I was hoping you could offer me advice.” Severus said.

Moody seemed to consider this. “For now? Keep this bit to yourself and Granger. And go find her and make up. Right now, she’s probably thinkin’ you’re right pissed off at her and you ain’t got no reason to be. Otherwise, I’m gonna maul over what ya told me, see if there’s something to be done about it.”

Severus nodded, masking the disappointment and tucking it away behind his ever present Occulmency shields.

“Hey,” Moody said, squeezing his shoulder. “Nothin’s as desperate as it seems. Nothin. Constant Vigilance, and that ain’t just about Dark Wizards and the like.” He tapped Severus hard on the forehead. “Use that, think of another way.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Severus said with a nod.

“I ain’t your professor, lad.” Moody countered.

“And thank god for that. You left the office a mess.” Severus turned around and stepped away from his former professor so the grey-haired witch who was his current DADA instructor to approach. She eyed Severus suspiciously, as she had often upon arriving, and then turned a warm smile to Moody. “I was on my way up to see Dumbledore. I thought, perhaps, since I only promised to be here for a year, he could arrange for some better way of relaying information to my successor.”
“Good luck with that, Scamander. Shoulda seen the mess I was left with.”

The two aurors headed toward the staircase, the elder comically more spry, and Severus waited for them to around the corner before he let out a heavy sigh.

Maybe he could write his mother, let her know what was going on, finally let her in on some of the less pleasant side of the Hogwarts and the Wizarding world, even though living with his Grandmother had likely alerted her to some of it.

And when he was done that, he would find Hermione.

———H———-

She smiled to herself when she heard the familiar footfalls coming down the stairs, never pulling her gaze from the window.

When Hermione felt his hand on her shoulder, she merely brought hers up to cover his. When he dropped the marauders map in her lap, she glanced at it and snorted.

“How long have they been waiting in the tunnel while Professor McGonagall and Alastor chatted outside her office?” She asked him.

“Long enough that Black and Pettigrew have both moved away from the others three times. I considered going down to ask an inane question and pull them into McGonagall’s office, but decided it would probably be best to let them sweat it.”

She giggled, picturing him for a moment standing in a blatantly obvious spot, blocking the way for Harry and Ron and anyone else foolish enough to tag along with them on their mischief making in the future.

“I want you to know,” He said quietly, “I in no way think you should delay your education, nor do I resent that it is likely your pursuits will be easier to obtain than mine. I merely resent that the options presented to me, the easiest ones, come with a condition, one I do not wish to engage in.”

“I know,” Hermione said, turning toward him, shifting so one leg fell off the low ledge. “But we have time. This year has barely begun, and we have a whole other one ahead of us. Something will come up, I’m sure it will.”

“You would be, wouldn’t you?” He teased before seeming to noticed that she was gasping slightly. “Merlin, Hermione, that … you didn’t say anything, really.”

She shook her head, allowing him to pull her to him, and then rested her head against his chest. She couldn’t even explain why it was the vow triggered. After all, something had to have come up for he wouldn’t be the potion’s master she knew in the future if it hadn’t.

And then it smacked her so hard her eyes widened and she pulled back.

The sneers and insults.

The scathing remarks.

The horrible, horrible way he treated her in her past and his future.
All with that underlying regret in his black eyes.

Because Hermione Granger circa 1990s was a Muggleborn Know-It-All and was not at all afraid to claim it.

Something would come up. Something that already had, she was realizing. Something that would explain everything, and yet ….

Hermione burst into sobs. For the relief of realizing that there was a chance for a future with him, even if they didn’t stay together. For the fate he would likely resign himself to gain what he desperately wanted. For the terrible, horrible uncertainty that lay ahead in that regard.

“I don’t know why you’re crying,” He said half panicked. “Was it me?” She shook her head. “Can you tell me?” She shook her head again. He remained quiet, still. “Then let it out, Love. I’m here. It’s okay, it will be okay.”

She clung to him more desperately, crying until her eyes hurt and ignoring every polite inquiry and the occasional rude reply her boyfriend gave. And when the tears finally stopped, she made no move to leave the safe space of his arms until he warned her curfew was coming.

Hermione nodded, stepping back and allowing Severus to pick up the map that had tumbled to the floor when she came off the ledge. He held it as he walked her back to the tower, only handing it over after he checked the corridors for anyone watching. It was also when he gave her a quick kiss goodnight. “I will see you in the morning. And perhaps, then, things will look better.”

She nodded, gave the password, and headed inside.

Glancing at the map, her melancholy cleared for a moment when she realized that the marauders and Lily were still stuck in the tunnel, this time with Professor Dumbledore joining Minerva and Alastor.

“If you could just pull yourself together!” She thought to herself, heading upstairs and to the dorm.

November 2nd, 1994

“I don’t understand how he, or anyone really thinks I did it.” Harry said as he and Aurora sat in the courtyard, waiting for the few others that would likely join them. Harry hadn’t had the cold shoulder let up once since his name came out of the Goblet, and Aurora was only glad her friend had classes for the last two days to act as a bit of a buffer from the ridicule.

“But it especially hurts that Ron believes it.” Aurora nodded, playing with the hem of her robe.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “And without Hermione to talk sense into him.”

“But this was the idiot that believed she bought her cat purposely to antagonize his rat.” Aurora pointed out, and despite the melancholy, Harry’s lips twitched. “She’d have likely been just as miserable, probably feeling the need to divvy up her attention.”
“Yeah,” Harry sighed.

“Stop sounding so forlorn, Potter. It hardly befits a champion, even if it’s a champion who shouldn’t be one.” Draco said from behind them, plopping down on the other side of Harry as Ginny and Luna came around to sit in front of them.

“Says the Slytherin sporting a ‘Potter Stinks’ badge.” Harry tapped a knuckle against the pin on Draco’s robes.

The blonde looked down and sneered at it, removing it from his robes and brushing his hand vigorously over the spot where it had been. “Bloody Parkinson accosted me with it. Couldn’t exactly tell her no, and even when I tried to point out how it ruined my robes, she just rolled her eyes at me.”

“I tried to enchant mine to say that Harry was set up, but it wouldn’t let me. Apparently, it came across as too nice.” Luna said as she began handing out sandwiches.

“Is that how you got those burns on your hands?” Ginny asked.

“Oh, yes. It was a nasty little protection, but it didn’t hurt too badly.” Luna said all this with a smile, and Draco shook his head while Harry merely looked at her incredulously.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Neville panted as he plopped down in a heap between Aurora and Ginny. “I… forgot… we … were meeting … out here. Seamus … and Dean … distracted me.”

“And Ron,” Harry pointed out. “You can admit he tried to get you to stay and eat with them instead of me.”

“Not everything’s about you, Potter.” Draco groaned.

“Actually, Harry’s right. He was.” Neville said sheepishly.

“Why is he being such a prat?” Ginny growled.

“Wish I knew.” Harry said.

“It’s because he doesn’t want to be seen as second best.” Luna said, getting everyone but Neville to pause eating momentarily. “He is Harry Potter’s best friend. And before Hermione left, he was almost seen as third best. You were the one who vanquished You-Know-Who, Hermione was the Brightest Witch of her age, and Ron was, well, Ron.”

“So, the Weasel’s jealous?” Draco asked as he brushed crumbs from his hands.

“Suppose, he does have our brothers to live up to.” Ginny said thoughtfully.

“Yes. He was hoping to come out from under their shadows, and merely fell into Harry’s. And now it will seem worse.”

“Well he could trade places with me, if he wanted to. See how glorious it is when he breaks a leg or his neck.”

“Such confidence in your friend’s abilities, Mr Potter. It is no wonder Weasley has stuck by you through this … troubling time.” Aurora looked up to see her father looming over them just behind Harry. “Or maybe it is an assessment of your own skills projected on to him?”

Aurora could see Harry’s eyes go cold, and a sharp retort perched on his lips as he clenched his fists.
“Potter can at least figure out what he’s doing on his own. Weasel practically needed Granger to hold his hand though basic classes.” Draco countered, and Harry’s anger melted away into confusion.

“Indeed. Though I don’t recall Potter being particularly proficient himself.”

“Well I doubt any of the tasks would require me to brew my way to victory.” Harry said, seemingly in spite of himself. “Not exactly what anyone would call riveting, would it?”

Harry seemed to force himself to look at Professor Snape, and when Aurora glanced at her father there was the unmistakable hint of satisfaction in his eyes, a slight, barely visible up turn of his lips, and a tilt to his head.

“No, I suppose to most it would not be.” He then straightened up. “After dinner, the six of you are to find yourselves on the Quidditch pitch.”

Aurora perked up, “Just the six of us?” She asked.

Her dad sighed. “No more than ten.” He countered.

“Why the Quidditch pitch?” Draco asked.

“Because it is quite difficult for anyone with any sort of impairment to hobble their way there.” Professor Snape replied before turning and heading inside, robes billowing, his presence causing a parting of younger students.

“I’m not sure what just happened.” Harry said. “I thought he was … but was Snape, Professor … your dad … teasing me?”

“Bantering, more like.” Aurora replied.

“Uncle Severus never teases.” Draco said firmly.

“That’s not entirely true.” Aurora countered.

“It was actually kinda … funny.” Ginny said thoughtfully. “I mean, it was mean, I guess, but not …”

“Has he always been like that?” Harry asked, frowning. “Mean but … not really. He pushes my buttons, and he’s always so quick to mock me. But Sirius, well, he said that Snape was always like that. It was his nature. He mocked and did things to purposely get those around him riled up, but he only ever set out to hurt if someone hurt him.”

“Mum told me once that when they first me, he was quite unpleasant. It wasn’t until she sort of made it known that nothing he would say would really get to her that he sort of let up. Sort of, he still mocks her and taunts her, but she either just rolls her eyes or gets him back.”

“I’m fairly certain at least a third of the conversations between our fathers is who can land the sharpest barb.” Draco nodded.

“It must be a Slytherin thing.” Luna said. “Even you still prefer to engage Harry in conversation by being slightly antagonistic.”

“Wait, I still want to know why we’re going to the Quidditch pitch.” Ginny said, looking to Aurora. “Does this have something to do with your birthday?”

“Probably. But the pitch itself isn’t usable for a game. Dad said they were doing something to it for
one of the tasks for the tournament.”

“It’s … it’s your birthday?” Neville asked, and when Aurora nodded he blushed. “Happy birthday.”

She smiled. “Thanks. And it’s okay, by the way, that you didn’t know.”

Neville blushed deeper, and Harry smirked while Draco looked a bit put off by it.

The rest of their lunch, however, was passed in companionable conversation about things not related to Aurora’s day of birth, or the tournament Harry unwittingly found himself in.

———A———-

“And where have you lot been?” Ron demanded as Aurora, Harry, Ginny, the twins, and Neville came through the portrait hall, still all smiles and laughter from the night’s events.

“Where have we been?” George said.

“Best night of our lives, where we were.” Fred said.

“Doubt it. Not with that cheat.” Ron said, gesturing to Harry who promptly lost all his good humor and returned the cold glare.

“Doubt it? Doubt it! Do you hear that Forge? He doubts that he missed out on being part of one of the best nights ever because he’s a prat.”

“Should we tell him all about, Gred?”

“I think we should.”

“Tell me about what?” Ron asked, uncertainty starting to come through.

Ginny collapsed into a nearby chair, a dreamy look on her face. “Racing Viktor Krum.”

“The best cake I think I’ve ever had,” Neville said in nearly the same dreamy tone.

“The most fun I think I would have ever had with Snape present.” Harry chipped in, a smirk coming over his face and growing as Aurora smacked him. Her Dad did, after all, demand that no one on the pitch breathe a word of how he was with them when he could step out of Professor mode and just be her father. Her snarky, sarcastic father, but at least they could all drop the “sir” and be more casual for the evening.

Ron merely looked like he was waiting for someone to start laughing, the joke finally being revealed.

“So, we went up to the Quidditch pitch,” George started, flopping down on one side of the sofa while Fred flanked him on the other. “Not sure what to expect.”

“When there’s Snape, McGonagall, and a couple other folks we didn’t recognize.” Fred added in.

“And our brooms.”

“Which McGonagall got for all of us.”
“The pitch is being re-done”
“At least there was still all kinds of growth there.”
“But Snape said we would still be able to fly.”
“Special permission from Dumbledore.”
“But after cake of course.”
“Of course.”
“Why cake?” Ron asked, looking about.
“Rory’s birthday,” Neville said.
“We don’t get cake for our birthdays.” Ron protested.
“You’re not the child or godchild of staff,” Aurora countered.
“So, we’re all enjoying a slice,” Fred continued.
“Truly the best, really. Except mum’s.” George added.
“When a bunch of the Bulgarians come up.”

“‘Headmaster Karkaroff said ve could fly here. Vas he not right?’” George attempted to mimic the Bulgarian’s accent.

Fred chuckled before putting on a serious face and deepening his voice, “‘But of course you can. Just know that these Hogwarts students were invited here to do the same.’”

“And then Viktor suggested they all fly together, especially when he saw Harry there. ‘Good fun,’ he called it, for the sake of sportsmanship.” George added.

“The race was actually Professor Snape’s idea.” Ginny said. “Though Rory’s mum didn’t seem too keen.”

“She never is.” Rory shrugged.

“So, then Viktor is all ‘ve fly the time. Ve vill lap the Hogvarts flyers.” Ginny said, attempting to deepen her voice to match Viktors, “But then Draco laughs and points out Harry’s firebolt.”

“Krum just sorta smirked,” Harry smiled. “He has a Nimbus like my old one. Says he doesn’t want to trade it in until he has to. Superstitions I think.”

“We got all lined up,” George said.

“Except Luna and me,” Neville inputted. “We didn’t have brooms.”

“And then Snape fired a spark with a bang from his wand, and off we went.” Fred continued where George was interrupted.

“Twenty laps.” George said.

“Great fun.” Fred nodded.
“The best.”

“Harry won.”

“But only just.”

“With Viktor right behind him.”

“And then Draco.”

“We did beat a bunch of the Bulgarians, though.”

“Ginny and Rory certainly made an impression.” George winked, and Fred lifted his brows a quick moment before looking away. George narrowed his gaze on his twin before turning back to his brother and smacked him on the back. “So, you see? If you weren’t such a prat.”

“Coulda had fun with us.” Fred said.

Ron scowled, looking at the bunch of them before narrowing his eyes on Harry. “Bet you just milked it up, too, didn’t you? Beat Viktor Krum in a race around a pitch Did you brag about being able to beat him to a snitch, too?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yes, exactly how it happened.”

“Whatever,” Ron said pushing up from the sofa and heading for the staircase

“Aw, Ronniekins!” George called before getting up and following him, Fred close behind.

“Aw, I think we hurt his feelings!”

As the twins chased after their brother, the other four looked at one another with quiet smiles.

“It was pretty amazing though,” Harry said.

“The best.” Ginny agreed.

Aurora smiled, agreeing with them all, and content to listen to Ginny and Harry rehash it all again.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for dropping by. Until next time.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 12th, 1976

----------S----------

Severus,

Lad, when we began our correspondence as such, never once did I think it would be laden with such heavy topics. Of your lady, your academics, perhaps even the mundane from time to time, but not talk of Death Eaters and the Dark Lord and selling your soul for a chance at an education.

Your grandmother had informed me that my tuition is still available, having never been spent despite my being disowned. She says that no grandson of hers will fall to his knees and beg to be given what should have been his right as a Prince heir.

As for the followers of the Dark Lord: do what you feel is right. With so few true Potion ‘s masters out there, we cannot be particular. If you must, think on your father when speaking of muggles, I’m sure that will supply adequate inspiration to muster through conversations with the lot of them.

If you can, see your grandmother during the holidays. She deserves to lay eyes on you in more than a mere picture.

-E. Prince

The pleasure at seeing his mother’s name, her proper name, on the parchment was nearly as strong as seeing that he did not need Lucius Malfoy or anyone else to cover the cost of his tuition.

And the letter, though late, arrived in time for him to be able to face Slughorn’s dinner. Should Lucius be there, he didn’t have to worry about being further tempted by the thought of an easy answer at the cost of himself.

Though he did have to worry about Slughorn practically displaying him like a trophy.

It was on a whim that Severus submitted his notes on crushing a sopophoros bean as opposed to slicing it, thought he had been tempted to do so with a couple drops of liquid luck. In the end, he decided it was an absolute waste of a perfectly good potion, and the likelihood that anything would come of it would be nil.

He was very, very wrong.
Mr Hicklepunk of potions quarterly thought Severus was quite inventive, and while he was certain that the young student’s methods would not be received well, it was precisely the kind of thinking that they longed for in their commentaries and suggestions. He was going to publish it in the winter quarter, and he claimed to have written Slughorn to praise his skills as a professor. Severus nearly laughed at the notation but thought it best to allow all to pretend it was as it seemed.

He had yet to tell Hermione, waiting to have to magazine in hand to show her, and Slughorn had blissfully kept it to himself. But he was called on more frequently in potions class and used as a measuring stick to which all the numpties were to be measured by. It was getting more than a bit annoying.

He tucked the letter in his bag, preparing to head over to meet Hermione at her table across the Great Hall, and spend the time before Slughorn’s social event with her.

“Mr Snape,” Professor McGonagall said as she came up to him, appearing stern and sounding a bit miffed. “If you could come with me for a moment?”

The others at the table looked at him with pity and confusion, though he merely nodded at McGonagall before standing and following her out the Hall. He caught Hermione’s eye on the way and shrugged when she seemed just as confused as he was as to why McGonagall was calling on him.

Once they were out of the hall and half way up the stairs, McGonagall relaxed a fraction.

“I’m sorry to pull you away from Hermione as I’m sure you were planning on spending some time with her before you were confined to Horace’s office for the evening, but I’m afraid you were requested.”

“By whom?” He asked.

“Professor Dumbledore.” She replied.

“What would the headmaster want with me?” He asked, his shields going up and locking in place as his apprehension took over.

“I’m not sure, Severus.” She said quietly. “But if it’s any consolation, Alastor is there as well.”

“Not Professor Scamander as well, I hope.” He said through clenched teeth.

“No. Though I must say why the two of you don’t seem to like one another ….”

“I have a knowledge of the dark arts she believes no one my age should have. Unless, of course ….”

“Say no more.” Minerva said as they came up to the gargoyle. She spoke the name of a sweet, and the statue moved aside for them.

When they entered the Headmaster’s office, Severus noted Professor Dumbledore was seated in his chair behind his desk, Moody standing off to his right.

“Thank you, Minerva.” Dumbledore said. “That will be all.”

“Albus, you can’t ask me to act the stern professor to a well-behaved student, dragging him to this office, and expect me to leave.” She countered.

“I’m afraid it’s Order business, Minerva. And what’s more, I need my deputy on patrol with
Horace’s gathering taking place this evening.” Dumbledore countered.

What did he mean by “Order” business? Looking between the Professor he trusted and the one he did not, Severus was quite near asking for McGonagall to stay simply to be a witness. But then again, Moody was in the room. Moody, who he trusted and trusted him.

He certainly didn’t relax, but when McGonagall asked Severus with nothing more than a look if he wanted her to stay, he gave an indication that it was alright. She left, but still seemed entirely too weary as she did so.

When the door closed, Dumbledore put on the genial grin that had always irked Severus to no end and gestured to a comfortable looking chair on the opposite side of the desk. Severus took it hesitantly, sitting rigidly, quietly.

“Lemon drop?” The headmaster offered, and Severus shook his head.

Dumbledore nodded. “Mr Snape, Alastor here has told me that you are being courted.”

Severus raised an eyebrow at Alastor who said nothing but gave a reassuring upturn of the lips.

“Something tells me that you don’t mean Hermione Granger.” Severus said.

“No, I do not. But it’s good you mention her, actually. You see, I’m not sure you have all the facts. I know you had an accidental gander into her mind last year, and she asked me not to Obliviate you afterward.”

That was news. He supposed, though, in the aftermath of the incident, it became a footnote in comparison to affirming that their relationship was intact.

But Severus made no reaction, and Dumbledore nodded once before continuing.

“However, what you saw was not a full scope of Miss Granger herself. I know that Slytherin’s have a strong sense of blood purity within the house, and I’m afraid what you may not realize is that Miss Granger lacks the qualities those of your house look for.” And then, as if Severus was completely stupid, Dumbledore peered at him over his half-moon spectacles and said, “She is Muggleborn.”

It took everything Severus had not to roll his eyes as the headmaster. “Given that I’m a halfblood, I don’t pay much mind to blood status.”

“No?” Dumbledore asked, and Severus felt that needling in his mind of someone attempting to poke around. He gave nothing, even as the headmaster’s presence became more obvious.

“Give it up, Albus.” Moody said, his smirk growing wider. “That boy ain’t letting no one in if he doesn’t want’em.”

“I believe you are quite right, Alastor. Mr Snape, I would like an honest answer from you, if I could. Were you ever planning on joining Tom Riddle’s Death Eaters?”

“Considering the last group of openly supportive students were expelled or placed on permanent detention, it would be stupid of me to admit if I were. However, while it may have seemed an option at one point, it would have been merely for the access and privilege that were denied me for nearly four years of my education.”

“And if the opportunity were still to present itself, if those of his inner circle had wanted you, would you not take it?”
“No.”

“No.” Dumbledore asked, tenting his fingers. “Pardon me for my assumptions, but I don’t foresee power or prestige being easy for you to obtain without connections.”

“Perhaps I do not seek power or prestige.” Severus said through his teeth, knowing it was only a half lie but his indignation was getting the better of him. He was already earning the latter, and by his own merit. His own knowledge and research. Power … it had been a dream, once, when the marauders were always against him. But since Lupin and he became friends, and Black called a truce, the other half of the irksome foursome had withheld physical retaliation.

“Ambition is a trait of your house.” Dumbledore said.

“Ambition and power do not equal the same thing.” Severus snapped.

Dumbledore smiled, “I suppose it doesn’t. So, perhaps, you should think on this: what would you do to protect Miss Granger? To keep her safe? I’m sure she is doing a fine job while here at the school blending in with the purebloods, especially as she was sorted into Gryffindor, who typically do not bother with such notions.”

Severus’ nostrils flared as every news article, every piece of information the school had tucked away on Dumbledore’s past and his association with Grindelwald flashed through his mind. He read them all, knew without a doubt that Dumbledore was not at all the saintly Gryffindor, champion of muggles that he had appeared to be.

“But when she is out there in the Wizarding world, working for the ministry, how well will she be able to keep things quiet? How long before she is pegged as the muggleborn she is, or worse, the traveler she is? What are you willing to do to keep her safe?”

“She doesn’t need to worry about that.” He said immediately.

“She doesn’t? She let you slip through and into her mind, do you believe she is strong enough to keep it from everyone?”

Severus did something he instantly regretted: he flinched. He wasn’t sure if Hermione was strong in her abilities and merely let him in because she trusted him, or if she wasn’t as good as she should be.

“There is a secret society, Mr Snape, known as the Order of the Phoenix. Our goal is, simply put, to stop Tom Riddle. There is, however a small problem in that we usually cannot prevent the casualties that occur. What we need is someone who can feed us information.”

“And you wish for me to do so?” Severus asked.

“It would be ideal, yes.”

“And you believe it will be that simple?”

“No, I don’t believe it will be a simple task at all. To get that information, the information we need, I would need you to become one of them.”

“No.” Severus said.

“You are catching their eye,” Dumbledore continued, ignoring his vehement denial. “If Lucius Malfoy is inviting you to parties, and is willing to sponsor your education, then it means he is likely receiving encouragement to do so. I admit, I would have preferred Mr Black for the task, with his
family’s close association to Riddle already established, but I don’t believe he’d be able to keep
cover as well as you may. With your already being in Riddle’s former house, a favorite of a
pureblood I am very certain has connections to him.”

“I have already given my answer.” Severus said, raising his voice slightly and not at all backing
down when Dumbledore glared.

“Severus,” Moody growled out, and Severus had nearly forgotten he was in the room. He beckoned
for him to stand, then hobbled toward the door. He opened it, gesturing for Severus to go through,
and then followed. He didn’t even give a backward glance to the headmaster as he left.

“Lad,” Moody began once they were alone. “The thing is this: we need ya. Now, Dumbledore may
think you’re like all the other Slytherins, but I know better. Ya’d have made a good auror if you
weren’t so keen on pursuing mixing a bunch o’ stuff up. But the fact of the matter is, that’s already
getting ya where we need to be.” He leaned in and whispered, “Ya don’t need to go in too deep.
Keep those walls up, keep quiet, and ya might find people talk. When ya see Malfoy tonight, ask
about the Masters.”

“But I have another way.” Severus said quietly. “I don’t need Lucius.”

“Great ya got the money, but ya still need someone ta teach ya. Much as I hate to admit it, most’a the
ones you’ll want are ones we’re keeping tabs on.”

Severus nodded, considering Moody’s request.

He was good at making himself unobtrusive, unnoticed, forgotten. It’s likely how he survived
childhood, and likely how he survived being less than pure in Slytherin. And he wanted a good
master, not someone like Slughorn who would merely parade him around for having a good idea. He
wanted to be challenged, immersed, fully bathed in the role of apprentice so when he emerged from
his tutelage he knew it was because he learned whatever could be taught, and was ready to discover
more on his own. And, admittedly, while he could likely gain a list from Hicklepunk, Lucius seemed
to have already looked in to the best of the best.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Severus said, denying the pride he felt when Moody clapped him on the
shoulder and beamed.

“There’s a lad. Now, get on with ya.”

Severus smirked to himself as he realized the Marauders would never actually want to be associated
with him.

Potter and Black were off on the other side of the room chatting up athletes and trying to look
impressive, their backs turned toward him. Even Lily was doing her best to keep her distance and
appear, for all intents and purposes, like she didn’t even know him.

Fine by him, Severus hardly needed the wealthy gits and the known Muggleborn to suddenly want
to rub shoulders with him in case someone from Lucius’ circle was there.

His eyes darted around the room, taking in all the alumni that were already there, not seeing anyone
of consequence to him, nor anyone he thought would be in with the revered or feared Dark Lord. At least not until Lucius himself came in.

Severus watched as the aristocrat did his very best not to sneer outright at Slughorn’s boisterous greeting or attempts to introduce him to a young, Hufflepuff muggleborn Slughorn was certain would find a place high in the ministry. He merely lifted his chin and looked down on the average, sandy blonde girl, and turned away from them both with what looked like a barely polite departure. Lucius went to the bar first, glanced Black and hesitated before curling his lip in disdain and searched the room.

When he found Severus, he immediately came up to him.

“Finally, someone of quality at this pitiful excuse for a gathering.” Lucius said as he shook Severus’ hand. “I wonder if Horace is trying to pollute his status with all these Mudbloods?” He glanced about. “I’m quite glad you have truly found them beneath you.”

Severus shrugged, swirling the butterbeer in his cup. “I’m beginning to find most people are.”

“Yes,” Lucius said, a glint in his eye that Severus didn’t like. “There is a rumor among the ministry that an old, pureblood family that was set to die out has quite suddenly found themselves… with heirs.”

“The Prince family, I will wager.” Severus guessed.

“Indeed. I must say, when I was able to report such a rumor to our esteemed … leader, he was most pleased indeed. Your stock is growing, my friend. Your mother casting off your muggle father, re-claiming her proper name, it is just elevating you in his eyes. He is becoming desperately eager to meet you.”

“It’s not as though I can shed my muggle father’s name, so the pureblood line would only continue in that way: blood.”

“Even so, I would so love to have you and Hermione over for that soiree I told you about. He will be there, and when he sees you with a lady of a pureblood line ….”

“All I wish, Lucius, is to have a mastery in Potions, and with luck, Hermione as my wife. I have no desire for power.”

“No?” Lucius asked suspiciously. “Or is that the influence of your new … friends.”

Severus felt the flare of panic in his gut as Lucius’ gaze darted to Potter and Black.

Keeping calm, Severus arched a brow at the man he’d long respected and admired. “I’m afraid I know not what you speak of.”

“Really? How interesting. I spoke to Regulus Black on my way here, and he says he’s found his elder brother constantly at your side. He wasn’t sure what to make of it, of course, but he was hopeful that it meant Sirius Black was finally beginning to see the error of his ways. Is that the case, Severus, or is there something I should know now?”

Severus gave a genuine snort of amusement, “I can assure you, Lucius, that Black, Potter, and I are not friends. While they do not harass me in the way they used to, it is merely because one of their own has a greater desire for Hermione’s company than theirs. Likely, he’s merely waiting for the moment I fuck up beyond repair. But at least for now I can walk the halls without needing a shielding charm around my person.”
Lucius smirked, reached into his robes, and pulled out a sheet of parchment. “I’m happy to hear that.” He handed the parchment to Severus. “I’m glad to hear of your inclusion into your proper family, and the likely tuition it grants you. If you find your grandmother is unwilling or unable to assist you, we can arrange something. For now, though, I would like to give this to you. A list of masters in your field. There is a slight issue, however.”

“Which is?” Severus asked, already knowing he wasn’t going to like the answer.

“They all have either taken on as many apprentices as they would allow themselves, in the middle of multiple apprenticeships and will continue to be so for another four years or would need you to begin by the summer.”

Severus’ heart dropped in his stomach. “I still have at least another year here.”

“What’s keeping you here? I hardly believe you would stay for a girl.”

Severus chose not to answer that.

“She’s academic, is she not? I cannot see you wasting your time with anyone who couldn’t keep up with you. I’m sure she’d understand if you were to test out early.”

“Why do you want me to do this, Lucius?” Severus asked. “You seem to be more keen on this than you should be.”

“You’ve drawn attention to yourself, Severus, in the best possible way. Why not take advantage of it?”

November 14th, 1994

—————H—————

She has just settled down for a cup of tea when she heard the floo flare behind her. Sighing, Hermione turned, expecting to see a ministry official with a fresh request for calculations, and was surprised to find a disgruntled looking Sirius coming through, followed closely by Remus.

“Cries himself to sleep each night, thinking of his dearly departed mother.” Sirius spat, slamming what was likely his copy of the Daily Prophet down on the coffee table on top of hers. “That witch is asking for a world of hurt, making him look weak as she did.”

“So, you’re not at all put out by the comment of his ‘notoriously deranged and incredibly dangerous godfather’s willingness to do anything to protect him’?”

“About as much, I’m sure, as you are by his supposedly womanizing ways. And I quote,” He said, snatching his paper back up. “But Harry’s sad, tragic past when paired with the bad boy air his living with former Azkaban inmate godfather has afforded him, has made him extremely popular with the ladies. Close friend, Colin Creevy, says Harry is hardly ever seen without his trio of lovely witches: Ginevra Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Aurora Snape.”

Hermione waved it off and rose from her desk chair at the far end of the sitting room. “Colin Creevy,
from the best of my knowledge, wasn’t so much a friend as a fan of Harry’s. Not to mention that I’m fairly certain anyone who believes, for a moment, that Severus would allow Harry to even look at his daughter with romantic intentions, is certifiably insane.”

“I’m actually quite surprised there’s no mention of the Malfoy boy in the papers.” Lupin said as he sat himself on the sofa.

“I believe that would be Narcissa’s doing.” Hermione smirked. “A few years back, I recall, Skeeter was escorted out of the Manor by wand point. I quite honestly have never seen Cissy look quite so… frenzied. I’m fairly certain there was a threat made should the detestable woman ever dare write the name Malfoy again.”

Sirius looked perplexed as Remus shifted in his seat.

“Cissy?” Sirius said. “Are you really on a nickname basis with her? A Death Eater’s wife?”

“I am a Death Eater’s wife, you may recall.”

“No, you aren’t.” Sirius countered.

“For all intents and purposes, Sirius, I am. He is marked.”

“He never chose it.” Sirius interrupted.

“And therefore, he is. Whether Severus wanted it or not.” She sighed. “And … and it’s ….”

At Hermione’s inability to say the thing that she denied terrified her, the lump in her throat one entirely of her own making, Remus got to his feet. He crossed the room, stepping around Sirius, and gently took her shoulders in his hands.

“What is it, H?” He asked softly.

She could feel her eyes stinging with the tears she refused to shed. It wasn’t a done deal, not yet. The numbers said there was still a chance, about sixty percent, but still….

“Severus’ mark is darkening.” She managed to get out, her voice harsh and barely above a whisper. “I went to see him last night, to show him the new figures. His mark is getting darker, and the last time it did that, we both believe Voldemort was on the cusp of returning.”

“How?” Sirius asked.

“I’m still trying to figure that out in between my true work and running figures for Severus.” Hermione sniffed, a slight smile gracing her lips. “For the first time in twenty years, I don’t know everything. There is no stating facts and seeing if I have a response or not. And it comes at a time when, well, let’s just say that Alastor Moody is very much not himself.”

“What do you mean, Kitten?” Sirius asked.

“He acted as if he didn’t even know me.” She replied. “I had run into him, last night, on my way up to see Min. He as stalking the halls, probably on duty. Had Severus not mentioned beforehand that he thought something was off, I’d have likely went right up to the man with a warm greeting and an embrace. As it was, he stopped and stared at me, asking what the hell I was doing there and if I was from the ministry.”

“That does sound off.” Remus agreed. “Have you mentioned it to Albus?”
“Quite honestly, no. Whether or not Severus has, I am not sure.”

There was quiet for a moment as the three of them stood around, and there was something of unease in the air that only grew as the minutes ticked by. Confused, Hermione turned to Sirius who seemed resigned and a bit dejected. He turned and quietly strolled to the fireplace, not to use the floo it seemed, and studied the photographs there.

“Hermione,” Remus said, squeezing her shoulders that she hadn’t fully realized he still had a hold of. “If … if it becomes too much, playing the Death Eater’s wife once more, and this time with children, I …. I want you to know that, well.”

“Remus, not this again. Please.” Hermione said, gently taking his wrists and taking a step back. “I love him. I have always loved him.”

“Perhaps not always,” Remus said with a touch of amusement.

“Okay, well, I certainly didn’t have a crush on my Potion’s Professor at fourteen, but I did love my best friend at fifteen. And I understand how difficult it must be for you to comprehend how that can be enough to stay with him, especially knowing who I was to Harry. But I beg you to let any hope that I will one day decide I can’t do it and leave him go.” Dropping her voice, she added, “There is someone who loves you and has loved you for a very long time waiting for you to realize that you love him, too. Someone who I know you found comfort and peace with before our worlds fell apart. You know the truth now, Remus. All of our truths.”

Remus looked like he was about to argue, and then stopped himself. He stood completely still before her, seeming to try to come to grips with things, when the front door to the cottage opened.

“Mum,” Leo’s voice called. “I’m home.”

Before Hermione could respond, Leo walked into the sitting room and stopped, staring at Sirius who stared back at him as if it was the most terrifying site he’d ever seen.

“Aren’t you a murderer?” Leo asked with a tilt of his head, not at all afraid.

“Might be.” Sirius said.

“I know a couple kids at school that.”

“Leonidas John Snape, you will not finish that sentence. Just because you don’t like a few of the kids at school does not mean you can speak of hiring a hit wizard, seriously or otherwise.” Hermione snapped.

Leo merely rolled his eyes and came toward her, dropping his bag behind the sofa as he had. “They are dunderheads, the lot of them. I thought being put in advanced placement was going to be better.”

“Yes, well, it is what it is. Do you have homework?”

“No.”

“Fine, then. I left you a few biscuits in the kitchen, and then you may sequester yourself in the library, if you wish. I will be there later.”

“Are we going to see Dad tonight?” He asked.

“No.” She told him with a smile, fully anticipating the groan of discontent from her little man.
“I want to go to Hogwarts!” He yelled as he went off into the kitchen.

As Leo left the room, Sirius declared, “That’s just disconcerting!”

“You were looking at the pictures on the mantel, Padfoot. How caught off guard could you have been?”

“I had thought they were of Severus as a child.” Sirius countered. “Blimey, I had glimpsed your daughter at the Burrow when I went to retrieve Harry, but she is such a mix of the pair of you.”

“Yes, well, if it helps at all, Severus isn’t best pleased that Leo is such a copy of him either. Except, of course, when it comes to personality. We have very little doubt he will be a Slytherin.”

Sirius snorted and shook his head, glancing at Remus. “Perhaps we should leave you to enjoy time with your son. I merely needed to rant with someone willing to listen over the Skeeter article.”

“I told you before there is not much that can be done about it, and if Harry is bothered by it, he will tell us.” Remus sighed as he headed toward the floo. “And as Hermione pointed out, anyone who would dare say anything against Aurora will likely get a hex or worse, so the believability is quite lacking.”

Sirius shook his head, watching Remus move to the fireplace, take a pinch of floo powder, and step inside. He called for Grimmauld place and was gone.

Sirius stared at the spot for a moment before turning to her with a sad smile. “Nothing changes, does it? It’s been twenty years, and here we are. You are still separated from your husband for most of the year, and I am still pining after an idiot who is holding out hope that you will suddenly have had enough.”

“Give him time.” Hermione tried to console. “The reality of everything is still fairly new, and you two are still adjusting to not having Harry around.”

“Perhaps we are, Kitten.” Sirius said. “If you need to talk about anything, know I am always there for you.”

“I know, thank you.” Hermione said, giving him a tiny wave as he eventually followed Remus back to the Black residence.

November 24th, 1994

She, Draco, and Ginny headed up to the champion’s tent, the three of them looking about to see if anyone would notice. Draco had been the first to note a few Beauxbatons girls heading in the general direction, and then he pointed out a couple Durmstrang boys coming out of the tent before finding a spot in the bleachers. It was Ginny who suggested they go up and show support for Harry, not caring a lick of anyone bothered to go say something nice to Cedric.

“Everyone’s wearing those stupid pins. He gets enough support.” She had half snapped, causing
Draco to smirk.

“I’m not going.” Neville said. “We’re not supposed to.”

“I’ll stay here with you,” Luna had said. “Besides, someone will need to make sure our spots don’t get taken.”

So, the trio set off, and while Aurora was pretty sure they’d be in trouble if they were caught, it seemed worth it when she noticed Cho Chang and a couple other girls slink off.

Draco marched in like he was meant to be there, giving a nod to Krum before finding Harry sitting off to the side and trying to look small.

Scared, Potter?” Malfoy asked, a slight lift of his chin.

Harry snorted, and while there was a fearful spark in his eye, he smirked. “You wish.”

“No really,” he said. “I put a bet down with the Weasley twins that you’ll survive, and at least place third.”

“You bet?” Aurora asked him, crossing his arms.

He smirked, “Don’t think I didn’t see you set your allowance in that jar, Snape.” He taunted back.

She blushed, because she hadn’t really meant to bet at all, thinking it ridiculous.

But then Fred had teased her, saying if she really though Harry would make it, she should prove it with her Galleons. She’d put down one: Harry survived. It was actually quite sad how many people seemed to think he wouldn’t, or he would be drastically hurt in the process.

“If it makes you feel better,” Fred had said, “We think he’ll make it through, too. Just thought it would be fun for the Harry supporters to profit like the ones against him have.”

“And if he does come out scathed?” She had added.

“This is the bloke who defeated You-Know-Who. This will be a walk in the park for him.”

Well, she hoped so. But seeing the arena hadn’t been promising.

“You talked to Sirius, right?” Ginny asked. “He said how to beat it, didn’t he?”

Harry gave a mirthless snort. “We got cut off. No one’s supposed to floo the common rooms as it is, but even waiting until bloody past midnight didn’t help. Ron came down, and it sorta ended the conversation before we got to that point.”

“You’ll do alright.” Ginny said with absolute confidence. “Youngest seeker in a century, chosen one, easy peasy, yeah?” She said, getting Draco to smirk.

“Yeah.” Harry nodded. “Easy peasy.”

“That’s the spirit, Potter.” Draco said, giving him a clap on the shoulder just as a shutter sounded behind Aurora. She turned, and sneered at the woman who wrote her, Ginny, and Luna out to be no more than a trio of airheads who thought Harry a god.

“Oh look. At. This.” The horrid woman said, glancing at Aurora and then Ginny. “Please, girls, go on. Give Harry an embrace, show him how much you care before the big event.”
“I think not,” Aurora said. “And just wait until my father hears about this little interruption.”

Skeeter frowned, glancing at Harry and Draco as they both started snickering. Even Aurora had a hard time keeping a straight face after running the words through her head again.

“But it’s forbidden love, star crossed, even. The daughter of the infamous Severus Snape, and the Chosen One.”

“Sounds ghastly.” Ginny commented, earning Skeeter’s instant attention.

“It would to you, wouldn’t it? The sister of Harry’s best friend, who pined for him and did everything she could to get his attention when she first came to Hogwarts.”

Ginny blushed deeply, and Aurora suddenly found her wand in hand and a hex on her tongue.

“You have no business here. This tent is for champions and friends.” Viktor Krum said as he came right to Ginny’s side, standing just in front of her, arms crossed. He looked quite foreboding, and eerily, reminded Aurora of her father in a way. His nose wasn’t as big, but still quite large, and his hair was cropped to nearly nonexistent, but the coloring was all there. Even the eyes were black.

She wondered, firstly, if maybe there had been some Bulgarian in the family on her father’s side. Secondly, it struck her that, had Hermione Granger remained at Hogwarts, she’d have likely had a crush on Viktor, considering who she’d fallen for before.

“No matter,” Skeeter said with a conniving grin. “We’ve got what we wanted.” She turned, waving her camera man to follow her.

“We should leave as well,” Draco said, looking back to Harry. “Don’t die out there, Potter.”

“Try my best, Malfoy.” He replied, barely able to smile back.

The trio left the tent just as Dumbledore and an entourage appeared.

Aurora looked around as they headed back to the stadiums and was startled to see her mother and brother in the teacher’s box flanking her father. Leo caught her eye and waved, smiling when she gave a little wave back.

She wondered her mother had done the Arithmancy numbers for the outcome, and if that’s why she didn’t appear as nervous about the event as Aurora would have expected. Or if that’s why she’d brought Leo to what might potentially be a blood bath. As she, Draco, and Ginny found their spots between Neville and Luna, a canon sounded.

This was it.

“Told ya he’d make it,” Fred said, coming up to Aurora with jam tart, offering it to her with a grin. She took it, narrowing her eyes at him as she did so. “What’s it do?” She asked.

“Make you sound like Harry’s egg.” He teased, and she knew he was.
“Fred,” She said in warning.

“Didn’t do a thing to the jam tarts. Why would I offer you one we hexed?” He asked, and Aurora was genuinely perplexed. A moment later, Neville sprouted yellow feathers. “Ah, there, though. Canary Creams. George and I invented them. Seven sickles each.”

“Explains the yellow feathers trailing out your room at the burrow.” Aurora snickered, taking a bite of the jam tart. Fred was watching her, making her nervous that her skin was about to go red, or something temporarily awful.

She chewed, swallowed, and waited.

Nothing.

“Don’t trust me, Snape?” Fred asked, twitching his brows.

“You? Never.” She replied, making him chuckle more.

“Probably wise.” Fred nodded sagely.

“Oi, Fred,” Lee Jordan called from the other side of the room. “Stop flirting with Snape’s kid and get over here, will ya?”

Aurora was pleased with herself that she didn’t blush at the implication, and merely smirked when Fred rolled his eyes and joined his brother and best friend.

“So, you know, right?” Ron said when his brother was gone. It surprised Aurora to discover he was talking to her. “You know I warned Harry, yeah? You believe me? You believe it was me how actually wanted Harry to know Hagrid was looking for him? Not Neville?”

“Why should it matter what I believe?” Aurora questioned.

Ron had the decency to look a bit shame faced. “Cause you were one’a the ones who believed ‘im. You and Gin, Luna … Malfoy. Saw the way the git was straining himself not to join us when I went to view the results with Harry. Saw how he caught up with him outside the tent. Just … you and he, you’re sorta … well, not a Hermione replacement, but ….”

“Ron,” She started, lifting a hand to get him to cease. “I’m not … Hermione.” She said, nearly slipping and saying just what Hermione was to her. “I’m not your best friend, or even your good friend. You’ve treated me like fubberworm mucus since we met.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that.” He said, bowing his head. “Truly. And I feel like a need to make it up to you somehow. You and Gin and Luna. ‘Cause, well, Hermione’s gone, and if she were here, well, she’d have stuck by Harry. And I know I’m a git for not doing so, so save that bit. But I’m glad he had someone.”

“Noticed you didn’t mention Draco in that bit.”

“Prat needs to make it up to me. Bloody awful he was. Still is.” Ron glowered.

“Give it time, I suppose.” Aurora shrugged.

“Yeah, well, anyway … thanks.”

Aurora considered, for a moment, holding all the mean, spiteful, hateful things Ron had said and done to her over his head and not taking the olive branch he seemed to be trying to extend. Maybe he
realized that Harry really didn’t need him, and he realized if he wanted to save his friendship he had to be a bit more welcoming to the other friends in Harry’s life.

“Yeah, well, I didn’t do it for you.” She said not unkindly, and Ron gave a little smirk. He rejoined Harry, who was now discussing the egg with Neville, and Aurora let out a heavy sigh.

She’d had enough socializing for the night and decided now that Ginny had went to investigate what the twins were going to Lee and a couple other sixth years, she would slink off to bed.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my commissions! Sorry for the long delay in updates, I had a spike in business. And a heads up, too, that the spoke had not at all dwindled, I just managed to squeeze in some writing time to finish
As you can see, things are starting to get serious in the 70s. More to come.
The sun wasn’t even up completely, and Hermione was already in Severus’ secret lab, on the sofa, waiting for him.

Since her realization of what was to come for him, of what it would mean, she’d been thinking. There was hardly any doubt in her mind of what was to come for the man she loved, or how it would lead to him becoming the man who was her professor. The question that circled her mind was whether or not he would want her around when the time came. How muggleborn did she really come across?

She’d been so careful since Eileen had explained to her the etiquette and mannerisms of a pureblood. She even made an effort to observe the Slytherin girls, knowing that they were all likely purebloods themselves, and therefore an example of their behavior.

But what if it wasn’t enough? What if, when it all came down to it, Severus would decide he needed a true pureblood to help him along in whatever was needed for him to survive becoming a Death Eater? Perhaps that was why he really looked at her with such contempt and disdain when he was older, he was trying to change time by making her not want to seek him out.

Sighing heavily, Hermione rested her head against the stone wall.

They hadn’t had much time to properly talk since the realization of his future crashed down on her two weeks ago. There was an experimental brew he was trying that he wouldn’t tell her anything about, classes, studying, and socializing. She hoped she hadn’t come across as distant or withdrawn, but she couldn’t be sure.

And the more she worried about him slipping away from her, the more she thought of how her own future would end up quite lonely, the more she wondered if maybe being distant in his eyes wasn’t a bad thing.

She startled terribly when the door opened, and she whipped her head around with her wand in hand only to find Severus staring back at her in equal surprise.

Pulling himself together much more quickly than she, he shut the door and crossed the room swiftly.
He had his fingers in her hair, holding her head still as he crashed his lips on hers before she could even contemplate something to say in greeting.

His kiss seemed desperate, yearning, though not at all in the way she would have thought it would be after nearly three weeks without real physical intimacy. It was like he was … scared.

When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers as he got to his knees, and it struck her how much taller he had gotten since before the summer began.

“I’m glad you’re here.” He whispered, sounding a bit sad.

She touched his cheeks. “Is that so?” She asked. He nodded against her head. “Why’s that?”

He seemed to hesitate, then took a deep breath. “I think we need to talk.”

The words didn’t match completely with the kiss he bestowed her, and while she wanted it to be a good thing, she couldn’t shake that feeling of foreboding.

“OhKay,” She said softly, steeling herself for what was to come.

He took a deep breath and took both her hands in his.

“I’m not sure where to begin.” He said, eyes on their fingers. “I … The Headmaster ….” He shook his head. “We were invited to Lucius’s soiree once again last night, only it’s because someone in particular wants to meet me.” He stroked her fingers with his thumbs. “Things are starting to be expected of me, things I hadn’t planned on or wanted. But I fear rejecting even one offer would have me in ruin.”

“Why do you say that?” Hermione asked.

“Because they would jeopardize my studies or my future in Britain. I …,” he sighed. “I love you, Hermione.”

The sudden declaration in a conversation that in no way seemed to lead to it had Hermione dumbstruck. She blinked, shocked, mouth agape, trying to believe he’d actually said it.

Barely louder than a whisper, in case her brain shorted out and made her hear something that hadn’t been said at all, she replied. “I love you, too, Severus.”

He let out a very heavy breath, as though he’d been holding it the whole time they spoke, his shoulders sagging with what she hoped was relief.

“Then maybe there is a chance that this will work out. If you really feel the same way I do.”

“What will work out?” She asked.

He met her eye, a seriousness in the blackness that seemed to come from twenty years in the future. “Alastor Moody recommended that I allow Lucius to give me the names of Masters that have ties to Death Eaters. If I keep my head down, keep quiet, it may serve double duty as not only a way to earn my mastery, but to give those who need it information on the Dark Lord and his followers. I have been given such a list. However, in order for me to gain access to any of them, I would either need to wait four years post-graduation, in which I could work in an apothecary. Or ….”

“Or?” She chewed her lip.

“Or I take my NEWTS this year, and then take up an apprenticeship immediately.”
“Oh.” Hermione replied, relief mixing with heartbreak. “So … so you would be gone? We … I mean, you’ll be with so many … someone like me would.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” He said vehemently. “Not at all. You are the best thing that has ever happened to my pitiful existence. Merlin knows what sort of wizard I would be had it not been for you. But I cannot pass up this chance. Reluctantly, I admit that an early graduation would be the superior option. But before I knew, before I heard you say the words, I was unsure if I should make the request I wish to of you.”

“Which is?”

“Wait for me?” He asked, swallowing and causing his Adam’s apple to bob visibly. “I realize asking this of a witch as beautiful and intelligent as you, with no ring and no promise of marriage, is the most selfish thing I could do. But I don’t want to make those promises without knowing I can give you everything you want and deserve. Without knowing for absolute certainty that I am not going to turn into some man you despise. I’ve no idea what I will be put through, nor the social circles I am going to be forced into being a part of. I may become everything you stand against and I refuse to tie you to me when I can set you free the moment it gets to be too much. But wait for me, in the meantime. Give me a year away from you, at least, before you decide.” He paused, looking down trodden. “Give me this academic year with you, at least. Until I leave these grounds, let me keep you. And if during our time apart, you decide that your feelings have changed, then ….”

“Severus.” She said, getting him to take a breath. “I love you,” her lips twitched at the joy of being able to declare it openly. “I … I think I know what’s to come.”

He panicked, eyes wide and a hand reaching for her lips to silence her.

She caught his wrist and shook her head. “It’s not something I know for certain, merely a hunch. I’m in no danger, I swear. But I think I know what’s to come, and to be frank, I’m more concerned with my not being enough for you. So, yes. I will give you this year, I will give you next year. I will give you as long as you need and never hold you to those very notions we called archaic when we began this. Our courtship does not need to end in a proposal, nor does it need to end. If we merely … date … for the rest of our lives, then so be it.”

“You’re muggleborn is showing.” He teased with a smirk.

“Oh? I have no family as far as anyone is concerned, so who is to say you aren’t merely stringing along the orphan pureblood with an American frame of mind? Perhaps that’s how they do things state side.”

He huffed, shaking his head as he tried very hard not to smile. He sobered quickly.

“Much as I want to take your declaration and hold you to it, there is one more thing you should know. Something that may change your mind. Something that the Headmaster, and Alastor, has asked of me.”

“What is it?” She asked.

“To become a Death Eater.”
Severus was both surprised and wasn’t with how calm Hermione took hearing of his conversation with Alastor and the Headmaster, followed by the hints Lucius dropped about being sought after by the Dark Lord himself. There was fear in her eyes, and she clutched his hand as though he’d disappear if she let go, but she never protested. Never yelled or complained through his relaying of the details.

It was only after he had finished speaking, with no sign he would continue, that she spoke at all.

“You’re underage.” She said quietly. “Dumbledore can’t possibly ask you to do something you are not legally old enough to do.”

“I am only a couple months away from seventeen,” Severus reminded her. “And I imagine he took that into consideration. He very likely thinks I can be tempted into being one of the Dark Lord’s followers before then, so it appears ….”

“He’s a bastard.” She said, a single tear slipping down her cheek. “I should have known. I shou-” She gasped out, but before Severus could comfort her, she pounded the cushion. “You know his first thought when we spoke in the hospital wing upon my arrival was that he had sent me. He thought nothing of the possibility of using a fourteen-year-old girl to give him an edge.”

Severus had no idea what to say to that, so he merely put his arm around her shoulders.

“I wish I could tell you what I know of you, but even if I could, it wouldn’t be much.” She said.

He nodded.

“What can I do?” She asked quietly.

He frowned. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“What can I do to help you?” She asked again.

“Hermione, there isn’t anything you can do. I would never expect you to actually accompany me….”

“And why not?” She snapped. “Am I so obviously Muggleborn?”

“No,” he managed to get in.

“Then you think me weak?”

“Hardly,” He snorted.

“Then why would you not expect me to be there?” She demanded. “I’m hardly going to run and hide because I don’t have the same way of thinking.”

“Because being seen with me ….” He trailed off, the pain of what he was going to say stopping his words. “Because your being seen with me introduces you to them. Should … should you change your mind about me, us….”

“It’s hardly like I would start an affair with someone who hates what I really am.”

“I’m going to have to pretend, too, you know.” He reminded her.

“But I know you don’t.” She took a deep breath, seeming to gather her nerves, “It’s not like it would be my first time hearing the ‘M’ word tossed around, and at least I know they won’t be directing it at me.”
“Are you really willing to do this?” He asked with a fraction of the uncertainty he was really feeling.

She smiled sadly. “How is it that after nearly a year together, you still seem to have trouble believing that I genuinely want to be with you. Regardless of any difficulties or near deaths that occur?”

He huffed as she chuckled at his annoyance. “Has it only been a year? Feels like I’ve endured a lifetime with you.”

“See? We don’t need marriage. We’re already an old married couple without the bonding.”

“Bloody hell, you’re insufferable.”

“I hardly think you can call me that anymore.” She said, twisting to face him properly. “I can think of many ways you do not find me insufferable in the least.”

“Oh? Name one?”

She leaned in, kissing him very tenderly at first before becoming increasingly more passionate until he had little choice but to drag her over his legs and have her straddle his thighs.

“Yes,” he said when they parted. “I had nearly forgotten about that.”

Hermione gave him a skeptical hum and another gentle peck. “I am going to be by your side when you go to that party next month, you know.” She stated, making it clear he had no room to argue.

“And if the Headmaster doesn’t want you to?” Severus countered, having the feeling it would be a distinct possibility.

“I’m of age. He’s not my guardian, and it will be the holidays. Considering what I told you, and you told me, I can’t … I can’t say I fully trust the Headmaster.”

Severus nodded, noting the sadness in her eyes. It wasn’t for lack of trusting Dumbledore, that was too much of a stretch. He would guess that maybe she had before her accident and was starting to regret ever doing so.

He gave her a peck on the lips, gaining her attention once more. “Then if you see no reason why you can’t, I will inform Lucius that we accept.”

“I suppose we do.” She mumbled.

He kissed her again. “It can wait. I can think of much more pleasurable endeavors, if you have no intentions of leaving.”

December 10th, 1994

————A————

Breakfast in the Great Hall seemed a normal affair. Harry was sitting with a view of the other houses, and from what Aurora could tell was occasionally making faces at Draco that were likely viewed as taunting except for the glint of humor in his eye. Ron was beside him, grumbling and complaining about homework with his mouth partly open and oblivious to what Harry was up to. Ginny was chatting with Luna, the girls each turned with their backs to their tables to face one another. Neville
was beside Aurora, quiet for the most part except when he stumbled upon an interesting fact in his Herbology book.

Aurora was thinking of Potions class, her first period of the day, and wondered what sort of mood her father would be in. On a good day, one that started with decent coffee after a fair amount of sleep (or, disgustingly, a night when her mother was in the castle), the class wasn’t terrible. On a bad day, well ….

She glanced at Colin Creevy a few seats down and hoped he wouldn’t cry this time if her Dad caught him not paying proper attention again. It didn’t last long, before, but it was a bit off putting.

“My mother is still going on about that bloody article,” Ginny complained. “It seems Ginevra Weasley, a pretty but immature girl, is getting sick of not being first among Harry’s favorites. Her parting from the Boy Who Lived has caught the interest of Bulgarian Bon-Bon, Viktor Krum.” She quoted in a voice that was a high, near exact copy of what Skeeter sounded like. “She’s utterly convinced that I have, indeed, caught a famous Quidditch player’s eye. Which, to her, has set her mind to thinking of weddings, and babies. I’m thirteen.”

Luna laughed a delicate, tinkling laugh. “Yes, I will say it is quite outrageous for her to think such things.”

“Exactly!” Ginny said, pointing at Luna with her spoon. “No one knows who they’re gonna end up with until there seventeen, or something.”

“My Dad knew he wanted to marry my mum the day they met.” Neville inputted as he turned a page in his book.

Aurora snorted, “My Dad definitely didn’t want to marry my mum when they met, and vice versa. But I think they were about fifteen when they started dating.”

Ginny huffed. “Okay, maybe not seventeen, but certainly not thirteen.”

“Some do.” Luna said thoughtfully as she paused with her toast part way to her mouth. “Some know precisely who they will be with. Like Neville said, his Dad knew the moment he met her. It’s like an instinct, or their magic meeting each other’s.”

“And have you found that special someone?” Ginny asked.

“Of course, I have.” Luna said with a slight tilt of her head. “You have, too. We all have.”

“Well that’s good to know.” Aurora said thoughtfully. “Though I can think of a few people I wouldn’t want it to be.”

“Like who?” Neville asked.

“Like anyone who hasn’t figured out how to chew with their mouth closed.” She replied.

“Oi!” Came Ron’s indignant input, his mouth still containing food.

“You’re disgusting.” Aurora said point blank.

“Hermione didn’t think I was disgusting.” Ron countered petulantly.

“She asked you at least once a day to chew with your mouth closed. We all find you disgusting. Seriously, you are the only member of your family who has yet to figure out the most basic of table
manners.”

“I think he needs a healing salve,” George said from a couple seats down.

“That did sound like quite the shot.” Fred commented. “I think she’s implying we’re gentlemen.”

“Of course, we are. Two for one deal, we were. All the brains, good looks and charms left for Weasley men were given to us.” George said as he straightened his tie.

“Prats.” Ron grumbled, and Harry laughed.

Then there was a clinking sound, and the Great Hall quieted as Dumbledore stood, hands called for a silence that already came.

“Now that you’re all fed, or at least partly so, I have a special announcement to make.” He started with a smile, and Aurora noticed her Father’s cool, black eyes were scanning the room, passing over her. “In light of our hosting those honored guests from Beauxbaton’s and Durmstrang, the board of directors has agreed to reinstate, for one year, the tradition of the Yule Ball.”

“Doesn’t make it a tradition, does it?” Ron grumbled with a confused frown.

“The Ball will be held at eight o’clock in the evening on Christmas day,” Dumbledore continued. “And is open to those in fourth year and above. Third years ….” Dumbledore stopped, glancing at her father, and smiled as her Dad locked eyes with the Headmaster. “I will allow Professor Snape to explain the details pertaining to third years.”

Dumbledore sat down, and her father stood up, taking his robes in hand before crossing his arms and looking down on the student body. A cold ball of embarrassment had already settled in her gut, knowing that no matter what was said, she was about to be humiliated.

“As it has always been, third years may attend the ball only if invited by one who is able to go unaccompanied. However, I would like all of you to bear in mind, when asking someone who would not be permitted to attend otherwise, that perhaps parental consent should be considered. Or, in some cases, mandatory.”

She thudded her head on the table, and she felt Ginny’s hand rub her back.

“Thank you, Professor Snape.” Dumbledore’s voice had returned. “I would recommend all third years write their parents to seek permission to go if asked.”

That wasn’t what her Dad meant, and now she was quite certain she wouldn’t be attending the Yule Ball unless Draco asked her.


“That’s not what they meant.” Ginny retorted.

“Course it is. Anyway, I’m going to write ‘Mione. She’s a sure bet, and likely would love the excuse to be able to come back.”

Despite everything, Aurora couldn’t help burst into peals of laughter, both at the situation and the idiocy that was Ron. She might actually have a better chance of going than he would, if that was his line of thinking.

If she wasn’t grounded by her father for trying to hex him, anyway.
“Your daughter’s going to hate you.” Minerva said from his right, not looking at him but out over the crowd of students.

He nearly smirked but refrained from doing so with so many eyes that could bear witness to it. “Is it not customary to have one’s teenage daughter loathe you? I had thought that was the aim.”

Minerva chuckled. “I don’t think there is much you could do to get Aurora to loathe you, but don’t deny every suitor that comes to call. I imagine if she is the only one of her friends not attending….”

“I will not decline everyone. Honestly, anyone who has the courage to come and face me to ask me permission to escort my daughter is likely to get a yes. And she will know which ones, I will make sure of it.”

Minerva shot him a skeptical look but said nothing.

He finished his coffee and rose from his chair, ignoring Igor as he stared at him with an intensity Severus didn’t want to deal with. It could only mean one of two things: Karkaroff expected Severus to force his daughter to attend the ball with Krum, or another Bulgarian, or he wanted to talk about the darkening of the mark.

He noticed a slight difference just before term began. It wasn’t anything he paid much mind to, assuming that it stood out more as his children gained a modicum of coloring compared to him during the summer months. He didn’t have reason enough to look until near the end of September when he had to brew for Poppy. His bathroom was always kept dimly lit, and dressing was so automatic that he barely looked at his hands, let alone his arm. Hermione never tended to look at it unless she needed to, so she’d not have realized the difference as he had as he rolled up his sleeves to begin his prep work.

His heart had dropped into his stomach.

He so wanted to believe it wouldn’t begin yet.

But there was the evidence on his arm: the Dark Lord was returning.

Completely faded, it barely looked like anything more than a very pale, very old muggle tattoo. In full form, it looked like fresh, dark ink just laid beneath the skin. It was starting to look somewhere in between.

Severus had no intention of discussing either. He knew no Bulgarians, except for the few that happened to be on the pitch during his daughter’s birthday, and unless they gave a valid reason, he would not permit them to take her. And if the mark was going to be discusses with anyone, it would be Albus.

Heading down to the dungeons, he gave little thought to the class he was about to teach. Slytherin/Gryffindor third years. An easy class, all things considered. The only less than pureblood aside from his own flesh and blood was Creevy, and he was almost as bad as Longbottom on a good day.

He was rounding the corner and paused when he’d seen the curling crackles of magic by the
Severus tamped down the laugh wanting to bubble up from his chest and approached the teenage Snape before him.

“You’ve managed to work yourself up in quite a frenzy if your hair is any indication.” He commented.

Aurora huffed. “You embarrassed me in front of the school.” She ground out.

“How so? It’s not as if I said your name in and of itself.”

“Dad, you practically did!” She stomped her foot in frustration. “Did it ever occur to you that no one would want to ask you?”

“Anyone who is afraid to approach me as the father of the girl they wish to court would not be anyone I would think you should consider.” He snapped, nostrils flaring. “Greasy, Bat of the Dungeons though I may be to these insolent little snots, they would need my permission for a great many things. If they don’t have the guts to face me and request your hand to the ball, how would they dare ask anything else of me?”

“You never had to ask permission with mum.” Aurora snapped.

“Because her parents were lost to her.” He growled back. When he felt the eyes of the portraits, and perhaps a few students on him, he cast a muffilato. “Do not think I ever once went about courting your mother without seeking any and all permissions first. They may have been their guardians, but I respected that they were as close to her parents as I would get. Know, Aurora, that the same is expected for you.”

“I’m going to be spending the ball alone in the tower.” She shot back.

“Then so be it.” He said, canceling the spell and waving her in the classroom. Taking a breath and finding his patient, he followed her in. Five minutes later, the first students began to trickle in, and class was in session.

It wasn’t until the end when they were handing in their samples that he found he had enough of a level head to speak to her again.

“Miss Snape,” He said, examining the sample she brought, clear grey instead of the cloudy the rest of her class handed in. “I expect better results than this from you. Stay after class.”

The wide-eyed disbelief from the rest of the class was damn near comical. Even Ginevra Weasley seemed at a loss of what to do or say as Aurora stood looking between furious and devastated.

She came up to his desk as the last of the others left, giving a nod to Miss Weasley that it was acceptable to wait outside. He waved his hand toward the door, locking and warding it.

“Where did I go wrong?” Aurora asked in a small voice.

“Frankly, by the color, I would say the cauldron was too hot. It’s a couple shades off, but that actually was not the reason I asked you to stay.” At her confusion, he set her sample down with the rest. “You will be asked, and I will grudgingly allow someone to take you. But bear in mind that it would be impossible for anyone to have asked me first until at least this evening.”

“Fine. How will I know then?” She asked with a sigh.
“I’ll inform you who asked me.” He stated simply before waving her toward the door. “Off to Runes, now.”

She snorted, and smirked, and with an eye roll, Aurora left for her next class.

Severus tried to recall if Hermione had ever been that temperamental. If she were, he was assuming love had blinded him to such a terrible fault.

———S———

There had been suitors.

The fourth year Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw class had followed his daughters. No brewing, merely lecture. The class had ten minutes left, so he dismissed them in a moment of rare generosity.

Two Hufflepuffs and a Ravenclaw approached him to ask. None of them even knew her proper first name. They were all promptly sent running.

Between that class, and his six-year NEWT class, four Slytherins all approached his door, all sent away as their classes would not be in the dungeons. He didn’t want to have to tell them ‘no’, merely give himself and Aurora time before the Death Eater children started to ask and he having to allow them.

But it was that class just before lunch that provided him the first, true intrigue of the day.

As the sixth year Slytherin/Gryffindor students began to file out and head to the Great Hall, he picked up on the tones of harsh whispers. He frowned, keeping his back turned and fingers running along the vials of potion samples as if they were of the utmost interest. He heard people filing out, and the door close softly, but he knew instinctively there was still someone in the room.

Turning around, he only felt the smallest bit of surprise at finding Fred Weasley standing tall, calm, and confident before him.

“Mr Weasley.” Severus said, his intrigue coming through in his voice. “To what do I owe your continued presence in my classroom?”

“I have come to you as a young man approaching the father of a daughter, whom I would like your permission to ask to the Yule Ball.”

His immediate, visceral reaction was “no”, but Severus refrained from saying it. He knew it was because Fred Weasley was nearly three years older than Aurora, and the age gap left him uneasy.

But, then again, the twins were both smart, mature when necessary, and that did count for something. And Aurora was mature for her age, all things considered, and had she been born a mere nine weeks earlier, she’d have been a fourth year, able to go with whom she pleased.

“What are your intentions with my daughter,” He said, and then reaching in his robes, pulled out a clear vial of water he decided to keep on him for the process of suitor filtering. “And bear in mind, Mr Weasley, I have the means to find out if you’re lying.”

“Veritaserrum,” Fred nodded to it. “Understood. My intentions, sir, are simple: to escort a girl I think is brilliant and fun, and who I know I would enjoy the evening with.”
“That simple?” Severus asked, and he felt a wave of rage when the Weasley twin smirked.

“I’d like to think I’m not stupid, sir. I’m pretty sure if I did anything at all untoward to Aurora, I would wake up with appendages detached, if I woke up at all. I like your daughter, Professor Snape, as well as respect her.”

Severus considered this for a moment, tapping his finger against his lips. “You may ask.” He said simply, half expecting a happy outburst in reaction.

Instead, Fred Weasley surprised him by bowing. “Thank you, sir.” And turned to leave without another word.

When he had closed the door behind him, Severus collapsed against his desk.

He hadn’t anticipated that.

Pulling himself together, and preparing to ask Min what she thought, Severus left the dungeons and headed toward the Great Hall.

He was nearly there when he was stopped.

“Professor Snape.” Viktor Krum bowed to him.

“Mr Krum,” Severus frowned, eyes darting about for Karkaroff. Ah, yes, there he was, lurking in an entryway as if Severus didn’t know what the Durmstrang wizard was up to.

“I have come to ask for your permission to escort your daughter to the Yule Ball.” Krum said as he stood straight.

“Have you?” Severus asked, brow arched. “Do you know her more than as an acquaintance?”

“She is a wonderful witch. Smart, likes Quidditch, tough.”

“Avora is also only fourteen.” Severus reminded him. When the young wizard before him merely shrugged, he sighed. Casting a muffilato about them, he looked the champion in the eye. “I know, for it is in my interest to know such things through observation, that you have little to no desire to have my daughter on your arm. Your interest actually lies in her friend, the young Miss Weasley. Though the latter is much younger, I know her parents would feel a sort of privilege by association should she go with you. You are a great wizard and seem a fine young man. I know the reasons Headmaster Karkaroff has pushed you to ask me this, but I will say no. I am thinking as a father first, and as such, I do not know you nor completely trust you.”

“I understand.” Krum said with what looked like a bit of relief. “She is beautiful, your Avora. But she is not … of my interest.”

“Then I believe our business is done.” And with a flick of his wrist, the spell was canceled, and the two wizards entered the hall through separate entries.

Severus took his place beside Minerva, looking out over the tables. No one seemed particularly up to trouble, but they were paying an unusual amount of attention to one another.

“How many broken hearts have you created thus far?” Minerva asked.

“Likely? Hardly any.” He replied taking a sip from his water goblet. “I have granted permission to only one thus far: Fred Weasley.”
Minerva seemed shocked at first, but then frowned. “If I were honest, I would have thought George would have found her attractive.”

“I’m surprised either of them have interest in the friend of their sister.” Severus countered.

“I’m not.” Minerva said with shake of her head. “If there’s one thing I noticed, it’s that while Ronald Weasley is protective of his sister, he finds her mostly a nuisance, while the twins seem to like her more than Ronald.”

“I will take your word for it.” Severus replied, tucking into his meal and watching the Gryffindor table in particular.

It was the end of the day. Gryffindor/Slytherin fourth years were due in any moment. And then, thankfully, he would have an evening in his rooms, grading papers, discussing things with his wife, focusing on that rarely had domestic bliss. His son would be around as well, and he missed Leonidas fiercely.

There was a knock on the door frame, and Severus looked up to see Draco walk in without any tag-alongs.

“Draco,” He greeted cautiously.

“Don’t worry, Uncle. I’ve come for quite an opposite reason: to say I won’t be taking Aurora to the ball.”

Severus arched a brow, and Draco took this for the sign that it was.

“My father would expect it, but none of the rest of us would want it. I’ve been spending enough time with Potter lately, I thought it best I ask Parkinson to … keep appearances, I suppose.”

“You’re lucky no one has caught on to where you’ve really been.” Severus warned as the boy took his seat.

“That would require them to have a half brain between the two of them.”

Severus allowed the smirk to flicker over his lips before Potter and Weasley walked in, followed shortly by Longbottom.

Severus watched as Potter met Draco’s eye, smirked and nodded, causing Draco to give a weary smirk and nod of his own. The curiosity over it held just long enough for the rest of the class to start filing in, making it fleeting at most.

The class went smoothly, all things considered. Longbottom didn’t melt or explode a cauldron, and he only had to smack Weasley once to get his attention back on his work. He had to deal with requests for permission from Nott, Crabbe, and Goyle, but none looked too pleased to be doing so. Duty, he imagined. He gave them permission, but he doubted they’d actually ask. And if they did, he already knew Aurora would say no.

He felt his wards tingle and knew Hermione and Leo had arrived via floo. The lot of dunderheads
before him were nearly gone.

He looked up and didn’t know what to make of the Gryffindor before him. Amusement, maybe, given everything. Unease, because of who he was. And he was also a bit impressed.

“Mister … Longbottom.”

“Sir.” He said in a shaking voice, his hands twitching at his side. “Sir, I’d-I’d …. I’d really like to take your daughter to the ball.”

He actually spit it out. Severus had half expected the young man to wet himself and run away. Bravery, indeed. This was no Hufflepuff, as Severus had often thought, and often heard his daughter and her friends refer to him as in jest. It took balls to stand up to one’s boggart and ask him to date his daughter.

“Then if she agrees, you may.” Severus replied.

Longbottom looked like he was about to faint away.

“Go.” Severus said, not wanting to clean anything expelled from Longbottom’s body from sheer relief and nerves.

Thankfully, the young man took off immediately.

Shaking his head, Severus left his classroom, moved for his office, and headed for his rooms.

By the time he had entered the sitting room where his wife and son were, he was nearly chuckling. Leo merely glanced up but was too focused on his homework to properly care what his parents were up to. Hermione was on the sofa, a piece of parchment at her side, and her lips twitching.

“And what has you all amused?” Hermione asked.

“Longbottom. He just left from asking me to escort our daughter. He looked ready to piss himself.”

“Well, if that amuses you, prepare for this.” She said, clearing her throat before picking up the parchment on the arm of the sofa. “’Mione. How’s it over there? Must be boring without us. You should come back. They’re having a ball, and you can’t miss it. So be my date, whaddya say? Ron.”

Severus stared at her for a long moment before he snorted. “Well,” he said as he began removing his robes. “Weasley will be in for disappointment when you inform him you already have a date for the evening.”

“Do I? I don’t recall you asking.”

“Part of the terms of our courtship, we go to this nonsense together. That became mandatory upon our wedding vows.”

“No, your sister is too young to go without being asked. I’m fairly certain if others got wind of a young lad who isn’t even a first year was in attendance, there will be a riot.”

“Good. Sounds boring.”

“You’ll be staying here.” Severus said, catching the question in his son’s eyes as he looked up. “By yourself.” And then before a rare outburst could be had from Leo, he added, “there will be wards.
No one in but us, no one out. Crookshanks will be around for company, I’m sure, and the books you are not allowed to touch will be warded. As will the door to the lab, so don’t even consider it.”

Leo smirked, “Yes, dad.”

“Would you like to place a bet on who our daughter will go with?” Hermione asked as Leo went back to work.

“No,” Severus scoffed. “I know better than bet against a woman who literally deals with odds. Speaking of, any change?”

Hermione shook her head, a slight glumness clouding her smile. “None. If nothing affects the current trajectory, Harry will not suffer for the tournament, but he will not win, either. And while I am still certain Moody is not Alastor, I have no idea who he could be. And as for ….” She glanced at his left arm. “Unchanged.”

Severus swallowed, wishing he had the forethought to pour himself a glass of something strong. “Then I will tell Albus.”

Hermione nodded, taking his hand in hers and giving it a squeeze.

The heaviness of it all was broken with a shouted, “I want names!” Coming from his office just before his daughter emerged.

Attention back on the everyday, Severus tucked the idea in the back of his mind that a conversation with the headmaster was needed. And more so, that this everyday would change before the following year was out, should Hermione’s numbers prove right.

And if there was one thing that hadn’t changed in twenty years, it was that fact that Hermione Snape, nee Granger, is a Know-it-All

Chapter End Notes

I've been super busy with real life stuff, so this took longer than I would have liked. I will try and get the next one out in the next couple weeks.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 29th, 1976

She stared at the floo with trepidation, hoping her gown was sufficient. Hoping _she_ was sufficient.

Hermione hadn’t put much mind to the party Lucius would be throwing, deciding instead to focus on studying, on the Yule Ball, on the things a normal seventeen-year-old witch at Hogwarts would concern herself with.

When she chose her dress for the ball, she’d gone with something in the color of red wine, with sleeves that were off the shoulder and an empire waist. She was told she looked much older than her youth, grown and mature. It was those words that buoyed her that re-wearing it to the pureblood soiree was a wise decision.

“Miss Granger doesn’t need to be there.” The Headmaster reminded them as he, Alastor, and Minerva stood in behind her with Severus in the Headmaster’s office. “In fact, I think it would be preferable is she wasn’t.”

“I was invited as well,” She said without looking at them, her voice strong despite her nerves.

“And passing on the invitation will make it clear that you do not harbor the ideals that Severus does.”

“I don’t harbor those ideals.” Severus countered, sounding very near snapping, and barely hanging on to respectable.

“But they believe you do, and for this to work, you must not cause them to doubt.”

“Said it before, Albus. Works better if he has a partner. He goes alone, looks bad. Especially when they know he has a bird.”

Hermione turned at Alastor’s voice, and saw the headmaster give a smile that said all too clear that he was merely surrendering for the moment.

Alastor looked at her, and she felt a probing in her mind. Her Occulmency was already well in place, and had been since before Christmas when she realized all that was about to happen, and how badly she needed to keep secrets. Severus had taught her how to put the things that she really didn’t want anyone to see behind a near-permanent wall, yet kept ideal, non-dangerous thoughts to the front. She had felt the Headmaster graving her whenever they first entered the office, and she suspected her new skill had him believing she was more vulnerable than she really was.

Moody have a smirk and nod of approval. “Get goin’, the pair’a ya. Stay only as long as polite, get what info you can, get out.”
Hermione nodded meekly.

"Understood." Severus said, coming to her side, and taking her arm. He held her arm tightly as they stepped in the floo together, controlling the ride as if she were a small child. He grabbed some powder and commanded, "Malfoy Manor, entry way," before tossing it down.

One moment, Hermione could see the concern on Minerva’s face, the next, she was being spit out the floo network with Severus still holding on.

They were both startled by the peach-colored, large eyed house elf that greeted them with a shy smile and a flick of its wrist. The soot and dust from the floo vanished from their formal wear.

"Dobby is to bring master Severus and guest to the ball room," the elf said, waving them to follow.

Hermione held on to Severus just that bit more, taking in the manor and the atmosphere as they went.

It was all so contrasting: the manor itself was light and welcoming, its opulence grand but not completely outlandish. The atmosphere was chokingly dark, the aura of more than a couple dozen magical beings with a lean toward that type of magic was nearly suffocating.

It only increased upon entering the ballroom.

There were many couples already dancing, a quick stepped, traditional wizard dance that Hermione knew but doubted she was very good at. There were tables near the back, clustered before what was obviously considered the head table. From the opposite end, Hermione could feel eyes on them, and only managed to dart a glance at the lone figure in a tall, throne like chair.

Severus gave her hand a reassuring pat as they stepped in to what felt like dangerous territory. There were a few confused glances or, and a couple of sneers, as they came to the edge of the fray. Dobby had disappeared as soon as they were through the doors, leaving them with not much idea of what they were supposed to do other than wait. They didn’t have to long before Lucius and Narcissa approached.

"Severus," He said warmly. "Wonderful that you could make it. And Hermione, of course. One needs a partner at these things, and you have chosen a marvelous one. Come, allow me to make some introductions."

The Malfoy’s turned, leading them around the throng of dancers toward what Hermione perceived as the high table.

The man who sat upon it was disturbingly handsome. Even with his eyes an unnatural burgundy with red around the irises, and his pallor closer to Severus than Lucius, he was striking. And his smile. His smile was disturbingly enchanting. He studied Severus as if sizing him up, eyes occasionally flickering to Hermione at his side.

"My Lord," Lucius said as they were close, he and Narcissa bowing and curtsying respectively. "This is the young man you have been longing to meet, Severus Snape. He is accompanied by Miss Hermione Granger-McGonagall."

"Severus Snape." The Dark Lord replied, his voice rich and alluring with a sinister hiss beneath the surface. "The only none master to be featured in a potion’s publication, not yet out of Hogwarts. A Slytherin, top of your year, and powerful. Your mother has renounced your father, and rejoined her proper place, and from what I heard, if it were possible you would discard your father’s name as well.”
“Tobias Snape is merely the man who fathered me.” Severus said, and then smoothly tacked on a swift, “My lord.” He bowed, and Hermione fell into a curtsy as well, watching Severus and trying to use her Occulmency just a bit more to keep from shaking.

“Yes, merely a tool, wasn’t he? Simply there to give your mother an heir. I suppose, given her other choice would be a blood traitor, it didn’t much matter.” Tom Riddle sighed, straightened, and stared Severus hard in the eye. Hermione felt a bolt of fear run down her spine, knowing what was happening despite Severus showing no sign of being invaded, and Riddle merely clenching his teeth. Slowly, very slowly, Riddle’s grimace gave way to a Cheshire smile. “Severus. Severus, Severus, Severus. You are going to be … wonderful. You have such passion. Such spirit of invention. Tell me what I must do to have you among my friends. What of your great ambitions can I assist you with achieving?” Riddles eyes turned to Hermione, and she felt him in her mind.

He ripped through what was available, perusing Hermione’s life as if flipping through a book. What he couldn’t see was tucked away, placed securely behind her walls. She had taken enough time to imagine herself as she had been in her early days at Hogwarts, wearing an Ilvermorny uniform and thinking of her muggle classmates as able to use magic. They were fuzzy, of course, but they had a tinge of memory loss as opposed to alteration. Her mind was clearer post-accident, and while she wondered if he was interested in finding out what she was like, she noted he merely looked closely at the memories with Severus. The memory of his confession of Dumbledore wanting him to become a Death Eater was there, but Riddle didn’t look at the whole thing. He heard the title of his followers in her mind and latched on it just long enough to see she wasn’t revolted by the idea. He pulled out immediately after.

“It would seem your lady would not be opposed to you becoming one of my Death Eaters.” Riddle said with approval. “She also seems to want you, so there is no persuading I can do there.”

“Forgive me, my Lord, but regardless of what my desires might be, I am still sixteen.” Severus replied.

Riddle smirked, “All the more impressive. So, when you come of age, we should revisit this discussion. But for now,” he gestured to the chairs at his right. “Let’s get to know one another better. I feel as though we have a lot in common.”

———S———

Their return to Hogwarts brought a rush of relief, and Severus nearly shuddered as the memory of Tom Riddle being in his mind washed over him.

Alastor was gruff, but not hard. Dumbledore was needling, like the buzzing of an insect in his ear. Hermione was warmth, love. Riddle was like a cold bath while reading the darkest tomes Severus had ever encountered, possibly more so.

“How did it go?” Alastor asked, eyeing them over with his good eye while the magical one seemed to do the same, but faster and more critically.

“Well,” Severus confessed, disliking the way Dumbledore lit up. “He’s … intrigued by me.”

“May I see?” Dumbledore asked.
Severus hesitated, which was likely not wise for him, but he couldn’t help it. He had a headache from being invaded so much and still managing to keep his shields in place. He was tired, and frankly didn’t think he could keep the old codger from seeing things he didn’t want him to.

The Headmaster seemed to sense this, and Severus immediately looked to Alastor. Dumbledore chuckled. “No, my boy. I will not poke around when I don’t need to. Merely put your wand to your temple, focus on the memory of the evening, and allow it to move toward your wand.

Severus frowned, but did as instructed. As he brought it to the surface, he had to concede that it wasn’t quite what he expected. While he knew there was dark deeds performed by the Death Eaters, he hadn’t expected the party to be quite so lively or gentle. He had danced with Hermione, spoken to a pair of potion’s masters who were likely brought in to entice him, but both seemed genuinely interested in snatching him as their own. He was among pureblood society as a freshly minted and acknowledged heir to a dying line, and many of those who had little to no use for him while they were in school suddenly didn’t seem to mind his halfblood heritage.

The memory got foggy, and there was a gentle pressure on the side of his head like the beginnings of a new, different headache. He drew his wand away, and there was an uncomfortable pulling sensation as a silver wisp of memory came free.

Dumbledore smiled and waved him toward a stone basin. “If you could drop it in there, Severus, and then walk Miss Granger back to Gryffindor tower Please don’t take too long, we’ll need to discuss what happened.”

He nodded once, taking Hermione by the hand, and leading her out of the headmaster’s office.

They were clear of the stairs when she pulled him to a stop, and he suddenly realized that, while he was still occluding, Hermione had let hers drop.

She was shaking violently, her fingers digging into his arm that he thought she would draw blood.

“That was terrifying.” She said, her voice barely above a whisper. “He was … he was in my head, and I thought for sure he would see that … what you said. But he just wanted to see what I thought of you joining. He was stuck on that one part of the conversation and shoved it away. I need … I need to be better. I need to be better for you if I’m going to face all that. I need … I need to be more pureblood in acting, I need to be a stronger occlumens, I need to be better.”

As she spoke, her voice got higher, most desperate, and by the end she was gasping for breaths while trying not to sob.

Severus pulled her to him, acknowledging that behind his shields he was scared as all fuck himself, but not nearly as bad as her.

“You can back out, Hermione. It’s okay.”

“No!” She half screeched. “No, I can’t, I won’t, I’ll be better. I promise I’ll be better.”

Severus held the sobbing witch, not sure what to do or how to help, when he heard footsteps, short and clipped, coming toward him.

Minerva rounded the corner and stopped for a moment in shock at the sight. She resumed, quickly coming toward them.

“Wha’ happened to her?” She asked, a hand on Severus’ arm while the other hovered around Hermione.
“She’s unharmed, just ….” He sighed. “It was a lot to take in this evening. She did well, she’s just ….”

“I understand, lad.” She acknowledged. “Albus is near expecting me for a bit longer. I assume he wanted ye back up when you brought Hermione to the tower?” Severus nodded. “I’m goin’ to bring her through to my office via the floo upstairs, now that I know you’re back. Come on.”

Severus turned Hermione around, heading back up the stairs.

When the entered the Headmaster’s office, Dumbledore had his head shoved in the basin, and Alastor gave him a confused glance before he snorted and rolled his eyes.

“Donea say it, Alastor.” Minerva warned before attempting to extract Hermione, now quietly crying, from Severus’ arm. “Hermione, dear, let’s go to my rooms and you can lay down there. Severus will see you as soon as he can.” She soothed, and Hermione relinquished her grip and allowed Minerva to guide her away without a word.

Behind his shields, panic boiled. What if she left him after all? What if the pressure was too much and waiting for him to finish his mastery was no longer an option. Things were made quite clear this evening: he was going to be marked or he would have to skip the country. He just wanted to keep his head down, get his education. If it meant being able to feed those opposed to the Dark Lord and his ideals the information they sorely sought, it was a bonus. But it wasn’t his goal, it wasn’t what he wanted. But then again, would he have been able to avoid such a fate?

“What happened?” Alastor asked once the ladies were through the floo, and Severus shot his eyes to Moody.

“She just was overwhelmed.” Severus admitted, letting his weight fall against the stone wall near the mantel. “He entered both our minds, and while she clearly did fine, she just ….” He trailed off. “He wants me,” Severus said, meeting Alastor’s eye. “We talked, extensively, and it seems he wants my skills. He wants my talents, he approves the courtship, he wants me out from under any possible influence of Dumbledore’s.”

“So … exactly where we want ya.”

“But not where I wanted to be.” Severus hissed. “I didn’t want to be involved before I got a break with Hermione, and I don’t want to be there now.”

“But it would appear that you are.” Dumbledore’s voice startled Severus, though he didn’t show it. He turned to the old wizard who gave him that infernal grin, hands folded in front of him. “My dear boy, you have done wonderfully. You are a favorite of Tom Riddle’s already, and you aren’t even one of his followers as of yet.”

“Nor do I want to be.”

“No, but as you have already deduced, there is no turning back. You will either have to take the mark or flee the country. And how long do you think it would be before tom hunts you down? And even if you hide, even if you make yourself completely untraceable, they will go after Miss Granger.”

“Not if she’s with me.” Severus countered.

“No, but I doubt they will wait until she’s a graduate before using her to draw you out.”

“She can take her NEWTs early, with me. Merlin knows she’s ready to.”
“Yes, she could do that, but unfortunately, she needs the signatures of all the professors involved in her education, as well that of myself. And I’m sorry, Mr Snape, but I will not release her into the Wizarding World before I absolutely must.”

Rage burned through Severus, and his lip twitched, urging to curl into a sneer. His nostrils flared, and his muscles tensed as a dozen or so hexes zipped through his mind just begging to be released.

“It would seem, Headmaster, that you have me in a corner, as it were.”

“It is a bit of a checkmate, I will confess.” Dumbledore said, clearly pleased with himself.

“It’s a bit dirty, Albus.” Moody said gruffly as the floo flared green and Minerva stepped through. “Ya know he ain’t gonna leave his witch for ya, and yet the only option you give him that allows him to run is to do just that.”

“Do what?” Minerva snapped, looking from Alastor to Dumbledore. “Albus, what did you do?”

“Merely secured us a spy, Minerva. Unless, of course, Mr Snape will decide to run after all? Leave Miss Granger behind? I have noticed Mr Lupin seems rather fond of her, so she’ll at least be in good hands should you decide to take the … other route.”

Severus heard the unspoken word as if the Headmaster shouted it from the astronomy tower: cowardly.

“Mister Snape,” Minerva said in a steely tone that was not at all directed to him. “I’d like you to head back to your dormitory for the evening.”

“Minerva.” Dumbledore started to say.

“Don’t ye dare, Albus. Ye’ve done enough damage for one night How dare you! How dare you do this?”

“Your answer, Mister Snape?” Dumbledore cut off McGonagall just as Severus reached the door.

Severus sighed heavily.

He knew it was all too good. He knew it would just be a matter of time before the other shoe dropped. Not quit six months before, he had laid in that tent, looking at the stars laid out on the enchanted ceiling, trying to read them to see when his good luck would run out. When he would lose the girl he loved, when the dreams he had of an apothecary would be pulled out from under him, when he’d lose the friends he’d gained.

And the Headmaster was right, from every angle, it was a checkmate. He could avoid the Dark Lord, shun the interest that was shown him, stay in school his seventh year, and lose the chance for an apprenticeship somewhere in Europe. Leave for anywhere else in the world at the end of this year, and Hermione was a sitting goose. Risk staying still, and they could both be tormented.

“I have no choice, do I?” He said over his shoulder.

“There are always choices.” Dumbledore countered.

Severus scoffed. “But only one right one, correct Headmaster?” He looked the old man in the eye, and thought he caught a hint of remorse. “I had guessed this would be my path before I left for Lucius’ home this evening. The visit just confirmed that I had no other options. I’ll do it, but not for you.”
“Fair enough, my boy.” Dumbledore said, and Severus took his exit.

He hoped that Hermione would still wait for him, and that the confirmation of his suspicions weren’t going to send her running. Though, really, he wouldn’t blame her if they did. He wasn’t sure he cared what anyone else thought, though he did feel a slight pang at the thought of losing Lily.

But at least he knew that he would still have Alastor to turn to, as well as Minerva. After all, she hadn’t even waited for him to shut the door before starting to tear Albus Dumbledore a new one.

December 11th, 1994

Aurora was actually thankful for her father’s insistence that he have the right to decide who could even ask her, because Aurora honestly didn’t know what she would have done had the options been presented to her without warning.

Fred had wanted to ask her, and that made her heart and stomach do weird things that she disliked but savored.

Neville wanted to ask her as well, and she didn’t like how that both excited her and filled her with guilt.

Why guilt, she wasn’t sure. Neither had approached her, though she could feel their eyes on her through breakfast.

No, you know precisely why you feel guilty, and it’s not just directed at Neville.

She hated that she was logical because she knew why the guilt cropped up with the sight of Neville’s name: she didn’t want to say no to him. But she didn’t want to say no to Fred, either. They were both her friends, though very different in personality. Fred was older, a bit more handsome, but Neville was sweet and trust worthy. She never had to worry if the drink or snack he handed her was tainted with some sort of prank. But then again, he didn’t have Fred’s intellect, and it perturbed her a little that a fourth year was asking her, a third year, potion’s homework questions. But Neville was also one of the few people who stood with Harry right from the get go of this whole tournament nonsense. And while they didn’t exactly wish the worse for Harry, Aurora had a suspicion that the bets for the first event was spurred on a bit by jealousy that Harry succeeded in entering where they had not.

With a heavy sigh, Aurora slumped against the table, looking at her list, ignoring all but two names, and dreading the pending decision.

“It can’t be that bad,” Ginny said, trying to cheer her. She knew of the list, and despite her brother being on it, she didn’t have a clear favorite. Nor had Luna. And worse, both girls admitted that, if she were to pick Fred, neither would be available to attend with their friend. Both had already acquired dates.

The owls began to flutter in, and Aurora glanced up to notice the family owl coming toward the Gryffindor table. She had fully expected a letter from her mother, offering encouragement and
support, and perhaps some advice thought up since she’d seen her last night.

Her eyes widened as the owl landed in front of Ron.

“It’s from ‘Mione.” He said with a smile, the bird not waiting for a reply and taking off.

“That was quick.” Harry said, frowning at the parchment as Ron opened it.

“Maybe International owl is faster than we thought.” Ginny suggested with a shrug. “Maybe they port key it, or apparate it somehow?”

Harry shrugged in turn as Ron unrolled the parchment, his smile dropping immediately.

“What’s it say?” Harry asked.

“Ron, lovely as the ball sounds, I’m not going with you.” He said, but even Aurora had noted that there was a lot more to the parchment that just that small bit.

As Ron slumped and nearly dropped the letter, Ginny plucked it up, reading the rest aloud with a smile on her face.

“For one, I would not want to have to arrange a port key for just one night where I would likely be forced to sit out nearly all the dances. Another, it is rather presumptuous to assume I would not have my own functions, or even a family event I would need to attend here. Also, I know full well you only asked me because you thought I would be a guarantee.

“Best of luck in finding a date, however. I hope my prompt reply, expensive as it was, will ensure you do not have me to blame if you wind up dateless. Best, Hermione.”

Those who nearby who heard laughed as Rob grew increasingly red.

“Not like any of you lot have dates yet.” He growled. “Least I had the stones to ask someone right away.”

“I have a date,” Harry said, and the look of utter betrayal on Ron’s face had Aurora snickering with his sister.

“Who!?” Ron demanded. Harry tilted his head behind him. Ron glanced over his shoulder, paling. “Mate, I know it’s modern times and all, but you can’t go with Malfoy.”

Harry’s cheeks pinched a bit. “Why would you think Malfoy?”

“Lookin at us, ain’t he? And you tilted your head his way.”

“, Ron, he was indicating me.” Luna said. “He asked me yesterday as we passed each other in the corridor. It’s quite an honor, really, being a champions date. And this way Ginny has a friendly face among the champion’s dates.”

The group said nothing as the attention shifted to Ginny who was blushing furiously.

“Viktor Krum asked me yesterday afternoon.” She confessed.

“When?” Aurora asked, having no idea when Ginny had encountered the Durmstrang champion. They weren’t attached at the hip by any means, despite being best friends, but she still hadn’t a clue when the whole thing could have happened.
Ginny shifted, “He managed to find me as I was heading back from Care for Magical Creatures.”

It was Aurora’s turn to shift uncomfortably, feeling terrible that she hadn’t taken the class with Hagrid. But Arithmancy was something she’d been raised around, seen as a genuinely useful skill, and Aurora had no ambitions to be a Magizoologist.

“Mum wouldn’t let you, you know.” Ron countered. “She finds out you’re going with a bloke older than Fred and George, she’ll forbid it.”

At the mention of Fred’s name, Aurora felt as though she was sinking a bit more into her seat. She glanced at Neville just a couple of seats down from her, and found he didn’t seem to notice, interested in the conversation between the youngest Weasleys.

“No, she won’t,” Ginny countered, looking at her brother as if he were bigger idiot than he already appeared was most of the time.

“Anyone ask you, Rory?” Harry asked, changing the subject before the siblings could argue. In her peripheral, she noted both Fred and Neville focus on her, though the former was much subtler than the latter.

Before she could answer, Ron let out a loud, “ha!” When Harry glared at him, he shrugged. “Who’s going to ask Snape if they can take Rory to the Yule Ball? No one’s going to actually go up to the Greasy Git. Bloody Great Bat likely’ll give detention to anyone who even tries.”

Well, shows what he knows, Aurora thought with a smirk, rising off the bench, and preparing to head to class.

“Be along in a minute.” Ginny said in a tight voice, her eyes shifting to Ron in quick spurts.

Aurora nodded, figuring she would just wait for her friend to finish hexing her brother outside the Great Hall.

Aurora paced slowly, scuffing the toe of her show along the stone floor, shifting the strap of her bag now and again.

She glanced up from her pacing, seeing Fred coming out of the Great Hall, and she stopped. Her heart leapt in her throat and started hammering away. Her mouth went dry and she had to remind herself to breath.

Fred lifted his chin, a confident smirk on his face.

“Fred!” Someone shouted. A girl, and one Aurora knew she should recognize, but her brain was having trouble computing anything at the moment.

Angelina Johnson came up from behind Fred with a lovely smile on her face, gently pushing him aside for Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Neville to get by, followed by George and Lee Jordon.

As Angelina started talking, or asking, as Aurora’s brain realized, Neville came up to her, glancing at their friends whom Aurora vaguely acknowledged as arguing among themselves over something.

“R-Rory,” Neville stuttered, getting her full attention. He straightened his spine, but he was still pale, and Aurora thought she could see him shaking a bit. “Umm, would you, ah, want to go to the Yule Ball? With me?”

It took great effort not to look at Fred, hearing the bits of his conversation with Angeline drift over
from a few feet away.

“Yes.” She said, giving a single nod. “I’d like that.”

Neville seemed relieved, and it was only when he slumped with relief that she allowed herself a glance in the Beater’s direction to see Angeline pulling back from a hug. She’d thought she’d seen the beautiful Chaser say, “my dress is blue”, the words too soft to be heard.

“I … I don’t know what I’m wearing yet, so, umm, you don’t have to match me or anything.”

“Well, umm, alright.” And then tensing, he asked, “Am I going to have to meet you in your Dad’s office?”

Aurora burst out laughing at that, the tension draining from her. She hadn’t realized how bad it was. “Probably.”

Chapter End Notes

*waves* Hi. I'm sorry it's been nearly two weeks. I've been very busy, and did not mean to neglect this. Ergo, shorter than normal chapter but with two big-ish events. Next up for Aurora, Yule Ball! Next Up for Severus and Hermione, well....
“You look weird.” Aurora greeted her mother as she entered her Father’s chambers. He chuckled from the sofa, lounging lazily on the sofa in his black dress pants and a white dress shirt.

“Well thank you for that, Poppet.” Her mother smirked, though it wasn’t quite the smirk Aurora was used to. In fact, there were many very subtle changes to her mother. Her hair was a touch darker, closer to Aurora’s shade of near black than her normal chestnut curls. Which were gone, leaving long, smooth locks of hair that seemed strange in and of themselves. Her eyes were lighter, more golden, and her nose was sharper. “So, do you think anyone will recognize me?” She asked.

“No,” she said bluntly. “Do you not remember what you looked like before you went back into the seventies?”

“Be nice,” Her father said. “Your mother was beautiful even then.”

“I do recall having my teeth hexed to grow past my chin and you stating that you saw no difference.” Her mother countered, and Aurora snorted at the same time she heard her brother off in the corner doing the same.

Her father shrugged lazily. “I didn’t like you at the time.”

“No, you didn’t want to like me.” Her mother countered as she headed toward Aurora’s room, beckoning her to follow. “There’s a difference.”

“Yes, Dear.” Her father said, and Aurora watched her mother roll her eyes and shake her head affectionately.

They entered her bedroom, and her mother closed the door, turning toward her with a smile. “Are you sure you don’t want to get ready with your friends?” She asked.

Aurora shrugged, looking at the bed instead of at this strange version of her Mum. “They’re in Ravenclaw tower getting ready. With Fleur Delacor, who is a champion. And Cho Chang, who happens to be going with Cedric Diggory. It felt a bit … elite. I didn’t want to intrude.”

It wasn’t that the invitation wasn’t extended and then begged upon, but Aurora had felt truly out of place at the thought of going. These girls were, after all, going to be opening the ball, and she, well, she was going with Neville. Which wasn’t a bad thing, but it wasn’t exactly requiring her to be the belle of the Yule Ball.

Her mother nodded in understanding, offering her a shy smile. “I didn’t go with anyone my first Yule Ball, and I most certainly didn’t feel the need to impress anyone.”
“But you tried for Dad.” She noted.

“Of course, I was already half in love with him, if not completely. And I know you’ve seen the pictures of Harry’s mother, she was stunning, and he, well … Between us, he was infatuated with Lily Potter when I first met them.”

Aurora couldn’t keep her lip from curling at that, making her mother laugh.

“I think I will keep that completely to myself. Bad enough that Harry’s going to figure out, one day, that his friend had married his professor, I don’t want him to know that same professor liked his Mum, too.” Then realizing the need for the changes, asked her mum, “You don’t want them to know tonight, do you?”

Her mother shook her head sadly. “I didn’t want to do a full glamour, because there is no younger me to see me. Nor do I think I need to hide so completely. But it’s only been a few months for them, and, well … I think they need more time. If they see me and see me, then so be it. But I was hardly going to reveal myself and take away from the evening. Which brings us back to you,” Her mother flicked her hand toward the closet door, a storage space empty pretty much all the time these days, and four dresses swept out and hovered before Aurora. “You never wrote about one,” She explained, “And there wasn’t a Hogsmeade day before the ball, nor was there a request to myself or your father for a few galleons. So, I took the liberty of providing you a few options.”

Aurora looked at the gowns in awe, and with just a touch of sentimentality. One was new, simple, black. It was lovely, and mature, and would certainly make her appear older than fourteen. There was another, also new, but was a lovely shade of gold. But the ones that drew Aurora’s eye the most were the two older gowns.

Both were her mother’s, both she had seen in pictures growing up and were coveted by that girlish part of her soul that wanted to be a princess, even for a night.

Her mother’s Yule Ball gown from the first year she went with her father, and the dress she’d worn their second year.

Without thinking, Aurora’s hands each reached out to stroke the silk-soft skirts of the two gowns.

“I didn’t keep any of the ones I’d worn to the parties of your father’s … associates. They always seemed tainted afterward. But these two, well, I suppose I had vaguely remembered you and held on to them just in case. I didn’t know for certain, after all, that you were mine.”

Aurora smiled at that. “It must have been odd, knowing I was going to happen before it happened.”

“At times, I suppose. But by the time you came around, I’d already grown used to the idea of having few surprises. Much like your brother was, despite our hoping for him to begin with.” She looked to the dress Aurora seemed to be fingering the most. “I can change the color from green to red. I was attending with a Slytherin, after all. But you’re going with someone from your own house.” And then she smirked, “You father told me what he did to Ronald.”

Aurora threw her head back and laughed, remembering that wondrous moment from a few days before.

They had been in study hall, and Ron had been whinging over not having secured a date for the evening.

With a sudden burst of something like an idea, Ron had looked at her and said, “Snape, you’re a girl.”
Her father, who had been walking up and down the rows, stopped behind Ron at the mention of his name and frowned.

Aurora, trying very hard to not draw attention to her looming father, mimicked his eyebrow arch perfectly. “Last I checked, yes, I am.”

“So, you should go with me.” Ron had said. “I mean, I’m sure by now your Dad would let ya, what with Gin and Luna going.”

Aurora had glanced at her father, who lifted his brow in question, fingering someone’s work book. She gave him a subtle shake of her head before turning to Ron again.

“I’m already going.” She said. “I was asked the day after the ball was announced.”

“No, you weren’t.” Ron returned. “Who’d have asked yo-”

Smack! Her father had moved so swiftly that it was as if he hadn’t moved at all.

Ron had rubbed his head, scowling but not stupid enough to complain.

“I was gonna ask her,” Fred had confessed with a cheeky grin. “Plan on stealing her from Nevvie for a dance or two, too.”

“Neville asked you!?” Ron had asked, his voice breaking. He earned another swat, and then her father had moved on.

“Yes, he asked. What’s the big deal?” Aurora had asked, then finished her homework and left.

Her mother’s eyes were dancing with mirth that she wouldn’t let out.

“How about that dress, changed to red.” She asked.

Aurora nodded, already picturing herself twirling around the dance floor. The only thing is, she couldn’t quite decide who’s arms she’d prefer to picture herself in.

———S———-

Severus looked himself over in the mirror and smirked at his reflection. He’d considered showing up to the Yule Ball in his usual frock coat and robes, maybe after a day full of brewing something and conveniently not having time to cleanse his hair. But he had so few opportunities these days to turn his wife’s head and, if possible, making her proud to be on his arm. Plus, it was a bit of an anniversary of sorts.

His hair was, despite his better judgment, immaculate. Combed and tied back in a dark green ribbon, that alone made him look drastically different. After the girls left, he’d cleaned up, replaced his trousers, and pulled out a dark green cravat. After it was in place, he found his silver Slytherin cravat pin that Minerva had gifted him when he became head of house. After that, it was his black waist coat, and then his black dress robes, which wouldn’t billow quite as much as his teaching robes, but he couldn’t always have what he liked.

As he was making a couple minute adjustments, Leonidas came into their bedroom.
“Will I need dress robes?” He asked, studying his father in the mirror.

“Eventually.” He replied. “Not for a few years yet, and the ball tonight is not likely to be repeated while you’re in school. Likely, you’ll need them before you leave Hogwarts to wear to a wedding.”

Leo nodded sagely. “I understand. Perhaps, if it’s okay with you, I can greet Aurora’s escort this evening.” As Severus turned to his son with intrigue, Leo shrugged his shoulders. “You likely think him a dunderhead. I thought a fresh perspective may help us determine the worth of Aurora’s future husband.”

“Future Hu-?” Severus half roared incredulously.

Nightmare like images of Neville Longbottom waiting for his daughter to approach him and bind herself to him. Oh, having Longbottom call him ‘Dad’ and quivering the whole time. Grandchildren that exploded cauldrons. Aurora Eileen Longbottom.

“Is that not what happens at the end of a courtship? She has chosen, and now….”

“Leonidas, where in Merlin’s name did you get the impression that your sister is courting someone?” Severus interrupted his son before the thought could make him any crazier.

Leo frowned. “Aside from the fact that you and Mum began a courtship that ended in marriage, it was in a book. Or a couple books, really.”

“And what have we said about books?”

“That they are excellent, useful things to glean information from, but not an absolute.”

“And does your mother remind you of this?”

“Frequently.”

“Then why would you think that what you read about such things would be the absolute truth?” At his son’s confusion, he added, “Your mother and I are the exception. Unless there is an arrangement in place, a courtship does not necessarily end in marriage.”

“Then what’s the point?” Leo asked.

Severus was saved from answering by the sound of a timid knock on his office door echoing throughout his rooms. Severus looked down at Leo who looked expectantly back at him. He did look an awful lot like he did at that age, just with cleaner hair and a less offensive nose. Still big, but not hooked, at least.

“You want to meet the dunderhead taking your sister to the ball?” He asked, to which Leo nodded. Severus pulled out his wand, and with a quick swish, Leo’s corduroy’s and simple oxford were gone and replaced with Severus’ usual teaching wear, shrunk down to fit his son. Leo looked down, then at his father with unrestrained glee. “Enjoy.”

Leo dashed out the room, and his sister and mother were seen bustling down the small hallway shortly after. “Stop!” Severus called, halting Hermione and Aurora’s progress. He stalked out, looking over his daughter with a keen eye. “You look lovely.” He told her with a half-hearted smile. “And entirely too grown up.”

“Dad,” She whined, and he raised a hand to halt her further.
“I don’t mean that the cut of dress isn’t proper or is too old for you. I mean you look to be much older than fourteen. Had Mr Weasley been the one to escort you, you would not have appeared out of place on his arm. And it is merely one more reminder that you are not a child anymore.” He then drew himself up. “Now go, save Longbottom from passing out while your brother practices being intimidating.”

Aurora scoffed a snort, picking up the skirts of her dress and heading for the office doors.

_________A_________

Neville had led her in by the arm, only shaking a little after the encounter with her brother.

Aurora still wanted to outright laugh at the scene she’d come across. Leo had stood as straight as he could, mimicking their father’s cross armed stance, complete with holding a bit of the robes in each hand as he did so. He stood just far enough back from the door that he wouldn’t get hit when it opened, and bellowed, “enter,” just as Aurora had made it to the office.

Neville had done as asked, stopping short and looking at Leo with a slightly timid and quite perplexed look.

Leo had done his best to scowl at him, though to Aurora it was a touch too adorable to be as intimidating as their father.

The way Neville blanched, she was certain it didn’t have the same effect.

“So, you’re this Longbottom I’ve been hearing so much about.” Leo had said, eyeing her date over with a sneer. “I must say, you are exactly as I thought you would be. What are your intentions with my sister?”

“Y-y-your sis-sister?” Neville stuttered.

“Yes, you numpty-brained, dunderhead, what are your intentions with her?”

“Well, uh, sir…” Neville frowned at the title, and Aurora had burst out laughing as she came into sight.

“You had your fun, Leo, and I’m sure Neville is properly terrified.” She said, making her brother scowl further as she kissed his head.

“Rory,” He hissed.

“I left my text books on the couch, you can have a look at them while we’re all at the ball.” She said. All thought of playing at being their dad had seemed to evaporate from Leo’s mind as he turned and ran, shouting, “You’re the best sister ever, Rory.”

His cloak had fluttered in a near billow as he ran.

“How old’s your brother, again?” Neville asked as they stood at the edge of the crowd, waiting for the ball to begin with the procession of champions, professors, and their guests.

“Leo will be ten in January. He’ll start when I’m in my fifth year.” She clarified.
“Right.” Neville said. And then after a pause, “He’s a bit frightening for someone younger than a firstie.” Aurora chuckled at that.

“Did I hear that right? Neville’s scared of a kid?” George said behind them, Katie Bell on his arm.

“Must be right terrifying, that lad.” Fred agreed, Angelina chuckling.

“He looks exactly like Snape. Even dressed like him.” Neville said.

“He did that on purpose, you know.” Aurora told him. “Normally he looks much more his age.”

The doors opened, and the hum of conversation in the room was replaced by gentle applause as Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall led the procession of professors and headmasters.

They were followed by Headmaster of Durmstrang, with a very severe looking woman at his side. His wife, Aurora would guess, though she must have just come to Scotland for the event as she didn’t remember seeing the woman around the school before.

The Headmistress of Beauxbaton’s came next, with Hagrid at her side, shorter than she. When he spotted Neville and Aurora, he waved at them, obviously trying to be subtle, and failing.

Professors Sprout and Flitwick came next, in which the short Ravenclaw head parted from his escort before reaching the short dais to make his way to the orchestra.

There was a pause in the applause as her father and mother entered the Great Hall turned Ball room.

He did look quite handsome, for her father anyway. And her mother was lovely in her silver white gown with subtle green trim.

“Is that Professor Snape?” She heard a few of the upper-class girls murmur behind her around the same time she heard a couple of the boys mumble, “no way is his wife that fit.”

There were whispers, but they were all in a bit of awe despite her father’s scowl and her mother’s amusement. The doors closed shortly after them, and when they reached the dais, Aurora watched her mother lean in and whisper something to her father to help soothe him.

“Blimey, I didn’t realize your dad could clean up so well.” Angelina said.

“Sure you’re mother isn’t on a constant guzzle of love potion?” An idiot a year younger than Fred and George, Cormac McLaggen, leaned past his date beside Angelina to ask. “She’s a bit too pretty for him.”

Before she could say anything, Fred smacked him. “More to life than looks, McLaggen. Maybe she likes smart blokes, probably a bit of a book worm herself.”

If they only knew.

The doors opened again, and the champions with their dates came in to thunderous applause.

Fleur Delacour looked lovely, and whomever accompanied her looked proud, though Aurora hadn’t a clue who he was.

Ginny entered with Viktor, looking both cute and pretty at the same time with her hair pinned up and a lovely burgundy gown. She waved to Aurora as she passed, then darted her eyes to Krum for a moment before making it known exactly how excited she was to be on his arm. Cedric and Choc Chang followed them, and then, of course …. 
Harry and Luna made quite the pair. Harry looked smashing and grown in his modern dress robes, though his was walking stiff and nervous. Luna, by contrast, was as serene as ever, though her dress was her typical eccentric style. A bold kaleidoscope of color and paired with a necklace of bottle caps.

Still, when the students surrounded the champions as they got ready to open the ball, Aurora had noted that Luna’s peace and calm had an effect on Harry. She and Ginny knew the boys had been practicing dancing, even if they didn’t want to admit it, and while she was fairly certain that Harry knew what to do she doubt he’d remember perfectly in the spot lot. Luna looked to be giving quite instruction as the song started, and Harry looked no more out of step than the others.

Ginny moved gracefully with Krum, looking all the world like they had been dancing together near their whole lives. And, with a pain of jealousy, Aurora acknowledged that Krum seemed quite smitten with Ginny. It wasn’t that she was jealous of the man, he reminded her too much of her father to find him attractive in any sort of way. It was just the look he had for her.

Professor Dumbledore brought Aunt Min out to the dance floor, followed quickly by the Durmstrang Headmaster and his severe lady. And if the pause in applause indicated anything, there was surprise that the great bat of the dungeons had brought his wife out to the floor nearly immediately after.

“Did you, umm, want to …?” Neville asked, holding out his hand.

A few other couples got bold and stepped out, and so not being among the first students aside from the champions, Aurora accepted.

Neville had practiced adequately and was near as graceful as her father was. She looked to her parents, and while his expressionless face would have anyone in the room who didn’t know him believe him to be unimpressed, there was a glint of approval in her father’s eye. She then met Harry’s gaze, and traded an amused grin before she was turned out of his line of sight. She spotted Draco bringing Pansy Parkinson out on the floor in movements practiced since shortly after he learned how to walk.

That meant of all their little group, the only one not dancing was ….

She found Ron off to the side with a dark-haired girl clinging to him. Romilda Vane. Ugh, he must of have been truly desperate.

Focusing back on Neville, she noticed he seemed stiff, unsmiling, not looking at her. She waited, hoping he would look up, and he didn’t. When the song finished, before the next one began, she asked. “Is something wrong?”

He looked up, blushing, then looked away. “No. I’m just … I’m trying not to, umm ….” He swallowed nervously. “You look really pretty.”

“Thanks,” she said, and smiled when she noted his smiling despite ducking his head. “Did you want to dance again?”

He looked up with surprise, then smiled wider. Why he was surprised, she didn’t know. It wasn’t like he stepped on her feet, and he was her date for the evening. But he nodded and took her in his arms much more confidently than he had before. And this time when he led her through the dance, he didn’t take her eyes off hers unless it was needed.

And if Aurora started to feel something similar to the uncomfortable flutter that Fred had caused her from time to time, she was keeping it to herself.
The ball had progressed perfectly well, with no need to hex anyone. Yes, he kept a bit of an eye on those who danced with his daughter, noting that aside from Longbottom, Potter had a turn with her, as did Draco, and Krum when Longbottom and he changed dates for a song. The youngest Weasley male eyed her from time to time but made no move even as his poor choice in companion for the evening had disappeared with a Durmstrang student.

Which had reminded Severus that he had rounds to do.

“I must leave you for a few minutes,” He said to Hermione, pulling her attention away from the conversation between Filius and Minerva for a moment. “I won’t be long.”

“Would you like company on your rounds?” She asked.

“No, not at first.” He replied, his eyes darting to Karkaroff who had been damn near staring holes in him all evening. The man’s wife had done one dance with him, then disappeared from the hall, and presumably the school. And since, his attention had been solely on Severus. He glanced at Hermione, who didn’t seem to be looking at Karkaroff, though he got the impression that she knew why he wanted her to wait.

This needed to be taken care of, now.

Severus rose, straightening his robes, and heading out the hall through a side door that led out to a courtyard.

“Ten points from Slytherin,” He said as he walked past a couple who somehow thought that being behind a pole was going to conceal them. “Mr Evans, Miss Addams, I had expected more from you, given your house.” The couple had slunk off, probably to a darker spot where they would be less likely to be caught.

He looked about the cold, stone paved area, scanning the carriages that were used merely twice a year to bring the students to and from the train station. He would have liked to have gone to the enchanted garden Filius would have created, but there was a small, sentimental part of him that couldn’t bring himself to break up couples there. After all, it was in a very similar garden on a very similar night, that he and Hermione had shared their first kiss. And so long as Longbottom and Aurora stayed within the Great Hall, he didn’t see the harm in little a couple of two have a similar experience.

But the carriages were different. I hadn’t occurred to him as a student to come here during the balls. He and Hermione had had his lab, and the Room of Requirement was thought legend enough that they had perfect places to meet up unseen. Well, he thought Poppy might have suspected what they were up to, given the rush to the hospital wing after Hermione’s reaction to the standard contraceptive potion, but she never stopped them.

Come to think on it, he wondered if it was a hereditary allergy. His stomach dropped when he realized exactly how close Aurora was in age to when he and Hermione had sex for the first time. She was too grown up, and he should have her blood tested against the potion as a precaution.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Severus.” Igor’s voice pulled him away from one set of unhappy thoughts and promptly pulled him to another.
“Hardly,” Severus drawled. “I’ve been teaching, and as head of house, I had to ensure my Slytherins were prepared for this evening. Not to mention the other duties I have.”

“You’ve still been putting off a conversation you know we should have.” Igor insisted, and Severus rolled his eyes as he half-heartedly checked a few of the carriages. They were old, slightly rickety things that would move under the slightest shift of weight. As far as he could tell, none of them held any occupants. Still, it gave him something to do while Igor got whatever it was he needed to say off his chest.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“It’s happening again, like before. And soon, neither you or anyone else will be able to deny it.” Igor hissed.

“And I told you before, Igor, I see no reason to discuss it.” He said, opening a carriage, and checking within. Before he could say anything else, the slightest bit of movement caught his eye, and he turned toward a carriage that shifted slightly. Dashing toward it, he cast a Lumos to light the window, catching the startled and fearful looks of two seventh years. “Ten points from Hufflepuff, Faucet.” He said as wrenched open the door. “And the same from Ravenclaw, Stebbins.” He added as the Miss and Mister within came out, adjusting their clothes and giggling. Giggling, as if getting caught by him was something amusing. He watched them dash off as he closed the door, likely to find another place to continue their liaison, when he thought he saw ….

Ah, so Potter was out wandering the courtyard. Alone, it seemed, or at least … no, there it was. Or they were, it appears, as he caught the tops of two, near white blonde heads that could have blended in with the snow on the short wall they were hiding behind. Potter had decided behind a post was appropriate, not having the brain of his Ravenclaw date or the cunning of his Slytherin friend to hide properly.

“It’s a sign, Severus.” Igor said as soon as the Dark Wizard assumed the coast was clear. “You know it is.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Severus snapped back, heading to another carriage to continue the show of checking, all the while hoping that at least Draco would get the sense that this conversation was not one Potter should hear and get his friend out while it seemed no one had noticed them. He opened the carriage door and peeked inside, putting a conceivable block between what may have been his line of sight and the trio of terrible spies, looking far longer than he actually needed to.

“Really,” Igor said with a hint of smug superiority. “Then I guess you wouldn’t mind rolling up your sleeve.” He closed the door and turned to find Igor reaching toward him. He yanked his left arm out of the man’s reach and glared at him. Igor sneered. “You don’t fool me, Severus. You are scared.”

Igor took a step back, and Severus lowered his arm, taking a step forward to set the taller man back just a bit more. Occlumency in place, he knew he appeared cold and calculating as Igor suddenly seemed less confident.

“I have nothing to be scared of, Igor,” Severus lied flawlessly. “Can you say the same?”

The door to the courtyard opened and closed as the two men, who knew one another for near twenty years, measured one another. Igor took another step back, his confidence draining.

“Severus,” Hermione’s voice echoed through the silence, her heels making soft clicking sounds as she approached. “I had wondered where you had gone to, dear one.”
Severus held out his hand to his wife while never taking his eyes off Igor. He watched as Karkaroff observed the intimate gesture, at least intimate for public by pureblood standards, as Hermione placed her hand in his. He knew his acquaintance had noted the ease in which they interacted, the warmth there was, when compared to the farce he had put on with the woman he was married to.

“Mistress Snape,” Igor said with a slight bow. “I am quite surprised to find you here”

“Are you?” She asked without surprise. “I find that quite odd. How are you enjoying Scotland?”

“It’s … agreeable.” Igor said stiffly. “Excuse me.” He said, bowing very slightly before taking off toward the door.

As Hermione turned to him, Severus met her gaze and very slightly shook his head. Slipping into her mind quickly, he pushed the image of Potter, Draco, and Lovegood hiding nearby to her.

He could tell as he slipped from her mind that she was making a decision on how to act. Hermione could not be out and out Hermione for Potter, yet Draco knew the truth, and Severus quite suspected that Lovegood wasn’t as in the dark as he would like. The girl had a good sense of what was what, along with a touch of natural seer capabilities.

“He won’t leave you alone, will he?” She asked carefully.

“He believes there is something to worry about. Albus says there is not. Between the two, I trust Albus.” Not a lie, really. There was something to worry about, because Severus doubted very much that whatever Riddle was using to bring himself back to life this time wasn’t going to be so easily stopped or destroyed. But it was likely enough to pacify Potter.

Sure enough, he, Draco, and Lovegood were sneaking around behind the carriages as if they thought he wouldn’t see them.

Hell, Hermione seemed to have noticed them by the way she was smirking.

“Well, I trust you over anyone, so whatever you say on the matter is what I will believe.” She said, and the echo of the door closing punctuated her sentence. Hermione’s smile grew before she chuckled. “He’s terrible at keeping hidden.”

“We’re lucky Igor didn’t say anything damning.” Severus nodded. “Much as I’m sure Potter will learn the truth when the time comes, and the Dark Lord does return, I see no reason for him to be suspicious of anything beforehand.”

“I agree.” Hermione nodded, looking around her as if noticing where they were for the first time. “Why would anyone come here instead of the Gardens? It’s snowing here, and there aren’t exactly warming charms.”

“Privacy for more carnal activities.” Severus said, gesturing to the carriage behind him.

He felt fifteen years younger when Hermione’s smirk turned feral. “Carnal, you say? In there. Quite small.” She waved her hand, and light flashed over the carriage, though nothing seemed changed by it. Moving past him, she opened the door and climbed in, and Severus realized that she immobilized the carriage. “Hmm, I suppose there’s room. Only one way to know for sure, though.”

He knew it was wrong. He was a teacher, a head of house, meant to set an example. But his brain was firing off ideas and fantasies as though he were a teenager again, and without much thought, Severus climbed in after Hermione and shut the door.
“Oh, yes,” She said, reaching for the lapels of his robes, and pulling him toward her. “I can easily see why this may be a spot to try. Something we certainly never did.”

“No, and we shouldn’t now.” He said as sternly as he could with a curl of his lips.

“No? Well, you can certainly leave. No one’s stopping you.” She challenged, and that was precisely what it was.

Severus barely thought about it. Inappropriate for a professor? Without a doubt, though with the dark mark darkening, the loom of his life going to shit all over again, he didn’t properly care.

He pressed forward, his wife’s pleased and amused giggles turned to a throaty moan as lips met lips. Her hand went to his neck careful not to loosen his hair, and Severus set wards to put off anyone who dared to come near the carriage.

It was likely twenty or thirty minutes later, with their clothes back in place that Severus lowered the wards. Of course, there was still a minute or two of stolen kisses before Severus thought to leave the carriage. He was just reaching for the door when it was yanked open by a smug looking seventh year prefect from Ravenclaw.

Smug, anyway, until the prudish girl whom he knew was terrified of him realized it was not miscreant students she’d discovered.

Severus exited the carriage with all the dignity he could with rumpled robes and a loosened ribbon in his hair. He drew himself up to appear as imposing as he could, and the Ravenclaw seemed to shrink.

“Ten points from Ravenclaw, Miss Moore. And if I hear so much as a whisper of this incident, your last months here at Hogwarts will be the most unpleasant of your life.”

“Yes, sir.” The girl snapped out, running back toward the school.

“Really, Severus, was that necessary?” Hermione asked with a smirk. “It’s not like anyone would believe she caught you, of all people.”

“No, but perhaps the chit will stop complaining about couples merely holding hands in corridors.” He waved his wand over himself, smoothing his clothes and fixing his hair, before doing the same to his wife. Tucking his wand away, he couldn’t help the half smile coming over him.

“What?” Hermione asked as she came to his side and took his arm.

He leaned in, whispering conspiratorially as they headed back inside, “that was more fun than the alcove on the fourth floor my second year of teaching.”

The ball was … fun, she supposed. She enjoyed her many dances with Neville, the couple with Harry, the one or two with Draco, and Krum. She even enjoyed lounging around the tables merely listening to the Weird Sisters instead of dancing to them.
But then Ron opened his big mouth, and a lot of the dance went south.

Ginny had, easily, been the belle of the ball as far as envy was concerned. No one could compare to the part Veela champion, but Ginny on Krum’s arm drew nearly as much attention. And Ron, being an older brother and friend of Harry Potter, so somehow an authority on things, decided to corner her when Krum had gone off to get drinks and berate her. Her dress was too mature, and Viktor Krum only wanted to use her for things she didn’t understand.

Ginny punched him, then hexed him for good measure, which then caused Krum to abandon his search for drinks and return to his date’s side to needlessly defend her honor. Harry growled at Ron, eyes glaring at how he could treat his sister like that, and was encouraged by Draco and Luna to go for a walk and bring even more attention to the scenario. As it was, the commotion had brought the attention of Aunt Min, and she escorted Ginny away from the ball to have a word. But, judging by the smirk she tried to suppress and the glint in her eye, Aunt Min wasn’t about to be harsh by any means. Aurora had noted her mother, now without her surrogate aunt to talk to, had left the head table after rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

Ron stormed off, clutching his nose, and grumbling about it being broken. Romilda had long abandoned him for a Durmstrang gentleman, so Neville had decided to be noble and help Ron either to the tower or infirmary.

Which left Aurora sitting by herself waiting for someone to return. Harry, Luna, and Draco first? Maybe, but they’d been gone a while now. Neville may get stuck waiting on Ron, which would put an end to the evening. Ginny might be back before then, and it was possible, but whether Krum decided to bring her back to the ball or escort her to the tower was yet to be decided.

She huffed, darting her eyes around at the remaining couples and groups and wondering how utterly pathetic she looked sitting by herself. Professor Snape’s daughter, abandoned at the Yule Ball. The stares and whispers would likely be unbearable.

“Been waiting all night for my chance.” Fred’s voice from behind startled her, and she looked over her shoulder to see him leaning over her with a mischievous smile. And alone.

“Where’s Angelina?” She asked, glancing about for a sign of his date.

He shrugged. “Katie had to turn in early, so she went with her.” He explained. “Lee and George are flirting with a couple of Beauxbaton’s girls, so I thought I’d come look for you.”

“Somehow I think you sold yourself short.”

“Says the girl who was my first choice to this shindig.”

“I was your first choice?” Aurora said incredulously.

Fred shrugged. “I was gonna ask as Angelina cornered me, and I was delaying saying yes for certain until I heard good ol’ Longbottom ask you. Didn’t seem fair to swoop in with my charm and good looks.”

She shook her head, saying nothing. “So now that you’ve found me, alone, what is your plan?”

“A dance, of course” He said, offering her his hand.

The band had just been wrapping up a song and would be starting another shortly after. She doubted Neville or the others would be back in such a short time frame, so Aurora shrugged and gave Fred her hand.
He pulled her up and led her to the dance floor just as the notes of a ballad began to play. He took her into position for a waltz, though the song wouldn’t allow for a proper one. Instead, Fred merely swayed them in a circle, keeping his eyes on her. She found it impossible to look away herself.

“Did you enjoy your night with Neville?” He asked her after a couple turns.

“I suppose. It was fun until your brother threw a fit.”

Fred chuckled, “Ickle Ronniejkins has a lot of trouble with Gin getting more attention than him. Percy’s a right prat, but Ron can be just as bad in a different way.”

Aurora snorted, “That’s an understatement.”

“He’s gettin’ better with you, though, yeah?”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me if he does. He doesn’t like Draco much, either, but whether he likes it or not, we’re both here to stay, as it were.”

Fred nodded, looking away.

She watched as he seemed to think of something, his eyes flickering about, and then turning his head to scan the other side of the room that he hadn’t before. He took a slight step closer, and then another, and Aurora found him much, much closer than Neville had been. He was warm, and he smelled wonderful, and suddenly Aurora found she didn’t quite mind the flutter of her heart or the way her stomach twisted.

“You know, I’ll have to thank Neville for asking your first.” Fred said, and Aurora felt bereft, despite his not moving.

“Why?” She croaked.

“Well, I did say to your Dad that if I’d taken you to this soiree, I’d have been respectful, had you back in the tower long before now, and would have been a gentleman.”

“You aren’t now?” She asked, leaning back enough to look up at him.

He smirked, eyes glinting with amusement and trouble. “No.” He said as he leaned closer to her as if they were in on a secret.

“How?” She asked.

He kissed her.

Aurora Snape, misfit of sorts, daughter of the most feared and loathed Professor in the last decade of Hogwarts and counting, had her very first kiss on the dance floor of the Yule Ball where absolutely anyone (included said feared and loathed father) could see.

Her mind blanked out, yet she knew in her gut and heart that she would never forget this moment. One that felt like it had lasted forever and only seconds. The later was likely more accurate, though it certainly wasn’t a quick peck, or shy for that matter. But it wasn’t aggressive, either. His lips passed over hers in one, slow stroke that allowed her the opportunity to brush back before he pulled away with a smug, satisfied grin.

“If I were a gentleman, I wouldn’t have kissed another bloke’s date.”

“Right.” She said, remembering that she had asked him something … right, why he wasn’t
gentleman. Well, that answered things.

The song ended, and as if did, they both seemed to catch sight of Harry, Draco, Luna, and Neville return to the ball.

“Suppose I should find George and Lee,” He said. “Thanks for the dance, Rory.” He said, lifting her hand to his lips for a quick, sloppy kiss, winking at her over her knuckles before he took off.

Aurora looked around as the others started to come toward her, noticing that none of the professors seemed to have noticed her (and her parents hadn’t returned yet, thank Merlin). None of the other dancers seemed to have witnessed Fred Weasley’s daring act.

None, it seemed, but Ginny who had snuck back in and waited at their table for the rest of them. Ginny, who had a feral, cat who caught the canary grin that Aurora just knew meant an abundant amount of teasing in her future.

“You okay, Rory?” Neville asked, putting a hand on her shoulder. “You look flushed.”

“Just warm.” She said. “Probably could use some air.”

“Right, probably a good idea.” Harry said. “You should hear what Me, Draco, and Luna overheard your dad talking to Karkaroff about. Maybe you can help us figure it out.”

“Figure what out?” She asked, glancing at a slightly paler Draco.

“Why would Karkaroff want to look at your Dad’s arm?”

Chapter End Notes

We’ll be heading back to the seventies next time.
Chapter 24

January 9th, 1977

Severus was through her mind, seeing the mundane, trying to look for something interesting all while being very cautious not to go too far. He felt as though going into Hermione’s mind was a mine field, and he desperately didn’t want to. Yet there was no one else to help her test her strengthened occlumency shields, aside from the headmaster, and neither of them were about to ask Albus Dumbledore to go poking around in her head.

It was quite a pleasant experience, though, all danger aside. Hermione’s mind was warm, and full of love, and if he revisited memories of their New Year’s Eve together in the very room they were currently end, well, she would have to break eye contact to stop him.

“Are you trying to find a way to improve?” She asked aloud, the question echoing in her mind.

“My legilimency?” He asked.

“No, your performance. You seem to be going over and over the same thing. I realize that perhaps it may not have been our best time, but there’s no reason ….”

“Witch.” He cut her off, noting the giddy joy in her mind before he gentle withdrew to see her smile. “Perhaps I just wanted to see what it felt like for you?”

“Perhaps, but I doubt that was your intention.” She countered.

“Alright, perhaps I just like reliving it in general.” He smirked.

“Give me a few days, and we won’t need to relive a memory.” Hermione teased, and Severus’ smirk grew. He leaned in, kissing her firmly, intending on at least getting in a damn good snogging session on his birthday, when there as a tap on the window.

Growling as they separated, Severus got to his feet and moved to the window to relieve the owl of its burden. He opened the panes, allowing the freezing air to wash over him and cool his ardor before taking the parchment from the bird. It hooted before flying away, vanishing from sight as the snow fell heavy outside.

“From your mother?” Hermione asked just as Severus turned it over and noticed the seal on the envelope.
Something in him turned cold, and his heart fell into the pit of his stomach.

The dark mark in deep green, almost black wax, taunted him.

“No, it’s not.” He said, taking a deep breath, and cracking the seal.

Severus,

_It’s been brought to my attention that today is of great significance for you. I do hope this means we will be seeing you soon, as I look forward to having you apart of our family. In the meantime, I have written to invite you to a gathering I am planning for the evening of January the 29th. If you do not know how to apparate, please send word to Lucius, and we will be sure to have a portkey sent to you so that you may be present._

_I look forward to seeing you there._

There was no signature, but there was no doubt whom the letter was from.

He looked up, seeing the worry etched on Hermione’s face, and promptly returned to her.

“It’s from him,” He said. “An invitation.”

“So soon?” She asked, chewing her lip.

“Not for the pair of us. I think … do you know what the Death Eaters do?” Severus asked cautiously. Hermione paled, lip released as she nodded once. “I have a feeling it’s something related. A test, perhaps.”

“You should inform Alastor.” She said, and he smiled at the fact she didn’t name the Headmaster as the person to turn to.

“I think I need to inform the headmaster. Given the reason, I’m sure he’ll conveniently look the other way while I sneak out of the castle.” Severus then grimaced, realizing there was one person who would likely be patrolling the gate, eager to catch anyone wanting to sneak back in. “Scamander will be an issue, though.”

“Professor Scamander,” Hermione corrected automatically, and Severus rolled his eyes. “But there is likely a way for you to sneak out, get past the wards of the school, without ever having stepped foot on the ground.”

“What would that be?” Severus asked, and then he remembered. “The bloody map.”

———H———

“I solemnly swear I am up to no good,” Sirius said the pass phrase as if he was trying to seduce the map, seemingly pleased with himself as the ink flowed and formed and revealed the map.

In another abandoned classroom, far from Severus’ lab, Hermione had asked the boys to meet them where they wouldn’t be seen by the Slytherins, or anyone for that matter. Only James and Sirius were able to come, Pettigrew stuck in detention for a late charms essay, and Lily and Remus off doing rounds.
“Exactly why can’t Snape be seen with us again?” James asked, looking suspiciously at the spot where Severus was likely to be standing under the disillusionment charm.

“It’s a thing for the Headmaster.” Severus replied.

“What sort of thing?”

“Not a thing you need to know about, James Potter.” Hermione snapped. “Much as I’m sure you hate to imagine it so, but the world does not revolve around you.”

She heard Severus snort in amusement as James’ face went red, reminding Hermione so much of an angry Harry that her heart ached. But, she noted, not as much as it once had. It had suddenly occurred to her that she had spent nearly the same amount of time with Harry’s parents as she had with Harry himself.

How long, she wondered, before he was no longer Harry, her Harry, but the son of her friends? How long before she no longer felt a connection to the Boy-Who-Lived because she had long outgrown him, literally and metaphorically.

“Snape, I have no idea if you can see this, so I will point it out to Kitten,” Sirius said, looking about the room before looking to Hermione. “It’s not overly risky, I think, to take this path here.” He said, pointing to the Whomping Willow. “You can take the humped witch slide to the Honeydukes cellar but depending on why you need to get out of the castle unseen…..”

“Why do you need to get out of the castle unseen?” James asked. “Why should we help you?”

“Probably because you left us in possession of this very map, and you still got it back.” Severus was sneering. Hermione could just tell.

“I never left it with you. Never would I ever.” James countered.

“Prongs, you were more than willing to go with the git at the time. What’s twisted ‘round your antlers that’s got you in a mood?”

“Probably the fact that, since that Hogsmeade visit, Snape here doesn’t want to be seen with us. Or Lily, for that matter. And I heard you were meeting up with Lucius Malfoy after we’d gone.”

Hermione’s gaze shot from the map to James in warning. He glanced at her but didn’t heed it.

“You know what I think? I think he’s decided to become a Death Eater after all. Always knew he would.”

“Are you purposely being an arse, or does it come to you naturally?” Hermione asked.

James scoffed. “Only makes you a Death Eater’s whore, doesn’t-”

James’ last words were choked off as he was thrown against a wall, seemingly unable to take. Immobile and unable to talk, true panic formed in his eyes as a shimmering form approached James in slow, menacing steps. Sirius had his wand drawn though it hardly looked like he was about to stun or hex anyone. If anything, the handsome young man looked utterly confused.

“Don’t. Ever. Call her that.” Severus said through what sounded like gritted teeth.

“Let him go, Snape.” Sirius asked, wand dropping to his side.

“Why should I?”
“Because maybe if he knew why we need his help, he’d understand.” Hermione offered.

Severus snorted. “And trust him to keep his mouth shut?”

“We’re quite good at secrets.” Sirius remarked, chin tilted proudly.

“Not as good as you think.” Hermione said softly, amused by the wide-eyed surprise Sirius had as he turned to look at her. “Severus, we could make them swear a vow.”

“A vow?” Sirius asked. “What is going on that you would need us to take a vow.”

“Dumbledore will know we told them.” Severus snapped.

“And did he say we couldn’t? And if you’re really that worried, allow me to tell them. Your disillusioned. Even if the headmaster peeks into their minds, and sees that they know, unless he stays in their heads to look for the whole thing, there will be no real sign you’re there. Just me finding out a way to sneak you out of the castle.”

After a moment, Severus released James.

Scowling, he looked to Hermione as he took out his wand. “Alright, Granger. What does he need.”

“Uh, uh. Oath first. I think, I vow on my wand to never reveal what is said in this room to anyone who does not already know.” She said thoughtfully.

“I vow on my wand to never reveal what is said in this room to anyone who does not already know.” Sirius said without hesitation, wand up as a gold light wrapped around his wand. James seemed to hesitate, then followed suite, the light wrapping around his wand and sealing his vow.

Hermione took a deep breath, feeling Severus’ hands on her arms from behind.

“Severus’ achievements in potions had earned him a lot of attention. I’m sure you know that Dumbledore is fighting against You-Know-Who. Well, he …”

“Demanded, or coerced.” Severus suggested lowly, though it seemed Sirius had picked up on the whispers.

“Severus was in the perfect position to do some undercover work, and Dumbledore thought it best they take the opportunity.”

“So, spying.” James said. After a moment, he let out a loud, “ha”, followed by, “Well, I would say it was good to know you, Snape, but that would be a lie.”

“You don’t think he can do it?” Sirius asked with mild disbelief.

“No.” James said flatly. “No, I think when he leaves at the end of the year, we won’t be seeing or hearing from him again.”

“If I never see you again after leaving Hogwarts, more the better.” Severus retorted.

“Well, for what it’s worth, you have stones, Snape.” Sirius said, and then a thought seemed to light his features before it faded with a shake of his head. He pointed at the map again. “Whomping Willow. If you take the Honey Dukes tunnel, you won’t have enough room to apparate until you get to the cellar, and then it may cause damage to the product and draw attention. The willow will lead you out to the shrieking shake, and from there you will be free to move about.” He paused. “Umm, when were you needing this?”

“Nothing, it’s just that it’s not safe certain times of the month.” Sirius said with a wry smirk, and Hermione noted James smiling smugly from where he was standing a few feet away.

“Only certain times of the month? I’m fairly certain the willow is murderous regardless of the phases of the moon.” Severus countered.

Sirius had a cheeky grin that had Hermione rolling her eyes. He was practically screaming that there was a secret to be had, and what it was if much thought was given to it.

“There is a knot on the tree, very obvious, and if you hit it, the tree will be stunned long enough for you to slip into the tunnel. That is also very obvious, and you really shouldn’t have any trouble with it.”

“Good, thank you.” Severus said, sounding relieved.

“Just be careful.” Sirius said. “Both with getting in and out and ….”

“I will.”

January 29th, 1977

Severus landed at just in front of the gates of Malfoy Manor, and there he remained until they slowly creaked open. He then strode through them, confident that whatever he faced tonight, he could do it.

“Bit of advice,” Alastor had told him when they had met a couple of weeks back in the Headmaster’s office. “Look up some dark spells that’ll look impressive but won’t get ya in trouble.”

Severus had combed through the dark tomes he could get his hands on, only cementing in the eyes of many that he was turning progressively darker. He noted that a few of his fellow students, after seeing him in the library, would avoid eye contact, if not him entirely.

But nothing in the texts he could see fit what he needed. So, Severus did something he hadn’t really done since his third year: he created a spell.

He knew it would work the way he thought it would, or at least it had on a few discarded tables in his makeshift lab. He assumed if he had to use it on someone, if the worst happened, he could probably do some damage. Hermione hadn’t known the, and he didn’t want her to, if it could be helped in anyway.

When he arrived at the front step of the manor, the large doors opened to give him entry. He stepped through, hearing the doors shut behind him as he took in his surroundings. It was much more quiet than the night of the party a month ago. An elf popped out of nowhere, not Dobby this time, and held out its hand for his cloak. Severus removed it, handing it to the elf before straightening his clothes.

He had a set of robes over a crisp, green oxford, and a black waistcoat with subtle silver threading. His black trousers were immaculate, and his boots shined. He vaguely wondered if perhaps he shouldn’t have put so much effort into an outfit he was likely to get blood all over.
He looked up at the sound of footsteps, and he felt the cold, welcoming feel of his Occulmency shields going into place.

Narcissa Malfoy smiled warmly at him, “Welcome, Severus. We’ve been expecting you.”

He bowed. “Thank you for having me, however brief it will be.”

She gave a tilt of her head, and beckoned Severus to follow her. A moment later, they were in a study, likely Lucius’ as the man himself stood by the desk, finishing a tumbler of whiskey, a strange, black set of robes on his shoulders.

“Thank you, Cissy. Don’t wait up for us, dear. There is no telling how long our evening will be.”

Narcissa smiled and nodded, turning away, and closing the study door behind her as she left.

“A drink, Severus?” Lucius asked as he poured himself another finger.

“Is it a wise idea?” He asked, causing Lucius to chuckle.

“It can never hurt.” He said as he summoned a second tumbler and poured a finger. Handing it to Severus, who took it with a nod, Lucius grinned. “I have heard you and Hermione have finally managed to shed the disgraced Black and his tag-alongs.”

Severus shrugged. “It merely took changing our routine.” Severus replied.

In reality, they had been using Potter’s invisibility cloak, something that explained how they could sometimes get the drop on him without being seen even by him. Lupin, Black, and Lily would hide under it the odd times they came to his lab classroom, or to meet them in the second abandoned classroom if they felt the absolute need to include Pettigrew and Potter. If he and Hermione were meeting them, they were disillusioned.

“Yet you spend next to no time with your fellow Slytherins?” Lucius mused.

Severus scoffed, a slight smirk on his face as he brought the tumbler to his lips and took a sip. “I am studying two years’ worth of subjects to compete my NEWTs this year. Aside from Hermione, I have no use for socializing with anyone. And if she wasn’t such a swot in her own right, I doubt I would be able to tolerate even that.”

Lucius gave a hearty chuckle. “Well, you’ve certainly found a woman worthy of you and your disposition. Much better than that pathetic Mudblood you used to pin after.”

Severus sneered, and forced himself to dredge up the memories of the year before to help keep the disgust on his face. He was starting to hate that word. “She’s an insipid, trite thing who thinks far too highly of herself.” And then because he thought it was needed, and anything else may be suspect. “Even if her blood wasn’t so repulsive, I doubt she’d have held my attention much longer.”

It was apparently the right thing to say as Lucius radiated approval. “Have you chosen a Master?” He asked.

Severus nodded “I believe myself and Master Nikola have come to an understanding. He seems firm, strict, but he allows more deviation than Master Anton would have. And he only has one other apprentice, a man named Karkaroff, I believe.”

Lucius nodded. “He is whom we had all hoped you would choose, if I may be honest. He-” Lucius cut himself off abruptly as he hissed thought his teeth, clutching his left forearm. Despite what
seemed like agony, Lucius grinned wickedly. “The fun is about to begin.” He said, waving his hand, and summoning a parcel. He handed it to Severus, “put these on.” He said, summoning a silver mask to him and putting it on.

Intricate, beautiful, it was also dangerous. Something about it made the hairs on Severus’ neck stand on end.

Quickly, he unbundled the parcel to find it was a set of black robes like Lucius’. He swung them on, fastening them as Lucius stuck out his left hand, wand in his right.

“Side along with me, friend.” He said from behind the mask, and Severus gripped the man’s hand just as he touched the tip of his wand to a black mark on his skin. The Dark Mark.

Before Severus could think much more on it, they were sucked into the void and deposited ….

In Cockworth?

Severus was entirely too confused upon seeing the old smoke stacks of the run-down factory before him. Of seeing the houses, all the same, row by row, as he glanced behind him. It was cool, and damp, and the air smelled of all the rotten things the streets and river had to offer. It had been so long since he’d been here, a year and a half, really, that he’s managed to forget how utterly wretched it all was.

“What utter disgust.” Lucius said, just as the sound of multiple apparations filled the air.

Nine people arrived and formed a semi-circle around them, various spots left empty.

As if from nowhere, the Dark Lord himself appeared before them all, and Severus fell into a kneeling bow like the rest of them. He didn’t want to, nor was he compelled. Except, in a way, he was. Something about the robes felt suddenly heavier, and kneeling felt like the most natural thing in the world.

“Severus,” The Dark Lord said, and as Severus lifted his head only slightly, the sinister man smiled toothily at him. Were his teeth more pointed than normal or was that just a figment of his imagination.

Without warning, the Dark Lord was in his mind, plowing through recent memories. Of his studying with Hermione, among other things. Of Professor Scamander sneering at him when he answered her question on curses a bit too thoroughly. Of his receiving his letter, and Hermione kissing him goodbye with a smile before he snuck out of the castle.

All the damning memories were safe, hidden away. As the Dark Lord withdrew Severus wondered how a man who entered a mind with all the delicacy of a battering ram could possibly not see his shields and attempt to smash them.

“Tell me, friend Severus.” The Dark Lord said as he gestured for he and the others to rise. “Do you know where we are?”

“Hard not to, my Lord, as I was raised here.” Severus said evenly.

“Not quite as terrible as the upbringing I had, but still distasteful. How your mother could resort to live in such filth when she had the power to change it is beyond me. But it matters not, now, she is back where she belongs. And you… I have a present for you, Severus. One I think will satisfy. One, I think, will help you shed the thought of this having been the place of your birth, of your youth.”
With a snap of the Dark Lord’s fingers, a stiff form of a tall man appeared slowly.

“Do you know this man?” The Dark Lord said, gesturing to the figure who was damn near frothing at the mouth.

Severus didn’t need to hide his hatred of disgust. “Why, that’s Tobias, my lord.” He replied with his teeth clenched.

At his words, Tobias whipped his head toward Severus, and paled. Oh, yes. He had never seen Severus as a wizard, because he was never able to dress like one in his father’s company. He had never seen his son as powerful, because magic outside of school was forbidden. And more so, Tobias hadn’t laid eyes on his son since he was fourteen years old. And Severus had grown. Taller, stronger, more powerful. It would seem in that moment that Tobias Snape had suddenly realized that, even if he was a muggle, Severus would have the ability to overpower him. Tobias’ eyes flickered to the wand in Severus’ hand, one the young man hadn’t fully realized he had drawn.

The Dark Lord seemed pleased. “You look ready to dispatch him.”

“I am, My Lord.” And the scary thing was, he meant it. His mother may have left him, but that didn’t erase all the bad Tobias had rained down on her for nearly twenty years.”

“You want to see him dead at your feet, yes? But why make it easy for him? Why not … make him feel pain? Why not show him precisely what you wished you could do when he made you feel powerless? Show him, Severus, how powerful you really are.”

He knew what was being hinted at, exactly what spells the Dark Lord wanted him to use. It might have been unwise to go against even indirect wishes, but Severus hadn’t worked on this spell for nothing.

He stepped forward. “Sectumsempra!” He half hissed, half yelled as he shot his wand toward Tobias’ frozen form like a whip.

At first, it was like nothing happened. Then a second later, the results were utterly gruesome.

A hand fell off, the other arm followed. His legs went in two separate directions, causing the bloodying torso to fall backward on the ground with a sickening thud. And all the while, Tobias’ eyes remained in focus, wide, panicked. His breathing was wet and ragged, but there, and had it not been for the pain, the shock, Severus was certain the man would be screaming.

The Dark Lord looked to Severus in shock, and then laughed with absolute delight. He threw his head back, clutching his stomach as the Death Eaters behind him caught on to the contagion of it.

“How wonderful!” The Dark Lord said, moving to get a better look at the damage Severus had done. He must have slipped into Tobias’ mind, for he giggled with glee after meeting his gaze. “He is in agony. Knowing he’s dying, knowing that his own flesh betrayed him. Oh, it is delightful. Where did you learn such a spell? I think I’d have come across such a wondrous form of torture in my travels.”

“I created it, my Lord.” Severus said with a slight bow, as if he merely performed a slight of hand for muggle children.

The Dark Lord shook his head. “Talented. Intelligent. If only all those who want to follow me could be so skilled. You created it?”

“He couldn’t have, my lord.” A voice that sounded familiar and foreign said from the circle. “It’s
merely a slicing hex.”

“Not a mere slicing spell, MacNair!” The Dark Lord roared, rounding on the Death Eater. He grabbed the man’s robes and pulled him toward Tobias’ barely breathing body. “One spell did this, one! It would take many slicing hexes in quick succession to do half of this. And look,” the Dark Lord said something, a healing spell, and nothing happened. He chuckled in his throat. “Had it been a slicing hex, he would not still be spilling his dirty blood on this filthy road.” He then half tossed MacNair away from him, and the man fell to his knees in placation.

The Dark Lord turned back to Severus. “Can you do this to those who oppose me?” He asked.

No, no, no.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And could you do worse? Could you torture?”

Never, never.

“Absolutely, my lord.”

“I will have other tests for you.” He said. “Truly denouncing your father and his filthy heritage is but the first. You have done well, Severus.” The Dark Lord then pulled something from his robes and handed it to Severus. A silver mask.

Severus took it in both hands before he began to trace the lines of decoration on the horrid thing with something that looked like reverence. “Thank you, my lord,” He said before he put it on. He had to, it was like it was impossible not to put it on.

It formed perfectly to the contours of his nose, his lips, his eyes. He had perfect vision through it, and he realized suddenly that the mask was not just a token of his welcome among the Death Eaters, but a way to conceal his identity from anyone who was to look at him. It had clicked, as the magic held the mask to his face, that the ones around the circle had all looked identical, not a single placement of an eye or nose off.

His eyes snapped back to the Dark Lord who smiled broadly.

“I will not keep you longer, my friend. I would hate for you to draw suspicion by not being seen around the school, especially with your lady.”

“Thank you, my lord.” Severus said with a bow before apparating back to the Shrieking Shack.

He was aware, vaguely, that Hermione, Black, and Lupin, of all people, were waiting for him to return on the old, dilapidated bed that was housed in the room. He noticed with the small part of his mind he allowed to observe such things, that the three of them had instantly drawn their wands, and only two relaxed slightly as he ripped off his mask.

Hermione was by his side and pulling his hair away from his face just in time to have him retch on the floor of the shack.

“What happened,” She said, attempting to soothe as he sweat and panted. Someone, likely Lupin, vanished his sick from the floor as he tried to control his breathing.

“I… I just killed my father.” He said, and was caught off guard by the pain that laced his voice.
It was what he had always wanted, really. Maybe not by his hand, but he had desperately wanted Tobias dead for longer than any child should want dark things. And it was his wand, his magic, that ripped the man apart and had him bleeding on the streets. He was likely dead, now, but there was always a possibility that he was still hanging on to life.

The scent of blood, metallic yet sweet with all the alcohol Tobias consumed, stuck in his nose, and wouldn’t seem to leave.

He retched again, but it was dry as there was nothing left to come up. He felt Hermione’s magic on him, cleansing him in an attempt to help in whatever way was possible.

“Can someone explain why Severus was dressed like a Death Eater?” Lupin asked, but before Severus could reply, he felt another wave of magic wash over him, and he fell into a contented blackness.
January 30th, 1977

—H—

Remus had sat with his face in his hands, and Sirius looked damn near ill. Somewhere, in the back of her mind, Hermione thought that maybe she should feel guilty about telling them both the truth, but she didn’t. Not at all. It was about time, high time, really, that the Gryffindor boys understood the truth about their beloved Headmaster. And while she knew James would never, ever believe a word she said simply because he would always see Dumbledore as infallible, these two would know different.

“So, he … he made it impossible for Severus to say no.” Remus finally stuttered out. He looked around the room, at the bed they sat on where Severus was sleeping behind them, at the dingy walls. It was like Remus was, for the first time, seeing the circumstances he was forced into.

“Unless Severus wanted to forfeit the opportunity to gain his mastership to stay with me, he made it so that Severus would see my life in danger should he back out of doing so. Yes.” Hermione nodded.

“He’s talked to us about it, you know.” Sirius said thoughtfully. “This … Order.” When Remus looked confused, and maybe even a bit hurt, Sirius gave his shoulder a squeeze. “To me and James, though I imagine he’ll want you, too, Mooney. How could he not?”

“What has he said to you?” Hermione asked curiously, crossing her arms and her legs as she braced herself against the wall opposite them all.

Sirius shrugged. “That the war is getting worse, that he needs people he can trust, people he knows will do what it takes to stop Dark Wizards. And what’s more, he liked that James and I will likely not have to find work after Hogwarts. That as members of old, Pureblood families we would likely be able to petition for places among the Wizengamot in a few years.”

“And because I am a halfblood with a condition, I wouldn’t be as useful.”

“Your lycanthropy is hardly a hindrance in stopping dark wizards.” Hermione said casually, smirking a bit at the wide-eyed terror that Remus had at her words.

He blushed, then went pale, then turned to Sirius, then to Hermione. He looked about to say something nearly a dozen times.

“You knew.” He finally said.

“Yes.” Hermione replied.

“And … and it doesn’t bother you?”
She remembered his transforming in front of her three years ago and seventeen years from now. How absolutely terrified she was, and how she sort of chastised herself for never confronting him prior to that last night in the shrieking shack.

“No,” She said with a slight shake of her head. “It’s not as though it’s something you have any control over.”

“He said he’d killed his father,” Sirius said before the topic of Remus’ condition could be continued.

“I guess that was what You-Know-Who wanted him to do this evening. His father is a muggle, after all.” She looked to where Severus was resting, the spell she placed on him to have him fall asleep still holding. But she doubted it would be for long. “I know it’s not precisely warm out here but to move him now wouldn’t be a good idea. Remus, I know you stay here when you’re changing. Will it bother you any if we stay the night?”

“Do you think we’d let you two alone?” Sirius asked. “He had to kill someone tonight, Kitten. He didn’t seem completely stable when he arrived. He might love you, but if he’s even slightly out of it when he wakes, he may not be able to decipher friend from foe right away.”

“I don’t think Severus would appreciate sharing a bed with you two.” She smirked, pushing off the wall. Withdrawing her wand, she pointed it at the piano in the other room, transfiguring it into a bed large enough for two. A few flicks at some of the torn sheets that lay about, and she sufficiently turned them into thick, warm comforters. She snatched one off the floor and handed it to Sirius. “If you insist on staying, you will do so in the next room. If Severus does wake, and is not half mad, he won’t want an audience. We can put up a silencing charm if he needs to talk, and you can still see I’m safe.”

“Done.” Remus said, snatching the blanket from Sirius and venturing into the next room. He nudged the bed until it was in the direct line of sight of the dilapidated one Severus was sleeping on.

Hermione turned to see a strange sort of nervousness cross Sirius’ face before he looked at her with a half-hearted grin. He rose, leaving the room, and Hermione went to Severus.

Climbing on the bed, sliding into the empty spot beside him, she examined his relaxed features. How long would they stay like that?

“Know that I love you.” She said softly, moving the hair from his face. “Know that this changes nothing for me. You only did what you had to do.” She kissed his cheek, and then cast as silencing charm on the room, including the doorway. She then curled up against him as best she could before closing her eyes and willing herself to sleep as best she could.

March 8th, 1977

The nightmares had come every night. The majority of the time, Tobias Snape had begged for his life in those dreams. He reminded Severus that no matter how bad things were, no matter how shit
Tobias had treated him, that they were still blood. Father and son. And Severus had more than killed him, he maimed him in the process. Sometimes it was his mother, though those were few and far between. Now and then it was Lily, because she was a muggleborn-\textit{Mudblood}- and needed to be taken out of the world.

And sometimes, on the worst nights, it was Hermione.

Severus had remembered coming to in the Shrieking Shack, lying next to her after he ripped himself from his nightmares. She held him tight, soothed him as he tried to plead for a forgiveness he already had from her, but it wasn’t the same.

Something in him broke. And whether it was his soul, his conscience, or something else, it could never be repaired. He’d killed a man. It didn’t matter that he wanted that man dead, that no one would miss him, or that Severus himself could have been the one dying in a puddle of his own blood had he not done the deed, he would never not be a murderer.

“What are you doing?” Hermione’s gentle voice asked as she sat next to him on the couch in his lab. She had moved quietly, though he’d sense her arrival long before she entered the room, and once beside him, placed a warm hand on his thigh.

He reveled in it, allowing that touch, the heat to soothe him. But he wouldn’t touch her. After that night, he hadn’t been able to bring himself to initiate anything between them. He could barely allow her to do so, and they hadn’t made love since before then. Or snogged. He’d kissed her, but didn’t allow for any passion. Part of him didn’t think he deserved it, or her. Part of him was terrified he would actually succeed in convincing her of such things.

“Research,” he replied softly.

“Would you like help?” She asked. She’d asked things like that constantly, and while anyone else who made the inquiry was promptly snapped at, Hermione was not.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It is something I must do on my own.”

She nodded, eyes sad, clearly missing him, but she didn’t push. She didn’t argue with him, or fight him on it, she merely just accepted it. Pulling a book out of her bag, she opened it and began to read. After a while, she leaned against him, and he wanted to sob with the relief and pain of it all.

Hermione absently turned and kissed his neck, and he winced.

“When are you going to understand that you are still the same Severus to me?” She asked not unkindly.

“How can I be?” he asked. “But then, maybe you’ve always known this of me. Maybe you already knew what I was capable of. But then that just begs the question, why the hell would you allow yourself anywhere near me.”

“Severus,” She growled.

“I have killed a man with a spell I fashioned to end a life if used the right way. To severely maim otherwise. I hadn’t even thought of the need for a counter spell until the Dark Lord stood over my dying father and tried to heal him to prove a point. My father, Hermione. I may have hated the man, I may have wanted him dead-”

“But not by your hand.” Hermione finished, because she knew him. She nodded, and he hated that she was so understanding. “What has your mother said about it all?”
He scoffed, “She wished she was there to watch the bastard bleed, after all he did to her.”

“So, she’s not angry with you. And I may have only figured it out before the holidays, but I did come to the conclusion that you would find yourself in this position. And, I have read the books, you know. I am aware what…” She stopped short and gasped for breath, grasping her neck.

Severus tossed the book aside and knelt in front of her, holding her hands and her gaze so she would gain her breath.

“I don’t get it,” She croaked, “you know. You’ve experienced it already.”

“It’s okay,” He tried to sooth, feeling her pulse in her palms.

“No, it’s not.” She said, tears coming to her eyes. ‘It’s not because you’re slipping away from me, and I already know. I know, Severus. And there’s nothing you would do that would make me love you less. You’re the very best thing that came out of my accident and now I’m losing you. You’re flinching from me, you’re distancing yourself.”

“Because maybe you deserve better.”

“I don’t want better, I want you.” She snapped.

And Severus felt his lips twitch. From the fog of despair, of self hate, he processed her words, and felt his chest rumble. And at her confusion, he laughed, loud and hard, throwing his head back. Her confusion became a glare, and he was gone.

“Severus Snape, are you laughing at me?” She demanded as he fell backward, catching himself on his elbows. He managed to open his eyes and glimpse her petulant glare and crossed arms, and laughed again.

“At least you aren’t trying to tell me that I am the best, just the best that’s come of your awful situation. It helps to know you aren’t entirely delusional.”

Her nose crinkled as her lips puckered in a displeased pout, and his guffaws changed to something like a giggle. Shaking his head, he reached over and cupped her cheek. Despite her obvious unhappiness, she leaned into it.

“It’s only going to get worse, you know. And there will be at least a couple years where we won’t see each other often. What if in that time you hear of all the awful things I likely did, or meet someone much more worthy of you? How can you still want to risk association with me?”

Her expression softened, and she placed a hand over his to keep his touch on her cheek. “I want to be associated with you because you are my best friend. Bar none. Even if you decide you simply don’t want me anymore, for any reason, I will always love you. And you will always be my best friend.”

“What if I am made to hurt you?” He asked in a whisper, terrified to give voice to one of the things that was bothering him. “What if you’re seen as a weakness in someway, and the Dark Lord demands I hurt you? Or worse? I’m beginning to think that Dumbledore is right in the fact I shouldn’t have anyone close to me.”

“And I believe in Alastor’s stance. It will look more suspicious if you are close to no one.”

He could see she wasn’t going to let it go. He should have probably known from the moment he tried to distance himself that Hermione was not going to back down or let him go, no matter what
evils he had done or would do. As the self doubt, the complete and total feeling of unworthiness started to settle over him again, he played what might just be his last card in convincing her she was better off without him.

“If you stay with me, if you stay by my side as I go down this path, you’re going to have to travel with me.” He said quietly, noting her forehead wrinkle. “Hermione, it would mean turning dark with me. You can’t show any signs of disapproval, any signs that perhaps you don’t agree with the philosophy. Or, worse, that you are exactly the thing they despise.”

Her forehead smoothed, and a gentle smile formed on her lips. “Why do you think I had such a breakdown after our meeting with the Dark Lord?” She reminded him. “Because I knew what this meant, and I was worried I wouldn’t be up to the task. But I am. I am, I know I am.” She surprised him by darting forward and kissing him roughly. “And so are you.” She whispered against his lips as she pulled back. “You could do this on your own, but why should you?”

With her lips on his, and her tongue seeking interest, the logical part of Severus’ brain short circuited, and all the excuses he had come up with before were suddenly null. The reasons for distancing himself had been stupid.

Merlin, had it really been over a month since he felt this? Deepening the kiss, that self-hating part of himself screamed how badly he didn’t deserve this. Her. Happiness in general. Gods, he was disgusting.

But thankfully, the rest of his brain told that part to sod off, and allowed he and Hermione to have some peace for a bit.

December 26th, 1994

“A comfortable room, like a common room, where we could possibly sleep if need be.

They would have been up there faster had Harry not insisted that they stop and get Ron before talking it all over. Prat though he was, Harry made a good point of things just getting back to right between them, and if he was left out, it wouldn’t bode well. There had been grumbling, a bit of sibling bickering, but they eventually got moving to a spot where they could all be together without house mates complaining about intruders.

“How are we up here?” Harry asked as they made it to the seventh floor corridor just as the clock struck midnight.

“Because we’ll need privacy, somewhere no one will find us.” Aurora replied as she spotted the ballerina trolls. She then began to pace frantically in front of the blank wall opposite of the tapestry.

“But thankfully, the rest of his brain told that part to sod off, and allowed he and Hermione to have some peace for a bit.

December 26th, 1994

“Blimey,” Ron said as he stepped toward the door, eyes wide. “How’d ya know about this?”

“Honestly?” Rory said as she stepped around him and placed her hand on the door knob. “Whenever
my mother was ill during the school year, and not able to properly care for me, my father would bring me up here and ask for a safe room where I could play, with a door that would lead to his office if I needed him for something. It is the room of requirement, after all.” She opened the door and stepped inside.

Never had the room disappointed her, and it certainly hadn’t started now. Cushy sofas with pillows here and there were centered around a small table. A neat stack of blankets was beneath it, and off near the fireplace was a dressing screen. Beside that, five pairs of red pajamas, flannel and two piece by the looks, one pair of blue, and one pair of green. The assigned colors only helped draw attention to how the room was decorated in the three house colors.

“Should we get comfortable then?” Draco smirked as he headed toward the pajamas, lifting the green ones and giving them a little toss.

“I’ve never been to a sleep over before.” Luna commented as she went to collect the blue pajamas. “At least not one that wasn’t school wide and mandatory.”

“Is there a loo?” Neville asked, and a panel of the wall behind him swung open to reveal the facilities he had just wondered about.

“What about food?” Ron asked, and then gave a high-pitched scream when a house elf appeared in front of him.

“Hi, Dobby.” Harry greeted.

“Harry Potter!” The little elf greeted.

“What are you doing here, Dobby?” Draco asked.

The little elf yelped and turned around, pulling at its ears. “Master Draco must understand that he is not master anymore. Master Malfoy gave Dobby sock, and Dobby is now a free elf.”

“Ah,” Draco nodded, then frowned. “Never did know what happened to you.”

Dobby nodded, letting go of his ears that now twitched as a smile came to his face. “Dobby was freed with the help of Harry Potter. Harry Potter is as good and brave and kind as Master Draco always said he was.”

Draco turned nearly as red as the pajamas meant for the Gryffindors, and then his eyes widened. Aurora darted her eyes from him to where he was looking, and noticed Harry was blushing as well.

Ron gapped at Dobby. “No, it can’t be. Malfoy telling you that Harry is all those things?”

“Master Draco told Dobby of Harry Potter. Of the real Harry Potter, not story like that the house elves hear.”

“Right, yes. Well, Dobby, I think we need some food for Weasel to cram in his face so he can shut up.” Draco sneered at Ron before taking his pajamas and dashing behind a screen.

“Should Dobby go to Hogwarts kitchen and bring food to Harry Potter and his friends?” Dobby asked, wringing his hands, and looking confused.

“Sure, Dobby. That would be wonderful.”

Dobby smiled wide before disappearing. The Gryffindors gathered their changes of clothes, and as
they did, multiple screens popped up throughout the room.

Changing, Aurora finally had a moment to fully comprehend what was about to happen inside this room. Was she betraying her Dad by revealing the truth? Well, it wasn’t as if Harry wasn’t going to find out anyway, was it? If he didn’t find out the truth from her, he would find out on his own. The hard way. And it would likely end up causing a lot of issues. Aurora knew Harry hadn’t particularly liked her father when they first met, and his antics and adventures didn’t soften the relationship. But she had noticed in the last year that they weren’t quite as hateful toward one another. She didn’t want that to fall away.

She just hoped her father would forgive her for it.

But the last thing that she needed was Ron to run his mouth, or Harry to do so in a fit of rage. So, what could possibly ….

She had an idea. Not a pleasant one, but one that would work all the same.

Once they were all changed, they came together on the sofas. Neville and Luna on either side of Aurora, Draco between Harry and Ginny, Ron taking up a spot on the floor close to the coffee table were pastries and warm drinks were laid out.

“So why was Karkaroff so interested in your dad’s arm. What’s this sign he kept rambling on about?” Harry asked as Ron began to tuck in.

Aurora looked to Draco.

“I don’t think it makes much difference, Rory.” Draco said. “It’s not my father we’re worrying about here.”

Nodding, she took a deep breath. “I can tell you everything, but I need something from all of you first: a wand oath.”

“Goddabre kinning me.” Ron said around a mouthful of food. “S’legal.”

“If you mean illegal, you disgusting baboon, you’re wrong.” Aurora said with a grimace, ignoring the glare and the way Ron’s face went red to his ears. “My mother was able to take an unbreakable vow at fourteen. And I was told her friends took one at sixteen and seventeen to keep this very secret. All you need to do one is a wand.”

Harry shifted on the couch, unsure it seemed, and Neville was suddenly interested in the hem of his pajama top.

“I vow to keep what is shared between us.” Luna’s voice came clear and concise, wand raised as it glowed gold.

“I vow to keep what is shared between us.” Draco repeated, chin high. Harry nodded, and followed, then Ginny and Neville, and finally Ron.

When the wands were put away, Aurora took a deep breath. “My dad is a Death Eater, but not by choice.” She started, and Ron slammed his hand down on the table, looking toward Harry while he chewed a fresh mouth full of food, appearing all the world like he was saying “I knew it” in his head.

But Harry just looked curious.

“What do you mean?” He asked.
“I mean,” Aurora sighed, “he was sort of given no choice at all.”

And so she explained. Her father had told her the story the year before, and while it haunted her as to what he had to become, what he had to do, it was also, she marveled now, a bit of a love story. It was with this perspective she spun the tale of his meeting her mother (thought not the truth of her mother’s arrival at Hogwarts), her friendship and the doors it opened to him as a Slytherin. She wasn’t so light hearted when it came to the fateful winter when the role was forced on him, nor did she sugar coat how Dumbledore convinced him it was for the greater good, though she thought maybe there was more than her father told her going on there.

When she was done, the room was quiet, and she could see by the look on nearly all of their faces that their opinions were being changed. All but Neville’s and Ron’s.

“I suppose you’re gonna say your Dad did it for your Mum, too, eh Malfoy?” Ron asked with scoff.

“No,” Draco snorted in a weirdly haughty way. “My father is a proper Death Eater. He sent Rory and I off purposely so he could play with those muggles at the world cup. And it was sickening. He was high, strung out like he’d done a few illicit potions, when we returned home that night. The morsmorder in the sky … he loved every moment.”

“When in contrast, my father raged.” Aurora said. “When he heard what happened, a wall or two in his study needed repairs. As did his hand. My mother was furious he would hurt himself like that, but he was … he wasn’t ready for this. He hoped Leo and I would be older when the possibility of the Dark Lord’s return came.” She met Harry’s eye. “That you would be older. He may not like you much, but he doesn’t want you needing to worry about that now.”

“And so that’s what Karkaroff if worried about, their marks?” Harry asked. He glanced at the others, and added, “Karkaroff must have one, too. Or else, why would he know about Snape’s? He’s probably the one that put my name in the goblet of fire, to take me out before Voldemort even returns.”

“But he’s worried about the return.” Draco pointed out. “So, unless he’s done something to really piss his master off.”

“Maybe it was Snape.” Ron suggested.

“Don’t be daft.” Ginny scowled.

“I’m not. Great git coulda done it.”

“I doubt it.” Harry replied. As Ron whipped his head around, facing his friend he clearly felt betrayed him, Harry shrugged. “Snape is a git, but he’s never put us in harm’s way, just dragged us out of it.”

“He didn’t.” Draco affirmed. “He thought you may have found a way at first. I told him you couldn’t have.”

Harry’s brow furrowed. “Really?”

“Of course. You aren’t that clever.” Draco sniffed and tilted his chin, and Harry smirked before giving him a ribbing. Draco smirked before turning to hide his face.

“Bloody hell, boys are both so obvious and oblivious.” Ginny mumbled, and Aurora coughed to cover up her giggle.
“I often suspected Professor Moody to have done it.” Luna said, causing the attention to go to her. She shrugged. “Wrackspurts seem confused by him, like he should do one thing yet does another.”

“I may have to agree with Potter’s theory of Karkaroff.” Draco said. “He was in Azkaban after the war, and got out by outing others.”

“How do you know?” Ron asked, for once not in a sneering way.

“My father wrote me when he heard who had accompanied Durmstrang. He told me to ensure he knew who I was and what we thought of him.”

“And did you?” Ginny asked with a laugh on her breath,

“No,” Draco replied, barely suppressing the smirk. “I didn’t even bother with him. Only with the Durmstrang students who didn’t seem too interested in purity nonsense. Krum, for example. Or, at least, after Rory’s birthday.” The he properly smirked, “Was quite curious if you would be will to attend the ball with him.”

Ginny blushed. “Never would be.”

“Oi, you’ll put me off my appetite.” Ron insisted as he reached for another scone.

“Can I ask something else, Rory?” Harry asked, and with her nod, he leaned forward. “Your mother, Karkaroff said he was surprised to see her here. Why?”

Aurora’s heart dropped in to her stomach, and she wasn’t sure how to answer that. She wasn’t even sure she knew what it meant.

“I can answer that,” Draco said quietly. When eyes were on him, he glanced around. “And remember our vow to only discuss all this between us.” He emphasized before taking a deep breath. “Uncle Severus was in Azkaban for a week.”

“Two weeks,” Aurora corrected.

“Two.” Draco nodded. “And, well, Azkaban does things to people.”

“Sirius won’t talk about it much,” Harry interjected with a nod. “He said he spent most of his time as a dog so the Dementors wouldn’t bother him. But all the same.”

“Yeah, well, even a couple weeks can be bad. And there’s a thing, with wizard marriages: it’s forever. Except, of course, if one of the two go to Azkaban.”

“Why does that have anything to do with Rory’s mother? Why would Karkaroff be surprised to see her?” Ginny asked.

“Because most all of the Death Eaters that went there had their marriages ended before they got out.” Draco replied. “Crabbe and Goyle were raised by their mothers. Theodor Nott. All of those lot, if there were already children involved, or a pregnancy, the marriages were ended. Even Karkaroff’s wife still only follows him for show, it’s said.”

“Because if the witch or wizard who went to prison showed any signs of being danger, their spouses could escape with their children.” Ginny nodded in understanding.

“And I had just turned one the week before my father was arrested.” Aurora confirmed.

“But your mum knew the truth.” Harry said. “So she stayed.”
“That, and dad is wicked good at Occlumency.”

“At Occlu-” before Harry could finish the word, a yawn broke through, and Harry’s stretched mouth caused everyone else to follow with it’s contagion.

When Aurora blinked, cushy pallets were placed in a circle on the floor behind the sofa’s. “Time for bed, it seems.”

“Good idea, I’m knackered.” Harry agreed, and the rest rose to grab pillows and blankets.

“We should do this more often,” Luna said as they were getting settled. “If we think we can sneak here before curfew, and no one would be looking for us, we should all have a sleep over from time to time.”

“Might be fun,” Ginny agreed.

Once everyone was settled, the room dosed the bright light and replaced it with a soft, green glow.

“Like Black Lake.” Draco murmured.

Aurora didn’t say anything, grateful to the room for providing her comfort, and for Draco to make it seem like it was granted for him.

No one said a word though, all too tired and comfortable to carry on. Neville was curled on his side to her right, Draco on his back to her left. Through heavy eyes, she could see Harry’s glasses in the space near Draco’s head, and Ron’s red hair on the pillow following. Luna was between the Weasley’s, like a blonde buffer in case earlier animosity resurfaced.

Aurora wondered, vaguely as she drifted off, if maybe Luna could be a buffer when Ron inevitably finds out his brother had kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay! Hopefully updates will happen more frequently as the month goes on.
“When is the next task again?” Draco asked as he shifted the golden egg around in his grip.

“About a month from now,” Harry replied, rubbing his hands together to ward off the chill. “I haven’t made any headway with it. All it does is screech when you open it.”

“May I hear it?” Luna asked.

“No!” Aurora, Ginny, and Ron all shouted, having had enough of hearing the cursed thing already.

Luna shrugged, “It may have helped to get a fresh perspective.” She said with a light smile, and while she had a point, Aurora just couldn’t imagine listening to the screech one more time.

“Think Krum’s morning swim is related in anyway?” Draco asked, glancing toward the black lake from where they all sat near the castle.

“Dunno, but he’s bloody mad for diving in, ain’t he?” Ron commented, looking to Draco as if he forgot for a moment he was supposed to hate him.

“It’s colder where he’s from than it is here.” Ginny said with a shrug.

“Chatting him up?” Draco teased, and Ginny’s cheeks went nearly as red as her hair.

“Shut it,” She mumbled, though Aurora shot the red head a knowing smirk and a brow arched eerily like her father’s.

While Ginny had yet to truly tease her about what she’d seen at the ball, Aurora had heard her fair share of light jabs. Ginny had taken to pointing out every sprig of mistletoe around the common room and anywhere in the castle as they passed. It was doubled if Fred were around, though he seemed to just thing the whole thing a laugh. However, there were plenty of times where Ginny was nowhere to be seen, and Aurora was now coming to understand exactly where her friend had been disappearing to.

“Have you tried putting it underwater?” Luna said thoughtfully, breaking up what could have very well been another argument between the Weasley siblings as Ron’s ears were darkening.

Everyone turned to look at her, and she grinned slyly. “Well it does seem a bit odd that Viktor is taking a chilly deep everyday, even if Bulgaria is much colder. And one of the prefects said that Cedric has been visiting the prefects’ bathroom more lately. If it’s as horrid as you all say it sounds, it could be something like mermish.”

“A bath sounds better than diving into the like.” Harry mused. “But the tubs in the tower aren’t deep
enough to hold the egg.”

“Which is probably why Diggory used the Prefect’s bathroom.” Draco countered.

“But I’m not a prefect,” Harry countered. “None of us are, and the bathroom has a password.”

“Leave it to me, then.” Draco smirked.

January 22nd, 1995

A bloody awful racket that threw Severus’ mind back a good nine years in his half-awake state had the Slytherin head out of bed, wand in hand, charging to the rooms of his children. They, of course, were not infants, let alone in their beds, and the noise he heard was not an alarm to notify he and his wife of a possible lack of breath or vital signs of their progenies.

The moment of relief was short lived as it meant that there was something else going on not far from his rooms. Quickly grabbing a pair of lounge pants and a robe from his room, he dressed as he moved to see what was going on in the halls of Hogwarts.

He left his rooms via the entrance to the corridors, he headed toward what sounded suspiciously like a Banshee. Determined as he was, he nearly missed the fact that there was a light on in his office. He paused, staring suspiciously at the crack under his door. He didn’t set strong wards on it, the entrance to his rooms only accessible to his wife and children, and while his private stores were accessible through it, it was also accessible via the corridor a floor above.

Opening the door, Severus found it empty, slight ransacked, and the entrance to his stores open ajar.

The end of the shrieking pulled Severus’ attention. Shutting the door, he moved to continue his investigation, now believing the two incidences were linked.

He climbed the stairs from the dungeons, just as the sound ended, and rounded the corner to find Filch shouting about something the bloody Poltergeist had been up to.

“Filch, what is going on?”

“It’s Peeves, Professor,” Argus said with a whisper, a hint of glee in his eyes that negated his tone. “He threw this egg down the stairs.”

Severus slowly climbed the stairs, examining the gold egg in Argus’ hands. It was the clue for the tri-wizard tournament, it was wet.

A light flutter of something caught his eye, and Severus’ attention was immediately brought to the piece of parchment on the stairs. Without a doubt, he knew exactly what it was, who the egg belonged to, and who was likely listening to every word in this corridor.

Silently summoning the Marauder’s Map to himself, he snatched it out of the air and peered down at what was displayed before him.
Peeve was nowhere near the spots on the map where he and Argus were, but a mere five feet away was a huddled clump of Harry Potter, Ronald Weasley, and Draco Malfoy.

Arching his brow at the parchment, Severus folded it up and tucked it into the pocket of his robes. He then turned his attention to Argus who looked longingly in the general direction the trio was hiding in.

“Peeves could not have gotten into my office.” He said, getting the old caretaker’s attention.

“This egg was in your office, Professor?” Argus asked.

“No, but it will be.” Severus said as he took the egg forcefully from Argus. “And I’m sure its owner would like to come reclaim it, lest they are too cowardly to admit they lost such a precious item. In the meantime, there is a miscreant who broke into my office. We need to find them.”

“But Professor, you see, the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. If Peeves is stealing from students….”

“Then he will need to be reported, yes, however I believe finding the one breaking into a professor’s office is far more important, do you not agree?” Severus said through clenched teeth, losing his patience with the squib. When Argus still looked entirely unsure, Severus snatched the egg from the caretaker’s hands, and then pointed down the corridor. “Go. Search that way.” He commanded, leaving no room for argument.

Reluctantly, Argus sauntered off.

When he was clear of the general area, Severus said in a low, but clear voice. “Twenty points from Gryffindor, and ten points from Slytherin for being out of bed well past curfew. You will be in my office tomorrow promptly after dinner, the three of you. You will get your egg, then, Pott-”

Severus was cut off by the distinct sound of a clunk, clunk, clunk coming down the stairs.

Hoping that the three idiots on the stairs did not move or breathe the wrong way as the not-actually-Moody appeared at the top of the stairs.

“Out in your pajamas, Snape?” He asked gruffly. He seemed to have spotted where the trio of miscreants likely was, the frown of confusion nearly comical had it not been for the fact that Snape still had no idea if this man was friend or foe.

“A noise near my chambers disturbed me, I came to investigate. Argus Filch had been here with this,” Severus gestured with the egg. “I sent him on his way in an attempt to find the little blighter that attempted to steal from a champion, or a champion that thought themselves above the rules of Hogwarts.”

Moody narrowed his good eye.

“Is that so?”

“It would appear so, would it not? Unless, of course, said blighter or other have already made it back to their common rooms. Or maybe, though unlikely, they left their precious egg somewhere that it could be taken so easily? Regardless, I will be holding on to it for safe keeping in my office. Though it is hardly safe with so … many … break ins.”

“Your office been broken into, has it?” Moody asked.
Severus shrugged. “Likely a student, I dare say.” He eyed the impersonator in front of him. “It’s happened before: boomslang skin, lacewing flies, knotgrass. Students attempting to brew … Polyjuice potion.” He watched for a tick or a twitch from the man before him. “The last student to attempt such a thing turned herself into a cat.”

There was the faintest of snorts, and Severus’ hand tightened on the egg. No, they hadn’t left, the fools.

“Potion’s ingredients, eh? Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?”

Severus’ eyes narrowed. “You know I’m hiding nothing, Moody.” He said softly. “As you’ve searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself.”

Moody grinned in a way that he’d never seen Alastor smile at him. He’d seen it, of course, when the great auror caught a proper dark wizard and had the fool right where he wanted him.

“Auror’s privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye-”

“On Potter. For any danger that lurks for him. Dumbledore trusts me.” Severus replied. There was something there, something so, so close to the surface that he believed he could figure out exactly who this impostor was with just one more hint.

“Course Dumbledore trusts you,” Moody growled. “He’s a trusting man, isn’t he? Believes in second chances. But me? I say there are spots that don’t come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d’you know what I mean?”

Had his hand been free, Severus may have seized his left arm, giving away the thing that shamed and scared him. Proof, his wife would say, that he was one of the bravest men she knew. Instead, he clenched his left fist, and stared the man down.

Whomever he was, he was someone who knew Severus to have the dark mark, but not someone who knew his true allegiance. One of the Death Eaters, then, whom claimed imperious or other forms of coercion in order to escape Azkaban. Someone who would have been privy to the public record of his trial, or merely thought him a coward. That was a long bloody list.

“Get back to bed, Snape.” Moody commanded.

“You don’t have the authority to send me anywhere. I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do.”

“Prowl away. I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor one day.” Moody stared him down menacingly.

Severus waited, caught sight of a foot out of the corner of his eye as the trio of idiots made their way up the stairs. He waited until they kept going, vaguely wondering how the hell Draco was going to make it back to his own common room, and once they were safely away, Severus blinked.

“I think I will return to bed.” He said casually.

Just as he attempted to turn away, Moody’s walking stick swung out and stopped just before making contact with Snape’s leg.

“That egg belongs to Potter, and I think we both know it.” Moody hissed.

“Does it? I was unaware it was labeled. Or perhaps it was done with invisible ink that only your silly
“You holding it can be dangerous to Potter’s chances in the tournament. If he ain’t got the clue figured out…”

“Then Potter is as lazy, arrogant, and self assured as his father. Traits that had the elder killed as surely as it would the junior.” Severus countered.

“Dumbledore is very interested who’s got it out for that boy,” Moody said, lowering his stick, and stepping closer. “And so am I, Snape. Very interested.”

“Indeed.” Severus countered. “Well then you can ask just about anyone in Gryffindor, and perhaps even in the rest of the school. If there is one thing that seems universally accepted, it’s that I have it out for the boy, and have since his toes touched the flagstone.” When Moody’s eyes narrowed in thought instead of accusation, Severus thought it best to step away. “I will be turning in. As you were, Moody.”

Nothing more was said, thankfully, and Severus made his way back to his dungeon suite.

Once behind his heavily warded door, he set the egg on a side table before heading to the fireplace.

He paused, uncertain if he should bother the headmaster, wondering if Albus was asleep. Running a hand through his hair, Severus heavily dropped it to his side where a crinkle of parchment came from his robe pocket.

The map. He had the map! Pulling it out, Severus unfolded the still active parchment to seek out the Headmaster’s office. He was stopped short by the sight of Bartimaeus Crouch slinking off toward the Gryffindor common room.

“Bloody, fucking hell.” Severus grumbled, folding out the map with new purpose. He caught sight of the three boys just before they disappeared on the seventh floor. Knowing they were safe, and Barty Crouch likely wouldn’t think to find them in the legendary room, he turned his attention to the Headmaster’s office.

Despite the late hour, Dumbledore was awake.

Setting the map down on a sofa, Severus wasted no time grabbing some floo powder and heading for the headmaster’s office.

He emerged, brushing soot from his sleeves, finding Dumbledore at his mid pace with an amused grin to his face.

“The last time I’d seen you come through the floo barely decent was when Hermione went into labor with Leonidas.” Dumbledore commented.

“Bartimaeus Crouch.” Severus said, causing the mirth to leave Dumbledore’s face. “He is impersonating Alastor.”

“How do you know?” Albus asked.

“I’m sure you’re aware of a certain map of the school?”

“I did not think that was passed down to Harry, let alone survived past that of you and your alums.”

“It was thought lost but discovered once again last year. It is what led Lupin to the conclusion of
Black. And once again it is revealing an intruder, though why we are allowing Potter to continue having it is beyond me.”

“Perhaps you, Remus, Sirius, and Hermione should come together and create a version for ourselves.” Dumbledore mused, smiling briefly before the concern clouded his face. “There is a memory I have been watching, over and over, since the start of the year. Perhaps you can provide me with a fresh perspective?” He waved his hand toward the pensieve.

“What is it?” Severus asked as he approached the basin. He gripped the sides, and prepared to dive within.

The last thing he heard before failing through was Albus saying, “The trial of Igor Karkaroff.”

“It’s not detention.” Draco insisted as he, Ron, and Harry came to join Aurora, Ginny, Luna, and Neville out in one of the court yards. It was snowing, and most students opted to stay inside where it was warm and dry, but the seven took the opportunity to meet where curious Slytherins wouldn’t notice their Prince cavorting with the enemy.

“We have to be in his office by a certain time, sounds like detention to me.” Ron grumbled. “Sides, Snape would never not make us do something ghastly after catching us out that late.”

“So, you’re the reason my Dad’s in a right foul mood.” Aurora said, everything finally making sense.

They had him first thing in the morning, and while he was normally snappish as strict, he had been a terror. And while Aurora was never exempt from his seeming contempt for all things Gryffindor, it was a rare occasion she lost house points, especially for something as silly as speaking loud enough to her partner that others could hear her and cheat as a result.

“We got caught coming out of the Prefects bathroom last night. Someone,” Draco explained, glaring at Ron who returned it. “Had insisted I couldn’t carry the blasted egg.”

“You’d likely tamper with it.” Ron argued.

“And what difference would it make?” Harry asked as the group moved to a small alcove where there were benches nestled just out of reach of the snow. “I already know the clue. I doubt very much I would need to carry the egg around in the second task, especially when it sounds like I need to be underwater.”

“So, Snape caught you? How did you explain the three of you taking a bath together?” Ginny asked with a smirk, crossing her arms, and waiting for the to explain.

Ron’s face scrunched up as he looked to his sister like he ate something bitter and she was to blame. “We wore bathers.” He half spat.

“All the better since Myrtle was there.” Harry commented, and Draco visibly shuddered.

“Moaning Myrtle watched the three of you take a bath?” Ginny said, near laughing.

“Apparently, she watched Diggory, too.” Draco sneered. “Why would a ghost have an interest in
watching people bath?”

“Probably because she’s forever stuck as a teenage girl.” Aurora said with a shrug.

“Ghosts can’t have the same feelings we do, though. There are no bodies for such feelings to occur in.” Luna said, eyes darting about to everyone as if she were teaching them.

“But ghosts keep the personalities.” Aurora pointed out. “She might have been a bit boy crazy.”

“You think we’d have heard about a peeping ghost girl by now.” Neville said with a blush.

“She mostly haunts the second floor girl’s lavatory.” Ginny pointed out.

“Yet she made it up to the fifth floor.” Draco countered.

“I bet there are spells.” Aurora said. “Keeping her out?” She added when everyone looked confused. “My dad has wards keeping ghosts out of his chambers. And portraits, come to think of it. Leo was right terrified of the ghosts when he was little, but I’m fairly certain the wards had been in place long before that. If the Bloody Baron wanted my Dad to know something, he would hover outside the door.”

“That makes me feel a bit better about taking a shower every morning.” Harry smirked, though Ron and Neville both nodded vigorously.

“Where were you this morning, anyway?” Neville asked as an after thought. “I was gonna ask you at breakfast, but you got in late.”

“We stayed in the Room of Requirement.” Harry replied. “We’d nearly gotten close to Malfoy’s common room when, well…”

“Snape and Moody showed up.” Ron said. “And that was after Filch.”

“There may have been a way we could have gotten past your Dad with just a lecture, once he sent Filch on his way. But Moody?” Draco reasoned.

“I think it may have been the opposite.” Harry said. “Snape was being pretty reasonable, despite everything, but I doubt he’d have let us go.”

“He didn’t. Which is why we have detention.” Ron grumbled.

“It’s not detention,” Draco insisted.

Before any further arguments could be had on the topic, the bell chimed, signaling the end of the break and the need to return to class.

Roughly seventeen hours after being woken by the Merin-forsaken egg in the corridor, Severus waited in his office for the appointment the boys had incurred to begin.

It had been about thirty minutes in the corridor between Filch and Crouch, another hour in the headmaster’s office discussing what should be done now that the truth was known (nothing, let it
play out, for now), and a restless time trying to get back to sleep. It was nights like that that he wished Hermione still took up residence in his rooms during the year, and not the cottage.

Rubbing his weary eyes, he was unsure what he would be facing when the dunderheads came in. A hundred questions as it was likely Potter had seen the same thing he had on the map. Whinging? Likely, Weasley was involved, after all.

There was a soft rap on the door, and Severus let out a heavy sigh.

“Enter,” he called, straightening up in his chair.

Draco entered first, head held high, shoulders straight. Weasley followed, glaring the whole way. Potter seemed fairly stoic, all things considered.

The three boys all took their seats, though despite the procession, Potter sat in the middle.

He let silence hang over them until Weasley started to fidget.

“I would like to know what was so important that the three of you felt the need to traverse the corridors after curfew with an object that was clearly meant to drive a man insane with the wish to go deaf.”

Draco looked to the Gryffindors, Weasley looked to his feet.

Potter took a deep breath, and bravely met Severus’ gaze. “The egg needed to be opened under water. I don’t know about the Slytherin dorms, but the tubs in Gryffindor tower barely cover your knees.”

“This doesn’t really explain the need for a midnight swim. And where, precisely, had you three gone?” He arched a brow.

“The prefects’ bathroom. Draco found out the password.”

“Indeed. I shall have to speak to the prefects about discretion. And I suppose you three decided after midnight would be the best time to enter where you do not belong? Then again, I suppose three young men in a tub, away from your common rooms....”

Severus watched as Draco paled, looking all the world like a terrified little boy who’d just been caught doing something he knew was wrong. Severus just about scoffed, having known the boy was gay since he was barely to his knee. There was a reason Lucius was adamant that Aurora marry into the family despite her lesser.

Weasley’s lip was curled, and his face took on a nice shade of green. It was nearly amusing.

Potter’s blushed, though he also looked as though he didn’t quite understand why he was doing it.

“So how did the egg come about wailing and disturbing the anyone in the vicinity?”

“Weasley dropped it.” Draco smirked.

“Oi, I’d like to see you hold on to a giant, wet egg.” Weasley shot back.

“I was perfectly fine until you insisted I would do something to the bloody thing.” Draco countered.

“Enough,” Severus cut in before a ridiculous argument could ensue. He studied each young, seeing them settle, though with Weasley it seemed grudgingly. “I would normally have the lot of you
scrubbing cauldrons, of preparing flubberworms. However, I think it best, for house unity, to merely allow you to escape punishment as you all were working together. On top of that, Potter, your dropping the map allowed—"

“You know about the map?” Potter cried.

Sneering, Severus spat, “Yes, I know about the ruddy map, Potter. My wife had a hand in creating a secondary version, along with your mother and father. That one is long gone.” Potter’s mouth snapped shut, and his eyes went wide. He blinked, and if Severus hadn’t been stressed, he’d have found it amusing. “As it were, your map falling out of your hands has allowed me to glean some information I hadn’t been able to discover on my own. It will remain with me for the time being.”

Weasley looked put out, but Potter merely nodded.

“Now, the three of you, out of my sight.”

There was a chorus of grumbled, “yes sirs”, and the three left.

He sighed again once the door was closed, then made his way wearily into his rooms.

The smell that hit his nose upon entering was utter perfection, and nearly made his knees weak with the pleasure of it.

“I figured you had dinner in the Great Hall.” Hermione said as she emerged from the small kitchenette, baring a serving of sticky-toffee pudding, “but I know you loathe to have pudding there for fear of your reputation.”

He took the dish from her as she came closer, than weaved his fingers through her hair and held her head in place to give his wife a firm, thankful kiss.

“How did you know?” He asked against her lips before releasing her hair and stepping back.

“Gut feeling,” She replied. “Something told me you needed me. And since Leonidas is at a friend’s house for the night….”

“I have never deserved you,” He said as he picked up his spoon, punctuating his sentence with a mouthful of his wife’s specialty when it came to desserts.

“So what has gotten you in such a mood that I can sense it in Sussex?” Hermione inquired, following him as he headed for the sofa.

Setting down his treat, Severus began removing his robes. “What do you know of my trial?”

He could tell that the question was nowhere near what Hermione was expecting. She stiffened, her eyes lowering. He waited her out, tossing his robes on the sofa. “Everything.” She said quietly. “Why?”

“Who was there?” He asked gently, taking a seat in the corner.


“Who was there that did not know my true nature?” He asked, the smirk growing as she glared.

“Not many, if I’m to be honest. Kingsley Shacklebolt was one. Another Auror that I don’t quite recall the name of, as I’d never seen him again. Bartimaeus Crouch was residing, but he did that with everyone’s trials.”
“Are you positive?” He asked.

She sighed. “Severus, don’t ask if you don’t want to believe me.” She stated, folding her arms and scowling.

“I only ask because I caught Potter, Draco, and Weasley out last night with the map. The map showed the very man who resided over my trial where Moody should have been had the Moody here been the true one. The way he spoke to me suggested it was someone who knew of my mark, but not of my real allegiance. Though I suppose Crouch would still make sense as I don’t believe the man really believed the plethora of evidence to the contrary of what he deemed the truth.” Guilt crashed over Severus as he recalled the reasons he was there to begin with. “Though I suppose the acts, whether under duress or otherwise, are deserving of time spent in prison.”

“And you served time.” She stated firmly.

“Two weeks.”

“More than you ever should have.” She said. “And don’t start spouting off the laundry lists of reasons why you think you should still be there, because we both know it is utter shit, and you did what had to be done.”

Severus conceded with a nod, knowing better than to argue even if he still disagreed.

Instead, he picked up his pudding and resumed his enjoyment of it while Hermione came to sit beside him and simply be.

February 14th, 1995

Ginny Weasley had attracted much attention from those around her, and even some as far off as the Slytherin table, when the large, dark owl set before her a basket filled with sweets. But, as many nearby noted, not all of them had been those that you would find in Honeydukes. Some were Bulgarian. In with it were some things no one in their right mind would think to give a girl for Valentine’s day: a broom care kit, a fine pair of Quidditch gloves. Oddly, there was a book of poetry in the basket, which was something Aurora could not fathom the seeker giving, but there it was none the less.

Ginny’s basket of goods drew enough attention that it seemed barely anyone paid any mind to those around her.

Aurora looked at the small box of chocolates beside her plate and frowned. Her first year, everyone attempted to suck up. Last year, no one bothered, thankfully, except for the notes from friends. The only boys who had sent her anything were Draco and Harry. This year, she, Luna, and Ginny had decided not to bother with notes to one another. So, who gave her these?

She glanced at Harry, but he seemed as perplexed at something as she was. A side eye at Draco, and she noticed he was quite focused on his food and not at anything around him,
Carefully, she looked to the twins, hoping she would see Fred’s silly half grin flashed in her direction.

They hadn’t really had a proper conversation after the Ball, though they had spoken of course. Sometimes she thought that maybe he even flirted with her. But Angelina was nearly always with him once term started back up, and while their kiss was never a topic of conversation, Aurora was fairly certain at this point it was a spur of the moment, friendly thing that meant much less to Fred than it had her.

As it was, in that moment, there was no silly half smile for her. There was a grin laced with humor, but his attention was divided between Ginny’s basket and whatever Angelina was whispering in Fred’s ear.

It was as she looked away that she noticed Neville blushing furiously and seeming to avoid eye contact with everyone.

Examining the slender box from Honeydukes, she noted no card. Sliding the red and gold ribbon off, she opened the lid to find it was not chocolate at all, but licorice wands. More accurately, the kind that had the white and pink centers. They were her favorite, the dark, biting flavor of the outside with the sweeter inside being a taste she inherited from her father.

And there, on the inside of the box lid, was the inscription:

*To Rory. Happy Valentine’s Day. All the best, Neville F. Longbottom.*

Aurora giggled, wondering if she should tell him that he was more formal with her than her tightly buttoned father had been with her mother.

No, probably not wise.

“Thanks, Neville.” She said, flashing him a smile when he turned toward her, looking all the world like he was about to face his boggart.

An exclamation of intrigue drew her to Ginny’s basket once more, but it was diverted nearly instantly when she caught sight of Fred. He was looking to Neville, seeming to think on something, and then he turned away, laughing as Ron grumbled something and earned a smack from their only sister.

She could dwell on it. Think of all the different reasons why Fred, who had kissed her, looked to Neville in a way she couldn’t decipher but figured was calculating. She could wonder if, perhaps, her crush was reciprocated by the older, handsome ginger boy. Or, she could let it go. It struck her, suddenly, that Harry’s life, and possibly someone else’s that they cared for, was like likely going to be put in danger in the coming week. There were more important things to worry about than Fred Weasley. Like, for instance, how Harry was going to breath in Black Lake for an hour.

February 23rd, 1995

S———S———
As Severus watched his fourth year Gryffindor/Slytherin class leave for the day, he noted Boy-Wonder had decided to stay in his seat. Despite Weasley motioning for him to get up, please get up. Despite Longbottom clapping him on the shoulder as if he were saying his last farewells. Draco even looked a bit dubious, so what ever Potter had planned, none of them thought he would be successful in his attempts.

When the last student left, Severus waved his hand toward the door. It slammed shut, and locked with a deafening click. Pulling his robes in as he crossed his arms, he looked down at Potter. He had the posture of one relaxed and at ease, but his eyes screamed utter terror.

“Let’s get this over with. What ever you wish to say, do so now.”

“I was hoping you had some gillyweed.”

Severus didn’t let on, but that had honestly been the last thing he expected to hear. He had yet to return the map to Potter, so that was his first and immediate assumption. On top of that, he couldn’t help but notice how much more cautious the boy seemed around Crouch-come-Moody. He thought, perhaps, he would try and stick his nose into that messy bit of business as if it belonged there.

But this somewhat respectful request for an herb that Potter would have likely stolen in the past had thrown him for a loop.

“Gillyweed?” Severus asked, just to be sure. Just to see what Potter would have to say.

“Yeah. See, since the night you found Malfoy, Ron, and me, I’d been trying to find a way I could breath underwater for about an hour. I could use a bubblehead charm, but I’m honestly not that good at it. I’d likely drown myself.”

“Pity,” he quipped, and the boy had the audacity to smirk.

“Yes, well. Neville actually found it in a book Moody gave him.” And here he stumbled, and Severus prepared for an off-topic inquiry. Instead, Potter gave the slightest shake of the head, and continued. “If I eat it just before going in, I’d have an hour, or a bit more, to breath underwater.”

Severus raised his chin, looking at the boy. “Using Gillyweed to breath under water is a painful method. Your neck is ripped open for gills to form, your anatomy is changed to filter contaminates from the water you’re sucking oxygen from. In addition, your feet stretch and thin until they are long and webbed, and your hands are not as dexterous as they go through a similar transformation. Not to mention it tastes like it essentially is: pond scum. Do you still wish to acquire it?”

He looked a little grin and panicked, but that Gryffindor bravery won out. With a nod, Potter said, “Yes, Sir.”

“And what will you do to get it? Gillyweed is not inexpensive, nor is it something the school tends to keep a large stock of. While offering you some for your trial tomorrow will not affect the education of others, it is still not something to be given freely.”

Potter seemed to consider this. Really consider it. It was odd, really, that Severus hadn’t really noticed the change in the boy. He was so brash, at least in the last couple years, and had started to become so in his first year, but now he seemed pensive. It would seem not being surrounded completely by Gryffindors did something for the Potter way of thinking.

“I suppose what was needed.” Potter said thoughtfully. “Maybe prepare some ingredients for you,
like in detention. I could also write Sirius to ask if he could pay the school for it. I could scrub cauldrons.”

“Enough.” Severus said, sharp but casually. He turned to his potion’s store room, slipping inside, and climbing the ladder. He gazed up at the shelves, his fingers mindlessly walking the run about his head until he found what he was looking for. Plucking a pre-measured vial, he stepped down and left the room.

Billing to Potter, he handed him the vial. “Enough for an hour only. Take care, for if this is in anyway ruined, I will not give you more.”

Potter nodded as he rose, gesturing with the bottle as he gave Severus a twitch of a grin and a respectful nod. “Thank you, sir.”

“And Potter,” he said, just as the boy was about to reach the door. When he turned, Severus glared, “Speak of this to no one. Understood?”

Potter smirked, nodded, and left.

Severus watched the door closed and instantly regretted his decision. Not because he hated the boy, he realized there was a soft spot there for him. Son of one of his best friends, friend to his own child. Bloody hell, the reality was he was a secondary God father to the boy, though he doubted Black had actually told him that bit.

It was the fact that the Dark Mark was becoming more and more vivid. But, he supposed, so long as Potter kept his mouth shut, things would be fine. After all, if Potter was captured, and his mind raided before his death, it would be at the hands of the Dark Lord anyhow. And if that ever happened, if Potter was destroyed, Severus doubted he’d live long himself anyhow.

March 5th, 1995

———A———

The snickering had started before the owls completely left the Great Hall. Draco had paled, Luna merely tilted her head, Seamus and Dean laughed so hard pumpkin juice had come out their noses.

It wasn’t until Ginny snagged the paper from her deathly pale brother, throwing her head back and laughing, that Aurora finally got a chance to understand what was going on.

The headline for the Daily Prophet was one she nearly wanted to clip for safe keeping.

The Boy Who Lived, and the boy he loves.

Beneath was a moving picture, cropped just so, of Harry surfacing from the water during the second task with Ron’s arms around his neck. The little Delacour girl had been placed just out of frame, Harry’s grip on her unseen.
“No,” Ron breathed, shaking his head. “No, what did I do to deserve this?”

“It’s not so bad,” George said as he looked at the paper with Fred.

“You make an excellent damsel.” Fred teased.

“But I’m not… and Harry’s not…”

“You sure about that?” Ginny asked, narrowing her eyes while a grin played on her lips. “You were acting half in love with my boyfriend after he caught the Snitch.”

Ron merely sputtered at that, his face shifting from pale to red and back again, he nearly made Aurora nauseated out of sympathy.

“You know Sirius is?” Harry asked, pushing eggs on his plate around with his fork and not looking at his best friend.

Ron turned to him, still seeming in shock. “In love with Krum?”

“Gay,” Harry said, no humor on his face at all as he looked Ron in the eye. “He’s gay. I’m pretty sure he’s even in love with Remus, but I’m not sure it goes both ways.”

“Right.” Ron said, still out of it.

“Just saying, if you have a problem with it….” Harry said, looking back at his plate.

“I don’t.” Ron said quickly, then frowned. “Wait, are you?”

“What? No.” Harry said, though while his mouth said one thing, the way his brow furrowed said he wasn’t sure.

“I don’t think anyone would believe this,” Luna said from the next table over, holding the paper upside down. “You two don’t make a good match. It would be absolute nonsense to believe the pair of you could love one another like that. In truth, I think Ron would be much more suited to someone like Justin Finch-Fletchly.”

Without another word, Ron stood from the table, shouldered his bag, and mumbled something about needing the hospital wing.

“What’s got his knickers in a twist?” George wondered aloud.

“Don’t you mean pants?” Harry asked, still frowning, thought here was a twitch to his lips.

“You would know one way or another, wouldn’t you, Harry?” Fred teased.

“Stop it.” Angelina chided gently, giving Fred a playful slap on the arm. “You’ve upset your little brother, don’t hurt Harry’s feelings, too.”

“He’s not.” Harry reassured swiftly.

After a moment of tense silence, Ginny said, “Notice how he didn’t even blink at my calling Viktor my boyfriend?”

“Is he?” Harry asked. “I hadn’t realized …”

“Sorta.” She smiled. “Why, jealous?”
“No. No offense, but something about ginger girls makes me think of my Mum. I may not have known her, but it still is a bit weird.” Harry grinned, really grinned. And while the rest of the table were still half gossiping, among the lot of them, the topic was passed over.

Chapter End Notes

I know it didn't end on a smooth note. However, we are getting to the heavy part of what was book 4, which we all know what that means. I didn't want to bog this down with the heavy things as we get ready to take a step into the darker areas in both eras.
April 4th, 1977

“Fecking hell!” Severus roared, pushing the cauldron off the portable burner with a might shove. It crashed to the floor, though it had no way of causing much more damage than a dent: the potion inside it was a congealed mess, almost as if he had left it sitting around for days instead of having just been brewing. He had, at least, been able to pull out his stirring rod that Hermione had given him before the experiment went south.

A couple angry flicks of his wand, and the cauldron was righted and cleaned, but his temper hadn’t calmed.

He had days, barely any time at all, before he was to be among the Death Eaters again. He’d received another letter from the Dark Lord himself, asking him to be prepared for a visitor to come and escort him to a gathering during the Easter hols. Undoubtedly there would be another test of sorts, and while it would likely be impossible to heal whomever he would be forced to maim and torture, he wanted to know that, if he could, it was possible.

But he hadn’t had any luck.

He tried spells, some obscure, some common. The rats he’d purchased to test on didn’t fare well. He’d attempted potions, including basic essence of dittany, and still nothing. Though, at least, the essence had given him an idea. It helped the rats survive longer, but it took too long work against the curse.

So, it became the base for a healing potion that he was sure would work, but there was something about the timing of the mandrake that was off, and he kept screwing up.

He was out of dittany.

He needed more.

It couldn’t wait.

Summoning a sheet of parchment and a quill from his backpack, he scribbled a hasty note for Hermione. She was supposed to meet him there not long after dinner, but he heard Black beg and plead her to help her with his homework as Lupin was ill and unable to do so. She wasn’t late, really, but he wasn’t sure if he would be able to meet her along the way to tell her that he was on a mission for ingredients.

Which, of course, begged the problem of how the hell he was supposed to get any. He could, he supposed, ask Slughorn or Sprout for what he needed. But the former would likely keep him in the classroom and ask him all kinds of questions that Severus had no intention of answering just so the
pompous old twat could say he had an academic discussion with an up and coming apprentice. The latter would just ask too many questions. Period. He wasn’t sure Sprout was part of this order nonsense he’d gotten sucked into, and Dumbledore seemed to believe that the less who knew the better.

He grit his teeth, realizing there really was nothing for it: a trip to Diagon Alley. He could, he supposed, take the tunnel guarded by the humped witch and pop into Hogsmeade. But he was still a student, and even transfiguring or changing his Uniform would not change the fact that they had only seen him the weekend before, and he’d be reported to Dumbledore. He doubted his co-operation in the scheme of getting intel would somehow offer him an escape from detention pass.

Discarding his tie and sweater, and leaving them on the table behind him, Severus plucked up his robes and transfigured them into a set of casual business robes. Donning them, he ensured he had his small sack of galleons before heading out.

It seemed odd that he passed next to no one until he was heading toward the courtyard entrance that was most direct to the Whomping willow.

It was there, near the alcoves, that he heard soft giggles and ill hidden whispers.

“Sirius!” A high-pitched giggle followed. “We’re going to get caught!”

“We won’t.” Black replied, his voice a bit off. Maybe from lust. Now there was a disgusting thought.

“Black.” Severus said casually enough, hoping the witch he was with wasn’t a Slytherin. Unlikely as it might be, there were rumors he was making rounds lately. Likely trying to prove he was just as red-blooded as the other idiots. “Black!” Severus snapped when his initial call went ignored.

Black’s head popped out of the alcove, looking thoroughly disgruntled.

Severus, frankly, didn’t care. “I’m going on a bit of an excursion via the Shrieking Shack.”

“Really,” Black said, sounding a bit too pleased by that.

“Yes,” Severus said. “If you see Hermione, tell her I won’t be long.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll let Granger you’ve gone.” He smirked, and there was something off about it. Not smarmy like it had been, or haughty. It was just not right for his face.

Not really wanting to think on why Black’s face looked off or give the man any ideas in case his early bullying was equal to what some claim the bullying actions of a young boy to a girl were, Severus continued.

He was heading to the willow, mind partly on the task at hand, while the rest was utterly preoccupied trying to figure out why there was something else off about Black that he couldn’t pinpoint.

If nothing else, though, he could appreciate the coolness of the night air. The moon was high, and bright, and gave him all the light he needed to see in order to make his way to the tunnel. He levitated a twig to poke the special knot to still the tree, then proceeded down into the tunnel, pausing to straighten his robes.

It was only when he was in the tunnel that a sudden thought struck him: the apothecaries may actually be closed for the evening, seeing as how it was a full moon and the absolute best time to gather ingredients. He knew Slug and Jiggers did most of their harvesting and preparation themselves, which was why they were usually the best quality.
There was a sound down the tunnel, and Severus drew his wand and pointed it at the space before him. A sniff, like an animal scenting the air, and then a growl that was a bit too predatory for comfort.

As greenish yellow eyes seemed to melt into blackness, a multitude of epiphanies hit Severus at once.

First, Black had never called Hermione “Granger”. Potter or Pettigrew, but never Black. It was always Kitten.

Second, Lupin’s supposed confinement to the infirmary was a bit too regular, though Severus had never put much mind to it. He also hadn’t considered that it was always the one time of the month he and Hermione hadn’t had to worry about Black interrupting them as well.

Third, that Black’s warning about visiting the shack certain times of the month was completely valid and related entirely to Lupin’s absence. The conclusion became abundantly clear and free from any doubts as those fearsome, green-yellow eyes shining in the dark were those of a werewolf and were now coming right for him.

“Sirius, I need to go meet Severus.” Hermione said, trying not to smile as Sirius trailed after her as she headed toward Severus’ lab.

“But I’m bored and stupid.” Sirius whined. “I promised Padfoot I wouldn’t go see Moony without him, and he’s too busy trying to convince Evans to ditch her Hufflepuff and, well, huffle the puff if you know what I mean.”

Hermione paused and turned around, rolling her eyes at the goofy, proud grin Sirius was sporting. “That was awful.”

“Oh, you loved it, Kitten. Now, please. Please, stick around with me. I’m willing to study for once, just for something to do!”

“Where’s Peter?” She chuckled as she resumed her mission. She was also being kind in not pointing out that she’d already helped him enough for the night, thank you very much.

“He had a date with a Ravenclaw, or so he said. Truth be told, I don’t see much of him anymore.”

“There’s likely a reason why.” Hermione said under her breath, remembering the rat-like version of the older Peter begging mercy and forgiveness to his once fellow Marauders.

She shook her head, clearing the image from her mind, and turned to enter the room. There was no Severus inside, though it looked like he was in the midst of starting a brew. There was a piece of paper among the ingredients, and Hermione went to see if it was just his notes for his experiment, or something for her.

H.
“No,” She gasped out, and sensed Sirius coming up behind her and reading the note.

“No, I thought he knew!” He said, turning, and dashing out of the room before Hermione’s stunned horror could loosen its grip enough for her brain to spring into action. A beat later, she’d dropped the note and went running after Sirius.

“I knew, not Severus!” She called.

“But I told him it was bad certain times of the month.”

“It’s not like you specified the time of the month in which it was a bad time to use it as a secret appariation point!”

They ran through the corridors, ignoring the perturbed ghosts and cranky portraits, hoping to make it to where Severus was before Remus found him. At the bottom of the stairs, not far from the nearest exit point to the Whomping Willow, Sirius skidded to a stop. “James!”

Hermione nearly barreled into Sirius, her chest heaving as she turned and noted Lily was with James, though the two looked like they’d just been snapped out of an argument. “Half-blood Prince is heading toward the shack, tell Dumbledore.”

“What?” James asked, baffled.

Sirius growled. “Snivellus!” He said, likely using the hated name for the sack of clarity. She could honestly say she’d never heard Sirius, Remus, or anyone of their friends refer to Severus as such. “He’s heading to the shack but doesn’t know about Moony!”

Recognition lit in James’ eyes, and Hermione even detected a hint of fear before the boy bolted toward the Headmaster’s Office.

A nudge from Sirius had her running with him once more, ignoring Lily’s calls demanding and explanation.

The rest of the dash seemed a blur. The ran across the grounds, heading for the willow. Sirius shot a well-aimed stunner, and Hermione ran beneath the frozen branches. She didn’t even go in the tunnel, she merely crouched down and yelled, “Accio Severus!”

There was a sense of a rush, and she was uncertain of herself and her method for only a second more before her love came rocketing up the tunnel and landed against her.

“We have to move, quickly!” Sirius said, and Hermione nodded.

The pair of them managed to drag a shocked Severus out of the Willow’s way just as the stunning wore off. The branches came dangerously close to them as the tree made an attempt to whack them, but Hermione hadn’t had much thought to care.

Panting, her heart hammering in her chest, she laid on her back beside Severus for a moment before rolling over, limbs already heavy with fatigue, and patted him with far less gentleness than she would
have wanted.

“Are you hurt? In anyway? Severus, speak to me, please!” She said, giving him a light shake.

But Severus didn’t focus on her as he seemed to come to his senses, he focused on Sirius.

“Why didn’t you say there was a bloody werewolf in there?” He asked softly, and Hermione tensed. She knew that voice. That voice was the one that preluded the loss of House points, or gave a scathing, character stripping insult. It spoke of toads possibly being poisoned, and detentions spent prepping awful ingredients. And, she was sure, it would be the voice that would warn to far worse consequences.

“Hermione knew, I thought you did,” Sirius put his hands out in front of him.

Severus’ eye flashed to Hermione, and then he pushed up on his elbows and got in Sirius’ face. “I told you where I was going before I left. I told you to tell Hermione where I was heading, and you. Said. Nothing.”

Sirius frowned at the same time Hermione did.

“I didn’t see you mate.” He said, shaking his head slowly. “I was with Kitten the whole time. Even followed her to your lab.”

Commotion from the castle cut off the conversation just as an angry, confused Severus was about to ask something else.

Dumbledore, McGonagall, and James were all coming toward them, slowing from their run now that thy could see all three of them on the grass, just out of the Willow’s reach.

“Are any of you hurt?” Was the first thing McGonagall said as she stopped in front of them. She crouched down, looking first to her adoptive niece, then to Severus.

“No,” Sirius said, running his hand through his hair, and dropping it to his side. “Mate, I swear to you, I would have never, ever let you go anywhere near the shack if you had asked me. On my life. We may have had our differences, but you mean everything to Kitten, and I would never have her upset.”

“Why were you heading to the Shrieking Shack anyway, Mr Snape? And what’s more, how did any of you even know of the path to get to it?” Dumbledore asked, piercing Hermione with a stare. She started to feel the tickle of his intrusion and used it to her advantage.

She had, after all, been training with Severus to make herself better at only letting certain things slide. She let the mundane of the evening filter through her mind, proving Sirius was with her to prevent his getting into trouble for supposedly sending Severus to the shack. She then allowed the focus of Sirius to transition the memory of him and James telling her and only her of the way to the Shrieking Shack. He can assume that Severus had gotten the information from her one way or another.

“I see this is a conversation we should all have in my office. Come, we will head back inside. I trust you can walk, Mr Snape?”

Gritting his teeth, Severus nodded, and allowed Hermione to help him straighten out.

Everyone back on their feet, they all headed toward the castle, Severus and Hermione slowly falling behind the group, with Sirius checking over his shoulder the whole time, making sure they were there.
Severus continued to glare at him, and just before entering the school, asked quietly through his teeth, “was he really with you the whole time?”

“Yes.” Hermione asked.

“And, where were you?” He asked, turning toward her with sharp, cold eyes.

She glared, “The library. I was helping him with his homework.”

“Are you sure? Because when I saw Black, he was with someone, in an alcove. I never did catch who she was.”

Hermione could feel her hair crackle, and she stopped him before they stepped inside. Gripping the door frame with both hands, knuckles turning white, Hermione snapped, “This shade of green looks terrible on you, Severus.”

“You aren’t denying it.”

“The fact that you think I have to is insulting in and of itself.” She retorted sharply. “I was in the library, helping Sirius, and then went looking for you. We found your note in your lab when I went to meet you as discussed, and Sirius followed along. He was the one that sprang into action far quicker than I did, because I was so petrified of what was going to happen to you, I froze!”

“Miss Granger, Mr Snape, hurry along.” Dumbledore called from inside.

Fuming, and loathing the blank, disinterested look on Severus’ face, she shoved herself off the frame and spun, heading to where the others were waiting for them. She didn’t look back to see if Severus was following, she could feel his presence not far from her.

They were all quiet as they made their way up to the Headmaster’s office, only pausing for the Gargoyle to step aside and let them by.

Once they were at the top of the stairs, and inside, Dumbledore waved his hand, conjuring a couple extra chairs for the lot of them to sit in. Once they were all settled, the four students in front of his desk, McGonagall off to the side, a careful observer over three of her lions and her favorite serpent, the headmaster behind his desk, appearing all the world like he had just brought them by for a friendly chat.

He was quiet, smiling, hands folded and tucked beneath his chin. A few beats passed, and then he sighed.

“Mr Snape, I want to make it extremely clear that the knowledge you obtained this evening of Mr Lupin’s conditions must remain with you, and those that already knew, or I’m afraid you will have to explain to the Master you’ve chosen why he can no longer accept you. He will want NEWT level, after all, and an expulsion from Hogwarts would out a damper on the time it would take for you to earn them through the ministry.”

“Albus!” McGonagall snapped.

“No, Minerva. We have to ensure that Mr Lupin’s secret is kept.” The Headmaster replied evenly.

“And my … secret?” Severus asked, arching his brow, and looking at Dumbledore expectantly.

“How would I be able to relay my information to you if I was not here at the school?”

“Is that why you were leaving the school, Mr Snape?”
“No. I was leaving to get something in order to possibly prevent unneeded casualties.”

“Ah.” Dumbledore nodded.

There was another tense moment of silence.

“Headmaster … if you expel Snape, you’d have to do the same to us.” Sirius said cautiously, drawing surprise from everyone in the room. He shifted, slightly, then straightened and looked the headmaster in the eye with absolute certainty. “We have known for quite some time. And Snape … he’s a friend too. Remus’ friend as much as ours.”

James looked to Sirius as if he really shouldn’t have made it sound like he was included in such an open sounding statement. McGonagall looked proud.

“Admirable as that is, Mr Black. You were not the one sneaking around this evening.”

“If you expel Severus, then you’ll do the same for me, sir.” Hermione said, part of her brain screaming at her that she was a bloody, sentimental idiot. She firmly ignored the swot in her head and met the headmaster’s eyes. “That or I’ll just leave.”

“Miss Granger—”

“I am of age.” She cut off the headmaster. “I can rightfully leave this school now, apparate to London, go to the ministry, take my NEWTS and be done with it. Actually, at this point, so can Severus. But this is all, of course, on the assumption that he or any of us would advertise that there’s a werewolf just beyond the school, with nothing but malicious tree and a narrowed tunnel to prevent possible casualties.”

She was almost panting again by the time she was done. Her heart was pounding, and her stomach twisted and churned as she realized she tore into an authority figure. The Headmaster. Bloody hell, she was going to be expelled regardless.

Dumbledore, however, said nothing. He smiled, though it wasn’t an honest smile, and he bowed his head for a moment.

“I have been assuming, haven’t I, miss Granger? Although, given the history between the Gryffindor friends and Mr Snape, you might see why I would assume he would be quick to sully the reputation of one them. But my main concern, I suppose, at this point, is the reason for Mr Snape’s attempted excursion. What were you after?”

Severus looked the Headmaster in the eye. “Dittany.”

“And why did you need it?”

“I am attempting to find a cure or reverse for a spell I created. One, it seems, that no manner of known healing spells or potions work on. Essence of Dittany is the most effective, though not enough.”

“And you thought it would be better to apparate to an apothecary, sneaking out way beyond the school grounds, as opposed to, perhaps, borrowing from Professor Slughorn’s personal stores?”

“Horace has personal stores?” McGonagall asked, sounding surprised.

Dumbledore shot her a look that Hermione couldn’t decipher, then looked expectantly at Severus.
He straightened. “I wouldn’t steal, if that’s what you were implying. And as a matter of fact, I had
asked Professor Slughorn if there was a chance I could borrow ingredients from him shortly after my
pending apprenticeship became known to him. I was informed he didn’t keep anything in stock
beyond what was required to teach with.”

“I see.” Dumbledore nodded. He took another breath. “I will require yourself to partake in two
weeks’ worth of detention.” He said seriously.

“With me.” McGonagall interjected. When Dumbledore went to argue, she stood. “He was given
rights to leave this school.” She said.

“Yes, for a particular reason.”

“And considering what he was trying to do, I believe it relates. We know he has an assignment
pending, I think it admirable the boy has attempted to prepare for it. It is not his fault that the way he
chose to leave the castle, the way he figured was the best not to draw suspicion should he come
under scrutiny, was wrought with a danger he never suspected.”

“Fair enough, Minerva.” Dumbledore conceded, though it sounded as though he conceded
grudgingly. “As for Mr Black, Miss Granger, and Mr Potter, the three of you showed bravery and
courage, coming to the aid of Mr Snape. And for that, I award you thirty points each.”

Hermione inhaled sharply, fighting desperately to keep the anger off her face, though she felt her hair
begin to crackle again. James looked pleased, but Sirius seemed unsure.

“You may go.” Dumbledore said, waving them toward the door.

Hermione was up before any of them, marching to the door and throwing it open. She marched
down the stairs, part of her brain trying to reign herself in, see the reasoning behind the headmaster’s
actions. The rest was pretty certain he was being an arse, and really shouldn’t have so much bloody
power if he can’t see reason. Forget his biased against the Slytherins, his love for his own house was
too obvious.

“Hermione.” Severus said loud and even, and she paused on the stairs for him.

“Are you going to insult me and imply I’ve gone behind your back again? Who am I with this time?”

Severus paused, holding his hands up a moment in surrender before continuing on toward her. “You
have to understand,” he said evenly with just a slight bit of bite. “Just before I left for the shack, I
found Black in an alcove with a girl. I thought nothing of it until I was down at the shack.”

“Look in my head and see I’m telling the truth. You shouldn’t have to, but if that’s what’s needed
….”

“I won’t.” He said, shaking his head. “I’m putting a lot of trust in you that this isn’t what it seems.”

“Really? You’re putting a lot of trust into my telling the truth? So, what, the last three years have
meant nothing? I have known you longer than I had known the friends I had in my old life, Severus,
and better. I love you, and you want to make it sound like you’re giving me the benefit of the
doubt!”?

“Kitten, is there something that -”

“Legillimans!”
The second Sirius had turned to corner toward them, Severus spun around, wand in hand, and cast the spell.

Sirius, surprisingly, remained still and unblinking long enough for Severus to lower his wand and turn back to Hermione in utter shame.

“So, you don’t even trust me enough to look through my head?” She said, not even pausing to hear what excuses he could come up with. Turning abruptly, leaving the boys to themselves, she headed to Gryffindor tower, angry enough that tears leaked from her eyes.

———S———

“Shit.” Severus said head dropping and shoulders shagging. He hadn’t felt this guilty since he had gone through her head and ended up seeing too much.

He was a bit angry that she hadn’t warned him about the full moon but reasoned that she couldn’t say anything. It was, after all, likely she somehow knew Lupin in the future as well.

But what had made him most angry was just how uncertain everything seemed. He had his suspicions that the Black he spoke to wasn’t the real one, yet it was hard to be logical when you’re facing down death, and the people that rescued you were the ones that should have warned you in the first place.

“My apologies for rooting in your head.” He said absently to Black. “It’s rude, but I had to be sure.”

“Mate, what do you mean?” Black asked.

“Padfoot, he’s not your mate.” Potter hissed, but as Severus turned to Black, he noticed him raise a hand, bidding Potter to shut it for once.

“I spoke to you, just a ways down from the nearest exit to the willow, and you were with a girl.”

Potter beamed, looking smug and ready to pat Black on the back.

“And you saw the only girl I was with was Hermione.” Black said, making Potter’s grin turn overly pleased.

“Indeed. In the library, as she said, with that Hufflepuff floating nearby. Have anything to say on that?” Severus asked, arching his brow in amusement as Black actually blushed.

“He’s just a fan of our team.” Black retorted.

“I somehow doubt a Hufflepuff is a fan of another house’s team.” Severus countered. “But while that’s neither here nor there, the fact is you have someone in this school posing as you. Likely to get girls, though Merlin knows why.”

“Oh, piss off.” Black smirked before it morphed into a frown. “How is possible for someone to look like me? And who could it be?”

“That’s for you to figure out.” Severus sighed. “Right now, I need to find Hermione and apologize. Profusely. I hadn’t been my intention to … I just had to be sure it wasn’t you I encountered.”
“Right … how did you get in my head?” Black asked.

“Spy trick.” Severus evenly.

Before Black could ask any further, Potter stepped up to them. “This chat has been … anyway, we’re leaving. You want to try and sort shit out with Granger, be my guest. Though I think she’s just finally wised up and seen that you’re nothing more than a grease ball.”

“Oi, mate, ease up.” Black said before turning back to Severus. “Come along. I doubt Kitten would have gotten far, and with Pince shutting up the library a bit early there aren’t that many other places to look.”

Hermione sighed, judging from the disgusted way that Marlene had said ‘someone’ that she meant Sirius. She dragged herself off the bed, Marlene coming into the room as Hermione was leaving.

Standing sitting on one of the sofas, between Sirius and Lily, was Severus.

Hermione looked around the common room, surprised by the sight enough to see what other’s reactions might be. Frank and Alice were at another grouping of furniture, looking from Severus to her, the seventh and fifth years around them looking just as uncertain of the snake in the lion’s den.

Anyone else hanging around would have been too young to remember or even know of the former antagonism between the beloved marauders and Severus. That, or they didn’t realize there was a Slytherin eyeing the red and gold common room with something just one step behind repulsed.

Dropping her hand from the stone, she inched toward the trio on the couch slowly.

Severus caught her movement immediately, holding her eye during her journey.

Once she’d arrived, Lily and Sirius got up, crossing the room. Hermione’s eyes trailed after them, noting them heading toward James and Peter tucked off to the side.

Her attention was pulled from them by a familiar hand lightly grasping hers. She turned her attention toward Severus.

“I’m sorry.” He said quietly, as if it were a secret he was afraid the room would hear. “I believed you. I did, truly. It wasn’t that didn’t trust you enough to enter your mind, it’s that I had to be sure that Black hadn’t …. He was there, Hermione, so I had to be sure the Black I saw wasn’t him.”

Hermione wanted to be angry with him, in fact she still was, but not enough to carry on this foolishness.
“And the conclusion you came to?” She asked as she sat down beside him.

“Polyjuice, likely. Maybe a really well-designed glamour.” He shrugged. “I don’t think I will ever know, and I didn’t gather that Black had any idea who could have gotten a hair from him.”

She nodded slowly, looking at her hand clasped in his hand.

“Hermione, I truly am sorry.”

“I know.” She said quietly. “But if this is how you react -”

“I think the circumstances -”

“We’re spending a year or more apart.” She reminded. “And if you’re going to think the worst of me at the slightest provocation…”

“I swear to you, it was a one-time reaction.” He gently turned her head and held her eye as he said this, his promise glinting in his obsidian eyes. “You have to understand that I, for lack of better sense, am starting to have an amicable view of Black. To have him send me out there, or thinking that he had, it made me wonder if everything I had thought was a lie. But just for a moment.” He smirked then, boyishly so, and it made Hermione soften just a bit more toward him. “Admittedly seeing you so fired up that your hair was crackling was a bit reassuring, let alone a bit of a, umm.”

She laughed, blushing as he did. “Yes, well, I’m glad you find my temper attractive.”

“You know I do.”

She shifted a touch closer to him on the couch before remembering that they were in her common room. “You probably shouldn’t be here much longer.” She noted.

Severus’ smile remained in his eyes as he curled his lip in disgust. “You’re probably right. I’m becoming a bit sentimental. I’ll claim it as an effect of this ghastly decor.”

“Well, don’t feel you need to be here a moment long. You’re forgiven, though I’ll likely still be a bit miffed at you for a couple days.”

“It’s well deserved.” Severus nodded as he got to his feet. He nodded toward someone, and following his line of sight, she’d seen a smirking Sirius standing next to a smiling Lily, the two whispering about something. Hermione would try and find out what that was about later.

She walked Severus to the door, stepping outside with him, and letting the portrait swing shut.

“I’m still not any closer to finding a counter for the Sectumsempra. Had I not run out of dittany…”

“Severus, you’ll find a counter. I know you will.” Hermione said firmly, believing it.

“While I appreciate your confidence, it doesn’t help ease my mind.” He sighed, glancing up and down the halls. “I should go.”

“I suppose.” She nodded. “You’ll be alright?”

“As much as I can be.” He nodded. Then, slow and hesitant, giving her all the time in the world to back away, he leaned in to kiss her goodnight. “I’ll see you in the morning.” He said against her lips, giving her one last peck before heading back to the dungeons.

Hermione watched him go, and the further away he went, the more clouded her head became.
Someone was impersonating other people and had almost killed Severus in the process. She knew precisely who she wanted to pin the blame on, being the only marauder not accounted for, and someone who could easily use a hair of Sirius’ in a Polyjuice. She didn’t think Peter was that smart, but then again, she did brew Polyjuice when she was twelve, and he did seem to be the most competent of the four in potions. She also knew she couldn’t really suggest such a thing to the others, they’d never believe her even if her vow didn’t stop her. It was future knowledge that allowed her to know he was a rat in the figurative sense as much as the sometimes literal.

And then there was the fact that Severus had been so easily convinced, even for a moment, that she could hurt him like that. Perhaps it was paranoia. Their levels of intimacy had greatly dwindled in the last few months as Severus prepared for NEWTs as well as the looming and ever possible need to go to Voldemort when he was wanted. It hadn’t exactly led to the most amorous of feelings, and perhaps he was actually worried, deep down, that she would grow bored with him. Or out of love. She doubted either were possible.

With a heavy sigh, Hermione gave the fat lady the password and went back inside, vowing to rest for the evening and give thought to everything else in the light of day.

Chapter End Notes

I am so, so sorry it took so long to update this. Real life has changed drastically in a way that I thought would give me more time to write, and that turned out to be very not true.

My apologies, both for the wait and for how short this was compared to what I planned, but I didn't want to keep you all waiting.
“And he didn’t question it?” Aurora asked Draco as they sat out by the lake. He’d just returned from Easter Hols, though he had done so long before the rest of the school would.

Draco smirked sadly, head bowed, eyes on the long strand of grass he kept wrapping around his fingers. “Why would he. My lady is here, and how am I to woo her properly, assure myself that I would maintain her affections if I allow her to be near the Weasley twins all on her own? Of course, he didn’t believe Potter was gay. Weasel, on the other hand …. He laughed, you know. How funny it was that at least the ‘blood traitors’ didn’t have to worry about losing out on an heir because there were so many of them that one of them preferring the company of wizards wasn’t going to do them any harm.”

“He can’t possibly be that oblivious.” Aurora grumbled.

Draco scoffed. “I’m fairly certain he knows, but he raised me to know what my purpose was, and that was to carry on the Malfoy name. To keep it pure.”

Aurora bit her tongue on that one, not really feeling the need to point out that his father would have already known her blood was less than pure, even if Uncle Lu didn’t know what the extent of that was.

“He seems … scared.” Draco said quietly. “He kept touching his arm, pacing randomly. And he found a need to be in his study more than ever. Mother was also worried. She would put on a good show, of course, pretend that everything was fine. But she watched him with an expression of utter … fear.”

“Dad’s a bit different, too.” Aurora whispered. “Do you think that means … do you think it could mean….”

“I don’t know, Rory.” Draco said softly, and a rumble of familiar laughter caught their ears. Turning, Aurora noted Harry, Ron, Gin, and the twins all heading toward them, Ron blushing as red as his hair.

Harry had glanced back up, did a double take, and smiled wider for a moment before he seemed puzzled as to why.

“You saw that didn’t you?” Aurora asked quietly, refusing to look at Draco.

“I saw. It doesn’t mean anything except that he was happy to see me.”

She refrained from rolling her eyes as the others approached.

“What are you doing back so soon?” Harry asked when they were within speaking range.
“I was bored.” Draco replied. “And staying near Rory would look good in my father’s eyes.”

“Snape has to marry a ferret. I thought snakes ate rats?” Ron smirked, crossing his arms.

“Rory’s not a snake,” Fred said, smacking his brother upside the head.

“And Malfoy’s not a rat.” George added with a punctuating smack of his own.

“Why are you two standing up for him? He’s of a rival house, and his family hates ours.” Ron grumbled as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Just because our families have history doesn’t mean we have to carry it on.” Draco sneered. “And besides, you’re really the only Weasley I can’t tolerate.”

“Really?” George asked.

“What about Percy?” Fred suggested.

Draco snorted. “Pompous boot licker, to be sure. But at least he had a brain. And manners.”

The twins chortled, and Ginny smirked, none of the siblings coming to their brother’s defense.

“Wish ‘Mione were here.” Ron said as she shot a glare at shaking Harry. “At least she’d have defended me.”

“No, she wouldn’t.” Aurora said with certainty.

“How would you know? Barely knew her, you did.” Ron countered.

“I know her better than you think.” Aurora countered. “After all, she was one of the first people who were nice to me after I was sorted into Gryffindor.”

Ron had opened his mouth, likely to counter it, but then promptly shut it.

“Are you ready for the final task, Potter?” Draco asked Harry, cutting off the topic of conversation before it could possibly lead down a dangerous road.

“I’m not even sure what it is yet.” Harry replied. “They’ll tell us closer to when it is, likely so we’re not distracted from exams.”

“Yes, because that’s really going to help.” Ginny snorted. “After all, the closer to exams they wait to tell you, the more pressure you’d have. If they told you now, at least you’d have some time to practice.”

“Unless the practice took away from your studies.” Draco pointed out.

“Blimey, that sounds like something Hermione would say.” Harry smirked. “Guess you’re filling in for her on that front.”

Draco quirked his lip at that but said nothing.

After a pause, Ron asked, “are you two really in an arranged marriage?” Aurora turned and gaped at him, and the others must have done the same as he looked about the lot of them and shrugged. “You have to admit, it’s a bit old fashioned.”

“If they are, then I’m in a lot of trouble.” Fred said cheekily.
“I’d say have at her, but I’m sure Longbottom would try and fight you for her.” Draco replied.

“I’m sitting right here and can speak for myself, thank you.” Aurora rolled her gaze to Draco.

“Yes, Dear.” He quipped, making the others chuckle.

“So, you are?” Harry asked, sounding as though he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer.

Aurora watched the mirth fade from Draco’s face as he sat up straighter. “Unofficially.” He replied.

“I am expected to court her beginning …. Beginning next year. When Aurora turns fifteen. It’s been something discussed since our birth, though never put on paper.”

“So, if Aurora were to choose someone else?” Fred asked.

“Like Neville?” Ron suggested. “He seems to fancy you, despite how terrified of your Dad he is.”

“I think that would rightly depend on Uncle Severus.” Draco replied. “Speaking of, where is your father?”

“You will take care of them?” Severus asked Black as the man lounged comfortably on the sofa of his sitting room, glass of fire whiskey in hand.

Sirius met his eye and held it. “Upon my honor, not that that accounts for much these days. But you can be assured that, should the worse happen, I will protect Hermione, Rory, and Leo to the best of my ability.”

“You have done an exceptional job with Potter on your own.” Severus admitted reluctantly. “In the short time he’s had you as his official guardian over Petunia and her boorish husband, his attitude has improved. He actually asked me for something before his second task, something that just a year before he’d have likely stolen.”

Sirius smirked, a pleased little thing. “I appreciate that, coming from you, Severus. Given that Hermione is his godmother, and you a second godfather by extension, I had assumed you’d have wanted a say in things.”

“Hermione had, in a way, up until you came in, already looked after him. Here, when she was younger, and through Aurora. We don’t exactly live near Surrey, after all. It wasn’t coincidence that put Rory in school with him from the beginning.”

Sirius chuckled. “She never ceases to amaze me.”

“And that fondness in your voice is exactly what has Albus convinced you’re Aurora’s father, and not I.”

“Well, she’s a lovely girl. Far more beautiful than her mother, and with my dark hair….”

“Yes, but you’d be more willing to hump Lupin’s leg than hers.” Severus smirked, amused he could still make Sirius blush over it.

“Yes, well, that would require him to have stuck around, wouldn’t it?” Sirius said bitterly, and
Severus frowned before suddenly recalling something Hermione had mentioned ages ago.

“He left. When he asked her to leave me again, and she said no, he left, didn’t he?” Severus asked, sneering at the thought.

Sirius shrugged. “He said it was because he needed to do things on his own. To branch out. We’re both doing work for Dumbledore, keeping an ear out for things, but when we get home….”

“I am not my wife, I quite frankly don’t need to hear of your marital woes.”

“We aren’t married.”

“You may as well be.” Severus countered, glancing out the window, seeing his daughter, Draco, Potter, and the Weasleys out near the lake. “How is … Harry dealing with it? That his godfather would hardly be able to give him advice on girls.”

Sirius smiled. “Actually, he asked me about that not that long ago in a letter. Shortly after that article in the Prophet about his… preferences. I’m not quite sure Harry is the lady’s killer that his father would have hoped for.”

“Bloody wonderful. I just hope Dra-”

Severus cut himself off mid-sentence as he felt something in his left arm flare. For a fleeting, fearful moment, he swore he felt the pull of a demand, the burn of summons. Appearing as calm as possible, Severus opened the sleeves of his coat and shirt, pulling them back as if he were peeling a banana.

“Severus, what is it?” Sirius asked, but Severus held up his right hand for silence before going back this his arm and running his fingers over the mark.

“It had darkened further, looking exactly as it did just day before the Dark Lord fell. He skimmed his fingers over it, waiting for the burn to intensify as though he were ignoring a summons.

“Blimey, that thing is ugly.” Sirius said, more to himself than to Severus, though he heard it all the same.

“Yes,” Severus agreed before swiftly putting his sleeves and buttons back in place. “And getting uglier by the day, I’m afraid.” He turned to Sirius, looking him dead in the eye. “Dumbledore would not have told you, but there is little doubt the Dark Lord will be back. He’s rising up again.”

“Are you sure?” Sirius asked.

Severus nodded once. “The year Aurora first started at Hogwarts, the mark had begun to darken again. Not as bad as this, except for the night Potter went down to the chamber of secrets to rescue Ginevra Weasley.”

“He told me about that.” Sirius said softly. “Of how a teenage version of You-Know-Who was returning, or something. That it came from a book, or something, and he went away when Harry stabbed the book with a basilisk fang.” Sirius chuckled. “A bit farfetched, I admit, but….”

“Hardly.” Severus replied. “Once Potter returned home after that year was done, Albus and I went below. The door had stayed open, after all. No one thought to seal it, and since Ginevra was going down there under the influence of Riddle, she didn’t remember going at all. No one quite knew how to close it. We found the basilisk, dead of course, eye gouged out as Potter told Albus Fawkes had done. We obtained a couple of fangs, I may have plucked a hearty amount of scales. Much as Potter can be his own, biggest fan, or had been, he did not lie about the basilisk. And while I was never
permitted to see it, I don’t doubt for a moment that he was being honest about the book.”

“So… what does that mean?” Sirius asked, his pallor having taken on a paleness that hadn’t been since his departure from Azkaban.

“It means exactly what you think it does. So be prepared, Black, for the worst.”

June 24th, 1995

There had already been red sparks sent up earlier, and Fleur Delacour had been carried out, unconscious but alright. After they had her roused, she was in a bit of a panic, trying to explain in both French and English what happened while hysteria clouded her voice.

Aurora had turned to look at her mother and Sirius Black who were sitting with the other parents and teachers, her father having gone with aunt Poppy to try and calm Fleur. Her mother shook her head ever so slightly upon meeting Aurora’s eye, Black too focused on the maze to notice someone looking their way.

When a new set of sparks went up, the crowd grew tense once more, the eyes of all likely going to those patrolling the area to see who was being carried out.

“Come on, Potter.” Draco murmured under his breath.

There was a tense silence, then suddenly Ginny cried, “Viktor!” Barely a breath, and she was out of her seat, running out onto the field.

“I actually bet on him winning,” Fred said, more confused than disappointed.

“Something’s not right,” George said a beat later.

And it wasn’t. Aurora watched as her father and Aunt Poppy left Fleur’s side, both wearing frowns as Fleur began to his and screech in French. At one particular word, Madam Maxine, who’d been at her Champion’s side, and her father both tensed. Her father spun around sharply, and while his words could not be heard, the timber of his voice carried over the near silent crowd, only the musicians having attempted to fill the void with music that frequently quieted or tapered off altogether.

There was a brief conversation in which Fleur gestured to her face, and then to Krum, and Professor Snape did nothing but give quick responses. He then turned back to Krum, crossing the distance in a few brisk strides, and then forced the boy’s eyes open just as Ginny had pushed past those trying to keep her back to be at his side.

And inspection, and a quick wand movement, and Aurora watched as her father turned to Dumbledore with a quick nod and said something that could not be heard at all.
Karkaroff whipped his head toward Professor Snape just before a bright, blue light came from near the center of the maze.

“What the bloody hell was that?” Ron asked, turning to Aurora with the space between she and him vacant with Ginny’s absence.

“Part of the task?” Draco replied. “A sign that there was a winner?”

“I’d overheard Professor Flitwick say that the winner would be announced by fireworks,” Luna said, her normal, dreamy tone laced with dread. “The crest of the school, and in the case of two champions, red for Gryffindor or yellow for Hufflepuff.”

“So, what’s blue mean?” Fred asked.

“Trouble, I’d wager.” George said thoughtfully. “And not the good kind.”

“’Mione would know.” Ron said, shifting uncomfortably.

Aurora looked to where her mother was still sitting with Aunt Min, worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

“I’m not sure she would.” Aurora said quietly, turning back to the maze to scan it for any sign of anything.

For a long time, it was quiet. The musicians started to play again off and on, there was a small wave of chatter as Krum was carried to the hospital wing, Ginny following, Fleur being led behind them. The Aurora noticed her father grimace before clutching his arm. His left arm. Karkaroff did the same, starring at Professor Snape with utter fear. She couldn’t see the minute details of her father’s face, but Aurora could imagine it all: the lift of his brow, the cold glare, the curl to his lip as he attempted to hide his pain. Karkaroff turned and left the field quickly. Aurora watched her father turn to Dumbledore. After a short exchange, her father stiffened, then bowed, returning to where Hermione Snape sat and watched the exchange with an increasingly worried glance. He knelt before her, and Aurora wanted to burst into tears for the way her mother’s eyes widened, the visible way her breathing increased. She doubted anyone had seen, but her father kissed his wife quickly before dashing off.

“Where’s your dad goin’?” Ron asked.

“I’m not sure I want to know.” Aurora replied.

She felt Draco’s hand slip into hers and squeeze it in solidarity.

More time passed, longer and more indistinct, during which Neville came and slid into the empty spot between she and Ron. His arm went about her, and she leaned into his comfort. She tried not to look at her mother, quietly crying, Aunt Min with her arm wrapped around her and doing her best to soothe. Yet her eyes kept darting there, and the longer her father stayed gone, the longer her mother let her tears fall while looking completely unperturbed, the more Aurora feared the absolute worse.

Then there was another flash of light, a thud, and before the teachers could surround him, she could see Harry on the ground. One of his hands clutched a glowing cup, the other was holding tight to Cedric Diggory. The latter didn’t seem to be moving.

The former just kept screaming, “He’s back, he’s back. Voldemort is back.”
The odds were not in their favor. Severus had Hermione do the calculations, and so when his arm burned a short while after the strange light came from the maze, he was not surprised.

He met Karkaroff’s eye and knew in an instant the coward was going to run. He had ratted out so many of the Death Eaters publicly, Severus wasn’t as surprised as he thought he should be. Karkaroff had loved the muggle baiting, loved to remind anyone of lesser blood that they were just that: lesser. Yet the moment things would have been hard for him, he was willing to sell out everyone and anyone that he could to be free. Even his name had come up.

Severus turned to Dumbledore as Karkaroff took off.

“I’m being … summoned.” He said.

“And you already know how I feel about that.” Dumbledore replied.

“And you know, for the sake of my family, I am not holding off.”

“Then you will do as we planned.”

“Yes.”

“Good luck, Severus.”

Severus bowed, then turned toward to seats where his wife was watching worriedly. He moved swiftly toward her, knowing time was of the essence. But just in case … if it was the end….

He took in his wife as he stopped before her, kneeling down to be at eye level. He’d wished, in that moment, that she hadn’t used the charm to alter her identity slightly. He wanted to see her: her big curls, and hazel eyes, and the freckles by her nose. He wanted to see Hermione, not this slightly altered version. But there was no time for that.

“It’s happened.” He told her, ignoring Minerva’s questions.

“And you’re going.” It wasn’t a question. Hermione held his gaze, and gave a curt, short nod.

“Come back to me.”

“Tell the children I love them.” He said, leaning in and giving her a swift kiss. He then rose to his feet and swept out of the stadium. Once he was clear of it, he felt in his robes for the items he had shrunken and kept on his person since the calculations became conclusive.

In quick motions, he wandlessly and wordlessly enlarged his mask, placing the heavy, silver piece to his face. As he pulled out and enlarged his robes as he swung them around his shoulders, the movement all muscle memory from thirteen years ago. His wand was out, and he pressed it to his mark. No apparating inside Hogwarts, except for the Headmaster and his trusty Death Eater.

When he opened his eyes from his apparation, Severus was a bit surprised to find himself in a grave yard. It was a short-lived emotion before it was tucked firmly behind his occlumency shields, ones that had not lowered since he formed them as a teenager.

He moved toward the tall, disturbing looking man he had no doubt was Lord Voldemort as he was now. He looked humanoid, but that was really where his resemblance to his old self ended. Even in
And there, pinned to a statue of a reaper, was Potter. The boy was bleeding, struggling to get free even though it was utterly useless. The boy was a fighter, and that may actually help him survive this. If only Severus could have as much confidence in himself.

As if imperious, Severus followed to suite of his brethren, getting to his knees, crawling to the Dark Lord, kissing the hem of his robes. He felt no less disgusted by it now than he had all those years ago. He stood, taking his place in the circle, the spots on either side of him empty. He glanced around at the numbers that were there. It was … low, really, considering how many went free.

“Welcome, my Death Eaters.” The Dark Lord greeted them warmly, hands out as if extending the sentiment physically. It was a near laughable thought, but it was almost as if the reptilian like man wanted to embrace them. “Thirteen years …. Thirteen years since we met. Yet, you answer my call as though it were yesterday. We are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?”

More swiftly than in the past, the Dark Lord’s mood shifted from familial to hostile, his expression shifting from joy to anger so swiftly, Severus didn’t even have time to blink. The nostrils on Voldemort’s noseless face flared. “I smell guilt!” He hissed. “There is a stench of guilt upon the air.

Severus straightened his spine, refusing to show fear now.

“I see you all, whole and healthy with your powers intact - such prompt appearances - and I ask myself, why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of the master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?”

A sob caught Severus’ attention, and his eyes shifted to the heap of whimpering on the ground. His sneer was hidden by his mask, the instinct too strong for it to be smothered quickly. Fucking Wormtail, the sniveling little rat, clutched his bleeding stump of an arm while on his knees, head bowed.

“And then I ask myself, but how could they have believed I would not rise again? They, who knew the steps I took, long ago, to guard myself against mortal death? They, who had seen proofs of the immensity of my power in the times when I was mightier than any wizard living? And I answer myself, perhaps they believed a still greater power could exist, one that could vanquish even Lord Voldemort. Perhaps they now pay allegiance to another, perhaps that champion of commoners, of Mudbloods and Muggles, Albus Dumbledore?”

Severus felt the Dark Lord’s eyes dart to his, and in practiced ease, Severus allowed the Dark Lord to ram his way in, all while hiding the most damning of proof of his allegiances.

“Master, forgive me, forgive us all!” Avery threw himself on the ground, begging and trembling, pulling the Dark Lord’s attention away from Severus and on to him.

The Dark Lord laughed, as though truly amused, and then a beat later said with utter seriousness, “Crucio.”

Avery writhed on the ground, shrieking and clawing at himself. The screams turned silent, yet his mouth was still open, pain twisting Avery’s already ugly features Severus would guess the man was ten seconds away from pissing or shitting himself when the Dark Lord ended the spell.

“Get up, Avery.” He commanded softly. “Stand up. You ask for forgiveness? I do not forgive. I do not forget. Thirteen long years, I want thirteen years repayment before I forgive you. Wormtail here has paid some of his debt already, have you not, Wormtail?”
Pettigrew said nothing, only sobbed.

There was an exchange that Severus only half listened to as he scanned the rest of the scene. The Death Eaters were all either focused on the Dark Lord or had their eyes to the ground. The grass around Avery’s feet was damper than the rest, though he only trembled slightly in the after affects.

His eyes darted to Potter as he watched Wormtail and Voldemort. He’d stopped struggling, no longer drawing any attention to himself. Severus looked away, spotting the tri-wizard cup not ten feet from where Potter was pinned, and….

Cedric Diggory. The boy was clearly deceased, face still frozen in confusion. It was a shame, he liked Diggory. Well behaved, concise essays, respectful. The boy had potential, though not in potions.

“Lucius,” The Dark Lord drew Severus’ full attention. “My slippery friend.” The Dark Lord stopped before Lucius’ spot in the circle. “I am told that you have not renounced the old ways, though to the world you present a respectable face. You are still ready to take the lead in a spot of muggle-torture, yet you never tried to find me. Your exploits at the Quidditch World Cup were fun, I daresay, but might not your energies have been better directed toward finding and aiding your master?”

“My Lord, I was constantly on the alert.” Lucius said smoothly. “Had there been any sign from you, any whisper of your whereabouts, I would have been at your side immediately, nothing could have prevented me-”

“Yet you ran from my mark when a faithful Death Eater sent it into the sky last summer?” The Dark Lord interrupted with false casualness. “Yes, I know all about that, Lucius. You have disappointed me. I expect more faithful service in the future.”

“Of course, my Lord. Of course. You are merciful, thank you.” Lucius bowed, but the Dark Lord ignored it, moving on in the circle. He stopped at the two-person gap beside Lucius.

“The Lestranges should stand here.” The Dark Lord said with a sort of sadness, though Severus suspected it wasn’t really toward the Mister of the relationship. “But they are entombed in Azkaban. They were faithful. The went to prison rather than renounce me. When we break it open, the LeStranges will be honored beyond their dreams. The dementors will join us, they are our natural allies, we will recall the banished giants, I shall have devoted servants returned to me, and an army of creature whom all fear…..”

The dazed like speech left Voldemort seemingly unaware. Severus had to wonder if noticed the shift among the ultimate purists, the ones who truly believed in blood supremacy.

Snapping out of his revere, the Dark Lord continued his inspection. He said nothing to a few of them, and Severus had no idea if that boded well for them or not. The exchanges he had with those he did stop before were perfunctory, barely nothing more than pleasantries.

It was when the Dark Lord stood before Severus, the spaces around him vacant enough that it was as if he was separating himself from the others on purpose.

“And here we have five missing Death Eaters. Three are dead in my service, one too cowardly to return, he will pay. One who has remained among my most faithful servants, who had already re-entered my service.” The others in the circle shifted, though Severus refused to even flinch. He may have been sweating a bit about his temples and hairline, but he willed his heart not to pound as he gazed upon the face of absolute evil. “He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant. And it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived here tonight.” Voldemort said, gesturing to Potter behind him.
“And you… you my loyal spy.” The Dark Lord approached him in an almost snake like manner. His hand reached out, and Severus worried for one moment that the Dark Lord was going to unmask him. The snake-like face smirked, revealing his slightly pointed teeth. “I will not unmask you, not yet. You have done well, my friend, for keeping to your task. I know how much you did not wish to teach, how much you longed to become a master worthy of your title. Yet once I was thought gone, you continued. You came to me tonight for you thought that, with my return, you were no longer needed, did you not?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Severus replied, pitching his voice just a touch lower, hoping with the mask and the slight difference, Potter wouldn’t know it was him. Not like it mattered, he wasn’t so sure Potter was going to make it out of this one. And there was no way for him to get word to anyone where they were.

“Yet you watched over the old fool, put up with his mocking, his taunting. It would have been so easy for you to kill him, and yet you didn’t. Why?”

“I did not think it would be wise to do so, my Lord.” Severus replied. “Dumbledore still believes me loyal to him, that my wife and I are his, and not yours entirely, as we are. He has grown increasingly complacent, hiring the worst to fill his consistently vacated Dark Arts position.”

“Yet you helped him.” Voldemort said, his voice dangerously calm and quiet. “With the Philosopher’s stone. You helped hide it from me, and my faithful Quirrell.”

Severus hadn’t even opened his mouth to respond before the intense pain of Crucio came over him. His knees buckled, and he grit his teeth in an effort not to scream. He could feel the blood vessels in his eyes burst from the force, the bile rise in his throat that he forced to keep down. He would rather die than show weakness.

Then it stopped. And with a deep, lungful of air, Severus grit out, “I did not know, my Lord, that he was one of yours. He would not trust me, and so I could not tell him the secrets.”

“If you had known me there, Severus, would you have allowed him to aid me?”

Not a chance in Hades.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“And should the need arise tonight, once I have … dealt with our guest, will you return to the old goat’s side and continue your good work?”

*If it means seeing you done, once and for all.*

“It is my honor to serve you in any way I can, my lord.”

“Then return now. As much as I am sure it would please you to witness what is about to happen, it would be best if, for now, Dumbledore continues to think you his. That cannot happen if you are here.”

With a bow, and a mumbled, “yes, my Lord,” Severus stepped back from the circle. With one last glance at Potter, he twirled away in apparation, landing outside the gates at Hogwarts.

The effects of the Crucio, combined with the mode of transport, had him shoving his ask off his face and vomiting his meager meal just outside the gates of Hogwarts.

“Like it was yesterday,” he grumbled to himself before accioing his mask and shrinking it. Panting,
he removed his robes and shrunk those as well, preparing to give his first report of what may very well be the second Wizarding War.

———S———

By the time Severus had made it back to the Quidditch pitch, Potter had returned. He stayed in the shadows, watching the events unfold as best he could. But he was not at his best, the effects of the Crucio manifesting quicker than he’d ever remembered them to, and his head was pounding hard enough to make his vision blur. It was that that had allowed Potter and the Moody impostor to slip by unnoticed.

“Shit.” He hissed between his teeth, moving to Dumbledore just as the Headmaster stepped away from the grieving Diggorys.

The old man did a double take upon seeing him. “I had not expected your return.”

“Tonight, or ever?” Severus asked.

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure.” Dumbledore confessed, eyes darting to the stadium seats. Severus followed his gaze and caught that of Hermione’s. Relief and worried mingled in his wife’s eyes, and he offered her a weak quirk of a grin to allow her to know he was well enough.

He then turned to Dumbledore. “We have much to discuss.”

“I believe it can wait.” Dumbledore said as he started heading toward the school.

“Or it can be said on the way. It was Crouch Junior who is impersonating Moody.” Severus said with certainty, ignoring the pain in his legs to keep a quick, confident stride in time with the headmaster.

Dumbledore looked at him curiously, pausing in thought. “So, it wasn’t Crouch Sr Harry had seen in the forest after a slip up in his Polyjuice dosage. Can you be sure.”

“Crouch was once someone who stood beside me in the inner circle.” Severus said, noting Minerva and his wife catching up to them. “As did Karkaroff. The other three nearest to us had perished in the first war, prior to my incarceration. Crouch was thought to have died in Azkaban, yet the Dark Lord mentioned a coward who ran, and one who remained loyal. And who was here at Hogwarts.”

“Who is?” Minerva asked as she and Hermione came up to them.

“Trouble. Mrs Snape, I kindly ask that you assist the staff in getting the students back to their common rooms as quickly as you can. You can step in for Severus to fill in for Head of House. Ask Aurora or Septima to do so for Minerva.”

“Of course.” Hermione said with a quick, decisive nod, reaching briefly to stroke the back of Severus’ hand with her knuckles before returning to the stadium.

“Albus, what is going on?” Minerva asked once they started moving again.

“Moody is not our Alastor.” Severus replied when Dumbledore remained silent.

“Well I’d already known that, but who is he?” She asked.
After a pause, Severus turned to Minerva and mouthed, “A Death Eater.”

She didn’t ask any further questions after that.

“Mr Malfoy, if you could come out here and speak to me for a moment?” Hermione said once she’d had all the Slytherins inside their common room.

The wards which were keyed to Severus were conveniently keyed for her as well, his magic recognizing hers as an extension of some form. Still, she mumbled something under her breath to make it look like she was merely cautiously giving the password.

The lagging Draco stopped, and the smirk he gave her reminded her that this was actually the first time she’d seen him since he started Hogwarts. Waving him out into the corridor, she checked and noticed that none of the other students seemed to notice he was being held back. Good, they would probably think he either slipped away in the chaos, or simply managed to avoid them.

The door closed behind him, and she gave him a proper smile. “You’ve grown up so much since the last time I saw you.” She said, reaching out and adjusting the collar of his jacket.

“I could say the same for you, Granger.” His smirk hitched just a bit higher.

“That’s Aunt H to you, now, young man.” She mock-scolded before she turned serious. “They’ll likely bring Harry to the Hospital wing. I thought, perhaps, you’d like to go be there for him.”

Draco swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing as though trying to slide around something large. “I heard what Potter said. That … that he’s returned.”

“And you believe him?” She asked, and Draco nodded. “And why should this news hold you back?”

Draco looked at her incredulously. “Because I’m … and he’s … and if my father….”

“Listen to me, Draco Malfoy.” She said, putting her hands on his shoulders and looking him in the eye. She didn’t even need to bend her knees to do it, merely tilt her head down. When had he grown so much? Could he have really sprouted up like this in just four years? “Your father does not define who you are. His beliefs do not have to be yours. His actions do not dictate those that you will take. His side is not necessarily yours.” She brushed his hair from his face. “Your Uncle Severus is a prime example of how no man needs to become the one who fathered him.”

Draco swallowed again, his eyes beginning to glitter. “What if I don’t have a choice?”

“Of course you do. Anyone who says differently is wrong.” Hermione said firmly. “If you need to, you can spend the summer hols with us, as much as you can. It may not be the manor, and you may not have an entire suite of rooms for yourself, but you can be yourself there. And now that I don’t need to worry about your seeing me and, well, you can come around as much as you’d like.”

Draco bowed his head, his hair somewhat curtaining his face. “I want to see Harry.” He said quietly.

“Then I’m going to take you to him.” She said, withdrawing her wand from her sleeve and tapping
Draco on the head with it. The boy melted away before her eyes. “Follow me, stay close.” She said, leading him up to the hospital wing.

Just outside the door, Hermione tapped Draco’s head and ended the disillusionment. Once he was visible, she pushed open the door, taken aback to find Molly inside, Ron, Rory, and Luna around her. Ginny was beside Viktor Krum, holding his hand as he lay asleep on his hospital bed.

As Poppy came around from a private room, she stopped short. “Her-mi-H.” She stuttered. “What are you doing here?”

“I was asked to oversee Severus’ Slytherins. Draco wanted to come up and see Harry, though I take it he’s not here yet?”

“Not as of yet, but… ah, here they are now.”

Hermione turned and watched as Dumbledore led Harry in the hospital wing, Sirius helping to support him.

Her heart dropped in her stomach. She didn’t want to believe it when Severus said Sirius casually mentioned Remus’ departure from their home. But there was no doubt that the werewolf had left now that Harry had been through something terrible, and Remus hadn’t turned up for either him or Sirius.

“Harry!” Molly shrieked, half rushing toward him.

“Molly, not now.” Sirius said firmly, cutting him off.

“How can you say such a thing! The boy needs.”

“Rest,” Dumbledore cut in. “He’s been through quite enough tonight, and now he needs rest, and quiet.”

“What are you all doing here?” Harry asked as Sirius helped him in the bed. He sounded half drunk, exhaustion slurring his speech.

“Here to see you,” Rory replied. “Just to be here for you.”

“And you can all stay with him, if you promise to be quite.” Dumbledore said, and Hermione covered her smirk as he looked pointedly at Molly.

“Do you all hear that? Harry needs quiet.” She hissed to the kids as though they were the ones who were loud and prepared to make a fuss.

Poppy rolled her eyes, gave Harry a drop of a potion, and Harry quickly seemed to succumb to slumber.

With a heavy sigh, Dumbledore looked to her. “Mrs Snape, I’m sure you would like to get back to your son.”

“Leo is with my parents.” She replied. “He is safe and has yet to know his father … slipped away for a moment. To be honest, headmaster, I would prefer to stay here with my husband.”

It seemed like Ronald mumbled something, but Hermione couldn’t hear what, and if Molly’s hissing scolding was anything to go by, she didn’t want to know.

“Very well. But I will need to speak with him for a while. Perhaps you could wait in his chambers?”
“Do you need anything, Poppy?” She turned to the matron, half ignoring the Headmaster’s request.

“Actually, would you mind brewing some of Severus’ pain relief potion? You’re one of the few who know it, and given Alastor’s condition, he’ll likely need it.

“I’m going to go to his lab, then.” Hermione said pointedly, and the Matron’s eyes lit with recognition.

“Thank you, H.” She said with a nod, and Hermione left the room for the make shift lab Severus had as a teenager. If the children needed her, Rory and Draco would know where to find her. If Severus came looking for her, Poppy could direct him. With a last glance at Harry, surrounded by his friends and sound asleep, Hermione left them to brew.

—S—

Severus had had enough of the bumbling idiot. His head still ached, his muscles were cramping, he’d just had any joy he possibly could have had in him sucked out by the presence of a dementor, who had kissed the man one and only person who could give testimony that the recent string of murders were done in an effort to bring back to worst wizard to ever be born. Or reborn. Well, except that Rita Skeeter woman. She disappeared shortly after the article on Potter and Weasley came out.

But Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, seemed to have his head so far up his arse he couldn’t see the truth before him. Dumbledore out for his job? Oh yes, it was so coveted by Albus that he had to turn it down each time it was offered to him.

“He can’t be back,” Fudge whimpered. “He just can’t be.”

Not wanting this whimpering idiot to beat around the bush any longer, Severus stepped forward, unfastening his sleeves as he went. He glanced to the children hovered around Potter’s bed. So much for trying to keep it from him. He had a feeling Aurora had told them, if not Draco, but he couldn’t be sure. He supposed it didn’t matter now.

Barring the mark, he shoved it in Fudge’s face, making it impossible for the man not to see it.

“The Dark Mark. Not as clear as it was an hour or so ago. Then it had burned as black as it had freshly seared into the flesh, but you can still see it. Every Death Eater had the sign burned into them by the Dark Lord. It was a means of distinguishing one another, and his means of summoning us. When he touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to apparate to his side in an instant. This Mark has been growing steady all year, as did Karkaroff’s. You may have noticed he fled shortly after that flash of light in the maze? He fears the Dark Lord’s vengeance, as he betrayed too many of his fellow Death Eaters to be sure of a welcome back into the fold.”

Fudge stepped back from him, disgust and fear written all over the pompous imbecile’s face. He stared at the mark for a long time before turning to Dumbledore.

“I don’t know what you and your staff are playing at, Dumbledore, but I have heard enough. I have no more to add. I will be in touch with you tomorrow to discuss the running of this school. I must return to the ministry.” He was nearly out the door before he turned around. As an afterthought, he gave Potter his winnings for the tournament, talking about a ceremony to the boy as if he could somehow guilt Potter into saying it was all a lie.
When it got nothing out of him, Fudge sighed, and left the hospital wing just as Hermione came in with a basket of potions.

“There is work to be done.” Dumbledore said once the door was closed behind Hermione. She came to Severus’ side as Albus continued. “Molly, am I right in thinking that I can count on you and Arthur in this once more?”

“Of course, you can.” Molly replied, pale but sure. “We know what Fudge is. It’s Arthur’s fondness for Muggles that has held him back at the Ministry all these years.”

“Then I need to send a message to Arthur.” Albus said. “All those that we can persuade of the truth must be notified immediately, and he is well placed to contact those at the Ministry who are not as shortsighted as Cornelius.”

“I’ll go to Dad.” The eldest Weasley child, who had been standing so quietly at his mother’s side, that Severus nearly forgotten he was there, headed for the door.

“Excellent,” Dumbledore said, catching him on the way by. “Tell him what has happened. Tell him I will be in direct contact with him shortly. He will need to be discreet, however. If Fudge thinks I’m interfering at the Ministry….”

“Leave it to me.” He said with a deceive nod, leaving the room.

“Minerva,” Albus said to his deputy. “I want to see Hagrid in my office as soon as possible. And Madam Maxine, if she will consent.”

She nodded, looking to he and Hermione with a nod for them as well before leaving.

“Poppy, would you….”

“No.” She said sharply. “I want in this time, Albus. I know precisely what you’re going to try and do, and this time I want to be a part of it. I will not be made to delay patching up Severus upon his return as I had before.”

“Fine.” Albus said, his serene smile seemingly anything but. “I will consider you a member, but I kindly ask you go down to Moody’s office and find the house elf named Winky. Bring her to the kitchens, as I’m sure Dobby will take care of her.”

Poppy nodded, leaving the room at a much slower pace than either Bill or Minerva had.

Severus watched as Albus eyed the children, his eyes lingering longer on Draco than they had on any of the others. “I must ask, all of you, to kindly leave the room.”

“No.” Severus found himself saying in time with Sirius. They looked at one another, and seeing as how Sirius was Potter’s guardian, he allowed him to speak. “Dumbledore, with all due respect, anything that must be said among us should be done in your office. Let’s not send the kids away.”

Dumbledore seemed torn, and then sighed. “I was going to ask you to gather the old crowd. I trust you are in contact with Remus?”

Sirius shifted, “He had been staying with me, and I’m sure he would come back when he hears what happened. Who else…?”

“Mundungus Fletcher and Arabella Figg are our priorities.” Albus replied.
Sirius nodded, and then clapped his hand on Harry’s shoulder. “If I am not back before school lets out, got to the Weasley’s or the Sn-

“No,” Severus cut him off. “We are not an option for Potter.” He said firmly, and he could tell by the looks the Weasleys were giving him that he sounded a bit cold.


“It had never been your strong suit.” Severus retorted.

“Quite right,” Sirius replied with a devilish smirk. He turned back to Harry. “To the Weasleys, then. And when I’m back, you can come right home.”

“Thanks, Sirius.” The boy replied. Sirius nodded, leaning in and embracing him. There was a whispered conversation, in which Potter nodded or shook his head before suddenly bursting into tears. He sobbed against his godfather, mumbling about it being his fault. Severus watched as Aurora grabbed Potter’s hand as it fell limply from Sirius’ back. He noted Draco clasp Potter’s shoulder as Sirius pulled away.

“You being honorable, by wanting to share the win, is not what killed him, Harry. You could never have known. It was Wormtail, and Crouch. Not you. No, listen.” Sirius said, cupping the boy’s face as he tried to deny it. “Harry, it’s a long road from here, and I know that as the Chosen One, you are the face of the light. But your shoulders will not carry the weight of loss. You are not responsible for those who fall or have fallen. It’s Voldemort.” Sirius said, flinching slightly as Severus hissed. “He is to blame. Not you.”

Potter nodded, face puffy and blotched red from grief. Molly went to him, handing him a dose of potion.

“Take your potion, Harry.” She encouraged, half helping him guide the vial to his lips. He took it without question, and Severus watched as his eyes fell shut nearly instantly.

“Sirius?” Albus said. With a nod, Sirius turned and left the room. Once he was gone, Albus turned to the children. “Now that Harry is asleep, he will remain so for the duration of the night. Please, return to your common rooms. You can come see him bright and early in the morning.”

All of them seemed hesitant, but one by one, the children, including the silent and out of the way Ginevra Weasley, left the room.

“Molly, could you please stay here with Harry since Sirius will not be back before he wakes?”

“Of course, Albus.” Molly said, straightening up as if she were planning to stand guard against a foe.

Albus nodded. “I will be in my office, should anyone need me. There is much to think on.” And with that, Albus left the room.

“Could you give these to Poppy for me.” Hermione said, handing the basket of potions to Molly.

“Of course.” Molly said, watching as Hermione plucked on of the vials from the basket and tucked it into her robes.

She then returned to him, taking his arm and guided him out of the hospital wing. He allowed her to lead, too tired and too sore to put up a fuss.

Once they were in his chambers, she led him toward their bedroom, and into the master bath.
“My Slytherins, has anyone…?”

“I was in charge of returning them to their dormitories, and the prefects were instructed to go to Rolanda if there was any problem, since I am not staff. I was actually the one who brought Draco to see Harry.” She replied as she began to work on his buttons.

“And you brewed for the wing, I noticed.” He commented as she removed his frock coat and robes.

She started on his shirt. “Yes.” She replied, and once she had the garment removed, she waved her hand toward the bath, setting it to fill. “And you.” She said, meeting his eye as she began to work on his trousers. “You were tortured tonight, weren’t you?” she asked quietly, seeming to already know the answer. He nodded, and she ducked her head. “I can feel the spasms of your muscles.” She said softly. “Light flutters that were always a sign that you’d been punished. What displeased him? Surely the fact that you showed up right away….”

“Back when Albus had the brilliant idea of keeping the Philosopher’s stone here at the castle, the Dark Lord was piggy backing on Quirrell. Do you remember that?”

“Vaguely,” Hermione replied, stripping him of his trousers and pants all in one go.

“The Dark Lord knew I was not aiding Quirrell, that I was trying to stop him. He needed to be certain I was not Dumbledore’s.” He explained, and Hermione did nothing more than nod. “You aren’t planning on having me bathe alone, are you? It seems like so much work for you not to join me.”

Hermione snickered. “Fine. But you get in first.” She said, gesturing to the steaming bath. Severus knew better than to argue and climbed into the tub big enough for two. Hermione went to the cabinet over the loo, opening the door and pulling out a vial he hadn’t seen in a long time. He watched as she uncorked the green, sludge like liquid and poured it on under the running water.

Instantly, the smell of strong spearmint filled the room, a note of lavender shortly behind it. Severus already started to feel the tension leave his body, and he watched as Hermione slowly undressed. He knew she was allowing the medicinal properties of the potion work its way into him before she came in and dampered some of the effect. Once she had her robes removed, she reached into the pocket she stored the pain relief potion in and pulled it out. Uncorking it, she handed to him.

He quaffed it in one go, closing his eyes as he waited for the rest of his pain to dull. He felt her curls brush his shoulder before her lips pressed to his forehead. Then the bridge of his nose, then the tip. Both cheeks, his chin, and then finally his lips.

He opened his eyes when she pulled back, and he was pleased to see his wife as she should look, with her curls and freckles and hazel eyes. She removed the remainder of her clothing, and then climbed in the tub with him, sinking down into the water with her back pressed to his chest. His arms came around her, and it all felt so familiar that Severus searched his memory for why that was.

It wasn’t that they hadn’t bathed together in the intervening years. Parents though they may be, there was still the need for physical intimacy even if it couldn’t lead to sex.

But then, Severus realized, that they had done this, exactly this before. Oh, so many years ago after he’d accidentally pissed off the Dark Lord. He couldn’t remember the exact reason why he had, it could have been as complex as not participating to his liking in a revel, or as simple as not having anything for him. Aurora had only been a few months old, and the real fear that something could happen to him, or Hermione, or both of them had him cold with fear.
And Hermione had done this. She eased his spasms and pain with a hot, potion laced bath. She’d kissed him in precisely that same way, and then climbed in with him. She was over tired from having a new child and a new job, and her two main sources of support were inaccessible to her. And yet she had put aside her fatigue, her own pain, and tended to him. It was not the first time Severus had felt wholly undeserving of her, but it was one of the times that had truly stuck.

“If something were to happen….” He said, his voice tight, tired, but resolved.

“Same as before.” Hermione said quietly, her hand stroking his thigh. “Should I be discovered, you plead ignorance, disgust.”

“Aurora and Leonidas will be sent to stay with Minerva, or I send them to Ireland with Delia.”

“And if you’re discovered,” Hermione said, her voice cracking slightly, “I take the children and run to the Americas, Order be damned.”

“No, not this time.” Severus said, stroking her back. “Potter will need your influence, even if it is through Aurora. This time, if I am discovered, stay with Sirius. Grimmauld Place will be safe for you all.”

“Alright,” She said softly, her hand moving leisurely across his skin. After a moment, she asked, “Since when did he become ‘Sirius?’”

He looked at his wife, seeing the amused glint in her eye and the slight curl to his lip.

“Since I knew for certain he had more interest in me than my wife.” Her replied, making her chuckle.

“Something you want to tell me?” She teased.

“Don’t. Start.” He replied, his words clipped. Hermione giggled for a moment, making him give a half smile, but the joy didn’t last.

“It’s going to be very different this time. I won’t know… and there’s so much more at stack.”

He kissed her head, nuzzling her curls. “And so, there is more to fight for. Which will only make us more fierce.”

June 28th, 1995

Her back to the tree by the lake, Aurora looked out over the water, contemplating. Her father had spoken to her, much like he had the year before when she discovered the truth about his mark. About why he took it. He had told her his job as a spy was starting up again, and that things would get … trickier.

She was already too entrenched with Harry to suddenly pull back.
“I’m going to tell the Dark Lord I allow the friendship as it allows me to know more about Potter. But unless the other children of Death Eaters that are still at school somehow find themselves in contact with their parents, I don’t foresee there being an issue. However, … it may come down to one of us renouncing the other.”

His words stuck with her, and over the last couple days they repeated in her mind whenever she was with Harry in the hospital wing.

She never said anything to him, none of them had. They’d all simply been there in quiet support. Now that he and the other champions were released, the leaving feast not long off, they’d all taken shifts in staying with him, and helping to act as a buffer from the rest of the school.

Oh, sure, Dumbledore told everyone what happened, to not bother Harry with it or ask for stories, but she, the Weasleys, Draco, and Luna all knew it was likely only their constant presence that had everyone keeping their distance.

Well, perhaps not so much Draco since Harry left the hospital wing. She’d seen him at the Slytherin table, eyes seeming to be staring off at the distance while eager whispers made their way through many of the purebloods. She hadn’t seen him around with them aside from meals, and while she could venture down to the dungeons, she chose not to. Harry needed space, and so did Draco. Perhaps she had needed a bit of it as well.

And now she was getting it. Luna was with Harry and Ron visiting Hagrid, Draco hiding, Ginny spending as much time with Viktor as she could before he returned to Bulgaria. She thought she would take this time to think of what she would do if it came down to a choice between the light or the dark, but she found it wasn’t so simple.

“Do you mind if I sit with you?” Neville startled her, and she managed to give him a slight smile before patting the ground. He sat slowly, his limbs awkward before he finally managed to get on the ground beside her. He smiled shyly. “I’m sorry I’ve been avoiding you.”

“You have been?” She replied, confused by the confession. “I hadn’t realized providing comfort during an unsettling situation was a form of avoidance.”

Neville blushed. “Before that.” He said, moving his hand about. “I… after you told us … about your dad? I… you know what happened to my parents. And who did it to them. Well, after you told me… well, all of us, about your Dad. Well, I just didn’t know if I should … if we should be ….”

“You didn’t know if we could be friends.” She filled in the blank.

Neville kept his eyes firmly on the ground, his face reddening as he nodded.

“I know what you said. And when you hear how your father was in comparison to Draco Malfoy’s? But then I always wondered, in the back of my mind, if your Dad was part of the one who did that to my parents. But then, well, my Gran told me the names once. Said that they were all in Azkaban or died while in there. But they weren’t. Harry told me who Moody really was. I trusted him, and he was one of the people who helped destroy my parents. And … I didn’t trust your Dad, but Harry said he was the one who helped the most. That he gave Harry a potion for the pain, healed his arm wound.” Neville looked up and around before leaning in and whispering, “He asked Harry if he was alright, and if there was anything he wanted to know. But Dumbledore… he said Dumbledore sent your dad from the room before he could say anything.”

Aurora frowned. “The Headmaster didn’t want Harry to know anything.”
Neville shook his head. “But anyway. That’s why I was avoiding you. And I know I shouldn’t have, it was bad of me. I mean, Draco is nice enough, despite who his dad is. But even him…”

“Neville, I get it.” Aurora said, putting a hand on his knee. “We’re still friends, I promise.”

He seemed relieved, and thankful stopped trying to explain himself.

Aurora turned back out toward the lake, watching as the Giant Squid came up and broke the surface.

“So, about that article.” Neville said after clearing his throat. “Do you think Ron and Harry would be a good couple? ‘Cause Dean and Seamus each think that they could be, one day.”

Aurora laughed, resting her head on Neville shoulder, the tension of the last couple days ebbing a bit. “Ron wishes.”

**July 3rd, 1995**

As the train pulled away from the Hogsmeade station, no one inside the car spoke. They’d said their goodbyes to their new, foreign friends. Ginny a bit more tearful as her first love departed for his homeland and his career as a Quidditch star, but no one was happy to see them go. Dumbledore had spoken of the need for unity, how the tournament helped create and cement bonds that would be needed during the dark times ahead. Aurora couldn’t help but not the convenience of it all with a suspicious mind.

But she would leave that thought unsaid for the moment.

“Everything’s going to be different now, isn’t it?” Ginny noted, the first to speak out of the seven of them all crammed in the car.

“Yes,” Harry said seriously. “I think it’s going to get worse.”

“It may not be as bad as you think,” Luna said, looking around Ginny to Harry. “You Know Who may be back, but you aren’t alone. You have your Godfather, and Professor Lupin. You have the Weasleys, and you have us.”

“Does he though?” Ron asked, looking at Draco where he sat beside Aurora.

Draco raised his head from its bowed position, his hands clasped between his knees. He didn’t straighten his posture at first, merely looked at Ron and said, “he does.” When Ron looked skeptical, that was when Draco straightened, looking down his nose at Ron as best he could while being at eye level. “I have a choice, don’t I? I could continue the charade, pretend to loathe Potter and mock him. Act like a prat. Or I could, effectively, renounce my father.” While Ron didn’t look convinced, Harry seemed hopeful. “A wise woman told me that my father’s actions and beliefs do not dictate my own, and I know for a fact she’s a hell of a lot smarter than most. I was told growing up that muggles and muggleborns were inferior. That even half-bloods weren’t as superior. Potter’s a halfblood and he can kick Weasley and Longbottom’s arses in most things.” Draco said, getting an indignant scoff from Ron and an amused chuckle from the rest.
“And Hermione was better and smarter than all of us.” Harry added.

“Speak for yourself, Potter.” Draco smirked. He then cleared his throat. “I told you back when we first met that you didn’t want to go making friends with the wrong sort of wizards.” He glanced to Ron. “That some wizarding families were better than others. Seems I needed to take my own advice.” He offered his hand. “No more hiding. I’m on your side, out in the open. If you’ll have me.”

Aurora watched as Harry smiled, reached across the gap, and shook Malfoy’s hand.

“Bloody hell, I must be dreaming. No way this is really happening.” Ron said, watching with his eyes wide as Harry and Draco finished their handshake.

“Sod off, Ron.” Ginny said. “Been friends for a while now, the lot of us. You’re the only one not letting it go.”

“Yeah, but,” he looked to Draco. “The Slytherins will skin you alive, mate. Supporting Harry Potter and being in the same house as You-Know-Who?”

“Snape did it.” Harry said. “He was on the side of the light while in Slytherin.”

“How can you be sure, though?” Ron asked. “You said he agreed to do what Voldemort said.”

“Yeah, but that’s his job. He was there in the hospital wing with his wife, that first night. I don’t think they knew I was awake, but I heard him talking. He wants to figure out a way to train me better, to prepare me. He said some other things, specific things, but I couldn’t hear what. She offered to teach DADA next year, but he didn’t want her to. Something about your brother?” Harry glanced to her, and Aurora nodded.

“Leo wouldn’t start Hogwarts for another year. He’s only 10 now.”

“Point is, Snape wouldn’t want to do that if he wanted the light to lose. He wouldn’t stand by and make sure no one came to harm me.”

“Why was his wife there?” Ginny asked.

Aurora stiffened, and she felt Draco tense beside her.

“She cares about Harry, too.” Luna said. And when everyone not in the know looked at her as if she were mad, she shrugged. “Harry’s parents and Godfather were friends with Professor Snape and his wife in school. I can’t imagine not caring about the child of your friend, especially when your friends are no longer around to care for him themselves.”

The cart went silent for a beat, then Ron said. “Blimey, so Snape really doesn’t hate you.”

“Well he’s not fond of you.” Draco said. “But you’re growing on him, I think.”

“Like I grew on you?” Harry replied with a smirk.

Draco coughed, “Not quite.”

Before anything more could be said, the twins slid open the door. “Ooo, full car, Forge.”

“I see that, Gred. Anyone up for some exploding snap?”

“You guys always cheat.” Aurora noted.
“Maybe, but you have a Slytherin in here.” George pointed out.

“And a Ravenclaw,” Fred noted with a wink at Luna.

“Maybe this time,”

“We’ll be out sneaked.”

“Or Smarted.”

“So whaddya say?” They said together.

“I’m game.” Draco said with intrigue.

“Me too,” Said Harry.

And for the rest of the journey, the atmosphere was more relaxed, and jovial. And even if the reprieve was short, Aurora couldn’t imagine any of them being worse for it.

Chapter End Notes

An extra long chapter because it was later being posted than I would have liked.
Canon? What's canon? It's just a guideline, right?
Minerva hadn’t questioned him when he said he had to skip out on detention. It was considered times served, and while it the grand scheme of things it was small, it meant something. One less thing he had to worry about. One less night he would have to spend away from Hermione.

As he walked through the tunnel to the Shrieking shack, blessedly free of Lupin, he thought of the dwindling time away from him. From them.

In a perfect world, the one that Severus had been sure was actually coming to fruition before November, he and Hermione would still have seventh year. They may have come up with a plan together, perhaps even decided to go to the states, claim she was returning to where she spent her younger years. He would get his mastery there, and Hermione could try and narrow down what she wanted to do. In that perfect, untainted world, he would have simply told Lucius that he was unable to attend his parties. He would never have met the Dark Lord, and he wouldn’t have been pressed into the hold as he had been. He’d have kept to himself, kept his head down, and gotten out without having fallen in with the Death Eaters.

Perhaps he could have found out about Lupin through a conversation, instead of a face to face with his other side. Perhaps he Black could have a more open … whatever it was they had. Lily and he could be the way they had been. Well, maybe that was a stretch. Her jealous streak had driven a wedge in their friendship, and while she was certainly having no problem making her way through the Ravenclaws and Hufflepuffs, she still seemed a bit miffed that he stopped pinning after her. So, Lily and he would likely have never made it to the end of Hogwarts as close as they had started it, they were too different, but maybe they would have been on better terms.

But it didn’t matter, now. Because there was no such thing as a perfect life, especially not for him. It was never in the cards for Severus Snape to have that sort of bliss.

And so, he put on the mask that he had been given, drawing the hood of his traveling cloak over his head, and focused on the place he was asked to go to. The picture was of a wooded area, a distinct rectangular, almost alter like rock, and just off to the right of it was a dead tree. It was an oddly distinct place, making it easy to focus on it. He could feel the slight breeze in his mind that was captured in the moving photo, smell the earth and the leaves from the trees that had fallen to the ground. One moment, he was in the shack, ignoring the fear that crept into his chest, and the next he was feeling the cool air of the night on the skin, and the fear in his chest made a home.

There were a couple of other pops of apparition around him before he opened his eyes and took in his surroundings.

His stomach dropped while it seemed his dinner launched into his throat and stayed there.
There were other masked men, some much bigger than him, older than him. There were also many who were likely only a couple years out of Hogwarts. He could probably even figure out who they were the moment they spoke. He hadn’t remembered there being quite so many the last time he was made to kill his father. But then again, he hadn’t paid much attention to the audience.

The Dark Lord was at the rock, and there was a man tied to it. He was bare chested, breathing heavy, likely from fighting the pain of having a rune carved into him.

Severus noted the others moving closer, slowly surrounding the Dark Lord. They all crouched on bended knee, and Severus followed suit, bowing his head while his eyes darted around, trying to make sense.


Severus only moved when he saw the others do so, not wanting to fail some sort of test if he wasn’t meant to.

“You may wonder why I have called you all here this evening. It is simple, really. This man, this … pretender … has put two of our dear friends in Azkaban. For what reason, you may ask? They were cleansing our world.”

“Toujours pur.” A few closest to Severus murmured, but he did not hear anyone else say it. And with the masks covering their faces, it was impossible to tell if everyone said it. He looked to the man on the alter, noting that he was scowling, ignoring the sweat dripping down his face and into his ears. Severus had only realized that the only movement the man made was with breathing.

“They were riding our world of the Mudbloods that dare join us. Of their families who manage to taint our world. They were trying to understand how they came to be, how the filthy muggles manage to tap into the power they do not deserve and birth children of magic. But this man put a stop to it. This man who posed as someone loyal to me!”

The Dark Lords hand slashed through the air, and a fresh gash appeared on the man’s chest.

“This is what happens to those who betray this family. This, is what happens when someone sides with those of bad blood! Crucio!”

Severus flinched inside, his body still as stone as his mind reeled while watching the man on the stone twitch and thrash under the unforgivable curse.

His blood ran cold when he watched as those nearest the altar stepped forward once the Dark Lord had ended the spell. One by one, each of the other Death Eaters tortured the man before them. Could he torture a man he didn’t know? Could he torture anyone for the sake of it? Well, if he didn’t, he imagined he’d be killed. Probably as slowly as this poor soul. But you had to mean an unforgivable. He wasn’t….

“How Severus,” the Dark Lord said, beckoning him forward. “Have you ever cast the Crucifcius?”

“No… my lord.” He confessed, hearing a chuckle from the rest of the Death Eaters. The tone of it reminded him of the older men his father always hung around with. Those that weren’t quite as bad of a drunk as Tobias was always had that laugh when ever Severus would say something they deemed amusing. That he would get the hell out of Cokeworth, that he would never become a mill worker, that he was not going to be what everyone said he would be, they all had that condescension that he loathed. And he showed them, sort of. As far as anyone was concerned, Toby’s boy was shipped off to boarding school. A scholarship, they were all told, because he was too damn smart. It
had him punched in the face a few times by those deadbeat’s kids, but he showed them.

He channeled that rage now, not having even realized the Dark Lord was encouraging him with whispers in his ear. Severus wanted to show those in the circle that he was powerful, that he was more than his age, that if they laughed at him with that same, ugly condescension he could hurt them. He was better than they were. He didn’t believe in their shit, regardless what language they chanted it in. He didn’t think any of them were superior to himself or his muggleborn love, and he would show them.

“Crucio.” He said in an eerily calm voice, pointing his wand at the man with an expressionless face that he was sure would make them all believe he was quite bored with the lot of them.

And the man, the poor man, twitched and thrashed as though he were electrocuted. Was it the strongest Crucio cast? No, there was the woman who had a much better unforgivable, and perhaps a couple others. But his was powerful, and the only sound that met Severus’ ears were the gurgled cries, and the thud of a body repeatedly hitting stone.

Severus ended the spell and returned to his place in the circle, shaking and screaming inside while he merely let out a heavy sigh externally.

“You have all expressed your displeasure, and I am pleased to see it was not found wanting.” The Dark Lord announced. “And now, now I will show my greatest displeasure! Avada Kadavera.”

With a flash of green, the man on the stone stopped moving. He remained frozen with a grimace, eyes lifeless, the lids more open than they had been in life, but Severus could still note that he had died in pain and pissed off.

Voldemort shook his head at the man, as if instead of having just killed him, they had had a heart to heart in which the Dark Lord had expressed his deepest disappointment in him. With a lazy flick of his wand, the Dark Lord lit corpse on the stone on fire.

“We are family,” he said solemnly. “And family does not betray one another. They stand together, they stand strong. And we will stand strong together, in one belief, and I will be like your father. Leading you. Guiding you. Teaching you to be stronger. I will be like an elder brother, looking after your well-being, ensuring you reach your greatest potential.” Then his face shifted from something benign to a horrid, nasty display. “But if you turn your back on me, I will disown you. I will make you less than nothing. I will ensure that you suffer the worst and will wish for death before it is granted. He is dead! But when we find where his family are, we will make them suffer as he did.”

Severus said nothing, but followed along with the other Death Eaters, raising a fist in the air in a solidarity he did not feel. Their proclamations, their shouts of agreement, would have drowned out any that he had made regardless, and his mask kept him hiding should his figurative mask fall.

His eyes darted to the pile of ash on the stone. That would be him if he slipped even slightly. Should Hermione’s true blood status be discovered, should his own duplicity at the pressure of Dumbledore come to light, that will be what remained of his body. Nothing left to find, a mystery to those who survived him.

“Come forward, Severus.” The Dark Lord called.

No! No, no, no, I don ’t want this. I don’t want this life. I don’t, I don’t.

But it was all too late, wasn’t it? He had had no choice, had been played right into this position. He was pressured to the point that there was no escape. He had to move forward, ever forward. If he
didn’t, he could be like the wizard on the alter: nothing but ash and a family under threat. Hermione under threat.

“Severus.” He said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You have the wealth at your fingers, and a list of masters near begging to take you on. You have a pureblood lady who wants nothing more than to be on your arm. There is nothing that I can give you that most of my loyal friends want to ask of me. I know you pledge your loyalty to me, join me in my cause and help elevate the power of the Death Eaters. But what is it you want from me in return?”

Before Severus could blink, the Dark Lord grabbed his chin and tore through his mind.

Just after the mundane, day to day that Severus had practiced keeping on the surface, a half-true, altered memory of his conversation with the Headmaster after his return from the manor in December was pulled up.

“Miss Granger will be in good hands when you’ve gone. I noticed Mr Lupin seems to be fond of her.”

“She’s planning on taking her N.E.W.T.S. with me.”

“She can plan how she wishes, but unfortunately she would need all of her Professors as well as her Headmaster to sign off. And I can’t let her out into the Wizarding World before it is absolutely necessary.”

The tint of murderous rage that had been Severus’ near constant companion at the thought of the Headmaster colored his memory vividly. There was no Moody in the memory, just a boy in his Uniform, talking to the headmaster about the fate of his girlfriend. Of why she was declined her ability to do her testing. But that hatred, the utter loathing Severus felt for the twinkling old geezer was plain as day. And sadly, very real.

Voldemort ripped himself from Severus’ mind with absolute glee. “We two are much alike.” He said with a toothy grin. “Dumbledore frequently stuck his nose in where it didn’t belong while I was his student as well. Will you join me, Severus, if by doing so I can offer you a spot at my side, and assistance in the torture and killing of Dumbledore?”

Whether it was the nature of his occlumency or a sign that Severus really hated the headmaster, he found his response easy and quick.

“Yes, my Lord.” He said with a bow.

“Then kneel.”

He dropped to his knee, and without being prompted, held out his left arm, his robes sliding down to reveal the pristine skin on his arm. He could feel the approval in the air, the pride, but he ignored it. Severus focused on Hermione, on remembering that this was the best way he could protect her.

“Do you swear your loyalty to me eternally?” Riddle asked.

“I swear.” Severus said automatically, thinking only of the bushy-haired girl who held his heart, who he would do anything for.

Riddle then began to speak in a language not that was not English. After a moment of not understanding, Severus realized it wasn’t even Latin. The strange language was just distracting enough that Severus was nearly physically startled by the touch of a wand to his left forearm.
At first, it was a warm tingle, and then it became a blistering inferno that made Severus want to retch. It was like holding a heated, metal stirring rod to his arm and then strapping it there. Sweat broke out on his temples from the sheer effort of not screaming in agony, and all the muscles in his body tensed.

The voice in the back of his mind reminded him that this was only the first ten seconds, and he would likely need to endure more of this.

His breaths were short and ragged. His head would have been pounding for how tight he clenched his jaw had the pain in his arm not overridden all other pain receptors.

The hissing language stopped, but the pain didn’t end.

“We are family, now, Severus.” Riddle said above him. “When I need you, you will feel it in the mark I gave you, and you can come to me from where ever you are. Rise, brother Severus.” He said, and Severus obeyed on shaky legs. He lifted his head to meet the red-tinged gaze of the Dark Lord who smiled at him with a twisted sort of fondness. “You’re an elite. Your skills, talent, potential, have all lead to being part of my inner circle. Death Eaters, welcome your brother.”

There was a notable lack of bowed heads from one side of the circle, but Severus was too focused on keeping still, keeping sane to care.

“You will be missed. Return to Hogwarts, you won’t have to be there much longer.”

Unable to open his lips for fear of what may come out, Severus bowed low. His knees buckled, and for a moment it was as though he wanted to show complete servitude. Either way, it seemed to please the bastard before him. He turned, walking as steadily as he could to be clear of the circle.

Destination, determination, deliberation, he repeated in the back of his mind as the image of the shrieking shack was brought to the front. He needed, quite badly, to get there. And with a slight turn of his body, he felt the compression consume him and then it left. He landed on his knees, though whether or not he splinched himself, he really didn’t know.

All Severus knew before everything went blank, was that he opened his eyes, opened his mouth, and screamed.

 Severus was sedated in the hospital wing, and yet still he twitched and thrashed despite the potion in his system. And she remained beside him, holding his left hand, wishing there had been a way for her to ease his pain, to soothe him, knowing there wasn’t.

Hermione had known he was to see Voldemort and recalling exactly what he was like when he came back the last time, she ignored his carefree wave off of her offer to wait for him. She, Sirius, and Remus all watched him on the map until he had disappeared from the edge, and then she took off.

“Are you sure you won’t want us there, Kitten?” Sirius had asked quietly.

She’d shaken her head, “I don’t want there to be any reason for him to lash out if he’s had a rough night. He may have agreed it wasn’t truly you there that night, but he still isn’t comfortable with Remus, and you don’t precisely stir the fondest memories.”
The boys had sheepishly nodded, and Hermione snuck out. It hadn’t been curfew yet, but she had still wished she’d had the Potter family invisibility cloak. Invisibility would be beneficial for them on the way back, and she didn’t think Severus would miraculously make it back before curfew.

And he hadn’t.

When he appeared before her in the shack with a loud crack, his back to her, he was gripping his left arm at the elbow, holding it away from him, screaming and shaking. She’d tried to calm him, but he didn’t seem to notice she was even there. After a loud, long scream, he’d passed out.

Somehow, she didn’t think that levitating him through the halls would be the smartest idea, especially with Professor Scamander seemingly extra vigilant with the year coming to a close. Explaining to an Auror why you were floating a Death Eater down the halls of Hogwarts didn’t hold any appeal.

Despite the fact her boyfriend was twitching in her lap, Hermione had attempted to conjure a patronus. It had taken far longer than she would have liked, focusing her efforts on a happy memory when one of her worst was so readily available felt impossible.

“Come on, Hermione. If Harry can do it, so can you. You’re powerful. You’re strong. And Severus needs help!” She said to herself, willing all that was in her to do the spell.

She’d been pleased, and quite enchanted, when the elegant raven swooped from her wand tip, circled around them, and then landed on Severus’ head. She’d thought of who would help her best, willed the bird to find him, and tell him what happened and where they were.

Alastor Moody appeared within five minutes.

“What happened?” He asked, hobbling a little before kneeling doing beside them. She explained as he picked up Severus’ left arm and pulled back the sleeve.

“Fuck!” Moody cursed.

“What is it? What’s the matter?” Hermione asked, glancing from the Auror to her lover. She’d caught sight of the dark mark, red and livid, blisters surrounding the area.

“He’s been marked, and it’s reacting badly.” Moody replied, taking hold of Hermione’s arm, still holding on to Severus. “Gonna be a bit of a trip, girl.” He said, the only warning he had given before apparating.

From there they flooed directly into the Hogwarts infirmary, and as soon as they were clear of the fireplace, she’d been tasked with flooing McGonagall to come right to the infirmary. Moody had placed Severus on the nearest bed, and as soon as he touched down, he’d begun screaming again.

Hermione had dashed to join him, gripping his right hand, and watching as the Matron emerged from her office the same moment Minerva came from the fireplace.

“What is wrong with the boy.” Madam Pomfrey had asked, great concern in her features before Moody had ceased his arm and showed her. The Matron instantly darkened.

“Not what ya think, Poppy.” Moody had warned her.

“Not what I think?” Pomfrey had hissed, glancing around the otherwise empty infirmary. “How can I misinterpret such an ugly mark?”

“Albus had all but held the boy down and offered his arm to You-Know-Who himself.” Minerva
half growled, her worry over Severus dampening her displeasure at the Headmaster.

The Matron looked from Severus to Minerva before she’d sighed heavily. “I need to retrieve potions, explain to me on the way.”

Minerva must have, because when they returned, the Matron’s sour look was contrary to the gentle, mindful way she tended to the angry, raw skin of Severus’ arm. She’d gotten him to drink a calming draught, and then a sedative before she began applying the essence of Murtlap, a burn balm, and nearly anything else that she could think of. She then wrapped it in a bandage and bid Minerva to come with her to the office for a drink. Hermione doubted very much they were going to have tea.

Moody had clapped her on the arm. “Impressive patronus, Granger.” He’d said with a smirk before hobbling off, likely to tell the Headmaster the condition in which Severus returned.

Once alone, Hermione had watched as Severus twitched once in a while until she eventually fell asleep.

When she’d woken, a crick in her neck and back from sleeping in a chair, she immediately checked on Severus’ arm.

She’d seen the mark, of course, just not on anyone’s skin. Before she went to Hogwarts, she’d been sure to read up on the important events of the wizarding world, had known from the book precisely whom Harry was before she’d ever met him, and knew the dark mark for its image was etched in her mind. She never thought it would look so painful, like a brand instead of a tattoo that had been freshly inked.

And Hermione knew in her gut that when Severus woke up, he would feel ashamed. Severus may have a mask in place to appear utterly indifferent to nearly everyone, but Hermione had been there as he built it. She knew how to read his eyes, the muscles of his face, his body language, and knew he was worried she was changing her mind about him despite everything. And this, well, she knew he wasn’t really expecting to get this until he left the school. When, as he likely still believed, she would eventually wish to part ways with him.

She re-wrapped his arm, careful to make sure it was snug, but not tight, then leaned back in the chair.

Stroking her thumb along his knuckles, she slowly began to drift off again. Vaguely, she wondered if madam Pomfrey was going to come check on him soon, but they thought didn’t stay long before she fell back into slumber.

She was immediately awakened when his hand twitched in hers, and Hermione’s gaze shot to Severus as his face scrunched up before his body relaxed and he opened his eyes.

There was pain in those dark depths, and when they flicked to hers, she saw the shame before his shields went up. Holding his gaze, Hermione bent over and kissed his left hand.

“I love you.” She reminded him. “This is not going to change things.”

“It should,” He croaked.

“Why?” She demanded.

“I’ve been branded.” He said as if she should already know. “I belong, in many ways, to someone else.”

“You belong to me where it counts.” She countered.
His lips curled. “That’s almost disgustingly sentimental.”

She smirked. “You love it though.” She goaded, and he glared, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

Face softening, and then turning to a frown, Severus pulled his hand from hers and forced himself up. He hesitated, then slowly reached for the bandage covering his arm, and carefully unwrapped it.

The blisters on his skin healed beautifully, and while the mark was still a bit pink, it didn’t look nearly as painful as it had. Gingerly, Severus reached out and ran his fingers over it, hissing through his teeth but not stopping or looking away.

“Boys, and even a few girls, had been drawing this mark in the common room on scraps of parchment, occasionally on their own skin. They spoke of their parents, who were friends with Riddle in school, who thought he was going to be the greatest leader the wizarding world had ever known. They yearned for this, and for what it represented. I was enthralled by what they said those who took this mark would get: power. It was tempting for a poor child like myself, bullied as I am, was, to have power. And they were all wealthy, so there was that aspect as well. It wasn’t until I started talking to them, actually getting in on the conversations, that I understood that they wanted nothing to do with muggleborns. No, actually, that’s wrong. They wanted to suppress them, destroy them. They wanted to put muggles in their place, show them who was properly superior. You can understand, I’m sure, why I would be drawn to that thought.”

“Your father.”

Severus nodded. “I dreamt of bearing this mark and showing Tobias, Potter, Black, anyone who ever wronged me that they shouldn’t have. Then as trite as it is, you came along. And you showed me what a real friend was like. A proper one, not one who wanted to use me like those future Death Eaters, and not one who wanted me around when the mood stuck them, like Lily.”

“I think you would have stopped yourself from taking the mark, even without me.”

“I don’t.” He said, meeting her eye. “Do you think Lily would have suddenly renewed her interest in me had there not been someone else who drew my eye away from her? Do you think Lupin would have still have convinced the other bloody dolts to stop attacking me if the very girl he fancies didn’t stand loyally by my side? Hell, Lily couldn’t get Potter to stop, and he is obsessed with her. Do you really think I would have distanced myself from those of my house who are fanatics of the Dark Lord if I had no one else to turn to? You are ….” He shook his head. “You are the wrench thrown into the workings of the very way my life was turning out.”

“I don’t want to be the reason it changed.” She said, and at the wide eyes fear in his eyed, she quickly added, “I don’t want you to think you wouldn’t have accomplished this without me present. It is absolute fluke that I’m here to begin with, so what if ….”

He put his fingers on her lips silencing her.

“We may never know, but I think this,” he said, gesturing with his left arm, “Would have ended up here anyway. Except instead of taking it because I was cornered into doing so, I would have begged for it. I would have done anything for it. It would have been everything I had ever wanted. And now … now it’s a thing that I must do.”

“And that’s better?” Hermione asked.

“Yes.” Severus replied firmly, allowing no room for argument. “Because when I look at this, instead of seeing all the awful, the evil it represents, I will see it as my way of making sure you get through
“You’re the bravest man I’ve ever known.” She said against his lips.

“Coming from a Gryffindor, one with knowledge of the future, I would say that is quite the compliment.” Severus whispered, and she hummed in agreement. “They may just take away my green and silver tie for it.”

She chuckled at that, but before she could either kiss him or tease him, there was a clearing of a throat behind her.

“Miss Granger,” Dumbledore started. “I thank you for watching over Severus last night. Your Aunt and Madam Pomfrey had decided that they had some matters they wished to… discuss with me last evening, and the latter had not returned until quite late, I am told. But now, my dear, I will ask that you return to your common room. There are matters I need to discuss with Mr Snape that would be better said without an audience.”

She gave Severus’ hand a light squeeze before stepping away. “Of course, Headmaster.”

Hermione walked past Dumbledore without further greeting, glancing over her shoulder at Severus before she left the infirmary. His Occlumency shields were most definitely in place. Good, let the old Bastard fight for his information.

July 1st, 1977

Hermione and Severus had spent their last night at Hogwarts in the Room of Requirement. A full moon meant the marauders were occupied with keeping Remus company, and the end of the school year meant Lily had gone off to say farewell to her boyfriend de jour. No one else would have looked for Hermione, and so she was free to escape the common room unnoticed or missed.

Severus, she knew, would have gotten out without reprimand simply because of the increase in his status. No one had actually seen the mark, but after a defense lesson shortly after he had been marked, in which Professor Scamander seized his left arm and he hissed, the rumors started. In Gryffindor, most had no idea what that could have meant except that it was likely the Professor had hexed him wordless and wandlessly. In Slytherin, the stories of their Death Eater friends and relatives had caused them to understand that Severus had been “chosen”. He’d spent his remaining two months being treated like Draco had been in her proper time, something Severus had loathed.

But last night, they had put all that aside, and themselves to bed, though neither slept a wink. There would be time for Severus to do so on the train to Bulgaria, something he had to take immediately after departing the Hogwarts Express. Cheaper, and safer than Port Keys when carrying fragile and volatile items in one’s luggage, it meant no time with her post-school. And so, after hours of noise, passionate affirmation of affection, they had a silent, subdued journey through the highlands and open fields. Arms around one another, Hermione half in Severus’ lap while they stared out the window.

“So, what will happen with you two now?” Lily asked, and Hermione glanced over at her. She shrugged. “You aren’t engaged, and Sev, I swear, if you propose to her on the train I will never let
you forget how lame it was."

“I would not do such a thing.” He grumbled.

“And we don’t need to be engaged.” Hermione countered. “I don’t need that sort of promise from Severus to wait for him.”

“Oh? Well, nice of you. But what makes you think he’ll return the favor?” Lily asked, and Hermione was nearly tossed from her position against her boyfriend with the force of his turning toward their friend.

“You cannot be serious.” He said through his teeth, quiet and calm sounding despite the dark glint in his eyes.

Lily snorted. “You’re a man, aren’t you? With a penis? I don’t believe for one moment you’re going to go to another country for, what? A year? Two?”

“Four is the typical length of an apprenticeship.” Severus ground out. “Though some do complete it in less time. Two is an accurate assumption.”

“Right, so, Sev’s gone for a year to another country, where I’m sure there are gorgeous women, ones who would find a young apprentice appealing. The most the pair of you will do is write,” She said, glancing away as the door to the car opened and Sirius and Remus came in. For a moment, Lily looked disappointed, but then she turned her attention back to the couple tucked into the corner, and she smirked. “You’re going to get lonely, Sev. Why hold on and break ‘Mione’s heart?”

“I would not do that to her. Though it warms me how highly you think of me. Which of your numerous paramours taught you this lesson, Lil’s?” Severus countered with a sneer.

“Common sense. Look at Sirius, he’s left a trail of broken hearted witches around the school, and he merely just gets bored.”

“Yes,” Sirius said casually, eyes never holding anyone’s gaze long. “I am quite the witch hunter, aren’t I?”

“And why is that, Sirius?” Lily asked, turning her attention to the marauder for a moment. “Why does not one witch hold your attention for long?”

Sirius snorted, smirking as though there was a secret no one knew but him. “Perhaps no witch will ever hold my attention for long.”

Severus scoffed, and when Hermione glanced up, she noted a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

“You just need to find the right one.” Remus said absently.

“Yes, maybe that is exactly it, Moony.”

Severus stiffened, and there was a wave of awkward around them for a moment as the slip of the nickname registered with those in the know of what happened, and the revelation of the meaning behind it settling in.

Severus cleared his throat. “In regards to myself and Hermione, Lily, I need no promise from her, nor she from me. It’s called monogamy, perhaps you should try it in your next … whatever. You may find they have little need to seek companionship from another witch when theirs isn’t rumored to have been caught by one more prefect in the corridor.”
“I don’t cheat.” She snapped.

Sirius and Remus both shifted uncomfortably.

“Oh, please. Do you really believe Marlene? She’s going around saying you’re gay, Remus, and that Sirius has … issues.”

“Really?” Sirius asked.

Lily blushed. “With your … stuff.”

“And yet a flock of witches are constantly looking to ride my broomstick. So, really, I suppose Marlene is being a bit… nasty. But to be fair, with me, she had every right to be. I didn’t do right by her.”

“She’s still a bit mean spirited.” Lily grumbled. “Never once did I actually cheat on any of the boys I’d been seeing.”

“No, just jumped rather swiftly from one bloke to the next.” Remus gentle pointed out.

Before Lily said anything, the whistle blew, and they all turned their attention to the window.

How could they be pulling into the station? Had she fallen asleep at some point? Had she just been so terrified to say goodbye that she didn’t notice the time escape her.

Hermione turned to Severus and saw everything in his eyes that she felt in her soul: fear, reluctance, a desire to leave the car, the knowledge of the inevitable.

Suddenly, he looked away. “Black.” He snapped. “A moment, if you would.”

Sirius was surprised, glancing about at the other occupants before he slowly nodded.

Severus kissed Hermione’s temple. “Wait for me a moment on the platform.” He asked, and she nodded. As though moving through pudding, Hermione rose from her half-perched position on his lap and headed for the exit. She looked over her shoulder one last time, just in case he decided it was easier to part without further goodbyes and left.

When the door closed behind a skeptical Lily and Lupin, Hermione already on her way to gather her trunk, Severus turned to Sirius. “I trust you know.”

“That you’ve been marked?” Sirius asked, nodding. “I thought as much.”

“I never told Hermione, but the night I was marked, I watched a man caught betraying the Dark Lord be tortured before killed, and his remains burned. I was even forced to participate.” When Sirius blanched, Severus glared. “You will not repeat that.”

“Trust me, Sev, I have no desire to think on it, let alone repeat it.”

“I tell you this because if I do not return for her at the end of the year, should it be suspect that something happens to me, I want you to try and keep her safe. And, if you would, watch over her
while I am not there. I’m sure you’ve noticed she becomes somewhat involved with her studies. If it were not for me, I highly suspect she wouldn’t eat. I have no idea if she sleeps, though my guess is very little.”

“Why me?” Sirius asked, and Severus had to admire how the man cut right to it. “Why ask me and not Remus?”

“Because you will not use this task to try and lure her away from me for yourself. You see Hermione as something of a sister, whereas Lupin would….”

“You’re probably right.” Sirius gave a wry grin. “He can be quite the straight-laced wizard, but I have a feeling if he was given a chance to possibly win her, he would certainly try.”

“With all the subtlety your house is known for.” Severus teased, standing. “I must go, my train departs in thirty minutes.”

“Good luck, Severus.” Sirius said as Severus was about to leave. “With everything, I wish you the best. And I look forward to seeing you when this is all over.”

“I would return the sentiment, but I think it best I stay honest where I can.” Severus retorted.

Sirius looked utterly offended for a moment before realization came to him, and quickly turned to mirth. “Quite.” He said with a nod, and Severus left him to seek out Hermione.

The bustle on the platform was minimum, and Severus was pleased to see that Hermione was alone, her luggage and his together on her cart so he wouldn’t have to waste precious minutes among the last of the students trying to gather it.

With tears in her eyes, she opened her arms as he came closer, and he walked into them without hesitation, wrapping his own around her, holding her tight.

“I love you,” She said quietly. “Write whenever you can, even if it is nothing more than a few words to say you have been busy.”

“I will try whenever I can.” Severus replied, kissing her curls. He then stepped back and reached into his trouser pocket, pulling out something that should never have fit within: his text potion’s book. “You don’t need this, but I wanted you to have it.” He explained. “I want this back, so this is the promise I will return to you. And this,” He said as he reached into the other pocket and pulled out his house scarf, “Is to give to doddering old man a coronary. Wear it to all Slytherin’s matches, unless your own house is playing, of course. I would hate to think something happened to you because you chose to forgo the garish red and gold.”

He smiled a bit as he watched her bring the scarf to her nose even before he finished putting it around her neck. “Done.”

He kissed her, firm and chaste, but with no less feeling than those of the night before. “I love you.” He said simply.

Without further farewells, because what good would they do, Severus took his luggage from her cart, gave her one last kiss on the cheek, and headed off to find his train to Bulgaria.

He didn’t look back, because Severus knew doing so would shatter his resolve. It would put them in danger, because if he looked back he may have just grabbed her and chased after the pipe dream of another life in the States. But he was marked, and so he could go nowhere. There was no place they could hide, and so he would not. He would go forward, apprentice with a man who was likely a
Death Eater, among other Death Eaters. He would work hard and do what needed to be done.

And he didn’t look back, because if he did, it would taint the last image he had of her, with that smile in her eyes as she clutched his textbook to her chest and sniffed his scarf. For if she didn’t wait, and how could he blame her, he didn’t want the last memory he had of her when they were together to be sad in anyway.

If this was goodbye, he wanted it to be beautiful. He had so little beauty in his life before her, and he didn’t see much of it in his future.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience with me as it takes more time to get out chapters than I had anticipated. :)
I'll be doing NaNoWriMo this year, though in cheat form as I will do my best to use the goal to work on this fic. You can buddy me if you're participating (meggles the geek).
Hermione stared out the window and watched as the rain poured down the pane. Of course, there would be no work in the green houses left to do, and impervious or umbrella charms didn’t hold up to the summer storm they were experiencing. So, as she did on the days off she was forced to endure by Bob, she studied.

Surrounding her in the little nook by the window were advanced texts on Arithmancy, Transfiguration, and Runes. And, of course, Severus’ text book. She had probably studied that the most, to the point in which Slughorn was likely to wonder how she’d been such a star pupil and he overlooked her. Not that she cared, Hermione was well past wanting the approval of her teachers. Severus was gone, and while he wasn’t her whole world, he had been a large part of it. She’d kept in touch with Sirius and Remus, sporadically from Lily who only spoke of a mystery beau, but it wasn’t the same. She wondered if she would have been this detached during her last year at Hogwarts had she stayed in her previous era. After all, the first three years was wrought with trouble, and she had doubted very much the last four would have turned out differently.

“Emonee,” Oliver’s little voice called from the hallway. “Emonee pay!” He squealed as he turned into her room with two stuffed toys.

She smiled, picking up her wand from beside her and making the bunny he carried spring from his hand and dance around the room. He squealed, clapping his little, pudgy hands.

Oliver, not quite a year and a half, was one of the brightest spots Hermione had when returning to the McGonagall’s home. He was also a reminder of how alone she was. It had occurred to her upon returning that she had actually spent less than a year of her life with the couple. And while they still welcomed her home warmly, and treated her like family, it was more obvious without Severus there to draw her attention that she didn’t quite fit in.

“Ollie, leave Hermione alone, sweetie.” Delia said in a tired voice before coming into the room.

She was still lovely, but there were fresh lines around her eyes, and her posture was a bit more worn down than it had been three years ago. But there was also a bliss about Delia that Hermione couldn’t deny.

“It’s quite alright, I don’t mind.” She insisted.

Delia scooped up Oliver who promptly fell silent and tried to squirm out of her hold. Delia huffed, trying to get a better hold on her wiggling toddler. “I know, and believe me, you donea know how much I appreciate it when I gotta get dinner goin’. You watching him then has been the most relaxing couple hours of my whole day for months. But I also know…..” Oliver finally stopped his
attempted escape, flopping on Delia’s shoulder. She huffed, then looked to Hermione sympathetically. “But I also know how hard it is to distract yourself while your love’s away. Watching a baby isn’t going to help there, just makes you wistful for the future. Which I also know feels entirely uncertain right now.”

A vague image of Aurora Snape came to Hermione’s mind, and she momentarily, desperately wished she could recall if she shared any features with Severus’ future daughter.

“They don’t feel so, no.” She confessed.

Holding Oliver, Delia came around and sat in a spot that was still clear beside Hermione. Absently rubbing Oliver’s back, Delia spoke. “Bob didn’t ask me to marry him before he left for his apprenticeship, either. Of course, you know I worked for Flourish and Blotts right after Hogwarts, and I quite liked my job, but it didn’t keep my mind from running off. Wondering if there would be a lass Bob would fancy more than me. And Min, well…..” Delia sighed. “There are two sides of the coin, Hermione. Taking a chance, and not. I took a chance, and waited, and I’ve been quite happy with the outcome. Min, well, she fell in love after Hogwarts with a local boy. Well, man now, but you know.” Delia shrugged. “He was a handsome lad in his younger days, and Min was quite taken by him. Accepted his proposal of marriage, too, or so Bob says. But she called it off, went off to work for the Ministry.”

“Why?” Hermione asked.

Delia smiled sadly. “He was a muggle. And after what Isobel went through with Robert, not being able to do magic or say what she was so he would understand that his children could be magical, well, Min couldn’t do that.”

“I never quite understood that.” Hermione confessed with a derisive snort, thinking of Eileen in that moment. “They’re married, so why not reveal what they are. A simple obliviate would take care of the problem should the spouse not accept, and the marriage could be annulled.”

“I’m sure it’s a bit more complicated than that, but either way, I do know what you mean. And in any case, I think in the end, Min was likely happier staying in the wizarding world.”

“But without love.” Hermione sighed.

Delia scoffed. “Minerva McGonagall has been having a not-so-secret relationship with a former co-worker from her Aurora days. He asks her to marry him all the time, she just keeps saying no.”

Hermione giggled, noting that at some point, Oliver had fallen asleep. She watched him for a moment before sighing heavily, looking out the window.

“Severus is a good man, Hermione, and it’s plain as day he loves you. Don’t get so down-trodden, it’s only been a month. Maybe you should ask one of those friends you keep writing to pop by.”

“Maybe.” She agreed, realizing that is would be quite sad if she let the whole summer pass without seeing any of them.

August 9th, 1977

“I want one.” Sirius said, voice heavy with desire, as he watched a motorcycle disappear down the
Hermione laughed, “Would you even know how to drive one?”

“I could enchant it. Or take lessons. Do muggles give driving lessons, or is it something you just grown up knowing how to do?” He asked, turning back to her as they continued down the street in muggle London.

“You could most certainly get lessons, though you might need to brush up on anything muggle so you don’t come across as too strange.”

“Yes, yes.” He said, dropping his arm around her shoulder.

Sirius had blissfully been more than willing to join her at the McGonagall’s, stating that, while the Potters treated him like a second son, and his living there was not all that strange, it did seem a bit odd to be there without James. And James, it seemed, had been out more often than he’d been in. But, unlike Severus, working the gardens and greenhouse held little interest for Sirius, and so they often went out together and simply roamed. It was the third time they had ventured outside the wizarding world, and apart from mistakenly calling 999 when thinking a random telephone box was going to take him to the ministry and trying to talk to the telly in a shop, he wasn’t as bad to take out as she imagined Ron would have been.

“So, have you heard from Snape?” He asked causally as Hermione slipped her arm around his waist.

She rested her head against his arm and sighed. “No. But it’s only been a bit over a month since his apprenticeship began, and I am almost willing to bet that his master would be strict, and perhaps not allow much free time in the beginning.” She chewed her lip, wondering if she should say anything.

“Have you heard much from Killian?”

Sirius stopped, not moving an inch.

“I know he was in seventh year, and I didn’t know how serious….”

“You … knew.” He said, finally looking at her.

She shrugged. “Severus said he was quite convinced that the Sirius that sent him to the shack wasn’t you. And, well, I had realized I hadn’t seen you with any girls at all since Marlene. I also happened to see the two of you one night when I was watching the map for Severus.”

Sirius slumped, bringing a hand to his face, and dragging it down.

“My own key to mischief used against me. I’m wounded, Kitten.” He said, and she laughed as they resumed. “No, I haven’t heard from Killian, nor do I expect to. He was due to marry a lovely lady of pureblood, and who am I to stand in the way of what society wants?”

“The first one ready to rebel against it.” Hermione countered.

“True, but I do have some respect. He wants to do right by his wife, even if it meant not indulging in his true desires, and I think that takes honor. Not even most straight pureblood wizards stay true to their spouses, nor have any plans to do so before they wed.”

“Were you betrothed?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Sirius shook his head. “The only girls available that my parents would have deemed worthy were our cousins. Bella is a few years older, and I believe was already promised to a LeStrange,
Andromeda was supposed to marry someone, but she ran off with a muggleborn, and Narcissa was bought up by the Malfoys. Of course, sick as it is, I think she actually loves her husband, Lucius Malfoy.”

“She does seem to.” Hermione remarked, and at Sirius’ quirked eyebrow, elaborated. “I’ve met them both.”

Sirius thought on it for a moment before understanding dawned on him. “Of course, you have.”

The subject was dropped as they entered a cafe, but as they stood in line, Sirius asked, “What about you? You’re pureblood, were you betrothed?”

“No,” Hermione said, shaking her head. “My parents married for love, and so they wanted the same for me.” It wasn’t a lie. “What kind of tea would you want?” She swiftly changed the subject.

September 1st, 1977

Dearest Hermione,

I hope this letter finds you in time, and it is not too late, and my words fall flat. With luck, at this moment, you are sitting on the train, having only just opened this letter as instructed. It is the first time since you came to this time that you and I have not been in the car together. I hope this detracts from my absence even just an infinitesimal amount.

You letter did arrive, and I will admit that had it been anyone other than Black that has kept you company over the summer, I would have been quite unpleasant to be around. I have sorely missed your company these last two months, to the point where I nearly slipped my fellow apprentice a babbling potion simply to have someone fill the silence with inane chatter.

Igor Karkaroff is a vain, arrogant man whom I loathe, yet must tolerate. He is a couple of years our senior and has been apprenticing with Master Nikola for the last eleven months. At risk of sounding big-headed, I already surpass him. In fact, Master Nikola has already shown subtle favoritism. I shall have an essay in Potente Potioneer by November’s end.

Both men are purists, and though neither man has bared his arm for me to say for certain, I am nearly positive both are most certainly loyalists as well. We must wear these frock coats, you see, with sleeves that cover our hands, and a number of buttons meant to drive a man insane. Nikola claims it’s to improve our Dexterity, and that a proper Potion’s Master would dress in clothes tailored to cover his skin as much as possible, while leaving his body free to move as needed.

Quite frankly, the moments I no longer have to brew under this man’s tutelage, I will be shedding the thing. I’m sure I will grow used to it, in time, but as of now I would not be too troubled if it had an accidental encounter with a cauldron fire.

I wish to hear of your last first day, and every day of your year. Knowing, of course, that this is an impossibility, I merely wish to hear from you again, and as soon as possible. Your words, even if I cannot respond in a timely fashion, is a support a deeply cherish. I hope mine can do the same for you.
Hermione startled as a package dropped onto her unused fork with a loud clang. Lily yelped. Sirius spilled his pumpkin juice over Remus.

“What the bloody hell?” He asked, setting down his now empty goblet to refill it as Remus cast a cleaning and drying charm on himself. “Birthday present?”

“It must be,” Hermione said, gingerly picking up the parcel, careful to avoid hitting her bowl of stew. “Though I can’t imagine who it would be from.”

“Really?” Remus asked, his voice squeaking a bit before he cleared his throat. “Why-why would you say that?”

“Because I’m sure anyone who was going to give me a gift would have already done so this morning.” She replied with a smirk, trying not to laugh as Remus’ cheeks flushed dark red.

It was as true, after all, that she had received all she had expected to that morning. Delia and Bob sent her a lovely card and a voucher for Madam Malkin’s, Minerva an invitation for a private tea in the evening. Sirius had gifted her a simple gold bracelet, just a plain, dainty chain that hung elegantly off her wrist. Remus had given her a card, a small bunch of wildflowers tucked inside.

From Severus, she had received a letter.

Hermione,

Happy Birthday. I will be thinking of you more today than any other and wish more fervently I could have been with you. Since I cannot, I hope this will suffice. I know I have found the scent quite comforting.

Severus.

The missive may have been short, but the scent that had come from the parchment when she opened it was intoxicating. Herbs, earth, and the masculine scent of Severus. He’d laced the parchment with Amortentia, and discovered he’d added a preserving charm when she had attempted to do the same. That had been her favorite present, and if Hermione Granger was thought to be odd for sniffing parchment, so be it.

So, this parcel was an utter mystery. The writing on the top, addressing the package to her, was feminine and unfamiliar. Setting the box on her lap, she removed the string and paper, removing the lid carefully. Another note rested atop the packing paper within.

Hermione,

Severus had requested this be sent to you on the 19th in his letter to us earlier in the month.
Apologies if this arrives late, there was some arguing between my mother and I as to whether or not this was appropriate to send a girl he has taken such a fancy to.

Yours,

Eileen Prince

Hermione’s heart dropped into her stomach, and then jumped up into her throat. For an insane, fleeting moment, she thought that Severus would have caved to the pressure of ensuring she stay with him with a concrete promise that had nothing to do with used text books and Slytherin scarves. But that couldn’t, wouldn’t be what was inside. She was fairly certain Ms. Prince would throttle her son the moment they met once more for giving her a ring via owl mail.

Removing the paper, Hermione giggled softly at the contents. Beautiful, thick sheets of parchment monogrammed with an “H”, a lovely green and gold note book with the matching embossing, and a beautiful, red feathered, self-inking quill. Yes, she could very well see how the Elder Mrs Prince would think this all terrible inappropriate for a young man to give the woman he was courting, but she didn’t know Hermione. And this, this was absolutely perfect.

“Who was it from?” Lily asked, standing up to peek inside.

“It’s technically from Severus, but he had asked his mother to send it for him, as he wasn’t able to himself.”

“His mother scares me.” Lily said as she plopped back down in her chair. “She’s so stern. So severe.”

“Doesn’t sound anything like Snape at all, does it?” Sirius smirked. “Him being all rainbows and sunshine”

“When did he ask her?” Remus asked curiously, changing the subject before Lily could say anything more.

“She said the beginning of the month. Why do you ask?” Hermione turned to Remus.

He shrugged. “No reason.” He replied with that sad sort of smile that always meant he was avoiding a truth he perceived to be painful.

“Well, we should do rounds. Come on, James.” Lily said quite suddenly, standing from the table, and marching out the Great Hall.

James immediately dropped his fork to his plate and got up, following Lily like a well-trained puppy.

Hermione watched them for a moment, considered saying something, then decided against it. Technically, if they were shagging like she suspected, then decided against it. Technically, if they were shagging like she suspected, it was a suspicion made based on her knowledge of the future. It had been a while since she had to deal with the effects of the vow, she didn’t want to chance it now.

“Well, I’m going to go have tea with my aunt.” She said, repackaging her stationary from Severus and the Princes and then placing the box in her bag.

“Why were we not invited?” Sirius asked with mock offense. “I seem to clearly recall you having a tag along last year. And perhaps the year before?”

“He was invited by her, not me. Professor McGonagall actually likes Severus.” Hermione retorted.
“She likes us, too.” Sirius countered.

“Well,” Remus winced.

“Fine, she likes us more these days than she had before. But that’s because we matured!” Sirius argued.

“Be that as it may.” Hermione replied. “I would actually much prefer the quiet of time with her.” She said, and without giving the gesture much thought, she kissed his cheek.

“Careful, Kitten.” Sirius said. “You’ll start rumors.”

“You’re like a brother to me, Sirius.” She replied with a smirk. “Those rumors would die fairly quickly.”

She shouldered her bag, heading toward the exit. She slowed and paused, feeling someone watching her. Instinctively, she turned to the Slytherin table, though she found no one seemed to notice her while she still felt like the focus of someone. Turning away from the Slytherin’s continued on.

It was only when she left the room did she realize the focus had come from the head table, and she somehow doubted it was Minerva watching her.

October 29th, 1977

“How can someone seem to hate another so much, yet are so obviously shagging one another?” Remus wondered aloud as he and Hermione walked down the streets of Hogsmeade together. Sirius was just ahead, walking with Peter as the pair of them and James were heading to Spintwitches. James, however, had been side tracked by Lily, Marlene, and Alice as they rushed past to get to Madam Puddifoot’s. Prongs became instantly side tracked, and despite Lily’s shouts to be left alone, the girls giggling beside her, James acted more like a dog than Sirius ever did.

“There’s a fine line between love and hate,” Hermione noted, crossing her arms to hold herself as the chill of the late October air threatened to penetrate her cloak.

“I always thought it was more, opposites attract.” Remus countered with a smirk.

“Except, of course, that Lily and James are more alike than either like to admit. Both a considered attractive, charismatic, have a slightly higher intelligence than average, and adore being the center of attention.”

“That’s a bit unfair, Hermione.” Remus chided, but Hermione merely shrugged.

“Unfair though it may be, it’s true.” She said.

They were silent for a moment, the sound of Sirius and Peter arguing over a broom the only distinct sound despite the crowds around them.

“Hermione,” He said slowly, carefully. “It’s been a long time since you heard from …. I mean a short note on your birthday, stationary? And Sirius confessed he hadn’t written you all summer.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re getting at, Remus?” She said in a measured tone.
“Are you… perhaps … maybe … hanging on to-”

“Severus?” Hermione said, though not to fill in the blank that Remus would have inevitably left.

She had to shake herself once, twice, but when the figure coming down the road, not fifty feet away, didn’t disappear she had to believe.

He was dressed exactly as she had remembered him to be in her old time, though instead of teaching robes, it was a traveling cloak. His face, of course, was far more youthful, though now Hermione wasn’t really sure if the man she remembered from her past was quite as old looking as she had thought.

She watched as he glanced toward the castle, his face a perfect look of indifference, though Hermione suspected that perhaps he was occluding. She hoped he was.

Taking a few steps forward, reaching for him without thinking, she felt Remus’ hand close on her wrist. He gave her pause, but she didn’t, couldn’t look away.

His head whipped around toward Lily and James, the pair so engrossed in their argument, they hadn’t noticed the frowning Severus not far from them. He then looked thoughtful, and he turned toward her.

“Snape!” Sirius greeted warmly, though he didn’t reply.

Remus’ hand tightened around her wrist, but not quick enough to stop her from pulling free. Severus remained exactly where he was while Hermione marched right over to him.

“No word that you would be here?” She demanded along the way, nearly sounding pissed off had it not been for the crack of joy making her voice squeak.

“I’d no idea I would be here until this morning. Master Nikola had required an ingredient immediately, and he’s never been to Hogsmeade personally.” Severus replied, and had it not been for the happy glint in his eye, she’d have thought he could have cared less whether or not she was there.

She stopped, standing before this man who was a mix of the young man she loved and the intimidating older version she’d known. It felt suddenly strange to stand before him, with four months’ time having passed since their last physical contact. When he kissed her and turned away, she knew, in her heart, that he didn’t look back because he couldn’t bear it. It’s why she’d forced herself to turn around and march through the barrier without doing the same.

“Well,” She said, taking a fortifying breath. “Wasn’t that terribly convenient?”

“It was.” He said, and then quicker than expected, he grabbed her head and kissed her. It was a comforting claim of his lips on hers, like being wrapped in a warm blanket dosed in the Amortentia that he’d bathed his last letter in. His possession of her eased as she placed her hands on his hips, one of his hands dropping from her face and eased around her.

After an undetermined, but too short amount of time, Severus broke away.

“I needed that,” Hermione sighed, keeping her eyes closed as Severus pressed his forehead to hers.

“As did I.” He murmured. “And much as I wish to indulge in more, I will be missed if I take too long.”

“Well it just so happens I was going to go in the shop myself. And while I know you can’t stay long,
I wouldn’t mind simply looking at you from the rows of supplies.” She smirked, peeking at him through her lashes.

He chuckled deep in his throat. “I look like….”


“Really?” He said, and she felt him lift a brow.

A throat cleared behind her, but Hermione didn’t move.

Severus, however, took a deep breath and stepped back. “Lupin,” he said, straightening his cloak.

“Severus.” Remus said. “Didn’t think it was worth your time to inform Hermione of your being in town? How caring.”

“I had no idea you were privy to the contents of my letters to Hermione.”

“Letters? You make it sound as though you’ve kept in contact.” Remus countered.

“Remus.” Hermione said in a warning tone, furrowing her brow at him.

Severus stepped away, heading for the apothecary.

“Hermione.” Remus said as she made the motion to follow Severus. “Come on, please. Come back. Let’s go to Spintwitches with the others.”

“I think I will continue with my original plan, thank you.” She retorted, heading inside.

The bell chimed above the door, and along with the herbal scent and the fumes, more comfort was brought from hearing Severus’ deep voice. She closed her eyes a moment and realized that it had already deepened to the tone it would be in decade or so, it just hadn’t had the authoritative edge it bore now.

“…if you could, please.” He’d said, and the man working the counter went into the back.

Hermione approached the counter, standing beside him but not quite daring to look up at him.

“Had I committed a blunder without being aware?” He asked now that they were relatively alone.

“I’m not sure what you mean?” Hermione asked, allowing herself to peek at him from the corner of her eye. He was occluding again, she could tell. She didn’t like it all that much.

“Lupin.” He spat. “Seemed to be very aware of our lack of communication.”

“I’m not sure I understand how this would result in a blunder, Severus. The mail arrives at meal times, and he does notice when I don’t receive any.”

“And is he there to comfort you when I fail to keep in communication?”

“Actually, I think if anyone thinks I’m finding comfort with anyone while you’re away, it’s with Sirius.” She countered. She watched him turn, that brow arch returning along with a hint of amusement. “One kiss on his cheek where others had seen, and suddenly people think I’m failing for his charms but don’t dare to leave you.”

“And are you?” He asked, the mirth ebbing.
“I think you and I both know that my level interest in Sirius is matched only by his level of interest in me. I’ve also met the Ravenclaw he is currently not dating and find him to be quite pleasant.”

“And what of Lupin?”

“A friend, as he’s always been.” She took the risk and rest her hand on top of his where it rested on the counter. “I quite like my parchment, had I mentioned that?”

“You may have.” He smirked. Then with his free hand, reached into his inner pocket and withdrew a thick envelope. “I had not known today was a Hogsmeade weekend and did not think I would have such luck as to have opportunity to run into you. I was going to post this, but since you are here…” He handed her the envelope, a light smile gracing his lips as he studied her face. “I have missed you desperately.”

“And I you.” She said, taking the envelop and holding it close to her. “And don’t feel as though I am lamenting our lack of letters. I knew when you left that I wouldn’t hear from you often. You had warned me. Though regardless of what I saw… well, Lily, James, Remus, they have all written us off, I think. That, or believe I am holding on to nothing.”

“But you are holding on?” He asked quietly.

“Of course.”

“Here we are, Mr Snape.” At the sound of the young man’s voice, Hermione stepped away from the counter, heading to the door of the shop but lingering as Severus inspected the ingredients. There was a small exchange, and then with a nod, and brief word of thanks, he turned to leave.

“Are you apparating?” She asked as they stepped out together.

“Yes, at the end of the road, near the tea house.” Severus replied. He looked as though he wanted to say something, thought better of it, then changed his mind again. “Would you like to accompany me that far?”

“Of course.” Hermione replied, and was pleased when he offered his arm to her.

“I may not be able to pull myself away for any extended visit just yet.” Severus began as they walked slowly toward the apparition point. “Between us, Master Nikola has stated that he believes, with dedication, I can complete the mastery in as little as two years. There was the option of returning here for the holidays, or putting in the work … I’m afraid I am leaning toward the work.

“There is, however, a requirement of me that will pull me away from the apprenticeship during the hols: Lucius’ holiday ball. It is a gathering of particular company, my Master officially included among them, and I will be required to follow him there for a multitude of reasons. I wouldn’t be surprised if you are considered included among that company as well.”

She took in a deep breath. “At least I will see you.” She said with resolve.

“See me, speak with me, dance with me, if you still desire.” Severus listed as they neared the end of their walk.

“I will admit to hoping for a dance of a greatly different variety, but I will settle for merely being in your arms.”

He chuckled, slowing to a stop, and turning toward her. He caressed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. “I love you.” He said, and it was bliss to hear him say the words when he hadn’t written
them once.

“I love you.” She replied, feeling tears tickle her eyes. “You’ll thank your master for making you his errand boy for me?”

He laughed. “Perhaps.” He then leaned in and kissed her quickly. “To sustain us another couple months.”

“Until December.” She said with a nod as he stepped back.

One moment, he was there before her, the Severus of the future with the face of the one she’d known these last four years. The next, he was gone.

The next time she’d see him, she would need to play the Death Eater’s girlfriend. Well, except it wasn’t playing at all, was it? He suspected the invitation would be extended to her, she was considered a part of their crowd. And while that frightened her, she couldn’t help but feel overwhelming pleasure with the knowledge she would see him again before the calendar year was out.

“Hermione?” Remus called.

“Kitten?” Sirius called as well, and she turned to see her two, dear friends looking at her with worry.

She sniffed, brushed away a stray tear, and gave a watery smile. “I’m fine.” She said.

“No, you aren’t.” Remus countered, rushing to her, and putting his hands on her arms. “Did he… did he hurt you? Say something to upset you?”

“Of course, he did,” She snorted. “He said his farewells.”

Remus appeared confused one moment, thoughtful the next, but Sirius interrupted any voice he would have given to his thoughts.

“I say you and I continue a few rumors and go share a butterbeer at the Three Broomsticks, what do you say, Kitten?” Sirius said as he came around and dropped his arm around her shoulders.

She giggled. “I’d say you’re completely mad and would have someone to answer to.”

“Two someone’s, really.” Sirius said thoughtfully. “But no matter. Come on, Moony, you’re a part of this party too.”

“And what about James and Peter?” Remus asked as Sirius started to lead Hermione away.

“If Peter isn’t still following Prongs around, and that would only be if Petals let him win and take her out, he’ll figure out where we are. Come on, let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Real life is crazy hectic, and finding time (or energy) to write it getting harder. However, I am doing NaNoWriMo this year in an effort to help me focus on getting some chapters
built into this thing. If you're doing it to, and want to add me as a writing buddy, you can find me as megglesthegeek.

As for the story, we will be returning to the future soon, but we still have a bit of the seventies to work through. Also, I apologize for the more fluffy chapter if that's not your thing.
There was still the hint of a smile on his face as Severus walked into the lab of his Master’s home. He could still feel Hermione on his lips, her scent still lingered in his nose, her voice still ringing in his ears. It had been a very pleasant errand.

Nikola glanced at him as he came in, not pausing once in his grinding of granite bean.

“You took longer than expected.” He replied, his Bulgarian accent thick, and deep. “I had not thought Hogsmeade to be a busy village.”

“It happened that today was a day in which the students of Hogwarts were permitted to leave the school.” Severus replied as he set the box of Scottish thistle on the table beside Nikola. “I had a moment’s distraction.”

Nikola gave him a knowing smile, glancing at him once more from the corner of his eye. “You sought out your lady?”

“Happened upon her, as it were. She, like I, had been heading to the apothecary.” He replied as he resumed his previous task of sorting through the previous night’s harvest, ensuring the ingredients were of the utmost quality.

“Is she to master in Potion’s as you?”

“No, her interest is strictly academic. I would imagine she will choose runes or arithmancy for her pursuit.”

“Pity. If your lady is as intelligent and quick as you, she’d have made excellent apprentice.” Nikola said slyly, and when Severus gave him a dark scowl, the master laughed. “I have seen your photo of your Hermione. She is not what I consider beautiful, you would not fear the sort of apprenticeship there.”

Igor chuckled behind them.

“I would not be so pleased, Karkaroff.” Nikola said without turning to look at him. “Your Yvonne is not a pretty flower herself.”

“At least she is my wife.” Igor replied, and Severus rolled his eyes so hard it actually gave him a momentary headache. “And your lady, Severus? Did you find her in the arms of another?”

The image of Lupin walking close beside her, taking her wrist as Hermione began to move for him before he fully looked at her flashed in Severus’ mind. He had worried, for a fleeting moment, when
Lupin insisted Hermione not follow him in J Pippins, that perhaps his lack of communication, and the long wait before them, would have caused her to have doubts after all. He received word from Dumbledore shortly after Hermione’s birthday that she seemed smitten with another. However, the old man’s insinuation that it was Black, having described her new object of interest as having similar coloring to himself, left him more humored than worried. Seeing Lupin nipping at her heels, though, had him slightly more guarded.

“At least Severus’ lady wasn’t paid to marry him.” Nikola replied.

Severus smirked in spite of himself.

He had expected Nikola to be cold and cruel, the way he came so highly recommended, and that he was strict, had lead Severus to believe he would be insulted at every turn. That it would be quite like his early Hogwarts days, only there would be no retaliating as he was under the man’s thumb.

But Ivan Nikola was actually quite pleasant. He was strict, yes. If either he or Karkaroff ruined a potion or spoiled an ingredient, there was yelling, and more cauldron scrubbing or lab cleaning than was ever necessary. By hand. Igor was appalled each time. Severus merely took his punishment without a word. The benefits of a half-blood upbringing, he imagined. If there was a truly stupid idea, something that happened rarely for either apprentice, Nikola was quite liberal with the insults, and in three different languages. Aside from those moments, though, the man had a dry wit he was quick to use at any moment, uniting them all in their passion for the craft, and their unfortunate lack of looks.

Evenings were frequently spent with port and the potion’s journals, and while Nikola did not allow either of them to write home often, part of his desire to have them focused only on their craft as much as possible, he did allow both young men to share stories of home. Igor was always willing to divulge, pleased to hear himself talk as much as he was pleased to talk of himself. Severus had limited his sharing to his mother, his time working with Bob in the gardens, and Hermione.

“At least Yvonne agreed.” Karkaroff boasted.

“Yes, for a price.” Severus replied. “I may not be betrothed in any official capacity, but I earned Hermione’s promise to wait with nothing more than a six-year-old scarf, and a used text book.”

Nikola laughed, clapping Severus on the back with great pride.

“My wife, she’d have liked you.” Nikola said. “Tried to take you as ours. Had we sons, she’d have wanted them to be like you.”

“And how are your daughters?” Severus asked politely.

“Well.” Nikola replied.

Severus knew better than to ask further. He was, after all, a spy. He’d pieced everything he needed together to know Nikola was the kind of Death Eater he wanted to be around. To emulate.

The revel in which it was confirmed to Severus that the other two men were, indeed, Death Eaters, happened just before Hermione’s birthday. When the burn pierced his arm, the other two men hissed, and then after a pause, they all summoned their masks and departed. When they arrived, it was a scene Severus hadn’t expected: a celebration.

The man whom he watched burn in the woods the night he took his mark had been joined in the afterlife by his family, and in the process, the Death Eater’s had taken out an auror. There were drinks, a feast, and most disturbingly of all, and orgy.
Severus had never thought he would be so repulsed by sex in his life.

“Will you not partake, Severus?” The Dark Lord asked as many of the younger Death Eaters, and about half of the older, had gleefully leaped into the fray.

“If I may pass, my Lord. I wish to have relations solely with the woman I intend to marry. Not only to keep myself pure, but to prevent a possible problem in the future. One can not trust that a child would not be conceived when lust is so keenly felt.” He’d replied, happy to see his answer was accepted by the Dark Lord.

“Wise, Severus. Quite wise. I, too, do not find myself straying from one lady.” The Dark Lord had said, his eyes falling on a woman with dark curls who was more interested in watching than joining. Bellatrix Black, Severus had recalled, though he thought her married now. “Your daughters must be of age now, Ivan” The Dark Lord had suddenly said to Nikola. “Perhaps you would like to introduce her to some of your brothers? They may find one among them that will make a good husband. Or lover.”

Nikola had paled. “They are … not within my reach, my Lord. They have left to be with my late wife’s family in Russia.”

“That is a shame.” The Dark Lord said. “Please, enjoy the evening.” He had said, and then went off to join Bellatrix.

“I do not wish to participate in such distasteful act.” Nikola said when they were alone. “Nor watch. We go. Bar down the road, good for people like us, yeah?”

And so, Severus left with Nikola, the excuse of following his master on the tip of his tongue should it be needed.

It had turned out it wasn’t. And more so, it was better that he’d left after all.

The bar was filled with mostly Death Eaters, or those of their ilk. Perhaps they were of mixed blood, but hadn’t the talent Severus had to peek the interest of the Dark Lord. Maybe they were mixed in a way too obvious for those were wanted purity to accept them. Either way, it was the best place for them to go, masks shrunk and fit inside their robes.

“Vodka. We drink.” Nikola announced.

Wizard Vodka, he had learned, was not something to drink lightly. It was potent, a little onion-y, and went to your head faster than Felix felicium.

Which was why Severus had only done two shots before he had chased his second with a few drops of that wonderful potion when his master wasn’t looking. He’d been carrying his winning bottle around for so long, he’d almost forgot he had it.

And then the trouble had started. Someone had walked in, Severus couldn’t remember who, and took exception to a half-blood and non-British wizard drinking in what he deemed “his bar.” His friends hadn’t liked it either, and a fight broke out before Severus really knew he was participating in one.

In the end, not a single unforgiveable was used on the five men who were in a pile, twitching and whimpering. Nor, really, had they been maimed.

“You use unexpected on Dark Wizards.” Nikola had nodded, clapping Severus on the back with approval. “I tell our brothers, ‘no need for blood shed. Do the same torture with few jinxes. All dark
spells, you have to mean them. Intention.”

“Intention,” Severus agreed, lifting his shot glass to Nikola. The older man had laughed heartily, giving cheers, and continuing on.

And that was how Severus had earned his place. How the Dark Lord began to take more notice of him. His intention. He had been successful when others hadn’t, in breaking a victim, getting them to plead for death with well placed stinging or engorging hexes. Some called him soft, the Dark Lord called him clever, creative. And the fact that he wouldn’t hesitate with a curse when it would be thought to be needed had ensured his cover as a genuine Death Eater was completely intact.

Just as it should be.

December 27th, 1977

Severus had arrived at the Malfoy’s just before Nikola and Karkaroff, the latter requiring the side-along apparition as he’d never been to the manor before.

Severus took that time to straighten his sleeves, adjust his cravat, hope for the hundredth time that he was presentable despite his hair being a bit greasier than he’d like, and that he was merely in a nicer frock coat than the one he’d worn around the lab.

It had been his fault, really. He hadn’t been paying attention in the early afternoon, and just as his seven-hour potion was about to be completed, his stirring rod slipped off the rim of the cauldron and into the potion, agitating it in such a way that it ruined it. The kicker was that, according to Nikola, the cedar stirring rod had to rest above the potion as it somehow increased the strength and longevity of the arthritis relief.

He’d cursed, and desperately wanted to throw the cauldron across the room, but he refrained. Instead, without Nikola needing to say a word, Severus banished the ruined potion and started again. He forfeited his shower, and settled for cleansing charms. He had to forfeit changing into the expensive dress robes his mother had sent for Christmas, and settled for transfiguring his frock coat to have gold embroidery, and his cravat to a deep green. It wouldn’t win him any beauty awards, and may not even earn him any points with Hermione, but there was a nod of approval from his master, and smile of pride that Severus was starting to crave, and that had made it worth setting aside his vanity for perfection of craft.

“She’ll be here tonight?” Nikola asked after he and Karkaroff were straightened out.

“She was invited.” Was the only certain response Severus could give.

She’d written him twice since Hogsmeade, and in neither letter did she say for certain she would be there. She spoke of her studies, how she settled on Arithmancy as her first master, breaking Minerva’s heart. She wrote of she, Lily, and the Marauders creating a new map after Pettigrew lost the original. But she never said if they would see one another.

Part of him hoped he would, another hoped he wouldn’t.

There had been a … festive gathering a couple of nights before. The Dark Lord, it seemed, thought it
would be amusing to terrify a bunch of muggles on Christmas night, destroying a church in a small,
thankfully remote village. It hadn’t been pleasant, and Severus was forced to kill for the first time
since his father. It was that, or allow that poor, young woman to continue suffering when she’d
already been tortured and worse by more than a half dozen Death Eaters. But more than that, he
destroyed homes, lives.

He may have missed her terribly, but he worried he wouldn’t be able to face her. That perhaps she
would be better off with the likes of Lupin.

The party was in full swing when they arrived, which was expected. The witches in their finery, the
wizards in their cups.

There was no sign of the Dark Lord, oddly enough, and Severus noted the host of the evening
seemed a mix of miffed and relieved.

There was also a distinct lack of Narcissa at his side.

“Nikola, Karkaroff,” Lucius greeted each man with a hand shake. “Welcome to the manor, please do
indulge yourselves.”

“And the Dark Lord?” Karkaroff asked, sneering at the sight before him.

“Unfortunately, he was not able to accompany us this evening.” Lucius replied.

Severus looked around once more, and noticed that there were some familiar faces not around that
normally were. “Did you have competition this eve?” Severus asked as his Master and fellow entered
the throng of people.

“Yes,” Lucius said through his teeth. “Bella and her husband decided that they simply had to have a
party themselves. Make it a truly pureblood affair.”

“Well, if it is any consolation, regardless of my blood status, I would have much rather had been here
than there.”

Lucius smirked. “I wonder why that is.” He stepped aside, and Severus frowned as he stepped
forward. He scanned the crowd, trying to find her, for that was what Lucius had to have been hinting
at, but he couldn’t see Hermione anywhere.

Until suddenly he felt eyes on him, and he whipped his head back to the cluster of women he
scanned over before.

And he stopped breathing.

Then immediately had wished he’d allowed his vanity to come to the surface earlier in the evening.

Hermione was radiant. Her curls were exaggerated in the best way, pinning on her head with only a
lock or two cascading down. Her dress was deep charcoal gray, fluttering at the bottom like a flag in
the wind, and the top wrapped around her torso in such a way that her upper bare was back save for
the fabric draped over each of her shoulder. She smiled at him, warm and coy, and then excused
herself from the others.

They met half way to one another, and she bowed her head with a little curtsy before offering her
hand. “Apprentice Snape.” She greeted, her voice sounding a touch huskier than normal.

“Miss Granger.” He said, taking her hand, and kissing her knuckles. “You look exquisite.”
“Thank you.” She said, a pretty blush coloring her cheeks. “I like the frock coat.”

He smirked, “I’m not sure if I should be pleased, or disturbed. If the context were clearer.”

“You would likely go with di-” she cut off with a gasp. “The latter.” She finished quickly.

Severus merely hummed in reply, stroking her hand with his thumb. “Before I spend the rest of my evening with you in my arms, I think I must extend some introductions.” He said, turning and tucking her hand in this elbow while he scanned the room.

As he found Nikola speaking with some other masters, Karkaroff as close to his side as he could probably get, Severus lead Hermione in their direction.

“Master Nikola, if I may interrupt.” He said as he approached, the Masters’ laughter quieting on the request. “I would like to introduce to you Miss Hermione Granger-McGonagall. Hermione, my Master, Ivan Nikola.”

“Granger?” Nikola said as he took Hermione’s offered free hand. “As in the famous pioneer?”

“A distant relation. Unfortunately, I was unable to learn more from my family before I lost my parents.” She swiftly explained as she gave a dainty curtsy. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir. I hear from Severus rarely, but when I do he speaks most highly of you.”

“And I think quite highly of him.” Nikola smiled.

“You had best,” Another one of the masters spoke up. “Snatched him away before one of us could get to him?”

“You said you could not take apprentice, Asimov.”

“Had I known it was this man who was searching for one, I would have adjusted my answer. When I inquired, I was informed young Mr Snape here was but sixteen, and only in his sixth year of schooling. Had I known he would graduate a year ahead….”

“We all would have, Asimov.” Another, quite British Master replied. “But enough, we can not change the past. Now, Miss Granger, should you be interested…?”

“I’m afraid I’ve chosen Arithmancy.” She replied.

“Probably for the best that there not be two Master Snapes in the field of potions.” Asimov said, studying Hermione in a way that made Severus clench his teeth.

“Quite,” Hermione replied.

Nikola turned to Severus. “As long as I see you in the laboratory by ten tomorrow morning, you are free to do what you wish, with whom you wish, for as long as wish for the rest of the night.”

“Thank you, Master.” Severus said with deep bow, offering another to the masters, and then turned himself and Hermione to the dance floor. He needed to hold her, and this was the best way to do so in polite company.

“I wasn’t sure if I would see you.” Severus said after they’d done a few turns.

“I didn’t want to make a promise I couldn’t keep.” Hermione replied. “Dumbledore was making it difficult for me to leave. He said he would already have you here, and he believed I wouldn’t be expected to attend without you. In fact, he seemed quite convinced that you object to my presence.”
“No.” He said with a subtle shake of his head. “I would never.”

“Good.” She smiled warmly.

“You seem different.” He noted, taking in the way she had done her charms, making her seem older, more mature. More pureblood.

She leaned in to him. “I wanted to play the part. To be the part for you. And I didn’t believe the type of women that would be here would wish to dress in bright colors.”

Severus smirked. “Did you wear playful colors to the Yule Ball this year?”

“Actually, that was canceled.” Hermione said thoughtfully. “Apparently the former Professor Schamander was so incensed by what Dumbledore allowed to take place within Hogwarts, that she went to the ministry and the board and promptly told them all she was now vowed to keep secret. The fact that more than three dozen students were intoxicated at a school function, intended or not, had the lot of them decide it was best to do away with the Yule ball. Of course, they blamed budget cuts.”

“Of course.” Severus twitched his lips.

They fell silent for a time, and Severus merely enjoyed holding her. As they moved, he took note of those around him. At this point, he recognized the true, inner circle Death Eaters by their voices. And as they went past various crowds and couples, he was putting faces to those names. Masks had been worn at all times, and while he knew some of them without them, now he was certain he knew them all. He was mentally composing an up to date list for Alastor when he noted Lucius approaching them.

“I hate to interrupt,” He said, glancing about the room. “But it turns out that Narcissa is in need of me, and I will have to step away. I merely wanted to extend the pair of you an invitation to one of the guest suites in the manor.”

Hermione blushed. “Is that appropriate.”

Lucius smirked. “More so than a room in any establishment. My father made me Lord of the manor, and so he has no say who stays here and in which room.” Lucius bowed to Hermione before turning to Severus to offer his hand.

In that quick, fleeting moment, without moving his lips, Severus softly whispered the spell to slip into his friend’s mind and quickly wish he hadn’t.

He watched Lucius leave the room, a dozen ideas already turning in his head.

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“Not here.” Severus replied, glancing around the room to see if anyone was paying any attention to them. They were as anonymous as they could be, so he turned her toward the entrance of the ball room with a hand on her lower back. Once out in the hallway, and elf hopped from one foot to another before leading them to the east side.

It was probably a good ten minutes of climbing stairs and winding down corridors before they were led to a large, gorgeous bedroom that held its own seating are. Lucius had even had the foresight (or perhaps the presumption) of sending up wine.

When the elf disappeared with a pop, Severus led Hermione to the divine and sat down beside her.
“What’s the matter, Severus?” She asked quietly.

He huffed. “It would seem Narcissa is having a similar problem that Delia had.” He said what he saw in Lucius’ mind.

“But you fixed that.” Hermione replied. “You even submitted a commentary on it.”

“Yes,” Severus nodded. “But that had been before I was under the tutelage and thumb of a master. In multiple ways. Nikola would likely approve of the gifting of the changes to Narcissa, or even to brew the potion for her myself. The Dark Lord would deem it worthy to further the Malfoy line, I believe but as Bellatrix hasn’t had any children from her union, it may be that those things matter little to him. And then there is Dumbledore, who would tell me not to do it, I’m sure.”

“And what does Severus want to do?” She asked. “Set aside all those other factors, forget everything else. Would you do that for them?”

“Yes.” He said without hesitation.

“Then ask your Potion’s master if you could do it for them,” Hermione replied, and she seemed to be thinking or calculating something before adding. “But, perhaps, maybe it would be better if you wait until after your mastery. So, you can make the decision with one less master to worry about.”

Severus narrowed his eyes at her, “You know something.”

“I may know things. Should that really surprise you?” She retorted, crossing her arms in a huff. He swore he saw a crackle of power around her curls.

“Had you known a young Malfoy in the future?” he asked.

“You know I can’t say.” She replied.

“I am aware, yes.” He said, moving toward her slowly, like a predator with his prey. He kissed her neck, saying against her skin, “But I do know some things. Such as how I have already begun to look like the man you knew.” He nipped her skin, hearing her gasp and being quite pleased with the results. “And how you find such a man … attractive.”

“I didn’t always.” She reminded him.

“No, but you do now, do you not?”

“Immensely,” She sighed, one of her hands going into his hair, the other caressing the buttons of his coat.

He pushed her down on the divan by his presence in her personal space alone, shifting from her neck to her lips, tasting her happily as she began to work on his buttons.

Severus spared one, fleeting thought of how he could repay his master for allowing him these hours of freedom, before Hermione’s fingers found the hairs on his chest, and all intelligent took a back seat in his brain.
The burn pulled him from his slumber, and he frowned before his heart plummeted into his stomach. He looked at Hermione, sleeping beside him, and he feared he wouldn’t be able to bid her a proper fair well. Walking away from her without looking back once again. She was going to hate him.

A knock sounded on his door, soft, as though wanting to be heard and not.

“Severus,” Lucius called out.

He rose from the bed, pulling on his pants and trousers in one go before he opened the door.

Light from the hall flooded into the room through the crack, and he glanced behind him to see if it would disturb Hermione. “What is it? I’ve been summoned, I need to prepare.”

“The Dark Lord is here.” Lucius replied. “He’s in the ballroom. There was … there was an incident at the LeStranges. He wants us there.”

“Is it only those who bare a mark?” Hermione asked, startling both men, and causing Severus to turn to face her.

She was sitting up in bed, the blanket pulled to her chest, hair only a little tousled from sleep and their earlier activities.

“No,” Lucius replied. “The wives and companions of this evening’s guests are there, and no one is allowed to leave the manor. But you do not have to come, if you do not wish.”

“I will be down in a moment.” Severus said, and at Lucius’ nod, he closed the door and renewed the lights with a wave of his hand.

He was genuinely surprised to find Hermione already reaching for her gown and putting it on.

“It isn’t going to be pleasant.” Severus warned her, hoping she would stay away. He dressed as quickly as he could, cheating with a spell he’d read about to fasten the many buttons on his coat.

“I know.” Hermione replied, turning toward him. There was a resolve in her posture, though fear in her eyes. She was entering the snake pit, the real snake pit, as the Death Eater’s lady she was meant to be. The future wife he hoped she would become.

Presentable. Severus took her hand, focused his energy on the mark on his arm, and apparated them both outside the ballroom.

They entered with another couple Death Eaters who, by their states, had been in equally pleasant company. And from the disgruntled look in a couple of their eyes, had been right in the middle of enjoying the companionship.

The Dark Lord was in the middle of the ballroom, many giving him a wide berth as he passed in a circle. He glanced up, taking in the room, then came to a stop.

“We had some unexpected guests at the LeStranges this evening. The aurory.” The Dark Lord said in a cold, stiff tone. “How they knew we would be there, how they knew there would be so many of my most loyal followers, I do not yet know. But as this event had been arranged after the traitor was taken care of, I must conclude that one among you is a spy.”

Severus refused to react, and Hermione only flinched the slightest bit. He did notice more than one nervous face, a shift of weight on person or another.
“Rookwood!” The Dark Lord called, and the man came forward, kneeling before his master.

Severus watched, hoping he appeared as utterly disinterested as he wanted to. Rookwood whined, his aw clenched and his body tight as Voldemort held Rookwood’s head and bore into his mind. When the Dark Lord was done, he was released, and another Death Eater was called. It appeared the search was random, and Severus imagined that it was also the wood-be Death Eaters that were selected as well, seeing how he did not find some of them familiar.

“Hermione,” the Dark Lord called, and Severus went cold.

She let go of him, head held his, chin pointed out. She walked with a confidence Severus did not have. His heart pounded, and his palms grew damp as he watched her bow before the Dark Lord, low, deep, before she righted herself, and seemed to look the devil directly in the eye.

Her gasp came not when the once Tom Riddle touched her cheek, but likely when he barreled into her mind. Severus watched helplessly as blood trickled down her nose, tears from her eyes, both staining the silk-like material of her dress.

“I am sorry to have caused you distress.” The Dark Lord said suddenly, withdrawing his hand from Hermione. “I must be certain.”

“Of course, my Lord.” She said, bowing again before heading back toward Severus. Her head was held high once more, and she conjured a handkerchief as she crossed the ballroom.

As she dabbed her face, cleaning it up, Severus resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her soundly. How had she done that? He knew the Dark Lord had been in her head before, and she didn’t let their secrets be known then, but the secrets have gotten so much bigger, more dangerous since then. He settled for placing his hand on her back, and waited for his inevitable turn to be called.

“I bet it’s Snape.” Donovan Mucilber declared. The room instantly turned to Severus, but he merely maintained the air of boredom. “He was hanging around Mudbloods and blood traitors before I was tossed out of Hogwarts. Bet his woman is one, too.”

“I have just been in her mind.” The Dark Lord hissed. “She is not but a school girl, too focused on studies and Severus to give time or energy to any other cause. But … I have not been in Severus’.”

Without waiting for an invitation, Severus stepped forward. He dropped to bended knee before the Dark Lord, bowing his head low, pushing the embarrassment of Hermione seeing him like this deep behind his occlumency shields.

Without warning, sharp nails bit into the skin by his temples, and his head was turned so his dark eyes were pierced by red ones.

The surface image, of course, was the evening. He allowed a color of disappointment to tinge his memory of being informed the Dark Lord wouldn’t be present. It then skipped back to filter through his days with Nikola. The Hogsmeade run was drawn up, but the involvement of the Marauders was altered to only include Lupin. Black was easily swapped for his brother, Pettigrew for a nameless girl. The Dark Lord went as far back as the evening in the woods, when Severus was marked. He lingered on the aftermath, but the pain had fuzzed his head so badly, Severus barely had any recollection of what was happening, who was there when he returned, and so forth. For all the Dark Lord knew, it was just Hermione there, caring for his new mark.

“He is loyal.” The Dark Lord sounded almost angry by this. He turned to Mucilber. “Loyal! And you declare him for what reasons?”
“He is a half blood, my Lord. And was seen frequently with those who worship Albus Dumbledore.”

“He has renounced his disgusting father and the retched heritage it brought him when he killed the man. He is as pure as me. And if he is seen around blood traitors it is because those same blood traitors are attempting to urge his lady to leave him for them. I have seen it. Minds can not lie, Mucilber.” He then turned to Severus, and in a much more measured tone, said, “You are a loyal follower, Severus. And as such, I will allow Mucilber’s punishment for so readily declaring you suspect to come from your wand.”

“My Lord?” Mucilber half protested as Severus headed the non-verbal command to rise.

The Dark Lord shot his wand out to Mucilber, and the man was on his knees in an instant. Cruciatius curse, likely. Severus had noticed it to be a favorite of the Dark Lord’s. “I said Severus would dole out your punishment, and so he will. I suggest you come forward Mucilber.”

Donovan rose the moment he was able, and walked with shake legs to stand before Severus. He was smug, as though he was sure he could survive anything Severus doled out. But there was something else there, too, just behind the eye. Mucilber had place himself in an odd position, angled. He was hiding something.

Severus pulled his wand from his sleeve, and began to cast what he knew would be a long, drawn-out jinx.

Mucilber began to laugh. “A tickle jinx, Snape?” He said through laughter.

Severus smirked. “Have you ever been tickled for any length of time? It’s quite fascinating how your body reacts in the beginning, isn’t it? The laughter. Did you know that it is merely a way for your body to relieve the stress of an attack? It is what I’m doing, you see. Attacking you. Slowly.” He said, noting panic was replacing the cocky in Mucilber’s eye even as he laughed louder, harder. “I’m caressing all your pain receptors, you see. And slowly, ever so slowly, you’ll wish you could bring yourself to beg me to stop.”

He continued on, wondering if the Dark Lord would ask him to cease sometime soon. As the seconds passed, Mucilber began to cry, clutching at himself around the waist as if that would somehow relieve the constant bombardment of the jinx. His eyes kept darting to the same place behind the Dark Lord, and it became too much for Severus to bare to not look.

“What is it, Severus?” the Dark Lord asked.

Severus hesitated only a moment. “I believe he truly suspects someone else.” He replied. “Someone over there. It’s where he keeps looking.”

The Dark Lord followed Mucilber’s gaze, and without ordering Severus to cease, he began to rip through the minds of those in the vicinity.

There was the scent of urine hanging in the air as the Dark Lord went through Death Eaters and guests alike, until he came to a young man that Severus did not recognize.

“Enough, Severus.” The Dark Lord said after but a few moments. He studied the man he held by the chin, then turned slowly toward Severus who had indeed ended his torment despite the laughter still coming in hysterical waves from Mucilber. “You and Hermione may resume your intimate celebrations. All of you, return to that which you were engaged in before I had the misfortune of having to put a pause on this eve’s entertainment. I wish you all a happy rest of the Yule season.”
Severus bowed, but did not stick around to find out what else would happen. He had a feeling Mucilber and the young man would be dragged to the dungeon below the manor for a special sort of torture on the Dark Lord could dream up.

He headed back to Hermione, but stopped short when he saw horrified look in her eyes. It was almost subtle; had he not known her so well, he may have thought she was unaffected by it all. He approached, slowly, reaching for her and all the while expecting her to flinch away. She, instead, joined him at once, and allowed him to lead them back to their room.

The way there was nerve wracking. He checked constantly to see if she was terrified of him, if she seemed in anyway uncomfortable with him now that she’d seen him essentially torture a man.

He opened the door, waited for her to pass through, and then slowly followed.

She was waving her wand around the room, setting up a ward of some kind. Once finished, she turned to him, her voice shaking. “I suppose you’ll be escorting me back to Hogwarts in the early morning.” She asked, moving to unwrap her dress.

“Yes.” Severus frowned. “After an evening like this, I won’t have the luxury of staying in bed with you until our time together is up.”

“Well,” Hermione said, her dress pooling at her feet. “I’m sure if we put in the effort, we could possibly return to enjoying our time together as we had earlier. If not, well, I do miss simply being held by you.” She gave him a smile, a genuine one, then laughed nervously. “Oh, don’t look at me like that, Severus. I was well aware that this wasn’t the sort of group that sat around picking flowers and braiding them into each other’s hair. Nor did I ever suspect you to not be a little dark yourself. Now come over here. You’re entirely too clothed, and I am in desperate need to feel you. It’s not precisely pleasant, having the Dark Lord rip through your mind, and … and I refuse to allow a bunch of Dark Wizards to spoil my night.”

He should be used to it by now, her unwavering love, her constant faith in him. But Severus was sure there would never be a day that he wouldn’t be shocked to find her still at his side, despite all that happened, and will continue to. He suspected Hermione was helping him hold on to his sanity as well as his humanity, and he’d have hated to see what would have happened to either had she decided to walk away, or had never shown up in his life at all.

“As the lady wishes,” He said, getting to work on his buttons, and shoving the memory of the evening out of mind.

January 9th, 1978

Severus,

As you requested. Be sure to go through the proper channels before you do this.

Happy Birthday,
Love,

Eileen Prince

Severus,

Happy Birthday. I had hoped this would have been ready in time for Christmas, but as it wasn’t, this is why I apologized so profusely over the boots as a gift. Yes, yes, I know you love them, and I know they were better quality than your other ones, but it’s really not the point. I apologize, again, for the delay. But I hope this makes up for it.

All my love,

Hermione.

Severus stared at the platinum lined cauldron. It was small, of course, and would have cost more galleons than he’d have ever wanted her to spend on him, but it was beautiful.

“From your Hermione?” Nikola asked, picking up the cauldron and looking it over. “Marry her now. She knows quality, and buys you good tools.”

Severus laughed. “Ah, yes. Marry the witch for her desire to stock my lab.”

“People have married for worse reasons.” Nikola said, glancing at Igor before continuing his work.

February 14th, 1978

“Are you sure you can’t stay?” Hermione asked, already knowing the answer.

When she saw him coming out of Minerva’s office in the morning when she was heading to transfiguration, she couldn’t believe her luck. But then, he was heading to Dumbledore’s office, and it wasn’t until near the end of lunch before she was finally able to see him.

“I can’t.” He affirmed, holding her as close as was polite. They were out by the gates, and while no
one came out this way, Hagrid did have his hut not far away, and who knew if Dumbledore or anyone else could see them. “Nikola only gave us until one off, and it’s nearing that time.”

“I wish I had known you were coming in the first place.” She sighed, resting her head on his chest.

“I do not. I had a favor to ask of Minerva, and then I was fully expecting to be tied up with Dumbledore the rest of the time. I had no hope of seeing you at all, to be frank. I had no desire to make a promise to see you, today of all days, and not be able to follow through. This, right here, is more than I could have hoped for.”

“It’s getting bad, isn’t it?” She asked quietly. “The war outside these walls.”

“It’s certainly not getting better. The Dark Lord is becoming more bold, believing now that he has a few of his followers in the ministry that nothing can stop him from over turning it. One way or another, he will try and get someone in the school. And then… I don’t want to think on it.”

She exhaled long, and low. “I wish there was more I could do.” She said.

A moment of silence passed between them as Hermione ignored the cold just to breath him in and feel his warmth.

“Dumbledore informed me you were quite popular this morning.” Severus said, and she couldn’t tell if his tone was teasing or jealous.

She lifted her head and looked at him. A smirk, only slight. His eyes were dark, but they held some humor. His jaw was tight, though.

“The chocolates were from Sirius. Mostly because I went on and on the weekend past how insipid this holiday is. Especially when Lily kept going on and on how alone I was. And if you couldn’t be bothered to send more than a letter every two months…. And then today, of course, she and Remus both had to point out that this is the second time we have been within touching distance of one another, and not only had I not been informed ahead of time, but that you may not have bothered seeing me at all.”

“So why are you waiting?” Severus asked, and Hermione was taken aback by the question. “You and I both know there is at least another year of this, of this barely seeing each other…..”

She placed a finger on his lips. “Shut up, Severus. Do not continue down that road, please.”

“I just want to remind you that you have a choice.” He said, pecking her finger, before reaching for her hand. “Your fingers are ice. You should head inside.”

“I suppose.” She relented. “I miss you.” She reminded him.

“And I never tire of hearing how my feelings are reciprocated, in every way. We will likely not cross paths again until closer to the summer.”

“Well then expect my owl.”

“I look forward to it.” He said, and surprised her with a sound kiss before heading for the gate.

She shook herself out of her surprise, was about to go watch him leave when the crack of his disappearance broke through the air, and her heart.

Bloody hell she missed him. And it killed her not being there for him when she knew he must have
been going through hell. The Death Eaters were making the papers more and more, if not for their torment of Muggleborns, but for their near breeches of the Statute of Secrecy while baiting muggles. She heard stories whispered in the corridors of aurors going missing, or tortured so soundly they gave up their badges from the shame of being broken. And then, there was the other side. Often, there were words of Death Eater arrests, mostly young ones who were too arrogant to believe they needed to hide. Each day, not hearing from Severus, had gotten worse.

Dumbledore would merely smile serenely the few times she’d gone to him to seek a clue as to how he was doing. Then he would tell her not to worry about it, offer her a peppermint, and then inquire after Remus or Sirius. The first time she’d left his office, she found herself spending her entire evening with Remus, laughing and talking. And while it was an enjoyable evening, when he’d asked why she sought him out, she couldn’t give him a proper reason. When the second time led her to Sirius, and suddenly having the inexplicable urge to cuddle him, she vowed off the peppermints from Dumbledore’s office.

The trudge back up to the castle was slow, cold, and lonely. Yes, the holiday was insipid, and no, she was not angry in the least that Severus had done nothing for her, but it was a painful reminder that they were apart. That, while she knew nothing would actually happen to him, that she could still lose him. She knew his future, and she was sure that his home life was happy indeed. She was just not sure if she were included.

“Hermione.” Remus’ voice called, and she noticed that the lunch break was over. Except, well, he shouldn’t have been outside.

She watched as Sirius waved to her, gave a quick one to Remus, and then ran to catch up with Peter, James, and Lily as they headed to magical creatures.

She came up the path a little more, glancing at the others now and then until she was standing before Remus. “We’re going to be late for Runes.”

“No, we won’t.” Remus replied. “It’s been canceled. Professor Niward hit Professor Darcy with some sort of spell during lunch. Unfortunately, whatever it was has knocked him out cold, and so no Runes for the day.”

“How advantageous.” Hermione replied as they headed inside the castle.

“In what way?” Remus asked, glancing behind them.

“In the way that I am not in the mind frame for studies, I’m afraid.” She said, and found her feet following a path to one of the enclosed courtyards.

“I imagine.” Remus said as he followed her outside.

It was an odd contradiction, the snow on the ground while the air felt warm. Perpetual warming charms, and a preservation spell on the snow itself. Odd, really, as it wasn’t as though the students enjoyed the stuff much in the small space.

Hermione moved to one of the benches and plopped down. As Remus joined her, she picked up a handful of snow and began molding it into a ball.

“It’s funny,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “I had known a man much like Severus in my old life. And while I respected him, I can’t say I particularly liked him. I held no ill feelings toward him, but he wasn’t pleasant. He certainly wouldn’t have been the sort of male I would have expected to fall for, and yet…” She stopped short as she felt her heart stutter. Too much information,
she supposed.

“Did you have any crushes in your old life?” He asked, and she peered at him to see the warm, friendly smile she had recalled seeing on his older self’s face. But then again, they were eighteen now, or nearly so. He was much closer to the age she’d originally known him than she wanted to admit. In just a couple years, the very boy he was asking about would be born.

“One.” She replied. “He was … well, he was much like … he’d have fit in with you lot, that’s for sure. More James and Sirius.” She wanted to be cheeky, adding a particular fondness for Peter, but her stuttered heart warned her not to.

“And nothing like Severus.” Remus chuckled.

She smiled, “No, he most certainly wasn’t. But why do you ask?”

“I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t have a particular type.” Remus replied, a bashfulness taking over his smile before it faded entirely. “You were surprised to see him again,” he said. “And it’s been the first and the last time you spent even a moment together. And even then, he hadn’t told you. He certainly wasn’t going to seek you out, and … Hermione, he barely writes. And when he does, it’s less than half a sheet of parchment.”

“He’s busy,” She said softly, looking down to the snow ball in her hand. “You know as well as I do that he has much more to occupy him than just an apprenticeship. I will not add to the weight of his pressures….” She stopped, frowning. Turning back to Remus, she said, “Wait, what makes you thin-”

It took her a moment for her brain to process that Remus’ mouth was on hers. His lips were moving, coaxing, attempting to stir her in some way, and that his hands were cupping her cheeks.

She made to slap him, and in the process shoved the snowball against his face and in his ear. He withdrew with a yelp.

“Remus!” She spat, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand as she took a step away from him.

He shook the snow off his face and out his hair, looking at her with sad, puppy dog eyes. It would have been amusing if she didn’t want to slap him again for good measure.

“Hermione. You have to know, you have to know how much I care for you, adore you. I may not give you the comfortable life Severus can give you, but I can make you happy.”

“I am happy.” She said through clenched teeth, her wand falling into her hand and giving her something to grip tightly.

“No, you aren’t.” Remus shook his head in pity. “You are terribly unhappy almost all of the time.”

“Of course, I’m not all smiles and warmth, the man I love is away and I never know if he’s safe.”

“You may love him, but are you certain he loves you?”

Her nostrils flared, her hair crackled, her body tensed. Had Severus had seen it, he would have later remarked on how attractive she was when she got riled up. She could almost hear his voice in her mind coaxing her, encouraging her.

“Are you certain he’s even waiting for you like you are him?”
She whipped her wand in Remus’ direction, and a flock of yellow canaries shot from the end and attacked the poor, unsuspecting werewolf.

Hermione watched the carnage for a moment with some satisfaction before she stormed back inside the castle. She would much rather spend the rest of her new, free time in the library or the common room reading. Or, perhaps, she could sneak in to her surrogate aunt’s office and hide there. Anywhere Remus wouldn’t find her.

—H—

She had been in Minerva’s office since leaving Remus in the courtyard. When the elder witch came in to find her office occupied, she said nothing. She did, however, seem to try and peek what Hermione was reading numerous times. She smirked.

“You know I’ve chosen Arithmancy as a field. I don’t think you could sway me to take up a second mastery in Transfiguration.”

Minerva startled, as if she didn’t realize she’d been caught snooping. “And why ever not?” She demanded. “I don’t think Severus would mind if you continued your education further. I don’t imagine he’d want the pair of ye settled down with children right away.”

Hermione snorted. “Since children would require us to see one another, and that likely won’t happen with a regular enough basis for a couple of years yet, I don’t think I have to worry about that. And I think we are getting a bit ahead of ourselves.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Besides, Severus and I might not make it to the end of the month, let alone longer.”

Why would ye say that?” Minerva asked, her voice deepening as if she were about to lay in to someone.

“Remus kissed me.” Hermione said softly, hoping that she was having a conversation with her aunt more so than her head of house. “It wasn’t welcomed, and he got both snow and a hex to the face to ensure him of my displeasure. But Severus has already had enough people whispering in his ear that other’s have been vying for my attention. He’s already worried that I wouldn’t wait, or that others have swayed my attention.”

“He’d be a right fool if he was angry at you for Mr Lupin’s transgressions.” She said sternly. “And all the whispers I know of involve a young man who quite clearly has no interest in ye.”

Hermione’s laugh was drowned out by the knock on the door.

“Yes?” Minerva called, and the door cracked open just enough for Sirius’ head to pop through.

“Professor McGonagall.” He said roguishly.

“Come in, Mr Black.” She said, waving him in. “I’m here in the capacity of Aunt at the moment, so you’ll excuse some liberties taken between myself and Hermione.”

“Yes, I had come to see if you were alright.” Sirius said, sitting in the empty chair beside Hermione.

“He told you?” She asked, already knowing the answer.
“He didn’t have to, to be honest.” Sirius replied. We were, umm….” He glanced at Minerva.

She rolled her eyes. “I think I’ll head to the kitchens for some tea.” She said as she stood up, setting her quill in its holder.

“Trust us alone together?” Sirius smirked.

“More than I’d trust you alone with Mr Lupin.” She said over her shoulder before leaving her office.

Sirius paled. “Well.”

“You were saying?” Hermione giggled.

“Yes. Right. Right, we were, uh… we were watching you on the map. Started after you left with Severus, actually. Remus wanted to see what was going on, and James, well, honestly, he was being a prat and seeing if there were any other guests on the map with Severus. Remus had said he was going to try and, well, talk to you when Severus left. We saw on the map how you guys were sitting together. And then for a few seconds you overlapped, and then you were very much not overlapping. He did say he was sure you would be excepting, but… well, Remus means well.”

“Remus is presumptuous.”

“Remus is in love with you.” Sirius countered. “I think he has been for as long as Snape has been. So, to him, all he sees is the man he views as the competition not paying you the attention you deserve.”

“And what do you see?” She asked.

“I see what Remus misses. The spark of joy in your eyes when you see him on chance. The way Snape’s posture changes when he spots you. I see short letters from a man who doesn’t waste words, and there always little touches Remus over looks. Don’t think I didn’t notice your birthday letter drenched in Amortentia. Or the holiday letter containing a sprig of mistletoe?” He said, arching his brow, and smirking as if he knew there was actually a secret there.

“You’re quite observant.” She noted. “How much of it is ensuring Severus is treating me well, and how much of it is waiting to see Remus come to an understanding.”

“Touché.” He said, sobering. “But Remus won’t see me like that.”

“Listen to you two, quarreling like an old married couple.” The memory of Severus remarking on the pair in the Shake her last night in her proper era came to her. She had remembered him all sneer, all anger, but now that she knew him, knew the man behind the front, she thought she could remember the twitch of a lip, the glint in his eye. The same sort of subtle mirth in Sirius’ despite the seriousness of the situation.

“Perhaps one day he will.” She countered.

Sirius snorted, “Who said I would want him to?”

“Oh please, Mr Black.” Minerva said as she came in, levitating a tray beside her. “If he wasn’t practically your brother, and taking Miss Evan’s into his room, we’d all have thought you and Mr Potter would be an item by now.”
April 2nd, 1978

Hermione,

I wish to start off this letter first by saying that you have nothing to apologize for. I am the one who must send my regrets, for I can not imagine how much you must have worried not hearing a word from me after a letter containing such information as it had.

If anything, I am, for lack any other word, impressed you even told me. Lupin’s kiss, being unwanted as it was, could have been something you kept to yourself for the sake of peace. Instead, you risked my anger, my jealousy, and your heart in telling me the truth. Your honesty, while admittedly incurring the former two, made me cherish having hold of your heart even more. Hermione, my love for you has not wavered in the slightest, and I am sorry, truly sorry, for the stress my late reply has undoubtedly put on you.

Lupin, however, will need to watch his back when next we meet.

I also feel I should inform you that Black had written me of the incident as well, and essentially asked I forgive his precious “Moony” his transgressions. All I can say is to pass along the message to Black that he should keep Lupin as far from me as possible when next we meet.

Now, to satisfy the wolf, what should I wax poetic about? How I miss being suffocated in my sleep? Waking to a mouthful of curl? I’d lament your lack of snoring, but even if that were the case, Karkaroff would truly take your place and surpass you. Your chatter? I haven’t had a textbook recited back to me in quite some time.

I will divert from the ways in which your absence is marked by noting this: Minerva was quite miffed about your lack of desire for a Transfiguration mastery. Prepare yourself to be gifted a few advanced texts come your birthday. You may be in a mastery all your own by then, but that will not stop her, I fear.

And on the topic of Mastery, I wished to inform you that I will be taking the first round of examinations late next month. With Karakroff. He is not pleased, but he could have easily been to the same point I am a year ago had he attempted more innovation. At least that’s my opinion.

I can write no more, I’m afraid. To speak more of you would be trite or repetitive, of my mastery narcissistic, and of other matters impossible. I look forward to your letters, even though I can not reply.

I do hope they keep coming,

Yours,

Severus
Hermione clutched the letter, happy tears streaming down her face as she reread it over and over. He wasn’t angry with her. He didn’t hate her, and while it was never explicitly said, he was waiting for her still. The relief was so strong, she was sure she radiated it. Looking out the window of the Gryffindor common room, she watched as many of her fellow students took to the grounds on an unusually hot day in spring after the Easter hols. She’d gotten the sudden urge to join them in a round about way, to sit beneath the tree that she and Severus had often claimed, to read the book he’d given her on her sixteenth birthday.

“A letter from Severus, I’m guessing?” Remus asked, and when Hermione turned to him, he gestured to her face. “You’re crying. It’s only ever because of him.”

“You aren’t going to try and kiss me again, are you?” She’d asked wearily.

Whether Remus had thought to do it himself, or Sirius had asked him to to keep the peace, Remus had apologized for the incident. Profusely. Publicly. Whether that was his round about way of ensuring Severus found out through the grape vine, or his strange version of chivalry, Hermione had forgiven him if only for the fact that he was willing to humiliate himself twice. He was also quite careful to keep any touch strictly within the platonic range, and to not bring up the very person they spoke of.

“No.” He said as he came up to sit with her on the window seat. “But I want you to know, I’m here. If you need a shoulder to cry on, I’ll provide.”

“How do you know they aren’t tears of joy?” She asked honestly.

Remus had seemed truly baffled by the notion. “Are they ever when it comes to Severus?”

She’d considered that. “I suppose you are right in the sense that, when I do cry over him, it’s not always pleasant. But it’s not all misery, either. Sometimes it’s fear, that maybe I’m going to lose him in the many ways that I could. Sometimes it’s frustration, because he has that way of avoiding things without outright doing so, or talk you into a corner.”

Remus merely nodded. “Well, when the inevitable heartbreak happens, I will be here.”

“What makes you think there will be heart break?” She asked.

He shrugged. “Lily and James. She made a good point when they split up: School romances never last.”

June 30th, 1978

It was a bittersweet thing, holding the piece of parchment in her hand, wearing the plain black robes with the Hogwarts tie. It wasn’t the tie she’d worn on the train her first day, the one she’d removed the night sorting hat declared her Gryffindor. It was borrowed, and she would give it back when the day was done. Hers hadn’t even been brought to her yet, for Hermione Granger had yet to be born, let alone receive her Hogwarts letter. But she’d graduated, top of her class, a string of Outstandings adorning her list of subjects. Strange, as she’d barely remembered studying for her NEWTs. Maybe it was because she was too busy ensuring the boys studied as they should. Which, had she graduated with the others like she was meant to, she’d have likely done with an entirely different generation.

“And that concludes our graduation ceremony, for this our Hogwarts School of Witch Craft and
Wizardry class of 1978.” Dumbledore pointed his wand into the air, shooting off sparks in the color of all four houses, red being more distinct than the others should anyone be paying attention.

The graduating class rose, lifted their wands into the air, and shot a spark of their own house color into the air. Hermione looked around and noted there was actually far less red than other house colors.

She missed one particular green spark more than she logically should.

As the others dispersed, Hermione tucked her wand in her sleeve, and reached up to loosen her tie. Approaching the stage placed on the Quidditch pitch, she made her way to the side with the stairs she’d ascended a student not thirty minutes before.

“Thank you for that, Aunt Min.” She said as she handed Minerva her tie.

The elder witch beamed before she wrapped her arms around Hermione in a tight embrace. “I’m pleased that there shall be no more Professor nonsense to come between us. Elinor is very keen to have you start your apprenticeship.”

“I’m quite keen myself, actually.” Hermione replied. “I could use a distraction.”

Minerva chuckled. “Well, find another way to fill the next couple weeks. We all need a break.”

Hermione would agree, but before she could say something, an over enthusiastic Ravenclaw bounded up to capture Minerva’s attention. With a wave, Hermione crept down the stage.

Bob and Delia were chatting with what looked to be old friends of theirs, so she didn’t want to interrupt them. Lily was busy introducing her friends to her parents, and the boys were no where to be seen. Dumbledore was watching her, a gentle smile on his face as if he was inviting her to have a chat, but she had no desire to speak to him.

Just as she was about to turn away from him, pretend she hadn’t noticed his seeking gaze, she noticed his smile lost its weight, and almost faded altogether.

Frowning, she turned her head.

“Severus.” She said with genuine surprise, the pleasure of seeing him not outweighing the fact she had so little expectations of seeing him.

“Hello.” He said, his lips twitching as if he wanted to smile. She waited a moment, hoping he would hold her, but he shifted from foot to foot. Clearing his throat, he said, “I thought perhaps we could take a walk.”

“O-okay,” She said, turning once again to glance at the headmaster. He seemed pleased, nodding to himself.

She shook it off, and then followed with Severus as he led her off the pitch, back toward the grounds. He said nothing until they were crossing the bridge, veering toward the lake.

“You must be pleased, top of the class.” He said, indicating the pin on her lapel.

She glanced down at it, then to him. “My competition had left already.” She said to his stoic visage. His lips twitched in that attempted smile again, but then he shifted his hands behind his back, over the robes that hadn’t flowed enough to billow. Robes much like the ones she knew from her past.
“I do not believe I would have scored quite as high as you in some subjects. I think you’d have likely taken the award either way.”

He brought them to the tree by the lake that they had sat beneath many a time, where most of their best memories were made. Something about this one was different.

They stood side by side in silence for some time, watching the ripples made by the giant squid, noting the people coming down from the pitch in the distance.

“We became friends here,” he said.

“We did,” She agreed. “It’s witness some of my favorite memories.” She said, a pleading note to her voice as she heard the formal tone to his voice, felt the space between them more keenly. Heard Remus’ words whispering in the back of her mind.

“Mine as well. It is here I realized that you’d become much more to me than I’d realized.” He looked at his feet, and Hermione turned away, looking once more to the lack. “And so, it is here that I wish to end the way things are between us.”

Her eyes shut, only to fly back open when she’d felt his touch on her palm, her fight surged through her, and then died upon finding him on bended knee.

“I could ask you to keep waiting, but I have nothing more to offer you as a promise than this ring. So, I will ask, Hermione Granger. After all you’ve seen, all we’ve been through, and all we’ve yet to face, will you marry me?”

Chapter End Notes

Oh come on! It's not like you didn't know it was going to happen for these two. Back to the 90s next chapter. It may be a bit before it comes out Nano is helping the writing part, but a chest cold and a busy micro business is taking up some of that precious spare time.
“Why does it sound like a herd of elephants are stomping through your house?” Aurora asked Harry just after seven o’clock, not thirty minutes after Molly had sent the lot of them up to the library for cake.

Harry frowned, setting down his plate and pushing himself off the floor. He crossed the room to the library door and peeked out, then stretched a bit further. He darted quietly out the room, then swooped back in. “Order meeting.” He said, and the rest of them all moved as softly as they could to stand and snoop with him.

From the banister, they could see people coming in, many still covered with cloaks and keeping their identities secret.

“That’s your parents,” Draco pointed out quietly. “Why didn’t they say anything when they dropped us off earlier?”

“Probably didn’t want you guys snooping.” George offered as an explanation.

“Which is why we should use this.” Fred said, showing them a set of ears with a string between them.

“What is that?” Harry asked quietly, glancing over the rail to see who else was coming.

“Extendable ears.” George replied. “We can stay up here and listen in, even when they think we won’t be able to.”

The door opened again, and everyone glanced down as best they could.

“Professor Dumbledore is here.” Luna said. “I suppose that means they’ll be getting started soon.”

“We should wait a moment,” Draco said. “If it’s a meeting, they’ll probably have minutes or something to take time in the beginning. It would do us no good to drop that thing down, only to have a last-minute arrival spot it and rat us out.”

“What do you know, Malfoy?” Ron asked, though the vehemence in which he used to say Draco’s name wasn’t there.

Ginny still smacked him for being a prat.

Draco merely rolled his eyes.

The lot of them had been spending a lot of time together over the last four weeks. Aunt Cissy had given Draco permission to be at the Snapes as much as he would like, and so was able to go with Aurora to the Weasley’s or the Black/Potter residence whenever the opportunity presented itself. And while Ron still seemed perturbed by Draco’s presence, their bickering and animosity simmered.
down with no obvious house ties to remind them they were supposed to be rivals. At least, they had most of the time.

But they weren’t normally about the Grimmauld place when there was an Order meeting. It had always been conveniently timed when the lot of them were having a quidditch match in the field between Luna’s and the Weasleys, Mr Lovegood supposedly watching over them, though he was far more focused on his magazine than the children. That, or the lot of them were encouraged to go explore muggle London, asking Harry and Aurora to teach the others a bit about muggle life.

The fact that all of them should have known that Harry and co were there was interesting enough as it was, but the fact that they chose to have an order meeting regardless of the group of teenagers upstairs made them all that much more interested in what was going on downstairs.

After a minute or two of silence, Fred lowered one of the ears down over the banister, and all of them fell silent, straining to hear what was being said.

“…followed. I refuse to let him out the house on his own, for who knows what the ministry might try to do.” Sirius’s voice came over the ear.

“Anyone, and I mean anyone, Fudge thinks is spying for you, Albus, or even on speaking terms with you was threatened by Fudge. We were told we might as well clean out our desks.” Mr Weasley said.

“The aurory is only investigating matters concerning dark wizards in the utmost secrecy. Fudge doesn’t believe, but if there was even a slight possibility that something could be related to Death Eater activity….” An unfamiliar female voice was explaining before she was interrupted.

“Which they wouldn’t be.” Aurora heard her father say. “The Dark Lord has no interest in revealing himself just yet. Not with Potter being mangled in the press, and ultimately because of his failure at killing the boy immediately upon his return.”

“So, what is he after?” Remus asked. “Same as before?”

“Yes. That, and a weapon. One I believe he thinks must be at the ministry, as those he’s asked to try and search for it would all have legitimate reasons to be there.”

“So, there are Death Eaters in the Ministry?” And elegant sounding man asked.

“Always were, Kingsley.” Professor Moody replied, and Aurora really hoped it was the actual professor Moody.

“And that, actually, reminds me,” Her Dad interjected. “You’ll have them in the aurory now, too. He’s recruiting, not just those who are not strictly human, but also those who feel underappreciated in society. Except, unlike before, I don’t think those who join him will know what they are getting themselves into.”

“Any word on that thing you told us about?” Moody asked. There was silence.

“So, what do we do about the ministry going after Harry?” Sirius asked.

“Nothing.” Dumbledore replied.

They all looked at one another in confusion, betrayal, then turned to the ear as though they could see the conversation as well as hear it.
“But-”

“But, nothing Sirius. I have been against his living in the wizarding world from the moment he was orphaned, and I continue to believe he should have remained with the Dursley’s, away from the wizarding world and cut off from its news.”

“But why?” Aurora was startled to hear her mother’s voice unaltered. “What good would it have done Harry to know nothing of what is going on?”

“Because we need not worry him, my dear. We need not make him feel—”

“Bullshit.” Aurora slapped a hand over her mouth at her father’s vehement outburst.

“I beg your pardon, Severus?” Dumbledore said with a very tight voice.

“No, I agree with Severus.” Sirius interjected. “He could have gone with his godmother…. Okay, fine, he couldn’t have, but that is beside the point! There were other families that could have taken him in within the Wizarding World. Hell, Remus could have. Min could have. So many people in this very room would have gladly taken that boy into their home and you denied that. And fine, make sure the boy doesn’t grow up like James,” there was a sound of some kind in the pitch of her father’s voice, but Sirius continued on, making it hard to determine her father’s reaction. “But why, why would you be so convinced, even still, that Harry remain in the dark about all of this? What aren’t you telling us?”

There was a long silence, and Aurora could hear her heart pound in her head as she waited with baited breath for what the answer would be.

“A discussion for another time.” Dumbledore finally replied. “But I do have something that needs addressing: We are in need of a qualified person to fill the position of the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor.”

“And I am not worthy to do so?” Aurora heard her father ask in a mocking tone.

“You know precisely why we cannot have that, Severus.”

“What about me?” Sirius asked. “I go, I can keep an eye on Harry.”

“I need you elsewhere, Sirius. And Remus, actually.”

“I wouldn’t want to go back for another round, anyway. I much prefer the scouting missions.” Remus replied, and Aurora noticed the angry flush that came over Harry for a moment.

“What happens if the spot doesn’t get filled?” Someone asked, the same unknown woman from before, Aurora thought.

“The Ministry has made an act that they will send someone they deem qualified in their place.” Dumbledore replied.

“Well then why not let Hermione—”

Sirius Black never finished his sentence. Or, he had but they just never heard the end. Aurora was quite certain there was a slight buzzing sound, indicating a muffilato being placed, just before Draco conveniently bumped Ron, and caused the oaf to bump the Extendable Ears in just the right way to break the string.
“Great, now we’ll never hear what’s going on.” Ron grumbled.

“Did you lot hear who Sirius was going to suggest?” Fred asked.

“Voice got right, muffled, didn’t it?” George agreed.

Aurora noticed that the only one who didn’t know the truth that seemed to hear it was Harry. But if anything, he just seemed thoughtful, as if it had never occurred to him that there could be more than one Hermione in the world.

“Might as well go finish off the cake.” Ginny shrugged.

“That sounds delightful,” Luna agreed, looping her arm through Ginny’s, and leading the charge back to the library.

Before Sirius had had her name fully formed on his lips, Severus’ wand was out, much to the shock of most, and had a silencing spell around the room in a blink.

The silence that followed was heavy, most of the order confused, those in the know uncomfortable. Well, except for Albus who seemed quite pleased with Sirius’ outburst.

“Hermione,” Molly laughed. “The only Hermione I know of is Ron and Harry’s friend.”

“The Hermione Sirius has suggested and Harry’s friend are one in the same.” Albus said with a gleeful glint in his eye. Hermione felt her husband tense beside her, and she rested her hand on his knee beneath the table in an attempt to comfort him. Albus merely smiled at the table, his flair for the dramatics too strong to look at her directly. “If you would reveal yourself, Ms Granger?”

Hermione almost didn’t simply for his address of her, but with a sigh, she waved her hand, and her altered appearance melted away. “It’s been Mrs Snape for sixteen years, Albus.”

“Her-Hermione?” Molly stuttered and gaped at her, blinking as if she wasn’t sure she was seeing properly. Arthur’s jaw dropped, and Bill Weasley looked utterly flabbergasted.

“Hello, Molly.” She replied with a smile. “I do hope it’s okay to still call you that. I would feel quite awkward going back to Mrs Weasley.”

“But… but how? And, wait, you married your student, Severus?”

“When I first met Hermione Granger she was nearly fifteen, and I was but fourteen myself.” Severus countered.

“You married your professor?” Molly asked Hermione in disbelief.

“I’d like to point out that I am now nearly thirty-six. If I avoided everyone I had known as an adult, I’d have been a spinster.”

Severus, Sirius, and Remus all gave a snort at that, and Molly was nearly instantly put out.

“I’m not sure what’s going on.” Nymphadora Tonks said, looking around at the others. They were
all somewhat baffled by the turn of events, which Hermione could understand. After all, none of them had really known her any other way.

“Hermione, as most of you know, had been quite helpful to us during the first war. The reason for that being was a slight mishap that sent her back in time. Harry was her classmate and fellow Gryffindor until her fourth year.”

“And they believe I’m in the States.” Hermione reminded Molly, who looked ready to bolt up the stairs and tell them all. “The only ones that know who I am is Draco, and my daughter.”

“And Miss Lovegood, I believe, has figured it all out.” Severus inputted.

“Wait, just… wait.” Molly said, hands in the air as if she could hold back the non-existent conversation. “Your daughter. You went to school with your own child?”

“Well I didn’t know she was mine at the time.” Hermione smirked. “I’d certainly been hoping she was since about 1975.”

“That’s… that’s just… and you allowed this?” Molly wheeled around to Dumbledore. “You allowed a student to marry her professor and go to school with her child?”

Albus chuckled. “Molly, my dear, I promise you I did everything I could to… make things better without altering the timeline as Hermione knew it.”

“Well this is all well and good, but we still haven’t found a solution for our teaching problems,” Minerva interjected, putting an end to the unpleasant conversation.

“I say we let the minister stick someone in.” Alastor said, and at the wild disbelief Minerva flashed his way, his smirked. “Not like the lot you’ve hired recently has been much better than whatever toad Fudge sticks in. And he might think he’s sticking a spy in the school for himself, but works both ways, doesn’t it? Whatever the toad will want to do, change, whatever, helps us get insight to Fudge’s plan.”

“Or we could just hire you again, seeing as how you actually didn’t teach last year.” Minerva countered.

“But more jumpy than I used to be,” Alastor mumbled. “Might curse a kid or worse.”

“So, we are in agreement to allow Fudge to spy on me, then?” Albus smiled as if it were all a great joke.

Hermione, while liking Alastor’s thinking, was not best pleased with how easily Albus was going along with all this. When no one argued, their leader nodded.

“Moving on to the next order of business, escorting Harry to school. There will need to be at least two of you with him, preferably four, and he should not be seen with the Weasley children, nor the girls.” Albus explained, glancing to Molly, and then to Hermione.

“Can we have your word on that limitation?” Severus asked, quirking his eyebrow. What was he up to?

“Yes, Severus. Only the Weasley children, Miss Lovegood, and Miss Snape would draw attention. The former because the Weasleys are infamously recognizable, and known for their affiliation with Harry, the latter because of the charming article in the prophet before Harry’s preferences were debated.”
“Very well, I shall have Draco board with Potter. No one should think him alone and an easy target while heading to school, before he would likely reunite with the others on the train.”

Albus tensed, and either ignored or didn’t notice the satisfied nod Molly gave the idea.

“Severus, no. You should not risk exposure by going to the Malfoys—”

“There is no need to go to the Manor, Albus, as Draco has chosen to spend his summer with us.” Severus said.

“And even more so, he’s right upstairs with Harry as we speak.” Sirius added, pointing in the general direction of the children.

There was a tense silence before Albus whispered. “I would like to know why there is the child of a Death Eater in the same building in which we are holding an Order meeting, and no one saw fit to warn anyone.”

“If you would like to get technical,” Severus said through his teeth, “there are two children of Death Eaters in this home, possibly a third, since I was never quite certain if Orion Black had taken the mark or if he were just an avid supporter.”

Sirius smirked. “He’d never have been willing to blemish his skin.” He commented, waving it off.

“There is a difference.” Albus said with a deceptive calm.

“Allbus, if you had spent any time with the boy, you would find he is nothing like his father.” Minerva interjected.

“I have to agree,” Arthur said. “I was uncertain of Draco at first, but he has shown to be of quite a different character than Lucius.”

“We can’t be too careful,” Albus said carefully, and Hermione narrowed her eyes as he smiled in that annoyingly serene way. “A boy who has strayed from his father usually feels he is not appreciated. If all it takes to earn back Lucius Malfoy’s affection is for the young Mr Malfoy to share some of what he knows, it would be easy for him to be persuaded.”

“Albus, if Snape trusts the boy, then I trust him.” Alastor said, and Hermione’s lips quirked with appreciation. “We ain’t telling Potter anything, so what difference does it make who his friends are? And as Snape said, he’s extra protection.”

**September 1st, 1995**

“A

“It was bloody weird,” Harry said as the train started pulling away. “I mean, Sirius was with us, of course, and Remus. But there were so many glances and whispers.”

“Because there were aurors hovering?” Ron asked.

“No, because Draco was with me.” Harry retorted, frowning a bit.
Draco smirked, flipping through the Daily profit in an utterly relaxed position. Aurora suspected he enjoyed it all a bit too much, being seen walking beside Harry. It was the first time the Malfoy’s hadn’t dropped Draco off, though Aunt Cissy had come to dinner the evening before to insure he had his school things and to wish him well. There was something about her that Aurora noticed to be off, but she couldn’t figure out what it was.

“Much as Fudge tries,” Draco said, stopping at a page near the back, his smirk threatening to become a smile as he tapped his finger at something on the page, “He’s not having any luck discrediting you.”

“He has nothing to discredit.” Harry replied. “Sirius explained that we can’t just go shouting about Voldemort being back, much as I want to. The fact that there are people who know, people who can actually do something about it, makes it a bit better. And he said that, without an army, without whatever this weapon they’re looking for, Voldemort and the Death Eaters are essentially powerless.”

“Sirius told you that?” Ginny asked.

Harry shrugged. “Sirius doesn’t keep things from me.”

“Must be nice.” Ron said, and Draco glanced his way.

“Your mother still sheltering you, Weasel?” he asked, setting the paper down on his lap. “Snape hasn’t been entirely forthcoming with Rory and me, but he deals with information a bit more sensitive than ‘don’t draw attention to yourself, let Fudge fudge himself.”

Ron glared at the Slytherin darkly. “She isn’t sheltering us. Bet we know more than you do. We’re trusted.”

“No, you aren’t,” Aurora cut in, and he flipped his dark look to her. “Oh, don’t get your robes in a twist. We’re kids, you heard as well as we all did, Dumbledore doesn’t want us to know anything at all. Period.”

They hadn’t been able to fix the Extendable Ears, but Aurora knew that they wouldn’t have needed them, as Professor Dumbledore had made it very plain, where they could clearly hear, that he had not wanted any of them to be in the same building as the next Order meeting. He all but shouted it when he was leaving the meeting, the Weasleys, Snapes, Professors Lupin and Moody and Aunt Min being the only ones really left by that point.

“That actually really bothers me.” Harry said, shifting nervously. When he realized everyone was waiting for an explanation, he cleared his throat. “I’ve been having… dreams.”

“No! Really?” Ginny asked, nearly sounding authentic in her amazement. “Dreams? That’s amazing, no one wonder you’re the Chosen One.”

Harry smirked. “Weird dreams. Flashs, feelings. I had them last year, now and again. There was a man, a muggle man, and I had seen Wormtail and the guy that had been impersonating Moody. Anyway, Voldemort was there, as he was before he was dropped in the cauldron. He killed the man. I had told Dumbledore, and he seemed worried, but he said nothing. But I am really, really sure that it meant something, considering what happened. Like maybe I have…. I dunno, a connection? When Voldemort used my blood, he said he could touch me now. And my scar always hurt when there was, well, him around. So maybe there’s a connection there?”

“Careful, Potter.” Draco said, folding the paper and tapping the front page. “You’ll end up here if
you keep talking like a nutter.”

Aurora glanced at the headline, assuming Draco was merely talking of the front page itself. There was a picture of Gilderoy Lockhart in the Janus Thickney ward, the truth of what happened to him coming to light as Fudge attempted to showcase Dumbledore’s incompetence.

Harry rolled his eyes. “My point was, Sirius had wanted me to mention it to Dumbledore, but after how he treated the whole thing last year, how he’s making such a point to exclude me from something I am supposedly destined to lead…."

“Perhaps you should do something separate from the Order of the Phoenix?” Draco said thoughtfully. “They are going to be there, of course. But in the end, it will be you that has to deal with … Snake face, so why not have those you really want with you?”

Harry seemed thoughtful, leaning back in his seat and appearing to consider it.

“Maybe.” He said thoughtfully.

“Why wasn’t Hagrid there?” Ron asked after the lot of them were loaded into the carriage.

“Probably still away, doing that thing for Dumbledore.” Harry replied.

“Did your dad say if there was a person in place for the Defense Position?” Ginny asked Aurora.

She shook her head. “Last we heard him complain was that Fudge hadn’t bothered to send a name.”

“My guess is the ministry doesn’t want Hogwarts to know who was coming.” Draco mused before they all fell silent again.

“I have a bad feeling about this year,” Ginny said softly. “With You-Know-Who back, and the ministry turning against Dumbledore.”

“And no ‘Mione round.” Ron said as he gazed out the window.

Aurora and Draco glanced at one another.

“Weasley,” Draco said, leaning forward to look around Harry at the back of Ron’s head, “did you love her or something?”

“No!” Ron whipped around, his cheeks rapidly turning pink.

“Oh, Weasel had was in love with Granger. Or, maybe still is.”

The thought made Aurora’s stomach churn, imagining Ron getting all heart-eyed and dopey around her mother as she was now. Not that she didn’t think her mum was pretty, and she recalled quite clearly the reaction many had at the ball when she entered on the arm of Professor Snape. But her sorta friend having a crush on her mother? She was quite well without that thought, thank you.

“Shut it, Malfoy. At least I could get a girl.”
Draco laughed, causing everyone else in the carriage to smirk except for Ron who just glanced around in confusion before grumbling about something Aurora didn’t catch.

“You know, I miss Hermione and all, but we don’t need her.” Ginny said thoughtfully. “I mean, yeah, she’d figure things out faster and all, and it takes three of us just to make one of her when it comes to problem solving, but… well….”

“She isn’t vital, is she?” Luna said what Ginny was avoiding, causing the very reaction from Harry and Ron that the ginger had been trying to avoid.

“What do you mean not vital? Hermione’s important!” Ron said incredulously.

“They aren’t saying she’d not, Weasel.” Draco defended. “But you go on as if the whole year will go to shite for her not following along behind you. And you have to admit, with Snake Face back, she’s probably safer where she is.” He said, removing a piece of invisible lint from his immaculate robes.

“You’re right.” Harry sighed, and Ron seemed terribly betrayed by the mere words. “I’d have worried sick over her.”

“I don’t think you ever rightly had to worry about Granger, but she’s certainly better off.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this.” Ron grumbled, turning back out the window.

After a pause, Ginny said. “Do you think she has a boyfriend?”

“Gin!” Ron groaned.

Draco smirked, “I wouldn’t doubt she had someone.” He said, leaning more into the corner of the carriage. “Bet he’s smart.’

“Dark hair,” Aurora added, feeling the mirth bubble in her chest and threaten to break out. “Dark eyes.”

“Bit pasty.” Draco agreed.

“He’d probably be quite witty.” Luna said, sharing a secret smile with them. “The sort that you think it’s a bit cruel if you didn’t know him.”

“You mean really sarcastic?” Ginny asked.

“Yes, precisely. I think he would be very good at sarcasm.” Luna nodded.

“Oh, and will he need glasses, too?” Ron growled. “Because you’re practically describing Harry.”

“Or Professor Snape.” Harry suggested, and Aurora stopped breathing momentarily as the panic crashed on her.

“They didn’t say greasy git. And ya see his teeth? No way ‘Mione would date anyone like him.” Ron nodded definitively.

Draco coughed to cover the snort that erupted from him uninvited. They let the subject of Hermione drop, the school too close to continue on the same vein before Luna and Draco departed for their separate tables.
“So, you were saying that the Hat has given warning before?” Harry asked Nearly Headless Nick once the sorting was over and the feast began.

The song it sang, of a history Aurora well knew and a unity Hogwarts was going to need, was still lingering in her mind. She wondered, as she was sure all their friends did, if it had been a warning not just of the coming war but pertaining to the pink clad professor sitting at the high table. No one had recognized her from anywhere in particular, something they’d all hoped was a good sign.

“Oh yes,” said Nick, turning away from Ron as he dug into his potatoes. Whether from envy of disgust, Aurora didn’t know. “Yes, I have heard the hat give several warnings before, always at times when it detects periods of great danger for the school. And always, of course, its advice is the same: Stand together, be strong from within.”

“Ow kunnit nofe skusin danger ifzat?” asked Ron.

Aurora curled her lip in disgust at Ron’s terrible manners but thought better than to say anything. After all, she’d enumerated countless times the ways he managed to disgust her, and it wasn’t as though it changed anything.

“I beg your pardon?” Nick asked without looking directly at him.

“How can it know if the school’s in danger if it’s a hat?” Ron asked again after swallowing what was in his mouth.

“I have no idea,” Nick said, shaking his head, having the ghostly appendage bounce a little. “Of course, it lives in Dumbledore’s office, so I daresay it picks things up there.”

“And it wants all the Houses to be friends?” Harry asked, glancing toward the Slytherin table. “That’s going to be a lot harder for some than others.”

Aurora glanced to Draco, the likely object of Harry’s observations. He wasn’t sitting with the usual crowd that he had in the past. Instead of surrounding himself with Crabbe, Goyle, Parkinson and Bulstrode, he was near the newbies. He was smiling and talking with the younger Slytherins, the light from a nearby candle glinting on his Prefect badge and causing it to be a white spot on his robes. The young snakes seemed in awe that he would be there with them, laughing and welcoming them.

She then glanced at her father, and Aurora noticed an uncharacteristic look of pride in the form of a slight curl to her father’s lips as Professor Snape watched the same scene she just had.

A glance back at the table, though, showed some uncertain looking older Slytherins, watching Draco as if he was either a Cornish pixie set free, or basic bunny they hadn’t decided was harmless yet.

Aurora returned her attention to her meal, realizing that she was too hungry to keep observing everyone else, and no longer really seeing a need to do so. The hat was right, of course. They would need to be a more unified school, and it wasn’t as though there wasn’t already some unity forming.

She glanced down the Gryffindor table in time to see Nick disappear in a huff and Ron looking baffled.

“He’s off to a poor start.” Fred’s voice nearly in her ear had Aurora practically leaping out of her
seat. She turned, throwing an apology over her shoulder to Seamus for accidentally whipping him, then faced Fred once more. He grinned. “How was your summer?”

“I saw you most of it.” She replied, trying very, very hard not to blush or smile or let on to the prat that she still sort of liked him.

Alright, she still plenty liked him.

But Fred Weasley was not the sort of boy Aurora wanted to like.

It was easy enough to not stay focused on him through the summer when she and Draco would make their way to the Weasleys. The twins only went to Grimmauld place if all the Weasleys would be, and she was fairly certain that was because Mrs Weasley didn’t trust them not to blow up or burn the house down while they were left alone. When they joined everyone at the Burrow, there was always a game of quidditch going on, or she and Harry trying to teach the purebloods football (and pretty much succeeding). There hadn’t been a lot of time for him to be… him.

And yes, there was a difference between George and Fred. Fred was more in line with her sense of humor, even if she didn’t always like his pranks. He was wittier than George, a bit snarkier. It also didn’t help that she did find him more attractive. Slightly fewer freckles, lighter eyes, his smirk…

He was trouble. Pretty, pretty trouble.

“Yes, but was that a good thing? A bad thing? Did you enjoy your time at the Burrow, or did you prefer to sit in your room with Draco, braid each other’s hair and talk about boys?”

And just like that, she remembered that he was also a bit of a git on occasion.

“Oh, come on, don’t look at me like that. No way would you be able to braid Draco’s hair.”

“My summer was fine, thank you.” She replied. “And yours?” She asked, arching a brow as she already knew.

He sighed heavily, as though he were about to lament. “While George and I had come up with a ridiculous amount of clever product for our business, I have been left by Angelina.”

“Yes. What business?” She asked.

“Business?” Aurora asked, taken aback.

“That’s the part you focus on?”

“Yes. What business?” She asked.

Fred smirked, and she lost all control of her bodily control and her face turned red. “You’ll just have to see, won’t you?”

Before they could continue their conversation, the food disappeared, and the room went silent for Dumbledore’s speech, which was then interrupted by the toad like woman wearing nothing but pink.

The woman immediately started talking about the ministry, and Aurora immediately looked to her father.

Without Rita Skeeter to write any more appallingly inaccurate articles, her Dad believed any attempt the ministry may have made to try and discredit Harry fell flat. After all, most of the staff didn’t want to write anything bad about the Boy Who Lived. He was, after all, the supposed vanisher of the Dark Lord the first time. If they didn’t believe in Voldemort’s return, they didn’t want to ruin a young
wizard who didn’t remember doing something so heroic. If they did, they didn’t want to possibly upset the one who could defeat him again in case he decided to let them all fall to You-Know-Who. There was also, the Snape Patriarch had wagered, the fact that Sirius Black was still considered a dark, dangerous wizard even if he was cleared of his previous charges. Who would even dare upset the once escaped convict’s ward if it may make Black want to darken their doorsteps.

So, they went of Dumbledore, the one who was actually out there spreading the word of Voldemort’s return. The man who had been removed and let go from positions of great power, likely as it was seen as a threat to the current minister’s position.

Aurora’s mother had calculated the odds of their bashing tactic working on the Headmaster, and it was always a fifty-fifty shot.

When the new Professor had finally, finally stopped her speech, there were two obvious staff members who did not applaud: Professors Snape and McGonagall. The two exchanged a look, what specifically about, Aurora did not know. What she did know was that Professor Umbridge was about to lack the support of two heads of house for whatever her purpose in coming to Hogwarts actually was.

September 2nd, 1995

“Did you guys have Umbridge at all today?” Harry asked as they all sat down to dinner.

“Yeah, why?” Ginny replied as she and Ron started piling food on their plates.

Harry shifted about, glancing at the staff table. “The Defense text that she gave us, it was pretty basic. Things we already know how to do. And when Parvati asked her when we would do our wand work, she said we wouldn’t be. That we wouldn’t need to do wand work if we studied hard enough.”

“Sounded like ‘Mione, she did.” Ron said, already stuffing a roll in his mouth.

Harry merely glanced at him before continuing. “She insulted every teacher we had before, called Remus a half breed. I got detention for defending him.”

“Really?” Aurora asked.

Harry nodded, “He’s practically my Godfather as well. When she called him a dirty half breed, I pointed out that it wasn’t very good for house unity if she pointed out differences in our blood status. She tried to say that he wasn’t a proper wizard at all. Dean was ready to jump in, too, but it was like she didn’t hear him when he said Remus was the best professor we had to date. She seemed really focused on me. I pointed out that it wasn’t smart for us not to practice, not with everything going on, and she’d gotten this nasty smile on her face, wrote up a note, and sent me to McGonagall to give it to her.”

Harry sighed, appearing far more exhausted than he should be his first day.

“What did Au-er-Professor McGonagall say?” Aurora asked in between bites.

Harry smirked, “She said to watch out for her.” He glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the Slytherin table. “Also mentioned it was probably best that I’d branched out in my influences. The
fact that I didn’t mention Vold-

Aurora stopped Harry by cramming her roll in his mouth.

Harry frowned as the few of those around them paying attention tittered, and when he removed the roll from his mouth, he asked, “What’d ya do that for?”

“You can’t say that name.” She said, flickering her eyes toward the head table. “It’s not said for a reason, and here it could prove uncomfortable for people in ways you can’t imagine.”

Harry’s frowned deepened, and he turned to examine the head table a moment.

“Yeah. Well, as I was saying,” he turned back to the lot of them. “The fact I didn’t mention him at all in front of her was probably my saving grace. That if I had, things might have been worse. I get the ministry is out to discredit Dumbledore, but I guess… well I never thought of what might happen if I became as loud as Dumbledore. Sirius told me not to go around saying anything, to keep things quiet. That it would be to our advantage.”

“So, we aren’t going to actually learn anything?” Ginny asked. “Because frankly, all we got from her was a week’s worth of reading and twelve inches on the laws of using hexes as a defense.”

“It’s all ‘ministry approved’ isn’t it?” Neville asked, a faintness of concern to his tone. “It’s what she kept saying, ‘ministry approved. But Draco said the Ministry doesn’t really have rights over Hogwarts, that they need the board of Governors to approve all the changes and such. The board his Dad was fired from a few years back.”

“The last time Voldy tried to return.” Harry said thoughtfully. “It was also when Malfoy’s dad was trying to get Dumbledore removed.”

“Do you think…?” Ron started to say before Ginny smacked him.

“Think we’re all wondering what you are, yeah? But maybe not say it where everyone can hear ya, especially not the toad.”

Aurora looked up at the Toad in question, seeing her sitting near her father. His scowl was so deep it didn’t even diminish as he attempted to eat despite Umbridge appearing to be yammering on.

“So Quidditch, then. Thinking of going for Keeper. Think my chances are good, Harry?” Ron changed the subject.

*September 10th, 1995*

_________S_________

“It’s bull shit,” Severus growled as he gripped the back of his chair in the small dining area within his quarters. House elves being able to provide everything, there was no kitchen, per se, just a spot for them to pop into the room and lay out food when needed.

Hermione glanced up at him from where she sat in a chair, her dinner only half eaten and set off to the side, a quill in hand and parchment before her. “I agree.” She said. “And to be frank, what Aurora tells me of her classes, of Harry’s detention….”
“Oh yes.” Severus said darkly. “Never had I thought the day would come when I would be a more favored Professor simply because I do not give the worst detentions. I swear if she even attempts that sort of thing on our daughter….”

“Would that be wise?” Hermione asked. “Provoking her? Being a father over a professor? Or even a father over a Death Eater?”

“I can tell you right now that the Dark Lord would have no use for that simpering, pink toad. Slytherin though she may have been, purist though she seems to be, he would not let her anywhere near his ranks. And to be frank, he would not take issue with me defending the child of one of his most loyal followers when it comes to the whims of the current minister for magic. High bloody-Inquisitor! One spy for anyone is enough in this school, not that she’s making any attempt at stealth.” He paused in his tirade as he noticed she was writing again. “What are you doing?”

“Writing Harry,”

He stilled. “H, do you not think it time…?”

“And how do I reveal it, Severus?” She countered. “How do I write Harry and Ronald and tell them I’m now thirty-six years old, or nearly there, and one of their friends is actually my child?”

“Instead you claim to be sixteen, attending school America.” He countered.

“But I don’t talk about the school,” She smirked sadly. “In fact, I haven’t properly carried on any charade as Albus would wish of me. I mostly just give them advice.”

Severus came and sat down beside her, resting his hand on her arm. “You have to tell them.”

“And I will. But I believe, given the current upheaval, they don’t need my accident to worry about. Especially Harry. Sirius says he still feels somehow responsible for Cedric Diggory’s death, even though he’s had so many people reassure him he has nothing to feel responsible for.” She gave a heavy sigh, glancing over her letter before turning toward Severus. “I can’t possibly imagine what his life would have been like had Albus had his way and kept him from the wizarding world.”

Severus leaned back. “I think… I think Potter would have been a very angry young man.” He said thoughtfully. “He’d have been frustrated at the lack of information, the Prophet never reporting what was going on in a way he would find acceptable. After all, he would want to know about the Dark Lord, what was happening, and no one at the Prophet would report anything for fear of losing their job. He would have been stuck in the muggle world with a family who resented him, because Albus would still be of the foolish notion that somehow Tuney taking Potter inside equates accepting him.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Hermione agreed.

“And if Rita Skeeter hadn’t gone missing, I would wager she would have written far worse about Potter than his supposed three girlfriends and gay lover.”

Hermione threw her head back and laughed, and Severus’ lips quirked.

“You are certainly right about that.” Her mirth faded, and she sighed heavily. “Please watch over him.” She asked unnecessarily.

“As if he were our own.” He nodded, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles. “How is your work with Sirius going?”

“It’s not.” She replied. “Much as Albus would like me to, I simply cannot step away from the
Ministry commissions. Especially when some of those commissions are coming from the minister himself.”

“Oh? And what is our illustrious Minister for Magic asking one of the greatest Arithmancer of her time to calculate for himself? When the bowler hat will become vogue once more? If it is ever going to be okay to wear such a bright colored hat with those awful, pinstripe robes?”

She smirked, “If there is a chance he can convince Harry Potter of Albus’ lunacy, the chances of his over throwing Cornelius.”

“Fudging the numbers?” He inquired.

“Did you just make a pun?”

“No, I would never sink that low.” He half smiled.

“No. There’s no need for myself to skew the results as the only information he will give me is partial to his agenda or incomplete. Most of what I hand him has an accuracy rate below fifty, and I point out that there are variables missing, but he just won’t listen.” She shrugged. “Normally such things would irritate me.”

“It still does, I see the tension in your shoulders.” He stood, kissing her cheek. “A tension I will relieve you of after rounds.”

“I look forward to it.” She smiled, and Severus left her to her letter.

September 11th, 1995

They convened in the courtyard before dinner, the air just cool enough that warming charms had to be employed, but also just enough to keep the majority of the student body indoors. It afforded them the only privacy the group could have.

“She’s vial.” Draco said. “I flat out told her that the injury in Hagrid’s class was caused by my own stupidity, but she just breezed over it. ‘He shouldn’t have had such a dangerous creature around you’.” Draco mimicked Umbridge’s voice with eerie accuracy, having the lot of them falling into a fit of laughter.

“You should have seen her in our class,” Ginny smiled. “‘Are you certain, professor Snape, that you can teach this class without bias?’”

“Obviously.” Aurora mimicked her father’s sneer as she deepened her voice. “‘Now if you’ll kindly leave the classroom, they’re attempting to brew Draught of Peace, and many of them have a tendency to make… cauldrons… explode.’”

“And Colin did explode his cauldron within seconds of her leaving the classroom, and we were only preparing the base.” Ginny sighed.
“I bet she’s actually a really nice person.” Luna said thoughtfully, earning incredulous looks from all of them. “She’s overly infested with Wrackspurts, and her aura is in need of a very deep cleanse.”

“Couldn’t agree more on that,” Neville mumbled. “My nan wrote me, told me to stay out of her way if I can.”

“Oh yes, Neville Longbottom always charges head first into situations that pose threat.” Aurora teased, and immediately regretted. There was a flash of something in Neville’s eyes, something like hurt and understanding, and he turned away from her before she could see anymore.

“You’ve been staring at that letter every chance you’ve gotten, mate.” Ron said, nudging Harry with his shoulder. “Who’s it from? Sirius?”

“Mione, actually. She says…..” Harry stopped abruptly as the letter was ripped from his hands by the over eager red-head.

“What’s the matter, Weasel? Does Granger not send you any love?” He taunted.

“Like she sends letters to you, Ferret.” Ron countered without tearing his eyes away from the letter. “Actually, she does.” Draco retorted, leaning back and smirking.

“Seriously?” Neville asked. “I didn’t think you guys were that close before she left.”

“Granger and I are much closer than most would believe.” Draco said, and Aurora watched as Ron’s entire face and neck turned deep red as he lifted his eyes to give Malfoy a nasty glare.

“She’d never want the likes of you.” He stated bitterly.

“Merlin I should hope not.” Draco replied, and Aurora smacked in in the gut, causing him to laugh.

“So, what’s Hermione have to say?” Gin asked.

“Well,” Harry said, looking decidedly nervous. “She’s heard all about what’s going on here, and she says-”

“You? Teach Defense Against the Dark Arts?!” Ron blurted, and Harry whacked him on the arm with a glare, shooting a pointed look at the castle before turning back to Ron. “Sorry. But seriously, how does she think you’re going to do that?”

“I dunno.” Harry replied. “I think she’s mad for even suggesting it.”

“Now, wait, hold on.” Gin said thoughtfully. “It might not be a bad idea.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“Well, you did save me from Tom Riddle and rid the school of a basilisk.” She pointed out.

“Which I almost died doing and would be dead had it not been for Fawkes.”

“You stopped Quirrell in first year.” Ron said thoughtfully. “Figured out the whole key thing, too.”

“Yeah, and you got past the chess set, and Hermione past the potions. And had it not been for Quirrell taking out the troll to start with, never would have made it to he and Voldemort, would I?”

“But didn’t you ward off a bunch of dementors in third year?” Draco asked. “Details were always a
bit fuzzy on that story, but didn’t you save yourself and your godfather?”

Harry blushed. “That was a fluke.”

“You were thirteen.” Draco retorted. “Ask a wizard, a grown wizard, when they first cast a patronus, and I bet most of them will have said never.”

“You were the winning champion last year, Harry.” Luna said. “If Voldemort hadn’t been waiting for you in the end, it would have been clear you were the winner.”

“Cedric and I grabbed the cup together.” He said quietly.

“But you were only fourteen. Fourteen to his eighteen, and you got through all the challenges either equal or ahead of him.” Aurora pointed out.

“I had help!” he nearly screamed. “In all those situations, I either had help, or it was fluke.”

“But you’re still the best in our year, mate.” Ron pointed out. “And more than that, you know more defensive spells than us!”

“Face it, Potter. We’re all right.” Draco smirked.

Harry looked at the lot of them as if he’d been completely and totally turned against. His mouth moved as a dozen things were thought and aborted before he could give them voice. After a minute, he huffed in exasperation. “I’ll think on it.” He said.

Ron caught Draco’s eye, and in a strange moment of unity, they shared a smirk and acknowledgment. And it Aurora had to guess, it was that they knew like she did, they all did, that Harry would be teaching Defense before the month was out.
“Mr Potter,” Professor Snape drawled as he approached the lot of them in study hall. “Kindly tell your mutt of a godfather that I do not take kindly to playing messenger. I’m not an owl.” He tossed Harry a folded piece of parchment, then turned away with an air of such great announce that it had even Aurora frowning.

“He can still be a right git sometimes.” Harry muttered, Ron still scowling in the direction the Potion’s Master went in.

“And you can be incredibly thick, but mother always told me it was rude to point out the flaws of others.” Draco said without looking up from his essay.

Harry smirked, his cheeks pinking a bit. “So, what you’re saying is you didn’t listen to your mother for a long time.” Harry commented as he opened the letter.

“Oh, I listened, doesn’t mean I headed the advice.” Draco countered.

Ginny and Aurora exchanged a glance, a mutual wondering if the two would ever actually realize how often they bantered like that.

Harry opened the letter and scanned it over. He frowned, he smirked, then chuckled, frowned again, then lowered the letter and stared off in the direction of a group of Ravenclaws.

Aurora, and likely the others, kept trying to see what he was staring at. There was a group of Ravenclaw girls, Cho Chang among them, all whispering and gesturing in a way Aurora had seen Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil do in the common room. Except, of course, they kept stealing glances at what seemed to be a completely oblivious Harry.

“Bad form to go after Cedric’s girl.” Draco sneered, snapping Harry out of his thoughts.

“What?” He said, looking at Draco while he seemed to be waiting for his brain to catch up with him. He shook his head. “No, not interested in Cho. Not like that. I was just…, well, here, read it.”

He handed the letter to Draco, and having been sitting beside him, Aurora rested her head on his shoulder to read the letter. Neville, who was on her other side, scooted a bit closer to read it, while Luna mimicked Aurora and rested against Draco on his other side.

Harry,
I have to say, Hermione is wise in her suggestion. It may be quiet now, but it will not stay that way. It is clear that Fudge is using this Umbridge to further his standing. After all, if there is not Voldemort, then there is no need to learn to defend yourselves at this stage. But you do. It would seem Fudge and other members of the ministry had forgotten just how bad things all were before, and how quickly they became so. Do, however, be quite careful in all this. Remember that you have allies within the school, those in the order who want you to be prepared. You know who they are, keep them in the loop.

Though I will say that Mrs Weasley asks me to express quite profusely that Ron and Ginny should not, under any circumstances, be involved in such a plot. It could earn them worse than detention, and they are forbidden to take such a risk. She also strongly pressed that I should forbid the same and has even attempted to sway Mrs Snape in trying to convince Aurora and Draco. Have no fear, for Molly is quite out-numbered, I’m afraid. Still, pass on the message.

Now, I am aware you have a Hogsmeade weekend fast approaching. I would like to meet you at the Three Broomsticks, if I may. There is something I would like to show you.

Good luck assembling your class, Harry. And be careful.

Yours,

Sirius

“I’m not quite sure why your mind wandered off after reading this.” Draco said as he handed the letter back. Harry handed it off to the Weasley siblings.

“I wouldn’t have thought anyone in the order would have approved of this. And he brings up people at the school. Like who? Dumbledore?”

“Or maybe McGonagall?” Ginny suggested.

“Or my Dad.” Aurora reminded.

“Can’t trust your dad, though, can we?” Ron asked.

“And why not?” Aurora folded her arms. “He brought the letter, didn’t he?”

“Well, yeah, but he’s still a git. And he might say he’s…”

“Shut it,” Harry said suddenly, glancing around. Ron’s voice had started to get louder, and while no one was paying attention yet, it would do no good for them if someone heard them talking about any of it. “Just shut it about Snape. Yes, he can be a git. Yes, he’s a bit greasy, no offense Rory, but he’s on our side. Okay?”

Ron shifted about in discomfort, glancing around at the rest of them before he petulantly grumbled, “Bloody well isn’t.”

“Oh, shut it, Weasel.” Aurora huffed before getting up and leaving Study Hall.

Her father glanced at her as she marched past a table of Slytherins. He was helping one of the younger ones and was unable to pull himself away. He gave her a slight nod, permitting her leave,
and she nodded back.

She had been absolutely right, the truce that Ron seemed to take with Draco didn’t last beyond aligning to get Harry to teach. And with the Slytherins increasingly becoming the favored house of the High Inquisitor, earning less detentions and less reprimands than the rest, Draco was an easy source for Ron’s increasingly disgruntled temper. And so did Professor Snape. Because Ron didn’t know of any other Slytherins in the order, and the fact that he knew her father bore a mark for Voldemort, he was always quick to say he couldn’t be trusted.

She was getting bloody sick of it, and the school year had only just begun.

“Oi, Snape.” She heard Fred Weasley call, and she stopped immediately. Then cursed herself for doing so.

“Yes, Weasley?” She countered, and Fred gave her a devilish smirk that she didn’t like that she enjoyed.

“Cheeky today, are we?” he said, putting his hands in the pockets of his robes. “My brother isn’t giving you a hard time, is he?”

“I can handle Ronald.” She replied, adjusting her bag on her shoulder. “Is that all you were doing? Ensuring your brother wasn’t being a bigger prat than usual?”

“Or I could say I missed our talks?”

“What talks?”

“Exactly. I thought, perhaps, we should sit down and have a chat sometime. Like, perhaps, next weekend at the Three Broomsticks.”

Aurora was about to counter when the true meaning of the question sunk in. Her eyes widened, and she could feel her cheeks warm even though she was desperately trying to make them stop. She swallowed the giddy squeal that tried to worm its way out her throat and squared her shoulders.

“I was planning on going with Harry to meet Sirius.” She said quietly, because anything barely above a whisper would result in her voice squeaking.

He smirked and shrugged. “Can’t take the whole day, can it?”

She shook her head.

“So whaddya say?”

She should say no, and do it in some cheeky, flirty way. But Merlin help her she could think of nothing witty in that moment. Nothing sly, nothing terrible charming. Bloody hell, it was all she could do not to dissolve into a fit of girly shrieks, and she would never lower herself to sound like Lavender Brown.

“Okay.” She managed.

“Excellent.” Fred beamed, and she did that. She brought that big, bright smile to his face. “You know, I’ve also been meaning to ask why you didn’t go for keeper.”

Quidditch, she liked quidditch. Quidditch was a safe topic that allowed her head to clear. “I’m more chaser or beater.” She replied with a shrug.
“Maybe so, but you’d have likely done better than Ickkle Ronniekins.” He replied, glancing over his shoulder as George and Lee emerged from study hall. “Later, Rory.” He said with a wink as he joined his brother and best mate, heading off to who knew where.

Alone in the corridor, Aurora stood stunned for a moment, allowing what just happened to sink in. Fred Gideon Weasley had asked her to go with him to Hogsmeade. On a date. It was a date, she knew it was a date because there was no way it wasn’t a date. And she said yes. In a moment of stupid weakness, she said yes to the prat, and she couldn’t not be happier for that slip in intelligence.

The squeal erupted, a quick, momentary sound before she became silent. She danced, a big stupid grin on her face as her body hopped around in circles against her will in an attempt to relieve itself from all the pent-up joy.

A moment later, she stopped, feeling eyes on her.

Her father stood watching her, utterly expressionless except for one arched eyebrow. Blushing she adjusted her bag, fixed her hair, and turned to leave.

She did catch the flash of a smirk on his face when she glanced over her shoulder. It was gone within a moment, but at least she knew she hadn’t disappointed her father too much.

Although now she knew he would never let her hear the end of it.

October 5th, 1995

It was the first spot they all went to the moment they arrived in the village. While nearly all the other third through seventh years ventured to a variety of other spots, Harry and co had headed straight for the Three Broomsticks, the twins and Lee joining the lot to meet Sirius. Well, Aurora knew why Fred was coming, but she figured that until they had broken off on their rendezvous, he wouldn’t mind George and Lee coming.

It was quiet upon entering, the locals usually staying clear of the village when the students were expected. Tucked into the corner, hands wrapped around a pint of something Aurora would wager was not butterbeer, was Sirius and Professor Lupin.

“Remus!” Harry exclaimed, half running toward the table where the two men smiled at him. He slowed and stopped before he could fly into either of them, and bashfully sat across from them.

“How are you, Harry?” Lupin said with a slight grin.

“Could be better.” He admitted as the rest of them sat around the table. “Did Sirius tell you what Hermione suggested?”

There was a sadness to Lupin’s next grin, and he took a moment to reply. “Yes,” He said. “I admit I’m a bit worried about that prospect of you trying to teach spells to those your own age. But, if what you’ve told Sirius is true, then it is probably necessary. And, from what I have heard from friends in the ministry, Dolores Umbridge is ….”

“A right toad?” Ron suggested, smirking at his own quip.

“Quite.” Remus nodded.
“So, what was it that you wanted to show me?” Harry asked.

“Well,” Sirius said, reaching into his pocket. “It’s actually something you’d all be interested in.” He set something on the table, then reached into his sleeve and pulled out his wand. He tapped the item and enlarged a box on the table. He opened the lid and withdrew a picture. At the same moment, Lupin withdrew his wand and waved it around. Magic washed over them, and Aurora guessed it was to shield them, though it didn’t feel anything like the privacy magic her father would use.

Sirius looked at the photo in his hand with a warm, somewhat wistful smile, then slid it over to Harry. “The original Order of the Phoenix.”

Aurora was only separated from Harry because of Draco sitting between them, so like with the letter Harry had shown them, she practically crawled onto Draco’s lap to see. Ron was on Harry’s other side, and everyone leaned in and over the table to get a good look at the picture.

Harry’s eyes were misty, and it wasn’t surprising when one noticed his parents front and center. He looked so much like his Dad it was surreal. Much like Leo, Harry was a carbon copy of his father, with his mother’s eyes.

“Bloody hell, is that Snape?” Ron jabbed the photo, causing the picture version of her father to glare at him.

“Severus was actually the first of our generation brought into the order.” Sirius said, gesturing to the photo. “He was noticed for his skills and creativity. And that led to what he does now.”

“Who’s that with him?” Harry asked, and Aurora’s stomach launched into her throat.

Her mother had her face pressed into her father’s shoulder and had for the loop of the picture. But it didn’t stay hidden, and she would turn her head on occasion and look at whomever was looking at the photo. Her hair was unaltered except that it wasn’t so bushy, she was not quite as thin as she had been when she disappeared, but there wasn’t enough curve to her to make her look like anyone else. Her eyes gleamed with mischief and intelligence.

“Kitten.” Sirius smirked.

“Who?” Harry asked.

“H Snape, Severus’ … wife.” Lupin seemed to have a hard time getting his mouth to form the word.

“That looks nothing like your mom.” Ginny said cautiously, with just a hint of accusation. It was a bit humorous that, at that moment, the picture version of Aurora’s parents chose to look at one another with adoration.

“She frequently uses a special glamour Severus developed for her. That way, she could dine with a certain kind of company one night and hex them in the back the next without Severus needing to worry about his cover. That is what she really looks like.” Sirius explained, and Aurora noted the warning look Lupin had given him that the dark-haired man ignored.

“See Mad-eye.” Ron said. “And you guys. McGonagall….”

“Our parents,” Ginny noted.

“My parents.” Neville said sadly.

“The Uncles we’re named for.” George pointed at the twins in the picture.
“Are there any Slytherins aside from my Uncle?” Draco asked. “Anyone other than Gryffindors?”

Everyone looked to Sirius and Lupin, who exchanged a weary look.

“No. As far as we know, the entire Order was made exclusively of Gryffindor Alumni, Severus being the exception.” Lupin said.

“Which is why if you go through with this idea, you need to make sure you get the other houses in on it. I know your house would be harder to do that with, Draco, but it’s best that you try.” Sirius said, looking at each other them quite seriously.

“It’s a shame we didn’t have any Hufflepuff friends,” Luna said thoughtfully. “We could have simply spread the word within our houses.”

“Yeah, but I’m sure there would be some narc that would rat us out to the Toad.” Ginny grumbled. “I mean, can we really trust Parvati not to say anything? Let alone the other Prefects?”

“Stick to the upper classmen.” Sirius suggested.

“Which excludes a third of us here.” Aurora pointed out.

“So how do we choose?” Ginny asked. “How do we decide who, outside this group, is trust worthy enough to work on Defense in private?”

“It’s quite easy.” Draco said, putting on an air of superiority as he leaned back and smirked at the lot of them. “We trust the ones who trust Potter. Who believe he’s telling the truth. It’s more than just us, enough to get a decent defense class of sort going. And we already know exactly who most of them are simply by who talks about it in the common room.”

“Yeah? Bet all the ones who believe in Slytherin do because then they can become junior Death Eaters.” Ron sneered.

“Or maybe it is because their families were ruined the first go around and now they’re terrified of what more could happen.” Draco shot back.

“I think you all need to set aside your house rivalries and prejudices, start being better than our generation.” Sirius said, tapping the photo.

“And in the meantime, try and come up with a way to ensure you’re not going to be sold out if things get tough later.” Lupin suggested. “Sirius and I need to go, we can’t stay here.”

“Alright,” Harry said, and Aurora felt eyes boring into her. Glancing up, she caught Fred’s gaze, and he gestured to the other side of the tavern.

There wasn’t all that much stealth to getting up and moving across the room at the same time as one of the Weasley twins. Aurora had heard the whispers and faint questions before they’d gotten very far.

“Well, that’s going to be a bit awkward later.” He said with a sheepish grin.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting much different.” She confessed as she settled into a two-person booth. Fred slid in across from her. “Gin had, umm, uh, seen the uh, the thing that, uh, happened… last year….” Aurora felt her cheeks grow warmer by the second, and she suddenly found the pepper pot on the table fascinating.
“You mean when I kissed you.” Fred said, and Aurora blushed deeper. “I told George, of course. He thought I was mad and said so again when I said you agreed to some with me.”

Two butterbeers were placed in front of them, and Fred gave a wink to Rosmerta as he handed her the cost of the drinks.

“How is your business going?” She asked, more amused by it than anything.

Fred smirked, withdrew his wand, and cast a muffilato about them. Aurora glanced around as the soft, buzzing sound blocked their conversation from eavesdroppers. She spotted their gang, Harry and Ginny having to tug Ron toward the door as he stared incredulously at where Aurora and Fred were. Draco was giving him a bit of a shove for good measure.

“Our business is going quite well. We actually have our sights set on buying a spot in Diagon Alley. Need to earn a bit more, first, but we’ve already got a bit coming in.”

“So, starting small, then.” She asked, taking a sip of her drink, feeling a bit more relaxed.

“Mail order, me thinks, or at least it will be when we are no longer within the walls of Hogwarts.” He glanced about. “You know what you’ll do when you’re all done this?”

It was an odd question, on no one really ever thought to pose to a fourth year. “I’m not sure.” She replied. “Though I’ve considered doing an apprenticeship with Aun-., er, Professor McGonagall.”

“Transfiguration? Not going into potions like your Dad?”

“Were you ever considering working muggle relations like your father?” She countered.

Fred smirked as he picked him his drink. “Touché,” He said before taking a sip.

The two carried on a casual conversation as they drained their butterbeers, getting to know a bit more about one another. In some ways, Aurora found herself growing increasingly more smitten with Fred the more they converse. In others ways, it made her feel… young. Too young, in fact, to have drawn the attention of a seventh year.

Yes, she knew logically she was among the oldest in her year, if not actually the oldest. And that Ginny had caught the eye of an even older bloke, and no one had bat an eye at the age gap. But hearing him say how he and George weren’t even sure if they wanted to sit their NEWTs, when she hadn’t even reached the year of OWLs, to have him paint a picture of what he thought he and his brother would be doing next year when she herself would only be entering her fifth year at Hogwarts, made everything feel daunting.

But he was funny, and clever, and despite his jokester nature, there was actually a bit of a serious side to him that she’d caught glimpses of. And it really didn’t hurt that he was quite handsome.

“How can I ask you something?” He inquired as they had a quiet stroll around the village. They’d already gone into Spintwitches, where a hearty discussion of Ballycastle bats vs Holyhead Harpies was followed by which broom was better for what position was played. They’d also stopped into Honeydukes, where he’d surprised her by buying her a bag of jelly slugs, her favorites.

“Yes,” she replied, offering him one of her slugs in the process.

He chose a yellow one, and she was sure she’d just become more infatuated with him simply for taking her least favorite.
“How have you always been able to tell George and me apart?” He asked. “Even our own mother has trouble sometimes. The only ones who ever could were Dad, Harry, and your Dad.”

She considered that for a moment. “I don’t know.” She admitted. “I mean yes, you’re identical, but you … you aren’t absolutely. George has more freckles, and his eyebrows are a bit different. And your face is more… slimmer? I suppose?”

He smirked, “Been staring at us that much, have you?” He asked, and she blushed as she laughed.

“No, it’s just small things. From a very young age, my father had always taught me to look at everything, to see all the details. He had always stressed that details were important. And while I doubt I will ever be able to pick up on the things he can, it’s helped me a lot. There were twins in the muggle school I went to, and it was the same there: I could always tell them apart. Even the Patil twins. I mean, yeah, different houses, but when they are in their plain clothes, it’s hard to tell them apart.”

“So, it’s not some sort of connection of the soul? You didn’t take one look at my mug and know we were meant to be and all that rot?” He teased, and she blushed again, just as the last had started to fade from her cheeks.

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Good,” He said, stopping in the street.

“No. Nothing like that.”

“Is it?” She asked.

“Yeah,” he agreed, “Never been one for any sort of divination. Quite glad it’s because of your brain.”

“Well, that helped with the blushing problem, Aurora thought, paling at the sound of her father’s baritone. She turned toward it, seeing him standing not ten feet away, arms crossed, a smirking Aunt Min shaking her head at the stern, black clad man.

“Well, that helped with the blushing problem, Aurora thought, paling at the sound of her father’s baritone. She turned toward it, seeing him standing not ten feet away, arms crossed, a smirking Aunt Min shaking her head at the stern, black clad man.

“Yes sir, professor Snape.” Fred said, straightening but not stepping away. He smiled that mischievous grin, and her father arched a brow at him as if in challenge. “Want a jelly slug? I bought them for Rory, but I’m sure she’ll share.”

“Fred,” She hissed quietly through her teeth, but he ignored her all the same.

“I’m fine, thank you.” He said through gritted teeth. He then turned to Aurora, “Miss Snape, I believe there needs to be a discussion had this evening? Come to my rooms at eight o’clock.”
“Yes, Prof-Da—Sir.” She stuttered.

With another withering glare at Fred, her father swept away, Aunt Min following after, quietly chastising him she was sure.

“Well, I guess that date’s over.” Fred sighed, but he was still smiling. “Better walk you back to the others, since it won’t be to the common room. Still feel your Dad’s eyes on me.”

“Right, sorry.” Aurora said turning with Fred to head toward the north end of the village where it was likely they would find the others.

Then she stopped short for a second when the enormity of what he’d said hit her: date. What they had done was a date. He had, in fact, asked her on a date. It was to him what it was to her, and while she’d figured it was quite likely to be the case, hearing the actual word made her want to fist pump the air again.

But she wouldn’t. She appeared utterly calm and resumed her step. So, what if she couldn’t keep the silly grin off her face?

“I think he’s being unreasonable,” Minerva said as Hermione made to leave the elder witch’s office.

“I completely agree,” She replied. “At least I do by what you’ve told me. Admittedly I’m not pleased to hear that it was likely a kiss was to happen….”

“You oppose the age difference?” Minerva questioned as she followed Hermione to the door.

“No, no, nothing so much as that.” Hermione waved it off. “I mean, yes, in Hogwarts it feels quite tremendous when you see her as a fourth year and he a seventh, nearly out of school. But there are couples in the wizarding world with near a thirty-year gap, and it is barely anything. No, I think… I think it is because I simply don’t trust him.”

“Trust? Mr Weasley? He may not be the most saintly of students….”

“It may have been a while, Min, but I do remember the Weasley twins. Jokers and tricksters the both of them, and Fred was the schemer. I don’t trust him not to make a fool of her. I don’t trust him to treat my daughter as she should be. He never took anything seriously. I do recall both of them being utterly indifferent to their OWLs. So, if he does not worry about the important things, if he does not put enough thought or care into the very things that dictate his future, how can I possibly believe he would put thought or care into a relationship? And I know my daughter, Min, and as much as she wants to be like her father, and appear utterly indifferent, she has my damnable way of wearing her emotions.”

“A Gryffindor, you mean?” Minerva smirked, and Hermione gave a chuckle at that.

“Yes, I suppose she is.” She sighed heavily. “I am utterly worried over what Severus will say, though. The twins are quite a bit like….”

“The marauders?” Minerva arched a brow, and while there was still amusement in her eyes, there was a faint edge of sadness about her, too.
“Yes. And while Severus had gotten along with Sirius in the end, he was really the only one who didn’t give him a reason to resent him. Not in the end, not when the truth came out.”

“Well, someone will need to play devil’s advocate when this discussion happens, and I think we both know Leonidas will be much too amused at his sister’s dressing down to do much supporting.”

“And I think, deep down, if Severus had it his way she wouldn’t date until she was out on her own. And even then, he’d be critical.” Hermione smirked, thinking of her overprotective husband looming in the doorway of a grown Aurora’s home while a young man who vaguely resembled a Weasley waited. “Must get going.” She relented with a sigh.

“Good luck, Hermione. And drop by again sometime soon.” Minerva said as Hermione stepped out.

She waved to the older woman and began heading down the halls toward the dungeons to play referee to her husband and daughter.

Severus had flooed her shortly after when they would be getting back from Hogsmeade, sneering and snarking over their daughter and how they had to make some ground rules, especially those pertaining to Weasleys. But before he could give her a proper explanation of what had happened, he was called away.

After bringing Leo to his father’s rooms, Hermione had sought out Minerva just to have an idea of what to expect and was pleased to get the whole story of what was witnessed.

She was nearly to the dungeon stairs when a ‘hum-hmm” sounded behind her in a disturbingly prissy voice. Frowning, Hermione turned to face a short, stout witch dressed entirely in pink. Too prim, to proper, walking toward her as though she were some sort of noble. Hermione had spent enough time with the wives of Death Eaters, purebloods, to know that this woman had been doing her best to imitate them and was going too far.

“Yes?” She asked politely.

“Visitors cannot be roaming the halls, and most certainly not be traveling to the dungeons. You must head to the Headmaster’s office or kindly wait in the entry hall for someone to come to you.”

Hermione blinked. “Visitor?” She asked.

“Yes.” The woman said. “You are clearly not a student, but you are also not a professor. Therefore, a guest.”

“Actually, I’m a part time resident of the castle.” She retorted, turning fully toward the little witch.

She looked Hermione over with what appeared to be a bit of curiosity, and a lot of superiority.

“There are no part time residents of Hogwarts.”

“No?” Hermione countered.

“No. The only residents of Hogwarts are the students, and the employees.”

“And their families.” Hermione added.

The woman gave a high-pitched giggle of condescension. “No Hogwarts professor currently in residence has family who live with them.”

“Full time, no. I come a few evenings a week and occasionally on weekends.”
“And precisely who do you claim to be married to?” She asked with an expectant expression.

“Hermione,” Severus said behind her, and she glanced over her shoulder to see him ascending the stairs with Leo beside him. He frowned at her, then caught a glimpse of the witch who held her up.

It was subtle, so subtle that if she hadn’t known Severus for over twenty years, she’d have never noted the exasperation and disgust he instantly felt when his eyes landed on the beady little witch.

“Dolores.” He greeted.

“Severus,” She smiled sweetly. Then she glanced at Leo. “A troublesome student off to detention?”

He frowned. “My son.” He replied. “Who is not yet a student of the school.” He then turned to Leo. “Are you positive you wish to see Aunt Min?”

“I’d have liked to have seen Hagrid, but since you say he’s not here….”

“Then go. Have Aunt Min escort you back no later than nine. I doubt very much this talk with your sister will take long.”

Leo did his best to suppress his smirk, nodding dutifully before turning to his mother. “She thought I was a student.” He grinned.

“Yes, yes.” She said, ruffling her son’s long, slightly oily hair as he passed her. He would be needing a stronger shampoo, soon. A sign his adolescence was closer than she’d have liked. She pushed the pang of sadness down as she turned back to the beady little witch who seemed torn between glaring at her or simpering at Severus. “If you’ll excuse me, my husband is waiting.”

“And that is?” She asked.

“Me.” Severus replied, the word ‘dunderhead’ in his sneering reply.

Dolores looked taken aback, and then glanced down at his hand. Naturally, Severus’ sleeves covered his wedding band, hiding it from sight. “Oh,” She said, the disappointment heavy in her tone.

“Yes,” Severus said. “If you see Aurora Snape coming to the dungeons, she is permitted to do so by me, and her head of house is already aware of her traveling the corridors.”

“Aurora… Snape. As in… right. Yes, of course, your daughter. Well,” She said, appearing to size Hermione up. “Carry on.” She then turned sharply and headed in the opposite direction, her tiny little heels clacking against the floor.

“Should I be worried?” Hermione smirked.

Severus shuddered. “Do not even joke.”

They headed down stairs and into his chambers, where once within he removed his robes and frock coat, then ran a hand through his hair. Stressed, Hermione thought instantly, taking in the way it seemed lankier than usual. “Are we really doing this?” She asked, closing the space between them and putting a hand on his arm.

“Yes.” He said with resolve, turning to the door as Aurora walked through.

“Umbridge just glared at me as I walked by, and she said something about detention?” She said, throwing her thumb over her shoulder as if the squat, pink witch was inside Severus’ office waiting for them.
Severus waved off Aurora’s concern with an eye roll. “If she gives you detention for this evening, I will make sure it’s with Minerva. Now, about this afternoon,” He pointed to the arm chairs across from the sofa. “Sit.”

Aurora sighed, looked a bit petulant, but did what was asked. She sat with her arms and legs crossed as Hermione and Severus sat on the sofa across from her.

Hermione waited, allowing Severus to guide the conversation.

It was Aurora who spoke first.

“You lot know it’s rare to find your soulmate first go, right?”

Hermione blinked, then looked to Severus to see if he was just as baffled as she was. From the surprise that morphed into a frown, she would saw he was. “What?” He asked their daughter.

“You and Mum,” She said, gesturing to them. “You met when you were my age.”

“Well,” Hermione said tilting her head.

“It doesn’t count that you were eleven when you met dad the first time, I met when you were properly … aligned. Aged. Whatever. You two never dated anyone else, you’ve been together for a bloody long time. But most people have to date to find who they are meant to be with.”

“Aurora.” Severus stopped her, raising a hand to affirm his need for her to cease. “This conversation has absolutely nothing to do with your dating. Much as I dislike it, it would have been expected of you quite soon to begin a courtship with Draco. And I know, I know that isn’t going to happen. But, Rory, not everyone does. And more importantly, the children of Death Eaters and supporters of the Dark Lord do not. Now, much as I am not a particular fan of Fred Weasley asking my daughter to accompany him to Hogsmeade without my blessing, I trust you to make the choice for yourself whom you’d wish to spend your time with. However, that should not mean public displays of affection with a member of a blood traitor family where not only other students would see, but adults within the village.”

“So, because you have to play Death Eater, I have to pretend to hate Fred?”

“Aurora, no.” Hermione interjected. “I agree with your father, I don’t like the idea of Fred Weasley, though my reasons are different, and frankly, of lesser importance than the issue at hand. We aren’t asking you to pretend you hate him, or even ignore him. But for the sake of many, many things, we need you to not ….”

“Snog him in Hogsmeade?” Aurora suggested.

Severus scowled. “Snog him at all, actually. You are far too young for that sort of thing.”

“And how old were you?” She challenged smugly.

“Not fourteen.” He retorted bitingly.

“I’ll be fifteen next month.” She retorted.

“And your mother was sixteen.” He countered. “And I nearer that than fifteen.”

“Rory,” Hermione cut in before they could get into any sort of row. “The bottom line is, we aren’t saying you can’t see him. But we ask that you stop and think before doing something he blindly
suggests. Like kissing on the streets of Hogsmeade, or maybe … more. Just … remember that you
are young, younger than him, and far less experienced. And aside from that, we are at war. And
while I know full well you did not ask to be born into this, you have a role to play. Same as your
father, same as me. Remember that there are always consequences.”

Aurora, finally, seemed to sober. She mulled this over a moment before nodding, rising to her feet.
“May I go?”

“Yes,” Severus said, seemingly more drained than he was before.

“Goodnight.” Aurora said before she departed.

When the office door had shut, Severus flopped back on the sofa. “I don’t want her dating.” He said.
“I don’t want any boys but Draco and Potter within ten feet of her, I don’t want to know she kisses
boys, I don’t want to acknowledge she is, in fact, to be fifteen next month. I don’t wish to concede
that she is closer to majority age than that of a firstie.”

“I know,” Hermione said sadly, thinking back on the subtle signs of Leo growing older as well.
“And with a war….”

“We’ll be so focused on protecting her, Leo, Potter, the lot of them, to notice they’ve grown. And
will have missed it.”

She leaned on her husband. “What are we to do?”

“Hope that it ends before that happens.”

Chapter End Notes

So if you hadn't guessed, updates are going to be slower with the upcoming Holiday
season.
Will try my best to keep them steady.
“Yes.”

Such a simple word, yet the moment it left Hermione’s mouth, it felt as though a heavy, dark cloud suddenly dispersed from over his head, taking with it a pressure that left him aching. Severus was off his knee and pulling her into his arms, his mouth falling on hers so quickly her elated giggles were born on his lips. And he smiled, still kissing her despite the minimal real estate such an expression gave to do so. Her arms were around his neck, and with her secured so snuggle to him, he actually felt buoyant enough to lift her off the ground and twirl her about once.

She laughed more, music to his soul, and he set her down and pulled back so he could look at his fiancee, his future wife, his Hermione.

“I thought you were about to break it off.” She said, only a bit miffed sounding. She gave him a very light smack on his shoulders, but other than that, she didn’t pull her hands away from him.

“I was prepared for it.” He replied. “I want to marry you, but I had no idea if you still felt the same. If you even wanted to take it to such permanence.”

“I have.” She said, running her fingers along his hair despite the texture of it. The touch was reverent, and he nearly felt handsome, despite his physical flaws.

But her touch reminded him of something important. “Then I believe I need to ensure I seal the promise,” He said, taking her left hand in his right and slipping the ring that had looped on to the tip of his finger on to her delicate one.

The silver ring with its cluster of diamonds around an emerald was a family heirloom that was meant to go to his mother but skipped her when she married Tobias instead of the man her parents had wished her to. On Hermione’s finger, it seemed large, but it looked right. He could not have imagined tromping off to a jeweler to procure whatever ring was in fashion, not to mention how much he loved the idea of a Prince family ring on her finger when the name he had to give her was Snape.

“Severus, it’s gorgeous.” She breathed, staring at her hand in awe.

“It’s not new.” He stated the obvious.

“I don’t care. The fact that … you had to have gotten it from someone, and I would wager that someone was either your mother or grandmother. The fact that they would allow you to give this to me….”
“Hermione, my mother adores you in her own way, and my grandmother is quite eager to meet you. The ring was practically shoved in my face when I’d gone to the Prince home to thank my grandmother for all she’d done for me over the holidays. I do regret that I was not able to come to you.”

“Severus, you don’t need to apologize for our lack of physical contact, honestly. You were to see me at the Malfoy party, I would not begrudge you the chance to see what’s left of your family.”

“And that is one of the many reasons I love you.” He said, cupping her cheek and pulling her in for a deep kiss. The hum of approval on his lips only had him pulling her closer, practically wrapping her in his robes.

His future wife. He had a future wife! An intelligent, fierce, strong, brave, beautiful future wife to share the rest of his days with. It had never felt so good to know Albus Dumbledore was fallible.

The old coot had been dropping hints, and remarks throughout the whole year that actually had Severus starting to doubt. He didn’t believe a word about Sirius Black and knew from being inside his mind that Hermione could practically sit in his lap, and all the reaction that would come from Black would be nothing more than a front. But there was Lupin, who he’d known from Hermione’s confession had no qualms about making his feelings and intentions known. Hearing Albus saying the two had seemed to grow close, even after the incident, had given Severus pause. Especially when he and Igor had been permitted to send letters so rarely. And, of course, he caught wind from said same Headmaster that the romance between Potter and Lily was ended. He had been disappointed but said with that damned twinkle in his eyes that it was inevitable. Hardly anyone ever stayed with their Hogwarts sweet-heart, and had he met any nice young girls among Voldemort’s camp?

When he asked, begged Nikola for the day off to attend Hermione’s graduation, he’d worried terribly the whole time it would have been a stupid idea. His Master permitted it, pleased his apprentice had passed his examinations with such high grading, and Severus had to work up the nerve to apparate to the Hogwarts gate. And then, when he went to approach Hermione, who’d appeared lost and alone, he knew he felt the Headmaster’s gaze baring down on him. He decided, then, to only allow parts of his well-planned speech to go through his mind: ending things as they are. Because he was ending them. He didn’t want Hermione as only a girlfriend any more, they were either going to move forward together or go their separate ways.

Severus was completely, utterly thankful she chose to go forward.

“Oi! Get a room, you two.” Black’s voice called out, bringing Severus back to himself.

He turned to see the marauders and Lily all coming toward them.

“I have one.” He said to only Hermione. “It’s rented at the Leaky Cauldron.”

“Presumptuous.” She smirked.

“That I was going to need a place to drown my sorrows upon your rejection, away from Karkaroff? Yes, I had presumed as much. But there are better ways to put it to use now, isn’t there?” He said, brushing his nose against her curls and making her giggle.

“Oh, the pair of you are so sweet looking, it makes me feel sick.” Black egged on more as they came within proper speaking distance. “You look so happy, and….”

“Is that a ring!” Lily demanded, and Severus enjoyed the instantaneous and various reactions from the five onlookers.
Pettigrew had frowned thoughtfully but said nothing as he stared off toward the lake. Potter looked like a petulant child who didn’t get what they thought they deserved. Lily was doe eyed and near tears, hope alighting her features. Black looked like he didn’t know who to be more pleased for. And Lupin, oh, Lupin looked utterly devastated.

“Severus asked me to marry him!” Hermione confirmed gleefully, presenting her hand to Lily so the ginger could have a better look.

“Oh, it’s lovely,” Lily smiled. “But Sev, honestly? Slytherin colors?” She teased as she handed Hermione’s hand to Black.

“I don’t think I’d have been a fan of red and gold for myself, to be honest.” Hermione said just before Black gave a long, low whistle.

“Goblin made silver. And they don’t cut stones like this anymore. Well done, Snape. I imagine it was likely a family ring, but this is worth more than most wizards have in Gringotts.”

“Which Death Eater did you snatch that from?” Potter asked, and Severus was surprised to see Black shoot him a derisive look.

“The wizard half of Snape comes from the Prince family.” Pettigrew spoke up, the attention pulled toward him. “Isn’t that right, Snape? You’re part of an old, pureblood line. The last of one, I believe.”

“I am.” He replied, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as something about the way Pettigrew stood, the way he spoke, seemed quite out of place for him.

Potter scoffed, but said nothing, his eyes falling on Lily.

“Well, heirloom or not, it’s beautiful and I cannot be happier for the two of you.” Lily said, and Severus regretted that Hermione actually stepped away to embrace their friend, and to allow Lily to accost Severus as well.

“Congratulations, Severus.” Lupin said, and despite a weariness from Black, he stepped toward the couple with an offered hand.

Severus looked down at the offered hand, to Lupin, smirked, and then decked him.

The crack of his fist hitting Lupin’s nose was utterly satisfying, the feel of the cartilage breaking wonderfully cathartic. Any time the werewolf had crossed Severus’ mind since the moment he read about his lips on Hermione’s, he thought of what it would be like to show Lupin how the men of Cokeworth dealt those who tried to steal their women. Reality was actually better than the dream.

“The hell, Snivellus!?” Potter screeched, wand drawn and pointed at Severus.

Hermione had her hand drawn nearly as fast as Severus had his, and Black was a beat behind them, making it clear that, should Potter decide to take on Severus, it would be three to one.

“Remus had it coming, Prongs.” Black replied, listing his other hand in an attempt to placate his friend. “Not like Severus had a chance to deck him for February before now.”

“It’s true.” Lupin replied, muffled as his voice was with his hands covering his nose and mouth. “I’d have done the same.”

“It was a kiss.” Potter countered like they were being unreasonable.
“It was an assault.” Hermione countered, turning back to Severus. “Which I’d already hit him for.”

“Yes,” Severus acknowledged, knowing that Hermione was implying it wasn’t necessary, and not wanting to have to say that it was.

She tried her damndest not to smirk, but as the tiny hint of it broke through, she shook her head at him.

“Mr Potter, while I’m aware you’re no longer a student at this school, I will kindly ask you to put your wand away.” Minerva said as she strode toward them, taking in the scene with a cautious eye. Delia and Bob were behind her, frowning at the marauders they clearly hadn’t met. Bob eying Lupin’s bloody nose with a suspicious glare.

“For you, Professor.” Potter relented, holstering his wand and straightening his graduation robes before gesturing for the rest to follow. Only Pettigrew and Lupin obeyed, and Potter seemed genuinely hurt when Black sauntered up to Delia.

“Mrs McGonagall, lovely as always. No little rascal today?”

“Ollie’s with Bob’s brother.” She replied with a warm smile. “It is good to see you Sirius. You’ve stayed out of trouble?”

Minerva scoffed loudly, and Black seemed to have the good sense not to deny it.

“I believe you’re about to gain a son-in-law of sorts.” He said, clapping Bob on the arm before he stepped past them.

Delia turned to them and beamed, just as Minerva said, “It’s ‘bout time, lad. Only asked fer permission back in February.”

Severus sighed, realizing now it may be a bit before he could sneak Hermione off to the Leaky to properly celebrate their new status.

July 4th, 1978

“I can’t allow it.” Dumbledore said as simply as he would have declined a cup of tea.

“I wasn’t asking your permission.” Severus snarled, glaring at the old man. “Merely telling you that Hermione and I plan to wed.”

“And I can’t allow it to go on.” Dumbledore repeated. “I have said, time and time again, Severus, that you cannot have attachments. Should something happen, should a choice be presented between Hermione and the greater good….”

“Are you expecting her occlumency to fail? Or for her to foolishly go marching in to a Death Eater gathering declaring herself a muggleborn, light loving witch? In what way will there ever be a choice between Hermione and the greater good?” Severus demanded, pounding a fist on the arm of his chair.

“I am unsure if your other master will think you fully loyal if you’re mar-”
“My other ‘master’, as you so wonderfully refer to him, was so pleased by the news of our pending marriage, he practically demanded Lucius Malfoy hold a party in our honor.” Severus spat back. “Because marriage to an old, pureblood family….”

“She is not a pureblood.”

“And I am not an idiot. I am aware she is not. My mother practically fucking groomed her, so she would appear otherwise. But the Dark Lord thinks she is a lost heir to the Granger pureblood line, and he is pleased to have her joined to the last of the Prince pureblood line. He wants to celebrate it, as he has all the unions that have come about.”

“And you don’t find that the least bit suspicious?”

“Why would I?”

“The man does not understand love. He cannot.” Dumbledore said as if Severus should suddenly see the error of his ways by such a revelation.

It was, in fact, something Severus tried very hard not to scoff at. Of course, the Dark Lord would not understand love for he is pure evil.

“He may not understand love, but he understands martial relations and how children are born. And for a blood supremacist, a new generation of purebloods, or nearly so, is something he would desire. Most of these marriages are not love matches anyway, so why should it matter?”

“Severus, I’m sorry. You must call of the engagement.”

“Like hell.” He snapped.

“Then I will have to ensure a wedding cannot take place.” He casually threatened.

“And how will you arrange such a thing, Headmaster? You are not her guardian, nor her caretaker in anyway now that she is no longer a student. She could apprentice anywhere, so if you think taking that away from her will somehow deter us, it will not. You have no real pull in the ministry, none in which can allow you to falsify any sort of records,” And there was the subtle change, the hardness in the old man’s eye as Severus easily unearthed what the bastard was likely going to do. “Short of killing her,” Severus continued. “You can’t stop us.”

“There are ways.” Dumbledore said with a shrug, his eyes twinkling again as if he had not just tried to interfere with another man’s life. “Now, have you news?”

“There were six new initiations three days ago. No one spoke, and because they were what the Dark Lord-

“Tom.” Dumbledore interrupted.

Severus sneered. “The Dark Lord would refer to as … outer circle. Those who are worthy enough to wear the mask and bare the mark but are just a special sort of lackey until they can prove themselves. It’s what made me realize that there was a reason myself and the others were selected for the position we are in. It’s either for talent or money, which leads me to believe the Dark Lord may be crippled should he somehow lose his funding.” Here Severus paused. He’d been debating sharing this with Dumbledore for quite some time, not knowing if the old coot actually knew who his mother was, or the status of his family. But, in for knut …. “I have asked my grandmother, Ena Prince, to kindly not allow my inheritance to come to me until after my mother passes. She will continue funding my apprenticeship, that was considered not negotiable, but she has granted to me my wish. I do not wish
for the Dark Lord to think I can be another, near-bottomless vault he can leech off of."

“And what does Tom need money for?”

“The usual: food, shelter, blackmail. Nothing out of the ordinary, that I have witnessed.”

Dumbledore gave a nod. “The new Death Eaters?”

“Young.” Severus replied. “Newly graduated, only four are Slytherins, from what I could tell by their voice.”

“Foreigners, the other two?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, English. Familiar, though I don’t think I had encountered them enough to know for sure who they were by voice alone.”

Dumbledore stroked his beard as he tilted his head, humming thoughtfully. “Outcasts of their houses, I would wager. Unpopular, likely, or poor.” He sighed, and Severus refrained from rolling his eyes at the lament the old wizard put in it. “It is as it is, I suppose.”

“Quite.” Severus said as the fireplace in the Headmaster’s office turned green. As the floo activated, Alastor stepped out, shaking soot from his clothes. Severus smiled, a small thing that only lifted the corner of his mouth. His occlumency had developed more and more over the last year, and now he found he was often a mask, barely showing any sort of emotion unless he was around someone he trusted completely. Hermione, Alastor, and Minerva were about the only ones who’d seen his true range of emotions. The McGonagalls, Black, and Lily were only getting half of him. The rest, well…

Dumbledore had fallen in the rest, of course.

Alastor saw him occupying one of the chairs across the Headmaster’s desk and gave Severus a knowing smirk. It kind of made the auror look a bit frightening.

“I hear congratulations are in order, Snape.” He said as he hobbled toward Severus.

The young wizard stood, taking Alastor’s hand when it was offered. He was a bit taken aback when the grisly auror pulled him in for a firm, quick embrace with a pat hard enough to knock the wind out of Severus.

“Alastor, you can’t honestly say that they should wed.” Dumbledore said casually, though something in his posture said he was certain he could sway Alastor should he disagree.

“They should.” Alastor said. “Know where I heard it from?”

“Min.” Severus said, already knowing it was highly likely the witch had been telling anyone and everyone she could that he had asked her permission (with Bob and Delia present) for Hermione’s hand.

“Aside from her.” Alastor said, cuffing Severus upside the head in a good-natured way. “The Prophet.”

Dumbledore shot Severus a glare, but he merely shrugged and shook his head. He’d no idea how his engagement would have wound up in the Prophet, having not had the announcement made himself. And as happy (and very enthusiastic) as Hermione was over the engagement, he doubted his fiancee would have put a notice in the paper without telling him first.
“Seems someone felt the need to have it add to the social section.”

His mother? Grandmother, perhaps? The McGonagalls? Or maybe….

“Narcissa Malfoy.” Severus concluded. He looked to Alastor as the man frowned. “Hermione and I were in Diagon Alley, celebrating her graduation, and our betrothal, when we happened upon the Malfoys. Hermione’s ring is an heirloom, Narcissa had spotted it, and the next we knew we were to be guests of honors at a party to announce our pending nuptials. Which, I must say, makes it all the more amusing that she would go on and put an ad out.”

“You were to attend a function with Death Eaters, and hadn’t thought to inform me?” Dumbledore asked.

“To be frank, no. Considering I don’t typically attend said functions on your commands, I hadn’t thought to mention it. And since, as of now, it is merely to be a night of too much wine and dancing, I hardly thought it necessary.”

Dumbledore stared at him coldly, and Severus stared back. He felt the niggle of intrusion at the edges of his mind and scoffed. Try, old man. Try.

When Dumbledore got nothing but day to day nonsense, he bowed his head, and conceded. “Very well, Severus. You’ve made your point. If something should take place at this event, you will inform me at once.”

“Of course.” Severus said, barely keeping the sneer from his face. His ironic bow, however, was too good not to resist. He then turned to the floor and walked away.

Withdraw from marrying Hermione? Because the bastard seemed to want him alone and miserable? No, he would do no such thing. Unless….

The image glimpsed in Hermione’s mind, of himself older, sneering, so utterly displeased with her, flashed through his mind. It was faded around the edges, and as he seemed to become that man, he was starting to overlay the reflection he saw in the mirror each day with the older version of himself.

But what if the reason you look so bloody miserable is because she leaves you? What if Dumbledore convinces her it is the right thing. After all, she knows the future, she knows me from then, so what if she knows now ….

He couldn’t finish the thought.

July 8th, 1978

———H———

Witches and Wizards gathered in their finery, dancing and twirling and mingling in shades of navy, green, gray, and black. The ball room was exquisitely decorated, reminding Hermione of Disney films her Nana used to watch with her when she was a little girl. There was the heady scent of wine and chocolate, and rich foods mingling in the air, and a wonderful mix of chatter and music for ambient sound. It was wonderful, and it was all for her, for Severus. It was also painfully
overwhelming.

Her head ached from the occlumency of keeping her secrets to herself, tucked deep in her mind, all while allowing her happiness for the occasion to remain skim-able. On top of that, there was the need to remember all of her pureblood etiquette. Hermione Granger never forgets a thing, of course, but putting on the act and having it be believable was much more difficult than she’d anticipated.

Severus was currently with Lucius, Rodolphus LeStrange, a couple others that she knew were married, and not wanting to appear unable to function without him, she hung off to the side. She offered smiles to those who gave her one, but for the most part, they were all leaving her to herself. She was a Gryffindor, she supposed, a rare find among those here this evening. So rare, it seemed, that she didn’t recognize anyone who may have been in her own Hogwarts house.

She took in the lay of the room again, noting the garden doors allowing the guests to depart for some air. Another glance at Severus told her he was watching her, his eyes shifting to her so subtly that she nearly missed it.

Hermione, knowing he would see where she went to, moved along the perimeter of the room and headed for the fresh, night air.

There had been a rain fall through most of the day, leaving the evening air crisp if not a little damp. But out on the deck, gazing out at the amazing garden and the roaming, albino peacocks, Hermione didn’t care one lick.

“You should be inside,” Narcissa Malfoy startled her, and she blushed as her hostess smiled gently.

“As should you, Missus Malfoy.”

“Narcissa, please. Or Cissy. Lucius has always had a fondness for Severus and considers him somewhat of a little brother. That would make you a bit like family.”

“I hadn’t realized Severus and Lucius were truly that close. If I am to be honest, he never really mentioned Lucius prior to our first meeting you.” Hermione replied, her cheeks warming a touch more.

“That is not terribly surprising. I was married to Lucius at that time and hadn’t known he was writing Severus all along. Severus, of course, had not mentioned you to Lucius before our meeting, but then afterward, the way Lucius carried on….” She chuckled. “He was quite pleased, of course. He was worried Severus’ infatuation with the mudblood would continue.”

“Lily,” Hermione said, and wondered if there hadn’t been enough vehemence there. She shrugged, as if the whole thing was completely beneath her. “She attempted to gain, or perhaps regain Severus’ attention early on, but she failed.”

“As it should be.” Narcissa said, then sighed heavily. “I don’t suppose she was a terrible person, but …”

“Say no more.” Hermione saved the pureblood woman who seemed to be lost for words. “I lived with her, after all. A vain, vapid, self-centered creature. If she didn’t have the whole of Gryffindor and all of her acquaintance of the male persuasion panting after her, she was a miserable bitch.”

Narcissa threw her head back and laughed, a true, honest guffaw of elegance that actually had Hermione smirking. There was awe, too, just beneath the surface, that a woman could be as lovely and elegant with a deep, hearty laugh as she could be bowing and dancing.
“I knew a few witches like that as well. My heart was for Lucius from the moment I saw him, and I never looked at another. But there were some witches who just hated that I had his attention as well. Was that what it was for you and Severus as well? You knew he was….”

“Merlin, no.” Hermione said emphatically, earning another laugh from the witch. “Severus, from the moment I met him, was just a cantankerous, rude wizard who sneered at anyone he disliked, which was most.” Hermione shook her head. “But we grew on each other. I think he just needed to know I wasn’t going to be like the others, turn my back the moment he was difficult to deal with.”

“Severus does take some coaxing.” Narcissa agreed as a pair of champagne flutes appeared between them.

Hermione took it, knowing there was likely an invisible house elf between them. She smiled at the space for a moment, hoping the little creature saw it before it likely disappeared.

“So, your wedding? When will it take place?” Narcissa asked before she took a sip of her drink.

Hermione looked down at her engagement ring, “We haven’t discussed it, to be honest. I imagine not until next year.” She said, her mind drawing up the time-faded memory of Aurora Snape. She started school when Hermione had actually been in second year, hadn’t she? And she was one of the oldest in her year, if she recalled, though her birthday had been long forgotten, if ever known. So, she would have been born sometimes after September in … two years?

Blushing deeply, Hermione took another sip of her champagne and said, “likely by next year, no later than December next.”

Narcissa stared, “You aren’t with child, are you?”

“No!” Hermione replied, “no it’s just….”

“You want to be.” Narcissa said, soft and sad. “That I can understand.”

Hermione’s heart ached for the woman, knowing that she would have to wait nearly as long for Draco to arrive.

Even though she knew it wasn’t proper, Hermione reached out and placed her hand on Narcissa’s arm. “You’ll be a mother someday,” She said, fighting the threatening flutters of her heart to give this woman some peace of mind. “Magic will know when the best time for it to happen will be. Perhaps it’s merely terrible timing.”

“Bella hasn’t been able to.” Narcissa said in the softest of whispers.

“Probably for the best.” Hermione retorted. “She doesn’t seem exactly… altogether. I’m sorry, I know she’s your sister.”

Narcissa shrugged. “I was never as close to her as I was to our other sister, Dromeda. But she’s… lost to us.”

“I’m sorry.” Hermione said again.

“No, no, she’s not… it’s just that she was eliminated from the family tapestry. We aren’t really supposed to speak of her.”

Hermione nodded as though she understood and made a note to ask Severus about it later.
Narcissa took a deep breath, then grinned. “For the best. With Lucius’ father wanting to take a step away from everything for health reasons, and Lucius needed to take over, it is perhaps for the best we hold off until we are resettled.”

“Perhaps,” Hermione nodded in agreement, taking a sip of her champagne in time with Narcissa.

There was something oddly comforting about the woman, and Hermione found she quite liked her. It was almost like it was with Draco what seemed like eons ago, just before she fell through time. Given the chance, she imagined she and Narcissa could become a sort of ally to her.

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October 5th, 1995

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“A jinxed parchment?” Aurora’s eyebrows lifted in surprise even as her lips curled into a smirk. “How utterly wicked.”

Ginny smiled smugly. “I didn’t actually tell anyone it was jinxed. Just you lot. And if any of you blab, then we were never going to make it.”

“Admittedly, I’m a bit miffed I hadn’t thought of it myself,” Draco commented, emerging from the bathroom created by the room of requirement.

Aurora had been on her way back to Gryffindor tower from the meeting with her parents when she spotted the lot of Gryffindors heading toward the staircase to the seventh floor. It would seem that sometime during her and Fred’s absence in Hogsmeade, they had come up with a plan to meet in the Room of Requirement for a sleep over, something that hadn’t been done in too long. So, she joined the lot of them, meeting up with Draco and Luna along the way.

Draco sat down in his gray pajamas, something the room had changed since last they used it for this purpose. There was no more division in house colors, and it was only by the clear division between the two piles that they could even tell what was more of a fit for the boys versus the girls.

“May not have come up with the parchment bit, but you did come up with the quills.” Harry pointed out.

“Quills?” Aurora frowned, and she noted that most of them had no idea what Harry and Draco were on about. The only other one who seemed to know was Ron, and he was such a splotchy red, Aurora didn’t think it was going to be something good.

Draco smiled smugly as he plopped down next to Harry.

“It’s not like I’m cut off from my inheritance or Gringotts just yet. Father has no idea I’m not exactly pining for a place with the Dark Lord, so I have money to spare, still. Quills, unbreakable, best of the best, and now charmed with Protean charm. The little serial numbers on the quill will change to show the time and date of our meetings, once we start up that is. Hate for our illustrious instructor to catch wind of what we’re doing before we even start.”

“And you don’t think it’s gonna look suspicious for some of use to be using two galleon quills?” Ron asked, looking awfully indignant.
“Come of it, Ronald.” Ginny huffed. “’Mione was the only one who a two-galleon quill would’ve been wasted on.”

“Is. Is. Stop talking like she’s dead.” Ron countered.

Draco got this smirk on his face, one of true and utter wickedness, so much so that Neville paused briefly before taking his spot beside Aurora in the circle.

“You’re right, Weasley.” Draco said. “She’s not dead. Actually….” He paused to summon his bag, Ron flinching as Draco drew his wand, Luna ducking casually as Draco’s satchel came soaring from along the wall behind her. “Granger and I have kept in touch, and she may have mentioned a bloke.”

“A bloke,” Harry asked, seeming confused. Ron’s face went a deeper shade of red.

“Yes,” Draco said as he opened his satchel and searched. “Unlike some, when I write, in don’t just lament my problems, or ramble on about a sport they care nothing about. Even if I am going to beat you this year, Potter. No, I asked, and she was more than willing to gush. With proof.”

Aurora did not like the smirk on Draco’s face. She felt her stomach drop and her heart pound as he removed a photo from his bag. He’d stayed with them all summer, and suddenly all the albums and such he was never allowed to look at before became accessible with the knowledge of who his Aunt H was. There was no doubt in Aurora’s mind that the sneaky little thief swiped something for a moment just like this one.

“I believe they were at a ball of some kind.” Draco explained as he handed Ron the photo. Everyone clamored to look, but Aurora merely scowled at Draco.

“Bloody Hell,” Ron said, going pale.

“What’s the matter, Weasel? Disappointed he’s not a flaming ginger?”

“He looks like….”

“Snape.” Ginny half gasped. Luna shot Aurora a secret smile but said nothing.

“He really does.” Harry said, a frown coloring the edges of his shock. “Like… I mean, this bloke’s hair is pulled back, and it doesn’t seem like it’s greasy, but….”

“He looks like Snape.” Ron gasped out.

“No,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “No, this bloke doesn’t look like him. Don’t get me wrong, ’Mione could get a guy with better looks, but he’s not half way bad. Just serious, is all.”

“They look happy.” Harry observed. “They sorta remind me of my parents. Like, the way they look at each other in the photo. Happy.”

“Way she carries on, I think she might be half in love with him.” Draco inputted casually, inspecting his nails for dirt.

“He’s no Quidditch player.” Ginny observed.

“I bet he likes books.” Luna said as if she was genuinely unsure. “Hermione would only go for the studious sort, I’m sure.”

“No,” Ron said with certainty, shaking his head in denial. “No, they’re just mates, is all. He’s probably more into wizards, and ’Mione just didn’t want to ask me to go with her.”
“You took offense to being given a two-galleon quill.” Aurora said. “Exactly how were you planning on getting across the pond if you refuse to accept expensive gifts?”

Ron moved his mouth about like a fish, but obviously couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

“Right, so, about this class I’m supposed to teach.” Harry changed the subject. “Does it need a name?”

“Actual defense class, perhaps?” Ginny mused.

“Potter’s Army.” Draco smirked. “Or perhaps, the assembly of the Phoenix chicks.”

“Helpful, Malfoy.” Harry countered, elbowing Draco.

“What about the Defense Association?” Luna asked. “Simple, effective…”

“We could call it the DA for short.” Aurora mused. “Sorta sounds like…. Well, we need to practice DA. It’s like we really can’t be bothered to say the whole thing.”

“I like it.” Harry said thoughtfully.

“And so tomorrow we will spread the news, quietly though.” Luna said with an airy smile. “We shall find those who want to be part of the Defense Association.”

“We’ll need someone to round up to Hufflepuffs.” Ginny reminded.

“Can we not talk about that now?” Ron said, thrusting the photo of Aurora’s parents back at Draco. “Let’s do something fun.”

“Like what?” Draco asked.

A football appeared in the middle of their semi-circle, its white and black pattern glinting in the candle light.

Harry smirked. “Ever play football, Neville?”

Chapter End Notes

I am really, really, really sorry it took so long to get this update to you. Real life has been busy with so many things, and writing has been the last thing to possibly get my attention.
It was well past curfew, and while Severus had never allowed himself to mark essays this late, he’d been falling behind. Not that curfew meant all that much to him, but it was always amusing (and good for one’s vile image) to go stalking the corridors shortly after the hour mark to catch students who were trying to make their way back from where ever they were running late from. But not tonight. He’d been called to give a report three times already to one master, thankfully with just enough intel to only receive a quick blast of the cruciatus curse. Nothing like some of the others were getting for their failure to find a way in to retrieve the prophecy, nor those who were supposed to be plotting the release of the Azkaban bound Death Eaters.

This, of course, meant that when he returned to Hogwarts to speak with his other, less vicious but no less cruel master, he would lose time to do the work of a professor. Hogsmeade weekends, and detentions, plus visits from his wife and son had started to cause Severus to put off marking more and more. And so, he sat, in his office, a tumbler of fire whiskey at his right, being nursed carefully, a near empty pot of red ink to his left, allowing easy access to re-dip his quill.

He nearly knocked over what little remained with the knock on his door.

He groaned quietly. Please don’t be Umbridge. Please, please don’t be Umbridge.

“Enter.” He called, focusing on the essay in front of him and avoiding having to see who was coming in.

It startled him to see Harry Potter crossing his threshold.

“Ten points for being out past curfew, Mr Potter.” He said automatically, though it had absolutely none of the bite he would have used had they been in the corridors. He set his quill down and looked the boy over. He looked a bit wind swept and bedraggled, and he was not in his school uniform. Severus wasn’t sure what to make of the sight, especially when it seemed Potter himself wasn’t sure why he was there. “What is it?” Severus asked.

“I’m not sure who else to talk to about it.” The boy said quietly. “I’ve told Sirius, and he was… he was unsure what to do the first time. Said if it happened again, I should talk to Dumbledore. But, even if I wanted to tell him now, I couldn’t, because Umbridge watches everything, and I don’t need her getting anything back to the ministry.”

Severus hummed in agreement, not even caring for Potter’s lack of respect or title when mentioning the toad.

“I had told Dumbledore, but he didn’t seem… concerned? I guess?”
“I’m afraid I’m not kept informed of your every discussion. What is it that you wish to speak to me about?”

“My scar,” Potter said, gesturing to it. “It’s been hurting, and when it does, I get feelings of what the Vol- er, what Riddle is feeling.”

Severus’ control allowed his face to remain impassive, all the while he was screaming inside. In frustration, because this was something that Dumbledore should have shared with him. In fear, for this was Lily’s son, Sirius’ godchild, his own as well in a way, and feeling another person’s emotions like that was. Not. Normal.

“What do you mean?” He asked quietly, and Severus realized a moment later that that was normally the tone of his threats. Potter, for his part, didn’t seem to know whether he should be pissed or scared. “Sit, Potter.” Severus said more gently, “And help me understand what you mean by, how he’s feeling. How do you know….”

“Dumbledore said, after he returned, my scar would hurt whenever he was near, whenever he would feel hate.’

“And has that all that you’ve been feeling? His hatred?” Severus frowned.

“No. Not… not hatred. More like… anger. Tonight was something … it was… it was like he was angry, but impatient, too. I dunno, but it was different last month. Last month, when I felt it… I didn’t realize until tonight that it was some kind of joy.”

Severus swallowed. A month ago? He was summoned around then, and the Dark Lord had been disgustingly pleased with his report. Potter earning detentions from the Ministry’s sadistic pet toad, worrying too much about Quidditch and not enough about defending himself against anything. Being a normal teenager, unprepared for the world. He hadn’t anything more, so it had caused him to have one of those brief bouts of torture the Dark Lord was so fond of dishing out this incarnation, but he had had a good night.

Potter sensed that? How could that be?

Severus tapped his finger on his desk, studying Potter, namely his scar.

“Do you sense anything else?”

“Well,” Potter shifted, “I’ve, ah, had dreams in the past. Dreams that I’ve seen him, from somewhere low. And those, they’ve all… they’ve all been real. Like, after I find out…. Pottery trailed off, the blush to his cheeks bright and burning.

Severus didn’t want to discredit him, though he had to admit that the dream thing sounded odd. But then again, sensing someone from a distance when they weren’t bonded was also odd. Potter had his moments of temper, to be true, but nothing like the Dark Lord. He couldn’t possibly have been imprinted on. Unless….

“Potter, have you heard of Occlumency?” he asked the boy, and was unsurprised to see Potter shake his head. He nodded. “My wife, and I, when we were in our fifth year, were taught the art of Occlumency. This is the practice of shielding your mind from invasion, and if you can perfect it, offer slightly altered or fragments of memory to miss direct the Legilimens That is, the person invading your mind.”

“Like… like mind reading?”
“The mind is not a book to be opened at will and read at leisure. The mind is a complex, many layered thing, Mr Potter. Muggles may refer to it as mind reading, though it is up to the legilimens to interpret what they see correctly.”

“And your wife had to learn this, too?”

“It was imperative that she did, for she had secrets that she had to keep hidden from all. When she was taught, it was initially with the intention of keeping those secrets secure should she somehow find herself captured. It became ever more important when she foolishly decided to join her life with mine.”

“How loving.”

“She knows my opinion.” Severus said casually and was mildly surprised to see Potter smirk. “She is not as skilled as I, yet she has had her mind invaded by the Dark Lord on more than one occasion and has successfully occluded him. I tell you this, Potter, because I think it is quite likely you will need to learn it.”

Potter blanched. “How?”

“I will teach you.” Severus replied evenly, seeing the look of utter shock on Potter’s face. “I will send you word when I am able to do so.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Potter replied. “And thank you for listening. For truly listening, and not merely brushing this off. It’s… I appreciate it.”

Severus nodded, not sure what to say. The Harry Potter who entered the castle five years ago, admittedly, was likely the same boy (or more accurately, young man) that stood before him now. A bad first day, combined with the copy of his nemesis with his best friend’s eyes, seeming to be paying no attention what-so-ever, had cemented Potter as “just like his father.” Arrogant, self-righteous, believing himself above it all, Severus would not hesitate to confess he disliked the boy.

Aurora’s opinion had swayed him somewhat, and Draco’s eventual migration to Potter’s side had helped a touch more. Even Sirius’ influence, a good one despite how Black was as a teenager himself, had shaped Harry Potter into a decent young man. And becoming wise. Influence from friends not in Gryffindor was doing wonders.

Severus leaned forward and snatched up his quill and a scrap of parchment, “This will keep you out of trouble with Mr Filch, or Professor Umbridge, should you encounter either of them. The other professors, should they stop you, will likely not need written proof of your coming to pay me a visit.

“Thank you, sir.” Potter said, waiting for Severus to finish with the hall pass.

As Severus handed it to him, he hesitated in the action until Potter met his eyes. “You speak of our conversation to only those you trust to keep it quiet. Aurora and Draco, I know, can keep quiet.”

“Understood.” Potter said, and Severus could see by the look in his eyes that he really did understand. He gave Potter the hall pass and watched as the young man left.

When the door closed, Severus let out a heavy sigh. A flick of his hand, and the door bolted shut, and a ward was raised in order to allow him knowledge should anyone attempt to visit him.

He then rose from his desk, marking forgotten, and headed to his floo. A pinch of powder tossed in the grate, “Eyre Cottage,” he announced before stepping into the Green flames.
He whirled through the system, then was expelled through the fireplace of a warm, cozy sitting room. The light was just enough for reading, and the room was quiet. The scent of strong, fragrant tea hit his nose, as well as the lingering aroma of lasagna.

“Severus?” Hermione said from where she was stretched out on the divan, the book she’d been reading closing as she seemed to hesitate rising.

He moved to her side. “Potter, Harry, he says he’s sensing the Dark Lord.” He knelt down, seeing the fear and confusion in his wife’s eyes. “They’re connected. And while I know Potter’s blood was used to resurrect him, it couldn’t possibly have been enough to connect them like that.”

Hermione frowned. “Harry had always had a pain in his scar, though, whenever the Dark Lord was near. I remember it pained him greatly in our first year, because of Quirrell. I don’t remember if his scar hurt his second year, with the near resurrection.”

Severus’ heart dropped to his stomach, further and further with each word his wife said. “It’s always pained him?” He whispered, and she nodded. “And there was a near resurrection of him before, using his old diary. And when it was destroyed…. Shit!” He rose to his feet and spun toward the fireplace. A flick and swish of his wand, and four ethereal lionesses departed in different directions.

He heard Hermione shifting on the divan behind him, but he watched the floo instead.

Minerva was the first through, dusting herself off and stepping aside. Alastor apparated in beside the mantel, as did Lupin. Sirius came by floo, a slight bit disheveled, in merely an oxford and his trousers.

“Severus, what’s going on?” He asked, looking around at the gathered ensemble.

With a heavy sigh, Severus waved his wand once more, pulling chairs and transfiguring them into something more comfortable, arranging them into a circle. He gestured for them all to sit, turning and taking the spot on the divan beside Hermione. He hung his head for a moment, gathering his thoughts, trying to figure out how to say what he knew.

“What is said in this room cannot be repeated. Try never to think on it in anyone’s presence but ours. We five should be the only ones to know, or to know we have these suspicions.”

“That sounds distinctly like a lack of trust.” Lupin observed.

“It is.” Severus replied flatly. “But I believe that we are the only ones who truly have Potter’s best interests at heart.”

“So, what’s going on, then?” Sirius asked.

Severus took another fortifying breath. “Potter came to me this evening with some distressing information.” He said, then relayed what Harry had told him. He watched as concern and fear mingled on the faces of those around him, knowing that not even the slightest bit of this information had reached their ears. He went on to add the information Hermione had given him, pertaining to Potter’s first two years.

“So.” Sirius started as if the wind had been knocked out of him. “So, when Harry said he’d been having dreams… what does this mean? He told me about the one he had last year, the one that turned out to be prophecy, not just a strange one. What… what is going on?”

“I think,” Severus began, not sure if he wanted to say out loud the thoughts churning in his mind. Instead, he decided, he would backtrack. Let them figure it out. “Back, way back, in the first war,
after the Potter’s had gone into hiding, there had been a meeting of the inner circle. At this point, it was starting to look a bit of a draw between the light and the dark, and some of the most loyal of his followers expressed a need for him to declare a successor. They wanted the wizarding world purified, and while they would never think anyone but the Dark Lord to be the perfect leader for such a cause, they feared what would happen should the Dark Lord fall. He assured us, then, that he would never perish. That he was to live forever, that he took measures to ensure that. He wouldn’t say how, of course, but not long after, he bestowed upon the Malfoys and the LeStranges gifts that he asked they keep safe. Shortly after that, Regulus had disappeared.” This he said to Sirius. “I’ve no idea what happened but is wasn’t long after the Dark Lord had asked Regulus for the use of your house elf.”

An idea seemed to spark in Sirius’ mind, but before he could allow his thoughts to be voiced, Alastor spoke up.

“And Albus knew.”

“Of course.” Severus said. “And not long after that meeting, Horace Slughorn announced his retirement. Which is how I earned my position as Slytherin Head of House and was forced to put my mastery to use teaching children. It was, of course, for the best as the Dark Lord had been trying to find a way to have someone close to Dumbledore and believed it the perfect opportunity to spy.” He looked to Moody, seeing the former auror having cottoned on to something, his mind working to put the puzzle pieces together. It was time to let the last of what Severus knew be known to the others, in hopes that he was not the only one thinking as drastic as he was. “When the Dark Lord fell, Albus informed me he would rise again. He was very confident that this was the case, and I had doubted it for ten years, until the first, near resurrection.”

“And what does this have to do with Harry?” Lupin asked, his voice small.

“Potter and the Dark Lord are connected.” Alastor said.

“More so than that prophecy said?” Sirius asked.

“Sounds like. What was it, exactly? Does anyone remember? We may be watching over the bloody thing, but none of us can actually use it.” Alastor asked.

“The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches, born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not.” Severus sighed, “That was all I got to hear before Aberforth kicked me out, thinking I was eavesdropping for ill intention. I thought, perhaps, I heard something about one not dying if the other is living, but that… that seems…."

“Fuck!” Alastor roared, standing, stomping around in a circle. “Fuck! He roared again, whirling around on the lot of them. “Do you have any idea what this means? Do you have any idea who all you’ve said, what all this could fucking mean?”

Before anyone could answer, a small voice said, “A horcrux.”

Severus, and likely the rest of the room, turned to the stairs where a little figure sat in the shadows of the steps.

“Leonidas.” He said.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Hermione asked, but Severus wanted to know something more pressing.
“How do you know what a horcrux is?”

He could see the shoulders of his son shift in a shrug. “I read about it in a book.”

“What book could you have possibly read that from?” He demanded.

Leo shifted down the stairs so that once he made it to the landing he was standing. In his buttoned-up pajamas, he seemed much smaller than nearly eleven. His shifting from foot to foot was nearly childlike. “There was a book at grandmothers.” He said to the floor. “It was really old, and kinda dusty. I don’t think she knew it was there. I flipped through it, and, well, I read that they were a magic too awful to speak of. But they allowed someone to live forever, even if their body was defeated, it said that much. Nothing about how to make one, or what happens when you do, just….”

“That is serious dark magic you’re reading about, lad.” Moody said, and Leo looked up at the grizzly wizard with a shy smirk.

“It kinda gave me the creepy crawlies. I ended up hiding the book. I wanted to burn it, but I was kinda scared what would happen if I tried. I know some books have protections, and it was a pretty dark book.”

“Leonidas, don’t speak of what you read to anyone, can you do that?” Severus asked, and his son nodded emphatically.

“Leo,” Moody said, hobbling toward the little boy. He knelt down, studying him.

Leo for his part, didn’t flinch, though he looked apprehensive at first.

“H, Snape, may I?” He asked.

Severus heard Hermione ascent at the same time he did, knowing what Moody had planned just as much as he did.

“Gonna feel a bit funny, boy, you don’t gotta be scared.”

“Not scared of anything.” Leo said, tilting his chin just a touch.

“Gonna be a Gryffindor like your mother and sister?” Moody asked.

“No,” Leo replied. “I’m going to be a Slytherin like father.”

“Slytherins aren’t not known for being fearless.”

“He is.” Leo replied, and Severus’ heart warmed at the admiration and respect in his son’s voice.

Moody nodded, then drew his wand and touched Leo’s temple. The boy flinched but didn’t close his eyes. He held Moody’s gaze, allowing the auror to do what he intended.

Time passed. Seconds or minutes, it was uncertain. But when Alastor backed off, Leo let out a heavy sigh.

“You’re a natural like your father.” He told Leo. “I think your mother should take some time to teach you how to put up walls. You’re too clever by half, and you shouldn’t be keeping what you know in your head unprotected.”

“Blimey, what else does he know?” Sirius asked.
Leo smirked. “More than you think, Uncle Sirius.”

“Uncle?” Lupin asked, negating the need for Severus to question the same.

“Sirius has been by for afternoon tea,” Hermione said simply. “He’s gotten to know Leo, and vice versa.”

“Enough of that nattering.” Alastor waved it off. “Young mister Snape, head to bed. Time for us grownups to have a bit more of a chat.”

“Yes, sir.” Leo nodded. “Goodnight Dad, mum. Aunt Min, Uncle Sirius. Sir, Mr Lupin.”

Everyone coursed a goodnight for Leo, and he went back up the stairs. As a precaution, Severus cast a muffilato around the living room.

“Are we saying what I think we’re saying,” Minerva asked. “That You-Know-Who has created a horcrux, and its somehow Potter?”

“I think he created more than one.” Hermione said warily. “The book, diary, that Harry destroyed back in his second year, himself…”

“Whatever the Dark Lord entrusted to the LeStranges. Three. Three horcruxes. That’s ….”

“Unnatural” Sirius said.

“But that makes me wonder what Voldemort needed the house elf for? Was it related, or do we need to worry about something more?” Moody questioned.

“And why didn’t Dumbledore tell any of us.” Lupin questioned solemnly.

“Because he wants control.” Severus said simply. “He wants the players where he feels they need to be. The Order of the Phoenix is nothing more than his army, made to play above the law, which means none of us can know too much. And most of all, he is too focused on his version of the greater good.”

“Like keeping me in Azkaban,” Sirius said thoughtfully, “And Harry with the Dursleys.”

“Trying to keep Snape in Azkaban and splitting up his family.” Alastor pointed out.

“Trusting no one from Slytherin and believing Harry’s support should only come from Gryffindor.” Minerva shook her head.

“And now we know, he’s likely been keeping this from all of us, probably didn’t plan to tell Harry, either.” Sirius sneered.

“But how do we destroy a horcrux?” Minerva asked. “How did Potter destroy the diary?”

“A basilisk fang,” Hermione said.

“Which Albus and I retrieved….” Severus trailed off as the memory flashed before him. “Six.”

“Six?” Lupin said, sounding near gagging.

“You sure?” Alastor asked.

“Positive.” Severus nodded. “So, unless there is another reason to have them, and I don’t recall
basilisk venom being used in anything but an anti-venom.”

“So, six horcruxes.” Alastor said, shaking his head.

“But he can’t mean to kill Harry,” Hermione reasoned. “He was meant to kill defeat the Dark Lord, after all.”

“Unless defeating He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named means dying so the horcrux in him dies too.” Sirius added sadly.

“If my mother still has the family books, it may pay to have a trip there and see if there is anything on living horcruxes. In the meantime….”

“We gotta keep this to ourselves.” Sirius said. “The children can’t know.”

“I think it may be times we start bringing the children in on all this.” Hermione reasoned.

“At fifteen?” Severus asked.

Hermione shrugged. “You were asked to spy at sixteen. And let’s face it, the Death Eaters are not going to care that Harry is a child, nor the friends he has who will inevitably stand beside him.

“I’ve told Potter I will teach him occlumency, but I don’t think I could do all of them.”

“Your daughter got a shield?” Alastor asked.

“Rory is proficient. Not a natural, but she can keep people out.” Hermione replied.

“Draco was taught by Narcissa, and aided by me, when he was younger.” Severus interjected.

“So, it is the Weasley children, Miss Lovegood, and Mr Longbottom we will need to worry about aside from Harry.” Minerva said thoughtfully.

“But wouldn’t it look awfully suspicious if, quite suddenly, Harry and all his friends know how to shield their mind?” Lupin asked.

“It would mean Dumbledore actually bothering with him.” Sirius replied. “Last letter I got from Harry said that Albus hadn’t bothered to talk to him virtually at all.”

“I will report to you, Sirius, how Potter’s occlumency is going. You can pass on the information to Alastor.”

“Want help?” he asked gruffly.

Severus shook his head. “Albus will sense you entering the school, and without a reason he has declared himself, it will only draw suspicion to all of us.”

“Which brings up the fact that you and I have both disappeared from the castle via floo.” Minerva pointed out. “How are we to explain if an explanation is demanded of us.”

Severus shrugged, “I came to visit my wife, as our song had developed a fever and she had no fever reducer in the cottage, nor the ingredients to make it. Perhaps I sent you a message to deliver some for me, or just the ingredients. While here, you two got to talking….”

“Yes, yes. Then let me go through first and wait a bit.” Minerva stood. “I assumed we were done plotting.”
“Of course.” Severus smirked. Minerva smiled back, then headed through the floo to Hogwarts.

“I’ll be by now and then to teach the boy.” Alastor said.

“We look forward to seeing you, Alastor.” Hermione smiled at the grizzly old auror, who appeared a touch bashful before he apparated away.

“I don’t like to think Dumbledore is using us.” Lupin said when it was just the four of them.

“He used myself at sixteen, thought he was using a fourteen-year-old Hermione as well. And how odd is it that, so promptly after graduation, when it seemed like the prospect of a future for you was so very limited, he magically had you join the order and promised you a job. How quickly was Potter the elder asked to try and secure his seat with the Wizengamot? I can guarantee you, Lupin, we are all pieces on his chess board.”

“Severus is right, Remus.” Sirius said.

“I have a hard time believing it.” Lupin confessed.

“Then come back with me to Grimmauld place, and I can tell you my side of things. Tell you exactly why I agree whole heartedly with Severus, and why I am fully encouraging Harry to form his own defense class.” At Lupin’s frown, Sirius smirked. “Exactly. You aren’t in touch as you should be, Moony. Perhaps you need to be brought up to speed.”

With a flabbergasted nod, Lupin followed Sirius through the floo to Grimmauld place.

Once again alone, Hermione turned to Severus. “Are we really going behind everyone else’s back? You know my level of trust when it comes to Albus, but Molly and Arthur? Kingsley?”

“We are the only five that had at least some level of occlumency.” Severus replied, caressing his wife’s cheek. “Albus cannot know we have figured it all out, for he will try to twist it around in some way or think us a threat to his plans. I know there was more to the prophecy, more that would help us understand. And I am beginning to think the Dark Lord suspects as much as well, as I have a feeling it is that in which he seeks.”

October 9th, 1995

They entered the Room of Requirement, and while Aurora logically knew it would be different, she hadn’t expected this. She ventured toward one of the metal dummies on the far end of the room, away from the books and the wall of dark detectors. Reaching up a hand, she stopped just short of touching the face.

“It looks so much like the mask my father has to wear.” She said, looking over her shoulder at the others. “What did you ask for?” She asked.

Harry shrugged. “A place to train to fight. A place to practice. One where we won’t be found.”
“You didn’t mention anything about Death Eaters in that thought?” She asked. He shook his head.

“Is that really what they look like?” Neville asked, coming up to stand beside her.

“More or less,” She said. “They tend to all be slightly different, sorta how they can tell one another apart when they’re wearing them, and yet still concealing their identities.”

“I hadn’t noticed.” Harry said.

“Well it’s not like we would have looked at them real close.” Ginny suggested. “We were running from them, after all.”

“But even in the grave yard…”

“Mate,” Ron said, “Pretty sure you’re allowed to have over looked that.”

Harry absently rubbed his left arm where it was sliced open not that long ago.

There was a quiet knock, and then the door opened, admitting Draco and a Theodore Nott.

“Ladies, gentlemen.” Draco said, looking around the lot of them. “Weasel,” he said as he spotted Ron, and the singled out Weasley’s face burned. “Know it’s not the stellar turn out you’d all have liked from Slytherin, but it is what it is.”

“He signed the parchment?” Ginny asked.

Theodore shrugged. “I signed.”

“Good enough, why don’t you guys go take a spot on the cushion while you wait.” Harry suggested, and Theodore did so while Draco went to Harry. They never got a chance to say anything before the door opened, and a group of Ravenclaws came in.

Since there was going to be some commotion for a bit, Aurora gestured for Neville to follow her to a cushion. There wasn’t much point in staring at the dummy, after all.

Once they were seated, they were joined by the twins, Fred, of course, sitting closest to her.

It wasn’t as though the conversation she’d had with her parents a few days ago affected their… whatever it was. Fred continued to flirt with her, and even in this moment he draped his arm around her, nearly touching Neville as he did so. But there hadn’t been any more attempted kisses, nor any hints about a date in the future. Really, she didn’t know if she should be grateful or disappointed. Aurora frequently went between the two emotions.

She watched as Ginny went to take a seat with Ron, Luna staying with Draco and Harry as the rest of the Ravenclaws split up. A couple went to sit with Theodore Nott, a couple with the youngest Weasleys, but the majority went off on their own.

A few lagging Gryffindors, ones that weren’t really part of their group, came in with the Hufflepuffs.

“Think we’re gonna get some more grief from good ol’ Zacharias?” Fred asked as he leaned in.

Neville must have heard, for he replied, “I heard he was pretty reluctant to sign up, thinking Harry was full of it. But Justin believes, so Zach went with him.”

Once everyone was settled, with Justin Finch-Fletchely as the member of Hufflepuff standing by Harry, the four turned to face the rest of the room.
“Right, so, welcome everyone. Glad you found the place okay.” Harry said, shifting about. “So, we’re all here because….”

“Umbridge is a toad.” Angelina called out, a chorus of agreement following her.

“Yeah, well, that too. But we’re mostly here because we want to be ready to defend ourselves. So, ummm.” Harry looked to Draco at his right, and for one moment, Draco smiled.

“Don’t look to me, you’re the leader of this operation.” He said.

“Am I?” Harry asked, voice breaking.

“I can’t imagine anyone better to lead us than the teacher.” Luna smiled serenely.”

“I’m not sure I get a vote, but I’m in agreement.” Justin said, inciting chuckles from the rest of the room.

“Alright.” Harry said, nodding, licking his lips, frowning as he gathered his thoughts. Like a curtain coming down, Harry straightened, shoulders back, head held high. “Right, so the first thing we should all know how to do is disarm. So, the first spell we will learn, and all get down perfect, is Expelliarmus.”

“Oh please, Professor Lockhart taught us that in second year.” Zacharias sneered, rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“But can you perform it?” Draco challenged, to which no reply came.

“And I think, more accurately, if anyone taught us it, not just told us, but really showed us, it was Professor Snape. And simple as it may be, I used it last June against You-Know-Who. It saved my life.”

“So, let’s get to it, then, mate.” George said.

“Right, so, everyone pair off. Draco, mind demonstrating with me?”

Draco nodded, and the room rose to their feet.

“Partner with me?” Neville asked immediately, and Aurora looked to see he was nervous.

“Sure, Neville.” She said with a nod.

They branched off a bit away from the twins, watching Harry and Draco’s demonstration. They each disarmed each other flawlessly, and with the example set, they turned their focus to one another.

“Lady’s first.” Neville said, gesturing for her to proceed.

Aurora focused inward, flicked her wrist, “Expelliarmus.” She said, barely raising her voice.

The spark of red and white flickered from the tip of her gray wand, and Neville’s own as plucked from his hand as if she’d accioed it. Catching it deftly, she tossed it back to him. “Ready?” She asked.

He nodded, got into position, and, “Expelliarmus!” Neville went flying back, his own wand leaving his hand.

Aurora ran over to him, kneeling beside him and glaring at everyone who laughed at him.
“You alright?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think I’m fine.”

“You need to not put so much flick into it.” Harry said as he helped Aurora get Neville to his feet. “Smaller movements. You’ll get it.”

“Right, of course.”

They went back to practicing, and after Neville’s twelfth failed, but less violent, attempt, the twins came over.

“Maybe you need a different target?” Fred suggested.

“’Cause you obviously don’t want to harm Rory.”

“Not that you would.”

“With this spell anyway.”

“A-Alright.” Neville agreed.

Fred looked to Aurora and winked, then guided her to his brother while he took over challenging Neville.


“I’m not your sister.” Aurora replied.

“Not yet you aren’t.” He countered with a smirk.

She disarmed him nearly instantly after that.

As they carried on, George would tease her a bit about her not quite but almost relationship with Fred, and the two would go back and forth disarming each other.

Just before Harry called an end to the evening, Neville hit Fred with a fairly powerful disarming spell.

October 10th, 1995

A

It was after midnight when Aurora crept back down to the common room, the fireplace providing the only light in the room. There was someone silhouetted by the light, laid back and at ease on the sofa, appearing as though he was watching the flames.

She moved toward him, her bare feet barely registering the rapidly cooling stone floor, her long
sleeved t-shirt and flannel pajama pants keeping the chill at bay for the most part. She certainly would be much more comfortable in her dorm, but this…

Aurora stepped around the couch and sat down on the empty space, tucking her feet beneath her to warm her toes back up. She turned to her companion, her heart stuttering just a bit as she met his eye and glimpsed his mischievous smirk.

“Out of bed awfully late, Snape.” He deadpanned.

“And who was it that left me a note to meet here?” She challenged, arching a brow.

Fred chuckled. “You have the Snape brow down.”

‘If you think I’m bad, you should see my brother.”

“I hope I do.”

They fell silent for a moment.

“Neville really likes you.”

“We’re friends.” Aurora shrugged.

“We’re friends.” Fred pointed out. “Friend’s who’ve had a snog.”

“Can it actually be called a snog, though?” she retorted.

“Suppose you’re right.” He said sagely. “Wasn’t long enough to be a proper snog. A powerful peck, perhaps?”

She laughed, “Yes, I suppose so.”

He chuckled with her but had sobered slowly. “Rory, I really like you.”

“I really like you, too.” She replied quietly.

“And I get the feeling that your dad doesn’t like the idea of us dating.” He said, reaching out and taking her hand gently in his.

She watched him run his thumb over her knuckles. “He doesn’t want me to date anyone, it’s mum who doesn’t like the idea of you specifically.”

Fred frowned. “Does she know me?”

“Yes,” Aurora replied with a smirk, then continued before Fred could ask particulars. “But I may still have to be Draco’s beard, as it were. And… and even if I don’t, I can’t be seen with you in that capacity where others might….”

“So even Neville doesn’t stand a chance.” Fred smirked, and Aurora giggled again.

“I suppose not.” She said. “Especially because I think my father would have rather been asked permission for my hand or some rot. He did saw something along the lines of any courtship I have, blah blah.”

“Oh, so that wasn’t just limited to the Yule Ball.” Fred nodded. “Alright, done.”
“Done?”

“Yes,” Fred said, looking her directly in the eye and causing Aurora’s breath to catch. “I will go to him tomorrow and ask for permission to court you. That is, if the lady does not object?” He asked, bringing their joined hands closer to him.

“I-I don’t.” Aurora stuttered and was thankful for the low light and the heat of the fire to blame the blush on.

“Then it’s done.” He said, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing her knuckles. “I know it’s hard to believe, but I can be discreet.”

“Really?”

“When it’s worth it to be, yes. And you, Rory Snape, are worth it.”

“Fred, I think you’re being very near sentimental.” She teased.

“Blimey, you’re right. Best fix that now.”

He leaned in, not slow, not fast, but allowing enough time for her to have pulled away if she had wanted to. And Aurora did not.

It remained chaste, but just. Their lips met and parted more times than Aurora could count, and if her father said no when Fred asked, and he honored it, it was a kiss worthy of a final one. The fingers of one of Fred’s hands gently weaved through her hair, the other placed at her waist. She kept one hand on his shoulder, the other rounding on to his back.

Just as the oddest flutter of something hit her, Fred pulled back. “Get to bed, Snape.”

“You too, Weasley.” She retorted.

He laughed, shifting off the sofa and offering her a hand to get her off the couch. He didn’t let go of it as he walked her over to the stairs of the girl’s dormitory. There were no departing pecks, or one last stolen anything. Fred gave her hand a squeeze, and then headed up the stairs to his dorm. Aurora smirked to herself as she headed back up to her own bed, noting to herself that she was not the only one who climbed the steps with a slight spring to their step.

———S———

“I need a drink,” Severus said by way of greeting as he stormed into Minerva’s office just after dinner.

“Don’t tell me you’ve unraveled another of Albus’ secrets?” She asked, looking at him with a touch of panic.

“Worse.” He said, raking a hand through his hair. “Against my better judgement, I’ve just permitted Fred Weasley to court my daughter.”

“Court?” Minerva repeated.

“Yes,” Severus replied.
She stared at him for a long while before she slowly began to chuckle. When he scowled, it became whooping hoots of laughter that had the witch in tears.

“It is not amusing. My daughter has a … boyfriend.”

Minerva did not cease laughing, and after a long enough interval in which it seemed like she was not going to relent, Severus rose and went to her liquor cabinet to pour him a couple fingers of scotch.

Fred Weasley had promised discretion. Promised to be a perfect gentleman. Swore that he would willingly allow Severus to gut him should he ever hurt her. And he agreed.

If it ever came back to bite him, Severus would plead stress induced insanity. There was nothing else for it. Well, perhaps there was good Scotch.

Chapter End Notes

I had to end on a little fluff.
Happy Holidays to one and all. I hope to have another update for you before the 25th, but if I don't, I wish you all the best!
It was nearly impossible to top last year’s celebration, but Aurora couldn’t help but enjoy being near the Quidditch pitch again.

She was flanked by Ginny and Luna, the former in Slytherin colors as had become her tradition when it was Gryffindor/Slytherin match. Neville was at her back, cheering on Harry, encouraging Ron despite a less than stellar performance as keeper.

Harry and Draco seemed to be having the time of their lives out there, flying circles around one another, chasing each other as much as they did the snitch. Aurora had caught snippets of taunts and laughter as they flew overhead earlier in the game, smiles wide on both their faces.

But, admittedly, her eyes didn’t stay on the seekers for long. She was, perhaps, a bit more drawn to the Gryffindor beaters. Or, at least, one beater in particular.

There were no clandestine meetings at midnight, nor were there longing looks from across the common room while they forced themselves to be apart. Aurora hadn’t sacrificed time with her friends, nor did Fred abandon George and Lee for her. They sort of merged where it was possible. She and Fred would sit beside one another in the great hall, their friends surrounding them. In the common room, they would be found seated together, thought here was always a respectable amount of space. As far as anyone was really concerned, she and Fred were just very good friends.

But when no one was paying attention, there were hands being held, a kiss on the cheek, cozy study or product development in a corner of the library, long walks around the lake even if it was getting a bit nippy out.

And she had, perhaps, been a bit louder when the beaters knocked away the bludgers.

When the game ended, Gryffindor just beating Slytherin by ten points, she and her friends not on the team went down to the dressing room area.

“Excellent game,” Ginny said as they entered the change area. “Well, except you, Ron. You kinda let more than a few of those quaffles pass.”

“Oi, shove it.” Ron snapped back, though Aurora noted that he was more than a bit blotchy after the statement.

“Is there much point in us washing up?” Harry asked, dabbing a towel to his forehead. “Or did your dad give us field time again this year?”

“’Fraid not,” She said, plopping down on the bench conveniently beside Fred.
“Oi!” Draco’s voice cut through the room before he rounded the corner and came into the locker area. “Do I need to shower?”

“Of course you do, Malfoy,” Harry grinned. “Can’t be keep up your pristine image if you don’t.”

“Yes, well, I’m also not going to bother if we’re going to go right back to flying.” He countered.

“Not this year,” Aurora shook her head. “He doesn’t want to draw attention to some points that, as of day, should be…fact.” She looked to her feet before meeting Draco’s gaze meaningfully.

“Right.” He said. “So, a more private setting, then? To the Room of Requirement?”

“I think that would work. Unless your parents had something planned?” Harry said, looking to Aurora once more.

She sighed heavily. So much for the good day. “They do. We can meet up after the dinner we will be having in my father’s quarters.” She said, looking to Draco once more. “And I do mean ‘we.’”

“ Bloody hell,” Draco grumbled. “Well, nothing for it, then. I suppose I should tidy up and prepare for a slow, mild form of torture.”

“Which would be?” Ginny asked.

“Dinner with my father, discussing with the Snapes the plans that will be set in motion for mine and Aurora’s arranged courtship and marriage.”

The room was silent, thick with awkwardness, until Ron said, “I thought Neville had a thing for She-Snape.”

Neville turned a deep shade of Gryffindor red, finding the tassels on his scarf fascinating.

“Attraction doesn’t factor very much into Malfoy arranged marriages. Merely a possibility for reproduction, and that the one marrying into the family is no less than a half blood.”

“And since you’re both purebloods….” Harry started to say, but a glance at Draco had him trailing off. His eyes went wide, and he looked to Aurora. “You’re half-blood, too?”

“What?” Ron scoffed. “No,” He shook his head firmly. “Slytherins are never less than pureblood.”

“That’s what you think, Weasel.” Draco smirked, sitting next to Harry on the bench. “My uncle is a half-blood.”

“Right.” Ron said in disbelief. He looked to Aurora, who merely nodded. “What, seriously? Snape?”

“Not exactly a wizarding name, is it?” Draco pointed out.

“More than just the sacred twenty-eight, though.” George said.

“Yeah, but even my grandmother’s family wasn’t part of the twenty-eight.” Aurora pointed out. “The Princes aren’t on the list. But Draco’s right, Snape is a muggle name.”

“But that wouldn’t make you half blood.” Neville frowned. “Your Dad being one doesn’t make your status the same.”

“You all assume my mother is a pureblood.” Aurora smirked.
“Alright, you lot,” Aunt Minerva knocked on the door frame, scanning the room “The field is all but clear, and most of you still smell. Hurry it up, lads. Mister Malfoy, please return to your own change room. While I appreciate the house unity, now is not the time. Ladies, Mister Longbottom, please vacate.”

“Walk with you in a bit?” Fred asked as she got up, and she looked over her shoulder at him and gave him a nod. Then, with her arm linked with Ginny, she and the others left the change room.

———A———

She waited for him by the Black Lake under one of her favorite trees. When she’d seen Fred approach, she pushed off the trunk, and his hand caught hers as they fell in step with one another.

“So why didn’t you tell me your mother wasn’t a pureblood?” He asked, swinging their joined hands and smiling.

Aurora shrugged. “It’s not my thing to tell, honestly.” And here she hesitated, wanting him to know the truth, but unsure if she were permitted to reveal that much. “My mother had a bit of … of an accident when she was about fourteen. It left her with no family, and she knew the dangers of being, well, Muggleborn.”

Fred stopped so short that she was pulled back to him when she hadn’t realized he’d done so. He gapped at her in amazement, and Aurora’s heart started to speed.

“Muggleborn?” He said, and she nodded ever so slightly. “Your mum, Snape’s wife, Muggleborn?” She nodded again. “And he knows?”

“You think because my Dad’s a Slytherin…”

“Not as stupid and short sighted as Ronniekins, am I? No, it’s just that your Dad was on trial for being a Death Eater. Not exactly the sort I’d have expected to shack up with a Muggleborn.”

“Well it’s not like he believes the rhetoric.” She said quietly, leaning toward him. “He loved her long before it was ever his mission to blend in.”

Fred nodded. “What’s her name again?” He asked.

“H.” Aurora replied.

“H. Right. That’s not a proper name. What’s H stand for?” He asked as they continued on.

Aurora didn’t answer. She looked to her feet, seemingly fascinated by the squish her feet made in the damp earth beneath them.

“Allright, what was her last name before she was married?” Fred asked, and Aurora turned her attention to the forbidden forest that circled the parameter of Hogwarts. “So that’s what happened to Hermione.”

It was Aurora’s turn to stop short, and she whipped her head around fast enough that her waves hit both her face and Fred’s. He chuckled, seemingly unfazed by her hair or her disbelief. “What?” She
said softly.

“Well, pretty brilliant, me. Sorta started to put it all together when we heard Sirius suggest a
Hermione to teach DADA this year. It’s been a couple years since Hermione left, yet we never really
hear from her unless Harry or Ron writes her. She doesn’t come visit. There’s no bloody way she
could have moved so quickly that she couldn’t say goodbye, and you two did, well, do, look awfully
similar. Sorta wondered, didn’t think it were really possible, but when you said this afternoon you
weren’t pureblood. And really, how else would your mum know me.”

“Who else figures this could be the case?” She asked, resuming their stroll once more.

Fred shrugged, “Just George, me thinks. We haven’t exactly sat around with anyone else and asked
their thoughts on it. Just a bit short of barmy, isn’t it? Does anyone know?”

“Draco and Luna.” She replied.

“Looney Lovegood knows everything, though.”

“Don’t call her that,” Aurora scowled.

“Yes, ma’am.” Fred conceded without argument. “So, any other secrets about you I should know?
Not going to tell me that Snape’s actually a dungeon bat, are you?”

Aurora held the scowl, but her lip twitched a bit. “No.”

“That’s good. Scary enough as it is, he is.”

“He’s supposed to be.”

They walked in silence until they were at the furthest point around the lake from the castle, the least
likely spot that anyone would see them. Fred stopped her once again, pulling out his wand and
drying a nearby fallen log. He stirred her to sit down, and then reached into his pant pocket before
sitting beside her. “Not much of a birthday present, I must say.” He said, tapping the small box and
enlarging before handing it to her.

Aurora hesitated with her hand on the ribbon, glancing at Fred as she wondered if perhaps there
would be some sort of jinx on it. When it seemed she would be safe, she pulled on the gold material,
watching it fall from the deep red box. She lifted the lid and pushed aside the tissue parchment to find
a lovely, ornate box. There was a crank on the side, similar to a muggle music box, and she looked to
Fred curiously.

“Afraid to say, the best part would be better viewed tonight in the Room of Requirement but didn’t
want to flaunt how lucky I am by being the one to show up with a gift.”

“Well, the outside it lovely.” She smirked, running her fingers over the pale gold images of flowers
embossed over the deep red lacquer.

“There’s the inside, too.” He said in a slightly teasing way. “Go on.”

She slowly opened it, still a bit weary that his natural tendency to prank would suddenly present
itself. The inside was lined with black velvet, and there was an odd scent coming from it. Something
like jasmine and honey, parchment. Aurora assumed Fred had spritzed a perfume in the lining, but
the scent was lost in the fresh air of the cool November day.

“Tap your wand to the crank.” He said, and she did.
There was something coming from the bottom of the box that she couldn’t see, lost in the light of the sun. But the song that played was quite lovely. Violins and a piano playing notes of something familiar. Not particularly romantic, but not anything meaningless, either. Whatever the song was, it pulled on her heart strings, and she smiled up at Fred.

He smiled back, proud of himself, obviously quite pleased, and Aurora was struck with the urge to kiss the smugness away.

So, she did.

“I must say, I had thought the rooms here at Hogwarts would be more… drab. You’ve done well with what you have.” Lucius said as he looked around the sitting room, a tumbler of brandy in his hand, walking stick on the other. In his semi-formal dress robes, he looked utterly pretentious, and Severus was a bit disgusted by the man he had once looked up to as a little first year.

He glanced at Hermione seeing her converse with Narcissa, a genuine smile on both their faces, though that of his wife’s had faltered as she clearly heard Lucius’ comment.

“Not all of us can have manors, nor do all of us want them.” Severus replied, his hand tightening around the tumbler in his own hand.

Lucius snickered, “Yes, well, let us hope Aurora does not share your sentiment. Where is she, anyway? And Draco, for that matter. They should have been here fifteen minutes ago. You don’t think that they are celebrating their impending engagement too early, do you?”

_Not in the least_, Severus sighed internally, lifting his tumbler to his lips but pausing when he felt his daughter and god son pass through his wards.

“Aurora,” Narcissa greeted warmly, stepping toward the teenagers and taking Aurora in her arms in a motherly embrace. “Happy birthday, lovely one. You’ve grown so much.”

“She is right, my dear. You look every inch the perfect Malfoy heiress.” Lucius said, raising his glass toward her.
From the sofa, Leonidas snorted, and Severus shot him a warning glance over his shoulder.

“You don’t agree, Master Leo?” Lucius asked, turning to the young man on the sofa.

“No.” Leonidas replied. “She looks ridiculous.”

“Thank you, Leo.” Aurora replied sarcastically.

“You’re welcome, Rory.” The boy returned, and Severus rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Shall we dine, then?” he asked. “I suspect that Draco is quite famished after his near victory against Potter earlier today.”

“Near victory?” Lucius sneered as the seven of them all took their places around the expanded table in the Snapes Suite.

“Yes, father.” Draco replied without looking up, setting his napkin on his lap and resting his hands on the edge of the table. “Potter out maneuvered me at the last moment.”

It wasn’t a lie, Potter had managed to feint at the end of the match. But Draco wasn’t at all put out about it and had openly shaken the Gryffindor’s hand while they were both still on their brooms, circling one another as the crowd roared with either cheers or disappointment. Whether his team mates noticed or not, Severus hadn’t known. He knew that no one from the quidditch team approached him about the rivals getting along so well, so he said nothing of it himself.

“You’re supposed to be better than he is.” Lucius said coldly. “At everything. You are to be the best. You are, at least, still top in your year now that the little mudblood has run off?”

Tension washed over the table. Hermione flinched, but covered it with taking a deep drink from her wine, all while maintaining her poise. Leonidas glared at his uncle, until movement from his sister had him shift that stony defiance to her. She subtly, oh so subtly shook her head, and Leonidas’ occlumency lessons had come abruptly to the forefront as he appeared suddenly quite indifferent. Narcissa looked to her plate, empty for the house elves had yet to appear, and Severus had noticed an air of embarrassment about the witch.

“I believe there may be a Ravenclaw who was out performing both myself and Granger.” Draco replied.

Hermione glanced at him, a slight lift of her brow, and a quirk of her lip. “Is that so?”

“Oh yes,” Draco confirmed. “I doubt she was ever going to graduation top of class. Too busy saving Potter’s arse.”

“Language, Draco.” Narcissa corrected instantly, wide eyes stealing glances at their hosts.

“Five points from Slytherin.” Severus said without thinking much of it.

Lucius gave a hearty laugh. “Really, Severus? House points?”

“I’m sure, at some point, Draco has used much more colorful language outside of my hearing. Considering it a long overdue infraction.”

“At least it wasn’t detention.” Aurora smirked.

“Ten points from Gryffindor for cheek.” Severus retorted, winking at his daughter as she turned to him, jaw dropped. Draco snickered. “I wouldn’t, young man. I could keep going, and then what will
“Your house mates have to say?”

“Likely that he shouldn’t have lost points because he spoke freely with his Uncle.” Hermione quipped. “Not to mention what the Gryffindors will say over Aurora losing points from her father.”

“I know it was your house, dear one, and our daughter’s, but it is still my rival house.”

“And that in which the most blood traitors come from.” Lucius added as if it were something one said in casual conversation. “But we shall not worry about that. For tonight, we are celebrating that, while living among some of the worst of wizarding kind, Aurora, like her mother before her, will join the best. And, if I may say, more so, as Aurora begins her official journey in becoming a Malfoy. Go on, Draco, seal the deal.”

The teenagers froze, the wives stiffened, Leonidas’ perfect mask nearly slipped as confusion and disgust crept into his eyes.

Aurora and Draco looked at one another, terrified, clearly having not anticipated Lucius’ demand.

As quick as would have been allowable, Draco leaned toward Aurora and placed his lips on hers in a very chaste kiss.

Severus held his breath, and as Draco pulled back, grimacing slightly, Aurora turning her head and wiping her mouth as discreetly as she could, Severus let out a sigh of relief.

“Feel any different? Has the world suddenly felt like it’s been made right? That everything has fallen into place?” Lucius asked, a light smile playing on his features.

“I can’t say it does.” Draco replied. “It was, after all, like kissing a sister.”

Leonidas’ face curled in disgust, and Severus felt his eyes crinkle in humor.

“Well. No matter. Sometimes these sorts of bonds take time to build, don’t they Cissy?”

“Oh course, Dear.” She said, and before anything more could be said on the subject, dinner appeared on their plates.”

“A bond?” Aurora said to Draco as the pair of them made their way up to the Room of Requirement. “Is that really a thing? Not just some weird thing my parents have?”

Draco shrugged. “They say that a couple, a proper couple, begin to really sense one another’s magical aura after they’ve been together a while. But that’s usually a compatibility thing, magics complimenting one another, and such. And there needs to be strong, romantic love. But you knew that, I know your mother read you the fairy tales.”

“Yes, but they were fairy tales.” Aurora sighed. “Do you think…?” She started to ask, but then lost her Gryffindor bravery.

“If you think you and Weasley A should call it quits because there wasn’t an instant swirl of magic like in _The Wizard and the Princess_, then you need to step away from Ronniekins, lest his lack of brain cells has become contagious. Not like you two are… wait, Fred hasn’t… do I need to hex
him?” Draco demanded, stopping on the stairs between the fifth and sixth floors, pulling out his wand.

“What? No! No, we haven’t … I mean we aren’t… it’s not like… bloody hell, Draco, we’ve only kissed.”

“Better be all that happened.” He said pointedly, sheathing his wand.

“Are you defending my honor as a sort of brother or an awkward future husband?” Aurora asked as they continued their journey.

“If this whole bloody war goes on long enough that you graduate before it’s ended, we’ll marry, and I will promptly leave the wedding suite and allow Weasley to sprog you up. Glamour the baby’s hair blonde until my father’s dead, or we can say it went rebellious on us.”

Aurora shook her head, barely keeping her mirth contained. “Could do the whole artificial thing.”

“Artificial what?”

“Well, you know. Suspended… stuff, a quick incantation, and a few potions to up the odds.” She looked to Draco. “Muggles call it the turkey baster method.”

“What’s a turkey baster?” Draco asked.

“Never mind.” Aurora shook her head as they reached the seventh floor and the doorway appeared. They entered, seeing mostly everyone already in their pajamas. Aurora and Draco parted, grabbing their change of clothes and entering one of the offered rest rooms within the room.

When Aurora re-emerged, she plopped down on a mat beside Fred’s, Draco sitting between her and Harry.

“Any way we can dim the lights in here a bit?” Fred asked, and the room obliged him just enough that the ceiling went dark, but the parameter of the room near the floor gave off just enough of a glow to keep Aurora from panicking. Fred then handed Aurora her box, something she’d asked him to keep safe for her until they could get to the room in the evening. “Open it.” He gestured, George elbowing him playfully with a smile that was both pleased and amused.

Aurora opened the box, and instantly the room was filled with green, purple, and pink waving lights. Gasps of awe over powered the soft melody playing from the box, and Aurora was so utterly dazed and mesmerized that she couldn’t pull her eyes away from the sight above her.

“Did you seriously enchant that box to project an aurora?” Ginny asked in disbelief.

“An Aurora Borealis.” Fred corrected in a fake, haughty tone.

“That’s incredible.” Harry said, a touch of laughter in his disbelief.

“It’s quite magical,” Luna agreed. “The charms you’d have had to weave is quite impressive. You got it to look nearly real.”

“You realize you could sell something like this and make a fortune?” Draco asked.

“Told him that,” George said. “But he wanted to make it special for Aurora.”

It was the first time she’d actually heard George call her by her proper name, and she looked to the
twin of her boyfriend with surprise. He merely grinned a little broader before turning to look at his brother’s handy work.

“I don’t mind if you sell others.” She said. “I’ll always know I came first.”

“Could do it in less fancy boxes,” Ron said, and the conversation shifted to possible business ventures.

The charms on the box never faded, not until the box was closed, or the crank was tapped on with a wand. It became the light source for the cake and tea that followed, for the laughter and conversation, and finally to fall asleep beneath as the night drew late.

But Aurora could not sleep, not properly and never for long. Her hand was linked with Fred’s, him curled on his side facing her while she remained on her back, staring at the swirling lights. It occurred to her that this gift was quite the declaration, that this was something he felt strongly about. No one went through the trouble of making something like this unless they cared quite deeply.

And that was a thought that terrified her.

December 1st, 1995

———S———

“Potter, focus. My ten-year-old has mastered this quicker than you.” Severus said as he withdrew from Potter’s head. Was it harsh? Perhaps, but if he had to delve into unfiltered, teenage angst one more time, he may turn his wand on himself.

So, Potter was pretty sure he was gay? Miss Chang had hung back and placed a kiss (a wet, tear filled kiss) on an unsuspecting Potter, and the boy was fairly certain his lack of enjoyment was from more than the emotional state of the giver. He was debating asking to kiss Aurora or Ginny for a test, but the thought had disturbed him in both accounts as he regarded both girls too much like sisters. And the worst along that train of thought, asking Luna because she looked most like Draco. Like the little blonde prat needed to get one more thing he wanted in life. There were other thoughts, too, like how nice it would be to have the simplicity of Aurora’s and Fred Weasley’s relationship? Where a couple could simply be, and there was no pressure between them. Though Potter had felt bad for Longbottom who still held a torch for his Yule Ball date.

Severus hadn’t lasted too long in Potter’s mind after that line of thought. It was the first lesson, so he gave the boy the benefit of the doubt, and asked him to clear his mind again, and then to attempt to keep him out.

The next line of thought had, at least, been less romantic, but more inane problems. Should Potter be a teacher? He was enjoying the defense instruction, found he liked helping others achieve an educational goal, and had even wondered if Hermione would be proud of him. Severus witnessed how the others were doing, at least. He found some amusement in hearing Fred Weasley bet against his twin the Aurora could take out Ronald, and then the undertone of pride in Fred’s voice and in
Harry’s mind when she had indeed done so. He noted that the youngest Weasley was quite skilled and could possibly be quite the powerful witch. That Lovegood was oddly proficient despite her carefree nature.

But the thoughts of their little defense class had doubts linger in Potter’s mind. He had thought he wanted to be an Auror for so long, it felt wrong to try and change his mind now. He was the chosen one, after all, so shouldn’t he go into law enforcement since he was supposedly a defeater of Dark Wizards? But he hated the fame he got from it. He didn’t want to do nothing, like his father had (and Severus was pleased the boy had at least knew that much). He didn’t know what Sirius would do if he wasn’t so caught up in working for Dumbledore, and Black had admitted during a discussion that he hadn’t much considered what he had wanted to do.

Severus had withdrawn and sighed heavily.

“I can’t clear my mind.” Potter said, exasperated. “What does Leo do to clear his mind?”

The question took Severus aback, having not known Potter even knew his son’s name. Yes, he was friends with Aurora, and it was likely she spoke of her brother. But as far as Severus knew, the boys had not met. While Potter would have attended Muggle school when Leonidas had started, the age gap would have been too great for him to have crossed paths.

“I do not know, for certain.” Severus said, and then, weary of confessing and possibly losing part of Potter’s motivation, added, “He is a natural, like myself.”

“And Rory?”

“No, she has to clear her mind. She tends to imagine the forbidden forest at dawn. When she was small, I would take her with me to allow H to sleep while I collected ingredients. She loved the forest then, the worst of the night creatures tucking in for their rest, the daytime creatures having not yet stirred.”

“Did she really grow up in Hogwarts?” Potter asked, and Severus nodded.

“For a time.”

“Sirius said that… that your wife was my godmother.”

That earned an arched brow, Severus surprised that Sirius had mentioned the connection to Potter. The boy shrugged. “You were one of my Mom’s best friends.”

“Indeed.”

“So why didn’t you guys take me?” Potter asked. “When Sirius was in Azkaban, why wasn’t I placed with you?”

Well, this wasn’t a conversation Severus had planned on having, but he supposed it wouldn’t matter. If Potter already knew at least a portion of the tale, it was portion enough for Severus’ head to be on the Dark Lord’s platter should he ever peek into that part of Potter’s memories.

“You are aware I am Draco’s godfather?” He said, and Potter nodded. “And so, you can imagine how it may look to those we were still in contact with should I have raised the enemy of the Dark Lord?”

Potter smirked. “Didn’t think of that.”
“Clearly. Regardless,” Severus said, barely thinking of what he was about to say next, “even if we were able to take you in and raise you with Aurora, Dumbledore did not allow it.”

Potter frowned, “What?”

“The night your parents died….” And Severus paused, having to swallow the lump in his throat.

He remembered that night too well. Lily had sent her Patronus over to the house, terrified. She said there were people outside the house, looking at it as if they could see it. Potter Senior had been confident that they were safe, but she wasn’t so sure. Could he alert the order? Fake that he had known there was an attack. But he hadn’t known, for he had been summoned the day before, and the Dark Lord had been angered still that the Longbottoms and Potters alluded him. No one had known where they were, though that was because Severus hadn’t let his occlumency slip. He had provided the location of Lily’s childhood home, knowing that the Evans had passed away only months before, leaving the place empty. There was enough evidence laying around that had the Dark Lord convinced they had been there, and Severus had only suffered a small torture for the false lead.

No sooner had Lily’s Patronus disappear did Hermione sob from down the hall. He had turned and ran to find his wife on the bathroom floor, her trousers stained with blood, her hands shaking. They had only found out they were Pregnant again a couple weeks before, and with the sudden, unexpected grief, Severus had nearly forgotten about Lily’s worries. He couldn’t do anything to help her, the house known to him, but it’s location blocked from his view because of its secret kept status. He’d sent a very weak Patronus to Sirius, asking him to check on the Potters.

Thirty minutes later, he was screaming as his arm burned worse than any summons he had ever experienced, and he nearly blacked out from the pain.

When his head was clear enough to understand what had happened, he left for Godric’s Hollow. The look in Hermione’s eyes when he said where he was going had braced him for what he would find there, but it didn’t lessen the visceral reaction he had upon seeing his longest friend lifeless.

“You were already on your way to the Dursleys before I got to your parents’ home. I didn’t know where you were until after your Godfather was arrested, and Dumbledore finally deigned to tell me where he placed you.”

Potter nodded. Severus had waited for Potter to ask why they hadn’t fought Albus on keeping him in the wizarding world, but then he noticed that the boy seemed to be figuring it out on his own.

After a moment, Potter nodded. “Thank you for explaining.” He said. “I have been much happier since living with Sirius, but sometimes it chuffs me a bit to think that I might not have had to be with the Dursleys.”


Potter closed his eyes a moment, shifting about as if he could physically shake the thoughts from his head. He opened his eyes, and Severus entered without warning.

A quidditch pitch, devoid of anything and anyone. Just an empty field, the seats of the stadium empty, the rings looming high above.

“Very good. Now get me out.” Severus said, moving toward the locker room, and feeling Potter panic as he headed for the very obvious door. He turned the knob, and just before the door opened and leaked all of Potter’s unorganized thoughts, Severus faintly heard Potter say something in a
panic, and then suddenly he wasn’t in Potter’s head.

He was opening the door to his old brewing classroom, his first lab. And there was Hermione, on the sofa, reading Jane Eyre. It was a memory, a really random one, and it was his.

He tossed Potter out of his head before he could see anything more. Not only of Hermione, but of… well, of Hermione.


“Clearly.” Severus said, watching the boy, waiting for questions. How much did he see? Was he now wondering why his friend was in his professor’s mind, only older? When Potter said nothing, Severus nodded once. “I think that should be it for today. You did well with the pitch, Potter. But you need to keep me from opening the locker room door. Expelliarmus is an excellent defense spell, but as you just seen, it can be dangerous. You’re lucky you landed yourself in a memory of my wife, and not some of the things I had to witness in my line of work.”

“Right. Yes. Sorry. Thank you, Professor Snape.”

Potter took off then, and once the door closed, Severus slumped.

“She better tell them soon.” He grumbled to himself. “Going to have to empty my blood mind into a pensieve for now on.”

December 18th, 1995

———A———

Time passed and worries of the extent of Fred’s feelings for her shifted to the back of Aurora’s mind. There were studies to keep up with, DA meetings, worrying over her father’s occasional leaving the castle, and the holidays.

She’d never been more thankful that Draco had signed up for the third time to stay at the school over the holidays. Because, it seemed, Uncle Lu had expected them to stay together. And if there was one thing Aurora wasn’t sure she could have brought herself to do was stay for the break at Malfoy Manor. She didn’t want to have to come face to face with the Dark Lord if she didn’t need to, and she didn’t want to do so unexpectedly. And at the manor, she wasn’t sure she would be safe from such a possibility.

But here at Hogwarts, she could be herself. And really, she could now appreciate why her father enjoyed being isolated in his rooms so much or patrol the halls at night alone. So, few people knew who he really was, what he was really like, because of the constant mask he had to wear. And now, well, no, she didn’t have to be someone she wasn’t outside of contact with Uncle Lucius…. Or did she?

As Aurora sat in the common room, the fire dimmed as everyone else was asleep, she realized that she put on a bit of an act as it was. She and her friends always sought out private spaces, away from everyone’s gaze, because of Draco. But did she not act more studious, more high brown in classes? Especially with those she shared with Slytherins? Did she and her father not act as though there was
a bit of cold indifference between them when they were in full view of everyone? Had she not been quiet about her mother’s identity for the last four years?

She flicked her wand, then shook her head. She then moved it in a tight spiral, and whispered, “Expecto Patronum.”

Blue wisps danced from the end of her wand, but they hadn’t formed anything. Luna had had a rabbit, Ginny a horse. Everyone knew that Harry had a stag and had been able to do the spell since his third year. And no, she wasn’t the only one unable to go corporeal at this point, but that didn’t lessen her frustration. She wanted to see if hers would reflect someone in her heart, like her parents had patronuses that showed how they protected one another. Or if she was like Harry and would find herself with a lioness or raven as like one of her parents. She knew some people had perfect matches with the loves of their lives, like Harry’s parents had a doe and a stag. She tried to remember what Fred had conjured, and fleetingly hoped it wasn’t something like a hyena. Or a monkey. She couldn’t remember, though.

She focused on the memory she chose, Fred saying she was worth the risk, and was about to cast again when she hesitated. What if that’s not what made her happiest? It was the freshest of happier memories, of course, but what if it wasn’t the happiest? She thought of earlier memories from her childhood, all happy, of course, but not what she would call her happiest. Her days with Harry in muggle school was fine but lacking something. Then she remembered her birthday the year before. Flying with her friends and the Bulgarians, her parents both there with Aunt Min, cake and crisps, and fun being themselves. Before the tournament got hard for Harry, when Draco finally stopped worrying about keeping up appearances, before her father had to face Voldemort.

“Expecto Patronum,” She said again, and far more than wisps emerged from her wand. “A squirrel? You have to be bloody kidding me.”

The squirrel circled about before coming to a stop in front of her expectantly. She stared back at it. “Umm?”

Her concentration on the ethereal animal was broken by a loud, tormented scream that sounded too much like Harry. It continued, and she turned back to the squirrel she hadn’t banished. “Umm, go to dad and aunt Min.” She half commanded and didn’t know if she’d did it right or not before she headed to the stairway leading to the boy’s dormitory.

There was light from upstairs, and she heard muffled sounds as she tentatively made her way toward it. She’d gotten no further than ten steps up when she heard the fireplace in the common room flare. Racing back down, she met with her Aunt as she came charging toward the stairs. Hair down, tartan robe over her night gown, glasses slightly askew.

“Aurora, dear, what is-”

“Your Dad’s been attacked!” Harry shouted, and Aunt Min paused, looking up the stairs. The fire place flared again, this time admitting her father. He found them immediately, his own dark robe drawn over dark pajamas, though he looked far less sleep disturbed.

“What is it?” He asked.

“I just heard Potter say someone’s father has been attacked. Glad to see it wasn’t you, Severus.”

“Who was guarding it tonight?” He asked Aunt Min quietly.

She thought about it, what little color in her face draining as she seemed to come to an answer.
“Arthur.”

“Fuck,” Aurora’s father swore before turning abruptly and heading toward the fireplace just as Aunt Min stormed up the stairs. Aurora glanced over her shoulder to watch her father disappear into the fireplace, and then up to see her Aunt escorting Harry down the stairs, Ron and Neville following close behind.

“Mr Longbottom, kindly go and wake the twins, if you will.” She said over her shoulder. “I’ll return for them and Miss Weasley in a moment. Aurora, if you could…?”

Aurora gave a nod and headed back up to the dorms. Moving as quietly as she could, she went over to Ginny’s bed and peeked behind the curtain. “Gin.” She said. “Gin, wake up.”

“Rory?” She mumbled. “What’s it?”

“Gin, you have to get up. Something’s going on. Something about your Dad.”

That caught her attention. “Dad?” She questioned but didn’t wait for a reply as she pushed the blankets off and got out of bed.

The two girls went down together, arriving in the common room at the same moment as Neville and the twins. Fred looked to her, curiosity in his eyes before he was distracted by the green flare of the floo.

“Now listen, you three. We can’t explain well what is going on, but something has happened to your father. We can’t, at this time, bring you to St Mungo’s. With what is happening in the Ministry, the lot of you arriving ahead of your father would look odd. We don’t even know if your mother knows what has happened yet. But you’re going to go directly to the Headmaster’s office, and you’re going to Port key with your brother and Mr Potter to his residence promptly after we arrive. Now, come along. Umbridge will have sensed there are students out of their towers soon.”

She bustled the remaining Weasleys through the floo, and then the room was silent again.

“Harry woke up screaming.” Neville said. “He said something….”

“I got the gist.” Aurora said soothingly.

“What’s it mean?”

“Aside from the obvious? I don’t know.” Neville was quiet, and so was she, the pair standing side by side, staring at the fireplace. “Draco will want to know. And Luna.”

“We can’t tell them now, Umbridge will find us for sure.”

“No.” Aurora agreed. “We’ll tell them in the morning.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! I apologize for not getting an update out sooner, as the holiday season turned out to be far busier than anticipated.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

**WARNING** A scene in this story could look like self harm in the eyes of someone who finds it triggering. If this does trigger you, skip Severus' section of the story. I promise, you won't be lost if you do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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Severus,

I have found myself back at Hogwarts, even arrived by train, but being ahead of everyone else has made the journey quite strange. Professor Dellard, now Elinor to me, has been as eager for me to begin as I am. It feels strange to be in the castle to learn, yet not be required to dress the part of the student. It nearly feels like I have been at Hogwarts for the majority of my life, but that is because it often seems as though life only began when I arrived here in this era.

And now I’ve grown maudlin, which was not my intention at all.

Missing you has become easier since our friends and I have gone our separate ways. It feels more natural now for you to be where you are, and I still here, for now we are embarking on the journey to apprenticeship together. Though I do wish I could have maintained a friendship with Remus, but he seems to hold little interest in such a possibility. Sirius, I’m afraid, is the only one I still have contact with, as it seems even Lily has disappeared.

I wish I had more to say, but really, I merely wanted to pen you a letter to tell you that I love you. I love you, and I miss you, always.

Yours,

H

Hermione clutched the simple letter in her hand as she headed through the silent school toward the owlery. Occasionally, as she would walk through a beam of light, she would look down at her left hand and inspect the emerald and diamond ring as its facets shone. She loved her ring, everything about it. She’d penned a letter to both Prince women to extend her thank you for allowing Severus to give it to her, and both wrote back how they looked forward to seeing it on her hand in person. She loved that it was more Severus’ house colors than her own, because she was not at all ashamed to be
the Gryffindor marrying the Slytherin. It made her smile as her heart warmed with every look at it, so much so that for the short time she was with the McGonagalls, Delia teased her mercilessly over her examination of it.

“Miss Granger,” Dumbledore said from behind her, and Hermione stopped, slowly raising occluding more than her norm as she turned to face the headmaster. He smiled at her. “I was wondering if I might have a word with you?”

“Of course,” Hermione replied. “Could I meet you in your office? I only wish to post this letter, and I will be there shortly.

“Of course,” He replied as Hermione felt him prodding her mind. She slipped an image of Sirius out, just a flash, and then felt the headmaster retreat. “We’ll say fifteen minutes?”

She nodded in acceptance, and then continued on her way.

Severus had told her the night of their engagement party of his interaction with Dumbledore.

“He’s dead set against it,” He had said, lying next to her in their borrowed bed at the manor, nothing but a blanket clothing him. “He is utterly determined I should remain alone. Unattached.”

She hadn’t said anything, merely smirked so wide it threatened to turn into a proper smile.

It made Severus smirk back. “You know something.”

“I always know something.” She had retorted.

“Yes, but something that means this is ….”

“I know enough to know for sure that Dumbledore will not get his way.”

She had, of course, been thinking of Severus’ daughter. The daughter who bore a slight resemblance to her, enough that some even remarked on it. The daughter she was now confident was her own. And she remembered from her former life, which did seem like another lifetime ago, that there was a hint that Dumbledore wasn’t so convinced that Severus….

No, she had to keep that line of thought tucked away. Thinking of the lovely, dark haired girl yet to be was fine, but if the Headmaster thought there was a chance that that girl could be someone else’s, he would only increase his meddling.

Hermione arrived at the owlery, posted her letter with a beautiful little barn owl, and then made her way to the Headmaster’s office.

The gargoyle moved aside for given password of “bridge mix”, and then she moved with the stairs up to the door where she knocked. He bid her enter, and she stepped in.

It had been too long since she stood within the office. Even the official acceptance of her apprenticeship had been done in Professor Dellerd’s office exclusively. The last time Hermione had been inside the room had been the night that Severus was nearly attacked by Remus.

“Hello, Hermione. May I call you that?” Dumbledore asked as she came in, taking the seat, he gestured toward across his desk.

“You’re my boss, now, headmaster. Hermione is fine.”

“And you may call me Albus, when away from the students. Anyway, Hermione, I know you’re
going to be quite busy with your apprenticeship, but I was hoping that, perhaps, you would be willing to join the Order of the Phoenix, now that you’re of age."

“I suppose you actually mean, now that I’ve graduated.”

“Yes,” He smiled genially. “That is much more along the line of what I meant. Now, with your knowledge of the future—”

“One that cannot be changed.”

“I think that you could be vital in helping us deter any losses that may happen from a Death Eater attack.”

Hermione blinked. “I beg your pardon, sir, but I’m afraid that my knowledge is not that extensive. I know big events, and therefore they cannot be changed. If anyone has knowledge on their activities, it’s Severus.”

“Yes,” The Headmaster agreed, “You are correct in that, Hermione. More than just your knowledge of the future, however, is the fact that… oh, I see.”

“Do you?” Hermione asked, confused.

“Yes.” He said, and Hermione noticed the sly shift in that stupid twinkle. “You see, you could have worked with us, gone on scouting missions, fought against the Death Eaters when necessary. But so long as you’re with Severus, you cannot be with us. You would either tip the Death Eaters off to one of the reasons Severus is there, and he could never be trusted. And if someone from the order who doesn’t know you….”

“Well, while I think someone from the order who doesn’t know me wouldn’t know Severus, making that point quite moot, you do bring up an excellent point, Headmaster. I shall have to consider what can possibly be done so that I may help the cause.” Hermione cut in rising from her seat lest her emotions get the better of her. Rage simmered beneath the surface, behind the increasingly weakening Occlumency shields. So that was his current plan? Withhold her chance to do something for the cause unless she ended her connection with Severus. Nothing would be worth that, and so another way would have to be found.

September 16th, 1978

———S———

“You gave letter with Amortentia last year, no?” Nikola asked Severus as he gently misted the parchment with a small amount of the love potion. His letter was already written, and he hadn’t planned on adding the potion to the parchment, but he liked the idea of making it a tradition while they spent her birthdays apart.

“I plan on giving her more than this.” Severus said, reaching into his frock coat pocket and withdrawing the advanced Arithmancy text he’d purchased.

“A book,” Igor sneered from his corner of the work space.
“Yes,” Severus said over his shoulder. “My future wife is an avid reader, and a scholar. Yvonne does … what, exactly?”

Nikola smirked, then nodded at the book. “You don’t do frivolous with her.”

“No. She is not the sort of witch who would want trinkets. She is practical.”

“She is good choice.” Nikola added with confidence before hissing and swearing in Russian, clasping his left arm. He looked up, confused as neither Severus nor Igor felt the pull of a call. “I must go.” He said simply, summoning his cloak and mask before putting his wand to his dark mark.

“Why do we not get summoned as well?” Igor asked, and Severus was wondering the same thing. It seemed strange that their master would be called to the Dark Lord on his own.

Severus returned to his task of preparing Hermione’s gift, all the while trying to think of a way to alert Dumbledore as to what was going on. He couldn’t very well cast his patronus and send it on its merry way, even attempting something like that would leave most if not all the other Death Eaters to be maggot meal. It would be suspicious to run off to the nearest floo, even with the excuse of speaking with Hermione. There really wasn’t anyway about it, it would have to wait.

Severus assembled his gift, brought it to the only owl the three of them had access too, and sent it off to his witch.

We then sat down and resumed work on the counter curse for Sectumsempra. He was close, but there was something about all the incantations he thought to try that didn’t feel right. His past creations had been fairly simple, the runes were easy, the incantation perfect. Yet the Latin kept troubling him. He gave it a bit longer, and then set it aside.

He thought of Hermione’s last letter from just a week ago. She had told him about Dumbledore’s keeping her out of the order so long as she remained with him, using the excuse of her being seen by one side or the other. Well that was a simple solve, wasn’t it? They could use Polyjuice and a few random muggle hairs. Well, maybe not that simple, he supposed. Not to mention that but about only having an hour to use it. But it was just a matter of disguise, and he was sure Dumbledore actually knew that. Well, they would just need some sort of charm. There were tones of them, he knew, that witches and wizards used to conceal flaws, to change hair color. And then one could transfigure parts of their self, but it was always a bit risky. All they needed was for Hermione to hide in plain sight.

Hide in plain sight. Latere Aparto.

Severus rose, heading for the washroom down the hall. He closed it, adding a locking charm and a muffilato to prevent Igor from snooping, something the odd man tended to do from time to time. Severus then looked at the mirror, pointed his wand at himself, and gave it a couple times while saying, “Latere Aparto.”

With his intent being second nature, he felt the new spell recognize the command and what was to happen, embedding itself in the fabric of spell work.

And then his hair lightened, curling just a bit. His eyes changed, too, to a deep hazel, and his nose didn’t seem so hooked. And his face was fuller. All in all, Severus found looking at his reflection with the sensation of having seen himself before, but not quite remembering where or how. He smiled, because at least this came easy. He was beginning to lose faith in his spell creating abilities when he reached the year mark of trying to work the counter curse.
“Finite.” He said, and a wave of panic hit him when he continued to look the same.

Taking a deep breath, he thought things through. He asked to hide in plain sight, so why should a simple finite work? He started to think on what taking off this seemingly permanent glamour off would be like in front of someone else.

“Seipsum revelare.” He said, and nearly sobbed when he felt the magic drain away, revealing himself to the mirror as he should look.

Satisfied at having accomplished something, Severus left the washroom, and returned to the work room all within an appropriate time frame.

The way his mind had worked with the incantations, something simple, made Severus take another look at what he wanted the counter curse to Sectumsempra to do. Heal wounds, of course, as there was no potion he tried that saved the rats their horrible fate. The wounds would heal. Would? Present tense would be are… wounds are being healed. Vulnera Sanantur. He glanced about, seeing Igor preoccupied, rolled up his left sleeve. He pointed his wand to just above the Dark Mark, hovering over the skull. “Sectumsempra,” he whispered, angling his wand just so, so that the cut would not be too deep. He barely waited for his blood to leak from his self-inflicted wound before he said the counter curse.

He felt it working but sensed saying it once wasn’t enough. He repeated it, seeing it work a bit more, but still not enough. Anyone with any drastic damage would die. So, he said it again and again, the constant chant working best. In fact, he found his voice was nearly singing the incantation, softly though it was. And the wound closed entirely without a scar, as if he had never cast in the first place.

He would have to tell the order, asap.

Thoughts of the order reminded him that Nikola still hadn’t returned. A glance at Igor revealed to Severus the man’s concern that their master hadn’t returned yet. So, it wasn’t just him then.

Just before Severus could ask, a loud crack of apparition drew their attention to the sitting room. When he hadn’t heard anything more, Severus moved to investigate.

He found his master on his knees, panting, sweat on his brow beading down his face and temples. And his left arm, gripped tight in his right hand, was bleeding.

Nikola looked up and met Severus’ eyes. He knew then that Igor had not followed, for Nikola did not look away.

“It seems our esteemed lord decided we first are too old to stand for old ways.” He said raggedly, removing his right hand to reveal the bloody sleeve of his white oxford. Severus knelt beside him, noting with a sickening twist in his gut that the blood stain on the sleeve was a near perfect outline of the Dark Mark. He helped Nikola push up his sleeve, revealing flesh that looked as though it had been cut with a jagged knife, only removing the mark itself.

“May I try a spell I have been working on, Master?” Severus asked quietly, putting as much respect into the request as he could, emphasizing the title in an attempt to relay to the man before him how he was the only one he served in which Severus genuinely wished to apply the title.

“Da,” Nikola replied, wincing in pain, gripping his arm just above the removed mark.

Severus hovered his wand over the area and began to chant his spell. He was mildly surprised it worked and watched with fascination and euphoria as the wound healed itself. And as it did, Nikola’s breathing evened out, his grip on his arm becoming slack. Tension left his body, and as the
last of the ugly wound turned to a scar, he let out a sigh of relief.

Severus accioed a scar treatment and handed it to the man before him.

Nikola took it, lifting the jar in thanks before unscrewing it with shaky hands.

As he applied the ointment to his arm, he said, “Two died. Could not live without Dark Mark. Think one is mad. All first Death Eaters, all friends of Tom Riddle, cast out. Not strong enough. Too old. Less willing. Was supposed to be about purity. About preserving magical blood. Purity, not so good over time. Need new blood. Preserving, that’s good. Tom Riddle, he doesn’t see like that no more. Not so sure man is even still wizard.”

“I could turn you in to him for speaking like that,” Severus said, meeting his Master’s eye.


“See right through me, don’t you?” Severus said sarcastically, masking how much hearing the honest to Merlin truth terrified him.

Nikola shrugged. “See myself in you.”

That, at least, had offered some relief.

“Where is wretched one? Did not even come to see if I’d been tortured. Or dead.” Nikola asked, and Severus let a gust of air that nearly been a snort escape him.

“He is attempting to perfect his alterations to the growth potion, I believe.”

Nikola began to rant in Russian, and Severus knew enough of the language to barely keep the smirk off his face at the colorful choices Nikola made in insulting his other apprentice.

September 22nd, 1978

————H————

She’d been thinking about the spell’s creator when Hermione used Latere Aparto for the first time. The results had stopped her heart a moment, she was sure.

There in her bedroom mirror was Aurora Snape. The memory of what she had looked like had faded since her arrival four years before, having not known the girl for long. But when she cast the spell, thinking of her future husband, Hermione had inadvertently placed some of his features upon herself, and the result was what was likely a slightly older version of the girl she was now certain was her daughter.

“Bloody hell,” she murmured to herself, shocked to find her voice sounded off in her head. She immediately cast the counter curse, then forced herself to clear her mind.

Before she could cast the spell again, there was a knock on her chambers bed.
“Enter,” She called, rising from her vanity table and heading toward the door just as it started opening.

She paused at the sight of black hair coming through her door, her heart dropping when she saw the face it came with, and the roguish grin that came with it. “Sirius.” She said warmly, quickening her step a bit and pulling her friend into a tight embrace. “I’ve missed you.”

“Have you?” He asked, rocking her around in a semi-circle.

“Of course, hasn’t been the same without you, you know.” She said as she pulled back. “Though I will confess, you are not the dark-haired man I was hoping was walking through my door.”

“Would that have been me?” The drawling voice had Hermione practically shoving Sirius away to see if Severus was really darkening her doorway, and she ignored her friend’s chuckles as she threw herself into her fiancé’s arms.

The strength of Severus’ embrace was precisely what she craved, what Sirius’ arms had nearly calmed but not quite enough.

It had, after all, been one of the toughest birthday since she left the nineties. No friends, only Minerva for anything close to family, and Dumbledore constantly niggling at her occlumency walls had made her nineteenth birthday feel more like any other day. There was, at least, a drink in Minerva’s chambers, which led to a good chat and laugh, and the package from Severus that she greatly appreciated. But she’d missed the others. Or, namely, her favorite men.

Hermione kissed Severus as passionately as would be acceptable in company of Sirius.

“You’re going to make me jealous that I haven’t had a decent snog in far too long.” Sirius said, causing Hermione to pull back.

“You can’t have him, his mine.” She said simply.

“Oddly enough, I’m not attracted to blokes with black hair.” Sirius replied. Severus must have made a face, because Sirius gave him a devilish grin and added, “most blokes with black hair.”

“You mean you aren’t attempting to sway Potter to your side?” Severus asked, turning to face their friend while keeping Hermione close.

Sirius looked mildly disgusted. “Prongs most certainly isn’t my type. And even if he were mildly attractive to me, he’s nearly back together with Miss Petal.”

Severus groaned and rolled his eyes but said nothing.

After a beat of silence, Hermione said, “Much as I adore having you both here, I would very much like to know why.”

“Dumbledore,” they said in unison, and Severus waved to Sirius to go first.

“He wants me to take up the post of Defense against the Dark Arts.”

“Honestly?” Hermione asked, and the dubiousness must have been too plain in her voice, for Severus barked a laugh.

Sirius looked a mix of hurt and humored. “I may not have been top of the class like some, but I did get an O in my DADA NEWT, thank you. And it’s mostly as an assistant.”
“Because Professor Sagan looks ready to fall over?”

“Or sleep.” Sirius agreed.

“So why is it that Dumbledore allowed him to fill the post?” Severus asked.

“Honestly, I have no idea.” Sirius replied. “I think they were friends at one point, or acquaintances.”

“Or lovers.” Severus mused. “In fact, perhaps he is one now.”

“They’re easily a hundred or more.” Sirius grimaced.

“Yes,” Severus replied, “only about three quarters through their life, if all goes well.”

“And why were you here?” Sirius asked, clearly not wanting to think of the Headmaster and the professor he was meant to be shadowing.

“A report.” Severus replied. “Things happened, as of late, and where Nikola is feeling under the weather, he allowed Igor and myself the weekend free.”

“So, you’re here…?” Hermione asked with a hopeful lilt.

“Until I must return, seeing as the weekend has only just begun.”

“Shall we head down to the Three Broomsticks, then?” Sirius suggested.

“Sirius, you’re going to be working, here, at the castle, yes?” Hermione asked, and Sirius nodded.

“Well, why don’t you go investigate your rooms for, say an hour? Really explore every corner. It is just after dinner time, as well, so you could probably practice taking points by patrolling the halls for the next generation of mischief makers.”

Sirius looked between the two of them, barely keeping the smirk off his face as he attempted a serious nod. “Yes, I must go investigate my room quite thoroughly. Severus, care to join me?”

“Not even if the Dark Lord summoned me there.” He replied.

Sirius shook his head and left.

And no sooner was the door closed did Hermione find herself wrapped in Severus’ arms, and he in hers.

“Missed you,” He gasped as he kissed down her neck.

“Missed you, so much.” She breathed back, clutching his hair. “Your spell was fantastic.”

“I also,” he said, kissing his way to her ear, working the buttons on her robes as he went. “Made the counter. For. Sectumsempra.” He nipped her ear, and then said against the shell of it, “it also heals other curse wounds.”

“It does?” Hermione asked, pulling back to meet his eye while unbuttoning the many buttons on his frock coat.

“Yes. Nikola had the mark torn from his flesh. He was deemed too old to be part of the new age.”

This had Hermione pause, studying her future husband’s face. “Is he alright?”
“He’s Russian. He takes vodka for the pain, and thinks he’s dodged a regime similar to what Rasputin had attempted before he was killed.”

“Oh, well.” Hermione ran her fingers along this half open buttons. “How did you… I mean, what did…?”

“He thinks I was merely lured into the Death Eaters by Lucius, lulled in by the call of power and placement, and became quickly disillusioned. I popped into his head when he was quite into his cups, he doesn’t suspect my duplicity, so much as he believes that, if given the chance, I would have the brand ripped from my skin as well. I would, of course, but merely because I didn’t want it there in the first place.”

“As long as you’re safe.” Hermione said in a voice barely above a whisper, running her hands up and down his chest.

“You know that I will be, for at least a while.” Severus said. “I do look a bit older than I do now in those memories of yours.”

She smirked. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean you were safe.” She said quietly, pleased that her lack of knowledge in this didn’t affect her any.

“I suppose.” He conceded. “But to be frank, I don’t particularly wish to discuss much at the moment. I have a feeling the newly minted Professor Black will give us precisely an hour, and then he will be barking at your door.”

Hermione hummed in agreement. “So, what is it that you would like to do?” She asked with a smirk. Severus’ casting of a contraception charm was her answer.

Chapter End Notes

A Short one to celebrate Severus' birthday!
This is a long chapter, and it is riddled with a lot of death scenes. But I hope the end makes up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

September 22nd, 1978 (continued)

“I think it would be beneficial to all of us if Dumbledore believes the pair of you to have a romantic relationship.” Severus said to Hermione and Black, glancing at the bar to ensure Lupin was still busy with drinks.

“Excuse me?” Hermione asked, and Severus was quite glad they’d had sex before leaving for the village as opposed to waiting. He was fairly certain she wasn’t going to be too keen on this plan. But it needed to happen.

He was, after all, a spy. And while Severus may not have been able to read Dumbledore’s mind, the former Gryffindor’s subtlety was lacking.

“I would be as many galleons as I had access to that the Headmaster’s motive for hiring your, Black, was to keep you within Hermione’s company. He had, after all, made a point to inform me countless times that he witnessed the pair of you being quite… chummy. He also wishes us to call of the engagement.” Severus said as Lupin returned.

“You’re calling off the wedding?” Lupin asked as he sat down with the tray of drinks, Rosmerta overwhelmed for some inexplicable reason.

Black cringed, and Hermione’s eyes darkened in a dangerous way.

“Heel, boy.” Severus sneered. “I said the headmaster wants us to call off the wedding.”

Lupin, at least, had the decency to blush.

“So, explain, please, how Hermione and I making Dumbledore believe there is something going on between us…”

“He’ll think his plan to tear Hermione and I apart is working, despite her being as far from your type as she could get.” Severus replied.

“And when the wedding goes ahead?” Lupin asked, still that touch of hope in his voice.

Severus shrugged, “Probably believe that Hermione is unfaithful.”
“Oh!” She said beside him, the look of a puzzle piece falling into place in that brilliant mind of hers plastered across her face.

“Oh?” He said, arching a brow.

“Nothing,” Hermione smiled back, “Just… you made me think of something my old Headmaster and someone had discussed once.”

“Indeed?” He asked, his mind knocking on her door, requesting entry.

“I don’t know if I can tell you,” she said in her mind, her voice a disembodied thing within her consciousness. “It’s regarding a small detail that you can’t know.”

Fair enough, he could let it go. Besides, her words may not have been able to reassure, but the humor coloring her was good enough for Severus.

“So, Sirius? And not me, because …?” Lupin asked, and Severus barked a laugh.

“Yes, because I would let you, an untrustworthy swine who had already stolen a kiss from my fiancée, to act as though you and she have a romantic entanglement.”

Black nodded, taking a sip of his drink. “That, and I am quite the friend of Mrs. King.” He said with that irritatingly charming smile.

Lupin frowned. “Sirius, that’s… that’s a very muggle term and I’m not sure you know what it means.”

“No? Alright, how’s this? I’ll be under Merlin’s robes, not Nimue’s skirts.” He retorted, a cheeky grin on his face.

Lupin was physically taken aback. “You don’t mean?”

“Do I need to spell it out for you? I don’t mind, really.”

“You’re?”

“Yes.”

“And they knew?”

“Oh yes.”

“And James?”

“Hasn’t a clue, frankly. But since he’s only had eyes for Evans, it doesn’t seem to make a difference.” Black took a sip of his fire whiskey, sighing in what might have been pleasure if he hadn’t been forcibly restraining himself from a grimace. “Wormtail may or may not know, but frankly, I don’t think it matters.”

“So, you’re… and that makes you the better choice for a make-believe love affair?” Lupin asked, and Severus barely kept his smirk to himself at the werewolf’s plain petulance.

“Moony,” Sirius sighed. “Put yourself in Snape’s shoes, and really think this through. Imagine you had Kitten, but someone didn’t approve because of your… condition, and they wanted you two broken up. But you’re engaged, and happy, and….”
“You don’t need to paint such a vivid picture, Black.” Severus interrupted, snaking his arm possessively around Hermione’s waist as Lupin’s eyes seemed to take on a pleasured, dream like quality.

“Right. So, the person who wants to break the pair of you, already separated for the time being, has the chance to hire someone who may turn her head. Myself, or Severus. Now, Severus here has carried a torch for her as long as you have, and has even, let’s say, put a toe out of line in the past. And then you have me….”

“Right, yes, I get it.” Lupin said, blushing and looking into his Druid Draught. “And I suppose no one would believe you’re….”

“Say it, Moony. Gay.” Black elbowed the werewolf. Lupin seemed to be having difficulty even thinking it.

“May we discuss something else.” Hermione asked. “Unless, of course, you’re seeing someone?” Hermione had asked.

“No,” Black lamented. “No, I am woefully single. And you, Moony? Have you found anyone worth sniffing?”

Lupin ducked his head. “No.” He said quietly. “That would mean socializing, and I’m afraid since leaving school this has been the most interaction I have had with anyone.”

“What have you been doing, then?” Hermione asked.

Lupin shrugged. “Private training with a new auror, Kingsley Shacklebolt. He’s a friend, or something of Dumbledore’s through Professor Moody. And he’s a member of the Order. I don’t think, though, that I’ll be able to actually become an auror.”

“Why haven’t you gone to stay with Prongs?” Black asked.

“As you said, he has eyes only for Lily. And I don’t want to be there, a shadow in the background, when they’re trying to reestablish what they’d broken off.”

“What has Lily decided to do?” Severus asked, looking to Hermione as much as the others.

“She’s writing for now. I don’t know if her heart is really in it, though. They don’t seem to want to run her stories.”

“All based on the Dark Lord, then?” Hermione asked, and Severus noted that Lupin was taken aback by her form of address.

“Yes.” He said simply, taking another long, drawn out drink of his draught.

They continued making small talk for a while yet, but as the sun began to set, and Lupin was getting deeper into his cups, Severus and Hermione left the tavern and headed back to Hogwarts.

She clung to his arm as they made their way up the winding path, and he placed his hand on hers as if it would keep her close. She was oddly silent, and he realized in the back of his mind that she had been the entire time they were out. He looked at her, seeing a slight bit of melancholy lingering around her eyes, and the hint of regret in her mind when he allowed himself a quick skim.

It had him stopping short. “Hermione?” he said, nearly breathless as fear clawed its way in and sat heavy on his heart.
“Hmm?” She asked, looking up at him, seeming half aware of him and their surroundings.

He swallowed. “Hermione would you… would you have rather Lupin been the one who…?” He couldn’t finish the sentence. It was one thing if she acted with Black, but with Lupin?

She seemed to snap out of what ever thought she was having and frowned. “No,” She said casually at first, then upon meeting his eye, became vehement. “No!” She assured, reaching up and cupping both of his cheeks in her hands. “No, Severus. I don’t want to act the part with either of them. I know that flirty banter with Sirius, and even taking tea in my quarters or his will be enough to alight Dumbledore’s suspicions, but I want no part in giving him an actual incident to base his beliefs on. Especially not with Remus. No, it’s just….” And here she trailed off, the sadness returning to her posture. “Sometimes knowing the future is difficult.” She whispered. “It’s knowing. Knowing too much of what’s to come and who it will affect. The time frames in which all of this will happen. I know you’ve seen yourself, but have you-?”

“I swear to you, I only saw myself through your eyes, and … well, I suspect it may be Potter’s child, given what he looked like, and a few things you didn’t saw during your spells. And, well, am I to suspect the werewolf I was protecting you from was Lupin?”

Her lips quirked. “If it didn’t kill me to do so, I’d let you take a look, so you can carry the full burden with me. But… knowing where life takes you all, it makes moments like the one we just shared with our friends a bit heartbreaking.”

Severus pulled her hands down from her face, set them on his shoulders, and then pulled her to him. He held his Hermione, reveling in the warmth, and the smell, and the feel of her, as he said, “I may not be able to bear the burden of knowledge with you. But I swear, Hermione, swear it on my very soul, that no matter what happens, I will never hold it against you. I will never rage, I will never blame. Any anger at any future situation will not be at you.”

“You’ll still love me?” She whispered, and his heart clenched at how tiny she sounded.

“Until my dying breath.”

November 17th, 1978

“Fuck!” Severus cried, accioing burn salve before the curse had fully left his lips. He’d been stirring a cauldron full of sober up when the mark burned, startling him slightly. He’d bumped his fingers against the rip of the hot cast iron, and the last thing he needed to deal with were blisters on his wand hand.

He set the stirring rod aside as he deftly caught the jar. He unscrewed the top, dabbing some past on his fingers before setting the jar down on the counter and closing the lid. A flick of his hand, and his mask was summoned while he rubbed the past in, pausing to catch and place the mask. Another flick of his wrist, and his robes were transfigured to those of the Death Eaters.

Nikkola looked up from his notes. “You have that down.” He noted.

“I multitask well.” He replied, hearing Igor grumbling behind him about inconvenient timing.

“Apologizes for stepping out.” Severus said with a bow.

“Don’t keep him waiting.” Was Nikkola’s reply, though curt as it was, Severus could hear the worry
he had for his apprentices.

Severus pressed his wand to his mark, and found himself in the woods, the rest of the new inner circle still coming in. He moved to take the place that seemed to be his, and waited patiently for the others to arrive. Igor, he noticed, was one of the last.

The Dark Lord, it seemed, noticed this as well. “How is Severus here before you?” He asked without preamble.

“He clearly abandoned his volatile potion.” Igor retorted.

Severus scoffed.

At the sound, the Dark Lord turned toward him, and closed the distance between them with eerie speed. Severus felt the Dark Lord enter his mind, and allowed him to see what was happening as he was leaving, blunting Nikkola’s concern.

“Your fellow apprentice was far ahead of you, and it seems he has been for some time. Tell me, igor, why should I keep you? I have Severus, a man much more skilled then you, in potions as well as in curses. What have you to offer me?”

The masks hid any reaction the Death Eaters would have had, but there was a tittering about the group that had Severus nervous. Was he already thinning out the younger Death Eaters? None of them would have been at his side or as loyal as the elder ones were, so what would happen if any of the new Inner Circle pissed him off?

As Igor didn’t seem to have a reply, Voldemort shot a quick cruciatus curse his way, just long enough to cause pain but not torture.

“It matters not what you have to say. Tonight, you will show me! Show me what it is you can give to me, your master! Tonight, we show wizarding Britain what they truly need to be afraid of! To Diagon Alley, my friends, and we will thin out the undeserving.”

There were cheers among the crowd, and while Severus raised his hand in a show of solidarity, he said nothing. He needed a way to warn the others, and damn it, he couldn’t do it from where he was.

The Dark Lord apparated, and it was clear they were expected to follow him right away. But Severus knew, if he acted quickly, he would not be missed.

One of the first to apparate away, he first vanished to his mother’s property. A swirl of his wand, a message hastily sent with his lioness, and he pressed his wand to his dark mark and was there before the others had finished appearing.

Already he was sweating from behind the mask, and dizzy from such rapid displacement and magic use. But he had a job to do.

Following the other Death Eaters in a morbid sort of parade, he noted many people frozen where they were on the streets. Some, mostly witches and children, fled. However, the majority just … stood.

*Leave, you drooling idiots!* He desperately wished people weren’t so magpie in all things morbid.

Once they were in the center of the Diagon Alley, the Dark Lord stopped, signaling for the Death Eaters to do so as well.
“Wizards. Witches. I don’t think I need an introduction. My power, my reputation, must proceed me. You see these people before you, my most loyal followers, my faithful. They are high within my ranks, but if you, today, deny your minister, renounce their muggle tolerating ways, believe as I know you do deep down that you are superior to those loathsome creatures, and join me.”

“No!” A voice Severus was likely never to forget had him want to groan with disappointment and sigh with relief all at once. For of course, James Potter would not stay quiet, ready to put himself out in the spotlight against a murderous tyrant. But, at least there was someone from the order there. “No, we will not stand for you blood superiority.”

The Dark Lord turned toward Potter, and looked him over. Severus’ heart stopped as he realized the Dark Lord may just skim the arrogant fool’s mind. And how much of his truth would be seen?

“You have a mudblood lover,” The Dark Lord said. “Talented, beautiful. Though she comes from poor stock, she could be of use in our regime. She won’t ever get to be much more than a broodmare, but she will serve as a good base from which children can come from.”

“You think I would subject my Lily to something like that?” Potter scoffed, and Severus nearly scoffed with him. Or at him. His Lily?

He looked behind where Potter was standing and caught a head of red hair just standing out against the wall of a building. She was here, so that … no, she wasn’t part of the order. Not as far as he knew.

“You defy me? It would be unwise.” Voldemort hissed, and as he did, two more Gryffindors stepped out in the light.

“We reject you as well.” Longbottom said, dressed in his trainee auror robes. The girl, one of Lily’s other friends, was dressed the same.

A survey of the crowd showed more looking as though they agreed with the fools standing alone, but were not fool enough themselves to try and start anything.

It then happened in a flash. There were pops of apparition, the order of the Phoenix and a few aurors appeared in the alley. The Dark Lord demanded the Death Eaters fight, and chaos ensued.

Quite rapidly people were trying to escape, their fear causing their brains to malfunction and make them run and hide rather than apparate. Potter had engaged with someone right away, but Lily, Severus noted, seemed to disappear. Perhaps she apparated? To be sure, Severus stalked toward where she was, making a good show to hit a few wizards with a strong stinging curse before stunning them or confounding them to wander away from the battle. He turned the corner, and found a small alley between two shops, and Lily Evans at the end with Marlene McKinnon.

“Oh fuck!” McKinnon yelled, and fled past him, screaming the whole way. Severus watched her for a moment before turning back to Lily.

The brave lioness had her wand drawn and pointed at him, a fierce look of determination in her eyes.

“Lils,” He said, glancing over his shoulder and casting a quick notice-me-not over his shoulder, shielding their alley from view. “Lily, it’s me.” He said, raising his hands in surrender before slowly removing his mask.

Lily looked at him, horrified, then disgusted.

“What the hell, Sev?” She hissed, her wand jabbing forcefully toward him. “I thought you gave up
this shit? I thought you didn’t believe since Hermione came along. Or does she believe it to?"

“Lily I’m… it’s not what it looks like.”

“No? Because it looks to me like you became a Death Eater.”

“Ask Black, or Lupin, they’ll tell you. Just… get away from here, okay? It’s important….” He was cut off by the burning sting in his arm. They were being called to fall back. “I have to go.” He said, maneuvering his wand up under his sleeve and touching the tip to his Dark Mark.

When he reappeared from his apparition, he found himself, not in the forest where they began, but in another village. Small, surrounded by trees, quiet. Remote. He swallowed back the bile that rose when he understood what was to happen.

Occluding, distancing his conscious from what he was about to do, Severus fall into full Death Eater persona as the first wizard emerged from his cottage to see what the multiple apparations around their little village meant. He knew this time a stinging hex wouldn’t be enough.

———H———

Diagon Alley wasn’t as badly damaged as she worried it would be when all the Death Eaters disappeared. There were scorch marks here and there, some damage done to signage or small carts selling goods, but for the most part, the area remained intact. The people, however, were another story.

Sobs of grief and devastation broke through the silence as people began to realize that there were casualties.

“Marlene!” Hermione heard Lily cry out. “Marlene, please!”

Turning around, Hermione’s eyes stung as she saw the open eyed, empty stare of the girl she’d shared a dorm with not all that long ago. Someone who hated her as often as she begrudgingly liked her, who thought her the competition for Sirius’ attention until she was so firmly placed at Severus’ side. Someone who wanted Hermione to look her best, but simultaneously couldn’t have cared less. While Hermione didn’t share Lily’s heartbreaking grief, she did mourn.

She went to Minerva’s side as the elder witch had a hand clasped to her mouth, staring at a group of people who were clustered together.

“Min?” Hermione sniffed, putting her hand on her Aunt’s shoulder. Minerva did a double take in her direction, taking a moment to reconcile the woman who was beside her with the way she knew her niece should look, and then nodded in the direction of the dead. “The McKinnons.” She said. “All of them. It looks… it looks like they had just come from Fortescue’s. Why of all the senseless….”

“So, the whole family, then?” Hermione said, glancing back to where Lily was still with Marlene’s body, James just behind her, trying to sooth. “But why?”

“They were traditionally all Gryffindors,” Minerva said softly. “Always one of Dumbledore’s biggest supporters, and demanded blood equality. The perfect targets, really.” Minerva glanced around. “It seems most of the fallen where either aurors, or vehement supporters of Albus.”
“Do you think that was the intention?”

“Merlin knows, child. Severus’ patronus was so rushed seeming, only saying Diagon Alley to those it stopped to. I don’t even know if he knew.”

“Order, to the meeting place.” Albus declared, and Hermione stepped away from Minerva so they could apparate.

The small cottage at the very edge of Hogsmeade was not quite secret kept, but had enough wards and charms on it for people to not think much of it, and not really want to see if anyone actually left there.

There had been a meeting already in progress when Severus’ patronus had announced the location and disappeared. The table was still full of the tea stuff, cups and biscuits in various states of completion. They all started apparating in, one by one, a slow trickle that spoke of how some where still lingering behind. And, well, Hermione realized they all should have probably done such a thing, and yet, she promptly followed Dumbledore’s command.

She was cursing herself when she felt the old wizards’ eyes on her. Glancing up, she noted that while he frowned, there was a note of recognition in his eyes.

“Interesting disguise, Miss Granger. I had asked you to stay, but I see now that you had not.” He said, gesturing to her appearance.

She hadn’t thought of anyone in particular when she cast the spell, so she had no idea what she looked like, only that Minerva was the only one to witness her casting.

“It was a tool Severus gave me,” She told him as there were a couple more apparation cracks, Sirius, Remus, and Kingsley appearing.

“Useful, but perhaps not one we should not advertise it. We need not have to worry about everyone hiding their identity so easily. But could you, perhaps, remove the glamour?”

Hermione nodded, allowing the disguise to melt away with a murmured counter and a flick of her wand.

A few more people began to trickle in, James and Lily, Alastor and Ted Tonks.

“Where’s Wormtail?” James asked, looking around.

“Probably still in Diagon Alley,” Lily replied solemnly. “He was getting close to Marlene.”

“Really?” Sirius asked incredulously. “Marlene and Wormtail?”

Lily, eyes red rimmed and glistening, turned a furious gaze on Sirius. “Yes, Marlene and Peter. She wasn’t about to wait around on you to change your mind forever. She realized Peter was sweet. That Peter was cute, she was…. She sniffed, hard, “She was trying to be better! Less self-centered! Less discriminating!”

There was a softer crack of apparition from just outside the door, and Hermione turned and craned her head to see Severus walking through the front door just as Molly and Arthur returned to the dining room. He shrunk his mask and robes before tucking them inside his frock coat, rubbing his face with one hand as he made his way into the room.

“I’m sorry, but-“
“YOU!” Lily cut Severus off, marching toward him and slapping him hard across the face, causing his head to whip around on the impact.

“Petal!” Sirius chorused with Remus’ and Hermione’s, “Lily.” But she didn’t heed them.

“What the bloody hell are you doing here? You disgusting, terrible, awful man! You betrayed us, you betrayed us and you just walk in here like you belong? Like you don’t follow that evil lot. Get out, get the fuck out of here you murdering swine!”

“Lily!” Hermione yelled, forcing herself between her fiancé and their friend. “Perhaps you need to settle down.”

“Are you with him, Hermione? Do you know what he is? Do you know what you’re marrying into?”

“Miss Evans,” Dumbledore said calmly, causing the fiery ginger to turn her attention toward their leader.

“He’s a Death Eater! I say him, with his mask and his robes and he was with the man, if you can even call him that. A Death Eater, Headmaster!”

“Yes, I know.” He said with a nod.

“You-you know?” Lily asked, her rage dying down and turning into confusion.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said. “I know, because I asked it of him. Severus had drawn the attention of Tom Riddle and his followers, and when it became apparent that Severus would be more than welcomed within the ranks, I asked his to sacrifice his good name, and possible his love, for the cause.”

“Coerced, more like.” Severus said under his breath.

“So,” Lily looked over her shoulder sheepishly at Severus. “So, you don’t believe their rhetoric?”

“No,” Severus sneered. “Although I do so enjoy seeing how easily I have blended in if my oldest friend, my muggleborn friend can believe that so easily.” As Lily blushed and looked to the floor, Severus turned his attention to the headmaster. His demeanor went from sneering to remorseful. “I am sorry. There was another attack after Diagon Alley. A remote village, Wales, I believe. We were pulled there immediately, and there was no way to send warning. Not that I knew where we were anyway. It was a wizarding community, and … and there were no survivors.”

He wouldn’t look at her, and Hermione knew that he was hurting. He was ashamed.

Severus took a deep breath. “He’s celebrating. The fact that the lot of us demolished a village that defied him, that was filled with, as he claims, blood traitors and lessers, he called a revel. Seeing as how I don’t normally partake in those types of celebrations, I left.”

“He will wonder where you are.” Dumbledore said in a warning tone.

“He believes I returned to finish a potion I was working on before being summoned. Which is where I should be returning.”

“Keep us informed, lad.” Alastor said, earning a nod from Severus. He placed a hand on Hermione’s shoulder, squeezing before he stepped back and apparated away. Within the same moment, Peter returned.
“Peter, I’m so sorry. Has her family, has she…” Lily started asking.

Hermione watched, tongue pressed to the roof of her mouth as if she thought it would somehow stop her from saying anything. To most, Peter still had a look of disorientation, as though he hadn’t quite regained his wits from the return trip. But Hermione knew, she could see it in his beady eyes: he was confused. He was trying to understand why the people he called his friends were surrounding him, offering him comfort.

She excused herself to the kitchen to make a fresh pot of tea, sure that she would be unable to stop herself from activating her unbreakable vow of silence.

December 24th, 1978

“Are you really going to be completing your apprenticeship this spring? Isn’t it supposed to be three years at least?” Lucius asked, his fourth cup of elf-made wine making him more than a little friendly.

Severus, who had been sipping very lightly, nodded. “Nikkola believes I am already at the level needed to complete the guild test, and with his health fading, he would like less responsibilities. I believe once Igor and I are out of his hair, so to speak, he will likely head to Russia to be with his daughters.”

In fact, Severus was absolutely certain that Nikkola would get the first port key he could. Ever since the Dark Lord ripped the brand from his arm, he had been slowly deteriorating. Nothing terrible at first, but then they noticed his charms were weak or failing all together. He would tire more easily, and his potions often became little more than sludge when he tried to brew. His skin was becoming more translucent, and he slurred his speech from time to time. He was dying, and Severus was certain that it was only he and Nikkola that knew this.

“How is your father?” He asked, taking a sip of his drink.

Lucius, too in his cups to have realized the timing of the question, sighed heavily. “He seems to be ill often these days, as though he has suddenly aged a few decades.”

Severus nodded, but before he could say or ask anything else, his attention was pulled to the entrance of the Malfoy ball room as though he were a magnet pulled toward metal.

Hermione had entered, looking positively lovely in her blue, silk gown.

They hadn’t seen one another since the night over a month ago when he came to report to the order meeting in progress the destruction of the village. He’d barely been able to look at her, unsure she would still want to be with him when she realized the extent that he and the other Death Eaters had destroyed the village. It had entered the Prophet a few days after, but the details were light.

It didn’t say how half the village were tortured, that most of the witches were violated. That children had died, as did the elderly. At least, he knew, those who couldn’t escape. Severus had managed to convince at least two fathers to stop dueling him and just get out his family out. One he had no choice but to bury under a pile of rubble, effectively killing the man as the entire village was set
He taint his soul further, murdered more than his father. He was certain that everything would just keep piling up against him, and Hermione would simply be done with him.

But she wrote to him, far more frequently than she had in the past, promising that her love for him had not lessened, that she would still gladly be his wife, that he had nothing to fear.

Admittedly, it was exactly what he needed to know, having seen how fast Lily had turned on him. Yes, he knew Lily was far more fickle than Hermione, much more Gryffindor, but he still didn’t think she would doubt him. Not in this, not with the way he drifted from the Slytherins when Hermione became such good friends to him.

Severus watched as Hermione enthusiastically greet Narcissa who was receiving guests while Lucius mingled. The two women clasped hands, which may as well have been an embrace by pureblood standards. There seemed to be mutual complimenting of the gowns, a friendly chat that was starting to last a bit too long, and then, finally, Hermione stepped away. She scanned the room, but quickly found him in the crowd, smiling widely warmly when their eyes met.

“Ah, I see that time and distance has not lessened the fondness.” Lucius said, though Severus refused to turn away from the sight before him until she was firmly at his side, where she belonged.

“Hermione, so wonderful to see you.”

“And you, Lucius.” She said with a half curtsy, a slight tilt of her head.

“So, when is the wedding? You have been betrothed for the last six months, it must be coming soon.” Lucius asked with a smirk, and Severus glared.

“I think it will have to wait until the end of my apprenticeship, I’m afraid.” Hermione replied, slipping her arm around Severus’. “I don’t imagine we will be able to beforehand.”

“Pity,” Lucius said. “Although, with the rate of success Severus is having, not to mention being included once more into the Prince family, I don’t foresee a reason for your need employment.”

“Well, the apprenticeship is for more than employment. Some of us like politics, others prefer academic pursuits.”

“So, you’re saying that, should you not need to work, you’ll still pursue a career?” Lucius appeared so baffled it was nearly comical, and Severus could barely contain the smirk threatening to overcome him.

Hermione smiled. “Yes. I realize it’s a bit against the norm. Call it an odd trait of the continent, or even the Americans. My mother continued her career as a medi-witch with my father, even after having me. I merely learned to entertain and, perhaps, educate myself. I would imagine any children Severus and I have would be academically include like ourselves.”

Severus grinned until a cold reality settled over him: she likely already knew if they were going to have children.

His brain trailed back to that fleeting set of images he got from her mind, but they were fading. Still, he had seen children, and while he only caught a glimpse of two, there could have been more. And how else would Hermione know him from before? Perhaps she was friends with his-their-child. Or children. Would they have multiple? How many? Did he want a lot of children?

Severus thought of the time he was with the McGonagalls post-Oliver. They were tired, beyond
exhausted, really. That little one screamed and cried and seemed to be never ending in the world of need. But Delia looked so content beneath the tired. Bob was proud. They adored him even as he seemed set to torture him.

He thought of Narcissa, her struggles clear as every pregnant witch that entered was greeted with a strangled smile and eyes filled with jealous longing. Parenthood, perhaps, may not be as bad as his own parents seemed to make it out to be. He did, he suppose, have the perfect example of what not to be in his late father.

“Severus!” Lucius smacked him on the arm, and he returned to the present. “Merlin, man, you escaped deeper into your own head than normal. Hermione was just telling me that she has a projected completion of a year’s time as well. Are the two of you out to set some sort of record? Have your name associated with that of scholar?”

“Perhaps that’s for the best.” Severus said, taking a sip of his wine.

“Well, I shall leave you two to converse. As always, a room for you has been set up in the east wing, so you do not have to return to your separate abodes at the end of the evening.” Lucius raised his glass to them and sauntered away.

Severus placed his away from his body, and a moment later it disappeared as an elf plucked it away unseen. “Shall we have a turn?” He asked, and Hermione gave a nod.

They settled into position, and began their dance.

“No Dark Lord this evening?” Hermione asked.

“No,” Severus said stiffly, tensing at the memories from earlier. “We had a revel to celebrate much earlier. A bit of muggle baiting, some others… indulged in their more baser instincts.” He said, and saw her pale just a touch as she nodded. “And you? How is the school?”

“Sirius and I are still doing rounds together.” She informed him, something he had already known. “We make sure to ham up our interactions more than needed.” He knew that, too. Last time he was at the school to give a report, a more in depth one about the attack in Wales, Albus had made more than one comment about how happy Hermione had seemed to have Black around. How often they laughed together during rounds, often giving their position away to the students they were supposed to be on the lookout for. And that frequently, very frequently, Sirius would end up in Hermione’s rooms. Often, he would not leave them until dawn.

“And what do the pair of you do in your rooms all hours of the night?” He asked, cocking an eyebrow.

She smirked. “We talk about boys and braid each other’s hair.” She snickered. “I honestly wish I were joking. Did you know he has a thing for Remus?” She asked, her eyes alight with giddiness. “I wonder if he would be willing to try with Sirius since I’m never going to happen.”

Severus smirked, pulling her closer. “Perhaps he would.”

May 9th, 1979

An umbrella charm in place, Severus stood at the grave of his mentor, his latest father figure, and
watched as the simple wooden coffin was lowered into the ground. Nikkola’s daughters stood nearby with a quiet strength and dignity, tears silently slipping down their cheeks as they laid their father to rest.

Severus completed his mastery a month ago, along with Igor, but did not leave his master’s side. He could see he was reduced to little more than a squib, and still his life force kept draining. The girls had been contacted, Nikkola not being able to make it to Russia, and they joined Severus in taking care of their father in his last days.

“You will make sure bastard doesn’t win, da?” Nikkola had asked Severus with a shaky, strained voice one night.

“I will.” Severus had vowed, finding promising this man his aid in the demise of Voldemort much more satisfying than that of Dumbledore’s.

“You marry your Hermonee, you make babies, raise them to be good potioneer.”

Severus snorted, “That I can’t promise.”

Nikkola had grinned. “You don’t let that Doombledore get power. He as bad, just different sort.”

“I had figured that out, yet.” Severus had smirked, looking at his master. He had then rose, setting the drink he had had on the side table, and giving the man lying on the expanded sofa a deep bow.

“Thank you, Master, for your teachings, your guidance, and your *ottsovskaya privyazannost*.”

Nikkola had looked proud, reaching out for Severus. When he managed to snatch his hand, Nikkola had kissed his knuckles and patted his hand.

It had been just under two years, but Severus had meant it when he thanked him for his fatherly affection. Never had any man in Severus’ entire life filled the role in such a way that Nikkola had. And now the man had passed, his magical core ripped away from him, his life along with it. Cut short because a mad man wanted an aesthetically pleasing, youthful regime.

He’d researched it when it was more than obvious why Nikkola was dying. A brand like the Dark Mark could not, and should not be ripped from those who bare it. It would deactivate upon the placer’s death, essentially becoming a scar. But to have it removed, even by the one who placed it, resulted in the very thing Severus was baring witness to.

As the coffin was placed, the funeral over, the eldest of the girls came toward him.

“You are Severus?” He nodded in response to her question. “Father spoke of you in letters. He was fond of you.”

“And I of him.” Severus said with a bow of his head.

The girl, Catarina, he assumed, smiled. “We no have need for his home in Bulgaria. And, potions… not our thing. He would want you to have.”

Severus shook his head. “I couldn’t.”

“We are happy in Russia. We are far from nonsense, do not fear being dragged in. Take what you want, do what you will with rest.” She kissed his cheek, then returned to her sisters, guiding them away.

Severus stood dumbstruck.
There had been a will. It wasn’t just his daughters being kind, there was actually a will that had left his Bulgarian residence, and all the contents within, to Severus. Oh, the girls would have been left with his fortune, thankfully, but the house in which Nikkola lived, where he had his apprentices live and work, was now his.

Well, he didn’t want a house in Bulgaria.

But what was in the house, well….

Contracts for brewing for St Mungo’s, a few clinics, and a smattering of apothecaries in Bulgaria and Germany held promise, as they were written in such a way that he could take them up upon his master’s death. The ingredients, the tools…. He didn’t want them all, of course, as Hermione had gifted him some beautiful pieces, and he preferred new models compared to some of Nikkola’s. But there was some sentiment that would have him holding on to a few, as well as practicality. The rest he could donate, or sell to some antique’s dealer. Any galleons he had he knew he would not hold on to. Earning them through the contracts were one thing, but earning it from selling house and home was not something Severus could do. He would send it to the girls, and if they refused, he would donate them. That should clear his soul at least a little.

But those jars of specimens, some that even he wasn’t sure of anymore, those he was keeping. They would look fantastic in an apothecary all his on. One, he hoped, he could name after his late master.

July 17th, 1979

He was just finishing a brew when he felt the mark burn. He looked over at Hermione, sitting in the plush arm chair of their rented cottage, curled up with a good book. Living in sin, Delia had teased. Well, he’d done worse things than live with a woman before they were married.

“Alert the order.” He said in a new bored tone. He was panicking on the inside, however. What would it be today? Muggle baiting? Punishing a family or a village for not bowing to the whims of Lord Voldemort? Would they be destroying something, or would there be a celebration? It was just after the summer hols began, perhaps today was an initiation. He wasn’t sure, and Severus knew what he would prefer, but very little went the way he preferred it to in life.

“Be safe,” Hermione said, appearing to all the world indifferent had it not been for that slight tremble in her voice.

Oh, she was getting very, very good at playing her own part. She and Narcissa had become something of friends, or at very least extremely good acquaintances. Christmas morning at the Malfoys had nearly seemed normal. As if they were all very good friends, and had been for ages, and were not connected by the whim of a maniac, that the men there weren’t branded slaves and their partners sat helpless at the side lines. There had been laughter, and good conversation before Bellatrix strolled in like she owned the place. Her husband had lingered behind quietly, trying to keep his distance as Lucius’ lip turned to a sneer. Severus and Hermione had taken their leave, and
what ever happened after, he didn’t know or care.

But he did know that she kept loose contact with Narcissa through owl, and he had received praise from his fellow Death Eaters in the inner circle for having found such a lovely witch of high breeding.

He was always so proud and smug. How could he not be? They were complimenting the very thing they claimed was inferior.

He pressed his mask to his face, swirled his robes about his shoulders, and pressed his wand tip to his mark.

He landed in familiar woods. Familiar, not because of the frequency with which the Dark Lord summoned them there, but because he had wound around these trees and treaded these grounds many times. During the summer, and at times over Christmas. He’d held a girl’s hand and meant it, had his first snog against one of these might timbers. Not far from where he stood, he swore was the spot he’d lost his virginity.

He pressed his mask to his face, cast the quickest, wandless, wordless silencing spell he could, and vomited. He knew what was going to happen. He just hoped he got to his target destination first.

Slowly, he moved to join the others.

“Severus, you are late!” The Dark Lord noted.

“Critical stage, my Lord. I do apologize.”

Another crack signaled the arrival of someone later.

“And your excuse, Lucius?”

“I was attempting to make an heir, my Lord. I was quite close to… laying the foundation.”

The rest of them chuckled, and the Dark Lord smirked.

“You are forgiven, for I am in a forgiving mood. This village, it is muggle. It is muggle, and yet, one of our own in the ministry’s office has discovered it is inhabited by a pureblood. Some half-bloods. A mudblood.” Someone spat as the Dark Lord said the word. We will take no chance of any more of those in this village. We will see that there is nothing and no one left. My friends, enjoy!”

It was a mad dash, some of the Death Eaters stalking to the village, others apparating in the streets directly. Well, if that’s how they were going to play it.

Severus closed his eyes, and apparated inside the McGonagall’s living room.

Delia yelped.

“Oh my god, Bob!” She said scrambling up on her chair as if avoiding a mouse. As Bob went to attack, Severus ripped off his mask.

Their faces morphed from fear and anger, to confusion, and then utter disappointment.

“Oh, Severus, no….” Delia said, her eyes watering.

“It’s not what you think, I swear, but I don’t have time to explain. They’re here, they’re all here, and
they are going to destroy the whole village. Get Ollie and get out!”

Delia, mother bear that she was, didn’t have to be told twice. The witch was running up the stairs to get her son as fast as she could.

Bob lowered his wand, the realization of everything seeming to hit him slower. “Mum, though.”

“I’m sorry, I haven’t been inside Nan’s home enough to apparate there, and if I appear there while someone else is already inside, my cover is blown and Hermione and I are dead.”

“Cover?” Bob frowned, then shook his head. “Got it, Delia!” He called to the stairs. “I’m going to Mums, get you and Ollie to Min’s.” He called, and then turned to Severus. He opened his mouth to say something, but then seemed to think better of it. Instead, he nodded once, clapping the wizard on the shoulder than apparating away. He heard the crack of Delia disappearing, and then Severus glanced around the home that had given him so many good memories one last time. Closing his eyes, he set a blaze one level lower than fiendfyre, and walked out he cottage.

“Woo! Nice one, Snape!” Someone cheered, and Severus remembered he didn’t have his mask on any longer. He put it back in place as he stalked toward Nan McGonagall’s cottage. He stunned a few muggles here and there, none that he knew. It grated on him that they were begging for god to save them, save them from the devils that came to them. He wanted so desperately to get them out, away, to do something. So he did what he could, he made cast discreet stupifys where he could to some of the muggles who were enduring torture in the street or worse. He hoped beyond hope that those that he did that too would not know of what was happening to them after they fell into unconsciousness. That the Death Eaters attacking would assume the victim was dead or near there, and move on.

He approached the cottage, heart sinking as he noted the door already opened. He cast a quick Homenum Revelio finding four figures inside, on the lower level.

Grateful for the mask covering his face, he marched in as if he were eager to participate.

“What have we here?” He asked in his most menacing sounding voice.

“A spot of fun,” Rowle replied, the smirk evident in his voice.

It looked like he had had fun with Robert McGonagall. There were, about five feet away, the splinters of a wand clearly crushed. The man himself was pale, covered in blood, his arthritic riddled body from years of working herbology was contorted from a curcio cast too many times too quickly. His breathing was short, unsteady, one of his eyes swollen shut from … who knew.

As Severus stood there, another Death Eater cast another crucio, and Bob’s scream turned gurgle before long. The laugh that followed was Dolohov’s. “Look at him, he’s practically a pretzel.”

“You want in, Snape?” Rookwood asked.

Severus met Bob’s eye, and he thought he heard, in his mind, the scream for death, the plead for a friend to end it.

“Sectumsempra.” Severus said with as much force as he could, but not as much as he had given his father. The cuts were deep, bleeding heavily, and he could tell that Bob hadn’t felt the pain of it, merely the impact. He hoped, really hoped, that he could hear him when Severus screamed with his mind, It’s over. It’s over, they’re safe. They escaped. Everyone’s safe, and I’m sorry, so, so sorry.”

He must have established a connection, however loose, because there was relief in Bob’s eyes, a
slight twitch of his head that could have been a not while his mouth nearly curled to a half smile. Then he stopped. Stopped moving, stopped breathing, stopped being.

“He was too far gone, anyway.” Rookwood said. “But at least we got one of them. Wonder if the others….”

“Well two are probably nothing more than ash by now,” Severus said, stuffing his grief and pain behind his occlumency walls as he said his words with a bored sort of smugness.

“Fuck, Snape, you surprise me sometimes. Not one for unforgiveables, but you have a talent, a refinement with charms and curses. Come on, let’s see if there’s more to go. Maybe a muggle bitch out there that hasn’t been fucked by too many yet.”

Severus watched the others leave, then knelt down by Bob’s body and closed his eyes. He then took his wedding ring off his finger, something to give to Delia, the only thing he could. He then stepped back, looked around Isobel McGonagall’s home, and set it ablaze as well.

As the revel or raid or whatever the bloody hell this monstrosity of a night was seeming to draw to a conclusion, little sound of signs of life that didn’t come from figures in black, Severus raged. He flicked his wand at more and more houses, ones he was sure were empty, a couple perhaps not so sure, and lit them a blaze.

He then moved toward the Dark Lord, seeing the pleasure in the twisted man’s eyes, the pride, the glee, before he knelt before him.

“My Lord, I humbly ask to return to my brewing.” He said with a bowed head. “I do not believe there are many if any one left alive now, your work, your goal, has most certainly been completed.”

“Has it?” The Dark Lord asked, and Severus felt the man tear into his mind. He pushed a memory mash of Delia going for Ollie with the blaze he set in the house. Pulled a memory of her in the same dress she’d worn this eve, carrying a small Ollie down the stairs and stopping. It was hazy, but he could blame that one rising smoke. And he had doubted very much the Dark Lord knew one of the registered half-bloods was an child. He then showed his ending of Bob’s life, and the Dark Lord cackled. “I think you may be right. Return to your brewing, Severus. I am sure you are not the only one with evening plans that are longed to be returned to.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” He said, bowing deeper before rising, taking a few backward steps, and apparating.

———S———

He apparated directly to headquarters. He didn’t want to, but he knew he would have no choice. A report would need to be made, a widow would need to be informed. A sister. A daughter….

He hung his head, his heart aching with what he had to do. Severus slammed his hand against the wall, wishing it would hurt more than a sting, but alas, no more damage would be done. He wanted to run, but Severus Snape was not a coward. He wouldn’t call himself brave, and he doubted the sorting hat disagreed, but he was not a coward.

Entering the cottage, Severus heard a distraught Irish brogue, a Scottish one attempting to soothe, and the gentle clatter of dishes from the dining room. Another deep breath, he slowly, quietly closed the
door, and headed down the corridor.

Hermione was lingering in the door frame, gnawing her lower lip while watching the scene within. Her eyes shot to him a beat later, and the relief in her eyes changed to tears as she seemed to sense the worst.

He took her hand as he came to the threshold, wishing he could hold on to her for the whole duration.

There was Dumbledore within, as was expected. Alastor, Black, Kingsley, Minerva, and Delia.

The men seemed to have noticed him, Black seeming to catch that the news was bad and bowed his head. Moody shuffled toward Min, and she looked first to the auror, and then turned toward Severus. “You’re back.” She said, and Delia whipped around to see him.

“Bob?!” The first desperate question, the only one that mattered to most in the room.

Black made his way to Hermione as Severus closed the distance between he and Delia. He knelt beside her, withdrawing Bob’s wedding ring from his pocket before taking her hand and placing it on her palm.

“I’m so, so sorry.” He said, feeling his tears rise with hers. He looked to Minerva over Delia’s shoulder, seeing the elder witch clutch her hand to her mouth as tears spilled. “Your mother escaped. She was not in the house when I arrived, so it is very likely that…."

“And Bob was… Bob was….?” Delia half sobbed.

“Not when I first got there, but very nea-”

Smack!

The sting of Delia’s palm across his cheek was the exact pain he had longed. It came again, much more forcefully, and quicker than he would have expected. He shifted his eyes to see Minerva hold her arms back as the grief in the pretty ginger’s face twisted with rage.

“You were there, were ye? With your Death Eater mates? Did you help them torture him? Did ye enjoy it?”

“No,” He said, thankful that she didn’t ask if he had dealt the final blow. “No, I swear I caused him no pain.”

“We thought you were a good lad. We thought you were good. You gave us Ollie, you were good.”

“Cordelia, if he were with them, then why would he be here, lass?” Minerva half whispered through her tears, holding Delia more snug against her as the widow’s rage change to sobs. Alastor held Min’s shoulders, gripping her to show support. “Severus would have done what he had to do. He would have saved Bob he could,” She choked. “An’ if he counea, he’d done wha he could to end the pain.”

“Severus?” Hermione said, and he turned to see her eyes red with tears, turning out of Black’s arms. He went to stand, to hold her, but was stopped.

“What happened to the rest of the village, Severus?” Dumbledore asked, and the spy turned toward his other master, noting that as he did, Hermione returned to the comfort of Black, and Dumbledore barely stopped his smile from showing.
“Near everyone is dead.” He said solemnly. “And if they aren’t, I have no doubt they wish they were. Isobel McGonagall likely escaped, in fact I am quite certain. Robert McGonagall….”

“The muggles?”

“Well, I don’t doubt for a moment Hermione had, in fact, alerted the Order as most of you lot are here. One would think the arrival of Delia would have tipped the lot of you off to where we were. How many lives could have been saved….”

Dumbledore held up a hand. “It would have blown your cover, I’m afraid, to have gone after you again.”

Severus’ nostrils flared.

“But you did well. You played your part perfectly, my boy.”

It was then that Severus felt the old man sifting through his mind. He slammed his walls up, as bitter with himself for letting them slip, even a little, as he was with the old man of tacking advantage of his grief, his loss of a father figure, to go riffling through his memories.

“Yes, you are the consummate Death Eater. Keep this up, and no one will doubt your true nature.” The Headmaster’s eyes flickered over Severus’ shoulder, and he turned to see Hermione tucked securely to Black, his arms around her, holding her tight.

If he wasn’t entirely sure of his leanings, Severus would assume the worse. He glanced back to Delia. Kingsley was comforting her, Alastor was still hold Min, who was still holding Delia.

Severus was alone.

He nodded. “If that is all?”

“You may go,” Dumbledore smiled, and Severus left the dining hall, apparating mid step to the sitting room of his rented cottage.

He collapsed on the floor, his mind racing, reeling. He hadn’t enjoyed any of it, any of the evening. So why would anyone believe otherwise? But then, the other Death Eaters believed the show. And how many victims did he accidentally kill this eve by stunning them? But setting a blaze a house that may have had someone hiding within. How many had he killed other nights without knowing? And it was getting easier, playing this part, being this person. Perhaps it was in him all along? Maybe this was exactly the path he was meant to take, would have always taken?

Time passed, and he remained where he landed. The clock struck midnight, but he’d forgotten what time it was when he left. He could have been there minutes, or hours, he didn’t know.

The floo flared, but he did not move.

Her gentle footsteps crossed the rug and stopped before him. She knelt, and he didn’t acknowledge her even as her hand came to rest on his back.

He waited, expecting her to cry, to ask questions, to want to hear the details. She had to have known he was the one that caused the fatal strike. That he killed her father figure the same way he killed his alcoholic sperm donor. He waited for her demands of ‘how could he’ and the like.

But nothing came.
She soothed his back, the odd sniff coming from her, indicating she had had a good cry over it all already, but said nothing.

“I am turning into a monster.” He finally broke the silence.

“No, you aren’t.”

“I killed him, Hermione.” He said, his tone distant, barely there. “I killed him tonight. He was so near death, the reaper was practically standing over him, but I’m the one who gave him into death’s hands. I killed Robert, and I had likely killed others. So many others, and not just tonight. I am tainted.”

“No, you’re not.” She said more firmly this time, and he looked up into her puffy, red rimmed eyes.

“I caused you pain, heart ache, I never wanted to cause you that. I am the reason you feel this way.”

“You already said he was on Death’s door. And if you had not done what you did, how long do you think it would have carried on? I know you, Severus, I know your heart. You would have done what you could as painlessly as possible.”

“Still…”

“No, don’t … don’t do that. This is war, Severus. And I did alert the order, and when Min brought Delia to headquarters, Sirius and I were ready to follow, but Albus said no. No, because he had no idea what we were going into, that there weren’t enough of us, even if we all left. “She took a deep breath. “Don’t think I didn’t hear what he said to you. You are not the consummate Death Eater.”

“I’m starting to feel that way. With the people we spend most of our time with, the way I can just… enter that persona so easily.”

“Then I am the consummate Death Eater’s wife. Perfect, and poised, and supportive of my husband and his beliefs. Really, it’s not much different than playing the role of a pureblood, only there’s more occluding than I would have expected.”

“You aren’t my wife. Not yet.” He said, ignoring the humor she attempted to put in there in the end.

“I might as well be.” She said, a laugh on her breath.

“Or you might take this chance and… and find something or someone better for you. I’m only going to taint further, only going to become darker.”

“Then I will be your light, we’ll balance.” She tried again, the desperate need for levity in her tone.

“Hermione,” He looked at her then, seeing the fear in her eyes. “Let me go.”

“Why?”

“Because I cannot let you go. I can be strong, and pretend to be unaffected by many things, but I cannot be unaffected by losing you. I cannot give you up, so please…”

“Severus Snape, for an intellectual, you’re incredibly stupid.” She said, no good humor left. “I will not leave you, or walk away, because some meddling old coot has somehow gotten in your head and actually made you believe it’s for the best. I won’t stand for it.”

“Hermione, please, see reason.”
“I am.” She said, and quicker than he could have imagined, she snatched his right hand from off the floor and wrapped her hand around it. Stunned by being taken off guard by not one, but two witches in one night, Severus was distracted just enough for Hermione to conjure a broad, white ribbon to wrap around their joined hands. He stared at the silk-like material as the last of it wrapped around them, then looked to his fiancé, stunned.

She had determination carved into her cheeks, in the clench of her jaw. Her eyes danced with apprehension, love, hope.

His heart stuttered in his chest.

“I, Hermione Jean Granger, bind myself, body, soul, and magic, to Severus Tobias Snape. I will share your burden, I will be your strength, I will treat you as an equal in this union.”

Severus blinked. “Hermione, you know that if we do this….”

“Oh shut up and marry me, your git, so you can have one less thing to feel like you don’t deserve.”

He smirked, “It’s rather permanent.”

“Yes, I am aware.”

“This isn’t pretend.”

“Severus, if you do not say your vows, I swear I will hex you bullocks off.”

He laughed, unable to not in the face of her adorable, fiery temper.

“Fine, if you want to be a dunderhead, who am I to stop you when it benefits me so much. I, Severus Tobias Snape, bind myself to you, Hermione Jean Granger, in body, soul, and magic.”

“You said it wrong,” She said under her breath.

“I’m not the one who’s likely read it in a book and instantly memorized it.” He retorted under his breath, making her giggle. He took a breath, trying to be serious. “I will share your burden, I will be your strength, I will treat you as an equal in this union, to Death do us part.”

“I think that’s implied with a magic binding.” Hermione arched a brow, nearly as well as him.

“Just so we’re clear, dear. All I need to do is kiss you now, and this is done. You can’t escape me. Last chance.”

She leaned toward him, “I’ll take the risk.”

He grinned. Merlin, Nimue, and any other deity of sorts, how would never deserve her. But he didn’t care, he was going to be greedy, and take this before she changed her mind.

Lips just shy of hers, he said, “and so the binding is made.”

At his gentle kiss, he felt a heat like a fire whip through him, and yet it was not at all painful. It was blissful, calming, home. It was tea, and lavender, ink and parchment, the smell of earth and plant life. It was Hermione, and it was _home_.

“We’re still going to have a wedding? A proper one?” She said against his lips as her fingers dipped into his hair.
“As large as you want.” He replied, his mouth caressing hers. “My only regret is that no one will give you away.”

“No one would have,” She said, a touch of melancholy in her tone as she pulled back only a fraction. “I loved Bob, but like an uncle. I’d have always gave myself away.”

“I am sorry.” He said.

“I know. And so does Delia. In the end, as I was leaving, she sort of… realized that there was nothing more you could do. And Albus, well, he may have remarked that you shouldn’t have even gone right to them. That it may have hurt your cover.”

“I bet he did.”

“Fear not, Min and Alastor were taking care of him when I left.”

He nodded, her curls brushing his forehead. “Do you regret this?”

“No, and I never will.”

“Not even if we bound ourselves under terrible circumstances?”

“No. This is life affirming, this is strength. And I think we both need a little of that, a little peace of mind and reassurance that no matter what, no one can keep us apart. I love you, and there is nowhere I would rather be than at your side, regardless of the role you need to play.”

“I don’t deserve you.”

“No, you don’t.” She teased, kissing him soundly. “But, husband, you can certainly make a good attempt at doing so.” She said, tugging at the bindings, causing them to slither off.

“How so?” He asked, following her lead as she pulled him off the floor.

“Consummation. But before that, sleep.”

He smiled gently, cupping her face with both hands and placing a soft kiss on her lips. “As you wish, wife.”

Chapter End Notes

Did it make up for it?
He stormed through the ward for creature induced injuries, wishing his robes would billow. And that they weren’t lime green. He may have been somewhat disguised, but he wanted some dignity.

Severus had asked upon arrival where he would find Arthur Weasley, and the stunned receptionist had taken several seconds to stammer out the reply. He sneered at her, likely giving himself away, but he hardly cared. It was always Albus who insisted he take to disguising himself when called to help at St Mungo’s. Heaven forbid that Severus Snape have a good name in the public world.

“Master Prince,” A relieved sounding Mediwitch said as he entered the ward.

“Healer Lovett.” He acknowledged briefly before looking at Arthur, taking in the damage. A bite to the right shoulder, and hand, another his ribs at the left. There were a few smaller ones on his face, and another on his left thigh. They were all bleeding profusely.

“We haven’t had much time to work on him, but I must say that we aren’t making much progress either,” Lovett said as two younger Mediwizards attempted to bandage Arthur while she gave him a dose of blood replenisher. “The wounds aren’t closing.”

“We could try stitches, Healer Lovett.” One of the Mediwizards said. “It’s a muggle method of closing wounds.”

“We could try,” She said thoughtfully.

“Have you collected a blood sample for me to analyze if there need be an anti-venom made?” He asked, and Lovett reared back in surprise.

“Anti-venom? How did you know it was a snake?” She asked.

While Severus repeated “shit, oh shit” in his tired mind, he gave Lovett a bored look he usually reserved for the likes of Neville Longbottom. “Fangs, healer Lovett. The wounds were clearly made by fangs. And, while many a creature have them, very few have venom that hinders magical sealing of the wounds. If not a snake, then, perhaps, a dragon? Unlikely, given the size of the bites.” He mentally patted himself on the back for such expertise in codswallop.

“Right, yes, of course.” Lovett said, conjuring a vial and collecting some of the blood dripping from Arthur’s shoulder. “Here. Any course of action we should try in the meantime?”

Severus swirled the blood, studying it for any signs of taint. “A bezoar would not go amiss. Worst that will happen is nothing. I shall return.” He said, turning and leaving the room swiftly, heading for the hospital potion’s lab.
In the near eighteen years since inheriting Nikola’s contracts with the hospital, Severus hadn’t had to work within the walls more than twenty times. Mostly, he was brought in as a consultant for the more obscure types of injury caused by creatures, herbs, or potion interaction. But from the beginning, he just knew that it would likely be unwise to use his proper name, never mind that Dumbledore promptly demanded he not reveal himself as he was to anyone within the hospital walls. He was registered with alias at the hospital and had been since signing the contracts over to himself. He was simply to be addressed and known as Master Nikola Prince. There was no bloody way he was going to use any part of his father’s name, and he was starting to get an inclining early on that an apothecary wasn’t going to be in his immediate future. He sensed neither of his living masters would allow it to come to fruit. How laughable was it that they had the same idea for him in the end?

The lab wasn’t as nice as his one at Hogwarts. For one, it was too crowded. For another, they had the most basic, standard equipment. Unfathomable for a medical facility in his mind. There were also too many apprentices there, all working for one master, and it wasn’t even a proper master. A Potioneer, which wasn’t bad unto itself, but that was all these poor fools would get continuing down this path.

As he went to his nearly never touched station, he caught a glimpse of himself in the window. He looked odd. Like his father, but not quite. His disguise for the hospital was simple: short hair, full beard, and slightly lighter eyes. If anyone with half a brain looked close enough, they would see him. Yet, because no one ever did, those that might would disregard the thought because of a name, it was perfect. Sometimes, the lack of original thought in the wizarding world scared him.

He went to work, testing out a couple of antivenom’s on a couple drops of blood just to see. When that failed, he then began the very difficult spell of separating the parts within. A little trick his late Master taught him, a charm of the man’s own devising. One, he knew, Karkaroff had never learned.

As he chanted, the blood levitated out of the vial. He stared at it intently, seeing the pale green glow begin to surround the hovering drop. Slowly, Severus spread his arms apart, and as he did, the blood began to separate. The white cells, the red cells, and platelets. The plasma. Then there, in the middle, a ball of dark green, vile looking poison. Carefully, Severus lowered the separated parts on the bench, then summoning a dropper while maintaining the separation charm, sucked the poison into the dropper.

He stopped the charm, and Arthur’s blood sample merged back together, minus the venom, and Severus collapsed in a charm behind him.

Sweating, exhausted, breathing as though he’d run a mile or more, he glanced around the room of idiots he used to teach, who all stared at him as if he were Merlin reborn.

“Would one of you kindly cease your foolish staring and bring me a Pepper-Up potion? Perhaps one that is a higher quality than adequate?”

He didn’t see who it was who actually brought him the potion, there was a haze coming over him that tried to persuade him to fall into blissful unconsciousness. He swallowed back the potion in one go, ignoring the nagging voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Hermione’s to not be so reliant on potions, and got back to work.

The snake venom was laced with dark magic, which was what was preventing Arthur’s wounds from closing. He’d done charms with potions, integrating them in when need be, but a counter curse was another thing. He wasn’t sure if it would work well.

Heading to the floo and ignoring the potioneer on duty who seemed bursting with questions, Severus knelt down and threw a pinch of powder into the hearth. “Snape residence, master bedroom.” He
called out, then waited a moment. “Mistress Snape?” Another moment, and then Hermione’s head appeared.

“Yes, lo- oh? Oh, well, I haven’t seen that face in quite some time.” He smirked. “Yes, and I remember you were quite fond of it. I need your assistance. I apologize for the hour….”

“I was up. I had gotten word from Min about… things.”

“Quite.” He said. “Bring Leonidas, if need be. I’m not sure how long this will take.”

“We’ll be but a moment.” She said, disappearing. Severus remained where he was, keeping the floo connection open while he waited for his wife and son to come through. When he heard their approach, he stepped back, allowing Hermione and Leo to come through.

Leonidas, tired from being woken up, was blinking away the fatigue quickly as he took in where they were.

“I’m still dreaming, aren’t I?” He said.

“No, but you are going to place yourself in that chair, and you are to stay out of the way, understood?” Severus said, crossing his arms.

“Yes, sir.” Leonidas said, promptly turning and heading for the chair Severus had collapsed in earlier.

“So, what do you need me for?” Hermione asked as she followed Severus back to his work station.

“You know what’s happened?”

“Yes. Or, at least, I know enough.”

“It was a snake, and the snake’s venom is imbued with dark magic. There is no curse counter potion in existence, and I have no way of being able to create one fast enough to mix with the basic anti-venom. So, my Arithmancy mistress, I need calculations on if, when, and how I can incorporate the Vulnera Sanentur.”

“Just a small request from a husband of his wife.” She said low enough for only them to hear.

“I make them so rarely,” He teased while he remained utterly stoic in all appearances.

Hermione gave a half grin, then pulled parchment to herself. Severus jotted down the anti-venom recipe and began doing the prep while Hermione did the calculations.

In the time it took for the calculations to come up with the appropriate answer, there was a change in shift among the brewers.

“Would you like help with the brewing?” Hermione asked.

Severus shook his head. “There’s no need, really. I have all the prep work done, and …. He paused, a familiar and unpleasant sound hitting his ear. He looked, to the middle of the room, where no one seemed the wiser of what was about to happen. “Shield charms, up!” He shouted to the room, encasing his family within his own, feeling Hermione do the same. It took the others in the room longer, the truly intelligent having paused and listened, obeying order before the first curl of black smoke. It took the dunderheads more time, and as the cauldron blew, Severus could only hope that
they had at least something in place. He felt the shrapnel of the cauldron his shield and was thankful for the ventilation in the room that instantly cleared the vapors away. Once the room was free of smoke and fumes, Severus lowered his shield charm and turned to ensure his son’s safety.

The scowl on his little face nearly had Severus laughing.

“I saw you!” Leonidas declared, standing on his chair in his button up, two-piece pajamas with little beakers, flasks, and cauldrons on them. He pointed to the fool in the middle of the room as he came out from under his table, looking bewildered and apparently as though he hoped no one would know he was the cause of the explosion. “I was watching! You put belladonna in a cauldron with crushed bezoar! Any idiot who can read knows you don’t mix the two, they have a violent reaction! As you’ve just seen.”

Someone snickered. “Turner got told off by a firstie.”

“Not even a firstie.” Severus mumbled before turning his full attention on his son. “While you are absolutely correct, Leo, it is probably best that you don’t … tell off the apprentices here. Just because you have your mother’s level of retention doesn’t mean you need to regurgitate it, especially rudely.”

“It’s how you talk to the dunderheads in your classes,” He countered. “I know, I’ve heard you. I’ve listened by the door in your office when mum and I come early.”

Severus opened his mouth and hesitated a second. “Yes,” he said slowly, “well, Leo, you see, the difference with that is I am their teacher, and they are not trained what-so-ever in potions. It’s why they are in classes. You have yet to even begin your Hogwarts education, and you are addressing an apprentice who has completed NEWTS level potions and was adequate enough to be accepted to learn here.”

“What your father is trying to say is ‘don’t be such an insufferable know-it-all’.” Hermione said sternly to their son before glancing at him with a smirk. “Since you no longer need my assistance, we’ll take out leave. I imagine it would likely be for the best, considering our son’s embarrassing an apprentice.”

“Yes, for the best. Will you be heading to Grimmauld place?”

“Yes, we will be. I’m sure Sirius is feeling a bit over run by Weasley.”

“Alright, until then.” He said, brushing her hand with his as a way of saying goodbye. She nodded, beckoned Leo to follow, and then headed to the floo.

Severus ignored the room once more as he began to brew the anti-venom, using Hermione’s calculations to know that the best time to direct the charm at the potion was during its final resting stage. His brow was damp with sweat, and his hair felt utterly disgusting even without touching it, but he looked at the cauldron of anti-venom, fluorescent green with a touch of an aura due to the charm, and he knew it was perfect.

Decanting the results into seven doses, he pocketed one for him to be able to replicate later, and then put the others in a basket. He grabbed his notes, tucking those within his robe pockets, and then swept from the room without even acknowledging the incredulous stares that followed him.

He made his way to Arthur Weasley’s room and stopped short in the doorway.

He was deathly pale, more so than Severus could ever claim to look. Molly Weasley was clutching her husband’s hand on the other side of the bed, looking as if she were praying to any deity would listen to just save her husband.
“Master Prince?” Healer Lovett addressed him, hopeful yet apprehensive. She had a vile of blood replenisher in her hand, and Severus began to wonder how much of the stuff they had been pouring down poor Arthur’s throat and still have it work well.

He handed the healer the basket. “I wish to stay for the first dose.” He said as she plucked one of the vials greedily. “I want to ensure that it works as I expect it to.”

“It’s meant to withdraw the venom, is it not?” She asked as she returned to Arthur’s side, handing the blood replenisher to one of her trainees before uncorking the toxic-looking potion he created.

“Yes,” Severus said. “And more.”

Lovett quirked her brow but said nothing as she poured the substance in Arthur’s mouth, messaging his neck to encourage him to swallow. His gulp was loud in the quiet room, everyone focused on the patient.

The blood leaking from his wounds grew ever darker, until Severus was certain it was no longer blood coming from the patient.

“Mrs Weasley, you may want to step away a moment.” Severus said, and the witch looked up, startled, and then did as he said as the black ooze dripping out of her husband inched to the end of the bed. “If I may have a vile or more of that?” He asked the most squeamish looking trainee.

He did as he requested, much to Severus’ amusement, finding the biggest vile he could and siphoning the poison into it as best he could while trying to remain as far from the bed as he could.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sack, Dellard, you’re going to have to get over this unease if you plan to last in Mediwizardry.” Lovett growled, rolling her eyes and shaking her head at her trainee.

The young man nodded, but he still handed Severus the full vial with nothing more than the tips of his fingers, holding it as far away from his body as he could. As Severus pocked the venom beside the antidote and the notes he made, he watched as Arthur’s wounds began to close, and then heal as much as possible. They still looked a bit raw and open, but the blood flow stopped.

“Blood replenisher, extra strength, state.” Healer Lovett barked orders once it was clear that Arthur could live. She turned to Severus and smiled wide. “Thank you, Master Prince. I think my patient is going to make a full recovery.”

Molly Weasley wailed, and before Severus could react, she was across the room and practically crushing him in her arms. “Thank you, Severus.” She whispered, “thank you, thank you, thank you!”

He stiffened at hearing his name, a shot of panic zipping through him. He glanced at the Mediwitches and wizards, but they were all occupied with their patient. Slowly putting an arm about Molly, Severus whispered, “tell no one.”

She pulled back, utterly baffled, but nodded dumbly.

He bowed his head once, and then extracted himself from her grip. Without another word, he turned and left the room. Fatigue was hitting him, and a quick glance at a clock in the corridor told him what he knew in his bones: it was nearly dawn, and he had been up all night.

He considered, of course, that he could return to Hogwarts and risk Albus’ game of twenty questions. He knew that Molly likely wasn’t going to leave Arthur for a while yet but wondered briefly if the Order head would care enough about his soldier to seek out an update in the meantime.
But in truth, Severus was exhausted. He had no patience for an inquiry, and he knew if he stepped foot in Hogwarts, it was going to happen. So, when he got to the floos, Severus tossed his powder in and called, “Eyre cottage.”

Hermione and Leo would be in Grimmauld place, and he could sleep in sheets that smelled of his wife, undisturbed, until he was ready to face the day. Thank Merlin his first class wasn’t until near midday.

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When Hermione arrived with Leo in Grimmauld place, she darkened her hair, and subtly changed her features, before starting to head toward the most likely place to find anyone who might be awake. Leo moved for the couch and flopped on it. The action, so out of character for her son, made Hermione pause.

“It is a bit rude to flop like that.” She teased.

“Uncle Sirius wouldn’t care,” Leo said into the pillow.

“Is yelling at apprentices that exhausting?” She asked fondly as she came to his side, gently ruffling his hair.

“Wasn’t tired when you and Da was working.” He mumbled. “Am now, though.”

“Hmm,” Hermione hummed in understanding, knowing all too well what it was like be stimulated mentally, and then suddenly have it shut off. She bent down, kissing his cheek while pulling the afghan off the back of the sofa. Once Leo was somewhat tucked in, she continued on her mission toward the kitchen.

Her footsteps must have been heard, for Sirius came bolting out of the kitchen. He paused upon seeing her, then his shoulders sagged as he went back into the room, waiting for her to join him.

“I was hoping you weren’t one of the children,” He explained, “Or, perhaps, I was hoping you were Molly. Truthfully, I’m not sure. All I know is I was about to head to bed when Phineas starts shouting about company coming, and they all came through the floo. Minerva barely explained before she was ducking back through. So here I am, stuck with near a half dozen teenagers, all worried, scared, and no idea what to tell them. Practically bit Fred’s head off when he was ready to storm St Mungo’s, sod the order and the whole lot. Tried to tell me that I had no idea what I was talking about, having spent a third of my life in Azkaban, and having no family but Harry. I want to blame it on the stress of the situation, but.”

“I’m sure that’s all it was,” Hermione said, steering Sirius to where he had been sitting before, plopping him down in front of his half-gone cup of tea. She sat beside him, placing a hand on his back. “I can tell you that I was just with Severus at St Mungo’s,” at this, Sirius looked up at her in concern. “He’s fine, he was called to help with Arthur. He’s likely brewing the modified anti-venom as we speak, so hopefully within the next three hours or so, we’ll have word.” She said with a heavy sigh.

Sirius looked at her, studying her face. “So, you haven’t slept either, have you? Couldn’t tell at first, the glamour sort of hides it, since it’s not your proper face.”
She smiled humorlessly. “Given the circumstances, I thought revealing myself to the children to be a bit much for them to handle right now. Rory told me the twins know, at least, but the other three….”

“When are you going to tell them?” He asked gently, bringing his cup to his lips and grimacing.

She smirked, more honestly this time. “I don’t know. By the summer, I think. It’s not something I want to say in a letter, but it’s not like I see them often, and with Leo….”

“Where is mini-Snape?” Sirius asked, glancing around the kitchen as though he could see Leo this way.

“On your couch, fast asleep likely. He was with me in the infirmary. Told off a trainee, sounding every bit like his father while doing it. You wouldn’t know, because Severus had never been your teacher, but Leo had him down to a tee.”

Sirius burst out laughing. “Was he dressed like Snape, too?”

“No, he was wearing his little potion jammies, though.” She replied, causing Sirius to laugh just a bit more.

“What in the bloody hell d’ya do to get him laughing like that, ‘Mione?” Fred Weasley asked as he came into the kitchen, his twin following behind. When no one else followed them, Hermione stood and crossed the room, crossing her arms and looking up at the tall boy while trying to still appear intimidating. “You and I are going to be having quite the chat, young man.” She said firmly.

“Just me?” He asked.

She nodded.

“This is what happens when you date her daughter,” George said as he moved around them and slid into a chair across from Sirius. “Get to be told off by Hermione in new ways.”

“First off, the pair of you best start calling me H, if you’re going to be cheeky and informal. Or you can call me Mrs Snape, proper like.”

“No.” Said George emphatically.

“Too weird, that.” Fred agreed.

“Knowing who you are.”

“Knowing you were younger than us.”

“So, H it will be then.”

“Too soon to be calling you Mum.” Fred said with a wink, and as much as she wanted to scowl at him, she felt her lips twitch toward a smile. She took a couple deep breaths. “You best be good to her.”

“I try my best.” Fred nodded.

“Do not hurt her.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“She still has another three years of Hogwarts left after this,” Hermione reminded him. “If you don’t
think you can wait for her, then don’t drag her along. Be kind to her, but don’t try and promise her
things you may not be able to give. Or keep.”

“I won’t” Fred said firmly, glancing at the others behind her. She wouldn’t look away to see if
George and Sirius were listening in, and quite frankly, she didn’t care. When he met her eyes again,
Hermione could see the adult within Fred that he kept buried behind his carefree, jokester attitude.
“Rory isn’t some girl I’m dating for kicks. I fancy her quite a bit.”

“Good.” Hermione said quietly with a nod. She then sighed, rubbing her face. “If the pair of you
aren’t going to be in your borrowed bedroom, could you bring my son Leo up there? He’s sleeping
on the couch, but he would likely be more comfortable in a bed.”

“Can do, H.” George said, seemingly thankful for change in tension about the room. He rose and
grabbed his brother, pulling him out the room and heading up the stairs to get to Leo.

Sirius watched them go, shaking his head. “I’m a bit thankful that the only interaction I’d had with
you while you were young and I was… not a teenager, was quite brief and during a slightly hazy
period.

She gave a weak grin as she sat down beside him. “Enough time has passed, that I don’t think of
them as my peers in the least. They’re my daughter’s friends, or boyfriend. Harry is my godson, not
my best friend. In reality, knowing them was a mere blip in my life compared to Severus, you,
Remus.”

“Remus,” Sirius sighed. “I have been meaning to talk to you about him.”

“Oh? I had thought things were….”

“He isn’t pining for you anymore, at least not outwardly. And he does come by, especially after our
whole meeting about the things. But just as I was thinking that maybe we could try again with
something … more, a realization hits me when he’s talking about his recent ventures for
Dumbledore. I have competition.”

“Oh?

“Nymphadora Tonks. My own cousin is bloody in love with Remus. Or at least heavily infatuated.”

“What is it about Remus that has all the Blacks pining.” Hermione mused.

“You don’t think Draco was a crush on him, too, do you?” Sirius half groaned. “It’s not like I would
really worry about that, but it’s just the principal.”

Hermione chuckled, “No, I’m fairly certain he has eyes for one person only.” She replied.

“Am I wasting my time, Kitten? My youth? Before the war got bad the first go, I sorta thought that
maybe… but was Remus just experimenting? Playing about and seeing if maybe he could be happy
with a bloke like you were? I thought it was more, but maybe I was wrong.”

“I think Remus doesn’t know what Remus is feeling any more than you do. I think he’s gone a lot of
his adult life separated from his friends, though Merlin only knows why he felt the need to distance
himself from Severus and me. And I think, in that time, he’s taught himself that he doesn’t deserve
love. I know you and he have patched up any mistrust between you, but maybe … maybe he doesn’t
realize you still feel that way about him?”

“Perhaps,” he nodded. Sirius then sighed heavily, glancing at the clock. “The rest of them will be
tromping down, soon. Kreacher?” He said more than called, and a slight pop sounded as the house-elf appeared.

“What can Kreacher be doing for Mistress’s greatest disappointment?” The House Elf said with a bow.

“Eggs, bacon, toast, and tea, please. Harry is home, and he has friends with him, so make enough for a dozen.”

“Yellow haired son of Black?” Kreacher perked up.

“No, just the Weasleys.”

The house elf visible deflated before shuffling off to the stove, beginning to prepare breakfast.

“A dozen?” Hermione whispered.

Sirius shrugged, giving a tiny smirk. “I have seen Ron eat before.”

It wasn’t long after that the smell of food must have roused the rest of them, for the twins returned to the kitchen with Harry, Ron, and Ginny trailing after them. Harry did a double take upon seeing her, and Hermione wondered if he’d seen through her disguise.

“You’re my god mother.” He said after a time.

“Indeed.” She smiled when her deliberate use of Severus’ phrasing caused Ron to look up and Harry to snicker.

“Bloody hell, she looks like Aurora.”

“Well I am her mother, Ronald.” She said and cringed internally at how much she sounded like herself. The twins were giggling.

“I just… I don’t think I have actually seen you or spoken to you since I found out you were my….” Harry gestured, as if it were now somehow a secret.

“No, I don’t think I have seen you since my daughter’s fourteenth birthday in such a capacity. Do you suddenly have a dozen questions?” She smirked.

“Well, possibly.” Harry said. “But I don’t think it’s the best time. And Professor Snape sorta answered the most pressing ones I had.”

Hermione watched as Harry’s eyes darted around the room, landing on her very fleetingly from time to time. She narrowed her eyes, wondering if he was seeing her. And if he did, would he say anything?

“Have you heard anything about our dad?” Ginny had asked in the quietest voice, bringing a sobering air to the room.

“Not directly, no.” She said gently. “But I was called to the hospital to help with the potion your father needed.”

“Some Dunderhead blew a cauldron,” Leo’s voice, sleep heavy and partly yawning, “It was bril… li…ant.” He stopped as he looked around the room, eyes widening. “There are a lot of Weasleys.”

He said quietly, though in the silence of the room, it was easily heard.
“Nice jammies,” Fred said without a hint of mocking.

“Bloody hell, it’s mini Snape.” Ron said.

“It’s what Uncle Sirius calls me.” Leo said, puffing his chest up a bit as he came further into the kitchen.

“Little half-blood mister is always nice to Kreacher.” The house elf mumbled, and when the plates of food suddenly appeared before the lot of them, Hermione noticed that, aside from Sirius and Harry, Leo had the biggest helping.

“Thank you, Kreacher. It looks good.” Leo said before digging in.

“Oi, firstie, why do you get so much?” Ron asked around a mouthful of food.

“Probably because I figured out the, apparently, difficult ability to keep my mouth close while still chewing my food. If you want, I can show you how to do it. It’s not that difficult, I promise.” Leo said, nearly sounding like his father and certainly looking like him as he slowly closed his mouth around a fork full of eggs and chewed deliberately while staring at Ron.

Hermione would have scolded him to be nice, but as everyone else around the table bore small smiles, a couple trying to maintain a laugh, she let it slide. The lot of them had had a rough night, and any sort of humor was bound to be welcome.

**December 19th, 1995**

He wasn’t in class. Seeing Professor Dumbledore standing at the front of the dungeon classroom had Aurora feel uneasy. Why wasn’t her father there, teaching? Had he been summoned? The memory of the night before, of the Weasleys being shuffled out with Harry after her father retreated through the floo had her a nervous wreck. And, Aurora knew, there would be no asking the headmaster on the off chance that her father’s disappearance had nothing to do with Voldemort. So, Aurora carried on with her day, her heart dropping a bit more at lunch when she noted her father’s chair was empty still. She did have a free period, perhaps she could sneak down to his rooms? Look for a clue?

“You’re worrying too much,” Luna said behind her, and Aurora turned to talk to her friend in the Great Hall. “Your family and Ginny’s are fine.”

“How can you be so sure? You weren’t there, you didn’t see what it was like.”

“No,” Luna replied with a smile. “But the Wrackspurts aren’t restless, so there isn’t anything to worry about. And besides, you know your father has likely gone to help where he could.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong, Aurora supposed. Still, she sighed heavily. “I’m still worried.”

“Perhaps your father has already returned, and he’s simply sleeping off a long night. Besides, it’s the last day of term, no one would blame him if he took the day off. In fact, I think the majority of the school would enjoy it.”
Another thing Luna wasn’t wrong about. Another heavy sigh, and Aurora returned to pushing the food around on her plate, her thoughts half with her friends and half with her family.

Giving it up as a “not going to happen,” she abandoned her lunch, grabbed her bag, and headed for the dungeons. She had to see if he was at least in his rooms, and that would put her mind at rest.

She was nearly there when she heard a high pitched, “umm hmm,” behind her. Closing her eyes for a moment to gather her strength and patience, Aurora opened her eyes to turn around and face the toad.

Umbridge had on that ridiculous, simpering sort of a smile as she approached, holding her wand before her. “Miss Snape,” She said in a sickeningly sweet tone. “Would you happen to know the whereabouts of Professor Snape?”

“No.” Aurora retorted, attempting to turn back around.

“Ah ah. Now, now, you were not dismissed. Now, Professor Dumbledore would not answer me, and Professor McGonagall merely said he was likely to St Mungo’s.”

Aurora shrugged, “He’s a potion’s master, I’m sure they asked him to brew.” Which she knew was a strong possibility if someone was hurt, but she still needed to know. And if her father wasn’t in his rooms, he may decide it better to rest at the cottage. She had to see if he were there, and if not, she wanted a way to floo her mum and know for sure, but the Toad was keeping her.

“Yes, but with all the Weasleys seeming to have….”

“Professor, with all due respect, I have no idea what’s going on.” Aurora interrupted with a snap. Umbridge’s mouth tightened in a displeased pucker, and Aurora knew right then that she was in for it. Oh well, in for a sickle…. “My father does not report to me his comeings and goings, and if there was something I needed to know, I have enough surrogate aunts on staff to keep me informed if my mother isn’t able to owl me. What’s more, I don’t know why the Weasleys are gone. Perhaps a sort of family emergency? Maybe, quite possibly, but it’s remote, their absence and my father’s are correlated. But I don’t know, and frankly, you’re going to make me late for transfiguration.”

She didn’t have transfiguration. She wasn’t even heading in the proper direction. Lunch wasn’t even over, but it didn’t stop her from coming up with some sort of valid reason to try and get away from the Toad.

Umbridge took another dainty step forward, rising up in her high heeled shoes as much as she seemingly could. She pursed her lips, and tried to be intimidating, but that is hard to do when the student you’re attempting to make cower was the same height.

Aurora crossed her arms, and a flash of displeasure darkened Umbridge’s eyes. “Miss Snape, you may be the daughter of a teacher, but you must still respect authority in this school. And no one has more authority than myself, as I am the ministry appointed High Inquisitor. I think you could use an hour of detention to remind you that no one is above reprimand.”

“Shall I be scrubbing cauldrons, or mucking out the thestral stalls?” She asked.

“Writing lines, I think.” Umbridge replied. “Be there at six o’clock sharp, or it will be a hundred lines instead of fifty.”

Umbridge turned and left Aurora in the corridor, where she remained until the coast was clear. She then went inside her father’s chamber and was greeted with the loud, booming snore from the fierce and intimidating potion’s master who hadn’t even made it to bed.
Taking pity on her father, Aurora carefully and quietly expanded the sofa, watching her father’s form slide to stretch out properly as it did so. She then summoned a blanket and draped it over him, his snoring quieter now that he was able to turn on his side. She then summoned a pillow, and gently tucked it under his head. The relief took over her then, seeing her Dad exhausted but safe. She brushed a greasy lock away from his face.

“Sleep well, Daddy.” She said softly.

“’Night, Rory.” He murmured, and she smiled as she left him be.

Of course, the relief was only momentary. Now she had detention to look forward to.

Aurora returned to the Gryffindor common room just before curfew, clutching her hand and having navigated the way through misted eyes. She bit her tongue and kept quiet, trying to write out the seventy-five lines she was sentenced to, the additional twenty-five because she lied about her class schedule. Seventy-five times writing out *I must respect authority*, watching her hand writing mere her skin much like Harry’s had done to his own. She could tell by the way Umbridge watched her that the toad was starting to have mixed feelings about applying such a detention to her. It was as if she was expecting Aurora to declare that a report to her father would be made, and the young Gryffindor suspected that Umbridge desperately wanted the Potion’s Master to like her. But she remained silent, knowing her father would see it sooner or later, and the hell could be paid then. She wasn’t about to rat out the woman, but she wasn’t going to deny what happened, either.

“You’re getting back late.” Neville said, virtually the only person still in the common room.

“Yeah,” Was all Aurora managed to say as she came to sit beside him, wincing as flopping down jarred her hand.

Neville frowned, “what’s wrong?” He asked, gently taking her hand, and Aurora allowed it. He pales when he saw it. “Rory, what in merlin’s name…?”

“I told off Umbridge a bit, earlier.” She explained.

“This could get infected.” He said standing up and encouraging Aurora to follow. “Come on, I’m taking you to the infirmary.”

“It’s fine,” She tried to insist, but Neville tugged.

“No, Harry said the same thing, but this is nuts. She can’t keep doing this, someone has to stop her.”

“And going to the infirmary will help? No, Neville, it won’t and it will only cause problems.”

“How?”

“Well, for one, if you think Dumbledore doesn’t know this is happening, you’re wrong. He likely just has bigger things to deal with.”

“Then student abuse?”

“Yes. And for another, even if we did go to the infirmary, and even if everyone there kicked up a
fuss, the results would likely be another bloody proclamation, further limiting what the teachers can do.”

Neville looked ready to try and argue, but then sighed heavily. “Wait there, I have some Murtlap I can put on it.”

Aurora nodded and watched the flames as Neville disappeared.

Her father would have a conniption when he came to take her and Draco to Grimmauld place in the morning, and she chewed her lip as she worried what sort of trouble this may cause in the grand scheme of things. And it was a bloody stupid thing to have scarred on the back of her hand. It wasn’t like she never obeyed authority, the toad was just… the Toad.

“Here,” Neville said, and it took his taking her injured hand gently in his own for Aurora to turn away from the fire.

He was very gentle as he smeared the mushed leaf over her hand and apologized softly when she hissed at the stinging. He wrapped her hand in a bandage, running his them over her fingers after tucking it secure.

“Thanks, Neville.” She said quietly.

“You’re welcome,” he said, his face turning red. “It’s, umm, the, ah, least I could do.” He wasn’t looking at her, and Aurora ducked her head a little to try and meet his eye.

“Are you going to be coming with Draco and me tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “My gran is very strict. I’m not allowed to spend my holidays here or with anyone else.”

Aurora smiled, “At least Luna won’t be the only one missing out.”

“Right.” He said, still not looking at her.

“Nev,” She tried to coax, but he only glanced at her. “Everything… okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, pulling his overly warm hand away from hers, rubbing his palms on his legs, and clearing his throat repeatedly. “I, umm, ah, just, need to, uh, pack. For tomorrow. So….”

“Okay.” Aurora frowned, watching as he walked backward for a moment, nearly colliding with a seventh year in the process. “See you in the morning.”

Neville blushed deeper, then bolted for the stairs to the boy’s dorms.

Aurora sat staring at here he went, wondering if maybe she were crazy. Neville didn’t… he didn’t still like her in that way. Did he?

December 20th, 1995

Watching Draco turn a delightful shade of Gryffindor red was an amusing sight for Aurora. With Harry’s arms wrapped tightly around him, Draco appeared flustered and unsure if he were awake, all while blissed out beneath a layer of snobbery that only the Malfoys had. Ron and Ginny had glanced
up from their game of exploding snap, and while the former looked confused by the overzealous
greeting, the latter looked as pleased as Aurora felt.

“The twins are in the library,” Ginny said casually. “Think you could go get them?”

“Sure,” Aurora said, catching Draco glance back at her a moment before Harry stepped away from
him and he refocused his attention.

She went down the stairs from Harry’s room to the library, already hearing the twins conversing
through the door. Their voices were muffled, and when she opened the door, she caught a “we can
completely do this,” from George before they looked up at her.

“Well,” he said to his brother as he rose from his chair. “I’m going to conveniently take something
close to a half an hour to find some tea and biscuits.” He winked at Aurora as he passed her, and she
blushed even as she was heading toward Fred.

She yelped as he pulled her down in her lap and wrapped his arms tightly around her. She put her
arms around his neck, soothing his hair. “Are you alright?” She asked, barely above a whisper.

“He looks awful, Rory. Pale, alive, smiling, but awful.” Fred said into her waves, and she turned her
head to press her forehead to his temple.

“But he’ll be alright though, won’t he?”

“Yeah, he will. Some healer named Prince took care of him.”

“I know.” Aurora said, and Fred turned his frown toward her. “He’s family.” She said in way of
explanation, and Fred’s eyes sparkled with understanding. “So, what were you two discussing when I
came in? Not your dad?”

“No,” Fred said, shaking his head. “George and I, we’ve had an idea for a while. A proper shop for
Weasley and Weasley. And, well, don’t say a word to anyone, or Harry will murder me, but he gave
us his winnings from the tri-wizard tournament. And, well, we were in Diagon Alley yesterday, and
there’s this shop there. Totally empty, not the best layout, but cheap. And George and I might just
buy it.”

“Really?” Aurora reared back. “Take it you won’t be furthering your studies after Hogwarts, then?”
She asked, and at the incredulous look on Fred’s face, she laughed. “I think it’s a brilliant idea.”

“Really?” He asked suspiciously. She nodded. “But you’re Hermione’s daughter. Shouldn’t you be
giving me a tongue lashing over education, and the joy of books.”

“I can give you a tongue lashing, but it won’t have anything to do with education.” She said to his
shoulder, now rivaling Draco for the deepest blush of the evening.

She felt Fred cup her cheek, lifting her head so she would look at him. He caressed her cheek with
his thumb as he looked in her eyes, and for a moment, he seemed to want to say something. Then he
didn’t and kissed her deeply instead.

Aurora melted a bit, knowing and trusting Fred to not get carried away despite her bold words. He
pulled her closer on his lap, and while the position was not what one would call appropriate in any
manner of speaking, he kept his hands in her hair, and on her back. Even the first sweep of his
tongue on her lips was polite and cautious, and she kept her sigh of delight as quiet as possible.

“What are you doing to my sister!”
Leo’s voice nearly had Aurora falling off her boyfriend, and Fred quickly pulled her to sit next to him in the small chair and keep her from falling on her butt.

The youngest Snape glared at the eldest twin, book clutched in his hand and stance that seemed to try and mimic their Dad’s.

“Leo,” Aurora said cautiously.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Aurora. I want to know what that braggard thought he was doing! Only grown-ups kiss, and you aren’t grown-ups. And he’s older, so he should know better.”

“I bet you ten galleons if you go ask your mum and dad, they’ll tell you that they were kissing when they weren’t adults. Possibly more.” Fred said, vibrating with suppressed laughter as Aurora smacked him on the chest.

Leo looked confused, and unsure. “Well, she’s betrothed anyway. So, you really shouldn’t be kissing her regardless.”

“Are you talking about Draco?” Aurora asked.

“Yes, he’s to be your husband.”

“You realize that that will never actually happen.”

“But you two kissed on the promise.”

“You kissed Draco?”

“Not now, Fred.”

“Oh, I’m hardly offended, or even peeved off. I think we both know that Draco was probably trying to picture Harry the whole time.”

“Why would Draco picture Harry Potter while kissing my sister?”

“Leo,” Aurora’s mother said just before she stepped inside, followed by George. “I’ve been informed that this room …was….”

“Oh, bloody hell, someone Avada me now.” Aurora grumbled burying her face in her hands, her boyfriend erupting in delighted giggles.

“What’s going on in here?” Hermione asked.

“That twin was kissing Rory.” Leo said.

“And that’s all we were doing, despite what it might look like. Swear on wand.” Fred said.

“Which one.” Hermione asked sharply.

“Which ever one you need me to swear on.” He replied easily.

“He wouldn’t have done anything too serious, H. Was coming back up here, after all.”

“You just be glad it was me and not your father that came up here.” Hermione said, and Aurora peeked up to see amusement in her mother’s eyes despite the glare she wore. “And you,” She turned to Leo, putting her arm around his shoulders. “I think you and I need to have another talk.”
“About what?” Leo asked as Hermione guided him out of the room.

“About bluffing, and also about what’s appropriate behavior for those in a relationship.”

There was more protesting, but it died as they disappeared down the hall.

“Well, now that I’m pretty sure the whole house will know what’s happened, I think I will venture upstairs and see the others one last time.”

“Yes, and I think it best that we finalize our plans now, Gred, before Snape murders you.” George teased.

“We’ll see you in a bit.” Fred said to Aurora as she got out of the chair, but she only waved a bit before darting from the room and heading upstairs.

Pausing outside Harry’s door, she frowned at what was lingering inside her. Embarrassment, of course. She also understood that there was lust there, which made sense given how snug they were. But there was also a deep-rooted sense of guilt. She wasn’t sure why, and she knew if she worried at it, it would only confuse her more, but she filed the acknowledgment away, nonetheless.

Chapter End Notes

You can probably guess why this took so long to get updated, and I am trying to stay on top of it. Bare with me, there are a lot of personal important dates coming up for me, as well as some business things.
I apologize for the wait between chapters.
August 31st, 1979

It was, by far, the oddest sort of day Hermione had ever had.

She was in a white dress, cut to be like wizarding robes, her hair tamed and pinned and perfected. She’d eaten enough that she felt as though she should have gone up a size in fitting, but there was no way she could offend Molly Weasley, who for some strange reason, insisted on catering the reception for those as part of the Order of the Phoenix despite having five boys at home and being pregnant with Ronald. Which, Hermione thought as the mother-to-be for the fifth time insisted she feel her son kick, was quite disconcerting. Her friend was inside there.

But it wasn’t only the pregnant Weasley matriarch Hermione had to worry about. The house elves at Malfoy manor would have been entirely too offended if the bride and groom didn’t partake in the feast prepared for them.

She was, however, grateful for the fact that Severus had perfected the art of quiet, side-along apparation. It just looked to the Death Eaters and their supporters that the newlyweds were constantly sneaking off to enjoy their martial relations whenever possible. Reality was, they were going between two weddings.

Their binding was made public record from the moment it was sealed with a kiss. Neither thought much of it, she and Severus lazing in bed the following morning, discussing when the best time to public wed was, when Minerva flooed them.

Albus had found out. And he was less than impressed that his spy would do something so spontaneous. It did, however lead Hermione to wonder why he would have found out.

“The bastard.” Severus had snarled. At the questioning look from his wife, and the flame formed one from Minerva in the fireplace, he explained. “When we told him of our engagement, his reaction seemed to hint that he was going to find a way to tamper with the public record. How, I do not know. Perhaps he intended to have you bound on paper to someone else, making it impossible for us to wed.”

“Whatever his reason,” Minerva said, “He is now trying to figure out how to prevent word from getting out to the rest of the order.”

“Well, then, perhaps we should make sure the whole of Wizarding Britain knows?” Hermione had countered.

But of course, there was meant to be a wedding. Everyone already knew of their engagement, and there would be so many people hurt or upset that they weren’t part of their special day. And there was no way to have everyone who would want to be there at the same ceremony. So, there were
Narcissa insisted they host the extravagant affair for them at the manor, and as a thank you, Hermione saw Severus slip a vile of potion to their hostess.

“This should help you.” He said quietly to her, and at her questioning brow, Severus added, “Lucius had best not name them anything ridiculous.”

The Dark Lord, it seemed, had heard, for as he approached the lot of them, he gave Severus a nod and an approving smile.

“Severus,” He said, his eyes more red than Hermione remembered, making his smile look more menacing. “You have found a good match for yourself. You will rise through the ranks of status, earning power and prominence for your name.”

“I’m glad this pleases you, my Lord.” He said with a bow, looking over the Dark Lord’s shoulder at the woman lingering there. “Bella.” Severus greeted.

“Sevvy.” She sneered. “You’re just lucky she’s nothing by an orphan. Otherwise, you would not be so lucky to marry so high above your station.”

“Bella,” The Dark Lord scolded. “We shouldn’t say such things, especially today. Severus is one of us, our brother,” he said as he reached out and caressed Bellatrix’s chin.

“Why? It’s only a wedding.” Bellatrix countered, causing the Dark Lord to chuckle fondly.

“Not all marry because they must. Some, inexplicably, want to.” The Dark Lord said before turning back to them. “I know you are eager to return to your love nest. Do so, with my blessing.”

“Thank you, my Lord. My wife and I will take our leave.” Severus said, tucking Hermione’s arm into his elbow and heading up the stairs leading out of the grand ball room. Before they had apparated with a deliberate crack, Hermione rolled her eyes at the cat calls and wolf whistles that followed them.

But at the end of the day, tired as they both were, their union was set before the eyes of the wizarding world. Unbreakable unless one of them was sent to Azkaban, or was visited by death. And despite how much he didn’t want to, Albus Dumbledore would have to acknowledge that from now on, Hermione would be known as Apprentice Snape.

**September 19th, 1979**

Hermione woke next to her husband, feeling his fingers lightly stroke the length of her spine. She hummed happily, turning her head toward him, opening her eyes to see his black ones shining down at her.

“Hello, wife.” He said, seeming to never get enough of calling her that, not since their binding in July.

“Hello, husband.” She said. And then to test the waters, she said, “Today is the day I was born.”
“Yes, I’m aware it’s your birthday.” He said with a grin.

“No, I mean it was the day I was born. I came into the world,” she paused, casting a quick tempus. “Two hours ago.”

Severus’ strokes slowed to a stop as his brows drew together in a frown. Then he looked her, his mouth slowly falling open. “I’m twenty years older than you?!”

“Well, nineteen, technically.” Hermione corrected. “And that’s not really the case anymore, considering I lived the last five years here in this era.” She rolled to her side, appearing casual but preparing for their first, true fight.

Severus’ frowned deepened. “But you knew me. Which would mean that you knew me… young. As in you were young. But how? How did you know me? Because of Hogwarts?”

“Perhaps.” Hermione said, adding. “You do live here because of me.”

“Yes, but… you aren’t going to teach, are you? It would seem that would be dangerous, you teaching your younger self.”

“I can’t tell you that.” She replied, and he nodded absently.

“My wife has only just been born.” He murmured to himself. “I had thought that, maybe, it had already happened. But then, I suppose, I should be grateful I won’t be in my twenties when you see me the way you did. Though being in my thirties and looking like that…."

“How do you know how old you’ll be?” She asked him, and he arched a brow at her as though she were slow.

“Deduction, Hermione. You arrived at Hogwarts when we were fourteen. If you were only born on this day, I need only add your age then to how old we are now to figure out the rest.”

“Yes, right.” She said lamely.

He chuckled. “You were gearing for war.”

“Well, to be quite honest, I was. I didn’t expect you to take everything so … well, not calmly, but certainly better than expected.”

He chuckled again, pinning her down and kissing her. “I can punish you if you’d really like.” He said against her lips, causing her eyebrow to tick up.

“Hmmm, as fun as that sounds, we need to be in the Great Hall.”

“Alas, if we must.” He said, bestowing one last kiss before rising from bed. And Hermione lingered, watching as he made his way to their private washroom. Naked.

November 25th, 1979

They emerged from her bed chambers, only pretending an attempt at being as quiet as possible. The
map that Sirius had borrowed from James showed that the Headmaster was passing by at that exact moment.

“Will he be back tonight?” Sirius asked Hermione in a stage whisper, glancing down at the map and seeing the Headmaster stopped around the corner from them.

“I don’t know,” Hermione replied, touching his chest for effect. “I will let you know this evening if he’s back.”

It sounded all so clandestine, but there was actually curiosity and sincerity behind the words. After all, Sirius had come to Hermione and Severus the night before, informing them that he hadn’t heard from James in days, and was starting to worry. Severus had tried Lily, but found that she would not respond. Not to the floo, not to his patronus, and there wasn’t even a ping on his tracing spell he placed on a letter to her to say she’d touched it. When Midnight neared, and neither she nor James, nor even Remus were heard from, Severus went off.

Shortly after, Remus was contacted, but he hadn’t heard from the missing couple either.

So, Sirius stayed the night with Hermione, failing asleep on the couch while waiting for news. Both figured that Severus wouldn’t come back until he knew one way or another, and it was possible that during his time investigating, he could have gotten a summons. They just hoped it wasn’t a summons because the Death Eaters were in possession of a blood traitor and a muggleborn.

“As soon as you know for sure.” Sirius said. “I’m not sure I could bare to keep away, not knowing for sure…..”

It was Hermione’s idea to wait until the Headmaster made his way around the school on his early morning stroll to through the staff corridor to emerge. He’d hinted with bare subtlety how much he wished Hermione had not gone through with her marriage to Severus. He’d pointed out that the Potion’s Master spent more time away from her and the school than with her, and he had only wished, after she lost a part of her family, that she had chosen someone who was always there. And, he reminded, with Delia returned to Ireland to be with her family, Hermione was essentially alone in England. Ignoring, of course, the fact that Minerva taught at the school and was still very much like an adopted aunt.

She was hoping that if the Headmaster was foolish enough to believe that Sirius Black could hold any romantic attraction to her, that maybe he was also gullible enough to believe they were having an affair.

“I know.” She’d replied to Sirius. Then wrapping her arm around his neck, leaned into him in such a way that it looked as though she were trying to kiss him. “He will find them,” She whispered. “Alive, I’m sure of it.”

It was just so conveniently timed that as Sirius turned his head toward her, her breath caught with the force of the vow. After all, she essentially said she knew the future.

Sirius had put his free hand on her arm, the one holding the map tucked to his side and out of view to the peeping Headmaster. He frowned at her, worry sparkling in his eyes, but she shook her head. Essentially admitting she knew the future, yet not why. It was merely a reminder that she needed to be careful.

They heard something in the hall, and a glance at the map showed the Headmaster changed his route ever so slightly, heading down the closest staircase instead of venturing further down the hall.
Smiling at one another, laughter suppressed between them, Hermione and Sirius parted, and started to head toward the Great Hall.

An ethereal lioness running toward them had them pausing. It stopped before them, opening its mouth. “Bring Black to the Three Broomsticks.” It said in Severus’ voice, and a moment, later, they took off.

While she and Lily had grown apart, and she was never very fond of James, relief washed over Hermione upon seeing the pair unharmed and sitting across from Severus and Remus.

She and Sirius joined them, and Hermione was barely in her seat when Sirius half-shouted “What the hell, mate!”

James smiled. “Yes?”

“You can’t do that! Not with a war. You can’t take off somewhere….”

“Gretna Green.” Severus filled in.

“Gretna Green! You can’t go running off to places like that without telling us. We were worried. All of us, worried. And why the hell did you go to Gretna Green, anyway?”

“To get married.” James said casually.

Hermione frowned, and then after a quick calculation, palmed her face and shook her head. No, no this was not the tale she was sure Harry was told. There was no way he was the product of an accident that preceded a quick marriage.

Severus, it seemed when she peeked at him, figured out the reason as well by the way he was eying Lily’s stomach, and then turned a deadly glare on James.

“Oh Prongs, no.” Remus said. “No, that’s… it’s not why I think it is.”

“Why? What do you think? What do you mean….” Sirius finally cottoned on. “No! No! I know it’s frowned upon, children out of wedlock and all, but there’s supposed to be a party. A ceremony where I stand with you and all that.”

“Look, it’s… we are planning on having a ceremony, just…” Lily shrugged, her cheeks tinting.

“There is a war.” James said flatly. “I can’t have Lily go uncared for if something were to happen.”

“And with all the precautions possible, you didn’t think to use one of the guaranteed methods of contraception? The potion, perhaps?” Severus asked through clenched teeth.

“James told me it doesn’t work on Muggleborns.” Lily said, and Hermione’s jaw clenched just before Severus rose to his feet and pointed his wand at James.

“You loathsome, lying cretin.” He hissed.

“Whoa, Severus.” Sirius said, looking like he was ready to step in between them before the words
sunk in. “Wait, no, that’s… that’s absolute rubbish.”

“Why did you lie?” Hermione demanded.

“Wait, you mean it does work on Muggleborns?” Lily fumed, rising to her feet. For his sake, James didn’t try to weasel his way out of it. He looked to the table, and quietly said. “It’s what I was told.”

“Isn’t your father supposed to be some famous potioneer?” Severus hissed. “Not a master, no, he didn’t want to do the work when he managed to stumble together a potion witches would go mad for. But he would know enough to have told you that wasn’t true.”

“Well my father hasn’t been around to ask, has he?” James grit his teeth, looking up at Severus.

“You could have asked Severus!” Hermione yelled, and at the scoff James gave, she snarled. “Or me, or Sirius, even. Picked up a book and read the truth! Merlin, is your head shoved so far up your arse that can’t be deigned to check the facts?”

“Oh, shove off, Granger.” James spat.

“It’s Snape!” She countered, getting to her feet and leaning over the table to close in on his personal space. “And you, you are such a….” She bit her tongue, her thoughts screaming at him. He was such an arrogant arse. She was glad he would have no influence over Harry. Glad that his son would never be like him. Her eyes stung as angry tears sprang to her eyes.

“At least tell me that you plan to back out of the fighting.” Remus asked. “If you’re going to have a baby….”

“If you think I’m going to sit back and let those disgusting Death Eaters attempt to take over our world….” James cut in.

“And if you get killed?” Sirius asked. “What then?”

Hermione watched James shrug, a cocky grin coming to his face. “They need to get to me first.”

“I want to ask, but I don’t want to risk your life.” Severus said that night as they sat before the fire, a glass of wine in hand. “But I know you know something about their future. I remember a child that looked disturbing like Potter in your memory.”

“Yes,” She said quietly, thinking of how James was eager to put himself at risk for the wrong reasons. Remembering the fear that crept into Lily’s eyes when she realized her new husband wasn’t about to be there for her as much as she seemed to expect. She tried to recall the stories Harry said he heard of his parents. That they were very much in love. That they were brave and selfless for their sacrifice.

“Are they happy?” He asked, and then amended, “Is Lily happy?”

“I can’t say.” She said, and it was a well-placed answer. For she couldn’t be sure if Lily was happy in the end, nor could she actually tell him if she did know. “You’re worried about her.”
“Of course.” Severus replied. “I found them just as they were saying their vows. I actually entered the church as the minister asked if anyone had any reason why they shouldn’t marry. I think Potter was actually stupid enough to think I was going to make some sort of declaration. I considered interrupting, but I didn’t think it worth bringing up that no one knew where they were or what they were doing. That Lily’s parents would be furious. After all, there is a reason people got to Gretna Green in the first place.”

“Lily is a grown woman and capable of making her own choices.” Hermione replied. “And besides, it has to have occurred to you that perhaps, one day, I would want you to meet my parents. And by the time you do….”

“We’ll have already been married.” Severus replied, then after a pause said, “For more than a decade.”

She smiled at first, but it faded. It had been a couple months since she’d thought of her parents. She had brought a bouquet of flowers to the hospital on the day of her birth, asking a nurse’s aide if she could bring them by the room as she didn’t think she could bring herself to see her parents. If it would be wise. But before then, before her actual birthday, it had been too long. By the time she would be able to go to them and tell them who she was and what happened to her, would she be able to? Or would she ask Minerva or Severus to break their hearts with a story that wasn’t true, much like so many seemed to placate Harry with false tales of his parents’ romance.

February 29th, 1980

———S———

He had barely seen his wife in the last three months. As Severus entered the Hogsmeade cottage, he actually felt a bit of nervousness coursing through his veins.

It wasn’t his intention to have his marriage slowly drift to the back burner, but shortly after the discovery of James and Lily’s marriage, the Dark Lord had found need of Severus and his skills. Nearly a month brewing the most vile, evil potion he’d ever read about. The drink of despair. He didn’t want it or its fumes anywhere near Hermione, so he’d kept his distance while making it for the Dark Lord. The week he spent after brewing the potion would have likely been better spent with those he loved, but he didn’t want to subject his family, actual or surrogate, the after effects of brewing. He had nightmares that had him waking screaming and thrashing. His mind was clouded with suspicion. His stomach recoiled at the thought of food. Once recovered, he’d gotten word from Black that his brother was missing. Feeling a sort of responsibility to the young Death Eater, Severus had tried to find him, venturing to all the haunts he knew Regulus frequented across Britain, attempting to seek him out by questioning the other Death Eaters. Had it not been for Walburga Black asking her eldest if he warped her precious boy’s head with his rubbish, Severus may have assumed he was there with his mother while she was still in mourning. But no matter where he went, word of Regulus could not be found. Between that, accompanying the Death Eaters on their many raids and revels, as well as Hermione’s own busy schedule and work for the order, their schedules hardly seemed to align. Barely six months into their marriage, and they were back to writing one another as they had during their mutual apprenticeships. It was horrid.

And Albus bloody Dumbledore was of no help, his clear dislike of the marriage he felt he should
have had some approval more evident with how thrilled he always seemed at keeping the couple apart.

He never failed to mention how often he’d spot Hermione with Black.

And didn’t it make his new assignment from the Dark Lord that much more hateful.

“Your wife will be finished her apprenticeship at the end of the year, will she not?” He had asked Severus casually as they sat on the side lines during one of the revels.

“Indeed, my Lord.” Severus had replied with a bow of his head. “She has been made many offers from within the ministry.”

“Has she? Not Hogwarts?”

“No, the professor of Arithmancy plans to stay on for another few years.” He replied.

The Dark Lord had tapped his chin thoughtfully. “But rumor is that Horace is longing to retire. So the school would be in need of a new Potions Professor. And you, Severus, my loyal friend, would be able to stay within the walls of the castle, be able to report to me the comings and goings of Dumbledore. You would even be closer to him than you are now, as part of his employ and not just the spouse of a measly apprentice.”

“As you wish, my Lord.” Severus had replied, fairly certain that Dumbledore would not want him as part of his staff.

He was wrong.

“Formality and all,” He had smiled at Severus when he said to meet him upstairs at the Hogs Head at seven o’clock. “I need to make it look like I’m interviewing you, at least.”

He had waited for his turn with Dumbledore, the interview before him, the position for the next divination professor taking longer than he was supposed to. Impatient, and wondering if maybe Dumbledore had merely decided to make him wait, he had gone upstairs to see what was taking so long and had heard something like a Prophecy. And it had mentioned the Dark Lord. Before he heard it all, Aberforth Dumbledore dragged him downstairs, yelling about eavesdropping. Severus had marched right back in, over riding the man’s measly wards and stormed back up the stairs. Dumbledore had let the young, flaky woman who wreaked of gin scurry down the stairs before calling off his brother, informing him that Severus was meant to be there.

“Did you hear what was said?” He had asked.

“Yes,” Severus had replied, “but I am willing to imagine there is more to it.”

“Good,” Dumbledore had said. “Tell Tom when you see him again. That should distract him for the time being.”

The Dark Lord had ate up the prophecy, laughing in a mad way that didn’t bode well for anyone who defied him. The memory of it still had the hairs on Severus’ arms standing on end.

It faded when he stepped into the dining room where the meeting was to take place and immediately spotted his beautiful wife.

He’d missed her so much that it nearly knocked the breath out of him. She smiled at him, excusing herself from Black and Lupin to make a beeline for him. Her arms wrapped around his neck,
“And I, you.” He said as he took her in his arms.

A throat cleared, and he pulled away long enough to see Lily smiling at him, her hand perched on the slight roundness of her abdomen. “Hey, you.” She said, smiling wide and embracing him when Hermione stepped away. Surprised by the affection, Severus gently pushed her away to see what was wrong. When Lily only continued to smile at him, he arched his brow. She laughed. “What? I feel like I haven’t seen you since November.”

“Since your wedding, you mean.” He said, and a shadow fell over her face.

“Yeah, that.” He frowned as she looked away, and then glanced around the room to see Potter and Black chatting off to the side, Lupin remaining silent beside them. When Potter caught his eye, he scowled looked to Lily, then down at the floor. Severus turned back to his oldest friend. “What has happened?”

“Did you know that wizarding marriages can’t end in divorce unless one of us goes to Azkaban?” She asked, clearly not needing Severus to answer. She laughed mirthlessly. “Yeah, I didn’t know that. Probably should have before I rushed off and eloped. I knew he was a toe rag, knew it for years, but I just got so caught up in his charm. You had Hermione, and Marlene was getting on well with… with, well, I don’t know who, actually. Alice and Frank were married, and everyone was happy, and I just wanted that, too. And after Marlene died….” Lily choked, and Hermione was beside her in an instant. Severus watched, seeing for the first time what Hermione had meant in her letters by a renewal in friendship between she and Lily. Lily clutched to his wife, taking a deep breath, fortifying herself with Hermione’s presence. “Anyway, I was a bit careless after that. And I’m so stupid, I should have known that it not working was bogus. I know other Muggleborns who took it, and none of them ended up, you know. Anyway, it hasn’t been the best, admittedly. I’ve been staying with my parents, but ….”

“I imagine Tuney is thrilled with that.” Severus rolled his eyes.

“She hasn’t spoken to Mum or Dad since her marriage to that pig, Vernon. Except, of course, the tell them that she’s pregnant, too. Due before I am.”

“And when are you due?” He asked, looking at the roundness of her stomach.

“August.” She said.

“If everyone is here, I would like to start tonight’s meeting,” Dumbledore announced, and Lily walked Severus to the table, sitting him in the chair beside her. Hermione went to his other side, and they turned their attention to Dumbledore. He appeared solemn, the twinkle in his eyes missing. “I regret to say that this is not going to be one of good news.”

“When is it ever?” Black quipped, earning a reprimanding elbow from Lupin.

Dumbledore attempted a smile and failed. “Last month, as I was conducting interviews at Hogs Head, the strangest occurrence happened. As I was conducting an interview with one Sybil Trelawny, she had a vision.”


“Yes, though I think it safe to say she isn’t as unseeing as one might believe.” He countered. “She predicted that the one to defeat the Dark Lord would be born as the seventh month died, to those who have defied him. Born this year.” He said pointedly, looking to Lily, and then to Alice. After a
pause, he turned to Hermione. “Mrs Snape, you wouldn’t be expecting as well, would you?”

“I haven’t seen my husband in months, so no. Safe to say I wouldn’t be.” She replied.

Dumbledore’s gaze flickered to Black. “It is possible that you are concealing such news for the time being.”

“I’m not,” She said with emphasis.

After a moment, Dumbledore seemed to accept this, turning first to the Longbottoms. “I’m afraid you will need to go into hiding.”

“We can’t,” Frank countered. “The Aurory needs us, needs me. With so many Death Eaters out there….”

“We’ll be fine, Frank,” Alastor said. “You gotta take care, now. Your lil one’s set to come in July, ain’t he?”

Alice nodded, her eyes glistening.

“The Potters will have to as well.” Albus said, looking to Lily and then to James. “And I think it best we keep the location as quiet as possible.”

“For how long?” James asked.

Albus looked at him with a somewhat stern expression. “Indefinitely.”

“No!” Lily stated, rising to her feet and slamming her hand on the table. “No, I will not stay locked away, not with him, and not for an indefinable amount of time. I have a family that would worry and knows I’m having a baby. They need to know! I need to see them!”

“Mrs Potter,” Albus tried to calm her, but it seemed the title only infuriated Lily more.

“Hey,” Hermione said, standing and putting her arm around Lily’s shoulders. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m sure we can still come see you from time to time. And it’s not like you and Alice are the only ones who are due to have a baby near the end of July.”

“But I’m due in August!” Lily said firmly.

There was something in Hermione’s eyes that Severus felt uneasy about, but he didn’t draw attention to it. He chanced a glance at Dumbledore, and while the old man seemed to know that Hermione knew something, the frown he wore seemed to be due to not knowing what it was.

“I know,” Hermione said again. “But babies aren’t something one can schedule.”

“You probably could,” Lily quipped.

Hermione chuckled, “yes, well, I suppose I likely could. But you need to understand, it’s for the safety of this little one.” Hermione placed a hand gently on Lily’s stomach. Then she leaned in, and if Severus wasn’t so close to them, he doubted he’d have heard her when she added, “plus, all this time locked up with James? After what he did? Think of all the ways you could torment him simply with pregnancy problems.”

Lily snorted, then allowed Hermione to guide her back to her chair.

Once Lily was settled, Dumbledore looked to Severus. “Is there any news you would like to share?”
“Regulus Black is still missing, and I fear at this point he won’t be found.” Severus replied, glancing at Black and seeing him nod his head in resignation. “There have been no new members added to the inner circle, and the Dark Lord was pleased with my placement at Hogwarts.”

“Anything we should be made aware of?” Dumbledore asked.

Severus cleared his throat, straightened, and looked to Moody. “I know the aurory is stretched thin and will be more so now that you’re about to lose another member. But the Dark Lord is now going to be looking to those who are expecting a child near the summer. He’s paranoid enough I noticed him eyeing Lucius Malfoy with suspicion.”

“Malfoy?” Lupin asked.

“Yes,” Severus replied. “Narcissa is expecting as well. June or July, which, of course, is causing the Dark Lord some paranoia. He is becoming less trusting as of late, even with those he has deemed his most trusted.” He turned back to Alastor. “A detail on all expectant mothers would be impossible, but, perhaps we can somehow be more vigilant. At least know who are.”

“Amelia Bones is expecting, in July as well.”

“But as the seventh month dies,” Black emphasized. “So not every single one of these pregnancies could be a target.”

“But to mention the thrice defied.” Lupin added.

“He cares not at the moment for specifics.” Severus said. “He is seeking out those baring children first, and then, I believe a process of elimination. Will he attack the Malfoys? Likely not, he just now questions Lucius loyalty. Had he ever denied, or defied a command, be it with a request to withdraw from a task or refusal to do so in the first place. Prophecy is all about perception, is it not? A child born as the seventh month dies to those who thrice defied him. It could be the Potters or the Longbottoms, people who are against him in every way, or the Goyles or Parkinsons, because perhaps they declined a simple task. The man is not sane, one can never tell what he will decide the words actually mean.”

“I think in this case, Severus, we will stick with only protecting our own.” Albus said, and then swiftly moved on to assignments for the next few months.

Severus’ fists clenched as he only half listened. Just their own? How wonderful of the magnanimous Albus Dumbledore to worry about the wizarding youth about to enter the world, who’s one fault could be in the month of their birth. A part of him hoped Albus was right to keep it strictly to the order, but a small part of him hoped the old fool would get it wrong. Not so wrong that it would be too late to save whatever poor soul would fulfill the prophecy best, but wrong enough to make him eat his words.

But knowing his luck, that would never be the case.

When the meeting wrapped, Severus was surprised to feel Hermione tugging on his hand and sneaking him away from the crowd without even saying goodbye. They’d barely got out the door when she wrapped her arms around him and apparated them into an unfamiliar room.

“Where are we?” He asked, realizing that they were inside a muggle hotel room.

She began undoing the clasp on his robes as she replied, “Somewhere no one will disturb us for the length of the weekend.” She began to kiss him. Hard, deep, as though she were trying to draw him into her. “I haven’t had you in months, Severus. Our time together has been nothing but tired
“And who says I’m not tired now?” He asked when he could, though despite his words his hands were busying themselves with the ties on the back of her robes.

“I will gladly do all the work.” She smirked, causing him to arch a brow.

He mirrored her expression. “Then I am exhausted. Barely able to move.” He said as her robes opened and he pushed them from her shoulders, watching the way they pooled around her feet. His hands moved to caress as if drawn to her soft skin by a magnet.

She moaned softly before starting on his frock coat. “Well then, I’ll just have to find a way to wake you up.”

March 21st, 1980

Hermione yawned, stretching, and coaxed herself out of bed despite desperately not wanting to get out of it. Severus’ warmth was still there despite his having rose already, and the fresh, clean, spring air that came through the open window made her want to curl into the soft bed. But she had classes to oversee, her master away for a while and trusting her to the task of teaching.

She showered, forcing herself to wake up more. She dressed, starting to feel more human. And by the time she was ready to head down, Severus was lingering in the doorway of their chambers, smirking.

“You’re taking longer to ready for the day.” He said, offering his arm to escort her to breakfast.

“Yes, well, perhaps I am enjoying the last days of rising to sunshine. Come September, we’ll be relocated to the dungeons.”

“Hmm, I suppose that’s something I’m more used to. The sun, I believe, is causing me to wake to early.”

“Mm, maybe.” She smirked as they headed down the halls together. “I saw someone sneaking out to the gates last night. And it wasn’t you.” She said conversationally.

“Lupin.” He replied, looking to Hermione with a smirk. “I happened to catch him coming out of Black’s chambers while I was doing rounds for Horace.”

“Really?” She asked, perking up a bit. “Do you think that’s why Sirius has been more cheerful lately.”

“Well, I’m usually more cheerful when I-”

“Don’t! We’re in the corridors.”

“There are no students around.”
“That we see! Honestly, Severus.”

He chuckled. “Yes, I supposed it’s best not to allow the little hellians to think of me as human. I heard a rumor yesterday that a few of the first years think me a vampire.”

“Really?” She laughed as they rounded the corner and headed to the Great Hall. “So, what you’re saying is that they’re terrified of you?”

“Actually, I believe most of them are as it is. The seventh year Slytherin Students would have been in their third year when I left, and I wasn’t really anyone of interest beforehand. I’m hardly remembered at all from my student days.”

“I suppose, you do have that advantage, don’t you?”

The headed up to the head table, Severus sitting beside Minerva, Hermione between he and Sirius.

“Good morning you two.” Minerva greeted with a smile. “I must say, it’s lovely to have you both up here. Makes me look forward to next year.”

“Speaking ill of a colleague?” Severus smirked as their food appeared before them.

Minerva glared, “I think you know how I feel about Horace Slughorn.” She said in a quiet voice, lest the students who were already in the hall and nearby hear them. Severus chuckled, but said nothing more, turning to his breakfast and pouring himself his morning coffee.

“Did they burn it again?” Hermione asked, wrinkling her nose.

“They haven’t burned it at all, you’re just imagining it.” Severus replied, setting the carafe down when it was clear Hermione wouldn’t take any.

“I think they have burnt it lately.” Sirius interjected. “It’s been awful.”

Hermione smiled smugly before digging in to her eggs and toast. She felt Severus looking at her, and she glanced to see his brow arched, and him glancing between her and the plate. “What?” She asked.

“Since when have you enjoyed your eggs runny?” He asked.

She shrugged. “I had some of Sirius’ last week, and I found I couldn’t get enough.”

“What prompted the sudden desire to try something I have been sent back to the kitchen to remake in the past?” He asked with mirth shining in his eyes.

“Well,” Hermione began, a clever retort on the tip of her tongue before it suddenly died.

An image in her mind lingered longer than it had for a while, not since she was asked by Severus to marry her. Of wavy black hair, and clever brown eyes. Of a pretty little Gryffindor girl born not long after the school year began.

“Oh.” She said, her breath leaving her all at once as she put her hand to her stomach.

“Hermione?” Severus asked, concern replacing his mirth, and with enough alarm in his voice that even Minerva stopped eating to look around him.

She met her husband’s eyes, and despite her inner berating of how she should have known what was happening, she smiled.
“I’m pregnant.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi, it's me, that awful author who hasn't updated in three weeks. I'm trying, I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Hopefully we won't go another near month for another update!
March 21st, 1980 (continued)

“I know.” He smiled, and seeing the shock and then confusion form on Hermione’s face was worth it. For once, just once, he had something on her. She likely knew, of course, deep down that this child was happening. After all, she didn’t need a potion or spell to come to the conclusion, therefore there had to have been a Snape she knew in her past. Their future.

“How?” She demanded, an edge to her voice that declared her suspicions of his snooping around.

“Well, you are exceedingly exhausted lately. You complain of aches in the most peculiar places. Your diet has been changing, you eat more and of certain things. I had a slight bit of doubt, as you didn’t have any sort of nausea from what I witnessed, but aside from that. Oh, and the night of the meeting, when Lily was sent away? It didn’t occur to me until well past the time it would have mattered that we hadn’t used any form of protection.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, her cheeks turning a lovely shade of red. She did glow more, too, but Severus had guessed she wouldn’t want to hear how radiant she looked. How much the knowledge that she was carrying his child, even if it wasn’t remotely visible yet, raised her attractiveness in his eye.

“Well, I suppose there’s that. We were in a bit of a hurry…..”

“I’ve never been more glad that my partners can’t have children.” Black interjected, eyeing his cup with suspicion. “Something’s in the water, the rate these pregnancies are popping up.”

“There is a potion I know of that would allow such a thing to occur. But it is dark magic, and it’s… not precisely for the man you love.” Severus said, watching as Black’s face turned pale. “And in any case, the only reason it seems like there are so many with child is because of the threat. If there wasn’t a prophecy to worry about, then you’d likely have never even considered the amount of witches currently with child.”

Sirius nodded, humming in agreement, focusing on his breakfast.

“I think a child is wonderful news.” Minerva said just, as it seemed, that Dumbledore took his place beside her. The headmaster had heard, and turned to look at Hermione with a glint in his eye.

“Indeed.” Severus agreed, a light smile pulling at his lips.

“Do you know what you’re having yet?” Minerva asked absently, taking a sip of her morning tea.

“I honestly can’t say.” Hermione replied pointedly, and Severus watched Dumbledore’s lip curl in something of a grin.

“And how far along are you, my dear?” He asked. “With Severus only being within the castle on a
regular basis in the last week, you must have been using a very strong spell to detect it.”

“I suppose I would be about four or five weeks.” She replied thoughtfully, and Dumbledore snickered. Snickered. And the way his eyes darted past Hermione?

Severus sighed and rolled his eyes internally, unable to comprehend how a man who supposedly knew so much about so many could be utterly stupid enough to think that Black was involved in Hermione’s impregnation.

Pregnant.

A flood of nerves and joy washed over Severus, the thought of a child, his child, inciting pride and fear at once. He had the perfect example of what not to be from Tobias, and while he still had a deep seeded regret over the bastard’s death, he was still a bastard. His mother, caring but aloof, proved even the most unnatural parent could be competent when given the chance. But there was still a worry that he would somehow poison his child’s mind unintentionally, his duel life leading them to believe the wrong thing. Or, perhaps, what if it eventually took its toll and he was not as patient with them as he should be.

Yet, as it had on occasion the last few weeks, when wistful longing allowed, he could picture a head of dark hair standing before a cauldron, their small hands wrapped around a stirring rod, learning the most basic potions well before their first year. Son or daughter, he would teach them anything he could in the field, teach them spells to defend themselves from bullies lest they happen upon a Potter of their own.

A smile tugged at his lips as his heart swelled with the idea of a little one running gleefully toward him with a non-poisonous plant for potions, proud of their identification.

He wanted it so bad he could taste it.

He hadn’t had much love in his life before Hermione, now it seemed he was going to be overwhelmed with it. And he wasn’t complaining in the least.

June 13th, 1980

———H———

“How are you holding up?” Hermione asked Lily after James left them alone in the kitchen. Hermione wasn’t quite sure if the production James had put on was just for show or genuine care for his wife. There was, after all, the assurance of a comfortable spot to sit for the very large Lily, as well as ensuring her feet were comfortably elevated, that her tea was fine, and that she wasn’t hungry before he left. He didn’t offer any comforts to Hermione, of course, until Lily pointed to the small bump at Hermione’s midsection. And that was fine, honestly, as she was really quite comfortable and not all that far along in comparison.

“It’s… better.” Lily said, nodding once as if she had to decide on the matter. “James is still a toerag from time to time, but once we were sequestered, with no one else here all the time… Hermione, he got better. It was like he was the James he’d been our final year. Less of an idiot, more sweet.”
Hermione narrowed her eyes at her friend. “Oh Merlin, you truly love him, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Lily replied with a grin.

“Even after what he’s done? The lies?” Hermione leaned forward a bit.

“Oh, and Severus has never done anything wrong?” Lily countered, a knowing look daring Hermione to counter her. And no, she wasn’t wrong, Severus was nowhere near perfect. And if she added the time she knew him before, and the way he acted as her teacher, well, there were many things one could say he’d done.

“But most of what he has was done prior to our being together.”

“And I went into this with James knowing what he was like.” Lily sighed. “Look, I get it. I do. He doesn’t like Severus, and because of that, things will always be hard. And he still is a bit immature, and really needs to grow up, but I promise he has been the best to me. And for me. I honestly can’t imagine going through this with anyone else. I don’t know, H, there’s just something about him.”

“H?” Hermione asked.

Lily smiled. “Well, yeah, sorry. Just… Well, I figured that in Death Eater meetings or whatever you’re sorta known. And even if you wear a glamour, your name isn’t really common. And, well, I do spend a lot of time just thinking.”

“I like it,” Hermione assured. “It’s better than needing to come up with an entirely different identity.” For a reason Hermione could not fathom, Lily blushed. “What?” She asked.

“Well…” Lily glanced at Hermione’s rounded belly. “It’s just… we do get visits from Dumbledore, and he’s… well, he’s hinted when James has mentioned Sirius being a godfather to our baby.”

“Oh for Merlin’s sake!” Hermione cut her off, startling Lily a bit before causing the red head to laugh. “Once, one time we made it seem like Sirius was coming out of my room from a night of … and, anyway, it was Severus’ idea to make the headmaster believe we had a thing. But I assure you, this is a tiny Snape in here.” Hermione grinned, patting her belly fondly.

“Either, way.” Lily shrugged. “I wanted you to be the godmother.” Hermione stared at her friend, blinking. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Lily said firmly. “I know we haven’t always been the best of friends to one another, and James has argued I am closer to Alice than you. But Sev is my oldest friend, and while we could have two godfathers, I didn’t think that would look right. So, second closest, living girlfriend, and wife to my oldest and dearest, I’m asking you.”

Hermione wasn’t sure what to say. Her mouth worked while no words came out, all the while her brain was trying to fathom that she could very well be her first real friend’s godmother. But it made sense, in a weird way. Why couldn’t she be? She knew what was to come, of course, and knew she couldn’t have Harry with her. But… well, she didn’t know anything beyond his third year. Perhaps, Severus says enough is enough and they take him?

“Ohay,” She said quietly, unsure how to handle the over excited Lily as she crashed into her with a hug so snug, she felt little Harry kick her from within the womb.

June 14th, 1980
“I swear on my wand that I, Severus Tobias Snape, will take Draco Lucius Malfoy into my family should anything happen to leave him without parent. I will protect him, guide him, and serve as an extension of this family bond should he ever be in need of me.”

It was interesting, given the conversation the day prior, to watch the ceremony tying Severus to the Malfoys through tiny baby Draco. The stray thought that these boys were bound together from the start in ways they couldn’t imagine caused her fake grin to gain reality for a moment.

Severus was the only one asked, there being no Godmother involved. Narcissa was the only one of the Malfoys with siblings, and Bellatrix was so entirely against children she wasn’t even present for the blessing, let alone have a desire to be apart of a true vow to the child. And from what Hermione observed, Lucius had no true friends of whom he would trust such a task. But seeing as how it was Severus’ potion that finally helped them conceive, Hermione supposed it was a no brainer as to whom they would ask to take the mantle of godparent.

Draco squirmed as he was placed in Severus’ arms to solidify the magic bond, and Hermione mused over how calm he was. They both were, really.

It was in that moment she felt Aurora kick, and Hermione grinned wider as she placed her hand over the spot where she felt her daughter.

**July 31st, 1980**

It was rainy, which only fit the mood all too well as the Order of the Phoenix gathered within the Potter house. Severus had been silent since news arrived via James’ patronus that morning that Harry James Potter was born two weeks early. He also clung to Hermione, never letting her go farther than he could touch her, save for when Aurora used her bladder as a kick bag, and made her need for the loo mandatory.

No one said anything to him as he gripped the back her chair, the same one she sat in when Lily asked her to be Godmother. But then, no one said much of anything at all. Sirius, seated beside her, was quiet. Remus, next to him, seemed to want to offer something to fill the void in conversation, but always seemed to think better of it. Minerva clutched her tea cup, having made a pot while awaiting those who could to arrive, and being the only one aside from Alastor who poured themselves a cup.

“Where’s Peter?” Remus finally asked.

“I haven’t seen him for a while.” Sirius replied, seemingly without even knowing he had.

“He should be here for this,” Remus insisted, causing Alastor to look to him. “Well he should. James and Lily are our friends, and now…."

“Now they fulfill a prophecy that marks their son as the possible defeater of the Dark Lord.” Severus finished the sentence Remus couldn’t seem to finish.

“And who was it that told the ‘Dark Lord’ about it?” Sirius hissed, dark eyes narrowed as he turned to Severus.

“I did. On Dumbledore’s orders. So if you take issue with what I’ve done, I’d like to redirect you to
the one whose orders I was following.”

“Now don’t the pair of ye start.” Minerva said sharply. “Was no one’s fault. Except, perhaps, wee Harry’s who couldn’t stay in the womb another two weeks.”

“But then we’d have known without a doubt that baby Neville would be the target.” Remus reasoned.

“I know how awful this makes me sound, but I would have rather it had been.” Sirius said, standing walking around the table, hand rubbing at his facial hair. “I know it’s selfish. I know it’s because I want Harry safe, protected. But at least if it were the Longbottom lad….”

“Should the worse happen, you wouldn’t be broken up about it?” Remus asked, the tone of his voice sharp, harsh.

Sirius whipped his head around in shock. “Do you think me heartless enough not to care? Of course, I do, but one baby is easy to keep hidden. Two….”

“Oh, so it’s the fact that James will likely need to remain in hiding.”

“Actually, yes, that is a part of it, Moony. Have you considered that there is no real time frame on this? Just a marked as his equal note. I don’t think that he will go around marking a baby, an infant, as his equal. So how long will James and Lily be locked away? Hmm? Until Harry goes to Hogwarts? Until he’s seventeen? Severus might know what the Voldy might do, but we don’t.”

“Be reasonable, Sirius. Dumbledore will not keep James and Lily hidden….”

“Actually, I will.” Dumbledore said as he came into the dinning room, James following behind, carrying the very tiny, sleeping Harry in his arms. “We will need a secret keeper for the Potters, much like I have enlisted one for the Longbottoms.” Dumbledore paused, and looked back at James who seemed to meet the headmaster’s gaze with cold certainty. He sighed, before continuing, “I’d have liked for it to be Severus, but Mr Potter here is adamant that it is not.”

“And not H, either,” James said. “Sorry, but no one can convince me that you two could keep the knowledge secure enough from Voldem-”

“Don’t say his name, you blithering idiot.” Severus hissed, gesturing sharply to his left arm.

“And that’s why I can’t trust you. Either of you.”

“He has proposed that Sirius be secret keeper.” Dumbledore said to the room. “I know the whole order is not here, but I’m afraid times are getting to bet that we will not be able to have full meetings. So of those here now, who is opposed to Sirius being the secret keeper?”

“Me, I am.” Sirius voiced instantly, and confusion washed over James’ face. Sirius laughed mirthlessly. “Bit obvious, isn’t it, mate? If I were someone who wanted to find you, I’d certainly go looking for me.”

“Is anyone else opposed?” Dumbledore asked the room.

Hermione looked around, at everyone, up at her husband, knowing that Sirius would get his wish anyway, but wanting to see if there were anyone who agreed. No one seemed to, but then, Hermione couldn’t blame them. It was sound logic for Sirius to be the one to keep the secret, for anyone who knew him knew he would die before betraying those he cared about.
Biting her tongue, Hermione held back the urge to say something, anything, that might somehow affect the vow she took. Times were beginning to get tricky, and she realized she had to watch what she said more than ever.

November 2nd, 1980

———S———

Why did he agree to teach? Why did he go along with the plans of the Dark Lord and Albus Dumbledore? He hated his fellow students, the lot of them, when he was a student, because they were all utter dunderheads. Well, okay, Hermione wasn’t a dunderhead, but he didn’t really like her much at first either.

But these little… creatures, for lack of better word, seemed worse than the lot he started school with. How could they not grasp the concept of a simple cure for boils. They were in their second year, for Merlin’s sake, and the lot of them knew nothing. How could Horace have gotten so lax in the last few years that these fresh, vibrant minds knew nothing? Well, perhaps vibrant was too optimistic a term for them. Functioning may be a touch too generous as well. Living, then? Minds housed within a living body?

Black smoke started to rise from a Slytherin cauldron, and Severus flicked his wand lazily, banishing the ruined potion from the cauldron.

“That, Mr Brooks, will earn you a zero, and one foot of parchment explaining the importance of a complete, circular stir in the proper direction. Now….”

A house elf popped into existence before him, causing a few students to shriek, and an item or two somewhere to fall.

“Tizzy is sorry for interrupting Professor Snape’s potions class, sir, but Tizzy has been sent for you.”

“Why?” Severus asked, flicking his wrist once more as a terrible smell filled the air. Dunderheads couldn’t handle the simple distraction of a house elf.

Said elf twisted her hands before pulling on her ears. “Tizzy is here because little Miss is coming.”

“Little miss?” Severus narrowed his eyes at the elf. “What in the world do you mean by-” The words clicked into place, and what little color occupied Severus’ face drained away. “Little Miss?” He repeated, seeing the concern on the elf’s face vanish and replace itself with joy. Her ears even flapped as she nodded excitedly. “It’s….” He spun toward the class. “The lot of you, out. Class dismissed.” He then vanished the remainder of the potions in the cauldrons, regardless of their states, and left the class, heading for his quarters.

November 3rd, 1980
Severus stood in front of the window in the quarter’s he’d shared with his wife since their marriage, watching the sun break over the horizon, and held his infant daughter.

He was called mid afternoon by Tizzy, and for the next fourteen hours, he watched his wife go through the process of labor. It was almost like watching someone suffer through the Cruciatus curse, the way she writhed and screamed through the contractions. Poppy had offered her relief many times, but Hermione refused. Her brow damp with sweat, her curls loosing their luster, she had set her jaw and determined she would go through the process without aid, not unless she truly needed it. Which, she hadn’t, thank goodness. Lucius had to bring a Doctor from St Mungos in because of how terrible labor was on Narcissa. Dumbledore had to bring Poppy to Lily, though it was likely because Potter had no idea what to do. Not that his knowing what to do made Severus at all helpful. He clutched Hermione’s hand more for his own comfort than for hers.

But then, just an hour ago, the cries of a small, dark haired little girl punctuated the last war cry of bringing new life into the world, and a laughing Hermione also wept with joy at seeing their daughter for the … well, not the first time, he supposed. Baby cleaned, wrapped, and given to Hermione to nurse, the pair of them had fallen asleep before Poppy left the chambers to allow them time to bond as a family. He’d watched the whole thing in awe, the way instinct had taken over his wife, and she seemed to know exactly what to do. But hours of labor had left her beyond exhausted, and so when it was clear their child had finished her first nurse, he tucked his wife in, took their daughter, and simply held her as he watched the dawn break.

“We never discussed what to name you, little one. Your mother, she’s from a different time, and knew who you were before I even thought you may exist. So I don’t think she particularly wanted to hint as to who you were to be. But of course, she still won’t be able to help, because she already knows what your name is. Did she happen to tell you it? Whisper it to you while you were still within? What do we call you, pretty girl?” He paused, looking down at her sleeping face. “And you really are so, very pretty. More so than I could ever hope.” He looked out the window once more, at the colorful sky, the breaking of dawn over the light snowfall that dusted the ground, causing everything to shimmer. “As pretty as this sunrise. How fitting a welcome for you, the way the sun greets you. Shall we call you Dawn, then? No. It doesn’t fit. How about, then… Aurora.”

“I think that’s perfect,” Hermione said from the bed, and he turned to see her giving a very tired but coy smile. “Aurora is perfect.”

“Is it?” He asked, arching one brow. “Well, then, if you so approve.”

Hermione chuckled, her voice still sounding hoarse from her earlier struggles. “I do. I believe I even know of a nickname for her.”

“Let’s not. Not yet.” Severus said, looking back to the bundle in his arms. “And what of your middle name? Aurora Hermione, while traditional, is not what one calls elegant.” He looked to his wife. “What was your mother’s name?”

“Jean,” Hermione replied. “My middle name. But I don’t think that sounds right.” She frowned, and he smirked.

“You don’t recall her middle name?”

“No,” She shook her head. “I only knew her first. So how about… what about… Eileen? For your mother?”

Severus’ brows shot toward his hair line before he furrowed them. Aurora Eileen Snape. Well, he wasn’t sure how his mother would feel about it, but it did have a wonderful ring to it.
He smiled down at his little girl, gently leaning in and kissing her tiny forehead. “Welcome to the world, Aurora Eileen.”

December 25th, 1995

Their visit to St Mungos to see Mr Weasley was very short. The Weasley kids got some time with him, of course, and Harry, she, and Draco being such close friends (if not honorary Weasleys themselves) were able to visit as well. At least until a small group of adults came in, putting an end to the festive mood. Aurora’s mother and father, Sirius, Professors Lupin and Moody, a pink haired woman, and Aunt Minerva asked them all to wait outside. And while they were all curious as to what was happening, they found the extendable ears the twins provided heard nothing but static. Her father sound proofed the room, making it impossible for them to listen.

“Well, that’s not going to do us much good.” Fred said.

“Perhaps, then, we should attend to some business, Gred?” George hinted, elbowing his brother in the ribs. A light dawned in Fred’s eyes.

“Perhaps we should.” He said, then glanced down at Aurora with hesitation.

They hadn’t had any proper time just the two of them since Leonidas’ interruption. And, admittedly, Aurora was beginning to miss her boyfriend. And not just for snogging purposes. She could still see the shadow of worry in his eyes, the annoyance and pain when they learned the middle Weasley sent back his Christmas sweater. She wanted to comfort him and distract him, and was growing increasingly annoyed that she couldn’t. The Black house was too full, the Snape house too far away, and there was likely no chance at all of he and the others returning to Hogwarts before Christmas break was out.

“Mind if I walk you out?” She asked. “Or even to the floo?”

“Come along, Rory.” George answered for them, and she flashed a wave to the others before departing, hand held in Fred’s.

George had the decency to walk a few paces ahead, hands in his pockets, pretending to be very interested in what was in front of him and like he had no clue his brother was behind him.

“I think we need to get George a girlfriend,” Fred suggested. “He seems lonely.”

“As long as it’s someone we could double with,” Aurora smirked. “Luna, perhaps?”

“Nah, he doesn’t go for blondes.” Fred replied, and Aurora hummed in understanding. “Would you like to come with us? To see the shop? I think George was wanting to head to Gringotts, see if we have the funds we need for certain, but we could swing by….”

“Best not.” She replied regretfully. “I can’t imagine the sort of hell my father would cause if he found out I slipped out. You’re lucky my mother hasn’t seemed to say anything about the library.”
“Yeah, probably best that I don’t push your Dad too far. Or your Mum, for that matter. She can be a scary woman in her own right.” Fred stopped, turning toward her in the corridor. “We’ll be seeing you for dinner, won’t we?”

“Not sure, actually. I think we’re due at the Malfoys.”

“Ahh, the in-laws.” Fred teased, and Aurora rolled her eyes.

“Bugger off with that, now, if you know what’s good for you.” She half growled.

“Oh, I know what’s good for me,” Fred said before ducking down and stealing a kiss. She did not swoon, nor did her heart skip a little beat. Aurora refused to acknowledge she was, in anyway, reacting like a love sick teenager. But the sigh that slipped past her lips as they parted gave her away, and it was worth it to see the grin on Fred’s face. “See you later, Rory.” He said, turning and doing a light jog to catch up with his brother.

Aurora waited for a moment in the lobby of St Mungos for her senses to return to normal. It was a very, very short time since they’d become boyfriend and girlfriend, and she was far too young, even if she were only a little bit younger than her parents were when they…. She refused to believe she was in love. Or at least falling in love. Infatuated for sure, but….

“R-R-Rory?”

The stutter from the side where the floos were startled her a bit, and when she turned to see a very embarrassed looking Neville standing beside a tall, imposing woman, Aurora blushed.

“Hey,” She managed, eyes darting from her friend to who could only be his grandmother. “Are you… is everything?”

“Yes.” He said, shuffling from foot to foot.

His grandmother looked unimpressed. “Stand straight, and don’t fidget, Neville. I raised you with better manners than this. Now, you must be Aurora Snape.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Aurora said, bowing her head, not really sure what else she should say or do. She was a raised like a pureblood, but in that moment it was like all her good breeding had gone out the window.

“Neville’s told me so much about you,” to which Neville’s blush deepened. “What are you doing wandering the hospital by yourself?”

“Oh, umm, a couple of friends were visiting their father, and they stepped out a moment, I was seeing them off.”

“The Weasleys, then? Yes, I’ve heard about it. Not from the papers, I have contacts. Now, Neville, seeing as she’s here, why don’t you invite Aurora with us to see your father and mother?”

Aurora immediately wanted to insist it wasn’t necessary, for the second the suggestion passed Mrs Longbottom’s lips, the blush coloring Neville’s cheeks vanished, and he became deathly pale. But then she watched him swallow what was likely a lump in his throat, stiffen his spine, and ask barely above a whisper, “Would you like to meet my parents?”

“Sure.” She croaked out, joining him at his side as he and his grandmother continued on to the Janis Thickney ward.
Along the way, she spotted Harry, Draco, Ginny, and Ron as they seemed lost, then confused by Neville’s visit. Rory just quickly shook her head, hoping the Longbottoms wouldn’t see, and also hoping the others wouldn’t question her or Neville on where they were going.

“My Frank gave his wits to helping put an end to You-Know-Who and his followers,” Mrs Longbottom said, and Aurora whipped her head around to her to pay attention. It would seem, however, that Augusta Longbottom wasn’t even looking at her as she led them. “Alice, too, the dear girl. I don’t think the pair of them should have been out together, but they were determined. She should have stayed home with Neville, like a proper witch. Put career on hold. Oh, there was some sort of nonsense about a prophecy, and all, but I still say that it was nothing, nothing of consequence. They didn’t need to be hidden, and maybe if they hadn’t been tucked away, then they wouldn’t have both felt the need to venture out.”

Aurora snuck glances at Neville as his grandmother carried on, noting how he seemed to desperately want to hold in on himself.

“Of course, Neville doesn’t have the talent he should have. Had Alice not worked so hard, rested like a witch should when with child, then he would have been just like his father.”

“Neville’s not so bad.” She said without thinking, causing both Longbottoms to look at her, surprised in two ways. She shrugged. “He’s horrid at potions, but I’ve heard he’s actually getting really good at Defense.” She gave Neville a secret smirk that made him beam, his chest puffing up a little.

“Hmm,” Mrs Longbottom replied, though she didn’t seem to believe her. “Well.”

They entered the ward, and Neville shifted closer to Aurora as they headed to the far end of the room. It wasn’t a particularly full ward, and Aurora wondered if it was because permanent spell damage was normally far more fatal, or if the witches and wizards in the ward were put here because they had no family that could or would take care of them. A glance at the posh looking Mrs Longbottom, Aurora guessed much of it was due to the latter.

“Frank, Alice, Neville brought a friend.” She said, and for a moment, Aurora thought that Neville had grossly over exaggerated their condition. After all, the two people beyond the curtain actually looked up toward Mrs Longbottom.

But the vacancy in the eyes of the handsome-ish wizard spoke of knee-jerk reactions. The witch smiled warmly, but there was no recognition.

After a second of looking at Neville’s parents, Aurora recalled the picture of the original order of the Phoenix. His parents were the same age as hers. Only their mid-thirties, so very young for magical folk. And yet Neville’s parents looked at least two decades older, their hair grey nearing white. There was no warmth in their eyes as the looked at their son, they passed over him as easily as they did her. He was a stranger to them.

“Mum, Dad, this is Rory.” He said shyly. “She’s the girl I took to the Yule ball last year. The picture? The one I … I brought? Umm, she was here to see someone else, but she wanted to, ah, come meet you.”

Well, it wasn’t entirely true, of course, but she stepped up to Neville’s Mum, the more open, friendly seeming of the pair, and smiled as warmly as she could. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs Longbottom.” She said, and a glance at the joy coming from Neville told her it was exactly the right thing to do.
“I would actually spend time with Weasel if it meant getting out of this.” Draco whispered to her out the corner of his mouth as he stood with Aurora off by the mantel, away from the adults. They were in the parlor of Malfoy Manor, dinner having come and gone, the adults requiring to go through the trouble of scotch and tea, sending Leo off to the Library as he was considered too young to be among them, yet forcing Draco and Aurora to stay because of their supposed future union.

“Sadly, I agree,” She mumbled back before delicately sipping her tea. She hated this part of her life, the one that had her in dresses, with her hair done, and now her make-up charms as well. And while she greatly appreciated Fred’s whistle of approval and longing stare as they departed Grimmauld place before Mrs Weasley fed them her own meal, it felt like a mask no different than the one she knew her father had shrunken within his robes.

“You should have heard the way he carried on after we spotted you with Longbottom. He swore you were two-timing Fred. I told him the only person you would ever be having an affair with was me, and anyone with a brain would know how well that would work.”

Aurora smirked, “Please tell me he was convinced it was a possibility.”

Draco snickered. “He’s loyal to a fault, clever when he wants to be, but has about as much common sense as a newt.”

“And what are you two love birds whispering about over there?” Uncle Lucius asked, drawing their attention to the adults.

While her parents looked bored, perhaps even a bit amused, Aurora noticed that Aunt Cissy looked a bit embarrassed.

“Merely discussing the idiots we are forced to attend school with, father.” Draco replied before sipping his own tea.

Uncle Lucius hummed, smirking as if he didn’t believe them, then suddenly hissed as he grabbed his left arm. Aurora noted her father grimace, clutching at the brand he bore beneath his layers as he looked to his wife.

“It seems our Lord is calling.” Uncle Lu said as he stood.

“Indeed.” Aurora watched her father bend to place a peck on her mother’s temple as he withdrew his mask. “Shall we?” he asked Uncle Lu as he enlarged the mask with a flick of the wrist. Uncle Lu nodded as he summoned his, and Aurora blinked as her father disappeared, followed by Draco’s father.

For a moment, the room was silent.

“I can’t take it.” Aunt Cissy said, and Aurora sensed Draco stiffening as tensely as she did.

“What do you mean, Cissy?” Aurora’s mother asked.

Mrs Malfoy looked ready to reply, then hesitated, looking to the pair of teenagers.

Hermione followed her gaze. “Aurora, why don’t you take your brother back to the house, and Draco with you.” She suggested, and Aurora nodded. The pair left the parlor, Aurora shutting the
door behind her before they headed down the corridor toward the library.

“She does mean Harry’s, doesn’t she?” Draco asked.

Aurora nodded. “And if she didn’t, I’m sure she’ll figure out where we are.”

——H———

“Cissy?” Hermione asked again once the kids had left. She knew they would go back to Grimmauld place, Leo being happier their with Sirius and Kreacher, Draco and Aurora wanting to be with their friends. She didn’t need to worry about them, but the way Cissy had carried herself from the moment they arrived had her concern firmly placed with the Malfoy matriarch.

Cissy was always free to smile when they came by, and while they would never be the best of friends, she was always warm and kind. She had always thrived in hosting anything, even a simple luncheon where Draco and Rory could play together. But everything about her friend tonight seemed strained, and the more Hermione watched her, the more worried she became.

Narcissa sighed heavily, and seemed to steel herself. “I can’t take this life, not this time.” She said in a whisper, even though they were alone. “Lucius has come back injured, terribly so in some cases. Gashes, spell burns. I’ve even… he’d spent an entire evening in the guest room after one of his meetings with the dark lord thrashing on the mattress as though he had seizures. Hermione, I’m not sure how I can go on with this. I know I must be stronger than what I am, but it’s not like it was before at all.”

“I know,” Hermione said, because it was the absolute truth. She knew Severus was spared about half the calls the others had, for he was to remain at Hogwarts under cover. But the times he did go, the times she came to check on him, she always found him nursing some wound or another, an empty vial of his Crucius cure on the floor or table near by. “It’s not as it was before at all.”

“Lucius is determined to do something for him, but he won’t tell me what. All he keeps saying his that if he succeeds, he’ll earn the Dark Lords favor, and remain so for good. But… but Hermione, what if he doesn’t do what ever it is he says he will? What if he fails?”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that.”

“What if the Dark Lord comes for Draco?”

That gave Hermione pause, because she had long stopped thinking of Draco as Lucius’ son. They were night and day, by comparison. Draco had long stopped believing in his father’s rhetoric, was dear friends with good witches and wizards, and all but declared his love for the boy prophesied to be the end of the very leader his father followed. Yet he was a Malfoy, and what if Lucius did fail in what ever it was he wished to do?

“If it comes to that, if there is time, come to me.” Hermione said. “Come to me, and only me, and I will ensure you and Draco go into hiding.”

“Where could we possibly go? Lucius could be hunted….”

“If Lucius fails, you can not be with him. He’ll either be dead, or he’ll be captured, and you’ll need to keep distance.” Hermione took a breath. “Remember, my own husband actually went to Azkaban
for two weeks. Before he was cleared, no one could find me or my daughter, not until his trail when we wanted to be found.” Narcissa nodded. “I’ve hidden others away as well, much as it hurts to do so. I can and will help you.”

“Thank you.” Narcissa said, her voice a sigh of relief. “It’s good to know there is someone I can turn to.”

“I love Draco as though he were my own, and I can tell you now that if Severus ever did anything to anger the Dark Lord enough that he didn’t return, I would take my own children and hide away. I will do the same for yours.”

“We shouldn’t be speaking like this, I know. I know that it’s wrong… but sometimes I wonder if it’s not. Blood should stay pure, of course. An occasional half blood to ensure that there aren’t abominations within the bloodlines.”

“But how do half-bloods come about?” Hermione smirked. “I know Severus’ parentage wasn’t the most prime example of how it could work.”

“I’m just not sure what to think anymore.” Narcissa said, shaking her head. “Draco used to speak of a girl in Gryffindor who was muggleborn, and unbelievably gifted with magic. She was powerful, or could have been.” Hermione grinned proudly. “But how could that be? Did she steal it? Was she actually a cast off from a pureblood family?”

Hermione pursed her lips, carefully considering her words. “I think….” And then, a light came on within her mind, and she started again. “My mother used to tell me that there were some muggle families who had the ability for magic locked within their genetics. Whether it was because there was once a squib in their family, or a more fairytale notion that were are all born with it, and for witches and wizards it just comes to us naturally. But regardless of the how, she knew it was impossible to steal another’s magic. Bind it to our own, of course, but never outright steal it. And she always figured, that, perhaps, it took some sort of magic for it to be unleashed.”

“She sounds like a muggle lover.” Narcissa countered.

Hermione shrugged. “We did live among them.”

“How dreadful that must of have been.” Narcissa’s lip curled.

“Not as horrid as you make it out to be. Their fashion sense was one I always preferred.”

“Yes,” Narcissa smirked, eyeing the dress Hermione was wearing. “I must admit that you do have excellent taste in dresses and robes.”

Hermione smirked, settling back in her seat, switching from tea to scotch. She and Narcissa discussed trivial things a while longer, but in the back of her mind, Hermione was already forming and escape plan, as well as taking in to consideration how Narcissa unease could actually be an asset to the Order.

Chapter End Notes

I am a bad, bad, bad writer and I am sorry it's gone from once a week to once a month with these updates. Thanks for sticking with me through this, and I will try extra hard to
get them to you more frequently.
“Is it cheating, us practicing like this?” Draco asked as he stood between Harry and Ron on the opposite side of the attic from where Aurora was.

She was with Ginny and the twins, which was odd in a way simply because it would have made more sense for it to be the Weasleys against the rest. But no, Ron didn’t want to be without Harry, claiming he was going to be with him to the end anyway.

“Thought you’d like cheating.” Ron said as he shot a hex at Ginny that she blocked easily. “Being Slytherin and all.”

“Doesn’t mean I like cheating,” Draco countered with a sneer, shooting for Aurora. She had to duck, too slow to raise her shield. She needed to work on that. “Just means I’m willing to do whatever is to my advantage.”

“Which is what we’re all doing, really.” Harry said as he effortlessly went after both Ginny and George. “With the DA.”

There was a moment where all that was heard in the room was the spark of magic, the mumble of spells, before a booming “Stop!” had them all obeying and turning to the door.

Aurora watched her father scrutinize all of them, arms crossed as he stood in the doorway. He wasn’t wearing his robes over his frock coat, which made him much less intimidating, even to her. But then he surprised them all by slowly undoing the buttons on his jacket, and then those on the cuffs of his sleeves as he walked into the room.

“You are all quite impressive for your age, but it is not good enough.” He said, slowly rolling up his sleeves.

As his dark mark was revealed, she glanced around at the others, noticing Draco doing the same. Every Weasley lost the color in their faces, but Harry seemed to only spare it a glance before looking up at his Potion’s Professor.

“Doing all we can.” Harry retorted.

“No, you are not.” Her father countered, looking at Harry from the corner of his eye as he’d turned to face she and her dueling partners. “For instance, each and every one of you is hesitating the slightest. You are doing so, because what you may not realize is there is a split-second delay from the moment you decide on a spell to the moment you cast it each time you rely on your words to cast. A Death Eater would have you on the ground, writhing in pain or dead before you even had a chance. You must practice wordless casting.” He said, entirely in teacher mode.
“But it doesn’t always work,” Ron protested, earning a glare that had him flinching a moment. “Well’s true.” He insisted.

“Yes, Mr Weasley, but that is because you are merely learning. And you are learning from someone who doesn’t know or understand what they’re doing.”

As Harry’s face began to turn red, his body tensing, Draco effortlessly said, “Which is why Umbridge has us constantly reading.”

“Precisely,” Her father said, and Harry deflated. “Which reminds me, has any of the rest of you received a special detention from the High Inquisitor?” Aurora glanced around, seeing Fred and George nod, Ginny and Ron shake their heads. Her father nodded. “Should you receive one again, go to Professor McGonagall. I have given her a special balm to heal the injury caused by the blood quill.”

“You aren’t going to do anything about it?” Ginny asked.

Her father turned toward her, amusement in his eyes as he arched a brow. “I will not. I don’t wear this mark for pleasure, Miss Weasley, nor did I even want it to begin with. It would not do well at this point to appear to worry for the well fair of a group of Gryffindors, especially those who are dear friends of Mr Potter’s. However, you can be assured that there will be a special treat for the toad come the end of the year.” Jaws from all but she and Draco dropped as Aurora did her best to hide her smirk. “Now, when the dueling club was in play, I purposely said the disarming charm for the benefit of those in attendance. Here, I will not, and all of you will be facing against me. Find you intent, will it through your wand. I know most of you have a deep-seated desire to hex me, now is your chance.”

**January 9th, 1996**

The second day of “teaching” had gone far better than the first. He still noted that Aurora, Ronald, and Ginny were moving their lips as they cast, but the timing was much quicker. The movements, he was beginning to think, were merely an afterthought, almost like muscle memory. He was sure, given time, the three of them would cease the habit.

He’d left them at Grimmauld place, flooing back to the cottage alone and tired. He moved from the mantel to the sofa, barely remembering to magic off the soot before making contact with the cushions.

“They’re children, Severus.” He heard Hermione tease behind him.

“You forget, witch, that the twins are of age, on the cusp of their magic maturity. And there are seven of them against one of me. This is supposedly my vacation.”

“No one is making you teach them but yourself.” She reminded him as she set down the tea tray she was carrying on to the coffee table, transfiguring a napkin into a tea cup. As Severus looked to her with amusement, she shrugged. “Didn’t feel like going back to the kitchen.”
“And you couldn’t summon it?” he asked as she began to pour.

“I am not risking summoning a cup from the cupboard, especially not one of my favorites, thank you.” She retorted, handing him a cup before making her own. “Are they improving?”

“Of course they are.” He replied. “George Weasley even managed to make my wand fall from my hand.”

“But not Fred,” Hermione chuckled.

Severus smirked, “I’m quite sure he was doing his best to show that he caught on without actually getting in a single hit.”

Hermione smiled as she settled back against him.

They sat quietly, sipping their tea, enjoying one another’s company. It had occurred to him to mention how little time they’d gotten to spend just the two of them these days. He then realized he hadn’t heard his son, someone who was very likely to have come running at the sound of the floo. Slowly, he leaned forward, setting his nearly empty cup on the table. The proper tea cup, he noted, as there were decorations on this one. He then snuck a quick peek into Hermione’ cup, noting she was near the end, and then banished the whole thing.

“Hey!” She said in protest, though obviously quite curious as to what he was up to. He then leaned in toward her, forcing her against the arm of the couch before taking her mouth with his.

She giggled against his lips, though she reciprocated all the same. His name on her lips changed from incredulous and humored to husky and pleading.

And then the front door opened.

“Mum! I’m-”

“Stuff off and head upstairs!” Hermione called, tensing beneath him.

“But-”

“Use the floo in the study and go prepare Dad’s gift at Uncle Sirius’.” She nearly shouted, her voice cracking a moment.

“Brilliant!” Leonidas shouted back, and Severus listened as he heard his son’s footsteps fade. A moment later, there was the sound of the secondary floo.

“My gift?” He inquired.

“Yes, he’s your son, I’m sure you can figure out what it is.”

“Mmm, potion’s ingredients harvested from the woods. I still have an overabundance of pine bark from last year.”

“He means well,” She said, toying with the collar of his frock coat.

He smiled wickedly at her, grabbing her wrist gently and pinning it back. “Is there something you’re wanting, wife?”

“I’m fairly certain you’re smart enough to know the answer to that,” She said, stretching to kiss him. He considered toying with her, dragging it on, playing, but recalled all too swiftly just how long it’d
been. And it was his birthday.

January 15th, 1996

Severus sat at his desk, wondering not for the first time if maybe it would be better not to give Dumbledore everything he learned. The meeting the night before had been odd.

“Severus,” The Dark Lord had hissed, “You have the Polyjuice I asked for?”

“Of course, my Lord.” Severus had replied, handing the rather large flask that was required of him. “I also have that poison you asked for.” He had handed that over as well, though already had an easily believable lie in place to explain away why it merely caused the victim to become comatose. He had no idea what was going on, and he almost didn’t want to know.

“Vincent, Greggory, Lucius, I put this task to you....”

He hoped that they failed, the lot of them. He didn’t want to imagine a world that had Bellatrix LeStrange roaming free. Or her husband. Or any of the others who managed to get themselves locked away.

And, of course, he told Dumbledore of the plan, which merely led the old goat to smiling and saying, “it will all work out as it should, Severus.”

All work out as it should, yet he never told anyone how that was. Not he, of course, for no matter how much Albus claimed to like him or trust him, it was never anything more than an attempt to lull Severus in compliance. He never told Minerva, and didn’t that just get her whiskers in a twist? Alastor had little to no clue himself, and the former auror was starting to get a bit miffed at the whole thing. He’d have to tell them soon, as well as Lupin and Sirius, to keep everyone who was meant to protect Potter safe.

He just rose to cast his patronus when there was a knock at his door. He sighed, flicked his wand at it instead, and returned to his seat as Potter crept in.

“I believe I said we would resume our lessons next week.” He said to the boy, ignoring the fact he was out past curfew when he saw how terrified he looked. And disheveled. Severus glanced at his desk, looking to the small clock indicating the hour past eleven. Apparently way past curfew. He frowned at Harry. “What is it?”

“A feeling of joy.” The boy said. “Pure, giddy joy. And it-it wasn’t mine.”

“How can you tell?”

“It had a different feel,” Potter when on to explain. “Like a sickly feeling I can’t properly explain.” He took a breath, shaking. “Rory said you took off last night. There was a meeting, wasn’t there?” This sounded accusing, and Severus pursed his lips as he remembered Hermione suggesting they let the children in on what was happening.

He took a breath, “Yes.”

“And he had a plan, didn’t he?”
“Yes.”

“So, if he’s happy, it probably happened.”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

Here Severus paused, because he wasn’t sure it was such a great idea to tell Potter. But then again, it wasn’t like it wouldn’t be all over the prophet. “The Dark Lord has not had the ability to gain new followers this time around,” he started. “While there are many young men and women who support his ideals, because it is the ideals they were raised on, they have established a life, and one they won’t have clouded with answering to a master. And, more so, it is hard to meet with people who could be new followers if one is laying low, trying to discredit an old man.” Severus stood, coming around his desk, standing in front of Potter. “He had broken several of his old followers, his favorites, out of Azkaban.”

Potter went deathly pale, stumbling a little, until he finally fell in a chair behind him. He searched the space in front of him, eyes darting about as though there were words there that Severus couldn’t see. After a moment, he looked up. “Draco’s aunt?”

“Yes,” Severus said.

“She-she’s the one, or one of the ones who tortured Neville’s parents.”

“She was.”

Potter deflated just a touch more. “How am I going to tell him?” He asked quietly. “How can I tell a friend that the witch that made his life hell is escaped. How can I support Draco when his life is going to get more complicated? I-I don’t… what do I do, professor?”

Severus met Potter’s pleading eyes, so much like his mother’s, and his gut twisted. He wished, in that moment, more strongly than in most, that he had more time with Lily before she were killed. That he and Harry could have had a stronger bond. That Black hadn’t gone and been reckless, getting himself put in a place where Harry couldn’t be with him. For Severus’ instincts as a father had him wanting to take this boy, wrap him in his cloak, and hide him away from the world. Or, at least, hug him.

It also made his lip want to curl.

“Return to your dormitory.” He said, barely keeping the sneer from his voice. “We shall redouble our efforts in occlumency.”

“What do I say?” He asked.

“Tell whomever you like, whatever you like.”

In that instant, the door to his office burst open, and a pleased looking pink toad made her way in, looking exclusively at Harry. “Out of bed after curfew, are we dear?”

“Yes,” Severus said, earning Umbridge’s gaze. “He was serving detention, and realized after he returned, that he had not actually met the requirements. Potter and I were merely discussing the ways in which he would make up for it.”

“Oh, Severus, I wouldn’t waste your time. I have just the thing for boys like him.” She said with a
simpering giggle. Severus noted the way that Potter ran a finger over his left hand.

“I’m sure you do. But I will be overseeing Potter’s detentions for the next… eight weeks. At least.”

He then looked pointedly at the boy. “Go.”

Potter nodded once, hurrying out the doors.

Umbridge was about to follow when Severus flicked his wand, forcing the door to slam shut. “I have been meaning to find a moment to have you alone for some time now, Dolores.” He said in his most silky tone, watching the witch turn slowly, a look of anticipation glittering in her eyes.

“Have you, Severus?” She asked.

“Oh, yes.” He said, slowly stalking toward her. “You see, we were just speaking of detention, and it reminded me of a most pressing matter. You do know, of course, that corporal punishment has been banned in Hogwarts since the reign of Dippitt?” He arched a brow, seeing if she would respond with anything more than confusion. “Yes, I can see how one can be confused on the matter. Some of the things this school has done to its students in just the last few years can lead anyone to believe it was supported. Transfiguring a student, sending them out into the beast infested forests late at night. I have even let slip myself that they run the risk of poisoning themselves or their pets should they earn my displeasure. But one thing that is not and will not be tolerated is the use of a blood quill.”

At this, her confusion faded, and a haughty smirk came to her thin, cracked, lipstick layered lips. “As the High Inquisitor, it is my duty to the school to ensure that the teachers are enforcing strict, and enduring behavioral corrections. If a scar being the reminder of what one must not do is required, then so be it.”

Severus smiled, and he could tell the Dolores thought this a good thing. It made it all the more pleasant to let out what he wanted to say.

“Lucius Malfoy once spoke highly of you, did he not?” He asked, and she nodded proudly.

“Imagine how quickly the tides will turn when he learns you scarred my daughter, the girl he has hand chosen as the next Madam Malfoy and betrothed to his only son?” He leaned in close, and whispered in her ear, “Imagine what would happen if word got out that you maimed the daughter of a Death Eater?”

He sensed her stiffen, and when he stood back, he was pleased to see her having taken on a grey tone. “Oh, don’t worry, Dolores. I won’t say a word. Unless, of course, Aurora finds herself scarred from detention with you again. However, so you are aware, I am truly not the one you need to fear.”

She backed out of his office without saying another word, tripping over herself to do so. And Severus grinned, knowing his wife was already working on her own retribution against the toad.

January 22nd, 1996

He didn’t like the idea, but the more he went over it in his mind, the more Severus realized it did have a lot of merit. It was a similar thing that had gotten Hermione’s occlumency walls perfected, and she had much more at risk should she have let him in.

Not to mention it was highly amusing to watch both boys shuffle in, confusion on their faces as each whispered insistence that the other had it wrong.
“Actually, I called you both. In. Sit.” He said, and once they were clear of the doors, he flicked his hand and had the door slam and ward itself from entry.

Potter and Draco looked nervously at each other before taking a seat in the guest chairs in front of his desk.

“Potter has a problem, Draco.” He began. “He can’t seem to keep the Dark Lord out of his head. His occlumency, while improving, is not where it should be. Where it needs to be.” He said this while looking at Potter, but turned his attention to Draco. “Do you know how your Aunt managed to become proficient?” He asked.

Draco frowned. “I had thought she was taught by a defense professor.”

“She was, but he not only taught her, but myself at the same time. And one day, when I was far acceding her, he ask that I legilimize her.”

Draco caught on to what was being asked of him much quicker than Potter, the boy having been able to speak Slytherin from a young age. He looked nervous, excited, and terrified all at once.

“Wait,” Potter suddenly said. “You want Draco to use legilimency one me?”

“How much of what is inside your head you aren’t willing for him to see?” He asked with a smirk, watching as Potter blushed fiercely and trying desperately not to. The panic in the boy’s face as his eyes darting to Draco, all while trying not to look at him, nearly had him laughing. “If you can keep out your… friend, then perhaps you can manage to keep the Dark Lord out after all.”

“And is that how you knew Aunt H was willing to court you?” Draco asked, a light flush to his cheeks even as he stared at Severus with suspicion.

“Actually, by that time, I was already courting your Aunt. What she had to hide from me was actually much more life threatening than merely whether she fancied me or not. Why? Is there someone you wish to court? Do you believe Potter somehow holds the answer?”

Potter audibly gulped, and Draco tensed like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to run or punch something.

“Fine.” Draco huffed, grabbing the arms of his chair and turning it and himself to face Potter. He dropped the chair so that it had an audible slam against the floor. “Come on, Potter.” He said, attempting to look and sound causal.

Potter at least had the Gryffindor bravery to turn his chair in a much more gentle fashion, though he seemed to need to muster more of it up in order to look Draco in the eye.

For a moment, Severus was wondering if, perhaps, he was being a bit too cruel in his attempts to get Potter to shield as he should. Yes, Hermione had learned quite quickly how to keep her mind closed after the incident, and yes, her secrets truly meant her life if she revealed them. But perhaps the mutual attraction the boys shared was equally as dangerous, in a different way. Draco may not have flaunted his betrothal to Aurora about the school, but Severus wondered what the others actually knew. And if they found out how much the other cared….

“Legilimens.” Draco said, and Potter flinched a moment before staring the blonde in the eye.

A few minutes passed, and Severus had watched them the whole time.

At first, Potter looked ready for battle, and Draco unsure. As minutes went by, Potter began to smirk, and Draco more determined. A time or two, the was a growl of frustration, and Potter chuckling to
himself.

Draco broke the connection and looked to Severus. “I can’t get in.” He said. “Even when the blighter shows me something, I can’t follow the lead, he slams the doors shut before I can dig up anything.”

Potter looked proud, smug even, as he turned to Severus.

“I have been practicing, Professor.” He said, and Severus did acquiesce that the boy had been shielding him more as of late.

The cold realization of why he was able to keep everyone by the Dark Lord out hit Severus like a bludger.

The boy was a living Horcrux. There was a literal connection between the two in Potter’s head. There would be no amount of Legilimency that could stop the connection.

“Indeed.” He said, eyeing Draco. “Potter, I feel… there is something you should know. Not in its entirety, not until I know you can keep the headmaster out.”

“Dumbledore?” Potter frowned but didn’t attempt to question him further when Severus merely nodded.

“There are a few of us among the order who believe the Dark Lord did more than merely mark you as his equal that night, and more than merely connect you through your scar. I believe there is a chance that you will never block him out completely. But, perhaps, you may be able to deter him from using the link.”

“Which would be?” Draco asked.

“I’m not entirely sure. Your aunt may have a few ideas.”

“Thank you, Professor.” Potter said with a slight bow of his head. “I appreciate the honesty. It seems every time I attempt to speak to Dumbledore, he ignores me.”

“If he does not see fit for you to know anything, he will not tell you. It’s his way, unfortunately. Now, the pair of you, go.” He waved them off, and the boys didn’t need to be told twice to leave.

Once the door was shut once more, Severus moved around to sit in his desk chair and contemplate. So, the Horcrux within Potter was linking him with the Dark Lord? So why did he see Arthur Weasley’s attack? The Dark Lord wasn’t there, he’d have merely Avada’ed Arthur. Perhaps…

Perhaps the Dark Lord sent his pet snake. And Nagini is a horcrux.

The item sent to the vault with the LeStranges, the Diary, Potter, something that required the house elf… two more that he didn’t know of. And two of the knowns were only ideas of whereabouts or difficulty. He’d checked Kreacher for any spells linking the old elf to anyone but the owner of Grimmauld place. There hadn’t been any, so it wasn’t as though the Dark Lord had gone through a phase of enslaveing elves. And whatever was done was bad enough that, if Severus’ theory was right, Regulus abandoned his fiercely believed in cause to seek retribution.

Severus sighed heavily. There was no way to know for sure without outright asking the elf, and it was unlikely he’d talk to anyone, anyway. But the possibility that the snake was a horcrux, at least that felt like a step forward when it was beginning to feel like they were all standing still.
“You aren’t seriously thinking of putting your faces on the outside of the building?” Aurora asked the twins as she walked with them through Hogsmeade. It was, essentially, a Valentine’s outing. Away from Umbridge and her umpteen proclamations, and with chaperons that likely weren’t going to be paying too close attention to what the students were doing, the day was filled with people on dates. And while George was following along, Aurora already knew that after a bit, he would slink off eventually and leave she and Fred alone. Though hearing ideas for their officially purchased, entirely their own shop in Diagon Alley wasn’t a bad way to spend part of the day.

“Well one of our faces at least.” Fred said with a shrug. “And as the oldest, and most handsome of the pair, I think it should be me.”

“Oi, you? The most handsome? Rory, tell him… well, wait, your opinion will be biased.” George said, pausing his request for a backup.

“Actually, I believe I’ve told Fred before that you’re the better-looking twin.” She smirked, pleased that she could keep it under control as the twins erupted into noises of teasing and indignation in turns.

“Alright, tabling the idea of a twin on the outside of the building. We’re also thinking of changing the name.” Fred said when George was clearly not going to stop holding the tidbit Aurora offered over his head.

“To what, precisely? Weasley and Weasley is quite a professional sounding business name. Not very indicative of what you sell, of course, but you could always add something as simple as ‘jokes’ at the end.”

“Thought of that.” George said.

“But it was lacking,” Fred added.

“Still not what we are.”

“Too serious.”

“So, we changed it.”

“To something more fun.”

“Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.” They said together.

Aurora smirked, “Certainly not going to be mistaken for serious that way.”

“Excellent,” Fred said.

“It’s what we were going for.” George nodded. “Production is already underway.”
“When we aren’t selling out.” Fred amended.

The twins, she knew, were up late most nights producing whatever was needed. And she knew they were taking potions to try and keep themselves awake, as well. She could taste the wakefulness draught on Fred’s lips more often than not lately. She helped where she could, mostly with the potions since she could brew nearly anything. She knew Lee did as well, though his skills were better put to packaging than potions.

“What has your mother said about all this?” She asked curiously and felt Fred shudder while watching George pale.

“She doesn’t know yet.” He said.

“And we’re hoping someone doesn’t let something slip at the ministry to Dad.”

“Yet you’re planning on putting a likeness of at least one of you on the outside of the building. You don’t think they’re going to question that?” She asked.

“Not up yet, is it?” Fred asked. “And besides, we’re hoping they won’t notice.”

She chuckled at that, wrapping her arm around his elbow and leaning her head on his arm.

George took a giant, sideways step away from them. “And now that it’s officially date time, I’ll be off. Oh look, there’s Katie.” He declared as he took off, she and Fred watching him go.

“Fancy anywhere in particular?” Fred asked once they were more or less alone. “Pretty sure Puddifoot’s is going to be over run today.”

“I don’t need to be anywhere in particular.” She replied with a shrug.

“We could just turn around and casually saunter back to Hogwarts. Wander our way up to the seventh floor. As for somewhere quiet….”

Aurora smiled and blushed. Yes, the twins stayed up quite late lately, and yes, she helped. But there were also a few nights that involved sneaking back down to the common room, and, well….

And then there was the room of requirement when they knew that they would need to do work for the shop or their respective homework once curfew hit.

And while she was not near as experienced as the likes of, say, Lavender, she could safely say that Ginny wasn’t the only one of their trio who had any experience with boys that went beyond snogging.

It was happening quickly. Ever since the Christmas hols when Mr Weasley had his confrontation with a giant snake, Fred wasn’t holding back as much. He never pushed for something she wasn’t ready for, and frankly that was really anything that involved clothing removal. He was respectful of the fact that, while he had experience with girls, he was her first… everything.

She cleared her throat. “As tempting as that sounds, and yes, it does sound tempting, I would actually prefer to spend time with you without, umm…."

Fred’s mischievous grin shifted to something warm and genuine. “Then how about we visit ol’ Aberforth. Likely to be a quiet spot.”

“Sounds good,” Aurora said, shifting her hand down his arm to entwine their fingers as Fred led the
Harry had been staring into the fire for the longest time, and it was starting to get a bit worrisome. He’d been quiet since everyone returned from Hogsmeade, and while Aurora had spent most of her time in the Hogs Head talking with Fred, and then later George and Jordan, she gathered via tidbits from the others that Harry was a bit absent.

“Alright, what’s wrong?” Ginny demanded, smacking Harry by leaning over across the space between sofas. He startled, looking around their small group as if he had just realized where he was, and who wasn’t there. “You’ve been out of it since we came back. What’s up?”

Harry huffed, looking around at them all again before running his hand through his hair. “How can you tell if you’ve been on a date with someone?”

They all stared in silence.

“Well,” Neville said, sounding as though he were about to impart some great wisdom. “It usually starts with someone saying, ‘Hey Harry, would you like to go on a date with me?’”

Aurora and Ginny chuckled as Ron shook his head, clapping his hand on his best friend’s shoulder. “Doubt you need to worry about that, mate. You were with Malfoy the whole time. Though how you can put up with that git’s company, I don’t know.”

“And where were you, then?” Ginny asked.

“None of your business,” Ron blushed as red as his hair.

“George said he saw you in at the Owl Post. With a rose.” Aurora said.

“Ooooh, who’s the unlucky girl?” Ginny asked.

“None of your business!” Ron snapped.

“Hermione.” Harry said with a smirk, earning a look of utter betrayal from Ron. “I saw the letter, mate.”

“Was just reminding her we were here, is all.” Ron said petulantly. “Haven’t heard from her in forever, have we?”

“Well, she’s probably busy with her brainiac boyfriend.” Ginny said. “You know, the Snape look alike.”

“Harry thought he might have been on a date with Malfoy. Don’t you think that’s what we should be focusing on?” Ron asked.

“No, I think we need to focus on the fact that you are pinning after the friend you did nothing but complain about.” Aurora said, shifting to get more comfortable on her sofa between Ginny and Neville.

“Or that she chose a bloke who looks nothing like you at all.” Neville mused.
“Oh, shut up, Neville. Like you can talk about pinning and girls that pick other blokes.” Ron snapped.

Neville looked to his lap, and Aurora had to squish the overwhelming instinct to try and comfort him. She had a feeling she knew what Ron was trying to say, especially after St Mungo’s at Christmas.

“Bit low, mate.” Harry chided him, and Ron shrugged and looked away, clearly feeling bad about what he said, but not ready to admit it yet.

“So, what was it about your time with Malfoy that made you wonder if it were a date?” Ginny asked Harry.

He sighed. “It was nice. Just the two of us, you know? We talked about all sorts of stuff. But there was … there was something sort of there, you know? I mean, I was… and he was… and there were moments where…. But it wasn’t like he asked. He didn’t, and I don’t think he assumed, and….”

“Why do you think it could even be a date?” Ron asked.

Harry looked at him, then to the others, to the floor, back to the fire, then swallowed. “I like him.”

“Yeah, I got that.” Ron said sarcastically. “Why else would you want him around.”

“No, I mean… I like him. Like… like Rory and Fred. Or you with ‘Mione.”

Ron’s confusion remained for, what Aurora counted, to be twenty seconds before the furrow in Ron’s brow melted away to shock.

“Harry,” He croaked. “Are you saying that you’re….”

“Well,” he shifted about. “I don’t know for sure, I mean. Maybe.”

“And of all the blokes you could go for… Malfoy?”

Harry chuckled. “Yeah.”

“Blimey.” Ron said as though someone knocked the breath out of him. “Need to talk to Sirius about this. At least he has a thing for Remus….”

“So, you aren’t completely oblivious after all.” Aurora smirked.

“Surprises the heck out of me.” Ginny said, earning a scowl from her brother. “What, you barely noticed that the reason Seamus and Dean have been joined at the hip was….?”

“Yes, yes, I get it.” Ron grumbled. “Look, mate, if you didn’t at least hold hands, I think it’s safe to say you and Malfoy were just hanging out. And seriously, you can do better.”

“Thanks, Ron.” Harry said, and Ron took it at face value and smiled, pleased with himself.

“He was dropped on his head as a child, wasn’t he?” Aurora asked Ginny quietly.

“Quite sure this is all Fred and George’s doing. Too many pranks on him.”
Chapter End Notes

It's a minor miracle! And update within a week of the last one! It's going to go faster through the OotP for the next couple chapters, and then maybe back to tie up the final loose ends in the past. After that, well, I have a lot of changes already outline. Until next time!
Harry had been quiet all day, and if Ron was to be believed, even stayed behind to speak with her Dad after class. So when he asked all of them to meet in the room of requirement prior to dinner, Aurora had a feeling it was about something in particular. Perhaps even the nightmare that had him screaming loud enough that Fred and George claimed to hear it in the seventh year dorms.

The room formed a simple space, though she snickered to herself at the round table with one high backed chair. Harry went for it, seemingly drawn to it as he had his head cast down, his mind appearing to be miles away. Ron sat beside him on his right, Draco on his left, and Aurora joined him with Neville sitting beside her. Ginny and Luna amusedly couldn’t seem to decide who would sit where, giggling before settling so that the blonde acted as a buffer between the siblings.

After a few minutes of silence, Ron leaned around Harry to look at Draco, the two of them having a silent argument over who should be the one to snap Harry out of it, and get him to tell them what was going on.

In the end, it was their gesturing that seemed to do the trick, and Harry gave a small smile at their pair before clearing his throat.

“I’ve been getting secret lesson’s from Snape.” He started. “In occlumency.”

“How bad were your headaches?” Aurora asked quietly.

“Actually, they aren’t that bad.” Harry said. “But, well, it was to try to keep… Riddle out.”

Aurora frowned, but it was Neville that asked, “out how?”

“Well, it’s not like, well, what happened to Gin. Snape says that I’m linked to him through my scar. We didn’t know before a few weeks back that it wasn’t possible to, well, to block him out. See, I guess I’m getting pretty good at Occlumency. Kept Draco out. Can keep Snape out for a while, too. But nothing I do can keep out Vold-Riddle. So, umm, anyway, I had a vision last night. Not one I meant to have, or, I guess, maybe it wasn’t a ‘vision’ so much as a connection to him. And… he’s after something in the department of ministries.”

“We knew that already,” Ron said. “’S why Dad got attacked.”

“Yeah, but what ever it is… I don’t think just anyone can handle it. There was a man, Rockwood, one of the ones that escaped Azkaban? He told … him that Bode wouldn’t have been able to go for it. Even under Malfoy’s imperious curse.”

Draco snorted, shook his head, but Aurora could see the nervous sort of shame in his eyes.
“It’s not like you did it,” Ron mumbled, glancing at Malfoy as if he were too scared to hold eye contact.

Draco shrugged one shoulder. “No, but it’s the name, isn’t it? I get that my father and his father and so on believed in blood purity. I get that they wanted to preserve the old ways. But imperiousing a man to get a weapon for a psychopath? Sending him to his death when he still couldn’t do it? Despicable.”

“You’re not your father, Draco.” Harry said, and the blonde shot his head around and looked at Harry incredulously. “No one here is ever going to think that. Even if we still call you Malfoy, it doesn’t mean we’re thinking of you two as one in the same.”

Harry had given Draco such a warm, earnest smile that Aurora shifted with the feeling of invading a very personal moment. She wasn’t the only one, either, and it seemed the boys had no idea what was going on around them as they remained frozen for a moment.

“So what do you think it is?” Neville asked, and that broke up the staring contest.

“I don’t know.” Harry said. “I talked to Snape about it. He said there was a meeting last night, that he was there, that… well, someone was punished for some bad information. He seemed relieved I lost contact with Volde-Riddle before he did it. He also said he was fairly certain he knew what the Dark Lord was after, but he couldn’t say. Not until I perfected my occlumency.”

“Why not?” Ron asked.

“Because good ol’ Dumbledore has been buggering around in our minds without our permission.” Draco said. “I never noticed until Uncle Severus pointed it out, but after then, I could feel the faintest little niggling in the back of my mind whenever I was around the Headmaster. I kept thinking that maybe there was something I forgot, that I almost always tried to think of during meals. Now? Well, the old goat was just trying to get info, wasn’t he?”

“Come to think of it,” Aurora said, “I know what you mean. I hardly noticed it before.”

“Well if you never noticed it, than how do ya know he’s doing it?” Ron asked.

“He might not be to us.” Ginny said. “And if he was, would we really notice?”

“I tend to think of some of my favorite creatures when he pops into my head.” Luna said dreamily. “Nargles in particular. He doesn’t stick around long after that.”

“So Snape knows, and thinks you should know, but doesn’t want the Headmaster to know you know? Why not?” Ginny asked.

“Because if Dumbledore wanted me to know, he’d have told me.” Harry replied bitterly.

“How do you know it’s not something that you shouldn’t know? Like, at all?” Neville asked nervously. “Maybe he’s not telling you for a reason.”

The table was silent as everyone waited for Harry’s answer, which came at barely above a whisper, “because I actually trust Snape more than I trust Dumbledore.” He looked up at everyone, shrugging. “Don’t be so surprised. Who taught us wordless defense over the holidays?”

“You learned that from Snape?!” Neville asked.

Harry nodded. “And he’s… well, he’s always been as forthcoming as he can be with me, when I
ask, and when I do so respectfully. His wife is my Godmother, and while I haven’t gotten to know her, Sirius talks about her as if she could defeat Voldemort with nothing more than firm words. I’ve known Rory since Primary school. Dumbledore sent me to live with the Dursleys. Dumbledore didn’t want me moving in with Sirius. Snape fought for it.”

“How do you know?” Ron asked, not suspiciously as Rory would have thought.

“Because Sirius told me. He said that, despite what it seemed that night in the Shack, they were mates once. And I should trust him.”

Before more could be said, the pop of a house elf drew their attention to the side of the room. A table had appeared, and a small buffet of food was laid out.

“Many apologies, Harry Potter, sir. But Dobby had been thinking that maybe Harry Potter and his friends would be getting hungry. It is dinner time, sir.”

“Thanks, Dobby.” Harry said.

The little elf beamed, his eyes flapping merrily before he disappeared.

“One of these days I will have to get you back for freeing my favorite elf.” Draco said as he got up from his chair and headed over to the buffet. “There aren’t any others as great as he was.”

“Oi, who said you could just get up and waltz over?” Ron said as he clamored to his feet.

“My stomach, Weasley. If I let you get to the food first, there wouldn’t be any.”

April 2nd, 1996

The school was filled with rumors over what happened the day before, but Harry being a witness had offered them a first hand account.

They had been in the room of requirement, practicing their nonverbals, their patronuses, essentially coming to what Aurora felt would be the inevitable conclusions of their lessons. As it was, it seemed at this point that there wasn’t much point in meeting as a group. About half the members hadn’t even bothered arriving, whether because of more pressing homework or quidditch practice, or simply from lack of energy. As it was, she and Fred had snuck out early, wanting to have some quiet time with one another on his birthday. George hadn’t even shown up, nor had Katie for that matter.

They were on the astronomy tower, thankfully not snogging, when a Luna, Ginny, and a Hufflepuff girl came up. They did their best to seem out of breath as they leaned on the rail, appearing as though they’d been looking up at the stars all night. When Crabbe and Goyle lumbered their way up, they were puffing and puffing way more than the girls had been, and therefore (for reasons Aurora couldn’t fathom at the time) left them be.

It was the following morning that it came to light. Marietta Edgecombe had gone to Umbridge, deciding to rat out the lot of them, and triggered the jinx in Ginny’s parchment. She was, apparently, confined to the hospital wing with the word “Snitch” written across her face in purple, painful looking pimples.
“Malfoy had shoved me in an alcove.” Harry had said, his cheeks turning a bit pink. “But I disillusioned him when it was clear there was no way we were not going to get caught.”

“Bloody idiot, is what you are!” Draco sneered.

“I was protecting you.” Harry snapped back. “It was your house coming after us, you know.”

“And you think I need protecting from them?”

“How would it have looked if you were caught colluding with Harry?” Aurora asked. “Either because you were with him while running from that room, or because you were found in an alcove together.”

Draco had the decency to look somewhat sheepish despite the sneer still plastered on his lips.

“Anyway,” Harry continued, “I was brought to the office. Fudge was there, so was Percy.”

“Prat,” the Weasleys all said together.

“We were ratted out by Marietta, I guess that’s how she got the,” Harry said, looking to Ginny as he waved a hand around his face.

“Damn right it was,” She said in seething tone. “Anyone who says a word betraying us gets the same treatment.”

“Why would she?” Ron asked.

“One would think it was because her parents both work at the ministry,” Luna said, “But I suspect it’s because Harry hasn’t returned Cho’s affections after she kissed him before Christmas.”

“Cho Chang kissed you?” Draco said, no hint of emotion in his voice or in his features.

Harry shrugged. “She sort of sprang it on me. I’m not sure why she did it, she was crying the whole time.”

“She fancies you, and had even when she was with Cedric. But now that he’s gone, she’d been torn between feeling like she should move on with you and trying to stay true to Cedric for the time being.” Luna looked around at each of them, serene as ever, an implication in her eyes that everyone should have known. “When you didn’t pay much attention to her after that, she wasn’t your biggest fan. Marietta’s her best friend, she did what she thought would cause you the most pain.”

“Cho wasn’t there.” Ron pointed out.

“Doesn’t matter.” Harry said, waving it all off. “Whatever her reasons were, she did it. She didn’t say exactly what was going on, anyway. Just that there was a meeting that Umbridge would be interested in knowing about. Anyway, so I was pulled up to the office, and, well, Umbridge was trying to make a case that I was the leader of the band and all, but for whatever reason, Marietta started denying she knew the truth. I think someone may have spelled her, there was something funny with her eyes. And Umbridge was getting a bit out of hand, and Fudge was getting uncomfortable. He calmed Umbridge, and then he started asking me if I was the leader of our group, and was leading a revolt against authority. When I said no… Umbridge pulled out the list of our names. I guess Pansy Parkinson got into the room, found it on our board.”

Draco smirked, “She’s much smarter than many give her credit for.”
“Yeah, well, her smarts had us all under suspicion.” Harry said, giving Draco a meaningful look. He paled, and and Harry nodded. “I think it may be best you don’t go home for the Easter Hols.”

“Probably not,” He said, swallowing.

“Then, well, that’s when things got… funny. See, we had ‘DA’ on the parchment, but not what it stood for. Dumbledore took the blame. He said that he was the leader of the elicit group. That ‘DA’ actually stood for Dumbledore’s Army, and that tonight was supposed to be our first meeting. That he was going to have us rise up against the ministry. Fudge tried to arrest him, and, well, he escaped.”

“And that’s why the toad is headmistress now.” Ginny said, glaring at the school as if she could pierce the walls and find the pink thing that way.

“Except, I don’t think the school accepts her that way.” Aurora said, and everyone looked at her curiously. “Haven’t any of you read *Hogwarts: A History*? It was practically mandatory reading in my house.” Draco snorted, but the rest of them just looked wistful for a moment. “Anyway, it says in there that Hogwarts has the right to accept or deny a headmaster or mistress. That no one would be able to enter the head’s tower while claiming the title unless the school allowed it.”

“Well it’s not like Dumbledore died, he just fled.” Neville said.

“Which could be construed as abandoning his post, which has happened in the past with other heads. Then the successor was still allowed access. Even Aunt,er, Professor McGonagall wouldn’t be allowed in, despite her being deputy. Because she herself is not claiming the title of headmistress, and therefore, the tower is on lock down.”

“Blimey, you reminded me of ‘Mione for a moment.” Ron said.

“Think she’s already paired off with a Weasley.” Draco snickered.

“Oi, not like I want to date her, anyway. She’s a Snape, after all. My brother’s mental for it.”

“What the bloody hell is wrong with being a Snape?” Aurora growled.

“Nothing, really, just wouldn’t want to have to deal with your dad. And it’s not like I want to date Hermione, either.”

“Right, you just send her letters and flowers, invite her miles away from where she’s currently living to attend a ball with you.” Draco commented.

“Whinge about how she isn’t around anymore.” Ginny offered.

“Doesn’t mean I like her like that, alright? She’s my friend. Just my friend.”

“Then why are you blushing.” Neville asked quietly. Ron scrunched up his face, about ready to say something, when a loud *BOOM* echoed from inside the castle.

Everyone looked around at each other, Aurora finding her father in the shadows of the courtyard speaking with Aunt Min, both looking at the castle. They took off running when a loud *BANG*, and a crackle echoed out to them, and the group of friends scrambled to their feet and followed them inside.

It was instant chaos, and Aurora knew precisely who was behind said chaos. Fred had whispered in her ear that morning at breakfast that it would be a good idea to be very visible at lunch time, to not
be able to be held in suspicion. And some of the fireworks spelled things in the air as they whizzed about and exploded.

It was quite impressive, of course, but nothing in comparison with the utter shock on disbelief on her friend’s faces when her father’s deep throated laugh was heard between the explosions.

April 11th, 1996

They reappeared somewhere with a crack. Not a loud one, of course, but enough that they had to have been noticed. And yet there was utter silence.

“You can open your eyes.” Fred teased, but Aurora still hesitated.

“Where are we?” She asked. She’d tried to get him to tell her where they were apparating to, but Fred was quiet on the subject. George was with Katie, Ginny had gone to visit Luna across the meadow, Ron had gone to see Harry at Grimmauld place. Instead of staying under Molly’s smothering eye, Fred had convinced her to get away. Only for a moment, no one would really notice. And Aurora, desperate to get away from a glare from Molly that screamed a thousand questions, ones that likely had nothing to do with Aurora herself, she was more than willing to do so.

“One way to find out,” Fred said, stroking her hair.

She pulled away from him, and finally opened her eyes. “Oh,” She said in a breathless way, looking up and around at the multi-story menagerie of joy and mischief. “Wow,” She added, her hand coming into contact with a banister as she mindlessly moved down the stairs to what would be the first floor. She ignored that Fred had intentionally apparated them to a landing that would clearly give her the best view of the shop.

Aurora gazed about, seeing there were still spots to be filled with merchandise, there were boxes in the corner that had clearly come from the muggle world. It wasn’t quite ready, but it was a near thing. She moved to the front counter where the register was mostly set up, and ran her fingers along it.

“So this is what you and George have been up to,” She said over her shoulder, taking in Fred’s proud stance and smug smirk.

“Of course. Not everything in life is about mischief. Besides, we needed a safe spot to make more of the wildfire whizbangs.”

“I quite liked those,” She smiled as he came down the stairs toward her.

“Glad to hear it,” he said, hoisting her up on the counter once he was close enough. He stepped between her legs, and she leaned in and kissed him. He kissed her back, but despite being alone, he didn’t take it behind that. When he pulled back, he ran his hands from her waist to her ribs, back again, looking her in the eye.

It was an intense moment that had Aurora’s heart in her stomach, her chest compressed, her lips eager to return to his lest the say what she shouldn’t even be thinking.

“I,” Fred said, his eyes taking in her face. He swallowed, “Rory, I,” He stopped again. It was so clear on his face, the way he felt in that moment. It was clear, because she felt the same way.
Everything she felt for Fred was reflected back at her in his features, that she summoned the courage to tell him what she had known for a while. She was falling in love with him, if she wasn’t already.

“George and I likely won’t be at Hogwarts much longer.”

His words stopped hers before she could say anything, and her mouth snapped closed as she looked at him in confusion.

“Alright,” she said slowly. “Well, that would make sense. You’re in your final year, you’ll be taking your NEWTs in June.”

“We might not make it to June.” He confessed, and everything inside her went cold.

“What do you mean?” She said softly. “Why aren’t you going to finish?”

“With Umbridge as Headmistress? Proclamation whatever whatever saying there will no longer be any recreational activities? Quidditch included? Hogwarts is quickly going to the toads, and we’re not sure we want to stick around for it.”

“And your education?” She asked.

“Don’t think there’s much more we’re gonna be learning, at this point. Most of our classes when we get back will start NEWT reviews.”

“So that’s it?” She said, forcing Fred to step back as she slid off the counter. She glared up at him. “

He smiled, though there wasn’t any body to it. “What would you have us do, Rory? We’re expected to be open for the summer, and school, well, it eats up at the time we could be doing making our merchandise. We already have a wait list for many of them. We need to hire help, but can’t exactly post a job listing stating interviews were to be held at Hogsmeade on Hogwarts Hogsmeade weekends.”

“And if the business fails? What then?”

“Don’t believe in us?” He asked with a coldness to his tone.

“It’s not that!” Aurora protested. “There is a war, Fred! A war that might not allow your business to flourish!”

“I think the war is exactly why it’s going to flourish,” he said calmly, picking up a knick knack from the counter and chucking it in the air. “People are going to need a reason to smile. Seems like a pretty good life, giving people what they need.”

Well, she couldn’t really argue that point.

“Rory,” he said, setting the knick knack back down and placed his hands on her shoulders, forcing her to stay where she was and look at him. Not like she would or could flee. “I promise, we’re thinking it over carefully.”

“You had best.” She scowled.

“Careful, your Hermione’s showing.” He teased, and she smacked him on the shoulder. Laughing, he said, “It’s not a bad thing. Now if your Snape was showing….”

“Oh shut it!” She said, grabbing his lapels and kissing him to make him stop laughing. It wasn’t the best tactic, he was still chuckling against her lips. He moved his hands back down to her waist, and
she slid her hands around his neck as she drew back to look at him. “Careful, Weasley.”

“Why?” He asked.

“Because you might just have me saying something I don’t think I’m ready to say yet.”

His eyes glittered, not with mirth, but with something else. “What would that be, then?”

“Won’t say.”

“Could it be an emotion that stems from right here?” He asked, taking one hand away to place his hand over her heart.

“It might.” She said, chewing her lip.

“Think it might be contagious, then. Cause I have a similar feeling right here.” He said, taking a hand off his neck and placing it over his heart. It beat rapidly, like hers, and her breath caught at the implications.

“If that’s the case,” She said, “It doesn’t matter if you leave Hogwarts now or in June. It’s going to be hard without you.”

He drew her into his arms, and she embraced him back as reality caught up with her.

She loved him, and Aurora now knew that he loved her, too. But the reality of three years at Hogwarts without him hadn’t really sunk in before this moment, and she held on just a little tighter at the horrible thought that Fred was very likely going to disappear from her life.

April 28th, 1996

She crept down to the common room, though unlike other nights, it didn’t feel the same.

Since returning from the Easter Hols, she and Fred had met in the common room quite late at night, when many of the others were asleep or at least to bed. Umbridge had a member of her “Inquisitional Squad” posted where the Room of Requirement would be, so it was off limits to everyone, not just those who had been part of the DA. There was snogging, but nothing more. There was conversation, but nothing of meaning. There was an underlying of something neither confessed to, yet there also seemed to be a hippogriff in the room as to why they wouldn’t.

They hadn’t seen each other all day, and considering it was a Sunday, that was worrisome as it was. The fact that she’d seen Lee whispering to them earlier in the evening, seeming to try and convince them not to do something didn’t help.

She moved around to sit on the sofa next to him, recalling all too clearly how this was how they began. Only then, Fred hadn’t looked so resigned.

“I forget a lot that you’re only fifteen.” He started.

“Yeah.” She said, because she honestly couldn’t think of what else there could have been to say.

“And you’re going to be here for a bit longer than I am. Even if we weren’t planning on leaving tomorrow.”
“Tomorrow?” She asked, sad and confused.

“We have something special planned, you’ll want to see it. But we can’t do it, Rory. We can’t stay when we know we don’t have to. We’re of age, we don’t need NEWTs for anything, and if we suddenly do, we’ll take them at the Ministry.”

“At least you have a contingency.” She said, and he smirked for just a moment.

“You know I can’t make you wait for me, right?” He said more to his lap than to her.

She snorted, “Wouldn’t it be you waiting for me?”

“Maybe,” He said with a tilt of his head. “Except, well. I love you, Rory. Never felt that way about a girl before. But just because I love you doesn’t mean I should make you go through your formidable years attached to a bloke you’ll never get to see.”

“Right.” She said. “And it’s not like you want to be tied down to a school girl while you’re the big business man.” She said, not caring that she sounded cold in the least.

“It’s not like that.” Fred snapped, and she met his gaze square on. “If I could keep you, I would. You’re quite the catch, Aurora Snape, and I know I’m not the only one who thinks that. But it’s not fair to you to keep you. You’re young, still.”

“And you’re ancient, now, are you?”

“Older than you. Bit wiser, too.”

“That’s stretching it a bit.”

“Oi, not all about brains, you know.” He said, smirking genuinely. “Please,” He said as his smirk faded. “Please understand that it’s not something I want to do. But I made your parents a promise, that I would be good to you, and not hurt you. And I know I’m doing that now, but I worry what might happen if we don’t… if I don’t.”

Her chest constricted, and her eyes stung. “So you won’t even try?” She asked softly.

“Three years, Rory.” He said, reaching out and stroking her cheek. “You think Hermione would ever forgive me if your studies ever faltered because you were busy trying to write me, or see me?”

She huffed, smiling in spite of herself. “My mum would kill me. Then you. Then find a way to reanimate me so she could kill me again.”

“Be right clever, too. Flawlessly executed, I’m sure.”

Aurora nodded, and for a moment, it didn’t feel like they were breaking up. For a moment, she wanted to tell him how her parents survived two years apart with very little contact. That they made it despite that and more impossible obstacles. But she remembered that they were older when it happened. That it was only one year in Hogwarts, and then they were apprentices. That it wasn’t a case of her father being older, but forced into a position that he didn’t ask for.

She sniffed, then leaned in and kissed Fred for what would be the last time. If this is what he wanted, what he needed of her, than she would do it.

“You need to go.” She said as she drew back. “You need to go upstairs so I don’t start pleading for you to change your mind again.”
“Rory….”

“No, you’re right. You’re right, it’s too much. Too long. And, well, we might be different people in three years, right? My formidable years. I get it.”

There was quiet, and she nearly thought she could keep herself together as Fred did what she asked, and rose from the couch. But then he gently placed his hand on her shoulder, and her face crumpled in an effort to keep her sob quiet.

“I wish it could have been different.” He said softly. “And ….” He never finished his sentence, the pain in his voice evident enough to all the things he wanted to say. That he’d be there, he’d still be her friend, all the things that they were before they were a couple.

When she heard his footsteps fading as he went upstairs, Aurora fell sideways on the sofa and sobbed quietly.

April 29th, 1996

She didn’t go to classes. Aunt Poppy took one look at her when she went to the hospital wing, and sent off a memo to all her teachers that she would be absent from class. She was put in a bed, curtained off, in hopes that she would get the sleep she would sorely need.

“Where is she?” She heard her father ask as he silently entered the infirmary.

“Over there,” Aunt Poppy said. “I don’t think the poor thing slept all night. She’s dehydrated, but when I attempted to give her a potion, she vomited it up. She couldn’t settle.”

“What’s wrong with her?” He asked, his voice coming closer.

“I suspect a hefty dose of heart break.”

She looked up as her father stepped around the partition, and her face crumpled at the sight of his concern.

“Oh, Rory.” He said gently, coming to her side like he would when she was small. He sat on her bed, and did his best to scoop her in his arms. He soothed her hair as she wept, surprised she had any more tears to give. After the initial wave faded, he asked, “What did he do to you? Should I dismember him? Put his head in a jar as part of my collection. He’d look wonderful between the Cornish pixie and the Russian pig goat.”

That had her chuckling wetly. “Dismemberment not needed, he didn’t hurt me. Not really.”

“Then why are you so upset that you’re confined to a hospital bed, and look like you’ve taken a dozen stinging hexes to the face.”

“Dad.” She groaned.

“What? You cry like your mother: ugly and puffy.”

She rolled her eyes. “He broke up with me. Said he had to. He’s leaving the school today.” She sniffed, and curled against her father.
He stroked her hair a couple times before he said, “At least he did the right thing.” She frowned, and as if he saw it, he explained. “You know your mother’s and mine’s concern when this endeavor began: You were too young. And, at the time, you were. And you still are, as in you should not promise your heart and time so soon. Your mother and I are, after all, an exception.”

“I know.” She said. “But it still hurts.”

“I know.” He said. “But you’re stronger than this. You’ve had your cry, and as evident by your face and Aunt Poppy’s diagnoses, it was quite thorough. Now you can start healing. Would it make you feel better to hex dummies? To brew?”

“Brewing would be distracting.” She said.

“Alright. Let Aunt Poppy give you your potion, feed you, then you can come down to my private lab and brew the replacements for the hydration potions you used. But clean up, first. The potion does not call for essence of mucus.”

She snorted, “thanks dad.” She said, meaning it despite the sarcastic tone it took on.

“That’s my girl.” He said, patting her head and getting up.

She did brew once Aunt Poppy gave her the all clear, and she finished just in time to see her ex and his brother depart the school in a blaze of swamp like glory. He looked back, and he met her eye before he disappeared. And while it hurt, she breathed through it. Most first loves weren’t forever, after all.

Chapter End Notes

I updated again! Two chapters in as many days. Both probably filled with embarassing typos and issues, but I am flying solo here. That said, this is me making up for terrible posting habits by taking a rare, commission free time period and playing catch-up. A very Aurora chapter, but it bridges to the finale of "Book 5" which I now think will be about 2 or three chapters, depending on how they flow. And I'm sorry, so, so, so sorry to the Aurora/Fred fans, but this was planned before they even got together. Sorry.
Hermione had been pushing down a headache since arriving at the ministry first thing that morning. Leo had been particularly frustrating the last few days, protesting that if the Weasley twins could decide to up and leave Hogwarts because they felt they didn’t need it anymore, then why couldn’t he do the same for muggle school?

Once she finally got him to the school, she apparated back to the house and flooed right back to the ministry where she dealt with yet another child.

“Where is he hiding, Mistress Snape? We’ve given you all you needed to know!” Minister Fudge had whined.

“I can’t express this enough to you, Minister. The calculations say that he is not hiding.”

That had led to another hour of him begging her to recalculate the results with varying differences. By the end, he’d asked her to change to many things, she calculated that Albus turned himself into a goat and was being harbored in Hogsmeade by his brother. Aurors were dispatched. Percy Weasley called fudge brilliant. Hermione wanted a drink.

Too bad it wasn’t even noon.

“Mistress Snape!” Someone called as she headed down the corridor toward the lobby. Since it wasn’t Fudge, she stopped and turned to see a small, blotchy little wizard rushing toward her. “Mistress Snape, I have been trying to contact you, but no one seems to know how.”

“How can I help you?” She frowned, not knowing who he was and not wanting to seem rude.

He took a moment to catch his breath. “I’m from the department of Education, NEWTs and OWLs division.”

Finally, something going right.

“Did you receive my recommendations for modifying the quills?” She asked him with a genuine smile, and the little man beamed back.

“Oh yes! It’s been quite affective. But I do wonder, why were we not able to test it with the ink you wrote about? The one that changed color should a student manage to use a cribbing spell?”
“My husband, Master Snape, has to brew it special. I’m terribly sorry that he wasn’t able to get it to you in time for testing, but he tells me the new headmistress has him brewing so many other potions for her … methods of discipline that he likely didn’t have enough ready in time. But I assure you, he will have them all potted and ready for the exams.”

“Most excellent!” The small man beamed. “But I do wonder, what made you think to have the word ‘Dunderhead’ appear in ink on the writer’s forehead when he cheated?

Hermione grinned, “A favorite word of someone I care for. If you’ll excuse me, sir, I would quite like to escape before our esteemed Minister discovers that, perhaps, the calculations he’s had me run are a bit preposterous.”

He chuckled, thanked her again, and let her be on her way.

She was smiling to herself as she crossed the lobby of the ministry, deciding that, perhaps, she would pop out into the muggle world and treat herself to a proper, fancy coffee to help reduce her headache before downing a vial of pain relief. She deserved it, after all, knowing how well her plan was coming together.

She was crossing the street when she heard the sound of her rarely used cell phone. Once she was safely on the other side, she withdrew it, flipping it open with one hand. “Hello?” She answered.

“Mrs Snape? This is Principle Brooks from Little Whinging Secondary. It seems Leonidas didn’t turn up at school today….”

“Oh, blood hell.” She sighed heavily. “I dropped him off in the building. How could he have suddenly not… never mind. Thank you for informing me, Principle Brooks. I know just where he would have gone.” She hung up, looked longingly at the coffee shop just three doors down, and turned around, deciding it best to walk to Grimmauld place, at least part way, in order not to hex her son at first sight.

—H—

“You should have sent me an owl or a patronus the moment he came through the floo.” She scolded Sirius as he opened the door for her. He chuckled, waving her in. “It’s not funny, Sirius. He would have had to walk an hour and a half from the school, through the woods so he wasn’t seen, just to get back to the cottage to floo here in the first place. And he’s supposed to be in school!”

“The boy is as smart as a whip, Hermione. What in Merlin’s name would he need muggle school for, anyway?”

“Because he is a half-blood, Sirius. And he needs to know all of his roots. And let’s not forget what an utter joke Muggle Studies is.”

“I will allow you that, it is a farce, but Hermione, the boy is a twelve-year-old who two years ahead of his peers.”

“That doesn’t mean he can just… not go. Honestly, I knew the twins would end up being a bad influence on my child, I was just wrong in my guess as to which one.” She sighed heavily, meeting Sirius’ amused gaze. “Where is he?”
“Upstairs, in the library.” He said.

She nodded once, then headed up.

When she opened the door, Leo was sitting in a chair, a large tomb in his lap, and for a moment, he didn’t realize anyone was there. When he looked up, he fell off his chair, eyes wide and terrified as he backed up against it. “Mum, what? I….”

“Did you really think your school wouldn’t call me when it became abundantly clear that you weren’t going to be there?” She asked as she crossed her arms. “And what were you thinking? Do you realize how much trouble you would be in if anyone saw you walking out on your own? I realize you’re a wizard, Leo, but magic isn’t going to get you out of every pickle you find yourself in. And it could have made matters even worse. And flooing here by yourself? Without letting Uncle Sirius know?"

“I’m sorry.” He said, and while she could tell he didn’t really mean it, she could see that he was starting to realize what might have happened if he had gotten caught.

“You’re coming with me, and we’re going to go to Diagon Alley.”

“What, why?” He asked, trying to reign in his excitement and failing spectacularly.

“You’ll see.”

—-*H*-—

It was worth showing up just to see the utterly terrified look on Fred Weasley’s face. His eyes had dark circles beneath them, worse than those of his brothers, and that at least brought some satisfaction to a mother of a daughter left heartbroken.

“’Mione.” He said apprehensively.

“Oh, don’t get your pants in a knot, I’m not here to hex you.” She said, suppressing a grin as he sighed with relief. “Leonidas, here, has determined that the two of you have the way of it. He skipped out on Muggle school today, because he no longer feels he has a need for an education with them. Therefore, I feel it best that he sees what it is you two left school for.” Fred had been looking between her and her son at an increasing speed, a look of guilt and unease that George didn’t wear.

“Can he brew? His sister was brewing for us for a bit, but someone decided to ditch her.” George asked.

“I can probably brew better than you can.” Leo challenged.

“Is that a challenge, little Snape?” He asked.

“It could be.”

“You will not attempt anything dangerous by trying to brew faster than is necessary. If any of you wind up in St Mungo’s, hexing will be the least of your worries.” Hermione warned before turning to her son. “They are your bosses now, so you must listen to what they have to say. No insults, no back talk.”
“Didn’t one of them spurn my sister and shatter her heart?” Leo deadpanned.

“Well,” She cringed. “Not quite how it went, but that’s something you must set aside.”

“If I must.” He said looking up at the twins, glancing between the two. “Alright Messers Weasley, I am at your service. At the very least until five o’clock. No later than eight. That’s my bedtime.”

“Let me show you to the lab.” George said, putting an arm around Leo’s shoulders and guiding him inside.

Fred watched them before turning back to Hermione, and she could tell he wanted to say something.

“Don’t.” She said before he could do more than open his mouth. “I asked you not to lead her on or make her any promises. If it’s meant to be, you two will find your way back to one another. In the meantime, move on, as best you can.”

He nodded, then waved as she turned away.

For a moment, she felt nauseous, saying such things to Fred when she herself had never parted ways from her first love. She felt like a fraud, someone who shouldn’t be giving any advice about the heart. She shook her head, headed to the leaky, and made her way back to muggle London.

June 20th, 1996

“Stop fussing, Lass.” Hermione heard as she came down the corridor of St Mungo’s, tin of Minerva’s favorite shortbreads in hand.

“You’ve known me how long, Minerva? Of course, I’m going to fuss about.” Delia’s voice replied sternly, her accent thicker from the years she’d lived deep in the Scottish Highlands.

“You shouldn’t be, I tell you. Didn’t your son just come home for a visit? Go be with him.” Minerva scolded as Hermione came into the doorway, physically trying to shoo off Delia.

“I think we all know very well that Oliver won’t mind terribly if his mother visits his favorite aunt. And former head of house.”

Delia smiled smugly at Minerva, pleased she had an ally, then came over and embraced Hermione.

“It’s been too long since our last visit.” She said into Hermione’s curls. “And honestly, you should have seen the look on Oliver’s face when I told him that the Hermione Granger was his foster sister.”

“I am willing to bet it didn’t last long before his focus was once more on Quidditch. How’s he doing, anyway? Still playing for Puddlemere?”

“Still in the reserves, yeah. Not sure how Bob woulda felt about it, but I’m sure pride would have been among it all.”

Hermione’s heart twisted a moment at the thought of her departed foster father, the years having only dulled the hurt.

“Don’t tell me the pair’o ya are going to start gaining up on me.” Minerva said from the bed, and the women parted with a chuckle.
“That really depends. Does bringing you your favorite shortbreads count as ganging up on you in anyway?” She asked, showing Minerva the tin.

“So long as the bloody Mediwitches don’t decide I can’t have it.” She grumbled. “I know I’m not a young woman anymore, but a stunner to the heart isn’t something I should be confined to bed for.”

“Don’t be foolish, Minerva.” Delia said. “Bob’d have made sure you didn’t move an inch, not a one, from where you are right now. And you’d best believe that if Mal could have gotten here, he’d have had the Mediwitches be stricter with ya.”

“And as the eldest, I think I can say I know what’s best.” Minerva retorted.

“Are you truly feeling alright, though?” Hermione asked, and Minerva seemed hesitant to reply.

“Truth be told, Hermione, dear, it wasn’t pretty. But while I was quite weak at the time, the feeling has waned. I should be able to go back to the school and oversee that that retched toad doesn’t destroy it.”

“I’m beginning to think Hogwarts has gone downhill since Hermione’s time. Quite glad Olly got out when he did.” Delia commented.

“It’s likely only to get worse, too.” Hermione added.

“I’m afraid I agree with ye.” Minerva said before she shook her head and shifted as straight as she could in the hospital bed. “Now, enough of this doom and gloom. If you’re going to visit me, you’re going to do it with decent conversation.”

June 21st, 1996

“You’re OWLs are the first stepping stone of the rest of your life.” The toad said as Severus handed out the pots of special ink. He was fairly certain they would work, Hermione’s arithmancy rarely wrong, but they couldn’t exactly test it out ahead of time. He paused at Potter’s desk, and when the boy looked up, he gave a meaningful look at the scar on his left hand before setting the pot of ink on his desk. Potter had frowned, picking it up and looking at it as though he’d never seen ink before, but Severus was starting to realize that it had nothing to do with the boy’s lack of intelligence. He just had the unfortunate trait of looking utterly clueless while figuring things out.

He continued, all the fifth years gathered in the hall, most nervous, few confident, as they listened to Dolores drown on and on about how this particular OWL, the Defense Against the Dark Arts written portion, should be a breeze with the amount they had read. And how their knowledge would reflect back on their professor.

Oh, if only she knew.

“Once Professor Snape has finished delivering the pots of ink, you may begin.” She said, and Severus gave Susan Bones the last pot. He banished the basket back to his lab, then turned and faced the front of the room. Arms crossed. “You may leave, Professor.” She said sweetly to him, a
He smirked maliciously. “I believe I will stay, ensure the ink works as it should.” He said.

He noted, glancing over Susan Bone’s shoulder, that the ink was a bit more red toned than he’s like. Black, of course, but the way the light hit it at just the right angle made it look like blood. Ah, well, no matter. It was a one and done sort of deal anyway.

It was subtle at first, the way Dolores began to look uncomfortable. Her hands would twitch in an effort to stay in her lap, but inevitably, she would reach behind her for what would be a tickle. At least, he figured it felt like a tickle. She certainly wasn’t screaming in pain. He slowly moved toward the front, pretending all the while to look at the OWLs, seeing where the students were.

When he got to Potter’s desk, he noticed the boy glancing between his exam and the toad with a smirk on his face. Severus shifted his eyes to the front, and smirked as well

**DUNDERHEAD** was slowly forming across her forehead, in clean, neat writing that could never be traced to anyone in the room. Hermione’s special sort of charm, to mimic that of typeface in the muggle world. She had given the spell to Scrivenshafts and had likely confounded the poor blokes when she picked up her order. No one sane would order nearly fifty of the same quill. Of course, she added a special layer to the order before she had sent to the Department of Education, taking the time to make it reflect a different, unflattering descriptor of one’s intelligence should they attempt to cheat. Unless, of course, it was dipped into an ink brewed with a deflecting charm, and a biological directive that forced the charm to be placed on a certain person. It would be nothing more than a scratch, of course. Not painful, and unfortunately not permanent, but it would last a few weeks.

**IMBECILE** started creeping up her neck, and **BROWN NOSE** was placed as though she was wearing it like a necklace. And the students, of course, had begun to notice.

“Why are you laughing?” Dolores demanded. “This is a serious test, there should be no talking. No noise what so ever. Keep your eyes on your paper. What are you….”

She’d lifted her hand to point at them and must have noticed the writing. Her face blanched with horror. “How did this?” She asked, glowering at them all. “Which one of you … who did this?” She fumed, and no one said a word.

“Professor Snape,” She snapped, and he looked at her as if he, too were wanting to know who the culprit was. “Please oversee the rest of the exam. And when this is finished, I want all of them, all of them, lined up outside my office. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Headmistress.” He said, giving her an exaggerated bow. She rose from the dais, and stormed out of the Great Hall, her indignant little toad head held high. He sneered at her back and made no attempts to hide it from any of them in the room. Let them see that he hates her as much as they do.

He then turned and walked to the dais, the last remaining snickers dying as he passed. He stopped, turned, “Continue” he commanded as he took a seat, and the students went right back to work. It amused him to think that Dolores would continue to find new insults until the test was finished. She never asked him to change the quills.

———A———
“You guys are still here?” Ginny asked as she, Aurora, and Luna found Harry, Ron, Neville, and Draco near the end of what was once the stupidly long line leading the to the supposed Headmistresses office. Now there were only about another five people away from Neville, who was nearest to the front.

“She’s had to send your Dad for more Veritaserrum at least three times.” Harry said, smirking, absently rubbing his scar. “I’m beginning to think it’s just water.”

“It’s nearly eleven o’clock at night.” Aurora pointed out.

“And you’re out here, because…?” Draco asked.

Aurora shrugged. “Today was the last day of anything. As far as everyone is really concerned, the term is over. Plus, with you lot still out of your dorms, and her toadness in there, well.” She shrugged.

“The firsties and second years were tucked in to bed.” Ginny said. “At least for the Gryffindors. ‘Magine it’s about the same everywhere.”

“What about Filch?” Ron asked.

“Dobby.” Ginny smirked. “He might have slipped him a bit of a sleeping draught.”

“Where did you get that?” Ron asked.

Aurora scoffed. “I’ve been able to brew that since I was five. And a potion’s kit doesn’t last year after year.”

“And you thought that with all this free time you all had, with no teachers properly worrying about your whereabouts, that you would come hang out in the interrogation line?” Draco asked. “I hadn’t realized you lot couldn’t have fun without us.”

“We can,” Luna said. “But we didn’t think it was very fair to celebrate when you four couldn’t join us.”

They paused, watching a weary Professor Snape carrying another basket of vials containing clear liquid. He knocked, and when he opened the door, an increasingly hysterical Umbridge could be heard thanking him profusely, but was it brewed properly? Aurora tuned her out, as had the rest.

“And after we get out of here?” Draco asked, glancing at Harry as he rubbed his scar a bit harder. “I’m guessing the seventh-floor corridor will still be monitored, even if Filch is out cold, and the other teachers don’t care.”

“You can come back with us to Gryffindor tower;” Neville said with a shrug. “Wouldn’t be the first time you and Luna tagged along, would it?”

“No, but it’s the principal behind it. It’s not neutral territory.” Draco started to say before Harry hissed and grit his teeth. “Potter?” He said, trying to steady his friend as Harry seemed to nearly collapse. “Harry, what’s wrong?”

Harry fell to his knees, clutching his head, and Aurora looked to the boys for a cue. Draco seemed to be the only one who had no idea what was going on, but Ron and Neville exchanged a knowing look that didn’t sit well with her.

“Potter?” She heard her father behind her, the sneer in place to keep cover.
“Hermione.” Harry croaked out, and all of them stilled. “He… he has Hermione.”

“Who?” Her father asked carefully.

“He does.”

“How can you be sure?” He demanded. “Tell me what you see.”

“She’s screaming. She’s in pain and screaming and he’s laughing.”

“What does she look like?” He asked.

“Different. Different than I remember, but… I don’t know. It hurts, and I’m… I want him out. I want him out.”

Aurora looked up at her Dad, and she could see the worry in his eyes. “Wait here.” He said, and he turned and took off at a sprint down the corridor, probably down to his rooms where he could floo to the cottage.

“Where?” Ron asked, his voice cracking. “Where does he got her?”

“In a room full of orbs. I know it. The corridor I’ve been dreaming about leads to it.” Harry said, seeming to regain a bit more of himself.

“What would she be doing there?” Ginny asked.

“I don’t know.” Harry said.

“We should go after her.” Ron said firmly, a determination straightening his spine, squaring his jaw.

“We should wait for my Dad.” Aurora said. “He’ll find out for us.”

“What does he know!?” Ron demanded.

“More than you might think, Weasley.” Draco tried to calm him. “He’ll know, alright.”

“How? How’s he gonna….”

He was cut off by Aurora’s father coming back to them. If one didn’t know him well, he would seem impervious. But his state instantly had Aurora clutching her mouth, not allowing a worried sob to escape. His eyes were wild, his hair not quite as tidy as it was before he left. His teaching robes were gone. “Potter, where did you say you saw Her-Granger?” He asked, a slight shake to his voice.

“A room full of orbs” He said, and Aurora watched the color leave her father’s face. “What he’s after, it’s in there, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” He said in a whisper. “Yes, it is.”

“Snape!” Umbridge shouted as she flung the door open. “I need more.”

“You used the last of my bloody Veritaserrum ages ago! Do you truly think that I would keep a ministry monitored potion around in a castle full of children?”

“You-you-you’ve been,” Umbridge started stuttering, her face turning a deep red, somehow emphasizing the words one her skin.
He flicked his wrist, and she went silent. Grabbing her throat, she kept trying to scream, becoming increasingly more flustered when she couldn’t.

He then looked at the lot of them. “You seven, with me.” He said, looking at the rest of the students waiting their turn for Umbridge’s interrogation. “Rest of you, bugger off.”

As the other students eagerly dispersed, Aurora turned to follow her father’s lead as he turned without a word and led them down to his quarters. Before those who hadn’t been there had time to marvel at them, he opened the floo, gesturing for them to take powder. “Eyre cottage.” He said simply, and one by one, they all went through.

Once the last of them came through, he followed, and Aurora turned to watch him, to see what the non-Professor Snape would show.

“Leo! H!” He called. There was no word, and he looked more worried than he let on. He turned to them. “The seven of you, stay here. If anyone, anyone comes through that floo, send a patronus. I know the lot of you can do it, so do so. I will return when I find out more.”

“Sir?” Harry asked, “Hermione isn’t even supposed to be in Britain. Is it… could it just be….?”

“I’m afraid, Potter, that there is a very high chance that what you said could very well be real.” And with that, he disapparated.

They were silent, Draco coming over to hold Aurora in a way of comfort and solidarity as Harry and Neville shifted about, not really looking at anything. Luna held Ginny’s hand, her worry far more tangible than youngest Weasley’s.

But Ron just looked angry, ready for a fight.

“But’s not the time to think you need to be a white knight, storm the ministry, and save the witch you’ve been pinning for.” Draco said as he stroked Aurora’s arm.

“I’m not pinning, alright!” Ron snapped. “Look, didn’t really have anyone around growing up, did I? All mum and dad’s proper friends stopped having kids before Percy. Only ones around to play with were the twins and Ginny. Didn’t have mates who were the kids of folks they knew, didn’t go to primary school, didn’t have anyone until Hogwarts. Thought I was the luckiest bloke in the world when the Harry Potter wanted to be my friend, ‘magine how lucky I felt when the smartest witch in our year was my friend, too? ‘Mione may have drived me spare, and we mighta had our moments, but she was my friend. She is my friend, and I’d been begging for her to find a way to let her parents let her come back and finish school with us. At Hogwarts, proper like. And now you’re saying that she coulda finally done it, got back to Britain, and just got ‘napped by snake face and his goonies? And what, Snape just wants us to all stay here and wait? Like he gave a damn about Hermione.”

“Ron,” Aurora started to calm him, but he rounded on her.

“No! No, he doesn’t care as much as we do, and how is he even going to find out if it’s her, anyway?”

“The order will go help.” Ginny insisted.

“I’m not so sure they will.” Harry said thoughtfully. “Dumbledore knows I have a connection with Riddle, so I know he’d believe me, but I’m not sure he would consider Hermione worth it. And besides, we don’t even know where he went, and it’s possible that no one does.”

“McGonagall is in the hospital.” Ginny noted.
“I could floo Sirius,” Harry said.

“Or we could just go!” Ron said.

They fell quiet, looking about at one another. Harry glanced at the clock, stared, really, and sighed. “It’s been at least thirty minutes since I had the vision thing. If Hermione was back, and if he had her, he could have done a lot of things to her by now.”

Aurora took a breath, looking at the facts. Harry had seen her mother, and he said she looked different. Reality was, she didn’t look that drastically different than the picture Draco had swiped of her in fifth year. Aurora realized that, even with the information provided, her father couldn’t go to the ministry because it would give away his cover. How could he explain knowing his wife was there if she were captured? And even if he went, it would be murder/suicide to do so, risking his life, his wife’s, and their children. She knew her parents would do anything to protect she and Leo. And what of his information? Even if he did find someone from the order who could go, would her mother be deemed ‘worth it’?

“We should go,” Harry said, nodding decisively.

“Potter.” Draco said worriedly.

“I agree.” Aurora jumped in, looking up pleadingly at Draco. “You can stay here, if you want. None of us will hold it against you, not with the chances your Dad might be there. But I’m going. I have to go.”

“I’m in.” Gin said.

“Me too.” Luna said.

“Hermione would do what she needed to help us.” Neville said. “And we’re always better as a team.”

“Fine.” Draco said. “I’m in.”

“Malfoy.” Harry said.

“Don’t try to talk me out of it, Potter.” He said simply.

“But how are we going to get there?” Ginny asked. “I doubt that Rory’s house has enough brooms for us to fly there, and I’m pretty sure we’re nowhere near London.

“The floo,” Aurora said. “My mum works for the ministry from time to time, it has a direct connection, no need to check in.”

“Right, let’s go.” Harry said, taking the lead. And one by one, they left.

———A———

No one said much as they followed Harry through the ministry of magic and down into the bowels where the department of mysteries was. The corridor was barely lit, and nervous apprehension crept up Aurora’s spine. But she shoved her silly, childish fear down, worry for her mother taking over.
When they made it to the circular room, they paused.

“Which door?” Draco asked, and Harry looked at all of them overwhelmed.

“I’m not sure.” He said. “I always walked through the door across from the one we came in.” He moved forward, hand reaching up hesitantly. Then, he gave it a shove. It wouldn’t open. “Someone shut the door. Maybe it won’t open if another one already is?”

Neville shut the door, and Aurora barely was able to control her gasp as the room fell into near darkness. A moment later, the small, blue flames from the torches began to move, shifting around the room in a blur until they finally stopped.

“Bloody hell,” Ron said. “Guess they really don’t want us to know where’re we’re going.”

“I think that makes sense.” Ginny said, moving up to a random door. She pushed it open with ease. “Someone test Harry’s theory.”

They all moved toward the doors, Aurora perhaps a bit quicker just to get nearer to the light.

“On the count of three?” Harry suggested.

“Three,” Draco said, and shoved the door open in front of him. They all did.

“Right, now how do we know who has the right room?” Aurora asked, hoping no one else heard the tremor in her voice.

“What do you see, Rory?” Harry asked.

“Brains.” She said. “Brains in a green tank. You?”

“A humming bird. It keeps hatching over and over. Draco?”

“The solar system.”

“I think I have the room,” Luna said. “I can see glass orbs on shelves.”

Harry left his door, and it shut. Thankfully the other open doors prevented the room from shifting once again, and he went to Luna to see.

“Yeah. Yeah, this is it!” He said. They all moved toward it, letting their doors shut as one as they allowed Harry to lead them through the room.

“Potter.” Draco said once the door shut behind them. “Tell us again how Hermione looked different? Different how?”

“Not like the picture you showed us.” He said, looking up at the top of the shelves. “Ninety-seven, ninety-seven, it’s always ninety-seven.”

“Yes, but… how? Hair not as bushy? Teeth not so big?” Draco tried again.

Harry shook his head. “No, nothing like that. Help me look for Ninety-seven. He likely took her there.”

“Harry,” Aurora said, glancing around the room, looking for the numbers and spotting them. They were on the right track. “I know Draco seems to be pestering you about this, but I think I need to emphasis how important it is that you tell us how she was different. Was she… was she older?”
They moved a bit further, rounded a corner, and found the number they were looking for. There were orbs, of course, but nothing else. Not even a sign that someone had been there.

“Harry, look.” Ron said. But Harry didn’t move. “Harry! It’s got your name on it.”

He whipped around and looked up to where Ron was pointing, shifting to try and see it better. He stared at it, dumbfounded, then a sort of resignation came over him. As he reached for it, Draco stepped up and grabbed his hand.

“Should you be doing that?” He asked softly, worry over Harry clear as day even in the dim lights.

“I think I have to,” He said.

“Why?” Draco asked.

“Because,” Harry smiled that self-deprecating smile. “I realized what was different about Hermione.”

“Was she older?” Aurora asked.

“No,” Harry said, turning back to the orb, clasping it. “She was younger.”

As he pulled it from the shelf, a slow, loud step clicked echoed from behind them, and Aurora moved swiftly beside Harry, Draco holding her shoulders, Neville at her side. Ginny and Luna stood slightly behind Ron, but all seven of them drew their wands and pointed it in the direction of the noise.

It was familiar, and when Aurora realized what it was she was hearing, she looked over her shoulder at Draco, who sneered as he steeled himself for the inevitable. The mask that came into view only solidified the “who” of their approaching death eater.

“Did you know memories can be altered?” Uncle Lucius’ haughty drawl spoke softly. “They are never perfect, a true Legilimens like that Dark Lord can always tell. But a desperate boy like you would never stop to look at it closer. To see the imperfections.” He unsheathed his wand from his walking stick and used it to removed and banish his mask in one, smooth motion. “I only met Miss Granger once, a year before she thankfully disappeared. But the Dark Lord knew you would come to rescue your mudblood friend. He wanted you to see her writhe so you would come running.”

“What for?” Harry asked.

“Hand over the prophecy, and I will tell you.”

Aurora noticed movement out of the corner of her eye and glanced down the side aisle. More masks. Merlin how she wished beyond everything that her father was among them. In that moment, it didn’t matter how much trouble she got in, she wanted her daddy to come and save her from the dark, and the scary monsters that moved within it.

“If you do anything to us, I’ll break it.” Harry threatened.

Before Uncle Lucius could say anything, the coldest, wickedest cackle Aurora ever heard echoed from the dark.

“He knows how to play,” A high, feminine voice said, and Draco squeezed her shoulder painfully as the woman showed herself. “Itty… bitty… baby… Potter.”

“Bellatrix LeStrange.” Neville’s voice quivered.

“I know you. Neville Longbottom, isn’t it?” Bellatrix said casually, seeming to lean against Uncle
Lucius. “How’s Mum and Dad?”

“Better now that they’re going to be avenged!” He snarled, lunging toward her.

“Don’t, Neville.” Aurora hissed, thankful when Draco’s death gripped shifted from her shoulder to Neville’s arm, preventing him from moving further than her own arm would have allowed.

She watched as Bellatrix raised her wand, and as she did, she caught Uncle Lucius’ eye for a moment before it shifted to where she knew Draco was.

He raised his hands slowly, eyes on is son, to her, to Neville, repeating the pattern as various emotions crossed his features. Betrayal, confusion, hurt, uncertainty, it was all mingling just below a calm exterior.

“Now let’s, everybody, just calm down, shall we?” He said slowly, looking back to Harry. “All we want is that prophecy.”

“Why did Voldemort want me to take this?” Harry asked, and Aurora heard the Death Eaters around them hiss.

Four entry points to where they were, and she thought she heard about eight or ten hisses. Unfortunately, none of them carried the depth of her father’s voice.

“You dare speak his name, you filthy half-blood!!?” Bellatrix shouted.

“No, no, it’s alright, he’s just a curious lad.” Uncle Lucius placated, slowly moving toward them, hand extended for the prophecy as he attempted to woo Harry to give it to him with words. Harry glanced in Draco’s direction, and she worried that maybe Uncle Lu’s presence would somehow cause a rift between them. But then Draco leaned over and whispered in her ear.

“Stun the Death Eaters.” He said softly. “Tell Longbottom.”

“Stun the Death Eaters” She whispered to Neville who never seemed to take his eyes off Bellatrix.

“When.”

“We’ll know.”

“I’ve waited fourteen years.” Harry said.

“I know.” Uncle Lucius said, sounding disgustingly too sympathetic.

“Guess I can wait a bit longer.” Harry said. “Now!”

Silently, like her father taught them, the seven of them hexed the death eaters nearest them before all taking off.

“There were other doors in this room.” Ron called. “I saw them.”

“Let’s find one and get out of here!” Harry shouted back.

Someone grabbed her hand, and Aurora allowed them to pull her along, knowing they were friend. The emerged into the time room, from what she could tell, and she looked up to see it was Neville with her, Luna right behind. She shot a wordless spell over his shoulder at the door, but as that one collapsed, someone started banging on the other.
“Quick, through there.” Neville said, pushing her toward the only other door. “Luna, you too, go!”

Almost arguing with him, Aurora hesitated until she noticed Neville following as he walked backward, covering them as they ran.

She nearly stopped dead in the next room.

It was nearly pitch black, enough so that the glow of the planets in the solar system didn’t give any proper light. And suddenly she was three years old again, her bedroom pitch black with not even moonlight to give reality to the noises in her room, the creeping about, the rustle of fabric. She had felt watched, and rightfully so, but no explaining that it was merely a house elf tidying their rooms in the castle could extinguish the newborn fear of the dark that had followed her her whole life since then.

She began to hyperventilate, making it all the worse by trying not to. She was floating, with no proper sense of up or down, and her heart pounded in her ears. She swore she heard Neville somewhere ahead, or behind, or somewhere shouting for her.

And arm grabbed her roughly, turning her around as a wand light shone in her face.

Uncle Lucius gazed at her, his face cold, his eyes studying hers. After a moment, he said, “Go. Run, get out of here. Take Draco with you before either of you are recognized.”

He gave her shove, and she stumbled away, turning, kicking and paddling as though swimming through the air farther away from the sun and to some of the smaller planets. A silhouette came into focus, and she nearly wept with joy as she spotted Neville. She was almost within his reach when a different hand snatched her ankle, and she screamed.

“Got you!” A man said behind her, and she kicked, and squirmed, and tried to get away.

“Reducto!” Luna said, and there was an explosion bright enough to light the room, and loud enough to deafen, masking the scream of agony that tore itself from Aurora’s lips.

“Rory!” Neville said, grabbing her arm and pulling it along.

“My ankle! Fuck, it hurts.” She seethed.

“I’m sorry!” Luna said as they floated toward the nearest door. Well, Aurora floated, occasionally using her uninjured leg to help Neville propel her forward.

“It’s better than the alternative.” She said, and Neville got them to a door. They emerged, stumbling a bit as they went from weightless to gravity, Aurora cursing quietly as they came through.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

Aurora looked around, seeing they were back in the circular room they first entered from.

“Rory got hit with a Reducto Luna threw at a Death Eater.” Neville replied. “What happened to them?” He then pointed to Ron, who seemed a bit out of it while leaning heavily on Ginny. There were tentacle like things wrapped around his arms and legs, and he just kept giggling. Draco who was unconscious in Harry’s arms.

“Ron was hit by a curse, we don’t know what. It’s made him go a bit funny in the head. That was in a room where there was a humming bird. We went from there but found ourselves in the room with the brains. Ron tried to levitate one to stop a death eater, but it got him instead. Draco blasted the
brain itself off Ron, but we can’t get the other pieces off him. Just before we left there, we caught off
guard by another two Death Eaters, Draco silenced one that was about to *Avada* me, but then got hit
back with something that knocked him out cold.” She rubbed at her nose where there was a trail of
dried blood. “I got punched in the face but fixed my nose.”

“We can’t stay here.” Harry said. “We have to move.”

Aurora allowed Neville to help her up and over to the next door. Harry carried Draco, probably
using a lightening charm to ease him, and Ginny helped her brother through the door.

Aurora’s breath caught when she entered the cold, foreboding room. There was nothing in the
cavernous room, except for an arch with ethereal curtains flowing around it as though there were a
breeze.

“This is the room I saw when we opened the doors.” Neville said.

“Who is whispering?” Harry asked.

“Me. Though not really whispering.” Neville replied.

“No, it’s not you. It’s someone else.” Harry shook his head.

“No one’s saying anything, Harry.” Aurora said.

“I hear it, too.” Luna said.

Everyone stayed silent, trying to hear what was being said.

Something like static raised the hairs on the Aurora’s arms, and she turned just as a bolt of something
red struck Neville in the back, causing her to fall as he cried out in pain. Aurora yelped, tears
springing to her eyes. She wanted to crawl toward Neville, but Luna stopped her, holding her by the
shoulders as Neville writhed and twitched on the floor.

Bellatrix’s cold cackle echoed loudly off the high, stone walls. “He screams like his father!” She
chortled. “Let’s see if he lasts longer than his father.”

“Now, now, Bella. Let’s not get too hasty.” Uncle Lucius said as he came out of the shadows. Three
other Death Eaters followed, and Aurora thought she saw the glint of two masks still hidden by the
darkness. Bellatrix ceased her Crucio on Neville with a pout, and Luna once more held Aurora back
before she could go charging over to him. Uncle Lucius looked at the lot of them, his eyes widening
a fraction as they landed on Harry who was still holding Draco. “You will all leave here, without
further harm, so long as you give me the prophecy.”

“Don’t do it, Harry,” Neville’s voice was raspy, weak, but his assertion strong.

Harry set Draco down in a near reverent way, brushing back his hair for a moment before standing
up once more. He reached into the pocket of his sweater and withdrew the orb. It glowed
momentarily, and then he headed toward Uncle Lucius. He stopped before him, looking at the orb,
back at them, then to Uncle Lu.

“I give this to you, they go. No one hexes or curses us in the back.” Harry asked.

“On my family, I swear it.” Uncle Lucius said, and Harry nodded. He handed Uncle Lucius the orb
and took a few steps backward.
Just as it seemed Bellatrix was about to double cross them, her arm lifting toward Neville with a gleeful, sadistic look in her eyes, there was a loud crack of apparition, and then a stunner knocked the witch away from him. A few more cracks followed, and Aurora whipped her head around, wand at the ready, and found she’d pointed it right at Sirius.

“Go, all of you go! Out the door, ask for a way out, it will lead you right back to the floos! Aurors are already on their way. Go.”

“Draco,” She said. “Ginny has Ron, but I broke my ankle. And Neville’s not going to be in any shape to move.”

“I’ll get him,” Remus said, scooping him up. “All of you, come with me.”

Luna helped her back to her feet, and the girls followed the rest out the room, the sound of spells and battle fading as they passed through a door. Aurora looked over her shoulder, seeing Harry helping Neville along. Just before the door closed, Aurora’s heart stuttered when she spotted her mother in disguise battling a death eater.

She was with Delia when the patronus came. Sirius’ German Shepard came trotting up to her. “H, if you are at all not in danger, you need to come to my place now!”

The note of panic was unmistakable, and she was on her feet in an instant. Delia was up just a second faster.

“Does not sound good.”

“No,” She said. “Leo, we need to go!”

A beat later, Leo was running down the stairs, a pout forming. “But mum! The books on herb—”

“Here, now.” She commanded, and Leo didn’t try to protest further. He came to her, wrapped his arms and wrapped his arms around his waist.”

“Another time?” Hermione asked.

“Any time.” Delia smiled back, though it was weary and sad.

A moment later, Hermione was in the living room of Grimmauld place. A second alter, she was engulfed in the arms and scent of her husband.

“Oh, thank Merlin.” He said, kissing her firmly before holding her tighter. “It was a lure. A fake.”

“What are you talking about, Severus?” She asked, forcing him back so she could look at him. He’d been terrified, she could see, and it did nothing to lessen the growing worry.

“Harry said he’d had a vision from the Dark Lord. All of them, absolutely all of them so far have been real. But something must have tipped the Dark Lord off on his connection to the boy, because tonight, he saw you in the hall of prophecies, being tortured.”

“Me?” She said, confused. She glanced at Sirius who was lingering in the door way, and Remus
right behind him. “Severus, he has no idea….”

“He said you looked different. He couldn’t determine how.”

“Well it would be simple, wouldn’t it? I would either look fifteen or thirty-six.”

“Except he doesn’t know you’re thirty-six, does he!” Severus snapped back. “You have been putting off telling him that he caused you to go back twenty years.”

“I don’t think this is the right time to argue.” Sirius said, cutting off the tiff before it full formed. “Severus, you came tearing into the Hogs Head, saying you had over half a dozen teenagers in a panic because no one knew where Hermione was. Shouldn’t you go inform them that she’s alright?”

“Yes, you’re right.” He said, turning to Hermione. “And you’re coming with me. This ends tonight.”

“Yes,” She said simply, taking Leo’s hand and apparating back to Eyre cottage. She looked around her living room, listened for sounds of life, and found nothing. She looked to Severus and frowned. He frowned too. “Aurora!” He called. “Draco?”

Nothing.

“They wouldn’t have been able to go back to Hogwarts.” He said to himself. “Perhaps they…”

“Dad.” Leo said, moving to the mantel. “The floo powder pot is knocked over.”

Hermione went cold, and slowly turned to see Severus had come to the same conclusion. “Once we save that boy, I’m going to kill him.” She said. “Dragging the lot of them to the Department of Mysterious….”

“It is far worse than that.” Severus said quietly. “Lucius is the one in charge of the retrieval mission. And Draco was with them.”

Hermione’s head spun just as the double crack of someone apparating filled the room.

“Where’s Harry?” Sirius asked.

“Off on a suicide mission, where else.” Severus sneered.

“I need to go off and warn Narcissa.” Hermione said, shaking her head. “She needs to know.”

“H, it’s going to blow your cover, let alone mine.”

“And what is more important right now? Our cover, or the lives of our children?” She snapped. “Because it’s not just Rory, and you know it. It’s Draco and Harry. And their friends, too.”

He stared at her a moment, but then he nodded, turning to Sirius and Remus. “We need to….”

She was grabbing floo powder off the mantel and throwing it into the flames. “Malfoy Manor, Mistress parlor.” She said and was pulled into the swirl of the flames. When she stepped out, she found Narcissa on her divan, book in hand, a gentle smile of confusion on her face until she took a good look at Hermione. “What’s wrong?” She asked.

Hermione crossed the room and knelt before Narcissa. “How much do you know about Draco’s school life?”
Narcissa shrugged, unable to look away from the witch in front of her. “He has a good number of friends, though he says they aren’t Slytherin. He’s very secretive about it, even with me. Why? What is it? Is it that Umbridge woman I keep hearing about?”

Hermione shook her head. “Narcissa, Draco is … he and Aurora both are very good friends of Harry Potter. In fact, I think Draco is much closer to him than he lets on.”

Narcissa merely seemed confused. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because Draco was once friends with me.” She said. When the confusion deepened, Hermione smirked. “My maiden name is Granger. I’m Hermione Granger.”

“Yes, I know, I remember. What does that have to do with….” Narcissa’s eyes widened. “Oh.”

“Before you ask, there was an accident with a time turner. I can go over the details another time, but right now, our children think they are going on a rescue mission to save me from the Dark Lord.”

“What!” Narcissa sat bolt upright. “Why would they do such a thing?”

“He’s been connected with Harry somehow, and we think he cottoned on to it, and sent him a false image.”

“So, the Dark Lord knows….”

“No, he doesn’t. Severus does, he knows the whole history, but no one else on… on his side.” Narcissa covered her mouth with her hand, turning her gaze out the window. “Cissy,” Hermione said softly, earning the witch’s attention. “I am trusting you with a lot right now. And I know you have a dozen or so questions, and probably feel a certain level of betrayal. But they need us, and I know you have a way for me to get to them faster than the Order of the Phoenix could ever hope. As one mother to another, I beg you, let me save our children.”

It angered Hermione that she seemed to be thinking on it. How could the information she gave her override the need to save her only son?

“I’ll give you my ring,” She said. “But you must promise me that when you get him, when you get Draco, you never let him come back here.” Hermione’s heart shattered, and it must have shown, for Narcissa hastened to add, “Not because he isn’t welcome. I … I had a feeling. About him. About you. Well, not you as in you, but that you and Severus weren’t all you seemed. Not since you offered to help me hide. Not since you showed me support and understanding when this all became too much. He can’t come back here. Lucius will kill him, or worse, Bella will have realized it was him. Because she’s there, too, Hermione. She’s there, and they will find them, and they will hurt them.”

“I know.” Hermione said.

Narcissa nodded and slide an obsidian stone ring off her right hand. “Tap it twice and say his full name. You’ll appear where he is.”

Hermione nodded as she waved her wand over herself, subtly changing her features, turning her hair blonde. She slid the ring on her finger and looked to Narcissa. “My offer stands. If tonight turns bad for Lucius, I will hide you.”

“Good luck.” Narcissa nodded. “And bring them back safe.”

Hermione nodded, tapping her wand on the ring. “Draco Lucius Malfoy.”
From the moment she apparated into the room and stunned Bellatrix LeStrange away from Neville, the battle was a bit of a blur for Hermione. The goal for her was simple: make sure the children escaped and get out of there.

She didn’t expect, though she should have, to be caught in a battle with a Death Eater. Masked as he was, she guessed from his voice and the way he flung his wand that it was Donovan Mucilber. The idiot never did figure out the proper way to duel, even in a fight. If it wasn’t for the fact that he thought fast was going to win it for him, she’d have been able to finish him off much faster. But eventually he was too tired, too breathless, to keep going, and a simple stun and binding had him down and out.

She glanced around the room, seeing the aurors had arrived. She caught sight of Sirius, dangerously near the veil, and reacted.

“Accio Sirius Black’s jacket!”

The garment, secured as it was around Sirius, pulled him abruptly out of the way, just as a spell from Bellatrix’s wand was about to hit him. Once she had him, she accioed them both to the floos.

“I’m not sure if I should be thankful or indignant.” He said, smirking at her.

“What in the bloody hell happened here?” She asked, and Sirius turned to see the same thing she had. Sand everywhere, all the panes of glass missing within the vicinity, and a limp Harry in Dumbledore’s arms, a sereneness to his face that had Hermione worried.

“Tom Riddle attempted to poses Harry as he got caught up in our duel while trying to leave.” Albus explained. “I’m happy to say that Tom didn’t last long.”

“Well there’s that.” She said. “We’ll see you back at Hogwarts.”

She tugged on Sirius who seemed to linger, but he eventually obeyed when Kingsley took Harry from Albus and started to head toward the floos as well. It was likely that he would head directly for the hospital wing, and so Hermione went to where the order was likely going to be meeting: the headmaster’s office.

She stepped out of the flames, and joined her husband, his shoulders sagging with relief. “Narcissa?” He asked.

“Knows.” She replied. “She asked we take Draco. He can’t go home, not now, not when he was there with Harry. She knows it’s not safe for him.”

Severus looked down at her, then to her right hand. He picked up, bringing it into his line of sight, and nodded. “We should have done one of these for each of the children.”

“And we will.” She said.

The floo flared, and Sirius stepped through.

“Sorry, I had to make sure Harry-” He was cute off by Remus grabbing his face and kissing her
squarely. When the werewolf pulled back, Sirius blinked. “Not that I’m not pleased. But, why?

“Why? Tonks told me you were taking on your demented cousin. And that when she looked back, you were gone, and she was still there, standing in front of the veil, pleased with herself before apparating away.”

“Did the aurors get anyone?” Hermione asked, hoping someone other than Remus would answer so he could have a moment with Sirius. And to collect himself, red as he was as he likely forgot where they were.

“Mucilber, Malfoy, and Nott, I think.” Tonks said, glancing at the men near the floo.

“Malfoy.” Hermione said. “I wonder if….”

“Go.” He said. “It will be some time before Albus comes back.”

———H———

“When school is over, Draco will come here, and then we will find you two a residence to stay in.” Hermione said as Narcissa dropped down on the sofa.

She had been prepared when Hermione arrived, a quiet strength as well as being completely resigned to what was happening setting her spine. Narcissa saw her come out of the floo, shrunk her bag, and simple asked for her to lead the way. On short notice, Eyre cottage was the only place to go, but Hermione had wondered if maybe there might be a better place to bring she and Draco available shortly.

“He’s going to go to Azkaban, isn’t he?” Narcissa asked.

Hermione nodded. “They had him.”

Narcissa nodded, then sighed. “So that’s why you were never caught. It’s a clever charm, I can hardly detect it. The changes are subtle yet powerful enough that it is nearly flawless.”

Hermione snorted, waved her hand, returning to normal for her friend. “I’ll be glad when I never have to wear it again.”

“I would imagine. And here I was complaining how hard it was. How living through this nightmare all over again, only worse, was difficult to endure. And here you are, leading a double life. Which, reminds me.” She got to her feet, and startled Hermione as she gripped her arm tightly. “With no binder, I can’t do more than this. But I, Narcissa Irma Malfoy, vow on my wand and my magic to never betray the secret of Hermione Snape, Severus Snape, or their children.”

Hermione gapped at her. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“You married a Slytherin, Hermione. Loyalty may not be a defining trait of our house, but when you earned ours it’s forever. True loyalty, anyway. Whatever the Dark Lord has had our husbands pledge, it is not that.”

“No, it is not.” Hermione smiled gently. “But speaking of children, I need to go see ours.”

“Give Draco a good shout for me.” Narcissa said with a smirk. “Or at least warn him what’s waiting
“Aurora Eileen Snape!” Hermione shouted just before she entered the hospital wing via the floo in Poppy’s office. There was no way she was allowing Albus-sodden-Dumbledore to attempt to hold her back when her rage re-emerged once she was zooming through the floo network.

She stormed through, hair lightly crackling as her eyes narrowed on her offspring. In her peripheral, she noted her husband offering a potion to Ginny, smirking at her as she marched to the middle area of their collective beds. “If you were not already injured, you would be in for a world of hurt. Leaving the cottage when your father asked you not to? Battling Death Eaters?! You could have gotten killed! You could have given away your father’s cover! You could have done a number of terrible, horrible things! And you, Draco Lucius Malfoy, do not think for one moment that you are getting out of this either. Your mother is waiting at the cottage for you to be dismissed from school just so she can box your ears and give you a tongue lashing. And do you realize what might have happened had it not been your father in charge of the task? What in Merlin’s name were you two thinking when you went on that foolish mission! You were supposed to be the sensible ones, the ones that would not run head long into danger!”

“I’m sorry, ‘Mione, it’s my fault.” Harry said behind her, and Hermione rounded on him, finger stabbing the air in his direction.

“Do not even get me started, Harry James Potter! You know the climate, you knew the danger, and you dragged your friends off on a fool’s errand with no proof of what you were seeing was real. You should have waited for Severus to confirm. What’s more, you should have told him exactly what you were seeing so he could have assured you, without question, that the Dark Lord was fooling you!”

“I can see that now.” Harry smirked, and his mirth at the situation raised her heckles. And then they were instantly lowered as cold realization came crashing down in her.

‘Mione. He’d called her ‘Mione. Not Mrs Snape, not Aurora’s mother. She tentatively reached up and touched her face, knowing without feeling that she had not replaced her glamour once leaving Narcissa at Eyre cottage.

Her eyes widened, and Harry chuckled. “Harry?” She said as if he were the one who had been hiding in plain sight.

“It’s good to see you, ‘Mione.” He said. “And I’m sorry.”

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dun!!!!! So you know what's going to happen next chapter, right?

A few notes. Guys, I'm SORRY I broke up Fred and Aurora. Honestly, I thought Neville was the major favorite for her, but the comments I got about Fred and Aurora
lately were a lot more than I expected. So, remember, no matter who you're rooting for, it's a long story.

Also, I wanted to find a way to combine the book battle and the movie battle. Because the flow of the movie worked a bit better for the rewrite, but it kinda bugged me that none of them were injured in the movie version. I know I twisted around a lot of what happened to them, but I didn't think Neville would go with Harry when Aurora was there. And as much as Draco and Aurora are like siblings, I think he would follow Harry over Aurora.
“It’s good to see you, ‘Mione.” [Harry] said. “And I’m sorry.”

“You’re… well, you’re not forgiven, but I….” She stopped, turning around to look at her daughter and her other god son. They had been wide eyed, and Hermione had assumed it was because they were terrified of her temper. But now, she realized, they had been wide eyed because she lacked anything clouding their vision of her. She looked at the others in the room, Luna smiling serenely, having always known the truth. Neville was squinting at her as if he was hard of seeing and truly couldn’t tell if it were her. Ginny stared, wide and teary-eyed, seemingly unsure if this development was a happy one or not. Ron was slack jawed, looking her over as if trying to reconcile all he saw.

“IT was the time turner, wasn’t it?” Harry guessed, drawing her attention back to him. “When we were in the hospital wing, the last time I saw you. Something happened with it, didn’t it?”

Before Hermione could answer, Severus’ voice cut through the room. “I think it best this all stays within this room. That said, I will find Albus, and discuss what has happened.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.” Harry spoke before Severus could leave. “I was scared. I wasn’t sure the Order would come through, and we had been waiting for a while. I should have tried harder to keep him out, too.”

Severus lingered in the door, wavering between saying something and simply walking out. He glanced at Hermione, then looked to Harry. “You have experienced how dangerous it is, how deadly it could be should it happen again.” Severus said, and Harry nodded. “Then do better to keep him out. And, perhaps, you’ll heed my word next time.” And without further word, Severus walked out.

Hermione felt his magic coat the room, ensuring the conversation within was not overheard and could not be interrupted.

She sagged, wanting to collapse but not being able to do so. With a wave of her hand, she summoned a chair to her, sitting nearer the beds containing Harry, Ron, and Ginny.

“It was the time turner.” Harry repeated, though there was no question about it this time.

“Yes,” She confessed. “You managed to send me back twenty years.”
“And… and you couldn’t come back?” He asked, wincing.

She shook her head. “You have to wait out the time, remember?”

“And you had to wait twenty years.” He bowed his head.

“Now, it wasn’t so bad once I settled in.” She smirked. “I missed you, of course, I missed all of you. But… I had a good life.”

“You married Snape!” Ron shouted. “How was that a good life? If you had to marry anyone, why not marry Remus? Or Sirius?”

“I prefer not to be someone’s beard.” She smirked. “And I love Severus.” Ron turned green, and she chuckled. “Ronald, do grow up.”

“He’s just mad you didn’t wait for him.” Draco said, and Ron glared as he turned red.

“Shut it, Malfoy.” He snapped.

“You realize if she didn’t love Snape, Rory wouldn’t exist.” Harry pointed out, and Ron paled further.

“Merlin, you’re….”

“Slow on the uptake.” Aurora smirked.

“So, you… you married Snape. And you… and Aurora.”

“I have a brother, too, remember.” She pointed out unhelpfully. “So that thing you’re thinking? Had to have happened at least twice.”

“You parents.” Ron said with disgust.

Aurora shrugged. “I’m not stupid enough to think that married couples only sit and hold hands.” She said, and Neville blushed crimson in the bed beside her.

“You knew my parents.” Harry said, bringing the topic to a halt.

Hermione turned and looked at him sadly. “I couldn’t save them.” She said regretfully. “Merlin knows I wanted to, but Dumbledore had me make an unbreakable vow shortly upon my arrival in 1974 to never speak or attempt to interfere with things pertaining to the future to those who didn’t already know. I will confess, I never cared much for your father. He was too brash, too obnoxious for my taste. And your mother and I… Lily and I had our differences. We had our rows, and there was even a time when she was jealous enough of me for earning Severus’ affection that we were not on the best speaking terms. But Lily was a dear friend, and I miss her every day. You’re very much like her, you know? You may look like your father, but you have more than your mother’s eyes, you have her heart.”

“Remus always made it sound like they loved each other from the beginning.” Harry said, seeming to understand something in what Hermione said.

She smiled. “Love and hate are two sides of the same coin. Your father most definitely loved your mother from first sight. Lily took much, much longer to come around. But when they finally did, they were happy, and they were in love.”

Harry smiled, pleased with this insight.
“Snape.” Ron said again, seeming unable to wrap his head around it. “He’s such a git.”

“That hasn’t changed much since our youth, but he wasn’t always one to me.” She said, recalling the days before they could even call one another friends.

“How did you deal with all that?” Ginny asked, sitting forward. “The professors were suddenly your age.”

Hermione shrugged. “I didn’t at first. It was difficult. Seeing Harry’s parents, knowing who they were, what was to happen. Seeing Peter bloody Pettigrew being chummy with James. Sirius, whole and healthy. He still isn’t quite to his proper form, but I don’t think he’ll ever gain that back. And Severus….”

“But he hates you!” Ron growled, rubbing at his bandaged arms. “He was always nasty to you!”

“Well, yes, I suppose he was as a teacher.” Hermione replied, trying to recall who he was. She did, of course, still have a vague recollection that Severus was not kind to her. But she also remembered thinking he hadn’t wanted to be that way. And she did get a tremendous amount of “just because” flowers the year she would have started Hogwarts, continuing until she would have vanished. “But you must understand that I was a muggleborn Gryffindor. On principal, he would have had to hate me for that reason alone.”

“What house were you in back then?” Ginny asked.

“Gryffindor, still.”

“So how was it different when you were a student?” Ginny frowned.

Hermione smirked. “I was never sorted before the school. It was presumed that Dumbledore placed me there because of favoritism. Considering how quickly Severus and I became friends, and then more, none of the Slytherins thought differently.”

“But you were muggleborn, still, weren’t you?” Ginny asked.

“No. I posed as a pure blood. Just, not one from around here.”

“More than friends with Snape.” Ron grimaced. Then it cleared, and he appeared thoughtful. “Wait, so… did he know you were not really pureblood?”

Hermione heard Aurora snort behind her a she did the same. “Severus’ mother was the one who taught me how to act like a Pureblood. Yes, he knew. He pegged it from the first. But he didn’t care. His best friend was muggleborn, as well. It was Dumbledore who wanted him to spy, to use the invitation to meet the Dark Lord and be part of his inner circle and become a Death Eater. It was never what he wanted.”

“The rumors he wants the Defense position?” Ginny arched and brow and smirked.

“Partly true. Potions is his passion, but it does depress him that so many of you are utter bullocks.” Hermione said, turning to smile over her shoulder at Neville.

“Got worse since you left.” He said, voice still quivering a bit, but he at least attempted a grin.

“He also wants you all prepared. It’s why he was willing to take the time with the lot of you over the Hols.”
“What do you mean Dumbledore asked you to make a vow?” Harry asked, and the room went quiet.
“And that he is the reason Professor Snape is with the Death Eaters?"

Hermione knew that look, and took a deep breath to steel herself. Harry was hurt, and angry, and seemed to be pleading with her for something in which she wasn’t sure she’d be able to give him.

“He did both. He didn’t want me to accidentally change events, and ensured it. Well, he apparently peeked around and read my mind before I learned occlumency.”

“Mind reading is a muggle phrase.” Harry smirked.

“Yes, well, old habits.” Hermione grinned before sighing heavily. “And I will tell you everything, Harry, in great detail, but not now. All of you need your rest, injured or not. And so, you’re aware, this little… reunion, doesn’t get any of you out of trouble. Sirius is here, and likely with Severus now discussing proper punishment.” She said, turning to look at her daughter and other god son, “and that is probably at the cottage where your mother is hiding away from her sister in the wake of your father’s arrest.”

Draco didn’t seem to react to that. Hermione figured he must have been resigned to his father’s fate. That, or he truly did not care. Aurora, at least, had the decency to look chagrined.

“Your parents are being spoken to,” She said, rounding back on the Weasley siblings a moment. “And so is your grandmother.” Hermione said to Neville who turned a shade of yellow-green at the mere mention of the woman.

“I’m sorry, ‘Mione.” Harry said again. “Truly. I know now we should have given Professor Snape more time, that he did care, even if we weren’t sure. That he was doing something about it. It’s just, I read the papers, I saw all the deaths being reported as mysterious, and knew who and… I know the order wasn’t doing anything about it, so we had to wonder….”

Hermione looked around the room as if she could see the wards she still felt in place. They were solid, and she knew that Severus had ensured that not even the headmaster could listen in, even if there were any sort of eavesdropping devices around. She then looked at the children, all of them looking at her.

“Harry,” She began. “You’re absolutely right. If it were me there, the order likely wouldn’t have been sent to retrieve me. My death weighed against the possible loss of more important people, Order people, would certainly result in my being left there. The greater good, in that instance, would not include me.”

“But it would include me, right?” Harry said angrily. “I’m the chosen one, so of course had it been me there, everyone would try to save me. They already did, because I took everyone to the ministry trying to save you. But if we weren’t all together in that room, if, say, Luna, or Draco were in another room….”

“The order wouldn’t have been asked to retrieve them, no. Their priority would have been you.” She nodded.

Harry’s face twisted in anger, his nostrils flaring as he looked away.

“But that doesn’t mean a good number of us would have looked for them, and did everything we could to get them.” She said, and he looked at her in confusion. “Draco is my other God son through Severus,” She said, ignoring the choking sound coming from Ron. “You’d better to believe that Albus-sodding-Dumbledore would not have stopped me rescuing either him or Aurora. Luna may
not be my child in anyway, but she is one of my daughter’s best friends. One of your best friends. I would dig through rubble, face down a dozen death eaters, if it meant getting her back. Because the loss would break you. Break all of you. And you may all be children, and what you did was absolutely foolish, but you are going to be the leaders of this war, whether the powers that be like it or not. There’s too much prejudice in the older generation. In my generation. There is still a stigma that lingers over all of us. Blood status. House loyalties. That doesn’t seem to be a thing for you all.”

“Except with Quidditch.” Ginny murmured.

“Yes, perhaps with Quidditch as well. But I know about the DA, I know you invited everyone, even if very few from any of the houses showed up.”

Harry seemed to think on that, a slight note of pride in his eyes as a smile began to play lightly on his lips.

“Still, you should never have put these six in any danger.”

“Yes, Mum.” Harry smirked, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Rest, all of you.” She said, earning murmurs of ascent and nods from the lot of them. She left the Infirmary, and leaned against the closed door, closing her eyes. Before she knew what was happening, she was quietly sobbing against the wood. Her energy felt drained, and it was both a relief and not having her identity revealed to all of them. There were no more secrets from them, from Narcissa. More so, this war was likely not going to be like the other. It wasn’t going to be filled with glamorous gatherings for the spouses to meet one another, all under the pretense that it was merely an evening with friends who all happened to know the Dark Lord. She may still have to walk a tight rope, but the chances that she would need conceal her identity wasn’t going to be as likely.

But they were at war, and her daughter, her God-sons, the people that were once her friends were children about to enter said war whether she or they wanted to or not. They had their first taste of it, and she her first taste of true fear for their safety. Only Luna truly walked away uninjured. If Harry had Voldemort in his head, it’s said head was pounding.

“Hermione.” Severus said softly, and she felt his hands grip her arm and pull her toward him. Gently, he embraced her, fingers flicking toward the door as she sensed two people go past them. After a moment, she calmed down, and she pulled back to look at him. “What were the tears for?”

“Everything.” She said, shrugging and shaking her head. “It was for everything. I think I was just finally processing everything.”

Severus nodded. “Come, we’ll go back to my rooms, and-”

“I DON’T CARE IF YOU DIDN’T REALIZE HERMIONE WAS THIRTY-SIX! IF IT COMES FROM THE SNAKE LORD, YOU ASSUME IT’S A TRAP UNTIL SEVERUS SAYS OTHERWISE!”

Hermione and Severus stared at the door.

“Was that?”

“Lupin.” Severus confirmed. “Quite frankly, I expected Black to be the one yelling.”

“Reverting to last names again are we?”

“Habits.” Severus said, turning her away from the door, and leading her down the stairs.
The change in the air as the end of the year approached was even more starkly palpable than it had been the year before. Where previously Harry had merely come back from vanishing, shouting that he was back, this year the prophet had confirmed it. Aurora had barely remembered who had been around when Harry had had his connection with the Dark Lord, but soon, with them all in the hospital wing, word had spread that Harry was somehow there, at the ministry, when Voldemort made his return. That they were all there. And the fact that Draco had been with Harry, had been at his side the whole year, and continued to be so, had many whispering about the Slytherins and their supposed loyalties to the darks arts and its lord.

“I’m getting tired of the looks.” Draco grumbled as they walked together through the castle to toward the transfiguration court yard. They’d passed a group of Ravenclaws, a couple of Hufflepuffs thrown in there, and they had been practically staring at him.

The day before, there was confirmation that Uncle Lucius had been arrested and sent to Azkaban, along with a couple other Death Eaters. It was reported his mother was missing from the Manor when the Aurors went to tell her the troubling news, in it was rumored that Narcissa Malfoy wasn’t merely missing if his father was Death Eater.

“How is it in your house?” She asked as they slowly made their way down the stairs. Her ankle was still tender, magic only doing so much, and Draco found that the curse mark on his chest made it hard to breath with he went too fast.

“Tense.” He said with a hint of amusement. “I’m either being glared at with malice or confusion. No one’s really talked to me, except Theo, but that was only after he got the letter from his Dad. He recognized me, but Uncle Severus has had you and Leo so well hidden from everyone but our family that I think your identity is safe. It’s not like Father shouted your name while we were there.”

“No, but he did let me go. And whichever Death Eater caught me after he did, if he had seen him, he’d know I was at least important to the Malfoys.”

“Perhaps, but that’s a bridge we’ll cross when we get there. The Weasleys are utterly screwed, of course, but I think Luna is a mystery.”

Aurora snorted. “A mystery for the time being. She’s not exactly an inconspicuous blonde.”

Draco snickered, and they finally made it to a landing. Turning, they spotted Harry, Ron, and Neville coming toward them.

Aurora peeked at Draco when Harry flashed him a bright, welcoming grin, and was happy to see him allow a small smile despite his faint blush.

“Here, Rory,” Harry said as he darted up the stairs. “Can’t be easy on either of you to be supporting each other.” He went up to the other side of Draco, lifting the blonde’s arm to put around his shoulders as Harry slipped his arm around Draco’s waist.
“Need a hand,” Neville offered when Aurora was free of Draco.

“No,” She said, waving it off. “I’m fine, just a little.” She cut herself of with a gasp as she inconveniently took her first step without her walking partner and had her ankle attempt to give out. “Okay, fine, a hand. But only if you’re doing better yourself.”

Neville grinned shyly as he tucked her arm in his elbow. “That stuff your Dad gave me is disgusting, but it worked. Within a couple hours, the tremors stopped. The next day I felt like I’d spent the day playing Quidditch, but aside from that, I was fine.”

She hadn’t been sure why Neville, after facing an unforgivable, had been released so quickly, along with Luna, Ginny, and Harry. She, Draco, and Ron having taken the worst beating had to stay a few extra days. But then, she hadn’t really known what the potion her father gave Neville would do, and then she was in her own potion haze from the bone mender.

The five of them continued through the castle, and Aurora had noticed the glances here and there from others in their year or older.

By the time they made it to the courtyard, she was glad to be somewhat away from the staring.

“Next year should prove interesting.” Draco said as they sat with the girls.

“Why’s that?” Ron asked. “Because now the world knows You-Know-Who’s back? ‘Cause we might get a professor who actually knows what they’re doing?”

“Well Umbridge won’t be returning,” Ginny smirked wickedly. “Rumor is she’s withdrawing from Britain all together.”

“At least until the markings fade.” Neville said thoughtfully.

“They kept trying to test the quills at the ministry.” Ginny nodded. “Nothing happened. Just the word ‘Dunderhead’ appearing on the forehead of anyone who cheated.”

“So that’s the last of her, then.” Ron said, brushing his hands together as if he’d been the one to send her off.

“At least here.” Harry said. Then to Aurora, “Think your Dad might teach next year? He knows what he’s doing.”

“No idea.” She said, shaking her head.

The seven of them were quiet, enjoying the sunshine, the quiet.

“I keep thinking nothing can be stranger than the year we just had,” Harry said. “And then September rolls around, and it starts all over again.”

“Would be nice to have an uneventful year.” Luna said thoughtfully.

“No stones hidden in the castle,” Ron said.

“Or him hiding on the back of a teacher’s head.” Harry nodded.

“Or cursed diaries containing him.” Ginny said.

“Pet rats who are actually his minion.” Ron scrunched his face.
“Accused murders breaking into the castle.” Aurora sighed.

“Deadly tournaments in which Potter gets roped into.” Draco said.

“That have him at the end of it.” Harry said.

“Makes this year seem tame.” Ginny noted.

They all hummed in agreement.

July 1st, 1996

She stopped short as she entered the sitting room, finding Narcissa holding a parchment, looking thoughtful and sad, staring off into the distance. After a pause, Hermione continued with the tea tray, setting it down on the coffee table, perching on the edge of the sofa should her guest decide she need some space. The children were all occupied, Severus in his lab, they were to be undisturbed while she broke to Narcissa the idea she had on where she and Draco could go.

Her friend, lowered the parchment to her lap, and looked to the tea set. Then, slowly, she looked to Hermione.

“It’s from the Ministry,” She said quietly. “Lucius has officially been registered as a prisoner of Azkaban. He was found guilty of breaking into the Ministry with ill intent, and aiding a Dark Wizard in crimes against Britain. His sentence length is twenty-years.” She shuddered. “They included the desolation of marriage form. I assume you’ve seen one before?”

“Yes,” Hermione said softly with a nod. She had, fifteen years ago, when her own husband was detained.

“Why did you stay married to Severus?” Narcissa asked. “I know how it sounds, but … but I want to know the reason you stayed.”

“I knew he would be let out.” She said softly. “You know our secret, so I think it safe to tell you that Alastor Moody had known of Severus’ allegiance the entire time. He was one of the ones that encouraged Severus to spy. He was arrested, of course, and a trial was set. But his was private, and there were too many to testify the good he’d been doing to have them keep him. But, I also knew that regardless of the length of his stay, Severus can occlude. Not everyone is able to shield themselves from the dementors like that.”

“And my cousin?” She asked. “How is he still sane after twelve years? Bella is utterly insane, far more than she ever was prior to her incarceration.”

Hermione smiled ruefully. “A dementor has no interest in a dog. And as an animagus, Sirius sort of spent a chunk of that time in animal form.”

“So there is little hope for Lucius, then.” Narcissa said softly.
“No, I don’t believe so. Not unless he is broken out.”

“But then, I still have Draco to think about.” Narcissa said, twisting the ring she’d once loaned Hermione around her finger. “The desolation renders him fatherless.”

“Yes,” Hermione said simply. “But only in terms of Lucius’ access to him.”

“Is this how Muggle separations work?” She asked.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded. “Though it doesn’t normally sever all rights to the child.”

Narcissa nodded sadly. “I still love him.” She said softly. “I love him, I do. But I have to think about Draco. I can’t have him still linked to Lucius in case he decides to punish Lucius through Draco. There is still a chance he might, of course, but less so if I sign this.”

“Severus is his head of house.” She nodded. “If the students attempt something on him, he can settle things. And as long as he is hidden for the next couple months, Draco will be safe at Hogwarts. Which reminds me. I know where you can go.”

“Go?” Narcissa said, summoning a quill.

“To hide for the time being.” Hermione said as Narcissa signed her name on the parchment with a stiff spine.

“And where would that be?” She asked.

“Somewhere I am certain you’ve longed to go for quite some time.

July 3rd, 1996

It brought a small smile to her face to see Narcissa nervous. She’d fussed enough with Draco’s clothes and hair that one might have thought him six and not sixteen. She fidgeted quite a bit herself, enough that Hermione had to talk the witch’s hand post apparation to calm her.

After Narcissa took a few, deep breaths, Hermione knocked on the door.

It opened very quickly, revealing a blonde, pudgy man. “Took you long enough.” He grinned.

Hermione smiled. “Nerves, Ted. This has been a while in the making, after all.”

Ted nodded, then looked to Narcissa then Draco. “Come in, come in. Dromeda is in the sitting room with Dora. We figured it was good for the children to meet as well. Well, not that they’re children anymore. Now really.”

Hermione followed the Malfoys inside, Narcissa having let go of her hand to enter.

The sisters stared at one another when Narcissa entered the sitting room. Nymphadora gave a sly smile and a little wave to Draco, and he did his best to smother a smirk and nod, taking a seat near
the cousin he was already somewhat acquainted with.

“Cissy,” Andromeda said, taking a slight step toward her younger sister. “It’s been….”

“I’ve missed you,” Narcissa choked. “And Bella, she’s not, she’s gone-”

Andromeda simply stepped up and wrapped her sister in her arms as Narcissa wept. Hermione
looked to Ted, but he was already slinking back upstairs, giving the witches space. Hermione then
looked to Tonks and Draco, and as a group, they left for the kitchen, and allowing the sisters their
reunion.

He wasn’t really sure why Black was there, in his living room, sipping tea thoughtfully. Hermione
was with Narcissa, acting as a mediator between sisters. Lupin wasn’t with him, so he couldn’t really
see this being some sort of bonding, or the pair of them getting parenting tips despite Severus’ own
daughter being the same age as their charge. He frowned, picking up his tea cup, taking a sip while
watching Black out the corner of his eye.

“Have you wanted to have sex with a man?” Black asked, and Severus choked on his tea. “Or
anyone other than Hermione.” Black amended when Severus sent him a scowl.

“No,” He coughed, barking out the last bit of tea from his lungs. “My desires have only ever settled
on my wife.”

“But have you ever had to fake seduction with … anyone… in your time as a spy?”

“Where is this line of questioning leading, mutt?” Severus asked, teeth clenched.

“Remus wants a relationship, but he wants it to be open.” Black explained in a slight rush. “He says
he loves me, and I believe him, but,” He cringed.

“But what?” Severus asked, much more calmly than he had before.

“But he also says he wants to explore what he feels for Tonks. And I get that he likes to be a beater
for both teams, but I would have thought that…”

“You thought that once he realized he had amorous feelings for you, he would simply choose you,
and that would be that.” Severus arched a brow. “The man pined for my wife even while the pair of
you were shagging each other senseless. Should it truly surprise you that, while you have a loving
relationship, that he should still seek out female companion ship? He’s a werewolf, Sirius. If he were
not born interested in the fairer sex, his biological compulsion to reproduced is magnified because of
his partly animal instincts. Females are required for reproduction. Unless, of course, you take that
potion I mentioned near seventeen years ago.”

“No, thank you.” Sirius said instantly, nearly spilling his tea in his haste to raise his hands and prove
as much as he could that he had no desire to carry a child. Severus snickered, pleased to have
unsettled the mutt. “But my own cousin? Isn’t that a bit…”

“Considering the amount of intermarriages within the wizarding population, a man choosing his
lover and his lover’s cousin as his potential mates is not entirely odd. Well, no more odd than having
the desire for two mates at once. It could be worse, he could have chosen a female who knew nothing of you. Kept it hidden.”

“I’m not sure that would have been worse,” Sirius grumbled.

“And when Lupin announces he’s to be a father?” Severus arched a brow. “What then? Would you not feel betrayed?”

He sighed heavily. “Probably. But Tonks…. Severus, she really loves him. Her patronus actually changed, for Merlin’s sake.”

“Oh?” Severus said. “To what?”

“A wolf. She used it to seek Remus out the other night, asking if he would be willing to go see her. I think it was a rabbit beforehand.”

“And so, because she has a patronus that is the same as Lupins, she is therefore in love with him? Hermione and I have never had matching patronuses, does that mean we love one another less?”

“It’s not what I mean. But, I suppose, in a way it is. You don’t match, no, but you compliment. She a raven, and you’re a bit bird like in appearance.” Sirius teased with a charming smirk. “You have a fierce lioness, and what is Hermione if not one of the fiercest lionesses we know?”

“If you are basing your worries off of ethereal guardians, then I believe Azkaban may have done more damage to your brain than it was originally thought. And don’t you dare bring up Potter the elder and Lily. Would you care to question the marriage of Molly and Arthur? I’m sure she’d love to hear your theory on non-matching Patronuses. And if you want to think they must be a reflection of our love, then would you care to tell Molly her husband thinks her a weasel?”

“So why do you think Tonks’ changed, then? If not for love?”

“Oh, it is possible that it had changed for love, but do not take it to mean anything significant. Personally, I believe it has everything to do with the creator. Their soul. Take, for instance, one who has gone dark. Truly dark. They would not be able to cast, correct? Narcissa, for instance, likely would be able to cast a patronus if she wanted to badly enough. Lucius would not. Now, love will either change, or strengthen a person, depending on the circumstances. I believe it made myself and Hermione stronger as people. But, even I admit to us being a bit on the young side to have fallen so completely in love with one another. It’s rare. Had it been a few years later, and she fell into our lives, it’s likely I may have reflected to match her. Because she will have changed me. I believe Lily changed Potter the elder when it became clear his antics and carefree attitude were not going to make her happy. And that he changed her with their pregnancy and marriage. You, and Remus, were independent of each other for a long time, enough that you were firm in who you were before you came together even the first time. The same could be said for Minerva who did not marry until quite late in life. Nymphadora… she is young, still. Young, and impressionable. And she can change herself at will.”

Sirius shook his head. “I never thought that I would be having a discussion over anything related to magical theory with you. What you said makes sense, of course, but…. When did you ever just sit and think on the why a patronus is the way it is? Have you always had this theory, or did you come up with it one the fly?”

Severus smirked, “I had pondered it once in my youth.”

Sirius scoffed, “Your youth. You make it sound like you’re ancient.”
“Raise a teenager, then talk to me.” Severus retorted.

“I am raising a teenager, in case you’ve forgotten. “It certainly doesn’t make me feel like a young man myself, but it hardly makes me feel like I have left my youth behind.”

“Forgive me, and allow me to amend. Raise a teenage daughter, and then talk to me.” It was then that said teenage daughter came through the floo looking as though she were about to Avada someone. Her wavy hair was a tangled mess, and sweat dotted her brow, while dirt streaked her cheek. “What in Merlin’s name….”

“I need my broom.” She said, heading for the stairs to her room.”

“You did not bring it to the Weasleys?” He said half over his shoulder as Aurora paused on the stairs.

“No, I didn’t think I needed to today, as the weather was shite this morning.”

“Language.” Severus half-heartedly scolded.

“Sorry. Anyway, Ron got a new broom last year for making Prefect. His old one… let’s just say, I’m surprised he hadn’t broken his neck. And if that ginger moron mocks me again for my supposedly terrible flying when it’s his sodding broom that is causing me to do so poorly, I’m going to hex him so badly, I’ll be expelled for use of magic way out of the realms of what could be considered accidental.”

Severus waved his hand, and Aurora stomped up the stairs.

Sirius looked to Severus, “I never knew she could be so terrifying.”

“She gets it from her mother.” Severus said, and Sirius merely nodded in agreement.

July 10th, 1996

He was curious why it took the Dark Lord so long to call this meeting. Frankly, Severus had expected it much, much sooner.

It did, however, surprise him to find himself at the gates of Malfoy manor. And, it seemed, he wasn’t the only one as he glanced at Crabbe and MacNair.

“Did he bust them out?” MacNair asked. “He couldn’t have.”

Severus said nothing, merely touching his wand to the gates, feeling the wards ease away for them. They walked down the path in silence, entered the manor without issue, led to the formal dining room.

The Dark Lord sat at the end of the table in a chair that was never seen in the manor before. A king on his throne, and to the left, his would be Queen. Bellatrix looked pleased, of course, not likely thinking much of not being on the Dark Lord’s right hand. But who then….

“Severus,” He hissed, “come, sit.” He gestured to the empty right seat, and it was suddenly clear by the sneer that graced Bella’s lips that she had been aware, she simply thought the place was for someone else. “My loyal spy, how are you this evening?”
The pleasantries were false, and as Severus replied, “Well, my Lord. I thank you for asking,” he felt Dark Lord barge into his mind.

In an instant, he knew he was searching for any clue as to Draco’s whereabouts. Carefully crafted memories of not seeing the boy since the end of the summer, of trying to convince the lad to stay with him and being defied rose to the surface. Images of his daughter weeping, technically over Weasley, but changed to be that of Draco’s ending their engagement came forth. Aurora was such hideous crier that the passing image of her in full sob would hide her exact appearance. He only hoped that the ministry was dark enough that night she went with Potter that none of the followers had gotten a good look at her.

But then the memories shifted, and the Dark Lord search for something regarding Dumbledore. There was always a thin layer of annoyance or bitterness that overlaid any memory of the old man. It wasn’t really hard to magnify that over certain scenes, but Severus had to wonder why this was being pulled forward now.

Whatever the Dark Lord saw, he was pleased. At least, that’s what Severus had hoped the wide, terrifying grin meant.

“You truly have no love for the old fool, do you, Severus? You have stayed at your post, obedient and loyal, for nearly seventeen years, for me.”

“Of course, my lord.” Severus replied. “You did not express, before your vanishing, that you would want me anywhere else.”

“And if I asked more of you, my faithful spy. If I asked you forfeit this role for another, would you take it?”

“I would do what is asked of me, my lord.” Severus replied. I would still be spying, just not for you.

Voldemort laughed. “Such faith! Such loyalty! He does not even ask the task, merely says he will take it up, will do what I ask without question.” The joy left the snake-like visage, replaced by cold anger. “Bring in the boy!”

Severus turned toward the door as Bellatrix smiled gleefully, cackling as quietly as she could.

Theodore Nott was half dragged in, Goyle pulling on his arm and keeping his grip on him as if to keep the unhappy teenager from taking off. Severus knew, though, that Nott was not a stupid boy, and would know better to run.

“Theodore,” Voldemort said, elongating his name. “Welcome.”

Nott said nothing.

“I wish it were under better circumstances,” Voldemort continued, and Severus was sure that no one in the room believed the lie. “Your father, you see, was an incompetent fool. He allowed witches and wizards of your age, blood traitors, to best him. I had hoped for Draco Malfoy to be brought before me, but alas, his mother has severed her ties to Lucius, and therefore Draco’s ties to him as well. But you, sole heir that you are to the Nott family, did not run. You stayed within your home, among your fathers’ things. You stayed … loyal.”

“The alternative was to become a ward of school,” Theodore replied with an air of indifference. “My stepmother has yet to sever her marriage, so as a result, I am able to stay where I am.” He said, looking defiantly at the Dark Lord.
Bella rose to her feet. “You will show respect for such a powerful wizard, you filthy ingrate!” She half screamed.

“Bella, sit.” Voldemort commanded. “He has yet to realize he needs to be respectful. Young men like him, they don’t realize just yet that they need to earn their place.”

“Sorry, my place?” Nott said, and Severus felt on edge, watching the Dark Lord, Bella, Theodore, waiting to see if this was the end of one of his students. If, Merlin forbid, he was going to be asked to be executioner to one of his snakes. He couldn’t do it. He’d have to, of course, but the thought of avada-ing one of his own students made his stomach twist.

“Your father failed me,” Voldemort said, casually rising, smoothly moving toward the young man. “Failure must be punished. And a family name must be redeemed. You see, Lucius, with no heir to take his place now that Narcissa Black as ended her union, his punishment is to give all he has left to our cause. His fortune. His home. And, if it were still possible, his son. But alas, he will simply need to find a new witch to bare him a new child, once I come into power. Once I lead all of Britain, and Wizarding kind, the name Malfoy will be clean once more. Pure, like the blood that flows through the veins of those who bare it. But Nott… Nott will not hold such esteem. Not yet. But you will be able to bring it out of the muck.”

Nott, wisely, remained silent, his glare of hatred becoming thoughtful.

“How would I do that?” He asked cautiously.

“You will prove yourself. Prove your family’s worth.” Voldemort smirked. “You will kill the fool Headmaster.”

Nott gave a single, incredulous laugh. “And if I don’t?”

“I will kill you.” Voldemort said simply. “Crabbe,” He commanded, and without another word, the wizard rose and joined his fellow Death Eater, and seized Theodore’s other arm. He gripped the boy’s wrist, then forcefully push Theodore’s sleeve up, baring his pristine left arm.

Despite not wanting to, Severus watched as one of his students, a boy who would not turn seventeen until May, was branded against his will. Much could be said about Nott, who tried to push away with his feet before someone had leg-locked him. He did not scream, but he did grunt and groan, still trying to push away from the elder Goyle and Crabbe despite his weaker frame. His eyes were glossy when it was done, but he was still full of fire and rage.

Voldemort, of course, did not seem to care. “I will be kind,” He said, “For I do believe education is important. I tried to be a teacher, once, did you know? But the righteous Dumbledore did not think me a right fit. But that matters not, now. I will be kind to you, Theodore Nott, in that I will allow you until the end of the year to complete your task. He is an old man, I’m sure his murder should be simple for you. And if you fail,” He said, touching the mark newly branded on the teenager’s arm, making the boy hiss. “I will find you. Regardless of where you run, or hide. And I will ensure your father watches.

“Severus,” He said, turning this his spy. “I expect you to be available to young Mister Nott, should he require your aid in anyway.”

“Of course, my lord.” Severus said, truly meaning it. He didn’t think Theodore would want to go through with it. He was fairly certain he was one of the only Slytherins interested in combating the Dark Arts.
“And if he fails in his task, I ask that you take it on, Severus.” Voldemort said as he slithered back to his throne-like seat. “I plan to have the ministry under my control by this time next year. Slower than I would like, but it does take time to do things properly. And when I emerge, wizarding Britain under my influence, my control, they will see that I am their rightful leader, that things under my reign are far more superior, the will not resist me. At least, they will not if Dumbledore is out of the way. With him dead, no one will oppose me.”

“And what of the boy, my lord?” Severus asked. “What of Potter?”

“I do not fear the boy.” He dismissed. “I have a plan to wipe him out. He is weak, full foolish notions that love is powerful, that friendship if more powerful than loyalty. He is nothing but a boy, and a boy can be easily vanquished, if not turned.” Severus noticed those Death Eaters who were in the graveyard the night of the Dark Lord’s resurrection looking at one another, but no one made a face or said a word. Yet, Severus didn’t need to skim their thoughts to know what they were thinking. He wasn’t there, but he heard the story enough to know: Potter was not so easily vanquished. Something happened with his wand that night when pitted against the Dark Lord’s, and it resulted in a win for Potter.

“Severus,” The Dark Lord commanded, and Severus turned to Voldemort. “Do I have your word on this? Should the Nott boy fail, will you finish the job yourself?”

“With pleasure, my Lord.”

How was he going to get around this one?

July 29th, 1996

“Must we?” Aurora asked Ginny as the ginger clung to her arm. They were facing the shop. And Aurora called it the shop in her mind, because to think of it as anything else made her stomach twist in nausea.

It had been nearly four months since she was last inside, and exactly three months since the bloke whose face was on the outside of the building broke her heart. And she knew it was Fred because of the number of freckles painted on his cheeks, and the way the hair beneath the hat was parted. And didn’t she bloody well hate that she knew those details.

“Yes, we must.” Ginny said, pulling along her reluctant friend toward the shop.

“But I have rats to get for my dad.” Aurora retorted, glancing at the magical menagerie over her shoulder. She wasn’t precisely sure why he needed rats, or why he was going through so many. This was his second dozen since a meeting two weeks ago, one that had her parents sequestered in their office, a strong muffilato on the door, and both of them coming out looking as though they’d been through a serious fight. Her mother hadn’t been quite as bad afterward, though they did seem to be spending quite a few of their nights together in her father’s lab. Leo wasn’t allowed down, and she hadn’t dared asked, but she knew from the faint curses and odd laugh that they were experimenting and not… being weird in the potions lab.
“I do believe your dad said, and I quote, ‘take your time, it will keep the lot of you out of my hair’.” Ginny said, deepening her voice in a bad imitation.

Aurora rolled her eyes. “That doesn’t mean go trapezing all through Diagon Alley!”

“And we aren’t,” Ginny countered. “We’re going to go see my brothers’ shop, and you are going to face Fred so you can stop being all… mopey.”

“I am not mopey.” Aurora countered. And she wasn’t. Not really. So, what if she preferred her music to be from the broken and scorned heart end of the spectrum? And preferably muggle as something about broken hearted wizard music had her left wanting. It didn’t mean she was mopey. In fact, she was not mopey. She was over Fred Weasley, and had been since the day after he left. Sort of. Most of the time.

“Rory, if I have to hear the song *Love Fool* again, I am going to take that … that circle thingy and toss it like a discus out the window, never to be heard again.”

“You love that song.” She countered.

“Not after the twentieth time.” Ginny countered as she opened the door to Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes and all but shoved Aurora inside.

She had no idea why she was so worried. There was so much noise, so much commotion, that any thought that she would be instantly transported to the day Fred had snuck her here was gone. And they were busy. She had no idea that their gags and tricks would be so popular. But then, she supposed, they did manage to buy an actual shop.

And then she heard him over the din, along with George, calling out product suggestions and sounding more like showmen than salesmen. When she caught a glimpse of his red hair on the landing, she darting her gaze away, only to have it land on the counter that she instantly had to turn away from as well. She sat on that counter once, with Fred so very close. She refused to remember what it was like to kiss him while she sat there with her arms around his neck, weeks before he broke up with her. She followed Ginny, nearing the pink glow of something that looked like a fountain with the way the mist rolled off of it. Ginny picked up a bottle looking it over.

“Love potion,” George said. “But from what we heard, you don’t really need it.”

“Shut up.” Ginny said, blushing slightly.

“Does this have to do with the date you had with the older bloke you won’t tell me about?”

“Might.” She said with a smirk, and Aurora rolled her eyes.

“What about you, Snape? Have any prospects?” George asked.

Aurora looked at him, a dozen answers shooting through her mind. But in that moment, George had never looked more like Fred, and she hated that he was asking. Even if he were only being nice, making conversation, treating her like his sister’s friend and not his brother’s ex-girlfriend. So, she turned away, leaving the inane love potions behind. She rounded a corner, heading for a spot she hadn’t seen before, and stopped short, immediately wishing she hadn’t.

*Alcoves not romantic enough? Cloud cover blocking the stars the night you sneak up to the astronomy tower? Use the AURORA. Simulate the Northern lights in any dark space. Deluxe version comes with gentle music.*
Hands shaking, Aurora reached for one of the boxes. It was both a relief and not to see that the flowers on the top (painted, not carved) were different than those on her own box that she hadn’t touched since the break-up. She gently opened the lid, finding she didn’t know how to feel about the black lining. And the scent. Again, this was different. Parchment still, perhaps honey as well, but the earthy smell was different. Grass, maybe? Damp grass in the early morning? No, not quite. It was something, maybe floral, that she just couldn’t put her finger on. And something else, something deep below the rest.

She brushed her fingers against the crank, and knew for certain it was relief she felt when the song was not the same as her own.

“It was our song,” Fred’s voice behind her startled her, but she refused to turn around and look at him. Especially when she felt him come up behind her, sensing his presence as he came closer. “Couldn’t sell them with our song, seemed too… personal.”

She closed the box. “And the scent?”

“Perfume in yours.” He said. “Didn’t know what I smelled like exactly, not without a few rounds of quidditch, and I didn’t think that was something to put in a gift. So, I made it smell like you. What you smell like.”

Aurora nodded, putting the box back on the shelf. She wanted to move, but realized too late that Fred was too close to for her to make a clean getaway.

“Looks like you’re doing well,” She said half over her shoulder.

“We are.”

“Good.” She nodded.

She swore he inched closer, thought she felt him touch her hair. “How are you?” He asked.

“Fine.” She replied.

“Are you, though?”

She took a deep breath, and hated that she could smell him, even if only faintly. Hated that she sensed his heat. Hated that, when she caught a glimpse of him in the reflective surface being the Aurora Boxes that he looked incredible in his suit, and that he had a look of sadness and longing in his face as he peered down at her waves. She stared, hating him, but hating herself for still finding him attractive. Her heart ached, torn between wanting to move and staying in an infatuation so deep she nearly called it love. It might’ve been love, still was, but he left. He left, and he did it for a good reason, and she was starting to agree with it. Because there was still three years left for her, and here he was, with a very successful business, and it really didn’t make sense for them to be together when they really couldn’t be together.

He looked up and caught her eye, and her heart jolted in that way that felt wonderful and miserable all at once.

Then she felt his touch on her hand, and knew exactly what she wanted.

“I can’t do this,” She said, turning and fleeing despite it causing her to have to brush past him.

“Rory?” He called, but she didn’t look back, she just wove her way through the crowd as quickly as she could, ignoring Ginny, ignoring Ron, Harry, and Draco as they came in the store as she was
leaving. She didn’t look back until she was out in the streets of Diagon Alley, allowing her feet to take her to the magical menagerie like she was supposed to. She didn’t look away until a ginger in a three-piece suit starting coming out the door. Which one, she wasn’t sure, and it didn’t matter.

She looked away in time to crash into someone else.

“Rory?” Neville said, and she looked up in surprise to see who she’d collided with. He frowned. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” She said quickly. “Just… awkward, being in there.” She said, throwing a thumb over her shoulder, refusing to look behind her. “Fred, and all. I mean… I just, ummm.”

“Looks busy in there.” He said.

“Very,” She agreed.

“Glad I went earlier.” He said, and she looked up at him in confusion. He shrugged, looking bashful. “I know I was usually one of their, um, test subjects.”

“Unwittingly so.” Aurora reminded him, feeling her lips tug upward.

He blushed. “Yeah. But, well, they were always a bit clever, weren’t they? I mean, not Hermione clever. That is, your, umm, well, just not as clever as her. But much more than me.”

“Just remember, they left without earning their NEWTs, how clever could they be.”

He smiled, “Yeah, well. Still.” He shrugged, smile turning a bit self-deprecating. “They had some neat things.”

“Yeah,” She agreed.

They stood there for a moment, and in that time, it seemed the both of them realized that Neville was holding on to her arms, likely to have tried to steady her when they collided. His blush, which had only just begun to fade, roared back to life. He cleared his throat.

“So,” He said, his voice going a pitch too high. He cleared his throat again while loosening his collar. “So,” he tried again, hands in his pockets as he rolled on his feet. “Were you just takin’ off, or…?”

“I need to get rats for my dad. He’s experimenting.” She said.

Neville paled. “Poor rats.”

She laughed. “Well he doesn’t want them to die.” She said, heading toward the menagerie. “But if he doesn’t test on them…”

“This is why I like plants. You want to experiment with plants, they aren’t going to,” He stopped, looking over at her as she arched a brow much like her father. “Well, okay, they might die.”

She snorted, “You just won’t feel as badly about it.” She nodded. “I get it.”

The entered the menagerie, and Neville looked around as Aurora inquired about the rats her father had owled about in advance. A box, charmed to remain stable with the rats inside, was handed to her. She turned, and found Neville smiling as he offered a finger to an owl, who gently nipped at it, fluttering its wings as it hopped from side to side.
“Are you twotiming to Trevor?” She teased.

“Well, lil fella is certainly livelier than Trevor. But I couldn’t find him before we left. I think he managed to get down the lake and stay there. Hate to say it, but I’d never be able to tell him apart from the other toads and what not.”

“Think you’ll get an owl, then?” She said, gesturing to the peppy little guy in the cage.

“Gram wouldn’t let me.” He said shyly.

“I wanted a kneazle.” She confessed. “At the very least, a cat. But mum wouldn’t let me.”

“What? No. But she had….”

“I know,” She chuckled. “And we sort of adopted him when she, well. But he tends to stay in my father’s rooms.”

Neville bid the little owl farewell, and followed her out as she left the shop.

Once they were outside, Aurora looked around, trying to both look at the Weasley shop, and not. She turned to Neville, wondering if maybe he wanted to stay with her while she waited out Ginny.

“Neville Frank Longbottom!” His grandmother stated, and even Aurora straightened to attention. “Why are you here with your young friend without a proper chaperon?”

“Chap-chaperon? Gram, I promise, we aren’t…. It’s not like that.”

“Do your parents know you are out here unsupervised with a young man, miss Snape?” She asked, turning her piercing eyes on Aurora. Even the vulture on her hat seemed to stare at her accusingly.

“I, um, ah. Well, you see, I hadn’t known Neville was here, uh, Ma’am. And, well, he just wanted to escort me while I ran an errand for my father. My friend is visiting her brothers in their, umm, shop.”

“Yes,” She said, sneering at the Weasleys Wizard Wheezes over her shoulder. “What a pointless establishment.”

She had no idea what say to that.

“Neville, if you had not arranged to meet up with this young witch, he need to go.” She said, turning back to her grandson. She didn’t ask or say anything further, merely turned and headed somewhere.

“I have to go.” He said, shrugging one shoulder regretfully.

“See you around.” She said, waving one hand.

Aurora watched him head off after his gram, but despite the shops closing down, the alley was still busy enough that she quickly lost Neville in the crowd.

August 3rd, 1996
“What have you done, you old fool!” Severus snapped, hiding his panic as best he could.

It was luck, Felix Felicius kind of luck, that he just happened to be in the castle when Dumbledore’s weak patronus found him. That he had just happened to be in his personal lab, taking stock of what needed to be purchased for the upcoming year. When he flooed up to the headmaster’s office, and found Albus half falling out of his chair, his hand blackened, Severus had to wonder if the old coot took a small sample of the golden potion before he did whatever idiotic thing he’d done.

“I was a fool, Severus.” He mumbled.

“Yes, I have known that for many years.” Severus said as he got to his knees, quickly withdrawing his wand and casting any and all counter curses he knew. It was as his brow began to dot with sweat, his voice becoming raspy, that Severus noted the vial on the Headmaster’s desk, filled with a gold potion. Well, he did say it was that kind of luck. Without thinking, Severus uncorked the vial with his teeth, spit out the cork, took three drops on the tongue, and set the bottle back down.

His head went fuzzy, as it always did when one was high on positivity, and it suddenly dawned on him that the curse was likely not going to go away. Not lucky. But, well, there was a potion that acted like a stasis. He had never had a specimen ingest it. Well, he never had a specimen alive to use it on. But he had a feeling, that, maybe, if he used it now….

“Tinny,” he called, and one of the house elves that favored his family came into the office. “I need you to bring me the potion in the rounded vial, with the serpent topper.” And then as an afterthought, “And my best fire whiskey.”

“Yes, Master Snape, sir.” He said, popping out of view. Severus resumed the incantations, disliking the way Dumbledore looked as though he were about to go into a seizer at any moment. Tinny popped back in the room, the thoughtful thing looking proud as it placed the two bottles and a goblet on the table.

“Thank You, Tinny.” He said, thumbing open both bottles and pouring an equal amount into both. “Quae continere tenebris,” He said to the goblet, then repeated the incantation of his will as he poured the smoking liquid slowly into Dumbledore’s mouth. Thankfully, or luckily, the Old Coot didn’t need help swallowing. He slowly directed the flow of his magic to Albus’ right hand, where it was clear the curse originated from. The sickly color in his skin began to recede, and Severus mentally held his breath as he waited to see if his efforts took.

After a moment, Albus’ eyes fluttered and righted themselves, the headmaster fully conscious.

Breathing a sigh of relief, in as much relief as Severus could feel, he slumped back on his haunches. He looked around the room, trying to decipher what it was that Dumbledore had touched that caused … that.

He spotted the sword first, which was so rarely out of its display case that it was the first thing Severus narrowed in on. He then spotted the glint of something on black. Creeping closer, he noted a ring, the black stone, the serpent mouth that held the stone in place.

“Why,” He said like a curse. “Why did you put on that ring?”

“I already said, I was a fool.” Albus shrugged, his voice tired.
“You had to have known it would carry a curse, why even touch it?”

“I was tempted. Sorely tempted.” Dumbledore shook his head.

“Tempted. By. What?” Severus asked slowly, watching the old man who did not answer and did not flinch. After a few seconds, Severus realized that his quick nip of Felix had worn off. Just enough to save the old man, not enough to earn answers. Bloody brilliant. “I have contained the curse in the one hand for the time being, but…” he said, gesturing loosely to the hand blackened by the curse.

Albus looked it over. “Very good work, Severus. How long do you think I have?”

Severus sighed. “I cannot tell. A year, maybe? A spell like that cannot be halted forever. Maybe if we remove the appendage….”

“No, I feel as though I must keep myself intact. And, you must admit, this *does* make things much less complicated.”

“In what way?” Severus asked as he got to his feet.

“In regards to Tom’s plans regarding young mister Nott, and should he fail, you.”

Severus waved it off, “I nearly perfected a spell-”

“No, Severus. No more spells.” Dumbledore shook his head. “Before a year has passed, I will be dead. And you will be the one to kill me.”

Chapter End Notes

So... yeah. This is still happening.
Thanks to all of you who are hanging in here, reading, commenting, lurking. I realized that next week it will be a year, a whole year, since the first post of this story, and it kinda blows my mind that I'm still writing this a year later. And we're only just heading into book 6.
So next post will be covering the years before Harry comes to Hogwarts, and then from then on, we likely will be staying in the 90s.
Until then!
“Would you like me to do it now?” Severus deadpanned. “Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?”

Dumbledore chuckled. “Oh, not quite yet.” He said with that damnable twinkle. “I dare say, the moment will present itself.”

“Oh, quite likely.” Severus said, a touch of viciousness to his voice. “With an audience, I would wager. Which is why I was creating the spell. To make it appear as though you are dead until such a time in which we can revive you. Only now, you’ve gone and gotten yourself cursed! Which means I will need to perform such spells that will surely end your existence!”

“In this case, Severus, you will be saving me from what is likely an embarrassing and painful death.”

“Because merlin forbid the wizarding world should ever see you as anything less than infallible.” Severus sneered. “And any spell I use? Hardly less painful. I believe my father was alive a full minute before he bled out, and had Bob not been so far gone, he’d have taken just as long.”

“No, Severus. I think you must, to prove yourself Tom’s above all others, use the Avada.”

Severus huffed. “An unforgivable?” He arched a brow. “You realize, of course, that you have to mean it. I may not always care for you, Albus, but I certainly don’t hate you enough to mean a desire to kill you.”

Albus smiled, that damnable, twinkling smile, and something in Severus’ gut churned.

“You may come to find, Severus, that you may have more reason to kill me than you think.”

April 9th, 1981

“I want another baby.” Hermione said to him, pressed against his side, the feel of her skin against his enough to stir up a desire to give her exactly what she wanted.

He smirked, turning to look at his wife. His beautiful, wonderful wife who seemed to take to motherhood like a fish to water. She still worked, of course, lending her considerable talents to many establishments who needed a bit of arithmancy to aid their findings, help along ideas. She was referred to frequently as some of the master arithmancers went into retirement, and Septima Vector
had decided to join the Hogwarts staff, though why Severus never understood. But Hermione was able to keep up with the requests, and spend more than adequate time with their daughter. And for six months old, Severus thought Aurora to be bright, an intelligent gleam in her deep brown eyes that shone with curiosity and mischief.

He loved that little girl, and her existence made him love Hermione even more.

“Another? So soon?” he asked, rolling on to his side, causing Hermione to lie on her back. The blankets shifted in a way that nearly exposed her, and his eyes took in the expanse of skin revealed to him.

“Well, there’s not saying that we’ll fall pregnant anytime soon. It’s said that, often, it takes time for your body to be able to handle a pregnancy. And, well, even if we were to right away, it would be nine months or so before the other baby would be here. Aurora would be one, but then, and…” She trailed off as Severus shifted over her. “I want another baby with you.” She said in a hushed tone. “I want a family, a wonderfully large, loving family.”

“How large?” He asked, brow raised. “Are we talking Weasley large?”

She chuckled, “Goodness, no. Three, maybe four. Definitely four. I want four.”

His chest rumbled with deep laughter. “And are we trying for genders?” He asked, kissing her neck. “Or do you already know?”

She sighed. “I only knew of Aurora. If she mentioned siblings, I don’t recall.”

He peeked at her, seeing her eyes had closed in ecstasy, and he smiled against her ear as he brushed her hair with his nose. “Then perhaps we should try to make your wish for four a reality.”

October 10th, 1981

“I’m pregnant.” Hermione said, a bit too loud for it to be a private word from him, but not so loud that it would impair his hearing.

“About time,” He said with a smirk, taking his daughter from her as she kissed his cheek. Bouncing Aurora on his lap, he grinned as she snatched a clump of egg off his plate. “And what say you, miss Aurora? Are you pleased to be a big sister?”

Aurora merely babbled while busily stuffing her face with egg.

“Another child.” Albus frowned. “When could this have possibly taken place?”

“Albus,” Minerva scolded, glancing out at the mass of students in the great hall. “It is not something we should be asking in the first place, but the location is less than tasteful.”

“I merely meant that Severus is quite busy, and Hermione is often… away.” He said. “How has the ministry been?” Albus suddenly asked her.

“Quite busy, actually.” She replied as she settled in her seat beside Severus, peeling a banana to hand to their grabby daughter. “I think they want me to come aboard full time to the department of mysteries, but that may change with another baby on the way.”
“To become an unspeakable would be quite beneficial,” Albus said, stroking his beard thoughtfully. The thoughtfulness in his eyes made Severus uncomfortable, because it did not seem to be filled with good intentions.

“What did your letter from Lily have to say?” Severus asked his wife, ignoring the way he felt Dumbledore’s eyes on the back of his head.

Hermione sighed, smiling sadly. “She’s bored.” She said, her eyes glistening. “James is starting to go a bit insane. No one’s been there since Harry’s birthday.” She sniffed. “I just… I wish… but then….”

Aurora grew quite as her mother became upset. Severus rested a hand on her arm, and Hermione took a fortifying breath. She was shaking, and he thought he’d seen the tint of her lips change from pink to purple, the sign of a lack of oxygen.

“Sorry,” She whispered hoarsely. “Hormones.”

November 1st, 1981

“You knew.” Severus had said, unable to get those two words out until the sun had rose. Everything, his head, heart, soul, ached. Hermione didn’t look much better, except she hadn’t moved once, not once, since he’d come home just after midnight. Aurora, thankfully a sound sleeper, had not roused for the day, and so they stayed in bed, clothed, miserable.

“Yes,” She croaked, sniffing. “I’ve had to live with the knowledge of this day for … for seven years.”

“How… how could-”

“Don’t you dare, say ‘how could you’, Severus. Don’t you dare say it!” She said vehemently.

“No,” he said, feeling a fresh wave of tears emerge as he took in Hermione, finally turned to face him, and realized how pale she was. So pale, so much like how Lily was when he found her. He feared that the grief of losing their friends, the whereabouts of their godson unknown, the loss of their pregnancy, would be too much for his strong, wonderful witch to bear. “No, I would never say that. Not to you. Hermione, why would you ever think…?”

“She was your best friend since childhood, and I knew from the moment I met her that she was going to die.” Hermione gasped, but more out of grief than her bloody vow. “I knew, and I could do nothing. Nothing! Not a single warning, not a bloody thing!”

“And that is exactly why I cannot blame you. I can blame Albus for tucking them away in a secret kept house where no one but Black knew where it was. I could blame Black for clearly giving away the secret. I can blame the sodding Dark Lord for being so egotistical that he truly believed a child, a baby could be his undoing and hunted them down. But not you. Never you.”

And he finally pulled her in his arms, finally felt that he could. She went willingly, and began to sob anew in his shirt, and he clutched her tightly, letting his own tears fall silently.

He lost Lily. Lily, whom he once thought he could have this with, who was the first real friend he’d
ever had. He would never hear her laugh, or see her smile again. Little Harry bore nothing of hers but her eyes, and he was starting to worry he would never see them again.

He was betrayed by Black, a man he’d begun to think of as a friend. No, a man who had become his friend. Now, a man willing to kill his friends in the name of a psychopath.

He’d lost his second child, long before he’d ever got to meet them.

And so, as Hermione wept, so did he, until they were both too tired to carry on.

“S

“There is to be a funeral for them tomorrow.” Albus said. “I’ve canceled classes for the day.”

“There really wasn’t a need,” Minerva said, filling Severus’ tumbler with some of her best scotch. “Really only myself, Severus, and Rubeus looking to attend.”

“True, but I feel it is appropriate for us all to take some time and mourn the loss of Lily and James Potter.”

Severus scoffed. “She’d not have wanted that.” He said, sipping his scotch, feeling it burn. “Potter might have, but not Lily.” He then cut his gaze to Albus. “She’d also have wanted Hermione and I to raise Harry.”

“And how would you explain such a thing to your friends?” Albus asked, and Severus’ lip curled at the blasé term. “No, Severus. You have a cover to protect.”

“What cover!?” He demanded, standing abruptly and slamming his tumbler so hard it cracked. “The Dark Lord is dead! There are no Death Eaters, no uprising, no cover to protect! There is, however, an orphaned little boy whose godfather is a lying, twisted fuck who may harm him if he has custody over him, and I demand to know where Harry is!”

“Severus,” Minerva said, a hand resting on his shoulder, but he knew she was looking at Albus. Who was staring at him.

“What endearing terms you have for the father of the child you’re already raising as your own.” Albus said calmly, and Severus felt a hex dance on his fingertips.

The resounding clap of magic, and deep looking burn on Dumbledore’s face, however, did not come from him.

“How dare you say such vile things, Albus Dumbledore.” Minerva said. “How dare you tarnish my niece’s good name with such despicable accusations! Aurora is Severus’ daughter, without a doubt!”

“Are you certain? I don’t believe Severus and his wife had much contact with one another during that time.”

“Then I believe you need to brush up on your basic biology, Albus, because much is not none, and that is how little time was needed to be spent together for that little girl not to exist.”

Albus smiled, not a sincere one by any means, but he nodded his head.
“To the matter at hand.” He said, “Harry will remain where he is, with Lily’s sister’s family, and will do so until it is time to come to Hogwarts.”

November 2nd, 1981

He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised not to have seen Petunia there, but in a small way, it had. The Evans had only been gone a few months, now. Lily was all the family she had left. And yet, she was not there, so neither was Harry, and Severus desperately wanted to see the little boy and know he was alright. Know that he was going to be okay.

Adjusting his daughter on his hip, he knocked.

It took some time, but the door opened, and a stunned Petunia Dursley stood on the other side.

“Let me in, or I will start causing a scene.” He said simply.

She looked at Aurora and sneered, “I’m not an orphanage.”

“I’m not about to give my daughter to you.” He sneered back. “If I could, I would take the boy as well. As it is, I merely wish to see him.”

Petunia looked as if she tasted something awful, but Severus had to wonder if that was not, in fact her natural state. Eventually, likely when one of the neighbors he heard leaving their home spotted him, she hurried him inside and shut the door.

He set Aurora down, much to Petunia’s displeasure, and she toddled off in the direction of Harry and a small pig. Or another boy, perhaps. It was really hard to tell.

“You were not at the funeral.” He said simply as he watched Aurora plunk down and play with Harry.

“I didn’t want to be around freaks.” She said, crossing her arms tightly. After moment, she asked, “Did she suffer?”

“It would have been quick.” Severus replied, taking in the small boy his daughter took a liking to. The pig was too busy with cars, a mass pile of them, while Harry and Aurora were pleased with the spoon and plastic container between them. “I had best see him at Hogwarts in ten years.”

Petunia scoffed. “They let people like you teach?” She asked.

“In my world I am a respected Master in my field, the youngest in a century, married to a witch who is one of the leading in her own field.” He said, not missing the way Petunia flinched at the word witch.

“I can’t believe someone married you.” She sneered.

“I could say the same, though looking at the thing I assume to be your son, you were likely the best they were going to get.” Petunia’s face went red, but he ignored it. “Harry will arrive healthy, happy, well cared for.”

“If you are so concerned, take him yourself.”
As I said, if I could,” He said, looking one last time at the mess haired child of his best friend. “I would.”

November 4th, 1981

“Severus Snape!” An auror bellowed as he came in to the Great Hall. “You’re under arrest for suspicion of Death Eater activity.”

The students became a buzz, but Severus ignored it. He knew this would happen when Lucius was called in for questioning the day before. He had suspected that, all things as they were, he wouldn’t have heard from the Malfoys again. But he’d received a floo call from Lucius that evening, asking if they were late for cake.

While Aurora’s first birthday was not what they had envisioned, it seemed oddly close to normal to have the Malfoys celebrate with them. Of course, Lucius had also come with a warning. People were talking, now that the Dark Lord had fallen, and anyone even whispered about possibly being part of their group were being at least brought in. Most, however, were being arrested.

Calmly, Severus stood, kissing his wife on the head, then his daughter, and then slowly came around the table with his hands out to the side. The aurors came up to him, the tallest removing his wand from his sleeve with a silent Accio.

Severus said not a word as he was magically bound, and led from the room with his head held high.

But in his mind, he was cursing, wondering if the man who forced him into this position would come through for him.

He sincerely doubted it.

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“What do you mean there is nothing you can do?” Hermione snarled at Dumbledore.

“He bares the mark on his arm, Hermione.” The headmaster said, shrugging as if there were truly nothing he could do about it. “I’m afraid he won’t be able to explain that away.”

“I never said he had to.” She said. “But you asked the task of him. You all but branded him yourself, and you are saying you’re allowing him to stay in prison?!”

Albus rose from his chair behind his desk, making his way over to the door of his office. “I do believe in a couple days you will be receiving your desolation of marriage request. Your daughter’s father is in Azkaban, Hermione. I suggest you save face in whichever way you can.” He said, sweeping from the room, likely heading down to the great hall to put in an appearance where he was absent from lunch.

Hermione collapsed in one of the guest chairs, trying to wrap her head around it all.
She knew he wouldn’t stay in Azkaban, he would be teaching her in ten years, and would have been around at least as long as Percy’s tenure. But she had sort of relied on Albus coming through for her. He had, as she reminded, been the one who ensured Severus’ spying was a set thing. So how was she possibly going to be getting Severus out of this?

“Here,” Alastor’s gruff voice reminded her that she was not alone, and it surprised her to find him at her side, offering her a nip from his flask.

“Ha, why not.” She said, taking a hit of whatever it was he kept in there. It was certainly his alcohol flask; the burn was intense. “I’ve lost my husband, my friends, my godson and another baby all in four days. I may have known at least part of that was coming, but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

“Talk to that foster mother o’yours ‘bout the baby. She knows that pain too well, she can help ya.” He said, coming around and perching on the edge of Albus’ desk in front of her. “Your godson, well, might be better off with his aunt for now. Famous now that he is, he might be better kept away from all the hullabaloo.”

She had to smirk at such a ridiculous word coming from such a rough man.

“Not much you can do for yer friends. Lupin wants to take off and sulk with his tail between his legs, it’s his call. Took off might quick after the funeral, and I get that we all grieve different, but ya’d think he’d have stuck around for those still kickin’.”

“Remus didn’t just lose his friends. When Sirius was brought in, he lost his lover, too.”

“Well,” Alastor said nothing more on that matter. “As for your husband, I got that covered. Might take time, but.”

Hermione looked up at the grizzled old wizard and felt a fresh wave of tears coming over her. “Is there anything you need from me?”

“No,” Alastor said, shaking his head, a gentle smile warming his features. “No, lass, I have it.”

November 18th, 1981

“Order in my court!” Barty Crouch Senior called, and the room fell silent.

There were no reporters allowed in, Alastor’s orders. Everyone entering the room were forced into a vow of silence, as was apparently the standards for all private trials. The Order of the Phoenix, or at least those that remained, were in attendance. Something, Hermione noticed, Albus didn’t seem very pleased about.

A cranking sound from the middle of the room, and Hermione looked to the caged dome in the middle of the room, the one she thought was quite unnecessarily lined with spikes. When her husband’s head first emerged, she took a sharp intake of breath. In the years she’d known Severus, she’d never once seen him so utterly unkempt.

His hair was so heavy with oils the nearly clung to his face. Which looked gaunt beneath the patchy beard. His frame seemed thinner in the prisoner’s robes, and she was suddenly wishing she hadn’t
decided to sit through this. She was glad Aurora was sleeping in her lap.

Severus’ eyes fell to her, and he seemed to drink in the sight of her and Aurora.

“Severus Snape,” Crouch called, pulling Severus’ gaze from them to the head of the court. “You have been brought in from Azkaban, as it has been said that you were not a Death Eater willingly. Is this true?”

Severus nodded. “It is.”

“Explain.”

Severus glanced at someone else, and judging by Alastor’s nod, it was him.

Severus looked down, then back to crouch. “At the age of sixteen, I was being courted by some deep within the inner circle of Tom Riddle’s followers. The Master I was placed with for my apprenticeship was one of his Death Eaters before his passing. It was during this courtship by the master and the Death Eaters that I was approached by Albus Dumbledore and Alastor Moody with the prospect of spying on the Dark Lord, and give information to them in aid to bring him down.”

“You committed crimes under this cover?” Crouch asked.

“I have.”

“Your honor,” Minerva stood. “If I may speak?”

Crouch stared at Minerva for quite some time, but then nodded.

She cleared her throat. “I have known this young man since he was but a boy. And he is, through marriage, part of my family. He was there when my brother was murdered by the followers of Tom Riddle.” She said, her voice cracking. “My former sister in lay is not with us, for she has found she wished to escape Britain after her husband’s death. But she would attest to his character as much as I.

For the night the Death Eaters raided a small, muggle village, because of knowledge they received of magical folk livin’ there, Severus immediately went to the home of my brother, his wife, and their son. He saved them with a warning. He saved my mother by allowing my brother to go to her. And when my brother was caught and tortured, Severus allowed him a -a quick demise. He has committed crimes, but he does them only when needed.”

“I can go on for days about the good this man’s done.” Alastor said, rising. “Have done, it’s how he got here. He doesn’t deserve to be locked up.”

“And what say you, Dumbledore?” Crouch asked. “You have said nothing in favor of this man, and allowed his arrest before the school. Is Severus Snape a spy? Or a Death Eater capable of deceiving the best?”

Hermione turned to Albus, holding her sleeping daughter just a little tighter.

And the old man did something that made her jaw clenched: he calculated. She could see it in his face, the way he weighed his options. And then, slowly, he stood.

“Severus Snape…. He said, and she could see Minerva and Alastor glare at him. “Had never intended to join the Death Eaters, though did so when asked, at great, personal risk. He was, and is, no more a Death Eater than I am.”

Hermione clamped her hand over her mouth to keep the squeal of relief from escaping. It looked as
though it truly hurt Albus to have said such a thing, but as he slowly sat back down, she could nearly forgive him for his near betrayal as she watched aurors head toward the awful cage.

"Then under the word of Alastor Moody, Albus Dumbledore, and witnessed by those here today, Severus Snape is clear of all charges against him, and is free to leave."

Hermione was up, and heading down the rows of seats faster than she’d realized, until she was suddenly before her husband and had to wait for the aurors to remove the cuffs so she could embrace him.

His arms wrapped around her first, holding her with their daughter between them, with surprising strength.

"I knew." She wept into neck, "I knew, I knew, I knew."

She assumed he knew what she meant, but it was hard to tell if the kisses he peppered over her forehead were of understanding or just need. It didn’t matter. He was free, and now, maybe, they could start moving past this horrid, horrid month.

———S———

“I could have lied,” Albus Dumbledore said to him, cornering him in the hallway of Minerva’s cottage. He was cleaned up, presentable, fresh clothes and dignity back in place, ready to face the welcome home party. And there was his only living Master, standing outside the bathroom door, waiting for him.

“Yes,” Severus replied, “But it would have made you look a fool. Alastor’s word holds weight.”

“Alastor has been considered a tad touched since his injuries a few years back. My word holds more.” Albus replied. “All it would take was to mention you were a Slytherin, one I had seen communicating with a few of those who were tried and arrested, or worse.”

Severus narrowed his eyes. “So why didn’t you?”

Albus smiled. “I realized, of course, that the boy will need protecting. Such a time will come when the Voldemort will rise, and he will rise once more, and Harry will need someone to look after him. To be sure he is set on the right course. You were so adamant you raise the child of the man you always seemed to hate—”

“No,” Severus cut him off. “I was adamant Hermione and I raise the son of our dear friend. James Potter had absolutely no factor in my decision or desire.”

“Either way, once he reaches eleven, and rejoins the wizarding world, we will need to be sure he is ready. And what better way to ensure he is prepared, than to have you, his secondary god father readily accessible to him.” Albus grabbed Severus’ left arm just above the wrist. “I kept you out of Azkaban, Severus. I think it prudent that there be repayment.”

“And how would you like me to serve, my lord.” Severus sneered, and contained the flinch as the sting of a hex shot through his arm.

“Since you’ve taken over the position of Potion’s Professor, the number of accidents has dropped
considerably. I foresee a long career in teaching the future generation how to brew, and how to do it properly.”

“Albus,” Elphinstone Urquart, Minerva’s fiancé, bellowed as he came around the corner. The auror took in the scene, quickly assessing what he saw, and plastered on a fake smile. “Al’s been pestering to get in the booze. Maybe you should allow me to escort the guest of honor to the sitting room before he gets too antsy?”

“Of course, Elphinstone.” Dumbledore relented, letting go of Severus. “There is, after all, to be more than a simple celebration of Severus’ freedom. He’s also accepted a tenure.”

“Tenure? Don’t those sorts of appointments need to go through the board of governors?” Ephinstone asked.

“Yes, but I do believe Severus has some close, personal friends on the board. He is all but guaranteed the position.

March 9th, 1982

—H—

“We should really consider moving into the cottage full time.” She said, looking around at the toys scattered about the rooms.

“No.” Severus said simply. “I couldn’t bear being away from you.”

“You’re teaching all day anyway. And it’s not like I wouldn’t be able to stay here from time to time.” She reminded him, weaving around Aurora and her chasing the toy flying carpet Eileen had sent her from her trip to Egypt. “And besides, I can hardly live here full time forever.”

“No?”

“No,” Hermione said carefully, placing her hand on her stomach. “But a growing family…."

“True.” She said, wringing her fingers, “but, you see… I don’t recall your wife living in the castle
full time. Or anyone really comprehending you had a wife until Aurora started school.”

He looked up at her with a half grin, “Well it’s hardly as if….” He trailed off, smile fading. “I’m here teaching for…. I was your teacher?”

“Honestly, Severus, you had to have known.” She said, crossing her arms, looking at her feet.

“Well, yes, I knew you would know me, I knew you would be Harry’s age, or there about. But it hadn’t occurred to me… I never thought…. Merlin, don’t tell me you had a crush on me.”

Hermione outright laughed, and where many a wizard would have been offended, Severus seemed relieved.

“You know, one would think it would be a good thing if I had.”

“No.” He said. “It would taint all our interactions during school if I had thought you were being nice to me because you had a thing for your potions teacher.”

“Rest assured, Severus. I fell for you despite how awful you were to me, then and before my trip.” She said, relieved he wasn’t storming out like she half expected him to. She kissed his head, then went chasing after their daughter.

February 28th, 1983

“Allow me to brew the potion for you.” He said softly, caressing his wife’s hair as she curled up against him.

“But we had Aurora.” She sniffed. “We aren’t infertile.”

“Nor was Delia.” He reminded her gently. “But she still needed the potion to prevent these… tragedies.”

“Maybe we should just be grateful we have Rory.” Hermione sniffed, and his heart broke for her. “Narcissa wants more children, and can’t.”

He couldn’t argue her that. Narcissa and Lucius had both requested another dose of the potion, but for a reason Severus hadn’t quite figured out, it hadn’t worked again. He knew Cordelia didn’t have long enough with Bob post Oliver to request a second dose, and that her new husband, Jacob Wood, wasn’t able to have children at all, so the request would be moot. They were the only examples he knew of a successful pregnancy after his alterations, and didn’t know if it were possible to actually have more than one following the dose.

But Hermione was right, they had had Aurora. They hadn’t even been trying. Everything about the whole pregnancy went perfectly, so why was Hermione having so much difficulty with another?

“We’ll figure it out.” He said, kissing her curls. “One day.”
He looked around the cottage, one that they had lived in during summers and occasional weekends since their wedding. But it had never been theirs, not properly. But until the passing of his Grandmother just after Christmas.

His mother hadn’t been as upset as most would have thought she should be, But Eileen Prince had had a rough life, and the fact that her mother would no longer be suffering through Dragon Pox when there was no cure was actually a bit of a relief. Severus had brewed the strongest healing brew he knew, of course, but it had only eased her pain and bought her some time. If he was ever able to do more than ensure dunderheads didn’t explode cauldrons, he’d work on finding a cure. The epidemic that swept through Britain was quite worrying.

“Now that it’s ours, I’m finding a hard time to find faults.” He said.

“I can find plenty,” Hermione said. “For one, a cottage should not have two dining rooms and no library.”

“So, make one,” Severus smirked. “It’s not like we need to keep things the way they are anymore.”

“There is that.” She sighed happily, and Severus was pleased to see that light in her eyes again.

It hadn’t been easy in the last year. Another two miscarriages, the strain of living in the castle as Aurora grew too old to stay indoors all the time, Hermione’s increase in requests from ministry officials. He didn’t want to admit she was right about needing to move, something about it seemed to scream defeat. But she was, and that light in her eyes proved that she was. Not because she was gloating, but because this was something she wanted that she could control.

“Albus has agreed to setting up a connection,” he said. “We’ll be able to come and go as we please, no apparation needed.”

“Good, because I’ve gotten quite used to sleeping next to you. I’d hate to have to give that up for ten months of the year.”

“Agreed.” He said, coming up to his wife and turning to face her. He kissed her slowly, carefully, putting his love and hope for her into each brush of their lips.

“Did you know this is just on the outskirts of Little Whinging?” She said between kisses.

“Is that so?” he said, pressing his lips more firmly to her smile, enticing her to understand what it was he was thinking of, and how it had nothing to do with the location of the cottage.


“It’s what grownups do when they love each other.” He said easily, turning away from his wife to pick up his daughter. He took in her deep, intelligent brown eyes, her gorgeous curls, her little grin. “And what does my little Rory want her room to be, now that she can have a bedroom all her own?”

“Gween!” She declared, little fists in the air. “Gween like Hogorts. Gween for Swervlin!” She said, and despite her lack of proper pronunciation, he had never been prouder.

“Slytherin green it is, for the little Slytherin Princess.” He said, grinning smugly at his wife.
“Uh huh, Swerverlin gween, with a lion.” Aurora added.

“A lion?”

“Wif wings.” She nodded vigorously.

Severus frowned, sighed, and started to carry her upstairs to do the transfigurations as Hermione laughed at him. Aurora was only three, her tastes were bound to improve.

———S———

“Must this be the time her accidental magic manifests!” He said, pulling at his hair.

“Swevrin Gween!” Aurora declared, pointing at his hair. His very green hair.

“Just be thankful she didn’t give you a lion’s mane.” Hermione said, snickering unhelpfully. “Or worse, snakes.”

**April 1st, 1984**

Her hand writing was shaky, but it was hers. Though the content of the missive led him to wonder if, perhaps, this was some sort of cruel joke.

He rose from the breakfast table in the great hall and charged down to his rooms. Hermione hadn’t been at the school for a week, saying she hadn’t been feeling well. And since Aurora was ill the weekend before, it hadn’t really surprised Severus that Hermione had caught the same bug their daughter had picked up.

But this wasn’t a bug, this was ....

He couldn’t say it.

He flooed to the cottage, and found Hermione standing before him, tears in her eyes. Smile on her face.

“‘You’re sure?” He asked. She just nodded. “But we haven’t even been trying!”

“I know.” She said. “I know. But there was the night a few weeks back, with the elf made wine, and Minerva and Elphy taking Rory for the night. And, well.”

He moved forward, kneeling in front of his wife, and pressed his face to her abdomen.

“Stay with us, little one. Please, please stay with us.” He whispered, kissing her just above the belly button through her shirt, closing his eyes and hoping.
“Are you looking forward to the new year, Severus?” Aurora Sinistra, the new Astrology Professor, asked him as they stood under a window in the Great Hall. There were always these little gatherings the night before the start of the year, a way for the staff to properly reconnect, get to know one another in the case of the new Defense teacher. Severus had gotten to the point that he ignored them, as there really wasn’t much point to get to know them if they would be gone before the end of the year.

He hadn’t really meant to get to know Aurora Sinistra, either, but she seemed keen on it.

“No,” He told her bluntly. “I never look forward to it. It is simply another year with another crop of Dunderheads.”

Sinistra looked taken aback for a moment, but then smiled. “I’m sure they aren’t all bad.”

He could only roll his eyes, saying anything more would be considered rude.

“Sorry we’re late,” Hermione’s voice cut through the crowd, and he beamed at the sight of her. How could he not? She was round, and glowing, healthy. Beautiful. And carrying his son. Yes, this time he cheated, and when she was asleep, he used a spell he’d read about to find out the gender of their child before he was born, a sort of one up on his wife who had known Aurora before she was even conceived.

And in that moment, as she came up to him all smiles, Aurora’s hand in hers, he realized he hadn’t actually told anyone they were expecting again, save for Minerva and Poppy. After the second miscarriage, they simply stopped announcing it, terrified of having to face their pity if the worst should occur again.

“Look at you!” Rolanda said, leaving Septima a moment to come and fawn over Hermione’s bump. “How far along are you?”

“Five months,” Hermione smiled, “I’m due in January.”

“Janu- Severus!” Rolanda wheeled around, smacking him in the chest hard enough to knock the air out of him and make him slosh his drink. “How come you never said?”

“Slipped my mind.” He said with a smirk.

“Slipped your mind that your wife was having another baby?” Septima teased as she joined her wife. “At least you know it will be beautiful, given this little bundle of cuteness.” She said, scooping up Aurora and making her giggle.

“Now you’ve jinxed it.” He said accused Septima. “Now the poor thing will be born with my nose, and Hermione’s original teeth.”

“Hey,” Hermione said, putting her hand to her mouth.

“You had other teeth?” Aurora asked, tilting her head in confusion.

“Come with us to see Auntie Poppy, and I bet she’ll tell you all about it.” Rolanda said, encouraging her wife to smuggle his daughter away to mingle.
“I had no idea you were married.” Aurora Sinistra said, sounding a bit put off by it.

“You didn’t ask.” He said simply.

She looked as though she were about to say something, but then decided to simply leave. Severus smirked.

“If I knew all it would take to get her to leave me alone was mention you, I’d have waxed poetic.” He said to Hermione.

“If you didn’t wear your sleeves so long, she’d have seen your ring.” She teased, rubbing her belly with one hand. The little wizard as rolling about, and Severus smirked.

“It’s a safety precaution.” He reminded her as he placed his left hand over the movement. “And what have you been eating today to make this one so agitated?”

It was Hermione’s turn to smirk. “Delia’s candy. I have been craving them something terrible. I think this one’s more like you than Rory ever was.”

“Mrs Snape,” Albus greeted, and he only ever said it that way when he was displeased with something she did. Severus could still recall how he refused to say even H for at least a month after his trial. “Can I get you any sort of refreshment? Pumpkin juice? Tea?”

“Oh no,” Hermione said adamantly. “Please, no tea. Just the smell makes me quite nauseated these days.”

“What you need is some of Filius’ punch.” Minerva said, coming up to Hermione and looping her arm through his. “He made it without the whiskey this year, so you and Elphy can drink it.”

“Is he still not allowed to indulge?” Hermione teased as they drifted off, and what further words were exchanged between the witches, Severus couldn’t hear.

“I am surprised you hadn’t mentioned this new child before.” Albus said sternly. “Considering how it will affect you.”

“Hermione will be spending most of her nights here with me. It will not cause a problem, as I will not miss time.”

“That is not what I meant.” Dumbledore said, peering over his half-moon glasses. “One child is enough to give you pause, should there ever come a choice between them and the greater good. Two is worse.”

“I am not going to put our lives on hold because the Dark Lord might return one day. We are continuing on as though nothing could change.” He took a sip of his drink.

“Yes, perhaps that is wise.” Albus conceded. “And, I suppose, it is one way to know for certain your lineage carries on.” He said with a smile that was not as kind as one may believe.

“She truly is such a pretty girl, your Aurora. Though I find she has very little of either of you in her.”

Severus rolled his eyes as Albus walked away, wondering how long it would be before the Old Coot finally stopped believing that Sirius Black had somehow sired his daughter.

January 10th, 1985
“We can say for certain his lungs are healthy!” Poppy said as she finished cleaning up. “He has quite the roar.”

“I would say so,” Hermione laughed, trying to coax their newborn son to quiet down, perhaps have a meal. “Please, please my little man, you need to calm down! I know it was all warm and cozy in there, but you were simply too big.”

Severus watched as his son finally latched on to his mother’s breast, and the room suddenly seemed deafeningly quiet.

“I think we have ourselves a lion.” She said.

“Perhaps.” He said, smiling gently as he had been from the moment his boy entered the world. This labor was quick, much quicker than her last. They had only just gotten Aurora tucked into bed when her contractions began. Just after midnight, their son was born, protesting his displeasure at being vacated loud enough he was certain the castle knew.

“So much for our evening together.” Hermione said, looking regretfully over at him.

“There will be other birthdays.” He said, finally venturing closer now that the baby had settled. He sighed after finally getting a proper look at him, and frowning. “He’s a small me.”

“Yes.” She said lovingly.

“I mean, he is … identical.” He noted, finding the scowl on his son’s face a bit disconcerting. Mildly cute, but disconcerting.

“Yes,” Hermione cooed. “You’re going to be handsome, just like your Daddy, aren’t you, Leo?”

“I think labor addled your brain, witch.” He countered before picking up on what she said. “Wait, Leo?”

Hermione smiled up at him. “Leonidas. It was in a book I was reading, and I thought the name quite charming. And with the way he entered the world.”

“I… like it.” He said. “Much better than the name I was thinking.”

“Which was…?” She asked cautiously.

“Angus.”

She laughed, throwing her head back, “Yes, I quite agree with you. Leonidas it is. Leonidas Severus-”

“No!” He said abruptly. “Think this through, woman. Leonidas Severus Snape. It’s a giant hiss.”

She wrinkled her face. “That does sound awful.”

“Your father’s name?” Severus asked after a moment.

“John.”

“And so, it shall be. Leonidas John Snape.”
At that moment, whether it was in agreement or not, Leonidas John Snape demanded more attention, and screamed until he was given to his father. Severus didn’t know if this was merely coincidence, or if something about him calmed his little boy. It hardly mattered, either way.

**September 1st, 1991**

The years had been good to Severus Snape. He was sure they probably shouldn’t have been, but they were.

He had two wonderful children, the eldest set to get her Hogwarts letting this year, already far exceeding what her peers would be in potions. His youngest considered a sort of genius in the muggle school system, being pushed ahead in the system so he wouldn’t be a disruptive influence. And they got along, for the most part. He and Hermione both having been only children were never sure what the appropriate amount of bickering was, though Minerva would merely laugh and she her head when he brought up his worries.

And that was a friendship he had grown to greatly appreciate during his life sentence at Hogwarts. Minerva had been his mentor, showing him how to be strict, but fair. Yes, his appearance and double sternness in the classroom had people thinking him worse, but he truly didn’t care. And if Gryffindor suffered more because they were more ridiculous than the other houses, so be it. He wasn’t about to bend when his rigid standard of discipline had actually earned him honors and recognition in regards to the well far of his students. And Minerva, bless her, understood his need to be so.

It was also an immense pleasure to have someone being so competitive in regards to Quidditch games. Pomona and Filius just didn’t get as involved in them as she did.

Teaching wasn’t his passion, but his advanced NEWTs classes were always enjoyable. Once the dunderheads were weeded out, he found he didn’t mind so much. It was nearly like have a half dozen apprentices. And the private lab Albus gave him as a peace offering shortly after Leo was born a nice addition. Since Hermione had the children at the cottage most days of the week, he would experiment, improving where he could, creating where he can. And at least here in the castle, he didn’t have to worry about his overly studious son wandering in the lab when it wasn’t safe.

His friendships outside of staff were not terrible, either. Though he loathed that Lupin simply disappeared when Black was incarcerated. One would think a man with so little companionship would stick around when all the rest were gone. But then, he supposed, it would mean seeing the witch he pinned after (still, for Merlin’s sake), remain married to the Slytherin he once tormented. Lucius was someone he saw more often than he thought he would. But, he supposed, he was Draco’s godfather, their children five months apart in age, and Severus did have a … cover … to maintain. Though, even he had to admit, if one were to take Lucius out of the whole foolish blood supremacy nonsense, he wasn’t a terrible man. Just a bit pompous.

Yes, life hadn’t been terrible to the man who thought he was set for a life of misery when he started his fourth year of Hogwarts. He’d come a long way from the poor, miserable, bullied boy who longed for his beautiful best friend’s attention, and was starting to think that perhaps the older Slytherins had the way of it. But there was something niggling in his mind that told him not to get to comfortable. A niggling that reminded him distinctly of Hermione, and the way she was actually nervous when he left the cottage to prep for the incoming students.
Draco was starting this year, and why he always thought he and Aurora would be together, he wasn’t sure. Perhaps it was because, in many ways, it seemed impossible to separate them.

As the first years came in, he immediately spotted a head of bright, ginger hair. Another bloody Weasley. How many was that, now? His sixth? How many were there supposed to be? Seven? One more after this one, then. Hopefully this one at least had some intelligence. The twins weren’t terrible, just menaces whose talents would be tremendous if they could focus it on anything but pranks and tricks. The eldest boy was good, too, but the one who the two after him were utterly ridiculous. Not cauldron exploders, but a near thing.

And speaking of cauldron exploders, he could spot two in the line. There was always a look about the, something in the eyes. A boy with a round face that seemed familiar, his head hung as though he’d been scolded for standing the wrong way, and a bulky boy with freckles and auburn hair who appeared as if he were already up to no good.

His eyes followed the line, and his heart stopped when he took in James Potter. Only, not James Potter. Green eyes, Lily’s eyes, were behind those round framed glasses. He was tiny, too tiny to have been properly cared for, and that made Severus’ lips curl in a barely restrained sneer.

Then the other shoe dropped, as it were, and he realized why there as a niggling. Why Hermione was so nervous.

Potter. Another Weasley. Draco. Which could only mean….

Merlin, the hair! His choked back a laugh, sipping his wine to mask his amusement. Sweet Nimue the girl was a disaster. Hermione’s hair had always been a bit wild, but this little chit looked like she’d stuck her finger in a muggle socket. And the teeth! They weren’t that bad. They couldn’t have been. No, there was no way they were that big. He could still see bits of Aurora in her, the shape of her face, the nose, her eyes, but there was no way anyone could peg them as being as close a relation as they actually were.

September 2nd, 1991

He walked into his sitting room after his first class with his first years, and spotted his wife on the sofa, looking at him expectantly, a smirk playing on his face.

“You’re a bloody annoying know-it-all, and I look forward to your sudden departure in a few years.”

It was a good thing she laughed. It was the truth, of course, but these things could be taken the wrong way. He didn’t much like sleeping with one eye open.

Chapter End Notes

Until the next update!
“Should we bring the kids in on this?” Sirius asked as Hermione set down the tea pot to the middle of the table.

“Thank ya, love.” Alastor murmured, the one within reach of said pot, and helped himself first. Kreacher came up with a tray of biscuits, beaming a little at the grin and ‘thank you’ Hermione gave him.

“No, not when part of what I have to tell you involves one of their peers. Until we have a plan, I don’t want them knowing the particulars.” Severus said adamantly, shaking his head.

“What could possibly be going on now that Albus won’t tell us about?” Minerva asked, exasperation evident as she took the tea pot from Alastor.

Hermione made her way around the table to sit between her husband and Remus. A round table, ensuring no one was made to feel there was someone here in charge. It was transfigured from the one typically used when Dumbledore held meetings, the one Harry and Sirius sat at during meals, which had always been rectangular.

“Always somethin’ Dumbledore doesn’t tell us.” Alastor grumbled. “Can see how easy he side steps questions. Doesn’t wanna talk ‘bout his hand, ‘nd I know a cursed one when I see it.”

“Yes, instead he merely goes on about scouting messages. Getting the word out against You-Know-Who.”

“Words won’t do anything against him.” Sirius scoffed. “He’s out, everyone knows, it’s common knowledge. You either fear him, or are on his side. And if you fear him, you either keep your head down, you leave the country, or you fight against him. And these recruitment missions are going precisely the way I thought they would: head down, or fleeing.”

“It’s because the man who once toted bloody supremacy above all else seems to just want to suppress the muggles. To enslave the muggleborns. I can tell the lot of you now that the werewolf community are already leaning more toward supporting him than not.” Remus said, jabbing at the surface of the table. “Albus Dumbledore, nor anyone aside from Volde-”

“Don’t.” Severus warned.

“Riddle … have come up with any kind of future plans for the packs out there.”

“But isn’t Greyback among his followers?” Sirius asked. “Isn’t he the reason for many of you?”
“Yes,” Remus said seriously. “But people don’t seem to care whether or not a we had a choice in the matter. A werewolf can’t hold down a job, can’t stay in a community. I was one of the rare ones who actually got to go to school.”

“So yer sayin’ we need ta be offering something to the werewolves?” Alastor asked.

“All I’m saying - thank you, Minerva - all I’m saying is that Albus has us heading out into the world, risking our necks, asking for others to rise up against a dark wizard who has returned from the dead. And I don’t think we can go around throwing the term ‘horcrux’ around, because then we will lose what ever advantage what might have.”

“And that brings us back to the topic of conversation I wished to have.” Severus said. “We will start with the hand.”

“Cursed?” Alastor asked.

“Yes.” Severus nodded. “One powerful enough that, had he been a weaker wizard, he’d have died the moment he slipped the ring baring it on his finger.”

“Bloody idiot!” Alastor barked. “What in bloody blazes made him do something so stupid?”

Severus shook his head. “He wouldn’t say. But, we know there are horcruxes, perhaps his hand is a result of what might happen should one touch one?”

“Not from my research.” Hermione said. Severus looked at her, perplexed, and she smiled. “I may have asked your mother if I could have a gander around her library.”

“You braved that on your own?” He asked, and Hermione couldn’t tell if he were more amused or concerned.

“You make your mother sound like this horrid demon.”

“Depending on the day, she is.”

Hermione shook her head. “Yes, well, either way. I found the book that Leo likely looked through. It was… unsettling. But from what I can understand, it’s this: it does mess you your mind. You say that Albus said he was a fool, perhaps he was under the influence of one. And take Ginny, she had no idea what she was doing, losing hours of her life, because of her contact with the diary. And if we are under the assumption that Harry is a living one, look at how he can become reckless. He’s been known to snap, lose his temper, or at least he would before he learned occlumency. It is coming into contact with a piece of a corrupt soul. Frankly, I think Harry is the least affected simply for the fact Riddle didn’t have much soul left.

“But it can’t physically hurt you. Not until you try to destroy it. I would wager there are protections placed upon them by the Dark Lord. Something to keep them from being destroyed, or at least a deterrent. Smart, really, when it’s a piece of your soul at risk.”

Alastor scoffed. “Do you really think he cared about such things?”

“I think he would have been concerned over someone risking his chances to be returned.” Hermione nodded.

“So Albus was somehow enticed to put this ring on?” Minerva asked. “And it cursed him. So what happens now?”
“That is the part I wanted the lot of you to know, the part he seemed to make abundantly clear he had no intentions of telling you: he is going to die.” Severus said, looking at the shocked faces from Minerva, Sirius, and Remus, the resignation in Alastor’s. “And what’s more, is he wants me to do it.”

No one moved. Hermione wasn’t even sure anyone breathed. She recalled exactly how she reacted when Severus told her. He had to physically keep her within the study so she wouldn’t march to Hogwarts and finish Albus off herself, Theodore Nott’s task be damned. Then she tried to come up with a contingency plan, some way to not have an audience, but still have proof he’d done the deed. Failing that, she ran the numbers of all the scenarios she could possibly think of, and which one was least likely to have Severus not end up killed or imprisoned. It was a long game, and one she didn’t want to play. It felt too much like Albus in the way he would do certain things and specific times, give information to one and not another.

And that is why she had Severus assemble this meeting. It reduced his chances of complete escape by five percent, but it would be worth it. She had no interest in being a master manipulator.

So she sat quietly, sipping her tea as Severus rehashed the meeting in which his task was set, the hours he’d spent toiling over notes, runes, and rats perfecting a spell that would make the target drop, and appear completely dead to anyone who would check. How it took him ages to figure out the counter spell, and understand that a rat under the curse for a day was less likely to revive than one who had only been under and hour. He told them how he was certain he had a fool proof plan to fake the death of Albus Dumbledore, only the have the Headmaster turn around and demand he kill him anyway. To save his dignity. To keep his pride.

Hermione would have much rather he pay for his mistake. She already knew this was not going to be an instance of getting what she wanted.

“What do you mean? What reasons would you have to kill him?” Minerva asked when the story was finished.

“Lot’s, I’d wager.” Sirius grumbled.

“It’s not like he gave me a list, Minerva.” Severus sighed. “In typical fashion, he gave me that merry little twinkle of a grin, then turned and headed for his chambers. I’ve been pondering it since. The only thing I know for certain is the way he derailed my life in my youth. He had wanted me isolated, cut off, likely angry and hurt. I’m not positive as to why.”

“Man always tried to argue it was bad for your cover.” Alastor said. “Having connections and all.”

“He was pissed off when he discovered Hermione was pregnant with Leo. Said children complicated things.”

Hermione noted the way Remus and Sirius tensed, Remus looking to the table as Sirius’ jaw tightened.

“He’d put Potter above all others, yet thinks it foolish when Molly worries over her children.” Minerva shook her head. “Sadly, his not wanting you to have a family does not surprise me.”

“It matters not.” Severus said. “He has a year at most, whether I end him or not. It’s hard to tell who he will appoint leader, but I think it safe to say he will not tell everyone everything. And I quote ‘I do not like to put all my eggs in one basket, especially one that frequently hangs off Riddle’s arm.’ That’s his excuse for me, I would love to hear his reasoning for the rest of you.”
“Well, things will be a bit easier with Hermione as the Defense instructor. Information can flow more freely at least with half of us.” Minerva said.

Hermione didn’t want to dwell on that. She had thought, for a moment, that Septima had decided to step down when Albus asked her to teach. With Leo starting Hogwarts, she saw no reason why she couldn’t cut back on her consulting work, but when he clarified the position, she couldn’t very well back paddle. The curse was lingering in the back of her mind though, because there had to be one with the way no one ever kept the position longer than a single year.

“Still gotta be careful, though.” Alastor said. “Constant vigilance. Albus might not tell us anythin’ if he gets rootin’ ‘round in our heads and finds out we know more than he’s let on. Same thing with your kids.”

“When are we going to tell them all this?” Sirius asked. “Especially Harry?”

“Let then enjoy their summer, the last of the innocence, as it were.” Severus said. “The Dark Lord is out, he’d known to be back. And if his plans succeed, and I have little doubt they might, the children have very little chance at being just that any longer.”

August 30th, 1996

Diagon Alley wasn’t the same as it was even four weeks ago. There were enough places closed and boarded that it started to feel a bit desolate. Thankfully, rumor was that it was just here in London, and not everywhere. Hogsmeade weekends would be terribly boring if that were the case.

She had accompanied her parents and brother to the alley, but parted ways when they ventured off to bring him to Ollivander’s. She had, after all, had the moment all to herself when she selected her wand. She couldn’t recall who Leo was with, but it wasn’t with them. And when Aurora had left her parents and brother to prepare him for his first year at Hogwarts, she hadn’t intended to go to the Three Broomsticks. Her first choice was Fortescue’s, but since he was one of the places boarded up, she had to make due.

That was the other reason Leo was much later getting his wand than she was: hope that the Ollivander would return. After a couple weeks with the shop closed down, his son came back to England to help get through the school season.

*I still can’t believe I was one of his last customers,* Neville had written in the letter she was rereading over a butter beer. *And to think, we were all in the alley that day, too. What if it were death eaters, and they recognized us? Gram was so pleased, so proud to think that I was actually a wizard like my father, but I don’t know. I’m pretty sure my Dad wouldn’t have been so scared.*

“What ya readin’?” Fred’s voice made Aurora jump, and she sighed with annoyance at her and him as her heart calmed. He sat down across from her, and while she wanted to tell him to leave, she was admittedly glad not to be alone any longer.

“A letter from Neville.” She replied, setting the parchment down and taking a sip of her butter beer.
“Neville,” Fred said, and Aurora tried to decipher why he would say his name like that. Loud, happy and displeased at once. “And how is good ol’ Neville?”

“Find out,” She said, handing Fred the parchment and taking another sip.

She watched him read the parchment, noting all the slight facial ticks as he went through it. The twitch of his eyebrows, the flicker of a smile.

When he set the parchment down, he gave a weak grin. “He really seems to fancy you.”

“That’s your take away from that?” She said.

“Yes,” Fred said simply. “But then Nev’s always had a thing for you. And here he is, asking how you are. What you’re plans for the school year are. Who you’ve kept in touch with. He’s getting a feel for you. I’d say. Probably ask you out before Christmas.”

Aurora frowned, “And what are your thoughts on that?”

Fred looked to the table. “I was the one who called it off, remember.”

“You also said you’d be here as a friend.” She countered, and he nodded as if he was only just remembering that bit. “So as a friend, one who isn’t close to Neville, what do you think.”

Fred glanced up at her, studied her. He snuck his hand across the table, picking up her butter beer and taking a sip. She arched a brow, and he smirked a little before it faded. Then he sighed, seeming resigned.

“I think you should take him up on it.” He said. “If Neville gets the courage to ask your dad’s permission, then give the bloke a go. Can’t hurt anything, and, well, he might be…. ” Fred shrugged.

“And that won’t … it won’t….”

“Met a nice lady the other day.” He said, and Aurora’s heart suddenly felt like it was being strangled. “Pretty thing, graduated from Beauxbatons. She works for Madam Malkins, an apprentice I think. She’s asked if I’d be interested in taking tea with her.” He squared his shoulders. “We should move on, Rory. You go out with Nevvie, I’ll go out with Janette.”

“Fine.” She said, reaching across the table and swiping her butter beer back. “If he asks, I will.”

“Okay, then. Brilliant.” Fred agreed.

“I’m armed now.” Leo’s voice drew their attention, and Aurora caught the amusement in Fred’s eyes before he made a good effort to smother it. “So if you’re here to cause my sister more heart ache…..”

“What wand chose you, young master Snape?” Fred asked, his smile breaking through.

“Black ash, ten and a half inches, Unicorn Hair. Much like my father’s. And, of course, powerful enough to hex you should Aurora leave with a single tear.”

“Don’t promise such things,” Aurora smirked. “The tear might just be from laughter.”

“And what would you find amusing?” Leo protested.

“My eleven year old brother attempting to defend my honor.” She retorted.

“There will be no attempting. I will succeed.” Leo retorted.
“And I think we got to know one another well enough for you to know I would never intentionally hurt your sister.” Fred challenged, to which Leo seemed to grudgingly agree with. Then, with a devious smirk, Fred leaned in and whispered something to Leo that Aurora couldn’t hear. Leo’s eyes widened, and he nodded with determination.

“Consider it done.” He said.

“Consider what done?” Aurora asked.

“Oh, is that Betty calling me. Food’s up, must run.” Fred said as he shot to his feet. He then paused, looking back at her. “Was great to see you, Rory.” And without another word, he left.

Aurora watched him, all while trying not to watch him. He said move on, so she would. Maybe not with Neville, but someone. She would. Really.

“I will, though.” Leo said, and Aurora turned to look at her little brother. “If someone hurts you, I will hex them.”

“Ditto.” She said with a smile, ruffling his slightly greasy hair.

“Hey!” He said, quickly righting himself. “If I’m going to be in the most dignified house in all of Hogwarts, I can’t have my Gryffindor sister mussing up my hair.”

“Oh, not going to be joining me?” She teased.

“No,” he said adamantly. “I’m going to be a Slytherin, just like Dad.”

August 31st, 1996

They were at Grimmauld place, which really couldn’t have made things easy for Sirius. Hermione sat beside him, hand on his thigh in support, her husband on her other side, arms crossed, glaring down Remus. Not that Severus couldn’t think of a dozen reasons at any given time as to why he could be giving Remus such a cold reception, but at least this time it was in solidarity for a friend.

“Where’s Harry?” Hermione asked Sirius, who seemed to be doing okay despite everything.

“He’s with Draco at Dromeda’s house.” Sirius replied.

Severus’s glare softened, and he arched his brow as he turned to Sirius. “Do you think that wise?”

“Why?” Sirius asked.

“Given the … tension between the two?” Severus asked.

Sirius snorted. “That would require the pair of them to acknowledge it. No, I’m not worried. And if, on some off chance, they decide to take that leap together, with Dromeda, Ted, and Cissy under the same roof, then good for them.”
Dumbledore came into the dinning room, eyes twinkling, hand hidden beneath his robes still. Hermione wondered if he would actually say anything about it this time, but she doubted it. A glance at Alastor and Min told her they were wondering about the same things.

“We’ll make this a relatively short discussion, so long as we can all come to an agreement. We will need protection to move Harry.”

“And the other children.” Minerva said.

Dumbledore smiled. “I don’t think we need to worry about all of them.”

“And why not?” She countered. “It wasn’t Potter alone who went to the Ministry.”

“No, but it is Harry alone who is the chosen one.”

“And why not put a larger target on his back than by having a guard follow him.” Sirius countered, looking to Albus. “You-know-Who’s re-emergence is in the Prophet. People know he’s back, and if anyone still thinks Harry is the chosen one, a crowd around him is the last thing that will keep him safe.”

“I think an escort would be smart, Sirius.” Remus said calmly.

“Perhaps, but you aren’t exactly his guardian, are you?”

“Gentlemen.” Dumbledore said, raising only his healthy hand to calm them.

“Perhaps if we had Kingsley and Miss Tonks, perhaps another auror or two who can be trusted simply standing guard around the platform, it will appear more like general security than special treatment.” Severus suggested. “Parents will already be on edge, this will assure there is protection for everyone.”

“I agree with Snape,” Alastor said.

“Be that as it may, our concern is for Harry.” Albus said firmly.

“So have him tailed, distantly.” Hermione suggested. “Get him there early, as one of the first. And not alone, allow him to go with a friend. He’s already with Draco…”

“No, from here and no where else.” Albus said firmly.

“No,” Sirius said. “He’s already there, with his things, and if he does require an escort, the lovebirds over there can follow them. And seeing as how Remus has already relocated to Tonks' place, it shouldn’t be too hard to meet up in the morning. Just over the tea pot, right Remus? Or do you drink only coffee now?”

Hermione palmed her face, shaking her head.

“Must you do this now?” Remus asked.

“I’ve no idea what you mean? It’s a simple inquiry. When you were with me, solely with me, you drank tea in the morning. Now that you’re with Tonks, I wonder if your habits have changed there, as well.”

“You’re the one who left, Sirius.” Remus reminded him.

“Yes, because after nearly twenty years of being in love with you, I decided I didn’t want to play
“second fiddle to yet another woman.”

The room fell awkwardly silent, and Hermione looked up to see a sheepish Remus, a surprisingly calm Sirius, most everyone uncomfortable, and Dumbledore….

Hermione burst out laughing, though quickly silenced it, at the look of wide eyed bafflement on the Headmaster’s face.

When Sirius turned toward Albus, he merely shrugged. “Call me petty, if you must. I realize full well I am making a scene.”

“How… how do you mean you were in love with Remus?” Albus asked.

Sirius looked about the rest of the room before turning back to Dumbledore in confusion. “You were with Grindlewald, weren’t you?”

“No. Yes. What I mean is, I had thought you were with Mrs Snape.”

It was Sirius’ turn to laugh. “No, that would be Remus who longed for her, not me.”

“Why is this the topic of conversation, we were discussing keeping Harry safe.” Remus said swiftly.

“I think it’s settled,” Alastor said. “An auror team around the platform, watching everyone. Tonks follows Potter and Malfoy in from Dromeda’s. Done deal.

“I do not think….”

“Great!” Sirius smacked the table. “Who’s up do a pint?”

“Lead the way, lad.” Alastor said as he stood up, hobbling toward the door. Kingsley followed, and Sirius came up behind them.

They left the Snapes, the Weasleys, Tonks, Remus, and Minerva to watch Dumbledore stare dumbfounded at the kitchen door.

“Much as you want to have the final say in everything, Albus, dictating how we do things is not much different than how You-Know-Who runs things,” Minerva said as she stood up. “Now, it’s late, and if we don’t have children to ready for the morrow, we have to be ready for children. And I, for one, am very much looking forward to the sorting tomorrow.” And before she left, she turned to Severus, “He’ll be Gryffindor.”

“No he won’t. He’ll be Slytherin.” Severus countered, standing as well, ignoring the still quiet Albus as he followed Minerva. “Just you wait and see.”

September 1st, 1996
“Are you positive you want to sit on your own?” Aurora asked Leo as they headed for the train. Their parents had only brought them through the barrier, gave them hugs, and told them they’d see them soon. It was much the same for Aurora when she first went off to Hogwarts, and with both their parents about to be on staff, it made very little if any sense for them to stick around. “There’s only seven of us, and Gin, Ron, and Draco are going to be heading off to the Prefect car about half way through.”

“I’ll be fine, Aurora.” Leo said, squaring his shoulders, looking all the world as though he was calm. Occlumency, it had to be, because before they got to the train station, he was jumping around as though it were Christmas morning. And Aurora? Oh he was really trying to layer on this proper wizard nonsense.

“Oh okay,” She said, nearly ruffling his hair. Leo’s dark scowl had her withdrawing, and trying not to laugh at how adorable he still was.

She watched him head off toward a lot of other young ones, firsties or second years, and then went to find her own mates.

Aurora moved down the cart, knowing from years before roughly where they would be.

She found the car with Draco and Harry in it, and she almost didn’t want to go in. They were seated fairly close together, leaned in toward each other, hands nearly touching but not quite.

She knew from Draco’s rambles that he and Harry hadn’t actually confessed to anything yet, but there were longer talks with more intense stares and the like. Honestly, she almost wanted to send some sort of jinx through the door that would have the dark haired wizard conveniently fall forward, having Draco’s mouth break his fall against his own.

“Hey, Rory, what are you doing out here?” Neville asked with a grin, opening the door without looking.

Draco and Harry jumped apart, nearly putting the vacancy of the rest of the seat between them before they settled and moved back together. Though frustratingly not as close.

“Hey, guys.” Harry smiled as she and Neville took the seat across from them.

“Hey,” She replied. “Did, umm, did you guys arrive together?”

“Yeah,” Harry said quickly. “Umm, well, uh… I was with Draco last night, well, I mean, umm, at his, ah, at his aunt’s house. Where he lives. With her. And his mom. And Ted.”

“Potter.” Draco smirked.

“Right, so, Tonks came by and escorted us with Remus.”

“And it wasn’t at all awkward.” Draco’s smirk grew as the door to the car opened, and Ron, Ginny, and Luna came in.

After everyone said hello and got settled, Ron and Luna with Harry and Draco, Gin with she and Neville, Aurora asked. “Why was it awkward?”

Harry looked to his fingers. “Sirius broke up with Remus.”

“What?” Ron said, utter heartbreak in his eyes. “Why? Why would he do that?”
Harry, looked uncomfortable. “Remus…, well, Remus, um….”

“Lupin wanted to shag my cousin Dora and Sirius. And be with them both.”

“A-at once?” Neville asked, blushing fiercely.

“I think he actually means have a relationship with both of them.” Gin smirked.

“Sure about that, Weasley?” Draco grinned. “Might have meant the other thing.”

“Shut it, you prat.” She rolled her eyes as Draco snickered.

“So Sirius just left?” Aurora asked.

Harry shrugged. “I don’t think this was a decision he came to quickly. He was sorta out of it most of the summer. It was shortly after my birthday that he seemed quit assured. He then… well, he then sat me down one night and said something like ‘there’s a war, and nothing is certain. So don’t wait around for someone. Don’t hold back, that sort of thing.’”

“He’s not wrong.” Luna said. “None of us are assured a tomorrow, even during peace time.”

“That’s not depressing or anything.” Ron sighed.

“Depressing or not, it’s a good reminder.” Harry said. “And I have a feeling that this year is going to be… big.”

“Bloody fantastic.” Ron sighed heavier, groaning a bit. “Just want one year, mate. One normal year.”

“I also have to hold quidditch try outs for practically every position, so that’s also weighing me down.” Harry said nonchalantly.

“You know I’ve always been your best mate, right?” Ron asked.

“Yeah, well, still gotta try out, mate.” Harry shrugged.

“Did you bring your broom?” Ginny asked innocently, and Aurora looked at her with a devious grin.

“Of course I did.”

“Bloody hell,” Ron grumbled. Not like he really had to worry, Aurora wasn’t after his spot on the quidditch team.

———L———

From the moment the letter on parchment landed in front of Leonidas Snape, he felt he was finally getting to where he needed to be. His Hogwarts letter, not that he needed proof that he was a wizard, but seeing it after waiting so long had been bliss. And since then, his mind had been filled with other imagined blisses. He would be in Slytherin, like his father. He would be favored by the professors, and have only the most intelligent friends. He would be able to pretend he was pureblood, like he’d been practicing since understanding his own mother’s reasons for keeping her blood status secret, and he would have the very best life from the moment he got on the train.
Well, the train hadn’t been what he had hoped it would be. He sat in the car with only one person: a girl who had her nose buried in Hogwarts: A History.

“I’ve read that,” he said, hoping to start conversation when it was clear no one else would be coming by. “My mum made me.”

“Did she now?” The girl replied in a haughty tone, and Leo kept his mouth firmly shut for the rest of the trip. Better to keep quiet than say the wrong thing and have it all go down from there. Uncle Sirius had said one of his biggest regrets was opening his mouth and saying the wrong thing, especially when it came to be that the person he said the awful things to was such a good friend of his.

But it wasn’t terribly long before they got to the castle, rode the boats over the lake, and waited to be brought in to be sorted.

Walking through the Great Hall as a student actually did feel different. He could feel the eyes of every student in the hall on him, or at least around him. He caught whispers here and there, and he wrapped his occlumency around his mind like a shield, protecting it from the gapes and pointed whispers that he swore he heard his name mixed with. His last name.

He caught sight of Aurora, and she gave him a smile and small wave. Her friends seemed to do a double take, but Harry Potter himself gave him a little grin. That bloke who’d taken her to the Yule ball a couple years back looked about to wet himself. Leo had to admit, that did make him feel a bit better.

It also helped boost his confidence to see not only his father, but his mother up at the Head table as well. Side by side, smiling ever so slightly at him, Leo’s chest puffed up just a bit as he and the rest of the first years stood off to the side.

“Aberdeen, Danielle,” Aunt-no, Professor McGonagall read from the scroll, and the shy blond near the front of the line stepped up and approached the stool and the hat. And so it began.

Leo barely focused on his surroundings until he heard, “Snape, Leonidas,” indicating his turn with the ancient relic. A turn he had waited for since his first day in muggle school.

He heard a couple, “another one” in the crowd, a couple requests for bets to be paid up, but mostly, it was eerily silent compared to the rest of the sorting. He vaguely remembered Rory mentioning the same thing happening to her.

Leo caught the barely there smirk on his aunt’s face before the giant hat was place on his head, and sunk down just enough that he couldn’t see a thing.

“Another Snape, I see.” The hat said in his mind. “I can say for sure that you do not belong in Hufflepuff.”

Leo snorted, smirking just a bit.

“I want to be in Slytherin. I want to be like my dad.” He said in his mind, knowing the hat would hear it.

“Slytherin, indeed. You are ambitious, resourceful, creative. But you’re also quite brave, or you wish to be. You want to be like your father, but fear you won’t be able to be as brave as he. But you do have traits like your father. Mother, too. Intelligent, witty, a thirst for knowledge. Yes, I know where you should be. Where I should have placed your parents had they not been so sure.”
And then, out loud, for all to hear, the hat yelled, “Ravenclaw!”

Leo sat in shock, and a twinge of betrayal curled his soul at having one of his first hopes for Hogwarts dashed.

Not a Slytherin.

Not even a Gryffindor, like Rory.

A Ravenclaw.

He sat up, vaguely hearing the applause from the school, believing he’d heard Draco in there, and most certainly Rory. He glanced over his shoulder, worried that he disappointed his father, that he let him down by not being what he needed to be to enter his house.

But Leo saw that his father appeared immensely proud. More proud than he’d ever seemed to be of Leo in his whole life. Not when he was pushed ahead two grades in muggle school, not when he mastered occlumency before he could hold a wand, not ever. It eased the sting of wearing blue and bronze over green and silver just a bit.

Heading to the Ravenclaw table, he sat down at the end, turning to give a shy wave at Draco who was at the end of the Slytherin table with their first years. His practical brother gave him a wave, and a thumbs up, of all things, but turned his attention back to the boy at his table asking questions.

It was then that a blonde girl, the most serene looking person he had ever seen, sat down beside him. She was wearing radish earrings, and had a pair of pink glasses that reminded Leo of hands perched atop her head. The lenses were tinted, right blue, left red, and he honestly had no idea what to think of her.

“Hello, Leonidas, I have heard a lot about your from Rory.”

It clicked. “You have to be Luna.” He said, mimicking his father’s drawl.

“I am. I know I’m a bit of an outcast here, but if you need help with anything, or someone who knows to talk to, you can find me when it’s past curfew, and you can’t visit your sister or parents.” She glanced up at the head table. “I imagine there will be a lot of talk about your mother this year, with her finally revealing herself as she is. Hermione was well known before she left, and she still looks very similar to what she had before.”

Leo blinked at the odd girl, and then smirked. He looked to the Gryffindor table, and smiled at his sister who seemed thankful that her friend was with him. Well, hopefully he would make his own friends soon enough, so he wouldn’t be Rory’s kid brother. He’d hate that for a reputation.

“Welcome,” The Headmaster said, calling their attention. “To another school year.” What was wrong with his hand? It looked burned, or simply dead. Leo watched the appendage with fascination as the Headmaster continued the welcome speech. “One I hope will be filled with unity. As always, the Forbidden Forest is off limits to students. Mr Filch will post this year’s extensive list of banned items. And, before we begin our feast, I wish to introduce to you, your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor S

There was silence for a moment, and then confused and curious whispers. Leo glanced up at the head table, seeing his parents smirking at one another.

“Allow me to amend that.” Dumbledore grinned, a bit cheekily if Leo thought so. “Professor Severus Snape will still be teaching potions. I want you to welcome your Defense teacher, Professor H
Hey everyone! And Happy ficversary. Is that a thing? I'm going to make it a thing now. So here we are, the start of the Half-Blood Prince. And as it was the most of you would have seen in replies I left you, Dumbledore may have had a hand in Severus and Hermione's heartbreak over the years. All will be revealed before he takes his dive from the tower. If that's where he still dies, of course.
So, you're at the end of the chapter, so I assume that means you have read it all. I make no promises, but would anyone be interested in a short, sorta side fic showing Remus and Sirius' relationship?
“It’s too bad for you, Rory,” Ron said, piling his plate with food. “Both your parents teaching.”

“You do realize this means Hermione is our professor.” Harry hissed, leaning toward Ron to try and keep his voice low.

It was amusing to watch the color drain from Weasley’s face, the reality of the person he used to copy off of not two years before suddenly the one doing the marking.

“Bloody hell,” He said, looking at his plate. Aurora imagined it would take a lot to ruin Ron’s appetite, but the fact he wasn’t shoveling it in his gob, she figured that was as close as he would ever get.

“It can’t possibly be that bad,” Ginny said.

“She used to write extra for essays for fun.” Harry reminded. “She is where she is because she used a thing to take more classes.” He said this much more quietly, lest they draw attention from those around them no in the know. “It’s gonna be bad.”

“At least we’ll learn something.” Neville said, trying to sound optimistic. “We know she’s really experienced, and she encouraged you to do the DA last year, so there’s that.”

“You’re all just worried she’s going to be like my dad,” Aurora noted with a chuckle. “You’re afraid she’s going to be the Dungeon Bat, the sequel.”

“Well,” Ron said, looking up at the head table. “Might be so. Just have to wait it out, I guess.”

Aurora glanced over at her parents, seeing a spark of joy in her father’s eye for the first time ever at the head table since she herself had become a student. She noted his gaze darting toward the Ravenclaw table, and she followed it to see Leo sitting with Luna, seemingly shyer than she’d ever witnessed him be before as two other firsties were making conversation with him.

She smiled, hoping beyond anything that Leo would have a far better first year than she did.

September 2nd, 1996
She was nervous. No doubt about it, Hermione Jean Snape was terrified of walking into her first afternoon class. The first of the day, first years, was relatively easy. Even with Leo there, she didn’t think anything of it. Nor did she think much of her second year Gryffindor/Slytherin class. But this, this was something she was not really prepared for. Because two or twenty years ago, they were her peers. This should have been her year, her class, and she was shaking.

Taking a deep breath, she walked into the class, and it fell silent. Her teaching robes, which were really a pair of Severus’ transfigured to fit her, fluttered instead of billowed as she walked down the steps to the front of the room. Her hair, changed by age and pregnancy, was pulled back into a sensible knot. Her face, older, wiser, was stoic. Some may see Hermione Granger beneath it all, but there would always be the shadow of doubt for those who did not know the truth.

She ignored her once friends, now mostly charges, as they say together in the front row. She could nearly smell the fear coming from Ronald, terrified as he was about the prospect of her in charge of setting essays. That part, admittedly, was kind of fun.

Hermione stood in front of the blackboard and turned to her class. Immediately she noticed a couple Slytherins not bothering to pay attention. Crabbe and Goyle, Nott, though that may be because of the task he had before him, Bulstrode. The others looked at her curiously, but then so did all the Gryffindors except for the three in the front with Draco.

“Who can tell me who the darkest wizard of all time was before Tom Riddle?” She asked. At the frowns and confusion that followed the class, she smirked. “You-Know-Who.”

“Ummm, Grindleward?” Lavender Brown said.

“Actually, it was Grindlewald, and you are correct. But who was before him?” No one answered. “Before him was Godelot, and before him, Emeric the evil. You will note, should you read up on these names, that the further back in history we go, the tamer the ‘greatest dark’ all seems to become. Can anyone tell me why?” She asked. Once more, silence. “Because, the Dark Arts evolve. It’s fluid, ever changing. Once we think we have mastered it, tamed it, found a way to counter its every curse, it shifts to something we don’t know, nor expected. This is why we have a Defense Against the Dark Arts class. Not just to learn how to defend ourselves, but to understand what the Dark Arts are at their core. Now, I’m going to use a throwback to one of my own lessons from my days at Hogwarts. In this room, how many of you have used a jinx one someone?”

Unlike her fifth year, there was no shyness among the crowd. Some even raised their hands proudly.

“Excellent. Now, I would like you to lower your hands… thank you, and raise them if you think the Dark Arts are… strictly bad.”

This was where there was a clear divide. A small amount of Slytherins raised their hands, where only Harry and Dean from Gryffindor kept their hands down.

“Did you know a jinx is actually considered a dark spell?” She said to the class.

“But Professor Snape!” Parvati protested.

“Ah, let’s fix that now, shall we?” Hermione interrupted. “Before there is any sort of confusion, I want the lot of you to refer to me as Professor H.” She said.
"Why not your maiden name?" Lavender asked, narrowing her eyes a touch.

Hermione snapped her eyes to Lavender’s, using her Occlumency to seem cold, allowing a slight sneer to come to her lips. “I refuse to use my former name.” She said, leaving it simply at that.

Should the children of Death Eaters mention her to them, it will come across exactly as she’d played it for nearly two decades: that while Granger was an old name, it was tainted by the tie in to the McGonagalls, and she wanted nothing of her past life associate with she and Severus.

“Professor H,” Parvati tried again, seeming to find it difficult to use such a simple address. “A jinx is not the same as a curse or a hex.”

“No, you’re correct Miss Patil, it is not. But, it is a spell created with the intent to cause harm, used with the intent to at least embarrass, and often causes some sort of discomfort. A slicing hex can remove a limb, or cut bolts of fabric in a moment. It’s not meant to be a dark spell, it wasn’t created to be one, but it is. Because its intent can be skewered, and can cause harm.”

“So, you’re saying we’re all goin’ to turn dark.” Lavender said.

“Going to turn?” Pansy scoffed. “I heard what you did to Janice Morris in Hufflepuff because she looked at Weasley at his brother’s shop. You’re more than half way there.”

Lavender turned a deep shade of red, a mix of embarrassment and rage. “I have no idea what you’re talking about, you slimy-”

Hermione casually raised her wand and shot off a loud bang, causing the class to yelp and startle. She waited for everyone to settle, smoke still floating in the air from the spark the bang ignited, watching impassively as they all started to look at her with apprehension.

“Let it be known, now, that in this class there will be no name calling. No taunting. No indication of who in this room is considered light or dark. Mr Potter, our supposed savior of the wizarding world, is sitting close to the would-be Prince of Slytherin. Your house does not dictate the type of witch or wizard you will become. You were sorted at eleven, based on inherit qualities that are part of your core. But remember, ambitious does not mean hostile, brave does not mean honorable, loyalty is not always a good thing, and wit does not mean intelligent. Just look at your Professor Lockhart.”

That earned a few chuckles.

“How de ya know Lockhart?” Seamus asked, looking at her suspiciously.

She smirked, pleased that someone was using their eyes. “I am Professor Snape’s wife. I have met all the staff that have come through Hogwarts. And Professor Lockhart made it his business that everyone knows who he is. Or, at least he did.” A few more chuckles, a few snickers. “Now, please turn to page two-hundred nine. Read that one page, and then we will discuss why we have the classes of dark arts that we do.”

“I never thought I’d say this,” Ron said as they all sat for lunch. “But I like that class.”

“Have a crush on your teacher?” Draco asked, sitting at the Gryffindor table between Harry and
Aurora. He got a couple odd looks, but for the most part, no one seemed bothered by it. In fact, Aurora noticed it encouraged Parvati and Lavender to shift over to the Ravenclaw table to be with Padma.

“Shove it, Malfoy.” Ron scowled. “We been through this already.”

“So, what’s she like?” Aurora asked, looking between Neville and Draco, the former sitting on her other side. “Is she strict like my father, or…?”

“Scary.” Ron said emphatically.

“She’s much more intense.” Draco agreed. “Where your dad is sharp tongued and sneers a lot, your mother is… cool. She seems to do everything with an air of calm.”

“Except when you bring up her name.” Harry noted. “She did not like that one bit.”

Glancing around the table, seeing Ginny and Luna settled across from her, next to Ron, Aurora pulled out her wand and casted a Muffilato around them. It was a bit buzzy sounding, but it would do.

“It’s because of her cover.” She explained.

“Blimey, is everyone in your family a double agent?” Ginny asked.

“No, I remember Hermione telling me about this.” Harry said. “She was adopted by McGonagall’s brother and his wife, and she took their name on as well as keeping Granger. Granger… was her pureblood link. I guess there’s some old Potion’s master who was one? Anyway, because the McGonagalls were half-bloods, and the one that adopted her married a muggleborn, she played pleased to be rid of them.”

“Like Uncle Severus shed his muggle heritage, she shed the tie she had to a muggle loving family.” Draco nodded.

“Not to mention I think everyone would know who she was if we called her Professor Granger.” Neville said. At the frowns that turned toward him, he shrugged. “She doesn’t look that different, right? Enough that, as a Snape, no one really thinks on it. Rory looks a bit like her mum, most would just assume that’s why she looks familiar. Call her Granger, and it’s game over.”

“Which would cause a lot of trouble for my Dad.” Aurora nodded.

“And you.” Draco pointed out.

“And Leo,” Aurora nodded, looking over at her brother who was at the end of his table, head bent over a book. “I wonder how he’s doing?”

Hogwarts sucked. Not that he, Leonidas Snape, would ever use that word out loud, but it sucked! Weren’t Hufflepuffs supposed to be nice? Why did they tease him in his classes? Oh, right, because it turned out that while he was a potion’s wiz, an Occlumency master before the age of eleven, and all out walking text book, he was… awkward. And if that were his only problem, he could have
dealt with it. But in his attempt to show the snickering idiots that he was superior to them in every way… he exploded his feather. In charms. How did he screw up a Wingardium Laviosa? Oh, right, he wanted to do it wandlessly. Like his fifth-year sister. Because Merlin forbid he not be equal to her.

He didn’t need to read his text book. Like his parents, his retention level was near eidetic. But he also knew that there was no way anyone would dare taunt or attempt to torment him here in the Great Hall where both his parents, his sister, and Draco all were.

Brave? Ha! No, he wasn’t brave like his father. Certainly not enough to be placed in Gryffindor like his mother and sister. And apparently not nearly cunning enough to be placed in Slytherin like his father, his ambition lacking as well.

But right now, he didn’t feel he belonged in Ravenclaw, either.

He didn’t belong anywhere.

Not here, not muggle school. Nowhere.

With a heavy sigh, Leo turned his page, staring off into nothing, wishing he had a time turner just to change how his day was. To get a fresh start. Like mum had.

September 5th, 1996

“And how was everyone’s first week?” Her mother asked as they all sat down to dinner in her parents’ private quarters. And wasn’t that something to get used to? It had been a very long time since they all lived together in the castle full time. Since before Leo was born, unless one would count the week after his birth. And it seemed that Hogwarts, sentient as it was, knowing her mother declined the normal quarters reserved for the Defense Teacher, had expanded the living and kitchen areas of what was once just her father’s quarters to make room for her. Or them.

The house elves still provided the meals, though. And how could she possibly blame her mother for allowing them to spoil all of them with a good meal during family dinner? Sure, Aurora watched her mother cringe just a fraction at how eager the elf declared itself “at their service”, but her mother wasn’t the best of chefs and, well….

“I hate it here.” Leo said, and Aurora whipped around to look at her brother with concern.

“I hate it?” Her father asked. “Why?”

“Because I don’t belong! Alright? The bloody hat made a mistake, and now I look a fool.” Leo lashed out, and Aurora shrunk back just a bit when his glare was countered by the much more adult version from their father.

“Leonidas, the sorting hat does not make mistakes. And you’ve been complaining about not belonging in Muggle school for ages. Now, what specifically happened? Is someone bothering you?” The last bit was asked coldly, and Aurora remembered all too well what it was like her first few months.
“Not—really.” He shrugged. “A few of the Hufflepuffs taunted me, but I scowled at them like you do and they stopped.”

Aurora snorted, then laughed when she pictured it in her head.

“It’s not funny, Rory!” Leo snapped.

“But it is!” She countered. “You realize they’re likely more afraid of you now? As in, maybe they were idiots and forgot who your father was until you did that?”

“But I have no friends!” Leo countered.

“I didn’t have any friends here at first, either.” Hermione said, and Aurora looked at her mum. She shrugged, shaking her head. “Ask your father, I was a terrible know-it-all. I was determined to prove I belonged here but spouting off everything I knew. I felt superior when I out-performed peers who came from wizarding families, but it wasn’t making me very likable.”

“No one in this family had an easy first few months,” Her Dad had said, and Aurora could only nod. “Give yourself time, Leonidas. And stop attempting to show off. Yes, you’re a smart, gifted young wizard, and you could likely give a few of the dunderheads in your sister’s year a run for the galleons. But you must not attempt to show off. It will only lead to things getting worse.”

“Yes, Dad.” Leo conceded, looking thoughtfully at his chicken and potatoes.

“And you, Rory?” Her mother asked.

She shrugged. “Not much to report. Except, well, Harry’s doing Quidditch try outs next week.”

As her mother said, “Absolutely not!” her Father said, “Beater or Chaser.”

Leo perked up as the two adults had a stare down, mother glaring and crossing her arms, father arching a brow and pursing his lips.

“By all means, ladies first.” He said, a touch of a smirk coming through.

“Quidditch is dangerous! She could get hurt or worse.”

“She faced down a dozen Death Eaters with six of her friends.” He countered.

“In which she returned injured.”

“For argument sake, that was actually caused by Luna, and it was an accident.” Aurora pointed out.

“It will take away from your studies.” Her mother tried again.

“Aurora is the top of her year, Hermione, she hardly needs to worry about that.” Severus countered. Her mother’s brow furrowed, and she seemed to grasping at straws. Aurora smirked when her father chuckled. “There’s a war going on, Dear. Worse things than broken arm can happen. Besides, she needs to make the team, first.”

“I was more or less thinking of a broken neck, but I suppose you’re right.” Aurora grinned as her mother sighed in defeat.

“The odds of Rory getting badly hurt during a quidditch game is really very low. The only true injury during a game in the last twenty years was Harry Potter when Rory first started, and I think it ended up being a house elf, didn’t it?”
“Yes, Leo, you’re quite right.” Their mother heaved another heavy sigh, and Aurora smirked at her bother for the assist.

**September 12th, 1996**

“You nervous?” Ginny asked as they made their way to the pitch, brooms in hand.

“Suppose,” Aurora replied. “I mean, yes, because I want to be on the team, and I know Harry won’t be biased. And I want to get on just to make mum a bit more nervous. But I’m not, because I bloody well know I can fly circles around most of our house, and then there are the lot of them heading up without brooms.”

“Yeah, feel a bit bad for them.” Ginny cringed. “I mean, it’s not like anyone would want to fly one of the school brooms in a quidditch match. Just asking for an injury there.”

“Obviously,” Aurora chuckled, a surge of nerves upon seeing the goal posts making relief necessary.

Ginny let out a long, slow breath, stepping just a bit closer to Aurora as they rounded their way up. “We’ll be great.” She said, squaring her shoulders, lifting her chin. “We can out-fly Ron, and he’s been keeper for the last year.”

“We will absolutely do brilliantly.” Aurora conceded.

They joined the rest of the massive crowd already forming on the pitch, one which looked comprised of at least half the house.

“Alright, the lot of you, groups of ten, we’ll do the flying first. Once I see who out of the lot of you can fly, then we move on to team potions. Remember, the only position not open is seeker.” Harry was calling out.

Aurora looked up and around, noting there wasn’t all that many people in the stands at least. She breathed a little easier shaking off the tension in her shoulders. Flying was easy, and she knew she and Ginny had nothing to worry about flying wise.

“You two ready?” Ron asked, looking much more pale than normal.

“Of course we are.” Ginny said with confidence. “Aren’t you?”

Harry blew a whistle, “Okay, group up, get ready. Each time I blow the whistle, a group of you will take off.”

It was actually quite sad how few of the half dozen or so groups didn’t get off the ground. There was an entire one without brooms, hoping that Harry wouldn’t call them up to the sky to do a lap until after another had landed so they could ask to borrow someone else’s. There were also a lot of first years who, unfortunately, hadn’t even really learned how to fly and promptly crashed. It was as this lot went up that Aurora looked over her shoulder at the stadiums again and found her entire family seated together. The *entire* family. Not just her parents, her brother, Draco, and Aunt Min, but Gramma Delia and Oliver.

*No pressure, Harry, just your former captain and now professional quidditch player in the stands.*
“Is Luna wearing a Lion on her head?” Ginny asked.

“I think she is.” Aurora agreed, and then Harry had blown the whistle, and their group was up.

She, Ginny, Ron, and Katie Bell were the clear leaders of their group, so she wasn’t surprised in the least when Harry segregated them off to those continuing on to the next phase.

“Blimey, what’s Oliver doing here?” Ron said, huffing a bit.

“He’s family.” Aurora said. “And I’m willing to bet Aunt Min told my Gram about this. And she would have told Ollie.”

“Wait, hold up.” Ginny said. “Oliver is related to Professor McGonagall?”

Aurora nodded. “She’s his aunt. His real aunt. His dad was killed by death eaters when he was a baby, and my gram sorta went into hiding. She met and married a pure blood in Ireland, and he sorta adopted Ollie. Couldn’t have kids of his own, so….”

“Hey,” Ginny said, grabbing Aurora’s wrist. “What are you flying as?”

“Beater.” She replied. “Harry’s seen me enough in pick-up games to know how I am as a chaser. Figured I’d play it risky.”

“Good luck.” Ginny nodded.

“Okay, divide up.” Harry called. “I’m going to charm your shirts, black and white, no house colors. You’ll know your team mates. Best ones will get picked for the team.”

Aurora got on her broom, flying off in the line and collecting the bat that Harry was offering by levitating them a little way above his head. She felt the grip, adjusted, took a breath, and remembered.

She once took on the Weasley twins and nearly succeeded.

She was a Snape, and weren’t they supposed to be known to be a little less than friendly? Wouldn’t smashing a ball toward the opposing team be an excellent way to work out that aggression? Oh, and she played muggle baseball on her school team.

Mental pep talk having eased her nerves, a feeling of cool determination washed over Aurora. It must have had an effect, because when she looked over at her fellow beater, he flinched visibly. It made her smirk, and when Harry blew the whistle, essentially starting a small game, she was off.

Ponytail whipping out behind, Aurora charged after an oncoming bludger, set to hit her fellow black-shirt team mate. Her grip on her bat tightened, and she gave a mighty swing. The bloody thing soared, and while there was some part of her brain that screamed at her aiming for Ginny, her friend did an excellent maneuver away, carrying the quaffle off to the goal posts.

Aurora could hear the whistle of another bludger coming toward her, and she quickly dove beneath it. Peering up, she sneered at the thing before gaining speed and out pacing it. She shot up and smacked it. Maybe not as hard as she would have liked, but it did manage to take out one of the ones trying for chaser. She then turned and zoomed off, watching as the other team hit that stray bludger back toward Katie. She swooped in, back handing the ball away in time and allowing her team mate to score.

She had no idea how long they were up there, but by the time Harry had blown the whistle, she was
sweaty and swore, high on the adrenaline of it all. She kept most of them away from her team, hit
them toward the others. A couple times a pair of boys squeezed in before her and got the hit, but it
was all part of trying to appear the best.

When she landed, she could hear once more, she clued in that there were people in the stands
cheering. She didn’t dare look. Cheering meant nothing. Ginny came over, and the two gave one
another a high five, but said nothing. Too breathless, too nervous, she supposed the reason didn’t
really matter.

Harry stood on the pitch, appearing serious and, perhaps, maybe even a bit older than he was as he
went over his parchment on his clipboard, feather of his quill hitting his chin from time to time as he
contemplated.

Breath caught, water had, Aurora, Ginny, and Ron huddled together, waiting.

“Alright,” Harry said. “It was a really tough call for the most part. But I have come to a decision, and
it’s final. You all were great, but some were a bit better than others. So, Bell, Peakes, Robins, Snape,
Weasley, and Weasley, you’re in, first position.” Harry said, and Ron nearly drowned him out with
his excitement as he continued. “Coote, McLaggen, and Thomas, you’re subs.”

Those who didn’t make the team tromped off, a bit down trodden, one or two grumbling about
favoritism, but really, Aurora couldn’t have cared less. Yeah, she was Harry’s friend, but she could
play.

“Don’t aim for my face when we go head to head,” Draco said, one of the first from the stadium to
make it on to the pitch. “I’d appreciate if you didn’t mess up my good looks.”

“Is that what you call it?” Aurora countered.

“Just for that, you should know, you’ll never win a game, not one.”

“We’ll only face off once, Draco. And while I may try to slow you down, we both know you’re not
my main focus."

“Congrats, Rory,” Neville said, smiling shyly before her blushed. “And Gin. And Ron. You know,
congrats, all of you. You made the team. Yay.” He said, stopping and rubbing the back of his neck,
refusing to look at any of them.

“Excellent flying out there, young lady.” Her Dad’s voice stopped all conversations, anyone still on
the pitch putting their full attention on them. “Just don’t expect me to support you when you’re going
up against my house.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Aurora countered smoothly. “Besides, I have mum. And possibly Leo.”

“While I will concede to your having Professor H on your side, do not count on your brother. Or
you will find yourself severely disappointed.” He said as if it were a truly nasty threat. In her
peripheral, she could see some of the students watch them in horror. After all, how awful could the
supposed great git be to speak to his own child like that? But no one would have picked up the
teasing twinkle in his eye. The slight smirk tugging at the corner of his lip. Understood the good-
natured tease that, while Leo may have been sorted Ravenclaw, he would likely support Slytherin
just to be contrary. Support the pseudo sibling instead of the real one.

With a short nod from Aurora, Professor Snape turned and walked off, passing his wife who, when
his back was turned, and most weren’t looking, gave Aurora a silent clap and a thumbs up before
turning and following her husband.
“You’re family’s barmy, the whole lot of you.” Ron said.

Chapter End Notes

It's a short, but very light chapter before we start getting into what will have to be the heavier aspects.
A note: I had a typo of Seamus calling Lockhart "Lockfart" and very nearly kept it. Anywho, until next time!
“Severussssss.”

“My Lord,” He replied, looking up from beneath the edge of his hood.

Voldemort sat on his throne-like chair, stroking the head of his snake lovingly. It seemed to lean into his touch, her tongue darting out frequently. Bellatrix, standing off to the side, looked disgustingly jealous. It was actually a bit amusing, but Severus tucked that away. The Dark Lord hadn’t torn through his mind just yet, and he wasn’t about to risk him catching such a simple stray thought.

“Severussss, I wondered how the boy was doing?”

“Mr Nott, my Lord?”

“Indeed.”

“I know not. The school year has only just begun, and he has yet to tell me anything. He is keeping to himself, showing no interest in clubs or sports. I know from his placement in my NEWTs potions he keeps his head down and does as he’s instructed. I have been meaning to ask him his plans, to see if he’s even begun, but I never seem to be able to get him in a situation in which secrecy can be had.”

The Cruciatus curse hit Severus before he had time to prepare, and a grunt escaped him before he could clamp down on his reactions. It was over fairly quickly, and through the blood rushing past his ears, he could hear Bellatrix cackle with glee.

“Do better, Severussss! I should be hearing of plans by now.”

“I will do better my lord.”

Before Voldemort could either hit him with another curse, or say anything else to him, the door behind them opened.

“What isss it!” Voldemort demanded.

“A problem, my Lord.” Yaxley said.

“Risssse Severuss. I shall return shortly.”

Severus rose and watched as the Dark Lord walked out, his pet following alongside him.

The hairs on his arm stood on end, and he turned slowly to face Bellatrix. The woman didn’t have all her sense before she went to Azkaban for fourteen years, now Severus was fairly certain she had
utterly lost it. He wondered if she ever bothered to use what little occlumency she knew to shield herself, or if maybe time had worn away the shields she had had.

Bellatrix was looking at him with a deranged grin on her face.

“Lucy had some things lying about.” She began, playing with her wand. “Did you know he was planning on having the manor in France cleared out? Made livable again? For the new Lord and Lady Malfoy.” She came around, slowly seeming to circle him. “Your wittle baby girl. Aurora.” She sang the name, and he curled his lip.

“Why does my daughter hold any interest for you?” He asked.

She giggled, though it turned cackle at the end. “Why don’t you bring her ‘round?” She said, eyeing her wand. “We can have a bit of fun. Girl talk. Find out where Draco and Cissy have been hiding out.”

A shot of cold rage ran down Severus’ spine, with a healthy dose of fear. “I think not. She knows nothing, of that I can be sure, and she is better served where she is. At Hogwarts, earning an education.”

Bellatrix scowled. “You should be doing everything you can to help our Lord.”

“And I am,” He replied calmly, smoothly, affecting an air of ease. “Our Lord has asked me to prepare Hogwarts for his reign, and it is what I am doing. When I am headmaster, there will be order. There will be institution. And it will be because I will have put Dumbledore in his grave.”

“Will it?” Bella asked, “because I think Theodore Nott is going to kill him.”

“Perhaps he will. And should he do so, and then decide to remain at the school, he will be named Head Boy, given far more power than what would be the norm. If not, well, we shall see.”

“You don’t fool me, Snape.” She said, and Severus had to repress the urge to roll his eyes. Here was the same old song and dance. Severus, the half-blood, is not loyal. He is not true to the cause, he is not to be trusted. And it always provided a bit of amusement to him to know that she was, in fact, absolutely correct. Yet after hearing it so often, it was getting very, very old.

“I’m not trying to fool you,” he said, mentally smirking.

“I see you. I see you’re not truly loyal to the cause. The Dark Lord will put me at Hogwarts, you’ll see.”

“He wants the next generation of purebloods to be intelligent, something you never were able to attain yourself.”

Her lips curled into a snarl, and she raised her wand, but stopped as a hiss marked the return of the Dark Lord.

Severus looked over his shoulder and watched as the snake slithered toward them. He remained still, tamping down his fear, as the giant thing slithered around his feet. It looked up at him, and for a moment, Severus thought it was looking into his mind, his soul. The snake was seeing through him and he was being judged. Then Nagini twisted around and lunged toward Bella, hissing with fangs bared but not actually striking.

Bellatrix stumbled backward, eyes wide with confusion and no little fear.
“Nagini, calm.” Voldemort said as he glided into the room. “You were but a young thing when last we were all together, you forget that Severuss and Bellatrix often bickered like siblings.” He then smiled, something that one might have called fond had it been on the face of someone who was not a demented psychopath. “Severuss, when do you expect to be able to encounter the Nott boy without distraction?”

“There is to be a Hogsmeade weekend a week from today. I will ensure the boy stays behind by whatever means I believe necessary.”

“Good,” Voldemort said, but Severus wasn’t looking at him as the Dark Lord granted him leave.

He was watching Bellatrix being to grin like Cheshire cat with murder on its mind.

October 12th, 1996

Aurora wasn’t sure she wanted to go to Hogsmeade. She wasn’t sure she was prepared for what awaited her.

A few days after she’d made the quidditch team, she’d received an owl at breakfast.

Rory,

Heard through Mum, who heard from Gin that you made the Quidditch team. Beater. Keep up the legacy.

✈

Fred

It was short enough, and simple. No form of intimacy or hint of lingering feelings. His note was safe, and she liked that it was.

But then just a couple days before, there was another note delivered to her by owl, and seeing as how her family was inside the castle walls, she had a feeling she knew who it was from.

Meet me at the Three Broomsticks at 11am.
It’s all the note said, no signature, and written with a quick-quote quill, so there was no way to tell who actually wrote it. But, who else would it be? Anyone who wanted to meet with her would have already been at the school, and, well, they’d be able to ask, wouldn’t they?

So, as she trudged through the village, soft flurries of flakes dancing in the air around her, she wondered if she should be doing this. Seeing Fred was just asking for trouble, and she knew that. But their last meeting at the Leaky was so perfectly platonic that she could nearly picture them actually being friends. Perhaps she was merely going there so he could give her pointers for her first, upcoming game. Share some weaknesses of the other teams that she may not have observed herself.

Near Zonkos, she spotted George talking to the proprietor, and wondered if Fred was still there, or had already left. She’d left Ginny at Spintwiches at ten to eleven. Ron, she knew was shadowing Harry and Draco, with Neville and Luna gently trying to guide him away.

Taking a deep breath, she headed for the tavern.

Inside, the warmth enveloped her, and she smiled softly to herself at the pleasure of it. She looked around, spotted Fred, though he hadn’t seen her. He was looking down at something, a parchment perhaps, and doing so with great intensity.

At least until Katie noticed him, and she went up to greet her old friend, who stood and embraced her.

“You got my note!” Neville’s voice came from behind, and Aurora turned around in surprise, seeing his embarrassment. He then glanced past her, and she did the same to see Rosmerta head toward Fred and Katie. “That is… you knew it was me, right? Or… or did you, were you meeting, umm, him?”

“No,” Aurora quickly replied, blushing at how loud and fast that came out before she took a breath and reined herself in. “No, I didn’t know who the note was from. I assumed Fred, because, well, anyone at the school could have just asked me to meet them.”

“Right.” Neville replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, I suppose I could have done that.”

She waited, shifting about, glancing around the tavern that was quickly filling up, with few people leaving.

“Should we find a seat?”

“You still want-”

“Nev,” Aurora interrupted, “Please stop. Yes, I want to hang out with you, just you. You only have to ask me. Which, I suppose, you did. In a note. Where did you get the quick-quote quill?”

“I didn’t,” He said, blushing again as he led her over to a table. “Gram made me practice writing over the summer, making it as readable as possible. Especially after the last letter I sent you. Probably why you didn’t know it was me. Thought the letter would make asking you easier, you see.”

“Neville,” she chided in good nature, taking a seat as he did. “You can just ask in the future, you know? Though I should warn you, should your intentions be more than platonic, you’re going to need my parents’ permission.”

He paled. “Right. Makes sense, I guess.” He swallowed, coughed, cleared his throat, “I’m going to get us some drinks.” He said, pointing to the bar, his voice going quite high. She nodded, biting the inside of her cheek so she wouldn’t laugh at him.
As Neville got up and left, she looked around the tavern, and noticed that Fred was alone again, she quickly averted her gaze and looked as best she could out the window. It was too far away for her to see anyone properly, mostly just shapes and shades of colors. She watched those coming and going again, her heart catching at the sight of a figure in black and covered with a hood. It reminded her of the Death Eater robes her father had, but she shook herself, remembering that while Voldemort was on the loose and possibly on the rise, he would be stupid to form an attack on Hogsmeade at the moment. Wouldn’t he?

“It’s busy, sorry.” Neville said as he came back with two warm butterbeers. “Rosmerta seemed a bit distracted today.”

“Probably just really busy.” Aurora said, observing the foam on her drink.

“So quidditch,” Neville said, and she peered at him through her lashes as he looked quite serious. “I, umm, was never really able to learn to fly before Hogwarts, as you know, so I wouldn’t have… I mean, what made you, umm, want to play? And beater?”

“I’m a good flyer and like to hit things.” She replied, and at his uneasy smile, she laughed. “My Dad, Draco, and… and Uncle Lu would sometimes play a small pick-up game in the back of Malfoy Manor when Draco and I were quite young. And then, well, I don’t know why, but Uncle Lu stopped. But Draco and I never stopped playing it, and Dad would sometimes join us when we were at ours. As for beater… I don’t know, I like the challenge.”

“Right.” Neville said, though he clearly didn’t understand.

She leaned forward. “Chaser, your main goal is to try and score, avoid bludgers. A seeker, you need to be fast, but balanced. I mean, it’s a small little ball flitting about. Catching it is a lot harder than a quaffle. And keeper, well, you just sort of hover there. You only need to go after the quaffle when it comes after you, duck a bludger. But a beater? A beater is like a protector. You’re watching out for all the players, keeping them all out of harm’s way so that they can do what they need to do. And at the same time, you’re an offense, aiming those rogues back at the other team in hopes to slow ’em up or stop them all together. And honestly, there’s a rush when you get a really good smack in with the bat.”

“Huh,” Neville said. “So... so you’re going for beater had nothing to do with….”

“Fred? Yes, Neville, I chose the position I tried for because it was my ex-boyfriend’s.”

“Just not many girl beaters, you know?”

“If you’re doubting my strength, I can give you a demonstration.”

“No! No, I saw the try outs. Your mum was always a bit scary, but you are for different reasons. Hate to admit it, but when you were up there on your broom, you looked quite a bit like your dad at times.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She replied, sipping her drink. While she was amused, it was clear that Neville wasn’t. Which, then, made Aurora wonder in what context, exactly, had he intended to invite her to the tavern in. Was this… was this supposed to be a date? Maybe boys were just never clear when things were supposed to be that way. Attempting to possibly smooth things over, she asked, “So why do you like plants?”

“Plants are easy,” Neville said, his grin genuine.

“I beg to differ.”
“They are, really. I mean, all the need is water, good soil, sunlight, and proper care. I mean, yeah, a few have quirks, but who doesn’t? It just takes the right touch, a good word, and you’re set. I’ve been working on this plant with Professor Sprout, a moon flower, opens only during a new moon. Haven’t gotten to see it yet, but I bet it’s really, really pretty when it opens.”

“You’ve been working with Professor Sprout?” She asked and watched as suddenly Neville was completely at ease.

“I have. She wants to take me on as an apprentice when I’m done with Hogwarts. Last year, when they were going over what we want to do with our lives? I mentioned Herbology to Professor McGonagall, and all of a sudden Professor Sprout is eager to take me on. Or, at least, help me get an apprenticeship with someone else, if I want to be a bit quicker with it all. That’s this year for you, isn’t it? Career options? And with both your parents in the school, that can’t be pleasant. But what were you leaning toward?”

Aurora chewed her lip. “I don’t know,” She confessed. “I always thought transfiguration, but I’m not sure.”

“Professional Quidditch?” He suggested with a smirk, and she laughed.

“No, I’m not that good. Gin, yes, Harry, Draco, if they wanted to.”

“Ron?”

“Blimey, no. I mean, he’s a decent keeper, but I wouldn’t say he’s, you know, professional level. I just… I don’t know.”

“What do your parents think?” Neville asked.

Aurora glanced around the room before leaning in a touch. “Honestly, with the war going on, I don’t think either of them have given much thought to having an opinion. I mean, Leo… Leo I already know is going to be a potion’s master like my father. You know he worked for Fred and George over the summer? Bloody lil bugger earned more galleons than I have saved, and he’s technically not even old enough to work. What I knew at eight, he knew at five. But me? No, I’m… afloat.”

“You’re not afloat.” Neville reassured.

Aurora smiled uneasily, gulping back her butterbeer.

“Want to go for a walk? It’s getting a bit crowded in here?” Neville suggested, and Aurora nodded as she rose to her feet. They donned their coats, heading for the door. When she felt eyes on the back of her head, Aurora glanced over her shoulder to see George had joined Fred in place of Katie, and the latter twin gave her a thumbs-up when she caught his eye.

She didn’t have the will to return it.

Following Neville outside, Aurora noted that the snow was sticking. “Bit early for this nonsense, isn’t it? Not even Halloween yet!”

“Does sort of make one think less of pumpkins and more of pine trees.” Neville quipped as they darted part way on to a quiet side street to avoid a herd of third years on a sugar high.

“Or mistletoe!” Aurora whispered, barely restraining herself as she smacked Neville, gesturing to the sight down the road.
Harry and Draco. Alone. Hidden just enough by the trees they were standing under, that they’d have easily gone unseen had it not been for the need of a detour. It as the road to the shrieking shack, after all, and there wasn’t a whole lot of reason for anyone to head this way unless it was to snog.

Which, admittedly, Aurora was metaphorically crossing all her fingers and toes in hopes they would. In reality, she was clutching on to Neville’s coat and scarf as if he would run toward them if she let go.

She watched, silently encouraging the pair as Harry very, very slowly leaned in toward Draco. She wasn’t entirely sure he did it, but she was very willing to bet that she saw Harry brush his lips to Draco’s. She nearly squealed with glee before Draco shoved Harry’s back against a tree, and….

“We should not be seeing that,” Neville said as Draco snogged Harry senseless, the two of them seeming to fight for dominance.

“No, no, no we do not.” Aurora said, loosening her grip and trying to shove Neville back down the road. They’d only just got back out on the main road when a scream came from closer to the castle, stopping them short and allowing them to witness Katie Bell rising majestically into the air.

——S———

He made no pretense of doing anything while he waited for Mister Nott to show up for his “detention”. He knew the boy was aware it was all a ruse, a fake misdemeanor to force him to miss Hogsmeade weekend and talk to him. Hermione, thankfully, had essays to mark, and so she was sequestered in their rooms, finishing those up so she would have the rest of the weekend free.

A knock on the door had Severus calling, “enter,” and he crossed his arms and leaned back against his desk, watching as Nott came in and shut it behind him.

The boy was wearing his Slytherin sweater, though it wasn’t required of him. Severus imagined it was to keep the mark on his arm hidden. Or protected.

“Does it hurt?” he asked first, gesturing to Theo’s left arm.

“Nothing works.” He replied with a shrug.

“There is. I have a balm, it will soothe and numb it. Occlumency is a skill you should be looking in to.”

“I have enough.” Theo replied, though the boy wouldn’t look him in the eye.

“You have what you think is enough,” Severus replied, gaining the boy’s attention. “If you were strong enough, your mark wouldn’t bother you at all. You’d be able to suppress the reason you’re in pain.” At that, he watched an understanding dawn over Theo.

“You’re going to have to kill Dumbledore yourself. I’m not doing it.” He said point blank.

“I was going to anyway.” Severus replied, and that new found understanding changed to uncertainty. “The way I see it, Mister Nott, is this: you were not asked, as I was, to commit murder before getting your mark. Your initiation was not at all in the way of the old ways, and therefore your soul is unbroken. I would like to keep it that way. You were part of Potter’s defense association last year,
were you not?"

“I may have sat in on a lesson or two. I had wanted to be an auror, after all.” The boy scoffed. “Not that that is going to happen now.”

“I have associates that may be able to arrange such a thing.”

“Yes, but are they really warding off dark wizards, or are the all part of the ‘old boys club’ as it were.”

“Speak frank, Mister Nott.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Of course,” Severus nodded. “Then, if you would, consider this: Draco Malfoy has been a close friend of my child for the last several years. Tell me, how easy do you think it would be to have found him when the Dark Lord was asking for him?” Severus posed the question, and Theo frowned. “Now this, why would I even allow my daughter to associate with one Harry Potter? Let alone a group of blood traitors and muggleborns?”

At that, Theo perked.

“Blaise is the only one who knows of the mark. He helped with the pain after I returned home.”

“And what does Mister Zabini have to say on matters?”

“That anyone who joins that mad man willingly needs to go to the Janis Thickney ward.”

“They’d never be able to handle the madness.” Severus replied, a slight quirk of his lips. “You need to at least make it seem as though you’re making a plan.”

“And how, precisely, am I to murder a man, or plan to, when he remains high in his tower above us all. Inviting no one there to see him. Should I sneak to the kitchens and ask a house elf if they’d be willing to put something a little extra in the headmaster’s food? Spice it up a bit? No? Should I have joined the quidditch team, become a beater, aim for his head?”

“That’s not a terrible idea.” Severus mumbled, momentarily allowing himself to imagine a stray bludger taking out Albus.

“Professor.” Theo said, and Severus refocused. The boy looked earnest, or at least as much as any Slytherin worth his salt would allow. “I’m being punished for the faults of a man I don’t even like, nor respect. My neck is for the noose, and I don’t know how I will get out of this.”

“We will think of a plan, if you’ll allow yourself to trust me.” Severus said. “I knew a young man once who was in your place: branded without wanting it, forced into acts he did not wish to commit. His soul is not as dark as many think it should be, and I can provide you with much the same aid he had himself. However, if word gets through to the Dark Lord that you are anything but loyal to him, your neck will be for the noose much faster than June, and no one will be there to stop it. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Theo nodded.

“Good, now, Mister Nott-”
“Severus, Severus come quickly to the infirmary!” Minerva’s patronus darted in, shouting in her brogue before it had even stopped in front of him.

He turned to Theo, “We will continue this conversation another day, Mister Nott.”

“Yes, sir.” Theo said, bowing his head to Severus as he turned and left.

He nearly ran to the infirmary, cold dread that something had happened to one of his children or his wife spreading as he climbed the stairs. He was thankful to the castle for co-operating, moving the stairs as needed to get him where he needed to be as quick as possible.

He was nearly breathless when he arrived with at the infirmary and was bloody well relieved when he’d seen his wife and daughter off to the side, and the prone figure on the bed was too big to be Leo. Potter, Draco, Weasley, Longbottom, and Miss Lovegood were with them, as well as Hagrid and Minerva.

“What has happened?” He asked, joining Poppy at the bedside of the young woman. Katherine Bell, Katie as she was known. She was in stasis, and her pallor looked dreadful.

“Tell them,” Hermione said.

“Katie was floating,” Harry said. “We heard a scream, and she was ….”

“She rose into the air,” Aurora added. “Neville and I didn’t see what happened before that, but we did see her rise. And then she screamed and convulsed.”

“Ron ran to get help.” Miss Lovegood added.

“Hagrid was with Mi-, er, Professor H. They came back with me.” Weasley nodded.

“She was seizing, Severus.” Hermione said. “I would say it looked a lot like the Cruciatius, but as the children have said, she was floating first.”

“She must have touched this.” Draco said, holding up a bundle in his arms. “I’ve seen it before in Borgin and Burkes when I’ve gone in with father. It’s cursed, though I don’t know what with.” At Weasley flashing him a weary look, he shrugged. “Things begin to look familiar if you see them often enough.”

Severus withdrew his wand and levitated the item out of the scarf, floating it toward him. The opals caught the light, lovely but deadly. He wordlessly cast a few spells, seeing what was on the jewelry before him. A curse, very similar to the one that affected Dumbledore, lingered on the metal. Possibly the same one originally cast by a witch or wizard weaker than the Dark Lord. Had Miss Bell been muggle, she’d have been dead.

“How would Miss Bell have come in contact with this?” Severus asked.

“We’re not sure how she got it.” Aurora replied.

“I did not think you would, but had anyone seen what she was doing with it before hand? Was she alone?”

“Leanne McInnis was with her, sir.” Miss Lovegood replied. “I heard her mention that Katie was acting strangely. And as Leanne attempted to reach for what Katie was carrying, Katie jerked away, and that’s when it happened.”
“Was the package... the scarf Draco was carrying?” He glanced at his godson, and then noted he was the only one of the six wearing gloves. Severus frowned, looking back at Miss Bell who was taken out of her outer wear when brought in. “Was Miss Bell also wearing gloves?”

“Yes,” Minerva said, confused.

“Severus, what are you thinking?” Poppy asked as Severus went to the pile of damp clothes on a nearby chair, that which would have likely belonged to Miss Bell.

“The curse requires the touch of skin,” He answered as he searched for her gloves. “Miss Bell is lucky to be alive. Therefore, she must have had....” He brought up her left glove and noticed the slight popping of a seam in her index finger. “She must have had only the slightest bit of contact. Through a hole in her glove.” He then looked to Poppy. “We will clear the room, and then you may remove her from stasis. I will get her stabilized by removing the curse, but she will likely need to go to St Mungo’s for further treatment. Neither you, nor I, are equipped to handle this sort of situation.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Poppy agreed with a sigh.

Severus then turned to the lot of them, eyes narrowed in on Weasley. “Five points to Gryffindor for prompt reacting.” He said very softly, but the way the boy’s eyes went wide, he knew he heard him. “Ten points for Slytherin for careful handling and removal of the cursed object. And ten points to Ravenclaw for being as observant as you were. Now, should I hear within these halls that I awarded any house any amount of points, you will find the removal of said points to be twice as many as earned.”

“I would like to know why, whenever there is trouble, Mister Potter always seems to find himself in the midst of it.” Minerva teased in tone alone.

“He wasn’t there for the worst of it.” Weasley said with slight grin before it changed to a frown. “Come to think of it, where were you, mate? Was looking all over for you.”

Severus cringed as Potter blushed, rubbing the back of his neck, and Draco looked oddly smug.

Aurora and Longbottom seemed to be trying to smother grins themselves, and Severus could easily put the pieces together.

“Five points from Gryffindor for being entirely too oblivious.” Hermione sighed, and Weasley looked to his once-friend as if she’d smacked him across the face. “Think it through, Ronald. I realize it’s not one of your greatest skill sets, but use deduction and observation and the answer will come to you. Now,” Hermione then shooed the lot of them out of the room, Minerva shaking her head as she and Hagrid followed.

“Wha?” Weasley whinged. “Whaddya mean? Harry and Malfoy went back to check out that broom in- Oh! Oh,” The understanding turned to disgust, and Severus was about to take away more points when he heard, “blimey, you two, get a room next time, yeah? No one wants to see anyone going at it. And don’t be thinking of any alcoves... prefects are watching, ya know.”

“I am a prefect, Weasel. And I would never stoop as low as an alcove,” Draco’s words were the last ones heard before the infirmary doors closed.

“Or abandoned classrooms?” Poppy remarked with a teasing lilt, a pointed look in his direction, and Severus nearly allowed himself to feel sixteen again.

“You didn’t stop us.” He said, not bothering to deny a crime twenty years in the past, the statute for detention and point loss well gone.
“Yes, well, I at least knew the two of you were being smart about it.” She said. “And then I always had to debate with myself how much I was willing to risk seeing your pale arse.”

He chuckled, “Having seen enough pale-teenaged arses on rounds, I would tend to agree with you.” He then sobered as he looked to the prone Miss Bell. “Someone did this to her, Poppy. Whether or not she was the intended victim or not, I cannot be sure. But someone knew what that necklace would do, and they purposely had her carrying back to this school.”

“What are you going to do with the necklace?” Poppy asked, readying herself to remove the stasis from Miss Bell.

Severus temporarily redirected his attention to the necklace still floating. He directed it to the chair where the bundle of clothes rested. “Once Miss Bell is stable for transport, I’ll send for William Weasley. He’s an excellent curse breaker and should be able to take care of it.”

Poppy nodded, though Severus could tell she wanted to ask more. Instead, she went to work, removing the stasis, and at the first agonized scream from the young Gryffindor, Severus went to work.

Chapter End Notes

A short one this go. At least short by comparison to most. Until next post :)
Under the pitch black of night, Severus walked out to the edge of the black lake and placed his wand tip on his mark. He hissed, not particularly enjoying the burn the request caused, but knowing it was needed anyway. With Miss Bell’s transfer to St Mungo’s taken place, it wouldn’t be long before the story hits the papers, and Severus had every intention of reporting to his “Lord” before it became a demand for his presence.

He waited, looking out over the lake, hearing the squid move about while skimming the surface. He thought of his family in the castle at his back, his children asleep in the dorms, his wife sitting with Min while pretending not to be nervous as she always was when he had to report. They were safe, and he was always bolstered by that knowledge. No matter what happened to him, his family was safe, and there were those who would care for them should the worst happen. Not that he expected it, but one could never be too sure with the way the Dark Lord was these days.

The burn of acceptance ripped through him, though now he was fortified and barely gave more than a grimace in response. He pulled up his hood, pressed his mask to his face, then placed the tip of his wand to his mark once more, apparating to the Dark Lord.

When he landed he immediately dropped to his knees.

“Risssse, Severussss.” He said, and Severus did so, looking around the room and seeing a few other Death Eaters already there and unmasked. He withdrew his own, removing his hood, seeing there was no hiding. The room was once the Malfoy ballroom, and it would seem this would be the place the Dark Lord had settled on placing his throne. The meeting seemed informal, a gathering of those who were supposed to be hiding from aurors or those without family to actually return home to.

“My Lord.” Severus bowed.

“You have assked to sssee me?” Voldemort said with intrigue, a slight tilt of his head, his posture relaxing in his grand chair “I had not expected to hear from you so soon.”

There was a quiet cackle off to the side, and Severus’ eyes darted to a pleased looking Bellatrix who was barely keeping it together.

Severus frowned, then turned back to Voldemort.

“My Lord, there has been an incident at Hogwarts that I felt you might wish to be made aware of.”

“Go on,” Voldemort said with a wave of his hand.

“This afternoon, or should I say yesterday afternoon, a student of Hogwarts came in contact with
this.” He said, removing the now neutralized necklace from within his frock coat.

There was an interesting reaction among the lot that were there. A few flinched away, a few drew closer, Bellatrix giggle-cackled a little louder.

“Interesting.” The Dark Lord said, leaning forward in his throne.

“Indeed,” Severus said, rolling the opals in his fingers. “Aurors on site at Hogwarts had sent for a curse breaker, who did indeed neutralize the object.”

Alastor had been called in, likely through Hermione or Minerva, and it was he who actually ended up asking William Weasley to leave Gringotts a moment to come and give them a hand. He had no idea if his grizzled, former mentor was actually already in Hogsmeade or not, but he was at least grateful it was someone who didn’t believe and follow Dumbledore’s every whim.

“How was it that a student came in contact with such an item?” The Dark Lord asked, his red eyes drilling into Severus’.

He’s prepared for this. He wanted to keep Aurora, Potter, the lot of them out of it.

So, he had gone and asked Miss McInnis.

“We went to The Three Broomsticks, and when I went to get us some drinks, Katie had seen Fred Weasley. She went to say hi, chat with him for a bit. I got distracted, and she disappeared. Fred said she’d gone to the washroom, and she’d be back in a minute. Except, when she got back, she was eager to get back to the castle. I tried to convince her to stay, but she wouldn’t listen. She wasn’t acting like herself. So, I relented, I thought maybe she wasn’t feeling good, but then she kept hold of this package. I thought she got it from Fred, but that didn’t seem right. Then, when we were heading back to the castle, we were arguing and then....”

Leann McInnis broke down into tears, then, her speech intangible.

Voldemort withdrew from Severus’ mind, and stared at his spy with a pondering gaze.

“How did the girl get the necklace?”

“I am uncertain, my Lord, but I do believe she acquired it when she went into the lavatory of the Three Broomsticks. She was under the influence of the imperious curse.”

Bellatrix laughed a little too loud that time, and Voldemort shot her a warning look that silenced her in an instant, but did not tame her mad grin.

“You were able to check a corpse?” He asked Severus.

“The girl lived. A mere pop in the seam of her glove is what allowed her to contact the necklace, as it was carelessly bundled in a scarf. No one knows for certain the destination, I would have thought it an ill assassination attempt from young Mr Nott, but he and I were in the process of making plans when I was summoned to deal with the curse.”

“And who was the girl?” Voldemort asked.

“One Katherine Bell, my Lord. A pureblood.”

“WHAT!” Bellatrix screeched, and Severus turned to look at her as she seethed with mad rage.

“Bella, what is the meaning of this!” Voldemort demanded, rising from his throne.
Bellatrix stormed toward them, her wand pointed at Severus menacingly. “It was your brat! The blood traitor spawn told the barmaid that he was hoping to see your ugly little half-blood.”

“Pureblood,” Severus corrected her. “I believe the status of my wife nullifies any partiality my own rejected muggle heritage would have brought.”

“She was supposed to have the necklace! She was supposed to die!”

“Enough!” Voldemort silenced her. The room was deathly still, silent as the grave, tense. “Are we not striving for a world of purity?” He asked the room at large, a put-upon casualness to his tone. “This is why we do not attack the school. While there are filthy, thieving Mudbloods infesting the halls of such a fine institution, we allow the children to obtain their education, however lacking it is. Children are our future.” He turned to Bellatrix, caressing her cheek before grabbing her neck and squeezing. “But they can’t be the future if they are dead, can they?” He asked her through clenched teeth.

“No, my Lord.” Bellatrix crooned as much as she could while barely able to breath.

“Did you truly intend to murder the Severus’ daughter?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Why?”

“Because he is disloyal to you, my Lord.” She gasped, her face beginning to turn purple. “He is not yours.”

“I have seen his mind, Bella, no one can hide anything from me, and he is mine!” He then threw Bellatrix to the ground, and the witch gasped and coughed, curling in on herself.

Voldemort straightened the collar of his robes as Nagini slithered out from behind the throne and encircled Bellatrix, whether protectively or in warning, Severus couldn’t be certain.

“Severus, my loyal, trusted, faithful servant.” The Dark Lord gave Severus a facsimile of a smile as he put his hand on his shoulder. “I am sorry, for I fear if Bellatrix should have succeeded, you’d have lost your child. I trust that you are looking into a good candidate to take the place of young Lord Malfoy, now that the betrothal is over?”

“Indeed, My Lord.” Severus said on the fly. “I had, actually, considered Mr Nott for the position of husband, should he succeed in his task.”

Voldemort nodded. “A reward indeed.” He glanced at Bellatrix. “Our dear Bella had attempted to wrong you. In doing so, she has shown disloyalty to me, to your brothers, to the cause.” He patted Severus shoulder, turning away. “Punish her properly, Severus.”

“With pleasure, my Lord.” He said, turning to the sadistic bitch, and drawing his wand.

He thought of what it would have been like had it actually been his daughter writhing in the hospital wing, sent to St Mungo’s indefinitely for treatment. “Crucio,” He hissed, and the way the witch flopped about on the floor had proven just how much he meant the spell.

He didn’t hold it long, she was already weakened from the Dark Lord’s grip around her neck. He used the spell just long enough to ensure she knew the consequences should she attempt it again, be them sanctioned or not, and then he turned to Voldemort.
“Your control is always a wondrous sight to behold, Severus.” The Dark Lord said with a nod. “Lesser wizards would have seen her near mad with the pain.”

Severus said nothing, merely tilting his head in thanks.

“The boy. Nott, you said you spoke to him.”

“I have, my Lord, but not long enough for us to plan.”

“Ensure that he does, indeed, come up with something, Severus.” Voldemort said as he retook his place on the throne.

“Yes, my Lord.” He said, and at the wave of the Dark Lord’s hand, Severus took a few steps back and apparated away.

**November 2nd, 1996**

Severus stared at the garment in his hands, a sneer curling his lip. Just touching it felt somehow wrong, utterly and completely, yet he knew in his heart it was something he must don. He didn’t want to and had paid good galleons in the past to avoid doing to after losing a bet, but that wasn’t going to get him out of it this time.

“Oh, Severus.” Hermione sighed, smiling affectionately at him before she kissed him on the cheek. “It’s not going to hurt you, I promise.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” He replied.

“It’s for your daughter.” She reminded.

“Who knows I support her.” He countered.

“It’s her first game, Severus. And every time Slytherin plays….”

“I’m aware,” he snapped, and when she raised her brow in warning, he deflated. “I’m aware,” he repeated more calmly. “But this seems extreme.”

Hermione stared at him for the longest time in utter disbelief. “It’s a bloody scarf, you git. Wear it for your daughter. You know damn well that if Leo had an interest in quidditch and had managed to join the team in his later years, you would be wearing blue and bronze as proudly as you would green and silver.”

“Ravenclaw is not a house rival,” He retorted.

“Oh please, every house outside our own is a rival.” She countered before there was a knock on the door to their rooms coming from his office.

Severus frowned. “Enter.” He called, wondering which of his children felt the need to knock.

When it opened, the answer should have been obvious: the blonde, non-biological one.

“Uncle.” Draco smiled.
“What would you like, Draco?” He asked, a smirk lightly playing at the corner of his lips as he sounded utterly annoyed.

“A favor, if I could.” He replied, hands behind his back, posture straight.

“Oh, and what would that be? If you’re asking for me to somehow rig the match if Hufflepuff’s favor….”

Draco scoffed. “Hardly. When I go up against my boyfriend on the pitch, I want that match to be one that matters. As close to our own score, or leading would be preferable when I inevitably win.”

“Boyfriend?” Hermione smiled. “Is it official, then?”

“I suppose as official as any relationship between us could be.” He replied, turning his attention his Aunt. “Sirius knows and approves. My mother is aware, or at least I have written her about it….”

“Much as I adore hearing about the intricacies of teenage relationships, you did not come here to sing the praises of Mr Potter, despite how short the song would be. You want something, and the game will need to be started soon. Speak.”

Draco glanced at the scarf still in Severus’ hands and had the audacity to smirk. “It’s my understanding that, in the days of Horace Slughorn, he had sixth years brew a complicated potion for the chance to win a vial of Felix-”

“No,” Severus said flatly.

“You don’t even know my question.”

“If it involves liquid luck, then no.”

“Not in the way you think it does.”

“Explain.”

“I wish to trick Weasley into thinking he’s ingested it.”

“Why?”

“That’s sweet of you, Draco.” Hermione said, and Severus turned toward her, confused. She smirked. “I’ve seen a couple practices with Minerva. All of them have moments, of course, it’s natural. But Ronald has been utterly atrocious. Honestly, it’s almost as if the reason he even made it on the team to begin with is because Cormac McLaggen was jinxed or something.”

He smirked, “Anything you wish to confess, wife?”

She snorted inelegantly. “Please. I like Ronald enough, I suppose, but certainly not to the degree that I would confund a boy to get him on a team. It just seems that, well, during the trials he was much better.”

“Weasley has always been better than he’s been.” Draco said. “I’m beginning to wonder if perhaps the incident at the ministry took more out of him than was thought.”

It hadn’t really occurred to Severus that the boy could be carrying scars beyond what was visible on his flesh. He glanced at his wife, noting her chewing her lip. So, she hadn’t considered it either.

“We will have Madam Pomfrey look over him once more. But… I suppose in the meantime,” He
extended his hand, silently accioing a special vial from the depths of their sleeping chambers. The shatter-proof container landed with a smack against his hand. “Do not actually put a single drop of this in his drink.” Severus said, handing him the half-empty vial of liquid luck. “It’s near twenty-years old, if he were to actually ingest it, he’d likely be poisoned.”

Draco smirked as he took the potion. “I knew you would have won it back in the day, but I hadn’t thought you would still have it. Where Harry, Weasley, and Longbottom aren’t in your class any longer, I thought that maybe I could simply say you held the same challenge. Get a potion from you that looked like it. I never thought I would get the real thing, albeit too old to use. Why is it only half empty?”

“I had used it for silly, frivolous things in my youth. Getting your aunt to fly with me,” he gestured to Hermione with a slight smirk. “Gambling against Karkaroff when we were apprentices together. But I never liked the idea of boosting my chances of survival or success with the Dark Lord with a potion. So, because it was something I never dared touch, it went bad. Retains its consistency and color, of course, but the ingredients are not likely to not cause luck but utter pain and discomfort. Possibly death. Which, I suppose, depending on whose drink you were to put it in, it could still be considered lucky.”

Draco snorted. “Indeed. Thank you, Uncle.” He said with a bow of his head, turning and smiling to Hermione with a wave, and then leaving his chambers.

As Severus watched Draco leave with what he once thought was his golden ticket to life, a thought occurred to him: why couldn’t he, they, use it as a means of boosting their chances of survival? There was a terrible, horrible future ahead of them, and Albus seemed to have little interest in doing anything other than his own bloody plan. So why couldn’t he brew a very small batch? Give a small amount to each of the children with the strict warning not to use it for idiotic things like quidditch or dating? A vial each to the sub-order, in hopes that when Albus passed on, the entire thing didn’t fall apart.

“Severus,” Hermione caught his attention, suspicion in her eyes. “Are you really considering it?”

“I think I am,” He said, not even questioning how she just knew what was on his mind. He took the garment in his hand and wrapped his around his neck absently, his mind still processing his plans. “It is not the solution, of course. But it may be the edge we want, perhaps even need, to make sure the children can get through all this.”

“Perhaps it is.” Hermione said as they left their rooms and passed through his office. “It would make me feel better to think that, maybe if they had to leave us for a time, that they could do so and, well, I wouldn’t worry so much.”

“You, Molly, Sirius, Cissy, the lot of your mother hens.” He smirked.

“Oh stop, you would worry yourself sick as well, and don’t say you won’t.” She said, pausing at the door. “Leo may be your tiny duplicate, but Rory has always been the one to have you wrapped around her finger. It’s why you allowed Fred Weasley to court her. It’s why you gave Neville permission to do the same, despite how much I know you wanted to torment him. You would do anything to make Aurora happy, and if she were to leave….”

“Hush, witch.” He said with a fake scowl. “I will not have these erroneous accusations of my having a heart and caring be spread around. I have a reputation to maintain.” He said as he opened the door, setting his spine rigidly and swinging his arms in such a way that his robes billowed.

When he realized the group of Slytherins who had been heading to the stairs, readying to head out to
the pitch, had stopped and stared, he scowled. When he realized they were staring at his neck, he glanced down at the garish red and gold.

“If I hear one word, the lot of you will be in a detention so long and so detestable, it will be legend to your children should you be released from it in time to have any.”

A chorus of “yes, sir,” was mumbled as eyes were immediately averted.

“Quite the reputation, husband.” Hermione said, her hand on his shoulder, a light grin playing on her lips as her eyes crinkled with mirth.

He grumbled, taking his wife’s hand and tucking it into his arm so he could escort her to the pitch to watch their daughter’s first game.

Aurora was nauseated. She was pretty sure the entire team was, but since no one out-right said anything, she supposed she could be the only one. No, that was a lie, because Ron looked like Death. They went up to the pitch early, one more round, one more practice, but like all the other times this week, Ron had been straight up lousy. She supposed she should consider themselves partly lucky that they hadn’t had Slytherin as their first match up, as was seemingly tradition. No, they were too busy trying to break in their new chasers, and so asked to have the Hufflepuffs play first. Partly, because last year’s team were undefeated, playing with ferocity, and they were all back again this year. At least they didn’t have to face Draco first go. He and Harry weren’t together long enough yet to have to contend with quidditch competitiveness.

“Well, you lot look like you’re just eager to get out there.” Draco said as he strode into the locker room.

“Not now, Draco.” Harry sighed.

“I’m not here to torment you, you know.” He replied. “In fact,” he snapped his fingers, and Dobby appeared, eagerly hopping from one foot to the other, a tray of pumpkin juice in his hands. “I propose we drink to you lot and wish you the best of luck today.”

“I don’t think I can drink anything.” Ron said glumly.

“You, especially, need to drink up Weasel. Come on, drink up.” He encouraged, grabbing the eighth goblet off the tray after Dobby made everyone take one. While the majority of the team took a sip or good gulp, Aurora’s fellow beater Ritchie looked at Draco suspiciously over his drink.

“Why should we trust you aren’t poisoning us, or something? How do we know we’re not just going to forget how to fly, or something?”

“I’m not going to poison my boyfriend,” Draco sneered. “I am merely offering you a bit of luck.”

“Wait,” Aurora said, looking down at her drink, seeing the glimmer of gold in the pumpkin juice. She looked back at Draco. “Did you spike this with what I think you did?”

“Did I?” Draco said, removing something from the inner pocket of his blazer. He looked at the half empty vial of golden liquid, smirking at it. “I suppose that depends on what you think this is.”
“What is it?” Ritchie asked.

“Liquid luck,” Draco said, looking from him to Dean who was taking over for Katie. “Won it Professor Snape’s potion’s class by brewing Draught of the Living Dead perfectly.”

“Right,” Dean said, nodding while still frowning. “I still say it was complete bias.” He gulped the rest of his pumpkin juice and then grabbed his broom. “Suppose I’ll see you all out there in a min?”

“Is… is it safe?” Demzela asked, she and Ritchie both unsure.

“It’s safe.” Aurora said, drinking back the rest of her goblet while maintaining eye contact with Draco. “Just makes it taste a bit like ginger.”

The pair gulped it back and hurried out with Dean.

Harry sipped his while Ron chugged his back. “Alright.” Ron said nodding as he looked at his now empty goblet. “I feel great. Lucky. Really lucky. Come on, Harry. Let’s get out there and get started before this stuff wears off.” He charged out the door, only to immediately return for his broom, gave them all a goofy grin, and hurried back out.”

“What’s really in here?” Ginny asked when it was just the four of them and Dobby left.

Draco looked to the house elf, gesturing for him to go ahead.

“Former Master Draco, miss, asked Dobby to make pumpkin juice seemed spiked, miss. He said it had to be sparkling, like golden potion, so Dobby be putting in special dust from the kitchens we elves use at the holidays. It’s really harmless, miss. Dobby just added a little ginger and honey to make Harry Potter’s orange haired mister friend not be so green. Dobby has seen what students of Hogwarts are like when they are green, miss. It’s not pleasant.”

“So where did you get that?” Aurora asked, pointing to the vial in Draco’s hand.

“Your father, of course.”

“Yes, but it’s not real liquid luck. He doesn’t brew it.”

“It is. Or was. It’s the one Uncle Severus won when he was attending Hogwarts.”

“So, you actually could have poisoned us.” Ginny noted.

“Yes, but I want you to win.” Draco said. Shifting to Harry, “Good luck,” he said with a smirk and an affectionate squeeze of the shoulder. Harry reached up and held Draco’s hand there.

“Thanks,” Harry said with a nod, gesturing for Ginny and Aurora to follow him out.

The sun was bright, the air was only just cool, and now the team had confidence. It may just be a better game than Aurora expected.

L————-

He hadn’t intended to sit with Aurora’s friends, but he liked Luna enough, and followed her to the stadium when the school began to assemble for the match. He was already friendless, he didn’t think
it would be the best idea to hole himself up in the library while everyone else was at the pitch. Plus, his sister was playing, and that was something he was interested in seeing. He was always a bit jealous of the ease in which Aurora took to sports, something he himself hadn’t ever come close to excelling at. It didn’t seem fair that she was athletic and smart. Well, he was technically smarter than her when an age by age comparison was made, but it wasn’t as if she was a dunderhead, either.

He sat down a row in front of Luna, noting the bloke his sister took to the ball a couple years back was with there, saving spots for them all.

“I’m nervous,” Leo heard the bloke say to Luna. “I’m not sure why I’m nervous, it’s not like I’m playing.”

“It’s Gin and Rory’s first time playing.” Luna replied. “And Harry’s first time as captain. Really, it’s quite a big day for them all.”

“Yeah, yeah that’s why.” The bloke said, and Leo rolled his eyes.

“Neville, have you made Leonidas’ acquaintance?” Luna said, gently laying her hand on Leo’s shoulder, causing him to look over his shoulder and meet the wide eyed, and slightly terrified gaze of the bloke. Neville. He’d have to remember that.

“We’ve been introduced in a way.” Leo smirked.

Neville paled. “He dressed up like professor Snape and answered the door when I went to get Rory for the Yule Ball.”

“Oh,” Luna said. “That must have been quite fun. You do look a lot like your father, after all.”

Alright, he really liked Luna. Leo smiled, nodded, straightened his tie, and was about to turn to face the pitch when he noticed Draco making his way toward them.

“Successfully tricked Weasel into thinking he consumed luck potion.” Draco said as he sat down next to Luna. “Now he just needs not to muck it up.”

“Explain to me why you would want them to win?” Neville asked.

Leo watched as Draco smirked. “It’s more fun when Harry and I have something to be competitive over. And if Weasel causes them to lose the match, it puts us on uneven footing.”

“Is this so neither of you are ever dominate in the relationship?” Luna asked.

“Relationship?” Leo asked in confusion.

“Yes,” Luna said as Draco flushed. “Draco and Harry have begun a romantic relationship. Wonderful, isn’t it?”

“I suppose.” Leo shrugged.

“You’re young yet.” Neville said, and Leo slowly turned and glared at the boy over his shoulder. Neville flinched. “Well you are only elven, aren’t you?”

“My age means nothing, it’s merely a number.”

“You’re young, Leo.” Draco said. “A year or two from now, you’ll start to see girls or boys in a different way.”
“If you say so.” He grumbled, turning back to the field as both teams had fully assembled.

He watched, understanding the basics, knowing the rules, even knowing which blurry shape flying by was his sister. It was very fast, much faster than he would have thought a school game would be. He glanced to his parents and Aunt in the teacher’s box. His mother had her fingers between her teeth, looking a strange mix of nervous, terrified, and proud. Aunt Min and his father were both nearly out of their seats, watching intently.

“And Snape nearly takes out Smith with that back swing.” The announcer said, and Leo felt a pang of jealous at the near smirk his father had. He didn’t need to be next to him to know there was pride in his eyes.

“Rory’s going to have the teams quaking.” Draco said, also sounding proud. “Everyone is underestimating her.”

“Because she’s a girl.” Leo asked incredulously.

“Girls don’t normally take bludger positions unless they’re broad and big.” Draco countered. “Aurora looks small. But like Ginny, she has a lot of up arm strength. Not many would think it to look at her.”

“She’s bloody amazing.” Neville swooned.

“Calm yourself, I don’t carry smelling salts.” Leo quipped, causing Draco to laugh, and even Luna to smirk.

“It seems such a brutal sport!”

Leo turned to the girl sitting next to him, and his nostrils flared in humor as she looked completely appalled. “Is this really all there is to Quidditch? Flying around on a broom and throwing a ball, hitting other balls at people on purpose?” She then looked to Leo, “Do we have to play it in flying class?”

It clicked as to who this was, and he felt like a dunderhead for not recognizing her. Jane Brooks, a muggleborn Hufflepuff who he had, of course, had in nearly all his classes with. It was just that she often sat near the back, and was usually very quiet.

“No,” He said, wondering why she was talking to him. No one in his year talked to him, not really. “It’s completely voluntary.”

She glanced at the game, then back at him. “Do you play, too?”

“No really.” He said.

“But that’s your sister, isn’t it?” She asked, pointing to Aurora as she slowed and stopped above them to smash a bludger back toward the Hufflepuff team. She had the Snape sneer on her face, and the cold malice in her eyes that he’d seen his father have when idiots in class were nearing cauldron explosions or accidental poison creation.

“Yeah,” He said, suddenly a little less jealous and a bit prouder. She was a bit scary, his sister. He hoped he could attain that level of fearsome when he was older.

“She looks like Professor Snape.” Jane said.

Leo snorted. “I look like Professor Snape. She just... bares his demeanor on occasion.”
“She looks scary.”

“Yes, she does.” He said with admiration. He then turned his attention back to Jane. “Did you not know anything about quidditch before you came?”

Jane shook her head. “I only had my text books to study, and I didn’t get to read all of them before arriving. My mum knew I was a witch, and so did my dad, but my step dad wasn’t allowed to know since he’s not really married to mum. I was only able to get in a bit of study here and there.” She then leaned in. “He thinks I’m off to some fancy boarding school. He thinks my dad made me go.”

“Really?” Leo asked.

Jane nodded. “He hates my dad.”

“Huh,” was all Leo could say to that, because he had no idea how to deal with this sort of situation. “I went to muggle school.” He said, and when Jane perked up, he grinned. “So, umm, you know, if, uh, you umm, want someone to talk to. You know, someone who’s done both.”

“Alright.” She said with a wide grin, and Leo felt his confidence rise.

He made a friend. Sort of. Maybe. Well, it was a start, anyway.

“And Harry Potter catches the snitch! Gryffindor wins!”

Leo looked at his parents, seeing his dad actually show excitement despite it not being his house that won. His mum and Aunt Min were hugging one another. He looked to the field, happy for his sister as she and her team mates flocked together with joy at their triumph.

“Suppose I need to tell Weasel I faked the potion now.” Draco said with a sigh that didn’t sound at all sincere.

“Yeah….” Neville said, sounding happy and let down all at once.

Leo caught Jane’s eye, seeing she was frowning in confusion even though she likely had no idea who Neville was.

“What’s the matter, Longbottom?” Draco asked.

“Well.” Neville breathed shakily. “It just… well, I told myself that if Gryffindor won, I would… I would ask Aurora out. Properly.”

Leo laughed, loud and long and from his gut. He laughed hard enough that Jane joined in, giggling despite not knowing why. Neville looked terrified, which only made it all the more amusing.

Really? Did he really think he had a chance with Aurora? Leo settled, wiping a stray tear from his eye, and contemplating writing Fred Weasley about the painfully amusing development.

“Have they come up for air?” Draco asked. He, Aurora, Harry, Neville, Luna, and Ginny all tilted their heads as Ron and Lavender Brown merely adjusted their heads and still hadn’t stopped snogging.
The party in Gryffindor tower to celebrate their first big win with an essentially new team had started just before dinner. The house elves provided food so the Gryffindors didn’t have to leave the common room, as well as copious amounts of butter beer. Luna and Draco, invited by members of the quidditch team, weren’t the only non-house guests. Ritchie’s girlfriend from Ravenclaw, and Demzel’s friends from Hufflepuff and Slytherin were also there but mixing with their own years on the other side of the room.

It was near an hour ago when, while the group of seven had been hanging out together, Lavender came up to them, plopped herself down on Ron’s lap, and proceeded to snog the life out of him. Neville and Luna, who had been sitting next to them, had gotten up and crammed on the sofa with the rest of them before Aurora had to good sense to transfigure it longer. They were originally merely going to wait until the kiss broke before teasing Ron and making inquiries, but it just kept going.

“Perhaps they’re breathing through their nose?” Aurora guessed before sipping her butter beer.

“The way Ron gets so nasally, I’m not sure that’s better.” Ginny said.

“Aren’t their jaws sore” Harry asked, absently rubbing his own in sympathy.

“Depends, I suppose, on how far down one another’s throats they intend on going.” Draco commented.

“Gross.” Neville, Ginny, and Aurora all said together while Harry just grimaced.

“Seriously, we’ve all snogged someone before, why is this so disturbingly fascinating?” Aurora asked.

“Because it’s beginning to defy human physiology.” Draco replied, taking a hit from his drink.


“Actually, I have.” She said. “Harry and I had a snog last year, just before Easter. He wasn’t sure if he disliked kissing Cho because of who she was, or because she was a girl.”

“And?” Ginny asked, trying not to laugh outright.


“Oh, I don’t mind. I was just happy to be able to help you through your confusion.”

“So… you like Luna, then? Or, liked?” Ginny asked.

“Well, no. It’s not like, well, no…. I mean, I didn’t mind kissing Luna, it wasn’t weird or anything. But it’s not like I wanted to keep doing it, either. With Cho I just…."

“Gotcha.” Ginny said, nodding in understanding.

“And who have you snogged, Weaslette?” Draco asked with a smirk.

“Tell you mine if you tell me yours.” She countered.

“Harry and Blaise.” Draco replied without hesitation. “You?”

“Krum.” Ginny retorted, and Aurora snickered at the jealousy in Draco’s eyes. “Michael Cormac in
Ravenclaw. And… Oliver.”

“Oliver?” Harry frowned. “Like, Oliver Wood?”

“You snogged my uncle?” Aurora asked, trying not to laugh as Ginny grimaced. “Wait, Ollie is the older bloke you’ve been seeing?”

“Is that why he was at the try outs?” Harry asked.

“Yes and no,” Ginny replied. “I mean, he was there for Rory, but also for me. Sort of using one to excuse the other. Sorry Rory.”

“You realize if you two get married, you’ll be my aunt.” She retorted with smirk.

“Not really, though.” Ginny protested.

“Are we really going to gloss over the fact that Longbottom has never snogged anyone?” Draco asked.

“Yes,” Aurora said firmly, and felt Draco’s eyes snap to her. “What? It’s really not that big a deal, is it?”

“I suppose not.” Draco conceded.

All of a sudden, Ron and Lavender jumped up and ran off toward the portrait hole, hand in hand, as if they had somehow made a mental connection and decided on going for a walk together.

“Where are they off to?” Neville asked.

“We don’t want to know,” Ginny replied.

“They’re probably going off to find a space to take things further.” Luna said, smiling in amusement. “Dean and Seamus went upstairs about a half hour ago, probably as they figured they would have the space to themselves for a while. And boys aren’t allowed in the girls’ dormitories.”

“How close is it to curfew?” Draco suddenly asked, withdrawing his wand and casting a tempus.

“Still have an hour.” Harry said with a shrug.

“Want to go for a bit of a walk? Getting a bit rowdy in here.” Draco asked, and Harry nodded. They two set down their drinks, got up, and headed for the door.

“I should probably head back to the tower,” Luna said, setting down her drink as well. “I’d hate to attract Wrackspurts by being too tired.”

“I’ll walk back with you,” Ginny said quite suddenly, leaving with Luna.

Which left Aurora alone with Neville.

And why hadn’t she realized this was something Ginny had been doing since their third year, the only exception being when she was with Fred? It seemed obvious now how often she and Luna conveniently left them alone, and Aurora was beginning to wonder if everyone saw something she didn’t.

She turned then to look at Neville. Really look at him, because for so long he’s just been Neville, her friend. He was pretty handsome, all things considered. He wasn’t the pudgy boy she’d first gotten to
know once he was past his fear of, well, her father. He wasn’t even really the same boy who took her to the Yule ball two years ago. He was still shy, though now she found it somewhat endearing. And she did like spending time with him.

“R-Rory,” he started. “I, umm, I wanted to, uh, ask you… do you think-”

“That is not the conduct I expect from Gryffindor!” Aunt Min’s voice boomed before the portrait hole opened, revealing a disheveled and embarrassed Lavender and Ron being dragged in by an irate head of house. “Twenty-five points each, and detention for a week with Professor Snape.” She said, then narrowed her eyes. “Professor Severus Snape.”

“Ouch.” Aurora said.

“What do you think they did?” Neville asked.

“A lot more than snogging.” Aurora replied, shaking her head. She then turned to Neville. “What were you going to ask?” She asked, fairly certain she already knew.

“Umm, well, I was uhh… do you think we could go down to your Dad’s rooms together tomorrow? It just seems weird, heading there, by myself, even if it is for your party.”

“Sure,” She said, allowing him the cop out. “See you in the morning?”

“Yeah, yeah, sure.” He said, and he quickly got up, heading for the dorms. With a sigh, Aurora followed, hoping Romilda wasn’t already up there, and knowing Ginny probably wouldn’t be much longer.

She was nearly at her door when she started giggling, realizing that Neville probably made it all the way to his dorm before he realized that Dean and Seamus might still be in there together.

Chapter End Notes

I ended up needing to stop this while I was ahead, because I didn't know where the chapter would actually end.
“Hey Dad,” Aurora said cheerily as she came into his lab where he summoned her.

“Happy birthday, Aurora,” he said with a bit too much resignation for his own good.

“Thank you,” She said, hopping up on the stool she normally sat on. He stared at her, trying to decipher why she was so cheerful.

It might have been that Longbottom finally got the nerve up to ask her to court. It had been an amusing afternoon when the young man came knocking on his office door. Even more so when he’d asked for Hermione first, going deathly pale when he was informed she was unavailable. But, he did have to give the boy credit. He actually didn’t run the words together this time, unlike when he asked Aurora to the Yule Ball.

But the boy had requested permission months ago, practically at the start of term. Severus had kept Longbottom’s request to himself and Hermione, not wanting Aurora to feel like she had to either encourage or gently let the boy down before he even got the nerve up.

“You’re in a pleasant mood.” He noted.

“Am I not allowed to be? Is there a rule that says one must be sullen at sixteen?” She smirked.

“Watch the cheek,” He said. “And no, I just find you uncharacteristically cheerful given the time of day.”

“I passed out on my bed just after nine o’clock and slept until about forty minutes ago.” She replied and seeing as how it was just after nine-thirty in the morning, Severus could understand his daughter’s buoyantness. “Apparently quidditch is good for insomnia.”

“Is it? I’ll keep that in mind. May I have your hand, please?” He said, extending his own right hand.

“Sure, what do you need my- Ow! Dad, what the bloody hell was that for?!”

He smirked as he levitated the droplet of blood he extracted via wand from his daughter’s finger and brought it over to the potion sitting on his work bench. The pink potion. The potion that very quickly took the smirk off his face and he had to force himself not to cringe when thinking about his daughter
A contraceptive potion.

Hermione’s allergy to the standard was something they had easily worked around. The charm, while not precisely as effective, was a good enough replacement when cast properly. And it had done the job and kept them child free for the period they had wished to be so, as well as preventing heartache from any possible losses the last eleven and a bit. But whether or not Aurora had inherited her mother’s allergy to the potion was something he’d been putting off testing for what might be too long. He could have, perhaps, kidded himself into believing that she was still too young. He’d nearly done it when she and Fred Weasley had passed three months together, figuring if they had lasted that long than the prankster was serious in his affections to Aurora. He let it slip his mind when their break-up happened, and barely allowed it a passing thought when Longbottom sought his permission.

But then Minerva was complaining over breakfast about needing to deduct fifty points from her own house for catching Weasley and Miss Brown in a compromising position. She also requested that he cover their detentions. And while the prospect of doing so did give him some cheer, a long list of disgusting or laboring tasks coming to mind to punish them with, the reality that a friend of his daughter was engaging in such an activity meant that there was a distinct possibility that she might do the same thing. Be it with Longbottom or someone else, he didn’t want to know, but the reality was she was the age he and Hermione were when they first had done it, even if it was only just.

He watched the drop of blood hit the potion and waited for the adverse reaction.

Nothing happened.

It was both a relief and disappointment.

“Dad?” Aurora asked, and he looked up at her.

“You do not have the allergy your mother had.” He said, turning around and retrieving six more bottles of the contraceptive. “Take the first the next time you start your menses, and a new one every two months afterward.”

Aurora frowned as she took the bottles from him, then really looked at them. Her eyes widened.

“Dad, I, what? Why? Why are you… I’m not even ready.”

“Good.” He said. “It’s what every father wants to hear, just short of a desire to join a nunnery. But the fact of the matter is, you’re at the age in which sexual intercourse becomes much more common, and while I would prefer to believe you would never do such a thing, I’m also not an idiot. Take the potion, Rory. Even if you have no one you desire to do so with now, there will come a time when you will, and this way you will be ready. And do not share it with Miss Weasley or Miss Lovegood, or anyone else.”

“Yeah. Pretty sure the idea of asking Professor Snape’s daughter for contraceptive potions, knowing precisely where she would have gotten it from, is something no one would ever do.”

“And where do you think Aunt Poppy gets them?” He asked.

“For everyone else, it’s a matter of plausible deniability. They think Aunt Poppy brews them, or buys them from St Mungo’s, or perhaps they merely magically appear in the infirmary to be available upon request, should the typical dunderhead not realize fifth year potion’s kit has everything they need to brew it.” When she stopped for breath, and he stared at her, Aurora shrugged. “My friends
aren’t dunderheads, and I’m fairly certain Ginny’s already brewed her first dose. And Luna might have mentioned someone in Ravenclaw doing the same.”

At least it is Miss Weasley and not her brother.” He grumbled. “I at least can have some confidence in her brewing skill.”

“She’s dating Uncle Ollie.” Aurora blurted.

“Aurora, it’s far too early for teenage gossip.” He said, waving her away so he could, perhaps, sneak back into his rooms and nurse a whiskey before the dinner to take place later in the day.

“It’s family gossip.” She retorted, placing five of the small vials down on the counter and uncorking the sixth.

“Then go tell your mother,” Severus retorted before frowning. “What are you doing?”

“You said take it the first day of ….”

He held up his hand. “Aurora….” He said in a warning tone.

She smirked, then swigged it back. “It’s best to do this in front of you regardless of the test. May be else that causes the reactions.”

He gave her a half smile for thinking clearly, watching his daughter, his beautiful, smart, vibrant daughter as she waited a time for the potion to kick in. “It’s disgustingly sweet.” She said conversationally.

“I have been told this.” He agreed.

“Well,” She said after about a minute. “I think it’s safe to say I am, in fact, allergy free.”

“So, you are.” He conceded.

“I’ll see you and Mum later, then?”

“You and your entourage should be in our chambers by five o’clock.” He said. “Anyone late won’t be admitted.”

She smirked, then surprised him by coming to his side and kissing his cheek. “Later, Daddy.” She said, collecting her potions and leaving.

Daddy. Oh, he must have looked positively miserable for her to have used that title. With a heavy sigh, Severus headed back to his rooms, a fire whiskey or two calling his name, as he knew there was much more to prepare for than merely an evening with his daughter and her friends.

———H———

“Alastor,” Hermione greeted the one-eyed wizard, and he smiled at her.

“H,” He said, hobbling past her. “How’s Hogwarts?”

“Limiting.” She replied, following him into the sitting area of her and Severus’ quarters. “Albus
wants me to teach, of course, but it’s pretty much just becoming a review of the last couple years. He
doesn’t seem to understand that they do need to learn, regardless of who is doing the teaching.”

“How’s Potter and the rest?” He asked.

“They are, admittedly, above and beyond. But then, they were actually learning, and there are some
things Remus had taught Harry, that Severus had taught him in passing, that Harry has shown the
others. You taught us about Patronus’ in our fifth year, but I believe it was only really Severus who
could cast a near-fully corporal one. He’s powerful, so I suppose that isn’t too much of a surprise.
But Alastor, all of those kids can produce a patronus. All of them. They faced Death Eaters at the
ministry and they all survived. They need more advanced lessons, but Albus refuses to allow me to
do so. Or Severus. Or bloody anyone, though he has been taking Harry off on special lessons.”

“We know what they are?” Alastor asked as they entered the sitting area.

“Why, our esteemed leader is teaching my sixteen-year-old all about Tom Riddle.” Sirius said as he
leaned back on the sofa, the space in the middle empty between he and Severus as they pair enjoyed
some of the latter’s whiskey. “Harry’s wrote to me about it. Everything about Riddle’s history,
starting from what Dumbledore knew of his life prior to Hogwarts.” He sipped his whiskey. “I’m not
sure if he’s trying to get Harry to understand him or sympathize with him.”

Severus scoffed. “He still believes it’s Lily’s love that protected him for all this time. I will concede
that Lily’s final, magical act was quite likely a shielding spell strong enough to guard against even
the killing curse. It was for Harry that she died, to protect him. Or, perhaps, it could have been
something as simple as wards on the crib. Runes carved within that we would never have seen.
Hagrid was the one who got to him, and frankly, without Harry there, I wouldn’t have thought to
look at it.”

“What’s left of Godric’s Hollow now?” Sirius asked.

“The house is ash.” Remus said from the kitchenette, fixing himself a cup of tea. “I’d gone not long
after you’d gone to Azkaban, and before Severus went as well. The place is dust, nothing but the
shell of the first floor left.”

Severus frowned. “So, someone set it on fire after I’d left.” He said.

“I suppose someone did.” Hermione said as she sat down between her husband and their friend,
Alastor taking the chair, leaving the love seat for Remus and the delayed Minerva.

“Coulda been anyone,” Alastor waved it off. “Anyone at any time. A regular witch or wizard trying
to burn the place the Dark Lord bit the dust, or a Death Eater wanting to try and earn back their
Lord.”

Minerva appeared through the fire place then, dusting herself off. She glanced at the men just as
Remus came over to hand Moody a tumbler of whiskey before taking a seat.

“Have I already missed the important discussions?” She asked, gesturing to the liquor. “Or is Severus
merely mourning?”

“What you lose?” Alastor asked.

“The ability to believe my daughter young and innocent.” He replied, leaning his head back. “She’s
able to take contraceptive potion.”

“Own fault on that one, ain’t it?” Alastor smirked.
Severus lifted his head. “Better to know she’s taking that than find out she’s been impregnated by some dunderhead.”

“At least that is one thing I have never had to worry about.” Sirius smiled.

“Harry still could…” Remus started.

“Harry is with Draco.” Sirius cut him off. “And I would bet my house that if those two make it through the war, they are going to spend the rest of their lives together.”

“What did you wish to talk about, Severus?” Minerva asked, taking a seat next to Remus and cutting off any argument the two marauders may have had.

“A few things, actually.” He said, leaning forward to set his whiskey down on the coffee table, steepling his hands between his knees. “We are facing what will likely be one of the most dangerous undertakings Albus has concocted yet: his own death. The fact that we were able to rid Miss Bell of her curse leads me to think that, with time and research, we could do the same for Albus. However, I don’t believe the man would allow it.”

“He hasn’t even said anything ‘bout it yet.” Alastor replied. “Makes me think he wants to die.”

“Which seems a bit odd since he wanted so desperately to become the master of Death once.” Severus replied, and Hermione was certain she wasn’t the only one in the room looking at him in confusion or disbelief. “He and Grindelwald were partners, or has he made everyone conveniently forget that he was once a rising Dark Lord himself?”

“I remember,” Alastor said.

“I never knew to begin with.” Remus said.

Sirius whistled, “neither did I. I had always thought he defeated Grindelwald.”

“He did.” Hermione replied. “In 1945, Dumbledore finally confronted Grindelwald, winning the duel and imprisoning him inside a fortress. But it was only because of the death of Dumbledore’s sister, Ariana, that he turned completely against Grindelwald. Before then, the two were reported to have… well, to have acted like a pair of Death Eaters. Muggle baiting, torture, believing that witches and wizards were superior over non-magical beings, and that the statute of Secrecy need be eliminated, and a hierarchy be put in place for… for the greater good.”

“They were also obsessed with wizarding lore, namely the Deathly Hallows. They believed obtaining all three items from legend were to make one the master of Death.” Severus added.

“Okay, let’s put aside the Hallows for now,” Remus said, shaking his head, pinching his nose. “You’re saying that Albus Dumbledore was once a man who wanted precisely what the Dark Lord is looking to achieve? And we are all following him…..”

“Like puppy dogs?” Severus said, eyebrow twitching. “Why yes, I believe most of the order are.”

“We’ll get back ta Dumbledore’s intentions another time,” Alastor waved it off. “He don’t want us knowing he’s going to bite it, let alone help, so what’s on yer mind, Snape?”

“How much danger we are all in.” He said bluntly, and Hermione reached over and placed her hand on his knee. He glanced at it, covered it with his own, but virtually ignored it. “The fact that he refuses to tell the order means he likely expects one of two things: that either I will die very shortly after his demise, because he likely thinks everyone will believe I was truly working for the Dark
Lord after all and go for my head. Or, the Order will splinter, and I am willing to bet he believes that should that happen, the side that will believe me guilty will have the greater numbers.”

“That’s your neck on the line,” Remus said. “What about ours?”

“Hermione is his wife.” Minerva said. “She’d be considered a traitor by association.”

“And should this execution of the leader of the light have an audience, there can be no one from the light willing to let me and mine walk away unscathed. Even faking ignorance, as I am walking out with a bunch of Death Eaters, could be risky. You’ll either be thought to be a traitor like your dear friend Peter, or you blow my cover, in which case you will fail to receive valuable information.”

“So, what’re ya suggesting?” Alastor asked.

“Liquid Luck,” Severus replied. “Just enough to get us through that night, and to allow the children a small vial each for their own protection.”

“Alright,” Alastor nodded, “Suppose that could help. But still don’t see how all of us need it, not just you and the missus?”

“Because I do believe there will be an audience, and I do believe that Dumbledore will ask you all there to bear witness to my turning sides. I wish to propose a plan that has risks. And, of course, requires a lot of misdirection, especially for people in the order who do not yet know the truth, and cannot until after Dumbledore’s death.”

“Why not let the others know now?” Minerva asked.

“Do you really believe Molly will be able to keep her opinion on this to herself?” Sirius asked, not unkindly. “She would go nearly blue when Harry or Ron would mention Hermione in the kitchen once it was discovered that H is Hermione. She doesn’t like the idea that her youngest children have been preparing for war, have been vocal about their learning things no fifteen or sixteen-year-old should know, and let’s not even get into her opinion on how we are raising our own teenagers.” He smirked for a moment. “If she were to know the truth about Dumbledore, she’d have something to say about it. If she knew even more so the plan for him, she would have a conniption.”

“Well that’s Molly, but I always thought Arthur wise enough to understand the nuances.”

“Perhaps, but he ain’t really stealthy.” Alastor smirk. “Got too many tells, that one.”

“Kingsley would keep quiet, but he’d also have a hard time simply letting Albus pass on.” Sirius conceded.

“And how would you know how Kingsley would take it?” Remus asked.

“I suppose that depends,” Sirius retorted. “Can you say how Tonks would react?”

“Yes,” Remus said, his tone suggesting his ready to argue his point.

“Precisely,” Sirius smiled.

There was a knock on the doors in the office, and everyone looked to one another.

“I suppose that means time is up.” Hermione mused, glancing at the clock over the mantel as Severus rose to answer the door. “It’s nearly time for the children to show up, and that’s likely one of them now.”
“I ain’t staying for a party,” Alastor said as he got up.

“Oh, Al, lighten up. You sat through Hermione’s sixteenth.” Minerva chided as she stood.

Alastor hesitated. “Who all?” He asked Hermione.

“Harry, Draco, the Weasley children, Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom.”

“Longbottom?” He said, mulling it over. “Suppose I can get a good look at the kid.

“Good, because once they’re all occupied, I wanted to talk to you about a plan I had for a Defense lesson.”

“Are you ready to head down?” Aurora asked Neville who startled quite badly at her question. He quickly closed his herbology book, grimacing when the parchment filled with notes was stuck between the pages. “I might know a spell that will remove the ink.” She smirked. “My dad taught me.”

“Really? Won’t it… won’t it remove all the ink?” Neville asked, glancing at the book apprehensively.

“No, you just need to specify the color. Our ink wells are filled with black, the texts are usually written in either dark blue, gray, or green.” She shrugged. “You should see how often mum has to remove things from her books. It’s quite amusing, really, when you consider that my father writes notes in margins, and she loathes pages being written on. Well, except that one book.”

“One book?” Neville asked, standing, heading with Aurora toward the common room door. Most of the Gryffindors were out in the Great Hall or socializing. She hadn’t seen Harry virtually at all that day, likely off with Draco, and Ginny had gone to get Luna just before Aurora found Neville.

“Yeah,” Aurora said as they stepped out. “Mum says it was the most romantic gift she’d ever gotten from him, and it was from before they even had their first date. A copy of Jane Eyre, with Dad’s commentary all through it. She still has it, and all the little herbs and flowers he stuffed in it.”

“What made it so romantic?” Neville asked as they slowly ventured down the stairs, his hands stuffed in his pockets as Aurora rested her hand on the banister.

“Well, I think it was the fact that he underlined a passage that sorta resonated with him. And it was during the proposal scene. I’m not sure, really. I suppose I don’t quite share their idea of romance.”

“And, uh, wh-what is your idea? Of romance, I mean?” he asked, clearing his throat and taking a deep breath. “I mean, the box Fred made….”

“And ended up selling,” She smirked. “Though, to his credit, I did say he could. And it isn’t identical to the one he made me.” She sighed, pondering. “I’m not sure, precisely. One would think that my parents are the prime example. Friends who fell for one another, stayed together through what would have torn many apart. There was faith in one another, that they would always be together. And they have, they have weathered so many storms. And it is wonderful, but… I don’t know.”
“Well that’s helpful.” Neville mumbled, and Aurora glanced at him, wondering if he realized she’d heard him. “So, get any mail today?” he asked after the silence lingered to long, and Aurora watched as Neville’s face twisted in agony, and his hand nearly rose to palm his disheartened expression.

“I did.” She said, smiling in an effort not to laugh. “Molly Weasley sent me a somewhat stilted letter of best wishes, though it seemed quite… cold in feel. Not entirely sure I understand that one. My various grandmothers all sent me galleons because the Granger one doesn’t know me as well as she’d like, the Prince one knows that if she could have given my father money at any time to spend how he liked, she would have, and the McGonagall-Wood one is never certain what my taste in clothing is. The twins sent me a card and some Instant Darkness Powder. And jelly slugs, I do love Jelly slugs. Conveniently with all the yellow ones taken out, I am really not a fan of those ones.”

“So… yes.” Neville said.

“Well, I saw how much you regretted the question the moment it left your mouth, so I figured I would answer it in detail to make you feel somewhat less silly.”

Neville gave a chuckle, and Aurora was quite pleased with herself.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you.” He started, “if perhaps… if maybe the next Hogsmeade visit you’d like to go just the two of us. I mean, just us… and you know it’s meant to be just us this time.”

“I’d like that.” She said as they headed down into the dungeons.

“Really!?” Neville’s voice pitched and echoed off the stone corridor.

“Yeah,” Aurora replied. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I have a rather long list of reasons why I figured you’d say no, but I’m not sure I should be getting into them and turn my luck,” He smirked, and Aurora chuckled as they came to her father’s office door.

“I doubt any of them could change my mind. Unless, of course, one of them was that you actually didn’t get my parent’s permission. In which case, I have to decline to appease them.”

He didn’t seem nervous about the prospect, so Aurora assumed as she entered her father’s office that Neville had, in fact, braved her father once more in order to get his blessing. Or cheated and asked her mother.

She didn’t knock as she headed into her parents’ rooms, simply opening the door that appeared for her and walking through, making sure Neville was following so they wouldn’t shut him out.

She was a bit surprised to find Draco and Harry already there, but more so by the abundance of adults she hadn’t counted on.

“Happy birthday, Uncle Sirius.” She said as she went over and sat on the sofa beside him.

“Happy birthday, Rory.” He smirked.

“Any particular reason why you’re here?” She asked, noting the not-quite Professor Moody speaking with Harry, Draco chatting with Professor Lupin.

“Just a few things your father wanted to chat with us all about, nothing in particular.” He shrugged. “And your mother had an idea she wanted to run by a few of us.”
“Bloody hell,” Ron’s voice cut through the haze of chatter, and everyone looked at him as he, Ginny, and Luna came through the door, held open by Auror’a’s mother. “I’m in a teacher’s chambers.”

“I see your powers of observation hasn’t changed throughout the years.” Hermione said, but Ron merely turned about as he continued to move forward. “If you were expecting coffins, I’m sorry to disappoint.”

“I think he was just expecting it to be darker, more dungeon-y,” Ginny smirked.

“More books than the library in here!” Ron nearly shouted.

“Haven’t spent much time in the library for studying, have you, Weasel?” Draco snorted.

“Yes,” Aurora heard her Dad say. “We heard of your escapades from the previous night,” he quirked a brow, making Ron blush.

“Can we please pretend that we aren’t at Hogwarts, and that my friends and I are not in a room filled with three current professors, and two past ones.”

“Three, actually.” Uncle Sirius smirked. “I was a sort of pseudo professor for a year. Defense against the Dark arts.”

“So… no one over the age of seventeen in this room has never been a professor here.” Ginny said, looking about the room.

“Except for Moody.” Harry noted.

“Nope, taught yer parents back in the seventies.” He said. “Was just before I lost my eye and leg.”

“Perhaps we should heed Aurora’s request.” Hermione said, and Aurora sighed with relief. “But first, before the food-”

“Oh,” Ron grumbled.

Ginny gapped at him. “We found you in the Great Hall stuffing food in your face.”

“Yeah, well,” Ron shrugged. “Didn’t eat as much as I usually do, knowing we were coming here.”

“Anyway,” Aurora’s mother continued, glaring at Ron before turning back to her with a smile. “We wanted to give you something, Poppet.” Aurora watched as her mother looked to her father, and he withdrew a small box from within his robes, handing it to Aurora. “When I turned sixteen, I was informed by my well-meaning foster parents that it was traditional to give a ring,” she said as Aurora opened the box and revealed the citrine, oval stone set in silver ring.

“It’s lovely,” Aurora said, removing it from the box and slipping it on to her right hand.

“It’s also enhanced with protective measures.” Her father said. “One being a link to Draco.”

“Me?” Draco asked, confused.

“Yes,” He said. “You have a ring from your mother, that allows her to go to you. Your Aunt and I can do the same with Aurora, but should she need to escape a situation that puts her in danger, it will send her to you. With us, it’s never known where we could be, and who we may have to pretend to be. The danger she faces could come from either side of this war. But you do not play a part, you have chosen a side, and it is the same one she aligns with. If she’s in danger, and you’re not with her,
then it’s less likely that porting to you will make her situation worse. And so, you know, your mother
has given us permission to add the same charm to yours, so that you may got to Aurora’s side if need
be.”

Draco nodded, both in ascent and understand, rising from his spot to go to his Uncle.

“Do you really think it’s going to be that bad?” Harry asked apprehensively? “Enough that Rory
would actually be safer going to one of us than either of you?”

Aurora watched her parents exchange weary looks, glance at the other adults who all seemed to
share the same trepidation.

“If all goes as planned,” Professor Lupin said slowly, “It will never be more dangerous for any of
you.”

November 10th, 1996

“Aurora,” Neville said softly, nervously, and she looked up from her transfiguration notes to meet his
timid gaze. “Are… are you… you’re busy, I’ll just…”

“It’s advanced notes,” She admitted with a sheepish grin. “Career counseling may not come around
until May, but Professor McGonagall is also my aunt, so she wants to try and convince me to follow
in her mastery. And since she probably knows I haven’t decided yet.”

“Yeah,” Neville grinned, and then seemed to realized why he was there in the first place. It dropped,
and his nerves came back in full force. “So, you’re free then?”

“Sure,” She said, waving her hand over her notes and tidying them up.

Neville gaped. “You can do wandless magic!”

“We all can if we put our mind to it,” She said picking the books up and putting them inside her bag.
“Our wands are merely a tool, a way to channel our magic.” She then withdrew her wand, and then
banished her bag back to the dorms. She smiled cheekily, “And tidying it pretty much the only
wandless I can do intentionally. So, there’s that.”

He laughed nervously, stuffing his hands in his pockets and stepped back a bit to give Aurora space
for her to move around the sofa. “So, where are we going?”

“Well, umm…” He stiffened his spine and lifted his chin. “Come with me.”

“‘Kay,” She smiled, following him as he led her out the portrait hole.

Neville helped her through, then led her down the stairs to the ground level of the castle. The further
away from the common room they went, the more Aurora frowned, and when he turned to the side
door that was a more direct path to the green houses, Aurora nearly questioned what he was up to.
Instead, she kept quiet and hoped her father or mother weren’t on rounds for the evening.

When they were out in the cool night air, Neville reached into his pocket and withdrew something.
Pointing his wand at it, he enlarged a cloak. “Here,” He said, blushing as he wrapped it around
Aurora’s shoulders.
“Thanks,” She said, curiously watching as he repeated the processes again for himself. “Neville, what are we doing?”

“You’ll see.” He said, glancing upward and then doing a double take.” We gotta hurry, actually,” He said, taking her hand and guiding her quickly along the path to the greenhouses.

Having spent a fair amount of her childhood in Hogwarts, Aurora had known the greenhouses fairly well, including which ones to avoid. Which was why she stopped short when Neville tried to lead her into greenhouse five.

Her halting had her tugging on his arm when he kept moving. He turned, looking at her over his shoulder, and a genuine, true, excited smile washed over him, causing a rush of something to zip through her veins. “Come on!” He said, tugging her hand, and she obeyed.

This particular greenhouse wasn’t overly humid, merely warmer than it was outside. The windows weren’t frosted, and much of the foliage inside were large enough to block the view of the interior from the outside. And all of them were benign, or at least as far as Aurora could tell. She stopped just inside the doorway, looking around, wondering why this one had always been off limits.

“Is there devil snare or anything lurking in a corner I don’t know about?” She asked.

Neville laughed, “No,” he said, waving his wand and dimly lighting some sconces placed few and far between. They brightened the space enough to see, but not so much that it drowned out the night. “Come on, this way.” He said, stuffing his wand up his sleeve and retaking her hand, pulling her deeper into the green house.

“Why are we in here? I was always told this wasn’t a safe space.”

“It’s the apprentice greenhouse,” Neville explained, and she hummed in understanding. “Remember the plant I was telling you about?”

“Yeah?” She said, and he stopped in front of a fairly large plant box with a single, closed, white-petaled flower inside.

“It’s going to bloom tonight.” He said, and as he said it, the petals slowly began to move. “I was actually aiming for your birthday, but… got it a week off. Then again, it’s not like… not like I could change the moon cycles, and that’s … that’s what’s needed for it. New moon and all.”

“Oh.” She said, watching as each iridescent petal began to curl outward.

“I had this whole plan,” Neville continued, his focus on the flower while his thumb lightly brushed the edge of her hand. “I was hoping it would have bloomed for your birthday, and I was going to bring you out here, and show it to you. Originally, I was going to re-pot it for you, but the more I read up on it, the more I found out they don’t like to be moved. So, I actually started to grow another, too, but that won’t be ready until the Christmas Hols. And I couldn’t wait that long, because … well, I’d already put off asking you to… umm… well your Dad called it court.”

Aurora turned away from the large, magically enhanced flower, and looked at Neville who was nervously looking at his shoes. He then looked up and met her eyes.

“I’ve had a crush on you for a really long time.” He said.

“I know,” She confessed.

“Oh,” He said, surprised, then, more sadly. “Oh.”
“Is that okay? That I knew? I mean, I didn’t want anything to be different between us…."

“Yeah, suppose that’s evident.” He said mirthlessly.

“But that’s not to say that I wouldn’t want to … court you.”

“But if you knew… and you didn’t…”

She put a finger on his lips to quiet him, and the surprise of it had him turning quite visibly red, even in the low light of the green house.

“I knew, and I didn’t want things to change because, well… you’re my friend. One of my best friends, and we have so many common friends that I worry…. And there was Fred, and I liked him, I do-did, and….” She sighed, taking her finger away and resting her hand on his shoulder. “Now I’m mucking this up.”

“Think I mucked up first.” He sighed. “I should have just left things as was.”

“No,” She said, shaking her head.

“Yeah, I think I really-”

He stopped talking when she gently tugged on his shoulder, bringing him toward her. And when he stiffened and wouldn’t move, Aurora brought herself closer. She paused, studying his face, seeing the nervous anticipation in his eyes, felt the pounding of his pulse against her thumb where it rested on his neck. Aurora wasn’t sure he’d even breathed since she moved, and she smile before closing the space and gently pressing her lips to his. He didn’t reciprocate, but she knew better than to think it anything other than shock. So, she kissed him again, and felt his hand touch her back briefly once, twice, then finally settled between her shoulder blades. He put his hand on her waist just as she moved her lips away, and this time he was the one who began the next drag.

Aurora’s other hand found its way into Neville’s hair, and he breathed deep through his nose, pulling back quick enough there was actually a smack to the end of their kiss, making Aurora giggle.

He did too, his smile so elated that it made her heart swell.

“Sorry,” he said, blushing. “Just… it was… I didn’t expect that when I brought you out here.”

“Am I moving too fast for you, do I need to slow down?” She partly teased.

“NO!” He half yelled, cracking his voice, making her laugh harder as he blushed and groaned. Neville bowed his head, his forehead touching hers. “Merlin can I please stop embarrassing myself in front of the girl I like. Please?”

“Still just the girl you like then? Not your girlfriend?”

He reared back. “You are now, aren’t you?” Then frowned. “Aren’t you?”

“I’d like to see if it fits.” She said, feeling her own cheeks redden. “I do like you, Neville. I wouldn’t have gone to the ball with you if I hadn’t. Or to Hogsmeade. And I want to do that again, hopefully without finding one of our house mates in the process of being cursed next time. And I would like to know it is a date going in.”

“Yeah,” he said with a breathless laugh, “Yeah, probably better when we both know, right?”

Aurora nodded, glancing at the moonflower in full bloom. “My muggle grandmother has a couple of
those. Well, the non-magical version. They’re a lot smaller and grow on something like vines.”

“They’re distant cousins of each other, actually.” Neville said. “It’s said that the muggle versions actually originated from ours. Sorta like a squib, born without magic, so they were smaller and didn’t shimmer like this one does. But they kept the night blooming characteristics, and apparently also have a much more powerful scent, and… I’m going to stop talking about plants and, maybe, kiss you again, if it’s alright?”

Aurora giggled, “yes, I think that might be alright.”

“Okay, good,” He said leaning in and kissing her, surprisingly adept for someone who had never kissed anyone before. After a few minutes, he paused and asked, “How am I doing? Is this okay?”

“You’re doing fine.” She assured, him, giving him a quick peck.

“Really? Because, if you want me to try and snog like Ron was.”

She chuckled. “Please don’t.”

“Okay,” He chuckled, then resumed his very sweet but confident kiss.

“The moment they spotted the teenagers talking to one another in front of the admittedly brilliant looking moon flower, the head of Hufflepuff immediately put up a silencing charm around them and locked his feet to the ground. By the time Severus had countered her jinx, Longbottom was leaning in, making his move.

“I know I gave the boy my blessing, but I didn’t think he’d actually go through with it.”

“Well, Aurora looks happy, doesn’t she?” Pomona asked, a romantic sigh lacing each word of the sentence. “A much better match than Mr Fred Weasley.”

He turned to his colleague and scowled. “You’re playing favorites.”

“And you’re not?” She countered.

“I dislike the idea of any of the miscreants running around the castle being anywhere near her, except her brother and Mr Malfoy.”

“And Mr Potter.” Pomona added.

He grumbled a slight agreement but wouldn’t fully own up to that being true.
Severus spun and quickly followed them out, stalking them a short way and not quite catching up to them when he heard Hagrid below a greeting to them, then offer to lead them back to the castle. An offer the teenagers warmly accepted, Aurora parting from Longbottom to loop her arm around Hagrid’s hand and ask how he’d been.

“They grow up, Severus.” Pomona said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You can’t always be her protective shadow. Sooner or later, you’ll have to let her stand on her own.”

Pomona didn’t seem to realize the weight of what she’d just said as she continued up the path to the castle.

But Severus did.

Aurora would be of age in, officially, less than a year. And in that time, the war would get worse, and who she decided to kiss in greenhouses would be the last thing Severus would have to worry about.

With a heavy heart and a buzzing mind, Severus slowly returned to the castle, wishing he’d had a time turner to go back before everything became so dire.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took about a week. I had a few other things come up that took time away from here. Until next time!
“Look at this! It’s like a triple date,” Ron grinned, looking first to Draco and Harry, then around Lavender to she and Neville.

It wasn’t something Aurora wanted, but when the Hogsmeade weekend was announced, Ron had become so adamant that they all hang out together that Neville soon caught on with the fever of it. As had Harry, though Draco seemed to be on her side of things, which was the hope for privacy and time alone with their respective partner.

Neville held her hand, smiling proudly as Ron went on about how great it was to have friends who were also couples to hang out with.

“You realize that literally none of us were together last time,” Aurora pointed out when he was becoming too much. “So, it wasn’t like there was a lack in couples to hang around with. Not to mention that this technically ostracizes two of our friends. One because her boyfriend isn’t here, and the other because she doesn’t have a boyfriend at all.”

“Gin and Luna have each other.” Ron retorted.

“It’s not really the point, Weasel.” Draco scowled.

“Malfoy,” Harry sighed.

“Won-won would never be mean to his friends.” Lavender said in a cooing voice that made Aurora’s skin crawl and her lip curl.

Won-won. Yuck.

Harry smirked. “Dra-Dra was just making a point, weren’t you?” He teased.

“Say that again, and you’ll find that precious broom of yours gone missing.” Draco warned.

“What point were you making, Malfoy?” Ron asked.

“That maybe you should have not have put so much emphasis on this being a ‘couples’ thing. This may come as a surprise to you, Weasel, as it seems you and Brown can’t exist without your tongue in each other’s mouths, but we’ve been doing just fine hanging out with one another while there are couples among the lot of us.”

That was certainly true.

She didn’t have any intentions of making her and Neville a big deal, but the following day at
breakfast when she arrived with Ginny and Luna, the sixth-year boys began to hoot and applaud, causing a few of the fifth and seventh years to join them despite not knowing precisely why they were doing so. Neville had turned red, half hiding his face, but he was smiling.

“ Heard about your greenhouse venture, Snape.” Seamus had teased when she sat down beside her new boyfriend.

“You make it sound illicit.” She had countered.

“I swear, I told them we only kissed.” Neville had quickly reassured, a touch of panic in his voice.

“Yeah, only brought him to a higher plain of existence.” Dean had smirked.

“Only awakened his soul and had his heart singing.” Seamus had added.

“Only thought he could face a thousand of his boggarts if his reward was your lips.” Ron had added in, though Ginny had smacked him across the head for it.

It was awkward that morning, but thankfully by noon things normalized. And while she and Neville didn’t exactly snog at every opportunity like Ron and Lavender, he wasn’t precisely shy in that way any longer.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s just enjoy it. ‘Specially you, Neville. What luck, eh? Snape backing out of chaperoning at the last moment?” Ron said, clapping his friend on the arm.

“Still have Her-, er, Professor H hanging around.”

Aurora snorted. “She’s with my aunt. They aren’t going to be doing much chaperoning.”

“Either way, lucky us, right?”

—S—

“Repeat after me: ludere mortuis.”

“Ludere Mortuis,” Theo Nott repeated, pointing his wand at the rats in the cage. The boy jumped back when the green jet struck the rat, and he looked at the tip of his wand in horror before turning a glare on Severus.

“Calm yourself, you didn’t kill it.” He sneered. “Iterum Vivere,” He pointed his wand at the rat, and after a moment, it sprung back to life, scurrying about.

Nott frowned. “I don’t understand. Did I kill it, and you saved it?”

“No,” Severus said. “Merely made it seem dead. Ludere Mortuis. I’d been playing with the spell for a couple months now, though the idea had always been simmering in the back of my mind. Translated, it means ‘play dead’.”

“You have got to be joking.” Nott deadpanned.

“I could turn the spell on you, and you can find out.” He asked, and when the boy didn’t respond, he continued. “It will put the victim in the ultimate stasis. To everyone, the heart will appear to have stopped, their breathing ceased, and they would be weightless. You only have so long before the spell is irreversible, however. And even any length of time risks damage to the witch or wizard it is
cast on. It looks, when cast, like an Avada. Therefore, you are going to practice this spell on these rats until you can cast it wordlessly. And once you can do so without fail, you will teach yourself how to say a slurred version of an Avada, while still casting this spell.”

“Why are you teaching me this?” Nott asked. “Why not just let me cast an unforgivable?”

“Because they will damage your soul.”

“So?” Nott countered. “Does it make a difference with this thing on my skin?” He demanded, pushing up his sleeve and all but shoving his arm in Severus’ face.

“Yes,” Severus hissed. “It makes a difference because this burden should never have fallen to you. Your mother left your father, same as Draco’s, and raised you without his aid. Had she not passed away, your father’s parental rights would never have been reinstated. If Cecelia Zabini had been a decent witch, she’d have claimed you as her own the moment your father wound up back in Azkaban.

“It makes a difference, Mr Nott, because dark times lie ahead, but I assure you that they do not last forever. And every cast of an unforgivable, every fracture of your soul awakens a part of you that slowly turns you mad. Twists your features and bares what’s within on the outside, showing the world precisely what sort of wizard you are.”

“Is that what happened to you then?”

“Watch your words, Mr Nott.”

“Fine. So, if every unforgivable twists your soul and the like, how do Aurors not become snake faced? Or insane?”

“A pure reason. An Avada may be cast to end a life that would have done anyhow, just much faster. Or it could be used to save a life, if it came down to a one or another situation. A crucio, I suppose, could be cast to hinder an assailant, slow them down so that one may escape in a non-lethal manner. Aurors would use an Imperious to send in someone undercover, to gather information if need be, but that likely hasn’t been done since before the time of Grindelwald.”

Nott nodded, seeming to think this over. “So, practice this spell you’ve made until I can truly make everyone believe that I can use the Avada, and then what?”

“Then, you and I will come up with a setting in which to carry this out.”

“And the Headmaster?”

Severus sneered instead of sighing as he wished. “Leave him to me.”

December 16th, 1996
fourth through seventh year student. There was the hum of confusion, glances toward the head table where the Headmaster was missing, but all the other professors were in attendance and none of them looked as though anything was out of the ordinary.

The five Gryffindors looked to one another, then all reached for the folded parchment.

All second period classes are canceled for fourth through seventh years, and those students are asked to report to the great hall instead.

“Got right excited for a moment.” Ron said, sounding quite down trodden.

“I wonder what’s going on?” Harry said, turning around and glancing at the Slytherin table. Aurora looked over to see Draco frowning over his note.

“I suppose we’ll find out during second period.” She said.

“Do you think it has anything to do with Dumbledore missing?” Harry wondered out loud.

“I think it might.” Luna said, sliding in between Harry and Ginny from her own table. “But, perhaps, maybe not in the way you think.”

“Why d’ya gotta be so cryptic so early in the morning.” Ron grumbled.

“Why must you speak with food in your mouth.” Aurora sighed, returning to her toast and eggs.

“She has a point.” Neville said.

“Oi, whose side you on?” Ron scowled.

“No one is on yours.” Ginny countered. “It’s disgusting.”

“She’s right, Won-won.” Lavender said. “You’re much more handsome when you have manners.”

Aurora glanced up from her food in time to see the near unthinkable: Ronald Weasley closing his mouth to chew.

At second period, it felt as though the entirety of Hogwarts had flocked to the Great Hall. The fact that no one knew why they were there had made things seem that much more exciting. That there were professors monitoring the flow of students instead of waiting inside added to that.

“I don’t think there’s been an assembly quite like this since Sirius tried to get into Gryffindor tower.” Ginny noted, clinging to Aurora’s arm while Luna held her hand. They’d had charms and herbology respectively that morning and met up with Luna as she was coming from the greenhouses so that at least the three of them could stick together.

“It is quite the feat, isn’t it?” Luna commented. “It’s nice that all the professors went along, too. It’s a
show of unity for the students.”

“And you really have no idea what’s going on?” Ginny asked Aurora who shook her head.

“I hadn’t heard it. Though, you know, now that you mention it Mom had mentioned people being around for a conversation around my birthday. Think it was for this?”

The inquiry was never answered as they made their way into the great hall and was temporarily stunned as all the before them momentarily were.

The tables were gone, and within the room, from what Aurora could see, were trees, grass, dirt, and rocks. There was also a barrier that prevented them from going anywhere except up a small set of stairs to the quidditch pitch like seating.

“There’s the boys,” Ginny noted, and Aurora allowed her to lead the way as she had no idea where in the already amassing crowd she was pointing. They made their way along the bottom row, and eventually Aurora had spotted Neville waving eagerly, a between he and Ron awaiting the girls.

“We had transfiguration,” He said as they came closer. “Professor McGonagall dismissed us a bit early.”

“Oh,” Aurora said, noting that from above, the trees and rocks she’d seen were completely transparent, almost to the point of ghost-like. And in the center, Aurora had spotted her mother, watching the crowd and waiting for everyone to settle.

“Is she making a mass announcement?” Ron asked, brow furrowing. “Like, you know…?”

“She can’t do that.” Aurora replied.

“It would risk everything if she did,” Harry added, looking around them to Ron. “She can’t. Because of….”

“Yeah, I get it.” Ron grumbled.

They waited until everyone who was supposed to be there settled down, and then the doors closed with a somewhat ominous thud. One could hear a quill drop within the room, it was so silent and still. Aurora could have sworn she’d seen her mother grin.

“Good morning,” Professor H greeted the room at large.

There was a near in sync response of, “Good morning, Professor.”

“Now, I’m sure you’re all wondering why I would call you all out of class for this period. What would be so important that all your professors would agree to this, and allow their own subjects to fall to the wayside, even for an hour?” She paused, looking around the room once more, turning in a full circle. “It’s a shame, really, because it would appear that not everyone believed they should be here for it.

“How many of you have seen a duel? A proper one, not what Professors Snape and Lockhart attempted a few years ago?”

There was a titter of laughter, nervous and honest, as a few people raised their hands, Harry, Draco, Ron, and Ginny included. Aurora slowly joined in, thinking back on the ministry, though she wasn’t sure that’s what it could be called.
“How many of you have seen battle?”

The seven of them immediately raised their hands, as well as a smattering of other students, possibly those in Diagon Alley when Olivander was taken.

“Today, your Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson is something… different. We’ll set aside the ‘Dark Arts’ part for a while, because as we’ve talked about countless times, anyone can cast a spell and have it dark with intention alone. Today, we will focus of strictly defense.

“You may have noticed when you came through the doors that there appeared to be a simulation of a forest, yet when you went to find your seats, everything appeared less substantial. That would be a charm Professor Flitwick can teach you, should you ask. There will be a shield placed above our makeshift arena so that no stray spell will escape, keeping you all safe.

“Anyone you see enter this area has agreed to be here as a participant. A similar charm will be cast on all of us, making it so you can see who it down here, but those of us on the ground only see a cloaked figure in either purple or brown. What you will see, however, is a glow around us. The stronger the glow, the less we’ve been hit. That, I’m afraid, is a charm we have borrowed from the auror department and cannot be taught to you.

“Observe. Watch what we do, when we do it, how, and to whom. I will be the first to reluctantly admit you cannot learn everything from a textbook.”

She turned away, and everyone looked up as the enchanted sky in the Great Hall suddenly became dark, as though a great storm had rolled in.

Aurora looked down, watching her mother as she weaved around trees and rocks.

“There,” Harry said, and Aurora looked over to see someone entering from the main entrance. She knew that stride, but kept quiet about it, waiting and watching with the rest of them.

She did wonder, though, if it was her father’s intention to wear his Death Eater’s cloak, and if any of the other children of such company recognized as quickly as she had. A glance to Draco said yes, and while his eyes narrowed, his eyebrows rose, making him look surprised and terrified all at once.

Her mother had just ideally stepped out from behind a tree when her father’s quick reflexes, shot a hex toward her, causing her mother to duck. Aurora covered her mouth to smother the gasp, and she felt Neville’s hand slip into hers, gripping it tightly in support.

While Professor H shot spells toward her assailant, using the tree as cover, more hooded figures came in to the room, slowly making a semi-circle behind Aurora’s father.

Aurora watched as her mother noted them, then sent off a Patronus, her raven soaring around the room before seeming to disappear altogether.

Her next hex hit hard, knocking her target back a step with enough force to knock the hood off. The room gasped when it was revealed to be Professor Snape battling the other Professor Snape. Aurora could feel the tension around her when her father curled his lip in a nasty sneer, shooting a spell back at his own wife strong enough to knock her off her feet. Before she could right herself, he had her up in the air, dangling like a limp puppet.

Harry shot forward, gripping the rail, his friend’s name on his lips. Had it not been for Draco grabbing his shoulder, half wrapping an arm around him to stop him, Aurora knew her mother’s identity would have been revealed. Harry still looked all but ready to jump the barrier despite the dangerous drop, when a flicker of light silenced the room. A spell from behind Professor H hit
Professor Snape, knocking him backwards, and freeing her from his spell to land awkwardly on her feet.

As if popping into existence through apparition, and equal number of witches and wizards appeared opposite the cloaked bunch.

Professors McGonagall and Lupin had joined them, along with ….

“Mother?” Draco said under his breath.

Aurora squinted, noting that, although her hair was darker, curled, and her clothes were not quite as elegant and refined as normal, it was Aunt Cissy down there battling.

“That’s Dad.” Ron said, pointing to Arthur down below.

“Is … is that Fleur?” Ginny asked, squatting down as if the angle would make it easier.

“And George.” Ron said.

Aurora darted her eyes to the cloaked figures just as one ripped his hood off and shot off a vicious looking curse.

She’d never once seen Fred in battle. Never once did she even see him angry. And while he still seemed to find the rush of fighting fun, there was a dark glint in his eye as he went toe to toe unknowingly with his younger twin.


Another cloak. “Sirius and Dad.” Ron said.

Another. “McGonagall and Moody?” Ginny frowned.

“Not so weird, is it?” Neville asked.

“Except that Moody is a family friend.” Aurora said, watching another cloak come off. “Fleur and Bill?”

Ginny snorted. “Mum would pay to see that.”

Harry smirked as the last cloak came off. “I could actually see Kingsley and Remus fighting.”

“Really?” Ron asked.

“It’s a long story.” Harry said, and they continued to watch the battle play out.

Slowly, the light around everyone began to fade. Tonks knocked Aunt Cissy to the ground, and her glow flickering out. The next moment, Sirius found himself out after a direct hit from Arthur. Tonks and Moody were each outed, aid from Arthur removing the latter, and the former removed while trying to protect her Mentor. Fleur managed to hit her fiance and taking him out before being hit herself from Kingsley. Arthur had countered managing, to take out the elegant wizard before a stray spell hit him as well, ceasing his glow. Professor Snape had been battling the last two witches standing, only just having hit his wife before a shot from professor McGonagall had his glow dimmed.

There was a stunned silence as the enchanted ceiling above them suddenly brightened as though it
were the end of a play, and then the whole crowed applauded.

Those down below looked at one another, shaking their heads and blinking as though they were coming too. Most of them laughed, going over and ensuring the one they’d been battling was alright. Others checked on their own team, looking for any signs of distress though none of them seemed overly worse for wear.

Professor H stepped away from the rest, raising her hands and silencing the room.

“As you can see, even a powerful foe can be felled with enough determination. We can’t-” She stopped to talking, her attention turned to the side of the room, and Aurora turned to see why.

Professor Dumbledore stood there, as imposing a figure as Aurora had ever seen, and he was looking at the lot of adults non-too-pleased.

Professor H smiled, turning back to the assembled students.

“A report of what you took away from today’s demonstration, eighteen inches, on my desk by Thursday. Dismissed.”

There was a different kind of buzz as the students began to file out, excitement with just a touch of disappointment at such a long essay. But for the most part, there was a knew found knowledge Aurora could note in the eyes of many, an understanding that the world outside would not be kind to them because they were still young.

“Why do I have a feeling the Hermione is about to get in trouble,” Harry whispered when they were free of the throng, the cluster of them remaining still a moment before departing for their classes.

“Why d’ya say that?” Ron asked.

“Did you see the way the Headmaster looked?” Draco asked.

“I’ve never seen Dumbledore that angry,” Harry agreed. “But why would he be mad? It’s Hermione’s job to teach us, now, isn’t it? And considering that Umbridge allowed absolutely no practical.”

“And no one but us really has an understanding of what it’s like to be in a fight.” Ginny added.

“And think how that turned out,” Draco said, absently rubbing his chest where his scar was. Aurora knew the pain in her ankle was all in her head, but the reminder of the battle of the ministry brought the idea of it to the forefront.

“So, it would be a good thing, wouldn’t it? Having everyone up to speed, as it were?”

“One would think,” Draco said, and a chime reminded them all that there were other places they had to be.

——H——

She couldn’t lie, even to herself, and say that she didn’t feel the least bit triumphant in pulling one over on the supposed omnipresent Dumbledore. She knew he would be away, and arithmancy only had a little to do with it. She noticed his absence for the morning at least once a week, and then
deduced that he would be away from the castle. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Wednesday, Monday, repeat. Where he went, she didn’t rightly care, but once a week, he would vanish until lunch, missing the morning meal on those days.

It didn’t take much to orchestrate the whole thing. Asking the castle was surprisingly easy, something she hadn’t thought expected given that *Hogwarts: A History* had said these things were usually only able to be done by the headmaster. Maybe the castle could sense her desperation, despite how mild it was. Either way, when the castle allowed its temporary alteration, she called on Filius who gladly charmed the transfigurations she made from the benches and tables.

When it came to who to extend the invitation to aside from what Severus had dubbed the inner-Order, that was only a slight bit trickier. Nymphadora was the easiest simply because she wasn’t just Remus’ new love, but also Alastor’s protege. Kingsley was a bit trickier simply because Hermione had no idea why he was brought to the order in the first place. He had no connections to any of them prior to his budding relationship with Sirius, aside from a short time of working with Alastor, and even he couldn’t vouch for why Kingsley would risk his career to work with a group of vigilantes. The Weasleys was where things were truly complicated. Hermione knew that Molly would never go behind Albus’ back, the man having been a sort of comfort to her when her brothers died, reminding her that they did so for…. Well, Hermione was truly getting sick of that phrase. Albus was also against, for the most part, letting any of her children in the order. At least not until they were of age.

But that was something Hermione thought a bit manipulative: withhold permission and inclusion to the point that, when they did become of age, they were chomping to join up and be included because it was something that had been seen as unattainable. And wasn’t that a trait of Gryffindors? Daring? Nerve? And what would be more so than to join in with a clandestine group of people working above the lie to stop Dark Wizards? Molly wouldn’t do anything that may hurt Albus, but Arthur had often questioned things. And since his close encounter with Nagini, Hermione was sure he was starting to wonder if maybe there should be more transparency, more training, more of anything, after all, it could have been Bill who had been there that night, and while he was the oldest and a curse breaker, it could have very well been that he had chosen a different career path and had nothing more than his scattered Hogwarts training to defend himself. It was all Arthur had, and he already saw the results.

Bill, Fleur, and the twins had been an unexpected bonus. Bill wanted to help in whatever way he could, and Fleur was more than willing to do so after what had happened to her in the tri-wizard tournament. It was, after all, her close encounter with an imperiused Krum that had her changing her career path from charms mastery to curse breaker. The twins had been floating nearby when Hermione approached Arthur, and both were eager to participate.

She knew as she stood tall before the scowling headmaster that she at least had the majority on her side, but it did allow her to be curious about where the others would place themselves when everything came out.

“Miss Granger,” He began.

“Professor Snape, actually.” She corrected without hesitation. “Or Mrs Snape, you would prefer.”

He smiled, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Yes. May I ask what you were doing?”

“Teaching,” She replied. “As I was hired to do.”

“Yes,” He said, bowing his head, bringing his hands together in front of him. “Except, I don’t recall the practical needing to be quite so… theatrical.”
“Well, it’s all well in good to teach them a spell, one that can’t be too harmful at that, and then have them practice on one another. And since it’s near impossible to conjure enough practice dummies outside the room of requirement, I thought them witnessing a battle, a proper one, would do some good.”

“While I would agree with that when it comes to Harry, perhaps. Maybe even his friends as it seems that they will stay by his side. But teaching all of the students….”

“Is what she’s meant to do.” Minerva stated firmly.

“Not this.” Albus said in a warning tone, darting his eyes briefly to Minerva. “I’m afraid I’ve seen a few too many green and gray-”

“We are not going to shun the Slytherins.” Severus said, almost sounding bored.

“No one is shunning anyone,” Albus said, pretending to be placating. “But we are running a great risk showing the way of the order to future Death Eaters.”

“You mean the children of Death Eaters?” Narcissa said, frowning.

“All children of Death Eaters are potential future Death Eaters.” Albus replied.

“Well then, should I give my mask to Aurora or to Leonidas? Who is the one meant to take up my mantel?” Severus asked, looking to those standing with them as if it were a genuine inquiry.”

“Oh, Rory, definitely.” Fred said, and Hermione gaped at the cheeky bastard over his shoulder. When he noticed he shrugged. “Leonidas might be sharp and sarcastic, but Rory is a fierce one. If anyone can go in, toe to toe with those lot like you, it’s her.”

“Yes,” Severus said slowly. “I suppose she is.”

“And I suppose, Dumbledore, that you’ve forgotten that dear ol’ Peter ended up being one of the top Death Eaters? A Gryffindor from a good family?” Sirius said, shrugging. “Or that I, a Gryffindor, actually came from a family of supporters. We can’t base anyone’s choices on how their family behaves.”

“There is a lesson, headmaster, and when the essays come back I am certain a vast majority will have picked up on it.” Hermione said, turning back to Dumbledore.

“And what lesson would that be, my dear?” He asked, and Hermione could tell he was already thinking of ways he could counter her.

“That sometimes we don’t know who we will be fighting against in the end, and that those we love most, those we trust, might be found on the other side of the line. That there is a war, and not everyone we care about, family or otherwise, will be on the same side.” She gestured behind her. “My past is not known to the vast of the student body. But they know Minerva and I are close. They would likely have figured I have a close acquaintance with Arthur and Remus, one for the fact his children and my daughter are friends, the later because he is the same age as I am, and both Gryffindor, true reasons aside. Yet I stood with them and not my husband. Family fought against one another, and it’s not hard for anyone with any knowledge of the sacred twenty-eight to know that there were three members of the black family in this room, and two of them fought one another. The twins, who are inseparable, were separated. No, no one would believe for a second that this would actually happen, except that it has in other ways. It’s leaving an impression, one that they may carry over. That, perhaps, just because they have family who believe and stand for one thing, that they don’t have to as well. And that they may see their loved ones on the other side of the line.”
“And if they don’t?” He queried.

“Then perhaps, at the end of the day, they will simply see how to fight. And perhaps, when everything comes to blows, we’ll have more youth make it out alive.” She arched a brow, daring him to challenge her. “Or, at least, know if they probably aren’t going to be able to stand against an adult and stay out of it.”

She and Dumbledore had a stare down, and she nearly laughed aloud when she felt him attempt to nudge at her occlumency shields. The funny thing was, there was a difference in feel to it compared to what she recalled. It would seem as though, perhaps, he wasn’t as powerful.

After a moment, though, he withdrew, and nodded slowly.

“Very well, Professor H.” He said with a knowing twinkle in his eye. “I will concede to your theories. For now, at least.”

—A—

“So, I know you spend Christmas with your parents.” Aurora said as she and Neville took a stroll around the transfiguration courtyard, hand in hand. She chewed her lip a little, unsure if she should ask.

There were memories of the year before swimming in her head, of Mr Weasley in St Mungo’s, of comforting Fred, that terribly awkward moment with Leo….

But she also remembered meeting Neville’s parents, which made what she wanted to do a little less daunting. He’d already shared a part of his holidays with her, perhaps she could do the same.

“I do,” Neville nodded, squeezing her hand. “I was hoping you would come with Gram and I to visit them again this year.”

“I-I… yeah. Yes, absolutely, I will go with you. I’m sure Mum and Dad wouldn’t mind, terribly, if I do. And that’s, well, it’s part of the reason I wanted to, umm, get you out here. See, I was hoping maybe you would come spend some time on Christmas eve with us.”

Neville stopped and when nearly as white as the snow. “You mean… at your house? With your Dad?”

“Well, maybe for part of it.” She frowned.

“I don’t know if I can be in there.” He mumbled, probably thinking she couldn’t hear him.

“You’ve been there before, remember? Before the ministry?”

“Yeah, but, that was different. I was worried for Hermione, and there was already so much going on.”

“I know. But anyway, it’s not really there that I was thinking of, or even just my family. See, Harry and Sirius have everyone over there for Christmas eve. And Mrs Weasley makes a meal, and she has help from the house elf, Kreacher. They usually send the lot of us upstairs, and such, but it’s still fun and, well….”
“I’ll ask my gram.” He said, stopping them so he could turn to face her. “But when I say it’s to spend some time with you, can’t see why she wouldn’t agree.”

“Really?” Aurora asked, a bit relieved.

“Yeah.” He said, blushing a bit. “I want to spend all the time I can with you.”

Aurora grinned, pleased to hear it. Before she could say as much, Neville leaned forward and kissed her, cupping her head with his free hand. Aurora touched his shoulder, not to deter him but simply to touch him. It must have given him confidence, because he deepened the kiss, something that caught her a bit off guard, even though she wasn’t truly complaining.

But something seemed off, making Aurora frown. Someone was watching them, the feeling of eyes on her a bit too strong to be coincidence. Someone in the castle, peeking through the window? Perhaps, but she didn’t think she’d have such a sense of it if that were the case.

Gently pulling away, she ducked her head against Neville’s chest and glanced around them. She saw no one, and sighed, thinking that maybe it was all in her head.

“Was that too much?” Neville asked breathlessly.

“No,” She said, leaning back and smiling. “Not too much. Just… a bit out in the open.”

“Right.” He said, smiling until a realization hit him. “Blimey, I would hate to have had your dad see us.”

She chuckled. “Then maybe next time be more careful about getting carried away?” She asked, and he chuckled and nodded. “Now, do you want to stay out here? Or would you rather go find the rest of the lot of them before our lunch break is done?”

Neville looked around, doing a double take at an empty bench. “How about we stay out here, and you can tell me more of what happens during these gatherings? So, I’m ready.”

Aurora nodded and allowed Neville to lead her to the bench where they could spend the rest of their lunch break together.

December 20th, 1996

He smirked at his wife sitting on the floor in front of the sofa, surrounded by parchment with only enough space to allow a tea cup and a path for him to the sofa. Her self-inking quill of red ink was in hand, and she chewed her lip as she read over yet another student’s essay. This was the second night of this.

Severus moved along the path, reaching around her and setting a refreshed tea cup in the designated space, and then sat down on the sofa behind her. He smiled as she sighed heavily, frustration heavy in her tone, and set his own cup down on the table.
"How much are you regretting eighteen inches now, my little swot?" He asked knowingly. "Can you now understand why it was so painfully frustrating for you professors when you went over the set amount? Can you see now why we limited you to twelve?"

"And what makes you think I regret the assignment in anyway?" She asked absently, making a vicious strike through the page.

"Possibly your frustration and exhaustion, though the premature wrinkles only dunderheads could evoke it a good sign."

She turned and scowled at him over her shoulder. "Oddly I’m not regretting the length. I already knew most of them would merely expand their normal writing size, since I didn’t set a maximum letter height. No, it’s the atrocious spelling, the sentence structure."

He snorted. "You’re correcting their grammar?"

"Well I can’t very well tell them their opinion is wrong, can I? The essay was supposed to be about what they took away from the whole battle in the Great Hall."

Severus looked at her curiously. "And? Was the outcome as you hoped?"

Something near elation flooded him when she smiled at him over her shoulder. "For the most part, yes. Most didn’t get the whole idea, but they got the majority. Especially the Slytherins. Oh, Severus, you should be so proud of them. Most of them outright stated that they learned the side they choose may not be that of their families. And those who didn’t speak of that had stated that anyone who believed themselves sufficient to go against a grown, experienced wizard was fool hearty."

"That could very well be a snide remark against Potter." He noted.

"It could, of course. It absolutely could. But Severus, I think it also means that they may not be foolish enough to get into it."

"I want to believe you," He said gently. "And in most cases, I do. But know that there are likely those in every house that believe this, but that they are, perhaps, the exception."

"So, you actually agree with Albus?"

"I said no such thing. All I mean is that I wouldn’t go storming the headmaster’s office, waving around a bunch of essays claiming you had the right of it. And no, he certainly does not, but it’s not the point."

Hermione sighed, looking at the papers, shoulders sagging. "Yes, you’re right. It’s just… we were lucky, in a way, that the war didn’t truly effect anyone still in Hogwarts before, not unless they wanted to become a Death Eater."

"And with wise decisions, it won’t this time either." He said and was glad when it seemed to end the conversation before it turned into an argument."

They were quiet for a time, each doing their own thing before Hermione spoke once more.

"Rory has invited Neville to Grimmauld place for the festivities." She’d said, and Severus couldn’t physically resist the urge to groan. "Oh, stop." She said with a smirk. "You allowed him to ask to court her, you can’t possibly dislike him as much as you pretend to."

"Oh, don’t misunderstand me, wife. I would dislike anyone who attempts to court our daughter. I just
have a special place for Longbottom in my ire.”

“Because he explodes cauldrons and has you for a Boggart?”

“Because he’s a numpty who can’t follow instructions, and I fear he would need to rely on Aurora for protection. I’m sure he did swimmingly at the ministry and taking the cruciatus is not an easy feat. But I would much rather our daughter be with someone nearer her equal than he is. He is brave, to be sure, I do not deny that. But….”

“Rory was also raised by you, a man who has subtly taught each of his children the ways in which to fight and excel, and I completely understand that, given your own early Hogwarts experiences. But Neville didn’t have that. He was thought to be a squib for the vast majority of his youth. It was actually relief when he received his Hogwarts letter. You think Aurora needs her equal, but perhaps she needs her opposite.”

“I’m not saying that they can’t have different experiences in life. Look at us, one cannot be more different than a time-traveling London girl than a poor boy from Cokeworth that had to hide his magic. Our houses were different, our early friends were different. But you, Hermione Snape, are my equal, as I am yours. We are an intellectual match, which means we can converse or not, and never have to worry about the other’s not understanding. Should I find myself unable to fight, I know that you can protect me as well as I can protect you. You followed me into the fray of Death Eaters and pretended to believe in them, just as I suffered through Lupin and Black.”

“Are you really comparing them to Death Eaters?” She half scolded.

“I may be friendly with Black and tolerant of Lupin these days, but those early ones I was, rightly, unsure. They tormented me for years because I existed, a Death Eater would hate you for the same reason if they ever found out the truth.”

“You know, I only meant to inform you that someone would need to be at the cottage to receive Neville and take him through the floo to Grimmauld. I hadn’t expected a debate on our daughter’s romantic choices.”

As Severus opened his mouth, the door from his office opened, and caused both he and Hermione to frown in confusion. Turning to the door, they watched as Leonidas shyly came into the room, dressed in regular clothing instead of his uniform, his hair tied back. He shuffled a bit as he inched closer, and Severus watched as he looked between his parents nervously.

“Leo, Sweetheart?” Hermione asked.

“What can I get a muggleborn for the holidays?” He asked quietly.

“Would this be the Miss Brooks you’ve suddenly begun to partner with?” Severus asked his son, brow arching as he refrained from smirking.

“Yes,” Leo said, lifting his chin. “And since I’m not in Slytherin, I don’t have to hide our acquaintance.”

“No,” Severus conceded. “But you must still be careful.”

“Yes,” Leonidas agreed, though Severus wondered if he really understood the magnitude of it all. “But that being said, she’s really the only friend I’ve made here so far. Besides Luna, I suppose.”

“Well, what does she like?” Hermione said, waving her hand and sorting the essays between marked and not, making room for their son.
Severus went back to his book, trusting Hermione to help guide their son through this tricky bit of business, knowing that she was much better at subtle gift giving than he.

Chapter End Notes

Next time we will have what we all know would be the last holiday for all of them together at Grimmauld place. Stay tuned!
December 23rd, 1996

“I think this one for Dad.” Leo pointed to a small, silver cauldron on the shelf in the shop, and Aurora came over to examine it.

“No,” She said. “He has one of those. Although…” She said thoughtfully, glancing down at her younger brother, smirking. “I think after he had to start brewing for Professor Lupin-”

“-Remus,” Leo said, having never had him as a teacher.

“-the one he had has been wearing down.”

“Because you aren’t supposed to use a silver cauldron that frequently.”

“It gets too mailable,” Aurora agreed, nodding. “So, we get him this, and then head over to Florish and Blotts, get mum that charms book, and we’re good.”

“Agreed.” Leo said, allowing Aurora to retrieve the slightly weighty cauldron. He wandered along the wall toward the register, passing books when he paused and then backed up. A moment later, he snickered. “Have you gotten that bloke you’re seeing a gift yet?” He asked.

“Umm, why?” Aurora asked.

Leo slipped Grass, Bugs, and Water, a child’s introduction to potions and imaginary play from the shelf. “I heard that this was about his skill level.”

She rolled her eyes. “Neville’s not even in Potion’s this year.” She said, closing the distance between them and plucking the book they each had as children from her younger brother’s hands. She slid it back on the shelf. “And before you ask, yes, I got him a gift. A nice book on the varying techniques used in Herbology around the world.”

It was, admittedly, much more difficult than she made it sound to find Neville something befitting a Christmas present. With Fred it had been a bit easier. She’d asked her muggle grandmother to send her prank candy, which she’d mixed in with some regular muggle candy. He hadn’t really been able to get around to it until after his father was released from St Mungo’s but he loved it. She was fairly certain a few of the simpler candies in their shop was inspired by it, if not outright muggle in and of itself.

The siblings made their purchase, then headed across the street. They were in and out of the shop relatively quickly, having been frequent patrons of the book shop since their youth, and stepped back outside.
“So,” Aurora said, looking at the boarded-up shops that dotted most of the alley, “where shall we go now? I believe mum and dad aren’t expecting us to floo back for another thirty minutes or so.”

Leo smirked. “I wouldn’t mind seeing the how the dunderheads are doing with the shop.”

She sighed but plastered on a grin anyway. “Alright.” She agreed, putting her arm around his shoulder and leading him down the alley.

It was still fairly magical, all things considered. Diagon Alley at Christmas time was nearly as impressive as many of the muggle shops just on the other side of the barrier. With the snow falling, the enchanted fairy lights that donned the awnings of the shops, some with garland, some with ribbon, gave a festive feeling that very nearly brought out the Christmas cheer in the pair of Snape children who were otherwise neutral.

And the Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes was among the decked out, complete with the Fred on the exterior, as well as his bunny, donning Santa hats. From a distance, they could see how busy the inside was.

“I would say the dunderheads are doing well,” She said, gesturing to the shop with the hand holding the cauldron containing the book.

“Yes, but I still want to go see them.” Leo countered.

“And you will, tomorrow at Harry and Sirius’.” She retorted.

“Rory, it’s not the same,” He protested, and she frowned as he stomped his foot a bit. “There I’ll be your firstie kid brother.”

“And in there you’re what, exactly?”

“A friend. Former employee.”

“And I go in there, do you know what that makes me?” She asked.

He pinned her with a bored look. “You have that numpty for a boyfriend now. Get over it.” And then he tromped off toward the store, having stunned Aurora into stillness for a moment.

Get over it? Get over it! What does he know, she was over Fred, completely and totally. And he was right, she did have Neville. She liked Neville, and it was going pretty good.

Squaring her shoulders, she marched toward the joke shop.

Aurora was stopped short by the snow falling gently inside, though the temperature was still warm. She thought for a moment that, if Santa Claus was real, the twins’ shop could have passed for the factory, the way so much of the inside was decorated and had the feel of the holidays. There was even a section geared toward holiday themed pranks.

“Rory!” Leo shouted, and Aurora turned to see him standing near the register with George. She went over, dodging a group of rambunctious young wizards as she did. “Isn’t it awesome?” He asked as she got closer.

“I have to say, I wasn’t expecting this at all.” She commented.

“Well, Fred and I popped into a couple toy shops in muggle London not long before the holidays really started, and we found that they really got into it over there. Thought we’d try something similar
here, changing some colors, adding details. Been a hit, really.”

“Oi! What is your sorry self doing about here, eh?” Fred’s voice said behind her, and Aurora turned to see he wasn’t talking to her at all. He also maneuvered his way through the crowd to join them, and glared at her brother, hands on his hips. “Here you are, swanning back in here during one of the busiest times we’ve had since school started, and you aren’t even back to brew!”

“You could have owled me a list.” Leo countered. “I probably could have even brewed during class, if I asked my father politely enough.”

“Probably not best idea to have you brewing contraband, mini-Snape.” George retorted.

“Regardless.” Leo shrugged.

There was a slightly awkward pause in conversation that seemed to allow the bustle of the store to penetrate, and it suddenly occurred to Aurora that the twins weren’t even going to help out. She darted a peek at the registers, finding the three they had set up entirely manned, a line forming at each one.

She felt eyes on her, and she peeked up to find Fred trying really hard not to look at her and utterly failing.

“We need to be heading home.” She said suddenly. “Our parents are expecting us soon.”

She ignored the dramatic eye roll Leo gave, and the chuckle George let out that said he’d seen said dramatic gesture, as Fred turned quickly to face her dead on.

“We’ll walk you to the Leaky Cauldron.” He said. “Make sure you two get to the floos all safe and such. Was gonna grab some lunch anyway, weren’t we Feorge?”

“Sure were, Gred.” George replied without hesitation, leading Leo out the door with his arm around the young boy’s shoulder.

Fred held his hands behind his back, gesturing for Aurora to lead on with a tilt of his head, and she preceded him toward the exit.

“And what about you?” Fred said as they stepped outside. Aurora peeked at him over her shoulder and discovered that he was a few feet away. “Leo’s all set to come back and work for us. You gonna join him?”

“I don’t intend to be a Hogwarts drop out.” She countered, allowing a smirk to play on her lips. “And I can tell you know that I can think of much better ways to spend my summers.”

“Ah, yes, I suppose you would have Neville to entertain you.” He said as he came up to walk beside her, still maintain a healthy distance.

Aurora frowned, glancing ahead as Leo and George laughed at something, but then turned back to Fred. “Neville has nothing to do with it.” She said, though there was a small part of her that wondered if he would even be able to spend any of his time away from Hogwarts with her.

It was through a quick letter that she learned his Grandmother had allowed the visit, but only just, and only for three hours. She took what she would get, but it did make her wonder if his Grandmother would ever allow him a bit more freedom.

“Oh?” Fred asked, voice hitching higher.
“Of course not,” She replied. “Since starting Hogwarts I haven’t properly seen him outside of school. If I relied on others for amusement, then I wouldn’t have survived prior to attending school. Can’t exactly invite your muggle friends to your house when your entire family is magical and practicing magic. And with regards to money, I’m not terribly worried. I’ll gladly earn my keep, as it were, helping dad brew over the Hols. Might not be the galleons Leo was bringing in, but it suits.”

Fred nodded, and Aurora turned away so she wouldn’t stare.

They were half way to the leaky when he asked, “How’s bein’ beater?”

“She replied. “It’s good.” She replied. “I get to fly, and I get to hit things. We destroyed Hufflepuff our first match, they traded off with Slytherin for first go. We’re supposed to be facing Ravenclaw shortly after the Hols. Bit glad Ollie isn’t my captain, don’t imagine it would have been as fun.”

“Oh yes, Ollie.” Fred grinned, and George stopped in his tracks to turn around. “You knew that, didn’t ya? Good ol’ Oliver Wood is actually Rory and Leo’s Uncle.”

“Oh sorts.” Leo shrugged.

“Yeah, remember that bit.” George replied, smiling. “He going to be at this big ol’ gathering tomorrow night, or are we going to have to suffer through Gin’s forlorn-ness?”

Aurora rolled her eyes. “No, not that I know of.”

“Don’t like that he’s dating her.” George said thoughtfully.

“Why not?” Aurora asked.

“Always thought he was on the other team, if you know what I’m saying.”

“And we don’t want her to be a beard.” Fred added.

“Fair enough,” Aurora nodded, not really being able to weigh in on it. She didn’t really want to think too much on the love life of someone she knew as family.

The conversation for the rest of the way involved little comments and antidotes pertaining to new products, and Leo gave his opinion here and there. The twins saw them off to the Leaky’s door, and Aurora and Leo went inside to use the floos.

She made the mistake of glancing back, something she did and didn’t want to do in equal measure. She was disappointed to find both twins had gone.

Severus stood by as Theodore Nott removed his silver mask and vomited just outside the gates. Despite appearing uncaring, his sympathy for the boy ran deep. Very deep.

He’d been there.

His first murder was his father. For Theo, it was a random muggle. And because he was meant to be a protege of Severus’ the Dark Lord thought it would have been fitting for Theo to off his first victim
in the same way: Sectumsempra.

It had been a bloody mess, literally and figuratively. At first, Theo was still just getting the hang of the spell, or at least that’s what Severus told the Dark Lord when the man they nabbed from who knew where only had minor slices that just wouldn’t stop bleeding. Then Theo was a bit too enthusiastic, and while it wasn’t the blood bath Severus had made with his father, it was a near thing.

There was the traditional holiday revel that followed, with all the typical activities that tended to follow. As was always the case, Severus remained a spectator, and the Dark Lord had him sit to his right hand said, making idle commentary and small talk as though there were not muggleborns being assaulted, and there had not just been a terrible blood bath of people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Theo had stood off to the side, still, probably so deep in his occlumency that time virtually stood still for him. He was mechanical in response when Severus had excused them for the evening, citing a need to return to Hogwarts before anyone noted their absence, duel or otherwise, and apparated them to the gate. No need for a student to know of his exception to the rule of apparation.

When the young wizard had finally managed to breath, he croaked. “You’re sick.” He coughed and spluttered, clutching his side. “You’re sick, and twisted, the lot of you. Knew my father was a good for nothing, but this.”

“You may have noticed I wasn’t precisely among the lot of them.” He deadpanned.

“No. No, you just had to teach me a spell of your own creation that-” he paused, retching with nothing more to expel, then continued. “He, that man, was nothing more than meat. A cow for slaughter.”

“And now you know how the Death Eaters work.”

“I never wanted to know!” Theo raged. “I may not like muggleborns, or even muggles, but I don’t want to see them dead!”

“And what, Mr Nott, is the difference between a muggleborn and a pureblood? Ask yourself if that man you killed tonight wasn’t actually a wizard that you did not know. Would you have been able to tell the difference? The women and men that were used for the pleasure of our brothers, how can you tell that they are muggleborns? Could you? I believe at least one of them was actually a half-blood, the crime of being a muggleborn’s child. And yes, Mr Nott, before you get anymore self-riotous on me, I do know who most of them were and I did not stop it. Doing so would be a monumentally stupid mistake. Now, curse me out all you must, but using that spell, my spell, brutal though it may be, would not damage your soul anywhere near the degree and unforgivable would.”

“But I am damaged. I am a murderer. How can I look…,” He stopped, seeming to collect himself and realize what he was doing. He vanished the mess he made, standing straight, squaring his shoulders. Waiting.”

Severus pursed his lips. “You’re wondering how you can face Mr Zabini or Miss Greengrass knowing the blood that stains your hands?” He asked, and he noted Theo’s flinch and slight nod. His nod was more visible. “After I was made to murder my father the same way you killed that muggle this evening, I returned to find Professor H waiting for me, allowing me no time to think of how I could stand before her again a killer. It’s never gotten easier, but with time, I have come to accept that she will still love me regardless. They do not need know, but should you tell them, do not withhold a single bit of the truth. Do not hide behind half honesty.”
Theo stared at him, calculating. “Does Aurora know?”

“Yes,” He said, “As does Leonidas.”

“So, your whole family….”

“Yes.” Severus said firmly. “And should danger lurk for them, I will know who brought it.”

“You don’t have to worry about that from me, sir.” Theo swore. “But to be frank, I can’t stand to look at you right now.”

Severus smirked. “Most can’t.” He then gestured toward the castle. “Go. The password for the Prefects bathroom is mer-tail. None of them are here for the Hols, so you might as well take advantage.”

Theo nodded, then passed the gate.

Severus remained outside, wondering if there was much point heading inside. Hermione and the children were at the cottage. With only Theo and a couple first years staying behind for Slytherin, Minerva had asked Rolanda to keep an eye on them while Severus had a holiday away from the castle. Dumbledore should have been the one to approve such a thing, but it seemed all the administration work had been passed down to his deputy.

As the dot that was the young Mr Nott vanished inside, Severus apparated to his backyard.

It was snowing there, casting an enchanting glow on the house dotted with fairy lights. The muggle neighbors, few and far between, would never know the multi-colors specs were charmed and not electric, but they looked so very much like all the other homes in the neighborhood.

Except, Severus thought, none would be quite so enchanting as this.

He watched through the window as Hermione, Aurora, and Leonidas puttered about the kitchen, appearing to be making cookies, likely for the gathering to take place tomorrow. And of course, because the children could not wave their wands to assist, Hermione was doing it the muggle way, which meant there was flour in her hair on her clothes, same as their daughter while their son somehow still looked pristine.

It occurred to Severus, though not for the first time, how much they were not children any more. A boy just a few months older than his daughter killed a stranger for the pleasure of a mad man not four hours earlier. She had faced down his supposed comrades and did so admirably. His son was starting to understand the intricacies of the politics that always hung over his life like a dark cloud, and understanding the risks having a muggleborn for a friend would mean.

Yet here in this moment, he could pretend that they were simply normal children, enjoying the holidays with their parents, making cookies with their mother.

Aurora looked up just then and startled momentarily before giving him a small smile and a wave. She went back to assisting without saying a word, as though she knew what he needed right now was merely to be an observer, to savor this memory. It could very well be their last, normal holiday. It didn’t matter the horrors and atrocities that occurred earlier in his evening. Severus pushed that aside to etch this in mind to cherish in the inevitable dark times ahead, to get him through it all if need be.

When he had his fill, and the chill began to get to him, he finally went inside.
In the spirit of the holidays, peace on Earth and all that rot, Hermione was the one waiting with Aurora for the Longbottoms to come through the floo.

Severus was at Grimmauld place, sharing a drink with Sirius, Alastor, and Minerva, Leo was probably tucked away in the library there, and since the Weasleys were arriving as she and Aurora were leaving, she assumed that it was now a new sort of chaos over there.

But their home was quiet, with Aurora silently sitting on the other end of the sofa appearing deep in thought, and it actually made Hermione regret her allowing Severus his drink and to not have to see Neville so soon during his time away from the castle. It was nearly suffocating without any cheer except for the Yule tree in the corner of the room.

“So,” She said into the silence, seeing Aurora lift her head a bit despite not turning toward her. “Have you thought much on what you want to do after Hogwarts?”

Aurora groaned, “Why does everyone keep asking me that?” She grumbled.

“Because it’s important.” Hermione retorted, turning to face her daughter head on. Aurora continued to look ahead, but Hermione went on anyway. “You may still have two years left, but after this year, you can limit or increase your course load as you see fit and gear it to the career of your choice. I know you’re likely to qualify anyway, but the matter of principal is, should you want to be an auror, you would need potions at NEWT level, as well as transfiguration, charms, defense against the dark arts….” She got no response from Aurora who stared at her fingers in her laps. “A curse breaker? You would need runes and arithmancy for that.” Nothing. “Perhaps you’re thinking of becoming a ministry official? It’s always good to be prepared with an area you’d like to be in. For instance, muggle relations. I know you haven’t taken muggle studies, but there’s always-”

“What’s the point?” Aurora snapped, bring Hermione up short.

“Aurora….” She started to scold but stopped when her daughter lifted her hand.

“There’s a war on.”

“I am aware of this, yes.” Hermione half-snapped.

“So, has it ever occurred to you, or dad, or anyone that some of us may not have the luxury of-of pointing our wands at a board and choosing a path because the world is our oyster? Mum, I am the daughter of a death eater. Who is not really a death eater. But I am also friends with Harry, and to be frank, I have no intention of abandoning him on some sort of pretense that I need to play a part. I was already spotted at the ministry; how long do you think it would take for anyone who was at that battle to figure out whose child I am? Dad has said Draco was wanted by the Dark Lord-”

“How did you know…?”

“I have ears and use them. You and Dad have a tendency to forget that just because I should be in bed doesn’t mean that I am.”
Hermione sighed, nodding.

Aurora sighed, too, rubbing her forehead. “I can’t think of ‘after Hogwarts’ because I my place in all of this has rendered it impossible to know what comes next. All I know is I don’t want to be a potion’s mistress, and I don’t want to get into teaching.” She flopped her head back on the couch. “And I am not going to go work for Fred and George.”

“What in the world has made you leap to that conclusion?” Hermione asked, glad to have had something to break up the tension at least a bit.

Aurora smirked. “It was offered.”

The floo flared before Hermione had a chance to ask further, and Neville emerged, followed sharply by his grandmother.

Augustus Longbottom looked about the cottage, her uncertainty clear on her face before her eyes fell to Aurora as she got to her feet.

“We will be here, young lady, to whisk you through to St Mungo’s by 1pm.” She said, looking down her nose at Aurora.

“Yes, ma’am.” Aurora nodded.

“I don’t tolerate tardiness of any kind, for any reason.” She said sternly, and Aurora nodded. “So, when I come back through to retrieve Neville, I expect him to be waiting for me. Six o’clock.”

“Of course.” Aurora said, and only at Augustus’ nod did Neville step away from her.

The woman turned her sharp gaze to Hermione. “Mrs Snape, I trust that there will be a chaperon with them at all times?”

Hermione’s brow arched. “They will be with friends, and there will be a plethora of adults around. I assure you, you have nothing to worry about as far as impropriety is concerned.”

“Good.” And without another word, Augustus left.

Hermione’s shoulders sagged, and she chuckled as she noticed both teenagers having the same reaction. “I can understand why it was a tossup between she and Severus for your boggart, Neville. She’s a fearsome woman.”

“Yeah,” Neville admitted, then smiled sheepishly at Aurora. “Hey, Rory.”

“Hello,” Aurora smiled, and Hermione tilted her chin, satisfied to see Augustus hadn’t ruined the potential for the two to enjoy themselves.

“Well, come on you two. Aurora, lead the way for Neville. I’ll go last, make sure that the two of you don’t sneak up to Aurora’s room.”

“Ginny, take it down!” Harry’s voice shouted from the library, and Neville and Aurora paused on the stairs, looking at one another in confusion.
She had a sort of rush, dull and understated, when their eyes met, and his hand squeezed just a little bit tighter. She hadn’t realized that she missed him until he was standing in her living room, and she was thrilled to see him there.

“No,” Ginny retorted. “And are you really complaining about the frequency with which you get to kiss your boyfriend?”

“It’s not exactly something I have to sneak around to do,” Harry retorted as the couple on the stairs continued hand in hand toward the library. “But come on! What if you get stuck under there?”

“It doesn’t need to be a romantic kiss,” Ginny retorted. “Doesn’t even have to be on the lips, you just make it that way.”

Aurora pushed the door open to find the Weasley family sitting in a semi-circle. Ron and George were on opposite ends of the couch, Ginny on the floor at Ron’s feet. Fred sat in the arm chair. The arms chair, Aurora’s brain provided, and she blushed as she looked away before she recalled last Christmas.

Her attention was drawn to Harry and Draco who were standing in the somewhat middle of the room, Harry frowning and Draco smirking before taking Harry’s hand and tugging him away.

“You don’t want it to reactivate Potter. Move.” He said, and Harry finally stepped away.

“Luna!” Aurora exclaimed, the couple shifting away revealing their friend in a soft, squishy chair that she had to have transfigured as Aurora had never seen it in the library beforehand.

“Hello, Rory,” She said, and shifted to make room in her chair for Aurora to crash in next to her. “I’m so glad you’re here. I know Leonidas said you would be back, but still, I had worried that perhaps you and Neville would want time to yourselves and I wouldn’t get the chance to see you. I’m afraid I won’t be here long.”

“It’s fine, I’m just glad to see you’re here.” She replied before looking at her boyfriend standing awkwardly off to the side. “Oh, sorry, Nev.” She said, struggling to get back up after having sunk into the cushions.

“Switch with ya,” Ginny said, standing and crossing the room, deftly avoiding the mistletoe in the process. She held out her hands, and Aurora took them, allowing her friend to pull her up. They stumbled, and as they moved, Ginny froze, Aurora crashing into her.

“Oh,” Ginny laughed, glancing up. “Oops.”

“Here,” Draco said, rolling his eyes as he came over and gave her a peck on the cheek. “Save the pair of you from being gawked at.”

“Oh, I think we would have been able to kiss one another on the cheek.” Ginny retorted. “I’ve already done it to Luna.”

“And I believe the pair of you got cat called.” He reminded, and Aurora rolled her head to face Fred. He smirked. “Wasn’t just me.”

“Or me.” George inputted as Aurora looked to him.

“I might have,” Harry smirked. “But only because Ginny did it to us first.”
“I can’t help it if the pair of you are adorable.” She retorted as she moved to sink into the chair next to Luna.

Aurora glanced around, seeing the love seat was already occupied by Harry, Draco returning to his side.

“Think it counts as magic outside of school during the holidays?” Aurora asked as she moved to the bookshelf and picked up brass figure.

“If it does, then Luna’s expelled.” Ron replied.

Shrugging, Aurora set the figure down on the floor. She withdrew her wand and mumble the incantation to turn it into a two-person seat. It may not have been the loveliest thing to look at, but as she sat down, she was pleased to find it wasn’t hard, nor so soft that she sank down like Luna’s chair. She looked to Neville and patted the spot next to her where he promptly sat down as close as he could, putting his arm around her shoulders.

“So, what have we missed?” She asked.

“Your cookies are gone.” Harry said.

“And I’m fairly certain Sirius is drunk,” Draco inputted.

“Yeah, before the Weasleys and Luna came, they seemed to be having something like a meeting.” Harry added. “I thought I heard something about a plan when I went down to get butterbeers.”

Aurora leaned forward. “A plan for what?”

“—S—

“She brought up a good point.” Hermione said with a heart heavy sigh. “It’s almost like we’re the ones living in our own little world, pushing them to think of what they want to do after they graduate, when this war is likely going to prevent them from doing so.”

“They are children.” Molly insisted, back to the lot of them as she whipped up a meal. “They don’t need to be concerned with the war.”

“But they are, Molly.” Sirius replied. “And rightly so. It’s not as though none of us were thrust into this whole thing before we left Hogwarts during our years.”

“You were all done by the time-”

“I may have been, but Severus and Hermione were not.” Sirius said, sipping his whiskey, well on his way to ruining all the work his earlier sober-up potion had done.

“That does not mean that those children will be.” She said, not turning to look at them all while stirring her potatoes a bit too harshly.

“Potter already is.” Alastor retorted. “Don’t think Dumbledore ain’t got him up in his office for career advice. He’s training him. Boy said so himself. Training him by teachin’ him all ‘bout Riddle.”
“Which is why I think we should tell Harry soon about the thing.” Sirius stated pointedly.

“How’s his occlumency, Severus?” Minerva asked.

“Can he keep it hidden? That he knows?”

Severus looked about the room to everyone staring at him, and he sighed. “I haven’t really given much thought to continuing our lessons, if I were to be honest. After last year, the incident at the ministry, Potter said he would try harder, and I believe he has. He’s never had a problem coming to me before about picking up on the Dark Lord’s thoughts. I think if he still were, he would ask for more training.”

“He’s a child!” Molly slammed her wooden spoon down on the counter, whirling around on them with tears in her eyes. “It’s Christmas, and they’re children! Why are we talking about their needing training? About them even being included in the war?”

“Molly,” Arthur said gently, the first time the man spoke up all evening. “Ron will be seventeen next year. Almost all of them will be of age by this time next year. And being of age, they will be able to make their own choices. Fred and George are already in the Order, and I think we both know Ron, Harry, Draco, and Rory will be involved in any way they can.”

“I wasn’t being pessimistic when I say that the Dark Lord will take over the ministry.” Severus said. “It’s his plans, and he will succeed. No one will be able to stop him, and until we have everything in place, we shouldn’t even attempt it.”

“Dumbledore will stop him.” Molly said with certainty, turning back to the stove. “You-know-who won’t win because Dumbledore won’t let him.”

Whether they meant to or not, Minerva and Alastor, Hermione and Sirius all exchanged a look that spoke of secrets. Maybe it was the liquor flowing through their veins, or maybe they were just tired of the pretense that they were as in the dark about everything as the Weasleys. But in that moment, when Arthur picked up on it, Severus knew that at least that secret wouldn’t last the night.

“There’s something you aren’t telling us.” Arthur said without malice. “And I’m willing to bet it has to do with Dumbledore’s hand.”

Severus looked to Alastor.

Alastor nodded. “Arthur,” He said, turning to the Weasley patriarch. “You’re a loyal fella. Stuck by Dumbledore through it all, even when others doubted him.”

Arthur frowned. “Dumbledore is the leader of the Order of the Phoenix. But, in truth, it’s Harry who is the chosen one. I suppose, if you want me to say who I am loyal to, it’s Harry.”


“Light.” Alastor scoffed. “If you only knew half o’what the supposed light has done, Molly, you wouldn’t be so self-righteous.”

“Then bring us up to speed, Alastor.” Arthur said genially. “What don’t we know.”

Severus smirked as Sirius uncorked the fire whiskey and poured an over-large serving into a tumbler, sliding it over to Arthur. “You’re going to want that.” He said, sitting back in his chair.

“We all will.” Minerva said holding out her own glass to the head of the house. “Be a good host and
The room was tense, and Aurora chewed her lip as she tried to choose a focus. Logically, it should be her boyfriend, who was unusually confident and it was a very good look on him, if she did say so herself. Confident Neville was rare, and somewhat insanely attractive. But so was self-assure Fred, and George to a slightly lesser degree, and the two had those knowing smirked as they glanced to one another slyly before staring down the competition. And… well, she supposed she could say Draco looked good when he was being arrogant, but he was like her brother, and that was weird.

“Alright. Let’s see what you have.” Draco said.

“Two pairs,” George said, laying his hand down.

“That’s good,” Draco conceded, but not as good as a full house.” Draco said, laying his muggle playing cards on the table for the others to see. This had been Harry’s idea, teaching them to play poker. It didn’t take long for all of them to pick up on the game, though since they were currently playing for crisps, and the rest of them had a tendency to eat their winnings (Ron especially), they were out before the game really got going.

“I can beat that,” Fred said, laying his hand down, “Four of a kind.”

Neville’s lips twitched a moment before he allowed a full smirk to come through. Without a word, he laid down his cards, revealing the royal flush in his hands.

The eruption of noises, joy, shock, euphoria, and defeat filled the air for a moment as Neville collected his crisps and set them in his bowl.

“We need more crisps!” George announced. “Get the lot of you back in here so we might actually stand a chance and break Nevvie’s winning streak.”

“Getting hard on the ego, that is.” Fred agreed.

“He’s changing the cards!” Ron said adamantly, already heading toward the door to head to the kitchen.

“Really?” Neville said as he stood, joining him Harry and Draco right behind him. “I can barely transfigure a match to a sewing needle, but I’m changing muggle cards?”

“You’re just pissed you’re losing, Weasel.” Draco commented as he and Harry followed the boys out the door.

“I’m thinking we need some butterbeers,” George said, “Unless someone wants something else?”

“I have to go home, actually,” Luna said as she fell in step with George. “But it’s been quite fun being a part of all this.”

“Your dad needs to let you come by more often,” Ginny said as she followed Luna and her brother out the door.

Aurora followed, until suddenly she wasn’t. Frowning, she looked to her feet, seeing nothing there
that should have held her. She glanced behind her at Fred who was smirking, narrowing her eyes. “What did you do?” She asked him.

“Didn’t do a thing, me.” He said. “All you this time.”

“What are you on abo-” She stopped, cold dread filling her.

No, no, no, no ….

Hesitating, Aurora slowly looked up and groaned when it was confirmed that she was, in fact, standing beneath that bloody, stupid enchanted mistletoe. How could she have been so stupid? How could she have not remembered to avoid it?

“Looks like you got yourself into quite the predicament.” Fred said, and she glared at him as he stood and strode over to her.

“Yes, looks like, doesn’t it?”

He looked up at it, circling as he seemed to study it at multiple angles. “Gin’s right bloody good, ain’t she? We actually had her teach this to us so we could sell it in the shop. They were actually a big hit, more so among the older generation, probably because of what’s needed to break the enchantment.”

“Well, it’s mistletoe. Now, are you going to help me, or do you intend to point out the obvious all night?”

“Are you asking me to kiss you?” Fred asked, a smirk playing on his lips as his eyebrows twitched in amusement.

“I suppose I am. Nothing says it has to be on the lips, does it?” She asked, her gut twisting and her heart starting to pick up speed.

“No,” Fred conceded. “No, nothing says it has to be the lips.” He shifted closer to her, and Aurora watched him intensely as he leaned in only a fraction before pausing. “But that’s the problem, isn’t it? I want it to be.”

He met and held her gaze, and the still functioning part of Aurora’s brain demanded she remember to breathe. She remembered that look, and all the things she stuffed down within to ensure that that look would never cross her mind came spilling out. Her heart, which was starting to find its way to Neville, was suddenly torn in two.

“I miss you, Aurora.” Fred said vehemently. “I miss you more than anything. And I’m starting to think I was the daftest fool this side of the veil to have actually thought we’d be better off apart. Or that I would be better off, I should say. Because you are doing fantastic, and you are going about things exactly how I hoped you would. Expected that you would. But blimey, I miss you. And by Merlin I am still painfully in love with you.

“I know you’re with Nevvie, and I am happy you seem happy. I really, truly am. I hold no hard feelings toward the bloke if he manages to keep you. But if something comes up, and you guys don’t work out, well…” He gave a pained little half-smile as he brushed a lock of hair from her shoulder. “Count on me to come running. Because there’s a war going on out there, it’s all official now, and we don’t know what’s going to happen. But I do know one thing: I’m yours.”

He leaned in, and Aurora’s eyes closed, her chin tilting up without her permission, every fiber in her anticipating his kiss.
His breath grazed her ear. “And I’ll be waiting. The quaffle’s in your hands, and all you need to do is say the word.”

Aurora’s breath rushed out when she felt his presence withdraw, and her brain was trying to reconcile the fact that she was as desperate for his touch as she was to be able to go back to before she stepped beneath the ruddy weed above her head.

He was nearly in the doorway when she realized, fully, that the was walking away and she was still stuck, “Oi, aren’t you going to free me?”

Fred stopped, then turned around with that trouble-maker grin. “Oh no. Already kissed you once when you were Neville’s. Not going to do it this time, wouldn’t be fair.” And then he left.

“Fred!” She called.

“I’ll send him up!” He shouted from out in the hall, making her grin.

It didn’t last long, as she replayed his words in her head. How many times had she hoped, in the early days of their break-up, that he would say something like that? How many times did they run into one another when he could have told her? Why now? What happened with Janette, or whatever her name was from before? And he had told her she should go out with Neville, so why wait until now to say something?

But then, she realized she hadn’t exactly been any less cold toward him. Wasn’t it just a few days ago she had hoped, however deep down, to find him looking back at her when she glanced behind her? Was it not him she had assumed Neville’s first invitation was from?

Neville, whom she could hear on the steps heading up to her, and who was sweet and good and wonderful. And who made her heart flutter.

Neville smiled when he came into the room, and she could tell he was laughing at her. “Fred said you got stuck.” He said as he came up to her. “I have to admit, I was a bit surprised he didn’t … you know.”

“Kiss me?” She asked.

Neville shrugged. “See the way he looks at you.” And then leaning in as if to impart a big secret, “Why do you think I like beating him in cards so much.”

“Thought you just really liked the vinegar crisps.” She retorted, making him smile a little brighter.

“Do like those, too.” He said, making her chuckle.

Neville cupped her face with both hands then leaned in, capturing her mouth with his.

It started off slow, simple, and Aurora pushed on him a little as she felt herself freed from the magic that had held her in place. But instead of pulling away, Neville let go of her face and put his hands on her waist, pulling her closer.

For a moment, she very nearly forgot everything. Aurora looped her arms around his neck and held him a bit closer. Neville deepened the kiss, and Aurora’s mind slipped for a moment to think of how different he was when he was like this. How from the moment she first kissed him, Neville gained a sort of confidence with her that he lacked before?

But then it changed course and reminded her that it was just last year that she was kissing a different
bloke, the same one who just said he’d wait for her. The same one who made a ridiculous promise to her parents and broke it off with her in the first place. The one who told her to go for Neville.

She refused to think on it, she told the voice to shut up and kissed Neville just a little deeper, causing him to stumble backward and land on the couch, taking her along with her.

“Rory,” He said against her lips after a moment. “The others’ll be coming back up soon.”

She nodded, kissed him again despite the warning, making him whimper a bit. She smirked, having not been able to get that reaction out of him yet despite the intense snogging sessions, and put her fingers in his hair, forgetting all about anyone and anything else until her brain demanded oxygen.

They each took a deep lungful of air, catching their breath, smiling with their foreheads pressed together.

“Blimey, I think I’m in love with you.” He whispered, perhaps not meaning for her to hear him.

But she did.

She scrambled away, but as she did, the door opened, making it seem as though it was the re-entry of the others, minus Luna and the twins, that caused her to back away. She turned, running her fingers through her hair and pulling, both to tame it back down and to give herself something else to focus on other than the ridiculousness of being told by two blokes in less than twenty minutes that they loved her. Two blokes she both felt deeply for.

She went to turn away when she froze, unable to move.

“Gin,” She said, closing her eyes and trying to remain calm. “Take down. The sodding. Bloody. Mistletoe. Do it now, or I swear to Merlin…."

“See,” Harry said beside her, and she felt his lips peck her cheek to release her from the hold. “You’re the only one who likes it.”

The mistletoe was banished. The twins returned with arms full of butterbeer, and the games resumed.

But while everything went on as it had before, Aurora could not. Fred didn’t look at her differently, but then now she knew why that was: because things never changed for him. Neville didn’t act any different, so either his confession wasn’t meant to be heard and assumed she hadn’t, or he just plan thought she didn’t hear him at all. They were both as civil to one another as they had always been, but then, Aurora never knew for sure if they were on friendly terms, or just got along for the sake of keeping the peace.

Nothing had changed.

Nothing except her.

Chapter End Notes
I didn't mean for this to take so long to get to you all. I really didn't. Please except my humble apologies and please don't murder me for how I ended the chapter. And before you wonder, the grown ups are going to start discussing things with the younger ones soon. The end of the school year is coming now that we're past December.
The mid-afternoon sun shone through the windows in such a cheery way that it almost emulated the sun of spring. Hermione had always found that fascinating, how there was always a difference in the way the sun shone through the seasons. With the clear skies and the chipper atmosphere, one might have thought it was set to be a pleasant day.

But it wasn’t.

The discussions with the Weasleys on Christmas eve had been beneficial, but it was Alastor who thought it best to start the new year with no secrets between those they really trusted. Those they knew were actually dedicated to the cause and not the leader.

There had never been so many people in her home, let alone in her living room. She had to remind Molly multiple times that this was her residence, and therefore her kitchen, and they didn’t need a massive meal for what they were about to get into. Arthur, bless him, had his wife sitting beside her, and provided her with her knitting just to have something to keep her occupied. Bill stood behind them both, a hand on each of their chairs as though he were ready to keep them there at a moment’s notice.

Remus and Sirius sat on her sofa, keeping Minerva between them as though they still needed a buffer so many months after their split. Kingsley stood with Tonks off to the side of the room near the mantel, opposite of the stairs that held the children.

Molly had protested their being there at all, but a reminder of their previous discussion had her cease her protest. Still, Aurora, Draco, Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Leo all sat on the steps with the railing obscuring them a bit as though they wanted to be forgotten lest someone change their mind and send them away. The twins occupied the landing, solemn for once, the weight of the tension settling around them.

Hermione stood with Severus in the doorway to their kitchen, and everyone focused on Alastor.

It was only fitting that their mentor be the leader of this niche of the order. He was someone to answer to, someone everyone knew they could trust, and someone who had already butted heads with Dumbledore and stayed in his favor.

He stood with both hands on his walking stick head turned one-way, magical eye scanning in the other.

“You all swear to keep this between us? No one else. No one, hear. You lot are being brought in on this because time’s-a-ticking, and we need to get our stuff straight if we’re gonna make it through what comes next.”
Molly shuddered, shaking her head, and Arthur rubbed her arm.

“What’s next?” Tonks asked, seeing there were a lot of them that were confused.

“The death of Dumbledore.” Alastor said, and no one spoke.

Hermione watched as Harry stood up slowly, hands gripping the railing and ignoring Draco’s hand on his leg.

“Dumbledore’s death?” One of the twins said.

“Something we definitely don’t know about.” The other added.

“It’s his hand, isn’t it?” Harry asked. “He says it’s nothing, but…”

“He has months left at most.” Severus said, meeting the Harry’s gaze. “He will not live beyond the end of the school year.”

“That seems utterly convenient.” Kingsley noted suspiciously, and Severus looked to Alastor who nodded.

“Dumbledore won’t be cured, he refuses. Heard o’ the incident in Hogsmeade involving a student?”

“We were there.” Tonks said as Kingsley nodded.

“Girl’s been cured of a curse that shoulda killed her. We know, if he’d have let us, Dumbledore mighta been saved, too. He picked up a cursed object, like that girl, and it cursed his hand. Lucky Severus was there, else we mighta been out a leader of the light.”

“Not that he’s very light himself.” Sirius scoffed.

“I still don’t believe it.” Molly said, shaking her head, knitting needles clacking harder than before.

“I’ve looked into it, Molly.” Remus said. “As much as none of us want to think it true, there are newspapers from the twenties, evidence that indicates it to be fact.”

“What’s fact?” Harry asked.

“That Albus Dumbledore was once a budding Dark Lord himself.” Hermione responded, meeting the gaze of her godson and former best friend dead on.

She had expected denial, she had anticipated rage, but what she got was a stoic nod. “In what way?” Harry asked.

“He was very, very close to Grindelwald.” She replied. “And before the death of his sister, you can see him at Grindelwald’s side.”

“We aren’t getting into this now.” Severus said, lifting a hand as if to physically halt her. “Potter, should you wish to learn more about the headmaster’s sordid past, I’m sure you can find another time. But right now, we’re dealing with his sordid present. That is, his choosing to die, and to do so by my hand.”

The room was so quiet, even Molly’s knitting paused. She and Arthur looked at each other through the corner of their eye, clearly still not sure how to deal with it.

Bill frowned. Harry looked terrified, while the railing obscured the children for the most part, so
Hermione couldn’t tell how they took it. The twins went pale, and while (she guessed) George looked as though he wasn’t sure he wasn’t dreaming, Fred suddenly seemed determined, like he was going to argue a point as soon as someone contradicted him. Kingsley seemed resigned, but Tonks just shook her head, her face contorted in anger.

“Bloody hell,” Ron’s voice broke the silence.

“Wh-wh-what do you mean ‘by your hand?’” Harry asked.

“Dumbledore wants Snape to kill ‘im to cement his position as a Death Eater.” Alastor said bluntly. “And to protect a fello’ classmate o’yours from damaging his soul.”

“Someone’s a death eater?” Draco asked, shooting up. “Who?”

“We’re not going to tell you.” Hermione said gently.

“Why not?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Yeah,” Ron said, standing as well, anger twisting his face. “Why not? He’s a death eater, ain’t he? Shouldn’t even be in the school.”

“Because he didn’t choose it, Mr Weasley.” Severus snapped. “The young man in question found himself dragged before the Dark Lord and his arm presented without ever having been given a choice. It was never something he aspired to having. Now, shut up and allow us to explain the circumstances. As you are a child of the order, much like the rest of you present, we are allowing you to be privy to this information because by the end of summer it is quite likely that the Dark Lord will have power over the ministry, and therefore wizarding Britain.”

“And Dumbledore is the only wizard powerful enough to stop him.” Bill said.

“But Harry’s the chosen one.” Aurora’s voice was just loud enough to be heard. The twin who looked so fiercely determined turned sharply toward her, and there wasn’t a doubt in Hermione’s mind it was Fred. “Which is why we’re hearing about this. Because if You-Know-Who is in control of the ministry, then there will be nowhere for him to be safe.”

“No,” Minerva said. “I dare say Grimmauld place will be the only one safe for the time being.”

“I can’t stay stuck inside if Vold- … if Riddle is in charge. If I am the chosen one, I have to stop him. Don’t I? Shouldn’t I face him?”

The room was heavy once more, and the six who had known the full depths of what was going on looked at each other.

“Oh, don’t tell me there’s something else we don’t know.” Arthur said, exasperated.

“I’m afraid there is.” Severus said.

“This is about….” Leo’s voice trailed off as everyone turned toward it. Hermione smiled warmly, knowing her son had forgotten for a moment, likely in his slight eagerness to prove he knew something, that there were more than just the regular familiar faces at the bottom of the steps. “This is about that thing, isn’t it?” He asked. “The horcruxes?”

“The what?” Harry said.

“How much has Dumbledore showed you of the Dark Lord’s past?” Severus asked.
It was like a light went on in Harry’s eyes, and he slowly came down the stairs. As the twins shifted to let him pass, Aurora, Ginny, and Leo stood with Ron to get a better view of the rest of the room.

Harry looked to Sirius, and Sirius gave him a proud, fatherly grin as he nodded, indicating that Harry should speak.

“He’s been showing me memories. Not all of them are his, but those he collected from other people.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “Actually, now that I think of it, he’d shown me a … well it was a memory but it felt wrong. Horace Slughorn?” He looked up at the adults, who all nodded.

“He was the potion’s professor before Severus.” Hermione said. “He retired.”

“He was also Tom Riddle’s professor.” Harry said.

“Horace isn’t that old, is he?” Molly asked thoughtfully.

“Old enough that he and Albus had a relationship during my school days.” Minerva replied. “And they certainly didn’t keep it as well hidden as they seemed to think they had.”

“It was actually Riddle that broke them up.” Alastor said, and even Severus seemed surprised by this revelation. Alastor smirked smugly at him. “Oh yeah. Think it all started around the incident involving Hagrid. Albus never trusted Riddle, Horace favored the boy. See where this all ended up.”

“And for years after, Albus not only favored the Gryffindors, but found ways of putting down the Slytherins.” Minerva said, her hand clasping the brooch about her neck.

“Also explains why, not so long before the Dark Lord came into power, Horace retired.” Severus said thoughtfully.

“Might even give credence to why he never allowed you the Defense Against the Dark Arts position, seeing as how the only qualified master in Britain that could take over in potions was Horace.” Hermione pointed out.

“What did you see in this memory, Harry.” Sirius asked, getting them back on task.

Harry remained stunned for a moment, appearing to be staring through the coffee table.

“Harry?” Sirius asked again.

“Horcrux.” Harry said quietly. After his eyes darted around for a moment, he looked up, meeting Hermione’s gaze first. “Tom Riddle asked Professor Slughorn about Horcruxes.” He looked to Sirius, “The part of the memory that felt really weird was… was that he, Slughorn, said Tom shouldn’t have been asking about it. That it was dark, and he wouldn’t have anything to do with it.”

Harry then looked to Severus. “I asked Dumbledore what it was, and all he told me was that we were going to pay Professor Slughorn a visit after the Hols, and that maybe I could get the true memory from him.”

“You don’t need to.” Severus said. “Dumbledore already knows everything he needs to about the situation.”

“So why ask me to get it, then?” Harry asked.

After a beat of silence, Sirius began to laugh. It started slow, quiet, then the rumble turned louder, more manic. Manic changed to giant guffaws as if he just heard the best joke of his life. Everyone was looking at him, and as he wiped a tear from his eye, he leaned forward, smiling at Remus. “He
never stopped us going to see you after … whoever it was sent Severus to the Shack that night, making you nearly kill him.”

“What!” A chorus came from the Weasleys, the children, and Kingsley.”

Sirius went on as if he hadn’t just revealed one of the few things Severus could never speak about. “All the mischief we got up to, and he still wanted us to work for him, for the order. And then there was Harry. Harry who has told me all about what happened in his first year. His suspicions over Severus, how he and Kitten and Ron all pieced together the puzzle. Who puts a stone that valuable inside a school and guards it with nothing more than little tasks? If the chamber of secrets had been opened in the past, why had nothing more been done about it before? Of course, Harry was given clues and hints on who to ask and how to get there.” Sirius turned to her. “The night I was freed from the tower, who told you to go back in time? You didn’t know me then, didn’t know what could happen. Yet it was Dumbledore who sent you with Harry through time to orchestrate my freedom.” He turned to Severus. “You know how much I begged for him to make the ministry see reason when Harry’s name came out of the goblet of fire. And I know you disliked the idea of him being in it for the whole task.” Sirius looked around the room, his lips still in a smile. “And the lot of you, you talented little blighters, you. Don’t think for one moment that he didn’t know what you were all doing and allowed it.

“It’s been adventures. Little adventures, little tasks here and there to aid in building up the legend which is Harry Potter. The Boy Who Lived. Ahh, but starting Hogwarts after being raised by muggles, muggles he put him with, why would anyone believe him to be the chosen one when the time came, because he knew the time would come. So, let’s put him up for an adventure? Make him seem nigh invincible. Be the hero all the Gryffindors would flock to follow. He won them the house cup his first year for following through with Dumbledore’s little adventures, snatching it away from the Slytherins. He helps with the chamber of secrets? Well, let’s face it, Harry may not have been paraded in front of the school, but—”

“It only takes one person seeing him walking through the halls, covered in muck and blood, leading Miss Weasley, Mr Weasley, and the once-professor Lockhart to my office, and just before the school is declared safe once more.” Minerva shook her head, lips twisting in a scowl.

“He wants me to be proven a hero so more people are willing to fight with me. For me.” Harry said. “I never wanted that. I never wanted any of it, but I certainly don’t want people to die for me.” He shook his head, then looked to Severus. “What’s going to happen when Riddle takes control.”

“If, Harry.” Tonks said.

“No,” Harry shook his head, looking to the pink haired witch. “Professor Snape said will, not if. If he says it’s a certainty, then I believe him.” He turned back to Severus. “So, what’s going to happen.”

Severus sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes. He took a breath, then stood straight. “I am not entirely certain. Nothing good, that can be certain. But it does us no good to theorize what may or may not happen. But right now, I think we need to focus on the horcrux situation as it seems our esteemed leader is finally willing to at least tell someone what we need to know.”

“You know, though.” Harry countered.

“We know a few loose details.” Hermione said. “Like, for instance, there are four remaining.”

“Four remaining!” Leonidas yelped.
“I take it that’s bad?” Harry asked.

“One is bad,” Leonidas said. “Four is asking for … for insanity. For pain, for-for…. It’s just wrong!” His voice continued to rise in pitch.

“How do you even know about this?” Aurora asked.

“I read it in a book at grandma Prince’s once. It’s … it’s really dark magic. It makes you feel like….”

“Like being near all of dad’s really dark books, that whole shelf worth, and it’s just one book.” Aurora said, terror coming over her as she turned to Ginny. “That diary.” She said on a shuddering breath.

Ginny slowly covered her mouth with her hands, eyes going wide. “Oh Merlin. I… I had that thing with me all the time! I-I held a horcrux.” Her voice broke, and Aurora immediately pulled her friend in her arms, though Ginny didn’t cry.

“What was it like?” Alastor asked as gently as he ever could.

“Everything that ever made me doubt myself, all my insecurities, it all came to the surface. I had a crush on Harry, and it after that year it seemed so ridiculous that I was so obsessed with him. That I was so forlorn over him not liking me back. I felt out of place, the only Weasley girl in ages, and having four older brothers in the school. My only friend was Rory, and I sometimes got so jealous of her because Harry would talk to her. My brothers would talk to her. No one paid me any attention. No one but Tom.”

“Albus wouldn’t say much about the ring he encountered.” Severus said.

“Which at this point should surprise no one.” Minerva snorted.

“So, have we any idea what the other four are?” Remus asked, and Hermione caught the flicker of betrayal Tonks sent his way. “I know we discussed it before, but I was hoping that perhaps we got somewhere with it.”

“I’m afraid not.” Hermione said. “From what I could calculate, it’s likely things that he had a sort of attachment to.”

“I suspect Nagini, of course.” Severus said. “After all, Potter saw you being attacked, Arthur. And it was she who attacked you.”

“So, three left to figure out, and then we have to determine how to destroy them.” Sirius said. “And preferably without shoving a basilisk fang through it.”

“Because of me.” Harry said. “Because…. Because I’m one, too. Aren’t I?” He asked. “That’s why I can speak parsletongue. It’s why I can feel him. Why I see things through the snake’s eyes?”

“No.” Hermione said. “You are not one.”

“Yer scar is, though.” Alastor said. “Which is why we wanna find a solution that doesn’t mean you gotta be destroyed.”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “I think I like that idea.”

“I would prefer it.” Draco said, earning as smirk from his boyfriend. When Harry turned it toward him, Draco shrugged. “You realize I’d been trying to get you to like me since we met on the train.
May not have always gone on about it the best way, but I was trying. Can’t have all that effort be in vain because you have to take a one-way trip through the veil.”

“Thanks. Glad it’s my wellbeing you’re so concerned about, Malfoy.” Harry retorted.

“Blimey, get a room, you two.” Ginny teased, which admittedly did help relieve some of the tension.

“As enlightening as this has all been, and it really has been, you said we needed to get everything together for what comes after Dumbledore’s death.” Kingsley said. “So, what do we do?”

“It is very likely that when Dumbledore is dead, and the ministry is run by death eaters, I will be names Headmaster.” Severus said. “And when I am, I will not be able to be the spy I was. My task, in the Dark Lord’s eyes, will be considered complete. So therefore, we will need… another spy.”

The last of order had disappeared through the floo, and Hermione let out a weary sigh before flopping back on the couch.

Aurora had gone with Ginevra to the Burrow, where he wouldn’t be surprised if they ventured to Lovegood’s. Leo had escaped to his room where Severus believed he intended to write to his Hufflepuff friend.

“That was more draining than I had expected.” Hermione sighed, leaning her head back. “But there’s a plan. And at least they won’t be caught unawares. Especially Harry. He seems so torn up by this, I can’t even imagine what he would have gone through if he was kept in the dark about all of this. Or having to actually be made to piece it all together.”

“While I admit that Potter does have his moments of intelligence, I don’t think he would have been able to sit down and logically think everything through if it were sprang on him.” And then a thought occurred to him as he sat down. “Which, I would imagine, was actually Albus’ plan.”

Hermione turned to him. “You really think Albus wouldn’t have told him what was going on?”

“How often has Albus attempted to paint me the enemy, or at the very least make it so that Potter felt in his right to hate me.”

“I suppose so.” She relented. “It’s hardly as though he sat Harry down and gave him facts. It was always a sort of a pat on the head and a ‘professor Snape is on our side, Harry’ type of conversation.”

Severus hummed in agreement. “Now we’ll just have to deal with his wonderful brand of disappointment when he inevitably finds out we’ve told the whole order, and the children.”

Hermione smirked, “Oh yes, however will I live with.”

She was interrupted by the floo flaring, and the couple frowned in unison before turning to see who was coming through. Aurora wouldn’t have been expected for quite some time yet, and there would only be a limited number of people from the meeting who would have felt the need to come to them
after everything that occurred.

It was a great shock, then, to find it wasn’t one of the children, or even an order member that come through, but one Augusta Longbottom.

Severus stood as the woman cleaned her robes, and he straightened his frock coat in preparation for whatever she had to say.

It was Hermione that spoke first. “Mrs Longbottom, to what do we owe this intrusion?”

Augusta paused her cleaning, turning to Hermione. “Intrusion?”

“Yes,” Hermione replied calmly. “Seeing as how you did not request and invitation, nor did we extend one, your coming through our floo is precisely that: an intrusion.”

“Well,” Augusta said, furiously brushing off her robes before straightening up and clutching her hand bag. “Forgive me my rudeness. I suppose what I had of mind to talk about is what led me to coming here in such a manner. May I sit?” She asked, and Hermione indicated the arm chair across from them.

“Tea?” She offered their unexpected guest, and at Augusta’s shake of the head, she sat back down again. Severus joined her, sitting slowly, watching the woman across from them, seeing what she had to say.

When a beat of time had passed with the lady saying nothing, he filled the silence. “Has Aurora done something to displease you?”

“No,” Augusta replied. “Quite the opposite, actually. She has proved to be a kind, considerate young lady, one that my grandson has found himself quite attached to. Therefore, as they have entered this courtship, with my blessing and presumably yours, I have come to discuss the arrangement that they have found themselves in.”

Severus frowned. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Augusta arched her brow. “Their eventual marriage.” She said as if he were a child.

If not for his years of practice reining in his visceral reactions, Severus would have laughed in the face of the woman in the vulture hat.

“Mrs Longbottom,” Hermione said carefully, and Severus darted his eyes to see his wife chew her lip a moment before straightening her posture. “I…."

“You did allow their courtship, did you not?” Augusta asked, looking between the two of them. “It was my understanding from Neville that he was to approach Aurora’s father for permission.”

“Permission to court her, yes,” Hermione said. “But in the modern way of thinking, one that doesn’t have to end in their union.”

Augusta frowned. “Such things may be suitable for a family like the Weasleys where there many offspring to carry on a name, but the Longbottoms are not as abundant. Neville has been deeply infatuated with your daughter since they had met, and since he has never mentioned an intention to court another, it is likely that he sees this the way I do: merely a way to know one another before their wedding. Now, I know Aurora has a couple years left in school-”

“Stop.” Severus said forcefully, bringing the woman up short. “Augusta, I have the utmost respect
for you and your family, your grandson being an exception.”

“Then why-”

He held up a hand, and she stopped.

“My daughter, for reasons I cannot begin to fathom, felt your grandson worthy of her time. As such, she was allowed to see if he was worthy to spend her life with. She may find your grandson lacking, she may even find the next suitor, or dozen suitors after he unsuitable, but she may court who she wishes for as long as she wishes, so long as they come to us first.”

“Then you are doing your daughter harm,” Augusta snapped. “Allowing her to sully her reputation, to make her name be associated with those one may find in-”

“Finish that sentence, and you will have that vulture on your head pecking out your eyes before you take your next breath.” Hermione threatened, standing swiftly and pointing her wand at Augusta before the witch would have had time to blink. “You dare come into our home, demand our daughter marry your grandson because of a ridiculous outdated notion, and then smear her when you’re provided with an answer you don’t like.” She took a breath to calm herself but did not lower her wand. “Our reasons are our own, and we do not need to share them with you. But Aurora has so little free will in her life because of so many outside factors, and we will not take more of that away because you’re worried that, should she not marry Neville, your family line dies out. It’s not a concern of ours, nor will it ever be. So, if that is all you came here to discuss, then I suggest you return home.”

Augusta blinked, then slowly began to shake her head. “You will find your daughter quite heartbroken, then, if this is the road you wish to take.”

“She’ll understand.” Hermione said, and after a moment of the two witches seeing which would blink first, Augusta turned and left through the floo. Severus quickly warded it, baring anyone from entering unless they seek permission.

Hermione’s shoulders slumped. “Aurora’s going to hate me.”

“No, she won’t,” He said, standing and wrapping his arms around his wife from behind. He kissed her temple, then placed his lips by her ear. “If Augusta has enough sway over Longbottom that he will end the relationship over her demands, then Aurora will know he was never worthy of her.”

“And if she had wanted this? If she was thinking of a future with Neville?” Hermione asked.

“Ha!” Severus said, stepping away from her Hermione to fall ungracefully to the sofa behind him. “Aurora hasn’t even decided on a career post-Hogwarts, and you think she knows who she wishes to spend the rest of her life with? She is not you, nor I, Hermione. She doesn’t have her future mapped out as we did. We may have taken the modern route, but we also never wanted anyone but one another.”

“Well,” Hermione said with a tilt of her head as she sat down.

“Lily nor Weasley count.” He countered, and she gave a hum of agreement. “There are too many things for us to concern ourselves with, for her to concern herself with, without having to factor in romance. And even if we could, what neither of us thought to tell the self-important Augusta Longbottom was that Aurora is technically already betrothed to Draco. And Merlin knows if that actually ever came to pass, the pair of them would hardly be loyal to one another in that way.”

Hermione conceded to that as well, and the two sat in quiet leaning on one another. “Can you
“I believe she was actually going to call our daughter a whore?”

“I believe she was going to say she was comparable to one someone may find in Knockturn Alley.”

“Technicalities, it’s still calling her a whore.”

“Yes, well, I’m sure if you were to ask Minerva, we’d find out Augusta Longbottom is hardly one to talk.”

January 6th, 1997

Aurora had mixed feelings about her choice of meeting. As she sat in front of the fire in the common room, watching the flames dance, she tried not to think of the last time she’d been down there past midnight. Tried not to think about the arms that had wrapped around her, of banter that punctuated kisses, of the way things began and ended on the very sofa she was sitting on.

In some ways, it spoke of her wanting to wipe away everything sacred that had been her and Fred’s, but the truth of the matter was, she wasn’t sure if that’s what she wanted.

Fred’s words from Christmas eve lingered in her mind and were involuntarily recalled more often than she’d have liked. When her parents hosted an order meeting, the first in which she and her friends were to be a part of, worried what it would be like to face Fred without Neville. It’d been surprisingly easy, but then, Fred hadn’t bothered her. She’d caught him stealing glances, noted that he lingered about the mantel to look at photos of she and Leo, a slight smile on his face, but he never said a word to her. When he left, he merely gave her an acknowledging nod before following George. She wanted to talk to him but didn’t know what to say. It had been easy to carry on after his confession with everyone around, but it was much less so when it came to the prospect of a face to face meet up.

She heard Neville creep down the stairs, and she turned to watch him make his way around to sit next to her.

Even in the dim light provided by the fire she could see he was blushing. “I’m glad this is considered appropriate attire.” He said, gesturing to his jams.

She kept her laugh to herself, her smile twisting for a moment before she remembered what it was like to sit there with another bloke in her jimjams.

“Well considering the hour, if you’d stayed in your shirt and trousers, I think the others would have been suspicious.” She said, keeping her tone light. “I know you’ve said you wanted to talk alone, and I know this is a very unorthodox way of going about it.”

“It’s the best we’re probably going to get, though.” He conceded.

The crackle of the fire filled the quiet.

“Neville,” Aurora said, twisting her fingers. “I, umm…. I don’t know where to start.”
“It’s my gram, isn’t it?” He said, and she nodded. He sighed heavily, throwing his head back. “I may have let slip how I, umm, well how I felt about you.” He said, his voice cracking and pitching, forcing him to clear his throat. “She waited until I was in the middle of a game of gob stones before she marched through the floo to your place. I gotta say, I’ve been scared to see you since. Right bloody thankful I don’t have your Dad anymore, but I have to say, looking your mum in the eye was... well...”

“They told me.” She said, only feeling a little bit better about the situation.

Neville nodded resignedly. “So, where do we go from here, then?”

“I suppose that depends on you,” She said, causing Neville to look at her in confusion.

It was something she had already thought very long and hard on.

She loved Fred still, she could admit that to herself. But the circumstances that caused their split hadn’t changed. And they were good reasons, and while she could appreciate his being honest with her, she also had to be honest with herself.

And that was that she was also starting to fall for Neville.

There was a chance that none of them would see the end of the war. There was a chance that she could love both of them, and neither of them were the one for her. But after her parents told her about Mrs Longbottom’s visit, and told her what to expect, she decided to let it be Neville’s choice. If he wanted to adhere to his grandmother’s wishes, she would understand that. But if he wanted to rebel, she was still willing to see where this could go.

“You-you mean you don’t want to break up?” He asked, sounding surprised and hopeful.

She smirked. “No,” She said, shaking her head. “Not if you don’t-oof!”

Neville had launched himself at her, snogging her gratefully, but also inadvertently pushing her backward on to the sofa. Aurora managed to keep up with him, but still had to wonder if maybe he realized what he was doing.

“Nev,” She said on a breath, but he smothered her lips once more. “Nev!” She tried again when he parted for air and couldn’t help but smirk at his kiss drunk face.

“Yeah?” he managed, and then seemed to realize where he was. “Sorry!” He said, attempting to scramble away before Aurora’s hands held him there. “Y-you’re sure?” He asked.

“For a few minutes.” She said, pulling his head down to kiss him once more.

February 14th, 1997

___________________I___________________

“Here,” Jane said as they headed down to potions together.
Leo frowned down at the pink piece of parchment, then looked up to her. “What is it?” He asked.

“It’s a Valentine!” She said with a smile, her blonde curls bouncing as she shook her head with a giggle. “You’ve never had a Valentine before?”

“Umm,” Leo said, blinking rapidly as he took the parchment. “No, I don’t think I have.”

“Brilliant! I get to be the first.” She said with a tilt of her chin, a pleased smile on her face.

Leo suddenly realized that Jane would be the sort of girl that one would consider pretty. In fact, as he glanced around him, he noted a couple of jealous boys glaring at him before looking away once they realized they’d been caught.

“Huh,” Leo said to himself, looking down at the pink parchment once more. It was heart shaped, and Jane’s hand was elegant, beautiful.

Leo,

Happy Valentine’s day to my best friend in all of Hogwarts.

-Jane.

There was a little heart darting her Is. She didn’t normally do that.

“I didn’t make you one,” He confessed, guiltily.

“That’s okay,” Jane assured, giving his arm a squeeze. She was blushing a bit, and seemed sort of shy about it, so he gave her a bit of a grin.

Jane grinned back, and then looped her arm around Leo’s.

Instantly, he panicked. He darted his head around, looking to ensure that there were no Slytherins nearby. But it wasn’t just Slytherins he had to worry about. Those loyal to the evil Snake Lord could be in any house.

Well then, you’re just out of luck anyway, you numpty, Leo scolded himself internally as he and Jane entered the classroom.

His father watched him walk in, eyes zeroed in first to the way Jane’s arm as looped through his, then to the pink parchment in his hand. And if that wasn’t bad enough, his father smirked. Smirked! With a raised eyebrow, and a turn of the lips so subtle, no one who didn’t know him wouldn’t have seen it, but it was there.

Leo wondered if this meant he was about to endure the good-natured ribbing he’d often overheard other children complain about when it came to their parents. Was he suddenly going to be asked if Jane was his girlfriend? Merlin, he bloody well hoped not.

February 15th, 1997
She knew Ginny was still watching her. Still watching Neville. Still eying up the gap between them currently filled by an oblivious Ron stuffing his face. She knew from the moment she had walked into the Great Hall at breakfast, and then tensed and froze upon seeing Neville, who blushed and couldn’t look at her, that Ginny would be monitoring her every move. Really, her father should have just asked Ginny to be his spy for him, because despite Aurora knowing Ginny was going to be watching her and Neville all day, it wasn’t until now, at dinner, that she made it obvious.

“Where’s Lavender?” Aurora asked Ron, hoping to divert his sister’s attention.

“She’s not feelin’ good.” He said around a mouth full of Shepard’s pie, promptly putting Aurora off her meal. “Lady stuff, I think.”

“You didn’t knock her up, did you?” Ginny asked.

Neville fumbled with his fork, causing it to clatter loudly against his plate, and earning stares from many at the Gryffindor table.

“No, S’son potion.” Ron said and Aurora curled her lip.

He glanced at her, did a double take, and swallowed. “Look like your mum when ya do that.” He said sheepishly, glancing behind her at the head table, likely to where her parents were sitting.

“Good,” Was all she said to that.

“You know the potion doesn’t always work, right?” Ginny asked with a wicked smirk, watching the color drain from Ron’s face.

“Does she get it from the hospital wing?” Aurora asked.

Ron seemed to think on it. “No? I dunno?” He asked, beginning to hyperventilate a little. “Does it make a difference?”

“Snape brews for the hospital wing.” Harry said, shrugging. “I’ve been in there enough times to see him deliver a few batches of something.”

Without another word, Ron promptly abandoned his meal and nearly ran out the Great Hall, likely to find Lavender.

Aurora made no move to fill the space now left between her and Neville, and he didn’t either.

Ginny noticed.

“I take it you are going to want to grab Luna and go for a nice, long stroll after dinner?” Aurora asked her without really looking at her.

“Why wait?” Ginny asked. “You’re not eating, I’m pretty sure Luna’s already had her two puddings, so let’s go.” She was already off the bench, turning to give Luna a tug.

Aurora sighed, groaning a little, knowing full well she didn’t actually need to tell Ginny anything, but knowing she was going to anyway. She didn’t look at Neville when she got up, not really. Just a quick glance to see he was still essentially pretending she wasn’t there, finding either his food or his book fascinating. There was a murmured “bye” as she passed which she returned, but her feet were taking her away so quickly, she was pretty sure he didn’t hear her.

Once outside the Great Hall, Ginny tucked her arm into Aurora’s, the other already firmly placed in
Luna’s, and led the way.

Up, up, up they went until Aurora realized they were heading to the seventh floor. And since it was early enough in the evening, no one would question their ascent. Ginny only parted from Luna and Aurora to ask the room for what she wanted, and when the door appeared, she opened it and waved the girls inside.

“Did you ask for a common room?” Luna asked as they stepped inside, finding a small room with three simple though comfy looking chairs near a lit fireplace. It reminded Aurora more of the sleepover room that was often conjured for the lot of them, but she also supposed without the cots, it would look a bit different.

“I asked for a place where we could have a chat, just us girls. So, Rory can spill what is going on with her and Neville because you two are acting like the worst thing in the world has happened.” Ginny grabbed Aurora by the shoulders and steered her toward a chair, then turning her and pushing her into it.

“What did happen?” Luna asked. “I’ve seen better relations between Wrackspurts and moon frogs.”

Aurora’s brows drew together for just a moment before she could control her reaction to Luna’s statement. She shook her head a little, choosing to focus on the floor rather than the girls sitting in the chairs across from her.

“You know we’re just going to start guessing soon, right?” Ginny said. “I mean, if you’re going to stay quiet, forlorn, I’m only going to assume-”

“I slept with Neville,” Aurora came out and said it, and when the girls remained really quiet, she peeked up, a bit surprised by their surprise.

“That's good,” Ginny encouraged, quickly pulling herself out of her shock. When Aurora gave a tiny shrug, Ginny frowned. “That's bad?”

“It shouldn't have been.” Aurora confessed. “It should have been good. Should have been… should have been nice. He was nice. He was…”

The Gryffindor common room had been a bit overrun with couples, and wanting to be away from everything, she and Neville stole away from the lot of them. The corridors were being heavily patrolled, more so than usual, and on a whim, they went up to the seventh floor. The room of requirement had been occupied, or refused to appear, but she would have guessed the former. But Aurora had known about a small, unused chamber that was probably at one point a guest chamber. They went inside, vanishing the dust on the old, decrepit bed that didn’t have sheets, and locked the door. It wasn’t her intention for things to go as far as they did when she went in there, and she’d known for certain it hadn’t been Neville’s. But snogging had been getting progressively more physical, especially after that night in January.

Clothes came off, and things had gotten heated.

“He did everything right it's just…. It didn’t feel right.”

“Is it because you didn’t feel the connection?” Luna asked.

“That’s a bit insulting to Neville.” Ginny smirked, chuckling a little.

That part hadn’t even occurred to her, which only made her gut twist with nausea.

“That only happens when you’re married.” Ginny said, waving it off.

“Oh no,” Luna said, “The marriage bonds are a spell that the couple casts with their words and intents. The bond within a couple ignites when they’ve engaged in intercourse, it’s actually what determined a marriage long before purity and blood lines began to become a factor. That’s why there used to be so many rituals that involved engaging one another intimately, so we could find our more perfect mate.”

“Well,” Ginny said, “That is… odd. So, what happens in arranged marriages?”

“A bond may form eventually, as being around one another can certainly lead to a connection, but often they don’t exist.”

“That’s actually quite sad.” Aurora frowned. “Imagine going through your whole life with someone who was wasn’t, for lack of better word, your soul mate.”

“You can have a connection with more than one person.” Luna said. “I imagine that’s what has had poor Professor Lupin so miserable. I saw him briefly when I was there for Christmas eve. He seemed drawn in two different directions.”

“So, wait, you can form a bond with someone you were forced to marry over time, and still have a bond with, saw, the one nighter after a quidditch match that you haven’t seen in twenty years?”

“If the one-nighter had magic very much aligned with yours, then yes.”

“So, it’s just a magic factor?” Aurora asked. “As in, your magical cores are somehow… compatible?”

“I think it has something to do with your sense of self as well,” Luna said thoughtfully. “My mother explained it to me once, but I think I was too young to really understand. It’s not a soul mate in the fairy tale sense, those stories are just what happened after we all decided other factors were more important. It certainly doesn’t mean you love them less, and it’s not as though everything changes. It’s supposed to be very subtle.”

“How mum always knows dad’s home long before he even makes it to the house,” Ginny said thoughtfully, then shook her head. “But we were talking about Rory, and Neville, and how they can’t seem to look at one another.”

“Oh, that. Was hoping you would get sidetracked.” Aurora said, pinching the bridge of her nose as a swell of embarrassment rose within her. ‘I knew the first time wasn’t going to be very good. Or last long. That’s not what made it awful. It was the second time.’

“I’m surprised you even had a second time.” Ginny cringed, shifting about in her chair uncomfortably.

Aurora shrugged. “I used a healing spell afterward.”

“Why didn’t I think of that.” Ginny grumbled, and Luna merely smiled. “So, what was so awful about the second time?”

Aurora rubbed her face, then kept her hands covering her eyes as though that would somehow allow her not to recall the memory. It was there, though, just behind her eyes. The endearing way he looked at her, the tender way he brushed at her cheek, her hair. How it had actually been really nice
“He said he loves me. And I didn't say it back. Because at the time I didn't think it was something he meant to say as loud as he did.” She swallowed, moving her hands away from her face but looking to the side of the room which was quickly becoming blurry. “And my stellar response was ‘we should head back before someone spots us during rounds.’” She clenched her jaw, forcing herself to keep herself together. Yes, she could have slipped into occlumency, but the truth was, she had been occluding most of the day and to do so any longer would give her a headache. “And that might have been forgivable, because it’s not like we were that well-hidden, all things considered. But then we got back to common room, and he kissed me goodnight, and he… he said it again. And I … ran up to the dorms.”

“Oh, Rory,” Ginny stood from her chair and climbed into Aurora’s Luna doing the same, the room accommodating them but slowly transfiguring it into a small sofa. Two sets of arms wrapped around Aurora, and she placed a hand on each set to let them know it was appreciated. “Is it…” Ginny trailed off.

“Is it what?” Aurora asked.

“Is it because you love someone else?” She asked. “Like, someone with red hair and freckles?”

“And a penchant for mischief?” Aurora asked, sighing. “Yes and no.”

“So why did you sleep with Neville if you still have feelings for Fred?” Ginny asked.

“Because I also have feelings for Neville. And I am falling for him, I am. But I’m not there. And I don’t want to say the words for the sake of saying them. I want to mean them.”

“I think that’s a good thing.” Luna said. “It shows you really care.”

“And I do. I mean, I could say ‘I love you’ to him and mean it in a friendship sort of way. I love the two of you. I love Harry. I love Draco, but that’s entirely different as well.”

“It also doesn’t help that Neville’s had a crush on you since forever.” Ginny said.

“No, it really doesn’t.” Aurora laughed mirthlessly.

“It’s quite a shame you and Ginny don’t like girls,” Luna said thoughtfully. “The pair of you would suit quite well.”

“Who said I don’t like girls?” Ginny said mischievously, and Aurora laughed honestly that time.

“I would wager the really manly men you’ve paired yourself off with. And I do mean men, even Krum was considered an adult when he took you to the ball.”

“Bloody hell it’s a shame that didn’t work out. The nose one him….” Ginny sighed as she trailed off.

“I don’t even want to know. Considering you’re dating a bloke who is essentially my uncle, I truly don’t want to know.”

“Not that I have anything to compare it to. Oliver is my first, after all. But I still have to wonder.”

“Professor Snape’s nose is rather large.” Luna said thoughtfully.

“That’s my father!” Aurora gaped at Luna who smirked back. Aurora then shook her head, leaning a little toward her blonde friend to rest her head against hers. “At least I know you’re more likely to
wonder about my mother than him.”

“Oh no, I don’t wonder about Hermione. She really isn’t my type.”

“Who is your type?” Ginny asked.

Luna merely smiled, the question remaining unanswered.

Chapter End Notes

I'll try to get another one out in the next two weeks. Until next time.
February 16th, 1997

“Where you two been?” Ron asked as Aurora and Ginny joined he and Harry in the Great Hall.

“Sleep over.” Ginny replied as they sat down, grabbing the breakfast served to the early risers. “Girl time with Luna.”

“Ah,” Harry said with a half-smile. “Someone may or may not have been wondering where you ran off to. Or when you were coming back.”

Aurora met Harry’s gaze but said nothing, she knew what he was implying. Instead, she grabbed some pancakes and sausage and when she swore she felt her mother’s eyes staring holes through her skull, fruit.

She was looking forward to the Quidditch practice scheduled for that morning. She had a desperate need to hit things, more to take out her frustrations with herself more than anything. Her time with the girls the evening before had been helpful, and it was oddly cathartic to have girl time, absolutely nothing felt better than whacking a bludger.

She ate, listening to the idle chatter between Harry and the Weasley siblings, noted her mother was in fact at the head table and probably had been staring at her. She rose with her team, heading out to the pitch where they could change and get their brooms.

Aurora and the girls parted ways from the boys, the readied, and then they were on the field.

With the cold winter air blowing on her face, Aurora escaped the problems that plagued her. They may not have been many, and they were entirely of her own making, but up there, listening to Harry as he runs drills, she didn’t have to dwell on them. There was only the biting wind against her face, her hair whipping out behind her, the pleasant coil of muscle as she hit the bludger.

And all too soon, it was over.

“Great job!” Harry said once they were on the ground. “We’re heading up against Slytherin next month, and where they have a match against Ravenclaw coming up, we’ll get to see where we need to adjust. “Anyway, let’s get on with our day.” He said, and Aurora was about to head to the locker room with the rest of them when she noticed Neville slowly coming toward them.

A part of her wanted to run, pass the others, and lock herself inside the changing room. She wanted to hop her broom and fly up and above the castle, far out. But she also knew she was being utterly ridiculous and would need to face him eventually.

Ginny had paused after she realized Aurora wasn’t following, and with a glance at Neville, raised
both brows and tilted her head ever so slightly. Aurora shook her head, and Ginny nodded, turning and jogging to catch up with the rest.

Aurora half leaned against her broomstick, and then turned toward her boyfriend.

“Hi,” He said timidly.

“Hello,” She said with a twitch of her lips.

Neville shifted about, looking more to the ground than her.

“I’m sorry,” Aurora said, and Neville’s head whipped up, eyes wide.

“Yes-s-sorry?” He said. “So… So, you regret….”

“No, no, not… not exactly.” She frowned, trying to put her words together. “Though I understand if you do. It’s just… well, the way things had been going between us since January, it felt like the next step. It felt like a natural step, and I found that I was ready for it. I wanted it.”

“Me too,” Neville said a bit too eagerly, and Aurora sucked in her lips and bit down to prevent the knee-jerk laugh that desperately wanted to happen. Neville blushed, laughing quietly at himself. “Bit too quick, that was.”

“I don’t know,” Aurora teased. “Heard some blokes are much quicker than that.” She sobered, their conversation meant to be serious. “Neville, it’s not that I don’t care quite deeply for you.”

“Is it … is it someone else, then?” He asked timidly.

“No, it’s not like that.” She assured. “I just…”

“You need time to get there.” Neville nodded in understanding. “I’ve been half in lo-, I’ve liked you a lot for a long time, and I suppose I forgot for a moment that… that you didn’t. Like me. As much.”

“I can get there.” She said, smiling hopefully.

“I can wait.” Neville smiled. “I’m good at waiting.”

“Patience of a Hufflepuff.” Aurora smirked. She then looked her broom, shifting it a bit. “I’m a bit sweaty, but if you don’t mind that terribly, we can go for a ride.” Neville’s deep blush had her laughing hard enough that she doubled over. When she could breathe again, she clarified. “Around the pitch on my broom.”

He shifted about. “Not very good at flying.”

“You’re not the one who would be doing all the work.” She said.

Neville shook his head. “I shouldn’t.”

“All right,” Aurora conceded, “Then at least allow me to get cleaned up, and then, perhaps, we can go for a walk around the grounds or something?”

“Yeah,” Neville nodded, smile growing. “I’d like that.”

March 18th, 1997
She’d been dreading this day.

Walking down the transfiguration corridor, the only thing that Aurora could imagine making this work was walking into Professor McGonagall’s office and finding her parents sitting there with her. Thankfully, she knew her father was also conducting the career guidance meetings as well, so she was not about to be accosted by him. Her mother, on the other hand…

After she knocked and was permitted to enter, she breathed a sigh of relief to find only her head of house inside.

McGonagall chuckled, “You were worried your mother woulda weaseled her way in, weren’t ya?” She asked as a tea service popped up beside her.

“Yes,” Aurora confessed, taking a seat as her aunt poured, preparing her tea just so.

“I thought it might be nice to do this a bit informally, like I had your mum. Though she was already fairly set on a career path. It’s my understanding that you, currently, are not.”

“Yes,” Aurora said as she accepted her cup with thanks. “I’m afraid when it comes to life after Hogwarts I am woefully unprepared.”

“What have you considered?” Aunt Min asked, and Aurora snorted.

“Probably easier to say what I won’t be doing. I will not go into potions, Leo can have that. I will not go into Arithmancy, I simply don’t have the passion for it. I do not wish to be a shop girl, though I know of a pair of business men more than willing to hire me on, if I so desire. Sadly, it seems that’s the way the thestral’s flying, as it were. I’m not good enough to consider professional quidditch, and I have no desire to teach. I spent nearly my whole life in Hogwarts, I would really like not to spend the entirety of it here.” Aurora smiled in self depreciation. “Can’t bode well for me, can it? We’re in the middle of a war, and I can’t think of a future.”

Aunt Min pursed her lips. “I worked at the department of Magical Law Enforcement for two years after Hogwarts. It’s what I thought I wanted, what I was made to believe I wanted. I gave up everything for it.” She looked as if she was seeing something else for a moment.

“What did you do? You weren’t an unspeakable.”

“No,” Aunt Min replied. “No, that would be the department of mysteries. No, I was employed as someone there to sort of aid in understanding and reversing transfigurations gone wrong. I had been studying to earn my mastery in transfiguration while still at Hogwarts, and the work would be considered part of the learning experience. But I found I did not enjoy that as much as I thought I would. I returned to Hogwarts to be a teacher after that, for Professor Dumbledore had been promoted, and there was a vacancy to be filled. I could continue earning my mastery through independent study, and it helped me escape from something I was not enjoying.”

“And yet you want to suggest such a path to me?” Aurora asked, earning a scowl for her cheek.

“The point is, Rory, that you may have had something in mind, and was set on it, but you may find out it wasn’t for you after all. You’re right, we are in the middle of a war, and it’s likely going to be that you’ll be changed by it. Perhaps in a way that allows you to figure out where you want to be in life. Mr Potter wants to teach, but prior to his need to fill in the gap that the former Professor Umbridge created, he had pondered being an auror. I imagine that, prior to his association with Mr Potter, Mr Malfloy likely thought he would be following in his father’s footsteps, with involvement in
Gringotts, the ministry, and other areas. Now, one wonders what he wishes to do.”

“A lot of the same, but with an aim to change.” Aurora replied.

“Well, there you have it. Change, Aurora, happens. Now, I have looked over your marks to get an idea where you should be, and not where your family will want you. Anything to do with Herbology is out, much, I’m sure, to Mr Longbottom’s dismay.”

Aurora snorted, mouth twisting as she tried to withhold a laugh. Aunt Min wasn’t doing much better.

Clearing her throat, she continued. “You have high marks in Runes, Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions. Should you choose, you can join the aurory, or you could get into spell creation. You would do well in something academic, though I don’t believe research is where you would want to be. Studious and intelligent though you may be, I can’t say I can see you spending your life in research.”

“No.” Aurora said.

Aunt Min looked at her thoughtfully. “Had you ever considered healing? Spoke to Poppy?”

Aurora shook her head. “But I’m not sure I would be able to handle it.”

“Perhaps not. But it is one path, and one that may be needed during these times. However, the thought just occurred to me… Muggle relations. Proper muggle relations led by an intelligent witch who grew up with a foot in both worlds. And stays in both worlds. Whose parents lived and stayed in both worlds. After all this is done, the wizarding world will need to make changes. You’ll have an advantage, Aurora, in that you’re friends with the Harry Potter. Use it.”

“Maybe,” She said, looking down to her lap, trying not to argue.

Her aunt’s cool hand covering hers startled her into awareness. “I do hope you aren’t thinking of gearing your decision to a young man?”

“No,” Aurora replied with a smirk. “I have a lot of respect for my Aunt Cissy and for Mrs Weasley, but my life will not be placed on hold for a man. I may not know where it’s going, but I do know that it’s not to be a house wife.”

Aunt Min smiled. “Good. Now, I believe we’ve had enough academic discussion. I wish to speak with my niece as just that. How are things?”

And with a smile, Aurora finally, truly relaxed.

April 12th, 1997

—S—

He had a feeling something was going to go wrong today. He knew it from the moment Potter had brought Weasley to his office, yelling for entry into his private chambers because someone had poisoned the ginger numpty.

It was conveniently timed, all things considered, and reeked of sabotage. It wasn’t a deadly poison
by any means, but it was enough to send the lad to the Hospital Wing where he would remain for the remainder of the weekend. It was also one of the last matches for the Gryffindor team for the school year.

He hadn’t paid too much attention to who the seconds on the Gryffindor team were, and it wasn’t like Aurora had mentioned it often, if ever.

The feeling that something wrong was about to happen only intensified as Mr McLaggen had sauntered onto the field. Minerva had already ranted enough about him for Severus know this would mean trouble. Apparently in the weeks coming up to this match, one that did have a fairly influence on the overall standings of the houses, the self-entitled dunderhead had felt it imperative to impart his supposed wisdom to Harry, as well as his observations.

It was a wonder Potter, Aurora, and the Weasley children hadn’t ended up in detention for hexing the idiot.

And he noted as the game started that McLaggen was almost trying to insert himself into the role of Captain. He was shouting, it seemed, from where he was supposed to be protecting the rings. He wasn’t doing a good job, not that Severus was complaining. It was his house they were up against, after all, and he was more than pleased to see that the points were starting to favor him.

“Honest opinion Professor Snape,” George Weasley asked without tearing his eyes away from the field. “Is Ickle Ronniekins going to be missed?”

The twins had accompanied their mother through the floo to see their younger brother, and when the coherent Ron asked someone to watch the match for him, they were more than eager to join the teachers in the stadium. Though what had surprised Severus the most was that, instead of sitting on a bench of their own, or maybe even sneaking in to sit with their former alumni, the twins sat between he and Minerva.

“From what I have witnessed, unless McLaggen is below average, he will not be.” Severus had replied and watched proudly as his daughter whacked away a bludger one of his more brutish Slytherins had aimed at Miss Robins.

The Mr Weasley beside him balled his fists before nearly folding his hands, his mouth barely restraining a smile. Severus watched this particular twin out of the corner of his eye, and while Fred did watch the match, his eyes flitted frequently to a particular player.

“Aurora has managed to earn herself a bit of a reputation.” He said, the crowd taking the opportunity to cheer and jeer as Ginevra managed to score. “She’s considered a bit more terrifying to encounter in the air than you were. You and George may have had a powerful hit, but what Aurora might lack physically, she makes up for with aim. Not mention the scowl she gets when she plays.”

He watched as Fred smirked. “I can see that.” He noted. “It must have shocked a bit of the other teams. Rory appears tiny in stature, and bludgers aren’t easy it hit.”

“I was asked by my Slytherin’s if she uses a spell. I never did have to answer, Draco was more than willing to divulge tales of the frequency and strength in which Aurora can knock him off his feet.”

The crowd roared, and Longbottom could be heard well over the rest. Severus turned toward where the Gryffindors were and sneered. Aurora had stopped a bludger from going toward Potter, hardly anything worth cheering her name for. Severus shook his head, trying to focus on the match once more.
“Ah, good ol’ Nevvie, cheering her on.” Fred said, and Severus glanced to the young man, noting the tightness in his smile.

“Every game,” Hermione said from the other side of Severus. “He roots for her like she’s the one to win it.” She smiled sincerely.

“And you believe that a good thing?” Severus asked, and Hermione did a double take in his direction.

“You don’t?” She asked.

“No.” He said bluntly.

“But she’s your daughter!” Hermione protested.

“She plays beater, Hermione.” George said, “She’s not supposed to be cheered for hitting the bludger.”

“It’s what she’s supposed to do.” Fred added.

“A cheer like Neville’s would only be appropriate for something spectacular.”

“Like hitting a quaffle into the ring with a bludger.”

“Or the snitch into the hand of the seeker.”

“Nothing likely to ever happen.” Fred concluded.

Hermione’s jaw tightened, and Severus had to control himself before he smirked affectionately at his wife and have it possibly witnessed by a student. She was about to saw something when she frowned.

Severus turned back to the match, eyes first falling to Aurora. She was on her broom, her scowl a full-on sneer as she faced the rings. Severus darted his eyes toward it and was on his feet in an instant. He could see what was about to happen before it even happened.

McLaggen had somehow taken the beater bat from the younger beater and had just hit the bludger as Severus looked toward him.

And the bludger was heading right for the pair of seekers instead of away.

Draco had moved just under Potter in an attempt to out-maneuver, and it may have saved him the fate his competition now had.

The bludger made contact with Potter’s head, and the boy was out cold in an instant.

Draco must have seen him falling past, because he instantly stopped his pursuit of the snitch and swooped to get his boyfriend. Severus noted Aurora flying up to get Potter’s broom before it took off beyond the pitch and went the way of his first broom. Ginevra dropped the quaffle in her hands and moved for the snitch as Draco flew toward the ground.

“I’m going to contact Sirius,” Hermione said, starting to take off before Hooch had even officially called the end of the game. With the youngest Weasley male in the hospital wing, Poppy wouldn’t be at the pitch. Normally, if that were the case, it would fall to Severus to tend to the injured. But he couldn’t do that, not for Potter, not while the whole school watched. He grit his teeth, trying to summon his occlumency to wrap around himself before his worry for the boy and his frustrations
showed.

“I think you’re good, sir.” George said quietly, and when Severus glanced at him, he gestured down to the field.

Aurora was casting a spell over Potter who was now on a stretcher. She was looking to Draco, and the two seemed to be determining something before the moved their wands in unison and slowly made their way off the field, Potter floating between them.

“Bright side is, your house won.” George added with a grin.

“For a minute there, I thought Rory was going to go beat McLaggen.” Fred mused. “Woulda liked to see that.”

“As would I, Mr Weasley,” Severus sighed. “But alas, we can’t always have what we please, and I’m afraid Aurora has just enough restraint in her that it wouldn’t be as enjoyable as we think it would be. If you’ll excuse me.” He said, turning and leaving the pair to see if he could help away from the prying eyes of the students.

April 25th, 1997

The owl landed in front of Harry, and he frowned as he read it over. He then handed it to Ron who paled as he read it over, then handed the parchment to Ginny.

“Might as well read it over her shoulder, Rory,” He said. “S’addressed to all of us.”

Ginny shifted closer to her on the bench, and she leaned in to read the notice.

_Aurora, Potter, and the Weasleys,

You, Draco, and Leonidas are to make your way down to my office for seven o’clock. No one else. Do not arrive en masse._

1. _Snape._

“What do you think he wants with us?” Harry asked his plate.

“Must be to do with … you know.” Ginny said.

“Has to be,” Aurora agreed. “What other reason could he have for us, us specifically, to go down
“Unless it’s a really overdue detention we never got.” Ron said thoughtfully. “I mean… we did sort of gang up on McLaggen.”

Harry snickered. “Bats out his nose, puking up slugs, toe nails growing out his shoes….”

“His hair still hasn’t started to grow back in,” Ginny chuckled.

“Yes, well, we five might have gotten retribution, but Leo had nothing to do with it,” Aurora said, finding her brother at the end of the table, reading a letter, occasionally talking over his shoulder to a little blonde at the Hufflepuff table.

“Definitely to do with the other thing, then.” Harry said with a sigh.

“Suppose we’ll know tonight.” Ron grumbled, and Aurora simply nodded in agreement.

———S———

He was pleased that they listened to instruction. Leo arrived on his own shortly after dinner. Draco was next, on his own, a half hour before they were meant to be there. Aurora came next, followed swiftly by Miss Weasley. Potter and Mr Weasley arrived together, appearing morose until they had the door shut behind them. With the lot of them assembled, it was clear that they had been wondering all day what was possibly going to be asked of them.

Severus looked each of them over and felt a pang of longing in his chest. For the times when Potter and Weasley hated him, because it meant they were still young. For the time when Draco had walked around the castle an arrogant Malfoy heir, for the realities of the world had yet to set in. He wished for the early days when it seemed Aurora and Ginevra were just beginning their friendship, and that Leonidas had yet to step into a world where he had to hide more of who he was than he ever did at muggle school.

They’d grown up and grown weary, cautious. He’d have said battle worn, but it wasn’t quite that. They had simply grown up too fast, thrust into a war they didn’t want to be a part of, either by birth or association.

His eyes scanned over them once more.

“Five out of six of you have already gotten a taste for battle, and the real consequences such a venture would wrought. It will only get worse. In a month, perhaps two, the events which we discussed in the cottage will come to pass. It will likely be tame compared to what’s to come. Which is why I had asked you all here.”

He turned to his desk, and picked up the six, small bottles with a golden liquid inside.

Draco’s, Aurora’s, and Leonida’s eyes all widened.

“Is that why I couldn’t go in the lab?” Leo asked, mesmerized by the potion.

“It is.” Severus replied.
“Why?” Aurora asked.

“Because your mother and I had a discussion, and I decided I wanted each of you to have a shot for a rainy day, as it were. For the other three of you who obviously have no idea what this is, it is Felix Felicius. Liquid luck. Each vial has enough potion to give you two hours of luck. Be careful, and don’t waste it on ridiculous things. This is in case of emergencies only, an insurance policy that each of you might make it through the war.”

“What about the rest of the Order?” Potter asked.

Severus began to hand them each a bottle, delaying answering.

“Some, and only some will have enough for a half hour, an hour tops. It takes six months to brew this potion, and what’s more, it never yields very much. But if you were to ask each and every member, they would rather the six of you have it.”

“So, this isn’t for us to use… when it happens. This is for later?” Ginevra said with a hint of uncertainty.

“When …it … happens, I fully suspect that all of you will either be in your respective common rooms. If you happen to not be, still do not use it, not unless you somehow manage to find yourself in a life-threatening situation,” He said this mostly to Potter who had the decency, at least, to look bashful about it.

“Dad,” Aurora said, and his eyes darted to her. She pursed her lips. “What about… what about Luna. And Neville?”

He shook his head. “They are not in the order.” He said.

“Neither are we,” Draco pointed out.

“Not officially, no. Because to be officially a member, one must be inducted by Dumbledore. But there were six of us who felt that perhaps secrets were not the way to go about this. That trust was the order of the day, and that the lot of you, those who were around us and this the most should not be kept in the dark. Miss Lovegood, and Mr Longbottom may be your friends, and they may have joined you at the ministry, but they know nothing of the order.”

“Neville does.” Potter pointed out. “It was either him or me as the chosen one.”

“That may be so, Mr Potter, but it was not Mr Longbottom. It was you. And Augusta Longbottom, while an avid supporter of the light and Albus Dumbledore, will not allow her only grandchild to risk life and limb in war if he need not.”

“Thank you, Uncle.” Draco said, gesturing with the vial. “We’ll use it wisely.”

“Not a word.” He said, and the six before him nodded before each of them left the same way they came, in pairs and apart, until Severus was left in his office alone.

He slumped against the desk, closing his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He heard Hermione coming through from their chambers and wondered why she hadn’t joined them earlier. Her arms slipped around his waist, and despite having an arm slung across it in a half fold, Hermione rested her head against his chest.

“You didn’t tell them that you and I gave our doses to Theo.” She said softly.
“No,” Severus said, shifting his arm to go around her. “But then, they don’t know it is Mr Nott who was forced to be a Death Eater and will need all the luck he can get when it comes time to face the Dark Lord.”

“Maybe so.” Hermione said, and he opened his eyes to meet her as she tilted her head up to look at him. She sighed, “And I suppose, one less thing for them to worry about, Rory and Leo. If they think we have a dose each, they won’t be as terrified when it happens.”

“Much as I hate to say this, I believe only Leonidas would be terrified. Aurora… Aurora has already faced Death Eaters, once from a distance, once face to face. I fear her fear will only make her that much more determined to be a part of it.” He then scowled. “She gets that from her mother.”

“You can’t pin all her rash bravery on me.”

“Says the Gryffindor.”

“Yes, says the Gryffindor who married a Slytherin brave enough to spy for a man he detested. I don’t recall being as steady and fearless when facing the lot of them as you were.”

He couldn’t argue that, so he didn’t. He simply embraced her tighter.

After a time, she hummed contentedly. “I’m going to miss this the most. This year has been an utter tease, being able to hold you every night.”

“I will confess I have felt spoiled. Like a man facing the gallows, I get one last taste of joy before certain death.”

“Well now you’re just being all doom and gloom.” Hermione chided.

“One of us has to be realistic.” He retorted, smirking when she playfully smacked his chest.

“Come on, I had the elves make us some tea. I’m not sure what it is, but it’s different. More like I remember from my student days.”

“The ones with Potter or the ones with me?” He asked as he allowed her to lead him into their chambers.

“The ones with you, of course. Awful as it sounds, I don’t remember nearly as much from my days with Harry.”

“Probably for the best,” He conceded, allowing himself to spend the evening with his wife.

One of the last he’d get before the world goes to pot.

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Chapter End Notes

I was pretty sure that this would only be 70 chapters long, but as I’m about to start 56, I’m beginning to wonder if that count was a bit off. It’s short, but I wanted to keep the events of the next chapter separate. Until then.
He knew he was not going to be facing anything pleasant when he walked up the lane to Malfoy Manor. Severus was not summoned often during the school year, unless it was a really important meeting, or the Dark Lord wanted an update from his spy about the mundane. And what’s more, he could see he was meant to come alone, Theo not having come to the gate when Severus made to leave.

The manor had fallen into disrepair, looking more and more worn and uncared for each time he visited since Narcissa abandoned it. There were no peacocks roaming the lawn, and it made Severus wonder if they’d been killed, or if they’d taken off. If there were still house elves about, they did not answer to the new master of the house. None opened the doors or greeted those who arrived. Severus let himself in and headed to the likeliest place in which he would be accepted.

He did indeed find the Dark Lord and those of the inner circle, a group which had grown substantially since the first war and seemed less refined, in the dining room. The snake was coiling around her master, scenting the air with her tongue as Severus moved to take his seat at the Dark Lord’s right hand. Bellatrix sneered from across the table, her dark, crazed eyes filled with malice.

“My Lord,” Severus inclined his head to the Dark Lord who smiled back in an oddly fond way.

“Severuss,” He hissed. “Welcome.” The Dark Lord then looked to the table, his brow wrinkling. “It’s been brought to my attention by your brothers and sisters that we may be putting too much faith in young Mr Nott. He has been able to do what is asked of him, thus far, but we cannot trust that Dumbledore will not corrupt him, warp his mind, make him spare him.”

“I see no reason why you should doubt Mr Nott’s loyalty to you, my Lord. He may have been reluctant in the beginning, but he seems to have thrown himself into his new station with great vigor.”

“I see no reason why you should doubt Mr Nott’s loyalty to you, my Lord. He may have been reluctant in the beginning, but he seems to have thrown himself into his new station with great vigor.”

“He has,” The Dark Lord conceded, “But none the less, we need to be sure. It was purposed, Severus, that we have a few witnesses. Not only to ensure Mr Nott’s loyalty, but to have back-up for you. What say you?”
Severus frowned, allowing himself to show him thinking it over. A rash decision in either way could not be a wise decision, and there were things to consider. Potter had said that Dumbledore continued the lessons pertaining to all of the memories and facts he collected of Tom Riddle, ensuring that the ‘know your enemy’ part of his convoluted plan finished in time.

“I believe that can be easily arranged,” Severus said, already mentally adjusting the plans they’d come up with for the big moment. “As you know, the Headmaster seems to disappear from the castle more than a Headmaster should, for long periods of time and for reasons I cannot decipher. I believe, if I have a way to alert those to bear witness that the Headmaster has left the castle unguarded, we could easily sneak a few inside without tipping our hand and having the aurors called on us. There are members of the Order roaming the halls, but all that’s needed there is to arrange it so those who tend to distract one another are paired off.”

“That is wonderful to hear.” Voldemort smiled, pointy teeth bared.

“And how do we know you won’t send for the aurors or the order once we arrive?” Bellatrix demanded before turning to the Dark Lord. “He cannot be trusted, my Lord. He can’t be trusted with this or anything else.”

“I believe there are ways inside the castle, dear Bella, that would ensure you or anyone else does not walk directly through the front gate. The shrieking shack, for instance, has a tunnel that leads beneath the Whomping willow. Simply stun the tree, and you can make a direct line across the ground to the castle.” Severus said in a bored tone.

Bellatrix pouted while Voldemort clapped with delight.

“So, it will be!” The Dark Lord exclaimed. “I will send the Carrows to you, as well as Yaxley.”

“My Lord!?” Bellatrix protested, but Voldemort held up his hand, silencing her.

“Your distrust in Severus has been noted, Bella, as has you desire to see his off spring killed. The children shall remain unharmed, Bella, and to ensure that I must keep you away.” There was a threat to his words, and Bellatrix was, for once, wise enough to keep her mouth shut. The Dark Lord returned his attention to Severus. “When next Dumbledore leaves the castle, touch your mark. I will send the others to you.”

Severus bowed his head, swallowing back the bile. “Thank you, my Lord.”

June 26th, 1997

He climbed the stairs to the Astronomy tower, the echoes of teenagers free from worry, from the pressure of exams, reaching his ears. His own children might be among them, though knowing Leo, he was more likely to be inside, tucked away in the library or his dorm. Hermione was with Minerva, sharing a cup of tea and grading exams, the knowledge that their time to do so would be falling short.

Severus made it to the top to find Dumbledore waiting for him, as he was supposed to be. The cursed hand on display, his haggard appearance all too visible. He didn’t look away from whatever he saw or watched over the rail, but Severus approached him none the less, waiting for the reason he’d been summoned.

“I will be taking Harry out this evening,” he began. “And when we return, we will do so here. And
then, you will kill me.”

Severus stiffened, though allowed a frown to come through.

“Potter, my-…. Potter?” He said.

“Yes,” Dumbledore said. He’ll need to believe you’re Tom’s completely. No one can know, Severus. The fact that your family does is nearly too great.”

“Nearly?” Severus said, barely containing the malice in his voice.

“I have said, from the beginning, that I would have preferred you having gone on alone.” Dumbledore said. “I still, to my very core, believe that you should have been by yourself in this. I had hope, however, when Aurora was born for I did not believe for a moment she was yours. Not once. Hermione had been spending so much time with Sirius that when that pretty girl was born, it seemed obvious. And Merlin knows I’ve tried to prevent you actually conceiving with Hermione once you were freed from Azkaban.”

Severus snorted. “I’m afraid errand boy tasks and ridicules amounts of work through my being here as a Professor would hardly-”

“I didn’t mean through you.” He said.

Severus stared at the old man, waiting for the death bed confession to finally come through.

When he didn’t say anything else, Severus said, “You know I would taste or smell a potion in Hermione’s breath or skin, so don’t try to insult me by trying to convince me a reason to actually go through with this is your poisoning my wife.”

“Poisoning is a strong term.” Dumbledore said.

“Is it? I believe giving anyone a substance, especially a potion, to them without their knowledge with the intent to cause harm is a poison.”

Dumbledore had the audacity to smile. “I suppose, in this, you are a better man than I.”

“I would counter I am a better man than you in many ways, but I will not.”

“How good of you.” Dumbledore said sarcastically. They were quiet a moment, Severus deciding to let Albus say his peace. “You will look after the school when I’m gone.”

“I will.” Severus said like a promise.

“I understand that you can’t keep them completely in check, but you will insure the Death Eaters entering will not harm the children?”

“They are under strict orders not to, not unless they get in the way.” Severus assured.

Dumbledore nodded, looking down and out at the grounds once more. He took a breath, and Severus noted the weary weight they seemed to carry. “A foolish fumble, putting that ring on. It only took seeing that faded symbol, and I was but a boy of twenty again. A hallow in my hand, and I forgot for just long enough that it had been tainted. Had I not allowed old greed and remorse to raise for that single moment, I would not be here, facing Death. But then, perhaps it’s where I was always meant to meet my end, and at the hand of a man I had wronged in many ways.

“I knew you had not wished to join the Death Eaters, not by the time they were calling you to arms. I
admit that I did not care. I needed someone in their ranks, and I thought you would work well for the job. I had wanted you to do it alone, so hoped Hermione would come to fall for one of her fellow Gryffindors when I separated you. I’d thought that, if I pointed out how you were growing darker, she would call of the engagement. And when you were sent to Azkaban, I truly believed she would confess to Aurora’s never being yours and leave. Alas, things would not fall into place as they should, and my suspicions of your daughter’s parentage what they were, I thought the truth would come out in time. To enrage you, to embitter you, to ensure you would do what was asked of you without hesitation, even if it meant betraying the light in the eyes of all, or even giving up your own life. But it didn’t work that way, so I thought a little push would work. Make you begin to wonder if there was perhaps something wrong with you when a second child was never brought into the world. Something to allow you to draw your own conclusions.”

Severus frowned at the old man, watching him as Albus hung his head in honest regret.

“We had a professor here before even you began school, and she fell pregnant. There is one thing I noticed near right away: she stopped drinking the herbal tea she’d preferred to the English Black right. When I asked, she said it wasn’t good for the baby. Hibiscus, while not a strong taste in anyway, was known to cause miscarriages, especially if consumed in any great amount. I had glimpsed Aurora in Hermione’s mind, but as she never knew Leonidas prior to her fall, I never knew a second child would come to be. But I admit to trying very hard, and succeeding, in delaying if not stopping it. Not to mention the added bonus of all those young witches who did not brew their potion properly, never needing to truly worry about being with child so long as they consumed their standard cups of tea.”

Severus’ whole body went cold as Dumbledore spoke. He had to occlude to keep from shoving the man off the tower right then and there. “And I assume you recently returned the tea to normal.”

“Yes.” Dumbledore said. “The house elves were always under my order to add the herb to the tea, all tea, brewed in Hogwarts. Now that my demise is imminent, I felt it wise to return what was to rights. And to tell you. Not only to give you all the motive one would need to kill me, but as a sort of death bed confession. I don’t wish to die with regret.”

Severus stared at the old man for a long while, even after he heard the faint creak of the door opening below, signaling Potter’s arrival. Severus took a step forward, keeping his voice low, but knowing Potter would likely hear it anyway. “And will you regret not telling the boy everything?” He asked. “Or do you plan to give him a death bed confessional as well?”

Dumbledore looked at him with tired eyes filled with condescension. “I know not what you speak of, Severus. Everything Harry needs to know, he does.”

Severus shook his head slightly, then turned away, heading to the stairs of the Astronomy tower. He paused as he and Potter met up with one another, and he heaved a heart heavy sigh as he looked at the boy. Potter looked a mix of betrayed, resigned, heartbroken, and disappointed. And then, in a flash, it was gone. He looked at Severus, placid, face blank of emotion, and the older wizard couldn’t help but smirk. The boy had learned. He had kept his emotions to himself and would now face a weakening headmaster who clearly had no intention of divulging the real truth.

The two wizards passed one another, and Severus headed directly from the tower to his chambers. As was planned, Hermione was in there, waiting. Pacing.

She paused when she spotted him, and alone in their room, away from prying eyes, before she summoned the order with her patronus, he allowed the emotions from the revelation Dumbledore brought come out.
“Severus,” She said carefully, slowly approaching him as though he were a wild animal. Her caution and concern quickly melted, replaced by a fierce, angry beast that would rival his own. “What did he say?” She asked quietly, before nearly shouting, “What did he do!”

“Every miscarriage, every failed conception, every time we asked ‘why us’, it was his fault,” He said before relaying the confession.

When he finished, he had expected tears, a Gryffindor demonstration of rage, for his need to remind her of their plans for the night.

Instead, Hermione had taken a deep breath, and calmly said, “You’re a better person than I, Severus Snape.”

“Because I didn’t push him off the tower?” He asked, frowning.

“No,” She shook her head. “Because I would have likely stunned the bastard, apparated him to the Dark Lord, and offered him as a gift. Then watched gleefully as Tom Riddle tortured him before killing him.” She sniffed, blinking the angry tears from her eyes. “Hibiscus in the bloody tea. No wonder I was pregnant two months after leaving the castle, and that was the one that stuck! I just… how? How could he really think that was somehow for the greater good? What is it about our lives that he so desperately wanted to meddle with it?”

“Because you were in mine.” He reminded her.

She sighed, shook her head. Taking a second-deep breath, Hermione squared her shoulders. “We have a task.”

“We do.” Severus conceded. He slowly unbuttoned the left cuff of his frock coat, then the sleeve beneath as Hermione closed her eyes and focused, sending her raven out to the order. It split off, flying off to ensure those who needed to be there would be.

“Dobby,” He said, and a moment later, he appeared. “Please ask Mr Theodore Nott to meet me in my office.”

“Yes, Master of Potions.” The small elf bowed before disappearing.

Severus sighed. “Potter will be there.” He warned his wife.

“Well, then. It’s probably for the best that he already knows how this is supposed to play out.”

The sky was overcast, which wasn’t really abnormal, but it felt more like an omen than normal. Before she and Neville disappeared from the common room, Harry had taken off for his final private meeting with Dumbledore. She knew what it meant. Ron and Ginny knew what it meant. So, Ron cuddled up with Lavender, Ginny went to see Luna, and Aurora coaxed Neville to their room on the seventh floor.

It wasn’t something they’d done often. If there was one thing she was grateful for, it’s that Neville wasn’t a terribly physical person, and he didn’t exactly pester her in any way. Ron practically humped Lavender’s leg every other day, and Harry and Draco had skipped out on enough lunches
here and there that she suspected they were up to something, but Neville was always happy to let her lead. To let her always initiate. And if there was one thing that having both your parents teach at the boarding school you attended did, it was limit how often or even how much you would want to sneak off and do things that one might say was against the rules.

But they were there, curled up on the old, dusty bed, him spooned against her, skin on skin, and she looking out the window.

Part of the plan was to keep those they cared about and not in the know out of the way. She and the others also knew it was meant to keep them out of the way, as none of the grownups would want them to be anywhere near the Death Eaters. Which was fine by her, Aurora wasn’t foolish enough to want to have a run in with them so soon.

Neville kissed her shoulder, and she flinched slightly as she was drawn from her thoughts. “Worried about your OWLs?” He asked.

“No,” She said, shaking her head slightly, “Not worried at all. Frankly it was relatively easy. Even Herbology, so don’t start on that.”

He chuckled. “Speaking of Herbology, I have another thing in the Greenhouse I’ve been wanting to show you.”

She stiffened. “Sounds nice, but maybe it should wait for tomorrow?”

“It’s another nocturnal one, and we both know we’ll be too busy starting to get things packed to get another chance.” Neville shifted away from her, and she twisted on the bed to see him pulling on his pants and trousers.

She smirked, barely containing a laugh at the sight of his bum while he bent over, but sobered when she realized he was serious. “Nev, we shouldn’t.”

He laughed. “We also shouldn’t be sneaking into an unused guest room to, you know… do stuff.”

“Well here, it’s less likely we’ll get caught.” She said, reaching down and picking up her clothes.

“Less likely, but still possible.” Neville said as she slipped on her underwear and denims. “And let me tell you, I have nightmares of it being your father catching me in here naked.” He said as she slipped on her bra. “Sometimes I’m not even with you.”

She chuckled. “Well, let’s just say that while he might be able to take points, I have a feeling he can’t take the high road. After all, my parents have been together since they were younger than we are now.” She said, reaching down to grab her sweater.

“That’s not an image I want either.” Neville said as Aurora pulled on her top. “I still don’t understand how ‘Mione could have fallen for Snape.”

Something about how he said it made her tense. It wasn’t the question, she knew that. In some ways, she couldn’t fathom the Hermione Granger she’d known ending up with someone like her father, but then she didn’t really know her. Even she could admit to being a different witch than she was in her first and second years.

“How could she not?” Aurora reasoned. “They were and are both incredibly intellectual.”

“Yeah, okay, I suppose.” Neville said, and Aurora turned to see something in his bashful smile that she couldn’t quite place. He fiddled with his cardigan before putting it on and buttoning it. “Anyway,
you should really see the thing I was doing. Come on.”

He was heading for the door. He already had his shoes on. Bloody hell, how did he get his socks and shoes on already? Scrambling to catch up, Aurora threw on her own, then plucked up her wand from the brown-turned-grey night table and chased after him.

“Nev,” She called. “Neville!” She persisted when he wouldn’t pause. “Would you wait?!”

“Why?” He asked over his shoulder. “We don’t want to be out past curfew, then we’ll really…..”

He slowed and paused, and Aurora heard it, too. Faint, somewhere else in the castle, but very obviously yelling.

“Something’s going on,” Neville said, and before she could stop him, he was hurrying ahead, unwittingly heading right in to the thick of possible danger.

———S———

All said, Severus couldn’t have been pleased with the set up.

Mr Nott had gone up to the Astronomy tower to await the return of Dumbledore and Potter, the Death Eaters were called and created the perfect amount of ruckus to raise the alarm and have the staff on alert. It was Filius who came running for him, a touch sooner than he had thought Minerva would put on her show, but it worked none the less. He stunned the small professor and headed upstairs, shaking his head to Minerva when she and Hermione had begun to enact their portion of the plot.

When he arrived, Potter was beneath the top off the tower, looking up, wand at the ready. He whipped it toward Severus as he came up, and he placed a finger on his lips to silence the boy. Potter relaxed, then mouthed, “Nott?”

Severus nodded, and noted the frown of concern as he glanced back up. When he made to pass Potter, to make his way up there, Potter stopped him.

“He disarmed Dumbledore.” He said so softly that if Severus hadn’t been attempting to listen, he wouldn’t have heard him. The information was… new. Disarmed? How could Albus allow such a thing. “He drank something.” Potter continued. “A potion.”

“Later,” Severus replied, leaving the boy in his position as he joined the others.

“Where you been, Snape?” Yaxley asked as he arrived.

“Dealing with some wayward staff and students. Hopefully they will stay precisely where they should be. Now… Nott, on with it.” He said, sounding bored.

Theo glared at him, his lips curling in disdain. He pointed his wand at Dumbledore, and with practice, said the words to an unforgiveable as the jet of green shot out toward Dumbledore.

The old wizard deflected it, eyes wide and stunned, looking to the young man with his wand still pointed toward him. The Death Eaters chuckled.

“Look at his hand.” Amycus snickered. “Mighta stopped it somehow, but he killed it.”
“Enough.” Dumbledore rasped out, and he stunned the Death Eaters and apparently Theo. “Severus…. But the old man didn’t get much more out before his breathing grew deep and ragged.

Severus slowly approached, studying the prone man before him. He realized that he was dying, whatever potion he had consumed in Potter’s presence was killing him faster, working with the curse in his hand to destroy him. Though, how much had that curse spread since the start of the term.

“Please?” Dumbledore wheezed, and Severus narrowed his eyes at him. Please? Please?! After all this time, all the things he was forced to do, through coercion or black mail, and now he gets a please? Politeness, a request, a beg for mercy after the old fool had done everything he could to attempt to ruin Severus’ life? He meddled with his relationship, his friendships, his marriage, and apparently even his family growth. What would he have done to Aurora or Leonidas if they were in Slytherin? If he was able to live longer? What he’d done to Potter! How he had no regard for the boy or his family. No regard for anyone as any more than pawns.

Severus drew his wand, and as he did, he felt that rage and hate build on both sides of his occlumency walls. He loathed this man. Loathed how he walked around as though he were to picture of pure goodness, all the while he had a past as a budding Dark Lord. And how was he not still one in his own way? He cared for no one and nothing but stopping Riddle and being cemented that much more firmly as the greatest wizard who ever lived.

“So Severus?” Dumbledore asked as he trained wand on the old goat, lip curling as he looked at the man he demanded spy for him. That he believed was willing to go along with whatever was asked for him for the sake of the cause. But he wouldn’t. And now, he wouldn’t even have to pretend.

“I was never yours.” Severus whispered to him, smirking wickedly at the terror and widening eyes of Dumbledore. “Avada Kedavera!” He said and was genuinely taken aback by how powerful that blast seemed. The railing of the Astronomy tower blew off as Albus Dumbledore’s body was sent careening over the ground below.

The spell placed on the Death Eaters broke, allowing the lot of them to laugh merrily as Severus peered carefully over the edge to see that a mass amount of students and teachers were now gathering around.

Pleasure was coursing through his veins equal to that of sex. There was a high buzzing through his head he hadn’t felt since sampling some elicit potions in his youth. He felt stronger, as though he could take on anyone who got in his way, the effects of the ultimate dark magic wrapping around him like his favorite robes.

He loved it.

He hated it.

He wanted more but feared losing himself.

“Let’s go,” Severus said coldly, turning away from the murder scene and beckoning the others to follow him as he made his way down the stairs. They did so without question, and Severus knew it was because of his display of dark magic. A blast as equal to that he’d seen the Dark Lord give. As powerful as the stories he heard when their Master faced Potter in the Graveyard.

He stocked down the stairs, and found his wife, Sirius, and Lupin, there waiting for him, as was planned. He focused on Hermione, how he longed to shove her up against the wall and ravish her.
To feel the delicious pleasure that was fading once more.

As was planned, Hermione looked between him and the Death Eaters, smirked a very believable, wicked smirk, and then parted from the Order to stand at his side.

Her hand slipped in his, and he regained a bit more of himself.

“Coward!” Potter yelled from the stairs, as was planned, and he returned just a bit more to himself. “You killed him! You killed Dumbledore!”

He would have thought they’d rehearsed it for the way that everyone fell into place so well.

Potter shot a hex off at him that zipped between his and Hermione’s head. They stepped apart, and the order pointed their wands at him as he turned a spelled Potter’s feet to the floor. As the Death Eaters turned to him, he warned, “Leave him. He’s the Dark Lord’s.”

“We should take him with us!” Alecto declared.

“If you think you’re taking him out of here!” Sirius said.

“Black is right,” Severus said.

“If you think we’re letting you out of here.” Lupin said, nearly sounding as though he meant the malice he put in his voice.

Severus scoffed, and Hermione had begun to lead the way out when Lupin fired a shot at him.

She stepped in front of him, in front of the green tinted spell.

Sirius clutched just below his ribs where his magic core was, and his knees began to buckle.

The spell hit Hermione and she dropped.

He knew this was the plan, he knew, but with the pleasant haze of the Unforgivable still lingering in his mind, he nearly lashed out against Lupin in a truly unforgivable way. He was distracted by the way that Sirius was sweating, seemingly in pain. Had someone hit him? Was a spell cast that he didn’t know about? He hit Lupin, the green tint of his spell causing him to drop much like Hermione did.

“Let’s move, now!” Severus said, scooping up Hermione, carrying her bridal style.

He moved through the corridor, knowing by now that Potter should have been able to release himself. Soon they would be followed by a shouting Boy-Who-Lived, calling him names and declaring him a bad guy for the majority of the school.

Movement on a staircase in the corner of his eye caught his attention, and Severus glanced to see Longbottom coming down to the last landing, and Aurora just behind him. Wide eyed, she reached out to Longbottom, gripping his shoulder and holding him back when the bugger looked ready to start a fight despite the confusion over who he’d be battling.

“You killed him!” Potter’s voice could be heard echoing down the corridor. “You murdered him! Come back here, you coward, and admit it.”

Severus kept going, marching out through the doors, heading out for the gates. They were nearing the front when the first hex went by.
“Go, I’ll be there shortly.” He commanded, and Mr Nott and the other Death Eaters nodded, taking off much more quickly toward the gate.

He set Hermione down, then turned, deflecting more well aimed hexes and curses as he closed in on Potter.

The tears on the young man’s face was real, and it was the final thing that pulled him from the lingering thrall of Dark Magic.

“Why did you say that to him?” Potter asked as Severus got into ear shot. “That you weren’t his?”

“Because I never was.” Severus replied. “I am Hermione’s, I am yours, and was your mother’s, I am for the cause, but I was never Albus Dumbledore’s man.”

Potter nodded, sniffling. “Better make it good.” He said.

Severus smirked, extended his wand, and knocked the boy back. He then scooped up Hermione and went for the gate, ignoring the sounds of a school in mourning and an uproar, before rejoining those he pretended to call brother, and apparating.

———H———

She inhaled deeply and coughed, her head fuzzy and disoriented. A hand on her back soothing her, a whispered voice calming and reassuring. Severus. His presence registered before anything else, followed by scent, then recognition of his voice, then Hermione’s vision cleared and she could see him. It took a her a few minutes to regain some semblance of breath, and when she was finally steady, she leaned against her husband, closing her eyes and relishing his heat.

“How are you?” She managed to ask before he could.

He didn’t answer right away, his hand still running up and down her back. She could tell he was trying to give her a proper answer, a real one, and not just brush it off.

“I feel in control of myself once more.” He said, “Though I think I nearly had Potter distrust me on the tower. I allowed too much of the anger and resentment I had toward Albus surface before I cast the spell, and I think the lingering effects of that much dark magic had me… changed, for a moment. It’s like a numbing agent to the soul, using an unforgivable. I couldn’t feel my soul breaking, though I’m sure it did just a little. I may have been helping end the old fool’s life, giving him an end with some dignity, but I relished it too much for it to have left me unscathed.

“And now?” Hermione asked.

“Now… now I am tired. Bone weary, and drained. But there is still a party going on in my honor, and my absence will be noted. It’s allowed briefly, I suppose, considering I am now a widower in the eyes of the Death Eaters. But that will not excuse me long.”

“Theo?”

“His consumption of the liquid luck proved well. The Dark Lord was more than pleased with the recount of what happened. It would appear that Dumbledore’s foolishness added to the rouse.”
“The children?”

“I did see Aurora and Longbottom coming down the stairs as we were leaving, but she prevented him from interfering. As was planned, I left Potter on the grounds, momentarily stunned. Everything went as it should.”

Hermione sighed, relief washing over her. But this was the easy part. Severus and she would have to go into hiding separately. He with the Death Eaters, she with the order. He couldn’t be seen with someone so soon after the love of his life died, and she was to be dead for the time being.

Turning her head, she took in a deep breath, breathing in his musk so she would have it buried in her brain and heart. As though the same thoughts were crossing his mind, Severus tipped back her head and kissed her tenderly.

“I need to return.” He said against her lips.

“I know,” She replied caressing his cheek.

“It won’t be as long as you think.” He promised.

“I know.” She sniffed. “Still, I don’t like the idea that we have to part, even for a little while.”

“Neither do I, but we must.” He gave her one last, deep kiss before standing and stepping away, apparating back to where he was.

Hermione sighed, looking around at where she was for the first time. Their cottage, somewhere she couldn’t stay. A dead woman could not be seen in her own house.

Taking a deep breath, Hermione closed her eyes, apparating to Grimmauld place.

**June 28th, 1997**

The funeral for the Headmaster was two days after he fell from the tower and took place early in the morning. For the most part, the school was unsure what really happened. Some thought it was suicide, others had heard Harry’s shouts and believed it murder. But then, Harry hadn’t said a word about the incident to anyone, choosing to stay sequestered with Draco in the room of requirement the day before.

Aurora had been with her brother, the two having to pretend to be grief stricken and uncertain as news of their mother and father was relayed to them by Professor McGonagall in front of Professor Flitwick. The two of them stayed in their parents’ quarters, had a brief visit from their mother as Uncle Sirius had arrived to help with the service, but aside from that had little contact with anyone.

And it was with this knowledge that Aurora walked with an overly tense Neville toward the Black Lake after the funeral was finished. He hadn’t looked at her, though he did take her hand and gave it a squeeze for a moment. He led them to the log near the lake where Aurora remembered having her first conversation with him. There he sat, gently pulling her down beside him.
She knew Ginny and Ron had explained what was going on to her and Luna while they were all tucked away, it was part of their plan. Adults be damned, Luna and Neville had stood with them and faced down Death Eaters at the ministry. They may not have been part of the order, but they were part of their group, and they needed to be in the know.

Aurora had expected this conversation to have dozens of questions, including but not limited to an explanation as to why they couldn’t know beforehand, and whether or not the night of the Tower Incident was to purposely keep him away. She watched Neville as he squared his shoulders, sitting straighter.

“I already wrote Gram and she agreed. You’re coming with us, we’ll put you up in a room, and—”

“Stop.” Aurora cut him off. “What are you on about?”

“Your mother, Hermione, is dead. And… and your Dad should be, but—”

“My mother isn’t dead, and my father shouldn’t be either.” Aurora said with all the patience she could muster.

“Aurora, you saw her body, you saw—”

“Stop!” She nearly shouted, needing to pause and collect herself. “She’s not dead, I saw her yesterday. She’s alive, it was a ruse. She’s going to be undercover.”

“Still, it’s not like you can go home.” Neville said.

(Of course, I can,” Aurora said. “Aside from not abandoning my little brother, I’m not going to alienate my father. He’s going to need us, especially with mum in hiding.”

“He’s going to be in Azkaban,” Neville said. “Where he should be.”

“Oh, we’re sending innocent men to Azkaban now? I’m fairly certain that’s on the Death Eater’s agenda, not those on the side of right. Which, might I remind you, my father is.”

“How can you say that? How can you pretend like he’s not a murderer?”

“Because he isn’t,” Aurora said with exasperation. “He was asked to do it.”

“By Voldemort.”

“By Dumbledore. He didn’t want to do it, but he had to, he didn’t have a choice.”

“And he said that, didn’t he? How can you trust him, Aurora?” He looked at her incredulously.

“He’s my father!”

“It doesn’t make him good! Aurora, he torments us. He is cruel, and vicious.”

“Oh yes, he’s so terribly cruel and vicious. It’s why he brewed you his special cruciatus potion after the ministry so you wouldn’t suffer. It’s why he unpetrified the students.”

Neville scoffed, “Yeah, your mother was one of them.”

“And you think that makes a difference? He’s a good man, who does good things.”

“It’s an act! He’s putting on an act.”
“Yes, he is, you’re just too bias to notice it’s not the one you think it is!” She pulled on her hair, shaking her head. “You were there, in the room, when I explained his mark. When I explained him. You were in the wing, conscious, when my mother just added more to the story. How can you sit here and ask how I can stand by him, go home to him, be his daughter when you know the truth as well as I do? Ask Harry, he’ll say the same thing! He was in on it.”

“Harry won’t talk to anyone. And he’s the one who tore through the school, screaming at your father, calling him a coward and a murderer. Why would he do that if it were an act? Why would professor Lupin turn to attack him? Harry’s god father?”

Aurora opened her mouth, ready to explain it once more, perhaps as if she were speaking to a child, when she stopped. Neville was tense, geared to argue and not about to back down. It wasn’t as if he and her father had ever been on the best of terms, and now this.

Aurora shook her head. “Nothing I say will satisfy you, will it? You dislike my father because you didn’t like the way he treated you-”

“All of us, Rory, not just me.”

“Oh yes, how could I forget. Aside from the walking hazards, he treated the boy who took down the Dark Lord, his supposed master, abysmally in class. Harsh words to a lad he thought arrogant, to the young man he couldn’t be seen to like in any sort of fashion. And you, who had to ask a firstie for help with second year potions. Who consistently came back with stories about missing an ingredient or mis-counting stirs. How utterly terrible it must have been for you to have a teacher dislike you for not following instruction and putting those around you at risk.”

He gaped at her. “You sound just like him.”

“Good. Perhaps you forgot this somehow, but my name is Aurora Snape. Whatever pedestal you managed to put me on that took away the tarnish of that name for you, I suggest you destroy it now.”

“You’re right. Because you are not who I thought you were.” Neville said as he got to his feet, looking down at her.

She rose, glaring back.

“Nor I, you, apparently.” She said, her heart breaking a bit. “I thought you understood. I thought you got it. But you didn’t, not once. How could you have if this is your reaction now?”

“Because my reaction, for anyone on the side of good, is the right one.”

She shook her head slowly, tears stinging her eyes. “I wish you could have been there to hear it all. To see everyone coming together with this plan. We weren’t allowed to say anything to anyone who didn’t know it, and it’s a shame that included you and Luna, but you could at least be understanding that we couldn’t.”

Neville looked away, out toward the lake. “Doesn’t matter. In the end, he murdered Dumbledore, the greatest chance our world had at righting itself. He had a choice, and that’s the one he made. One in which we will never come back from.”

“Do you really believe that?” She asked.

“I do.” Neville said firmly.

Aurora inhaled sharply. “Then we’re done here.” She said with finality, and she felt an odd sense of
relief as she said it.

Neville looked at her. “Really?” He asked, scoffing a bit in his anger.

“Yes,” She said. “Because right now, your standing implies you don’t trust me. You don’t trust me, and you don’t trust my father. You don’t even like him. Which makes me wonder why you bothered with me in the first place, knowing it would mean associating with him in some way.”

Neville seemed to think on it, and as he did, his anger left. There before her was the boy she befriended here in this very place, but he had grown and changed since then. He was no longer timid, no longer quite so shy. And what was more, he was braver, so much braver than he had been back then. But with that growing bravery came something else: stubbornness. A trait of their house, and not always one for the best.

“Not a lot of people like your dad, Aurora.” He reminded her.

“You’re right.” She agreed. “They don’t.”

“And you’re not like him.”

She scoffed. “I’m more like him than most people want to believe.”

“No, you’re good!”

“And so is he!”

“We can’t keep arguing over this!” Neville huffed.

“You’re right again.” She nodded. “And since we are at an impasse, I reiterate my early standing: we’re done here.”

“Done?” he said the word, seeming to finally realize what she truly meant by that.

“Yes,” She said firmly. “I’m not saying you have to like him, but you need to believe and trust me. And as long as I stand by him, you won’t. So, we’re done.”

Neville’s lip quivered a second before he straightened his spine. “We’re done, then.”

There was that relief again, but it was mixed with heart ache. Chest aching, Aurora nodded, her mouth unsure whether to frown or smile, and then turned away.

She still had bags to pack before she and Leonidas joined Harry, Draco, and Sirius at Grimmauld place.

And she needed to cry and let out the bottled-up emotions in the safety of the girls’ dormitory. This heartbreak, she realized, was far worse than her first. Not because she loved Neville more, but because it occurred to her on the walk up to the castle that she didn’t just lose a lover, but a best friend.

Chapter End Notes
Team Neville, don't hate me. Team Fred, this doesn't mean anything. Both sides, please remember that the only way to make everyone happy is her not picking either, and that's very likely not going to be the case.

Also, the updates might be sporadic and drawn out for the next bit. Just a heads up!
She looked to the doorway after hearing the knock and gave a small smile to Harry as he stood there.

“Can I come in?” He asked, and Aurora waved to the bed before turning back to the dress and continuing to unpack. “Gotta say, kinda don’t mind you being here. Meant Draco and I got to share a room.”

“How long before he transfigured one of the beds larger and conveniently made the other one disappear?” She asked with a smirk, which only grew at Harry’s chuckle.

“Umm, probably about a minute of being in the bedroom. Two, maybe, if you consider the time it took to do the spell work.” He replied, and as Aurora closed the drawer she was tucking sweaters in, he cleared his throat. “Look, I wanted to say that I talked to Neville.”

Aurora paused, remaining perfectly still as Harry let the silence linger.

“What did you say?” She eventually asked.

“What really happened.” He replied. “That we’d known for a while what was going to happen. That the only thing we didn’t know was who the student Death Eater was.”

“Yeah,” She said, unsure what else to say.

Harry shifted on the bed behind her, causing the blankets to rustle and the frame to creak. “He said it doesn’t change anything for him.” He eventually confessed, and that bone relief tinged heart break washed over her. “Rory, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” She said, closing the drawer and turning to face Harry. He looked genuinely apologetic, which only made her laugh. “None of this is your fault.”

“Sorta feels like it somehow. Maybe if I hadn’t chased after your dad….”

“Then the plan wouldn’t have gone the way it should.” She replied. “Dad needed a spy, his best bet was mum, Lupin, or Sirius, as any of them could rightly disguise themselves with a spell and hold it. If you didn’t tear through the corridors screaming about his being a murderer, then Mum or Lupin couldn’t have faked their deaths, and it would have made it impossible for them to be put in place if need be.”

“I know,” Harry sighed. “But… if we had just told them all beforehand.”

“No,” She said, joining Harry on the end of her bed. “Luna understood because she’s always sort of seen the bigger picture. She’s always had her eyes open to dad, no matter what sort of front he put
“Yeah, you have a point,” Harry conceded. “But I still sorta hoped that… well, when Gin said you two broke up, and why, I had hoped maybe if I talked to him about it, he’d come around. But his family really believed in Dumbledore, especially when he tried to keep Neville’s parents safe when it was sort of up in the air who Vold-Riddle would choose. His family are for Dumbledore, no matter what any of the history or anything says.”

“It’s good to have someone you can put that much faith in,” Aurora sighed.

“Yeah.” Harry agreed. “And I might have been right there with them if I hadn’t learned firsthand how much he tried to control my life.”

Aurora leaned her head against Harry’s shoulder, and he put his arm around her. “I want to go back to the days of playing marbles on the playground and telling your cousin to shove his pig face in the mud.”

Harry chuckled. “But then you wouldn’t have had the rest of us.”

“I’d have still had had Draco, and I wouldn’t have had to deal with the prat phrase.”

“He’s still a prat,” Harry chuckled.

“But he’s your prat.” Aurora teased, her head jostled by Harry’s half-hearted attempts to dislodge her. She laughed along with him, and it felt good to do so. “Life was just easier, then.” She said once the calmed. “I knew about magic, but I didn’t think anything that came to pass actually would. It seems insane that it had to start with.”

“And it’s only going to get worse.” Harry sighed. And she since she couldn’t argue, she rested her head on his shoulder once again.

July 3rd, 1997

It was harder than it should have been to live without her husband. Severus wouldn’t be able to leave the Voldemort’s side for very long before it would be questioned as to where he disappeared to, and the aurory still had questions about his involvement in Dumbledore’s death. And she, well, she wasn’t supposed to exist.

Hermione also desperately missed her children, but she knew they would be in safe hands with Sirius. Minerva may have been their Godmother, but that would be the first place anyone would go looking for them. With Grimmauld place still secret kept, no one would be able to find them.

She looked up at the towering buildings and sighed. How she had longed to see New York, yet now that she was here, she found it less appealing. Too busy, too bright, too loud. Maybe she’d spent too much time in the wizarding world, having spent over half her life in it, that was why she found the
city lacked magic. Still, there were parts of it that was magic, and it was here she wound her way too. Ducking down an alley she was sure no one thought was safe, Hermione noted the signs coming into view for her the closer she got. When she arrived at the wand maker’s, she knocked on the door three times as the signage instructed and waited.

A moment later, a small, dark haired woman opened the door. “How can I help you?” She asked, looking Hermione over.

“I need a new wand.” She said bluntly, causing the woman’s eyes to widen.

“What happened to yours?” She asked suspiciously.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s not confiscated, I assure you.” She said as she pulled out her old one. “But I can’t use it back in Britain, either. And I dare not use it here.”

The woman nodded in understanding. “The bunch of you got a problem over there, we heard. Just do us a favor, keep it there. We don’t need another Grindelwald coming over and mucking about here.”

“That’s the plan.” Hermione said.

“Your old wand?” The witch asked as she beckoned Hermione inside.

“Vine wood, dragon heart string, ten and three-quarter inches.” Hermione said, handing it to the witch to examine.

“An Olivander wand, too. It’s a shame you’ll have to give this up, even temporarily.” The witch handed Hermione back her wand, and then ambled behind the counter. “Now, let’s get you set up, shall we?”

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**July 17th, 1997**

“How was New York?” Severus asked between peppering her lips, cheeks, and neck with kisses.

“Not was lovely as I would imagine. But I have a wand. Walnut, dragon heart string still, a touch longer than my previous one.” She replied, stroking his hair, his back, anywhere she could reach. To feel his warmth, his skin, to know her husband was with her once more, even if only for a day.

He’d been waiting for her at Grimmauld place in the kitchen, which was a wonderful surprise considering she’d been expecting Sirius. Their reunion was quiet, as just after a heartbeat of seeing one another again, they were in one another’s arms and kissing as though it had been years and not weeks since they’d parted. As if they were much younger, Hermione had wrapped her legs around his waist, and Severus had carried her upstairs, quietly closing their assigned bedroom door before sound proofing the room. They still hadn’t spoken much in the two hours that followed, not until now, not until their bodies refused to act half their age anymore.

He nipped at her neck, “Did you see any sights?”

“No really.” She sighed. “Frankly, I wanted to get the hell out of there as fast as I could. They hear a British Witch they don’t know, and they look at me warily. Which they have every right to, given the history.”
Fatigue finally seeming to get the better of him, Severus flopped down next to her, closing his eyes. “Yes, I would imagine that would be the case.” He sighed, rubbing his face. “Lucius has been released, as had the other Death Eaters who were arrested at the ministry. But it is he whom I’ve been speaking to the most, simply for the fact that we are both fathers who haven’t been able to see our children.” He snorted. “Well, fathers who actually care about that sort of thing. Nott barely paid Theo enough mind to say hello, let alone acknowledge the work he’d done to possibly get back in the good graces of the Dark Lord. But Lu… I have never seen the man look less than pristine. He’s been out of Azkaban for three days, I had suspected his first day he’d have been back in his flourishing robes with his perfectly coiffed hair. But he’s not. He’s dressed very basic, he’s simply tied his hair back, he looks awful. He wants to see Draco but know he cannot.”

“Did you tell him anything?” Hermione asked, turning to her side and lightly stroking Severus’ hair.

“Only that he was happy and well, that he was loved and his friends were at his side the whole year. I did not elaborate who those friends were, or who was caring for him. I doubt Lucius ignored what he saw at the ministry, and likely had time to mull over it while locked away. Which, one would hope, was enough time to reconcile that not only is Draco in love with Potter, and that affection returned, but that he has made friends with the light.” He sighed. “And that he has likely worked out my try allegiance.”

“But Lucius is an occlumens.”

“Yes, thankfully, and was always a decent one. I doubt, given that he’d have likely felt the severing of the bond with Narcissa, that he’d have survived the dementors otherwise.”

“You’re probably right,” Hermione agreed reluctantly. She waited until he met her eye again, “I don’t want to leave this bed any more than you do.”

“But we must, I know.” He said stretching to kiss her. “Does not mean I did not wish to indulge in your company for just a little longer.”

“You’ll get to see your children.” She smirked.

“Ah, yes. Those little blighters. I suppose one could consider them a bright side on a good day.”

Hermione laughed. “You missed them,” She chided gently, pecking his lips one last time before getting up.

They dressed about as quickly as two thirty-somethings could without having had any sleep, and then departed their borrowed bedroom together.

She had no idea what time it was, and when she heard the sounds of multiple young witches and wizards coming from the kitchen, she was beginning to wonder if maybe she should have cast a tempus charm before leaving their sanctum.

The door was open a crack, and she paused to see them all just inside. Her own two flesh and blood children, the two boys she was god mother to, and Sirius relaying a tale as Remus and Nymphadora helped where Kretcher allowed.

“…just facing off against my demented cousin, Draco’s insane aunt. I was sure I was a goner, to be frank. She was quick and dirty, and I doubted she would have hesitated to Avada me, when suddenly I was yanked away from where I was standing by my jacket. Lost a couple buttons with the force of it, but I dodged the spell Bella managed to cast.”

Hermione and Severus snuck in, standing at the back, watching and listening.
“And now I imagine you owe my mother a great debt, Uncle.” Leonidas said solemnly. “I read up about life debts, and it seems to me that what happened had all the makings of one.”

“I have no doubt of it, Leo. Because with Remus over there had to cast your Dad’s spell on her, her magic and mine saw it as a threat. One of the bloody Death Eaters thought he had done it somehow, even though his aim was so off he did nothing more than break a pillar.”

“Amicus always did fancy himself a bit more powerful than he really is.” Severus said, earning four heads whipping in their direction, and one smirking Sirius.

“Dad!” Leonidas yelled, jumping out of his chair and running to embrace his father. Hermione smiled affectionately at him before looking to their daughter.

She seemed so much more grown up than the last time Hermione looked at her, but then maybe that was because of everything that had happened. Add to that that she would be seventeen in just four months, and Hermione wistfully smiled as she realized her eldest was essentially an adult witch.

Leonidas switched from Severus to her, and Hermione embraced him warmly as she watched Aurora get up and greet her father.

“I’m afraid we don’t have much time,” Severus said after giving his daughter a brief hug, gently steering her toward Hermione. “I need you to assemble to order, if you could. While I know the majority of it was aware of what was to happen that evening, I believe it’s time we fill the rest in, and I only have a few more hours.”

Remus was the one who sent off his wolf. “Do you have a plan for Hogwarts, yet?” He asked.

“No, not officially. My installment as Headmaster won’t be announced until the Dark Lord takes over the ministry. Which, actually, is what we need to discuss. I know the plans, and I think if we are to actually win this war, we’re going to have to give up a battle. We’re going to have to let him do what he’d been trying to achieve and become the puppet master for the minister for magic.”

August 1st, 1997

“A—”

“Bloody hell this is a big to-do, isn’t it?” Aurora said as she looked around the set up the Weasley’s had in their yard for the wedding to take place in the afternoon. “You realize that if muggles attempted something like that, they would need days to set it up.”

“Poor muggles.” Ginny mused as they sat on a fence together near the shed, watching those who could do magic work.

“Has your mother come to terms with it? With what’s happening?” Aurora asked, watching as her mother helped Sirius hang garland.

“No,” Ginny snorted. “She still thinks Fleur is only marrying Bill for his looks, which, well… I think being friends with Draco helped me with that bit.”
“Explain.” Aurora said as she frowned.

“Yes, Snape.” Ginny teased, earning a smirk from her friend. She then went on to explain. “Fleur’s a bit blunt. I sort of thought that back during the tri-wizard tournament, too. The way she would be very direct, as in, ‘oh no Ginny. You should wear your hair like zis. The other way makes you look twelve.’ Which, well, wasn’t that far off the mark at the time. But I got a bit of taste of it. And Draco, he doesn’t hide the truth, either. Doesn’t sugar coat it. I get it, so I was able to handle it more when Bill started bringing her around. Mum hates it.”

“But she still seems… eager for this wedding.” Aurora said, eyes darting to Molly Weasley who was directing people like a mad woman all while seeming to vibrate with giddiness.

“Ah, yes. You see, Fleur sort of extended an invitation to Viktor. She figured with all the ‘honorary’ Weasleys about, one being a fellow champion, she felt it sort of prudent to invite him. And once mum got wind, well,” Ginny shrugged. “I think she hopes a bit of wedding madness will rub off on us all, and since Ollie and I split.”

“At least you won’t be my Aunt.” Aurora sighed, chuckling as Ginny elbowed her.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be helping me de-gnome?” Leo startled them, and Aurora looked down to see her brother scowling at them.

“We’re watching them set up.” Ginny replied, reaching back and helping Leo up on to the fence as Aurora scooted down to make room for him.

“It seems too much work for a bonding. Why don’t they just do what our parents did and simply recite the spell of bonding?” He asked.

“Probably because it’s not considered very romantic.” Aurora replied. “Mum and Dad got married as a way to solidify themselves. They had the ceremony after more for everyone else.”

“This is considered romantic?” Leonidas asked, brow arched, question punctuated by Mrs Weasley demanding the twins stop whatever it was they were doing and set things up proper like.

“It will come the ceremony.” Ginny replied. “Likely.”

“I think it’s insane.” Leo said simply. “It’s too much effort for virtually nothing.”

“I suppose we can’t argue with that.” Aurora replied with a smirk.

After a bit, Ginny asked, “had you ever thought of your wedding?”

“No,” Aurora replied. “I always figured it would be to Draco, and then his mother would be the one in charge of it. And if I didn’t marry Draco, well….”

“I did when I was little. But then, I also thought I was going to marry Harry, be a princess of the wizarding world.”


“I was a child, I had fantasies.” Ginny retorted, frowning at him.

“Don’t mind Leo, he isn’t one for that sort of thing.” Aurora said, ruffling her kid brother’s hair.

They sat for some time quietly watching the setup, seeing the near completion of it all. Guests would be arriving soon, and when that happened, the lot of them would need to go get ready for the
wedding. Ron looked like he was two seconds away from hexing himself, the way his mother went on about how the garland wasn’t just so, and wasn’t Draco doing a much better job? Harry was laughing, doing something by hand with Fleur’s younger sister near the lot of them.

“Do you think they forgot?” Leo asked after a time. “That the reason we’re here is because the Ministry is supposed to go down this evening?”

“No,” Aurora replied. “I think they’re choosing to not think about it.”

“It must be nice,” Leo sighed. “Because with Dad being there, it’s all I can think about.”

She didn’t want to lie and say that everything would be fine. And a glance at Ginny told her she didn’t want to lie either. Leo was too smart for that, anyway.

S

It was near the end of what most would consider their work day at the Ministry. In a way, Severus thought it a coward’s move. They could argue that Rookwood, MacNair, many of the lower circle who worked ministry jobs would be there regardless of the time, but somehow the Dark Lord was convinced it should be just after working hours. He lurked about in the shadows, a notice-me-not charm furthering his concealment, mask and robes on, wand at the ready. He watched the people moving around, talking, mind wandering, not realizing that there was about to be an upheaval.

At once, the floos flared green, giving pause to those who were awaiting their turn to exit. At once, masked Death Eaters stepped out, causing those in the lines to step back. Severus canceled his charm, stepping out of the shadows as about a dozen other of his brethren did the same, more coming out of the hallways. It was about then the screams really began, and it weighed heavy on those within that they were, in fact, under attack. That all those stories in the Prophet were about to happen to them, in the ministry.

He shot at a nameless wizard, hexing him, grateful when he took up a fight, disappointed when he was easily stunned and taken down. The aurory were already starting to arrive, and he hated the thought that there were some about to turn on their fellow protectors.

A burning sting grazed his arm, and he turned to see a woman, tall and fierce, scowling at him. He smirked behind his mask, because she reminded him for a moment of his wife. This woman wasn’t Hermione, not at all, not even a little. Hermione was away from both the ministry and the Weasleys, keeping out of sight to ensure no one would see her new disguise. Or think her alive when she was supposed to be dead.

He never liked dueling women, there was a deeply ingrained sense of chivalry in his bones that made it hard for him to really point a wand at one. But he didn’t have a choice, not this time. So, he engaged her, firing shots, deflecting hers, working on getting her back toward the floos where she might escape.

“Stop playing, Sev.” MacNair said nearby, and the witch dropped in a hue of green.

Severus whipped around and snarled at his fellow Death Eater. “I don’t believe it is our Lord’s wish for us to kill every witch or wizard who dare oppose us!”

“We need to show them our might, and what we’re willing to do that they won’t!” MacNair retorted,
and Severus rolled his eyes.

“Show those that matter, our might, not the bystanders.” He turned, moving through the various spares, hexing or binding those who attempted to come at them, as well as the ones dueling the other Death Eaters. They had a mission, and he knew his assignment, where he was meant to go.

The bonding was breathtaking, and if anyone asked, Aurora would vehemently deny that she was misty eyed, her heart warm and aching. She had never expected to see so much love between them or comprehend how Mrs Weasley couldn’t see it.

She sat at a table that she had shared with Ginny until Viktor coaxed her on to the dance floor. She fiddled with the hem of her burgundy dress, watching as Draco and Harry both tried to lead one another, a slight grin playing on her face. Ron and Luna were dancing as well, if not a bit oddly. He seemed baffled but was going along with it and seeming to be enjoying himself as well.

“What’s a pretty witch like you, sitting by yourself like this?” George asked as he came to plop down next to her. She smirked, noting that the twins either change or charmed their suits to be different.

“Trying to pull the wool over my eyes, ‘cause it’s not working, Feorge.”

The smile that lit up George’s face was brilliant. “Clever, clever, as always. Dance with me anyway. Mum’s been watching the rest of us like hawks whenever one of us even gets near a potential match.”

“Has she, now?” Aurora said as she took George’s hand, allowing him to bring her out to the floor. Harry did a double take in their direction and frowned, twisting to peek around Draco to glimpse Fred.

George spun her around once before bringing her into position. In her heels, she could rest her chin on his shoulder, and was nearly tempted into doing so just to tease Mrs Weasley into a frenzy. But then she thought better of it, remembering the plans she had had for Ginny when Viktor first came into the picture.

“How’ve you been, anyway? Since everything that happened?” George asked.

“I admittedly miss my parents.” She confessed. “Mum can’t be seen with any of us, Dad is nearly always at You-Know-Who’s side. It’s like the man forgot his favorite had a family.”

“And Leo?” George asked, gesturing to where her brother sat with a couple of younger Weasley relatives, looking bored and lonely.

Aurora sighed. “He’s acting about the same as he always does, but I’m certain he’s not the same, either. The only friend he made this year is a muggleborn, and if what Dad predicted to happen does happen….”

“Leo might lose his only friend.” George nodded in understanding. “But he knows Fred and I like him, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, well, true as that may be, it doesn’t help in Hogwarts.”
Before George could say anything more than a mumbled agreement, Aurora was tapped on the shoulder. She looked over it, seeing Fred there behind her.

“Mind if I cut in, George?” He asked.

“Not at all, Gred.” He said, turning Aurora toward his brother.

She stepped into Fred’s arms, “Thanks for the dance, George.” She smirked, gaining a chuckle from both mischief makers. Aurora watched as George headed over to where Leo was, he and the cousins all lighting up to see one of the twins head their way.

“Why did you two change up?” She asked Fred.

He grinned, “Thought we’d give mum a coronary. She’s been hinting for about an hour now that you were looking awful lonely, that maybe you’d be willing to give ‘Fred’ a second chance. Mind, I was going to send George as was, but I thought you might be called a harlot or something. Figured this way it’ll look like I’m giving you a speech or something. Don’t hurt me again and all that rot.”

“You’re the one who ended it.” She reminded not unkindly.

“And you know how I feel about that.” He countered, then sobered. “And don’t think I’m going to hound you now that Neville’s gone and mucked it up.”

“How did you know about that? I haven’t even had a chance to tell my parents?”

“Gin. She didn’t have a whole lotta nice things to say about the bloke, but it’s what it is. Sure, they’ll mend fences and all next year. As will you two, I’m sure.”

“I forgot how awful optimism sounds.” Aurora replied.

“See, how could he forget who your Dad was, even for a moment. There’s his sneer, right there. Looks a touch different in red lipstick, mind, but can’t deny the family resemblance.”

Aurora snorted. “You’re full of compliments tonight, aren’t you?”

He surprised her with a sudden dip, causing a slight shriek to erupt before the fit of giggles that followed. “Gotta keep you on your toes somehow,” He winked before righting her, spinning her around again as the song tempo picked up.

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His life or theirs, that’s what Severus kept telling himself. He refused to use a killing curse, not again, not after the haze that came over him when he killed Albus. Most of those he encountered, he was able to contain, others….

The auror blocking his path was doing his damnedest to end Severus.

He ducked as he noticed the tint of green spark at the end of the auror’s wand, barely moving out of the way of the killing curse, hearing the thud behind him of one of his fellows falling to the floor. Sneering behind his mask, pissed that the auror wouldn’t just surrender, he cast his specialty. The auror went down, slowly bleeding out.
He moved over to him, looking over that imbecile who thought he was doing good, thought that maybe he would make a difference. Didn’t these fools know that none of them could? They were doomed, meant to fall in line or run, flee, regroup. The Death Eaters were winning, and he…

Severus shook out his head, trying to clear the dark voice murmuring in his head. He couldn’t believe that they were set to fail now, because deep in his soul he knew they weren’t. But knowing what he did about all of Albus’ manipulations in the end had twisted the mercy he might have felt and turned the killing curse into something vengeful. And while he could keep the darkness growing within him at bay, it was not without challenge.

He’d been on exactly three missions with the Death Eaters since the astronomy tower, and each time the wordless whispers and enticing allure of going dark was there with every curse.

He stepped over the aurors body, marching down to the arranged room.

Opening the door, the hairs on the back of his neck rose, and he set up a shield charm in time to deflect Kingsley’s hex. They stared at one another, and Severus removed his mask. Kingsley looked like he’d been through hell, and Severus doubted he looked much better.

“Your lover’s last mate?” Severus asked.

“Remus. Who did you battle against in the great hall?”

“Hermione.” Severus replied.

In better circumstances, they might have relaxed being in the presence of allies, but this was not the place.

Kingsley took a deep breath. “Shall I, then?”

“The Dark Lord has likely had the minister under an imperious for some time. To delay would only make things worse.”

Kingsley nodded once, then produced his lynx patronus. Squaring his shoulders, he told it, “Find Arthur Weasley, Bill Weasley, and Molly Weasley, and tell them this: the ministry has fallen.”

The song slowed, and Fred stepped back. “Would you escort me to our brothers?” He asked, offering his arm.

“Sure,” She said, looking over her shoulder, seeing Ginny was very absorbed in Viktor. As she and Fred headed toward George, Leo, and the other small children, she noted Harry and Draco had moved on to speak with Luna and her father, Ron moving toward his brother Charlie.

“How’s it over here?” Fred asked as they came closer.

“Young Master Snape here has already told me how we might improve the formula for U-No-Poo,” George beamed. “Which, really, one would think that—”

He stopped as an ethereal lynx came bounding in the tent. Some of the children moved toward it, only to be stopped by their parents and pulled close. Leo and George stood up as Kingsley
Shacklebolt’s worn but steady voice said, “The Ministry has fallen. Death Eaters have taken over.”

There was a wave of panic from those who were not in the know, the music stopping only to be replaced with the hum and worry of many of the guests.

And then the screams began as pops of apparition filled the air around them, and masked men and women appeared.

“Death Eaters.” Fred cursed. “They weren’t supposed to get here this fast.”

A few more pops of apparition behind them, and Aurora felt cold dread creep up her spine.

Fred and George exchanged a look, and Fred took hold of her arm at the same time George took hold of Leo. Aurora felt him tense beside him, then the twins looked horrified.

“Anti-apparition wards.” They said in unison. George turned, putting Leo behind him as he attempted to disarm the Death Eater nearest them.

She moved to where George and Leo were, standing so that she was sandwiching her terrified brother between them. Fred slid in beside her, and she moved so that the three of them encircled Leo.

A shot was fired toward them, and Aurora shielded the lot of them while Fred countered whoever it was.

“I remember you.” Someone hissed behind a mask, and Aurora knew they were talking to her. Before whoever was behind the mask might chance a peek at her brother, a boy whose parentage could never be questioned, she shot a stunner at him with as much force as she could muster. The Death Eater dropped.

Her heart pounding, Aurora tried to think of what could be done.

“We need to get outside the wards,” Fred said as he shot at another Death Eater.

“Each grab a Snape on three?” George said with a touch of strain in his voice.

“Take Leo, I can handle myself.” Aurora said, shooting a weightless charm at her brother, lowering her shield just quick enough to do it.

“Let’s go now, then.” George agreed, grabbing Leo and running.

Aurora and Fred took off together, each of them glancing behind them. A hex grazed Aurora’s arm, causing her to hiss, and Fred shot at the Death Eater that was tailing them. When he missed, she paused, spun quick, and shot a tripping jinx, catching him off guard and making him fall on his face. But another two were tailing them, a third joining them.

“Least it’s keeping them in, too.” George said ahead of them. He then dropped as something whizzed by him, letting go of Leo and causing him to roll.

“George!” Fred panicked.

“Keep going,” George said dizzily, struggling to get up.

Aurora ducked down, defending him as two of the three pursuing them started catching up.

“Sectumsempra!” She yelled in a half panic, and one of the Death Eaters dropped, the other looking at her stunned.
Shit. Shit, shit shit!!! She remembered, quite suddenly, seeing that spell in her Dad’s old text book, one placed in the library among the treasured possessions. She’d used it from time to time, asked her father why it had said “for enemies”, and he simply said because that’s what it was to be used on.

But it never crossed her mind that she hadn’t seen it in any sort of defense books, that it was likely one of her father’s private spells. And one she shouldn’t know.

“Confundus,” Fred said, and she snapped out of her own daze, then helped George get up. She noted that Fred had Leo, and then started moving toward the edge of the wards once again. They were close, so close, when that third Death Eater finally caught up to them.

He grabbed Leo and ripped him from Fred’s grasp, tossing him toward Aurora before taking a Fred ready to go on the defensive by the throat and slamming him down into the ground. The Death Eater’s wand pointed at the three of them, and Aurora started a shield.

She felt the tingle of something odd wash over them.

Leo screamed, and Aurora had a curse on the tip of her tongue when she realized that Fred was looking at the spot they all were in a panic. Then the Death Eater with Fred at his mercy glanced at them. She knew that mask.

“Rory,” Leo panicked, but she shushed him, pausing, waiting.

Fred gave the Death Eater a near imperceptible nod before shooting a non-verbal spell at him, knocking him away. Without wasting time, Fred scrambled to his feet grabbed, took Leo’s hand once more, then put the hand hold his wand at her back, guiding she and George toward the boundaries.

Spells zipped past them, but nothing that would actually hit, and just as she was worried someone would notice, the tingle of passing over the wards ran along her skin.

Without a word, Fred stopped, urged Aurora closer to him. George managed to put his arm around Fred, and then they apparated.

They landed inside a living room, and poor Leo, entirely unprepared for any of it, vomited on the floor. Aurora nearly joined him, and by the green tint to Fred, so did he.

“Okay…. Me… me thinks me need to lie…. George slurred before his eyes rolled back in his head and he started to fall forward.

Aurora and Fred caught him in tandem, and brought him over to the plush, green sofa.

“Your dad said you would know how to fix this.” Fred said, barely suppressing the panic in his voice.

“Fix what?” Aurora asked, looking back at George only to rear back.

She hadn’t noticed in the rush to get away, and she’d been on the wrong side to see that he was now missing an ear, and was bleeding quite profusely, likely made worse by apparating.

“Did he say what the spell was?” She asked, pressing her hand to the part where his ear should have been, looking over her shoulder at Fred.

“Dad?” Leo croaked.
“He said it was his! It was his and you knew the counter! That he taught you! That it heals about everything!” The fear in Fred’s eyes twisted her gut, and she nodded as reassuringly as she could.

She knew the spell, her father had taught it to her and Leo, but she doubted her brother used it any more than she had. Raising her wand, she was about to cast it when she hesitated.

“Give me your wand.”

“What?” Fred croaked.

“Your wand, Fred! Mine has the trace. I cast the spell, we might get company we don’t want. Your wand!”

It took him a moment, hands shaking and fumbling, to give it to her. It felt alien in her hand, as though it was more than willing to cause mayhem to anyone not its owner. Closing her eyes, she silently begged the thing to co-operate, just this once. That George needed this, and therefore so did Fred.

“Vulnera Sanentur,” She began to chant, moving her borrowed wand to redirect the blood and seal the wound. She didn’t know if they’d actually be able to regrow the ear. To ask for help from someone who knew might be difficult to do at this time, not without rousing suspicion. But the wound was closing, and George’s breathing was evening as his color began to return.

When the spell was done, Aurora turned the wand in her hand to the sick on the floor left by her brother and then vanished it before returning the wand to its owner.

“You still want ‘er?” George mumbled, voice hoarse. “‘Cause you don’t, I’ll take her.”

“George,” Fred half gasped in relief, dropping to the floor beside him. Aurora got up, moving to Leo and embracing him as they watched the twins. “How you feeling?”

“Saint like.” George retorted.

“Come again?” Fred asked after a pause.

“Saint like. I’m holy.” George said, slowly moving his hand to point at the spot where his ear should be. “Holey, get it?”

Fred laughed, and Aurora noted the tears of relief lurking in his eyes. “The whole world of ear-related humor, and you go for, ‘I’m holy’? You’re pathetic.”

“Reckon I’m still better looking than you. What say you, Rory?” George asked, and she laughed.

“Not wrong. And witches dig scars.”

“Think your Dad got confused with the suit? Probably should’ve changed them back.”

“Mum would say something along those lines.” Fred agreed with a chuckle.

“Dad did that?” Leo asked in a small voice, and Aurora glanced down to see he was still really pale.

She crouched, meeting his eyes, gripping him firmly by the shoulders. “Dad only did it because he had to, to keep cover.”

“Actually, it was an accident. He didn’t mean to hit George at all,” Fred said, helping George sit up now that he was starting to recover.
“But he tried to strangle you!” Leo’s voice pitched. “He tried to kill you!”

“Wasn’t that tight,” Fred said. “Just holding me down. Told me to hex him off and make it look good, he’d watch our backs until we were outta there.”

Leo frowned, looking at each of them a few times before settling on his sister. Aurora nodded, trying to smile reassuringly.

He sniffed, then sniffed again. His face crumpled, and despite Leo’s best efforts to appear strong, he broke down. “That was terrifying.” He said on a hiccup.

Aurora pulled him into a hug, trying her best to comfort him. “I know. I know, but we’re safe. Dad wouldn’t have let anyone hurt us, he made sure us and the twins got out. He knew where we would be, he purposely went there to make sure we’d have been among the ones that got out. It is scary, and dangerous, but we’re out, and no one’s going to find us here.” She said, looking over her shoulder at the twins. “Right?”

“No one knows there’s an apartment above the shop but us.” George assured. “Wasn’t in the plans.”

“And our family. But it’s very warded.” Fred added.

“Scarily so.”

“People think the door is a shelf.”

“Filled with hemorrhoid salve.”

“No one ever goes for it.”

“And if they were to try.”

“They forget why they were going to.” Fred grinned.

“See,” Aurora said to her brother. “Safe. As much as we can be with these two anyway.”

Leo half-giggled as the twins grumbled.

“Anywhere we can sleep?” Aurora asked them.

“Got a couple spare rooms.” George said. “Leo can stay next to me.”

“Can I stay with you?” He asked in a small voice.

“Wouldn’t you rather stay with me?” Aurora asked, trying and failing not to sound offended.

Leo arched a brow, mimicking their father. “You can’t use magic without setting off the trace. Sorry, Rory, but I want to stay with someone who can defend us and not give out our location.” He said as he stepped up to stand beside George.

Well, she couldn’t really argue that point, could she?

____________________S________________
Why didn’t he kill the boy? His hand was wrapped around his neck, and it would have been so easy. Squeeze the life out of him, the Weasley who dared touch his daughter. His daughter who deserved so much better. His precious little girl who was meant to be treated like a queen. Wasn’t she supposed to be as close to royalty as a witch could get? She’d be safe with Draco, safe and unsullied, untouched.

Severus shook his head. He knew, deep down, that he didn’t really think that. But there had been torture. So many people didn’t escape the wedding. So many people to question whether or not Harry Potter had been there. Oh, some thought he had been. Some thought the said same heir of the Malfoy fortune who should have been with his daughter had escaped with the boy they recognized but didn’t know.

And it felt so good to Crucio them into telling him what he needed. Merlin, the high! It was like fire whiskey, warm and smoky on his tongue, coursing through his veins and relaxing him. It was an orgasm long awaited. It was potions he could take for pain, feeling nothing and everything.

He had apparated to a small cabin in the woods, deep in the Scottish Highlands. Behind him would be Hogwarts, dark for no one was there. He would be soon, for in just a day or two he would be instated as Headmaster, and he can roam the halls of his prison more freely than before.

Severus had plans, first on how to sully the office of the once great Albus Dumbledore, and then how to make the place he loved and loathed more his own. But they were buried, and he couldn’t get to them. That alluring dark, that seductive siren was hovering in his mind, preventing him from occluding her out, wanting him to take her hand so she could drown him in the sea of taint that would poison his soul forever.

He entered the cabin and stood still. He didn’t dare move, didn’t dare speak, until he could get the darkness under control.

It was her hands on his face that made him realize he hadn’t been breathing, for the gentle touch had all the air rush out of his lungs. He took in another lungful as those hands, small but strong, stroked down his cheeks and neck, gripping his shoulders. He held his breath again, anticipating the feel of her lips on his. She didn’t disappoint, and the taste of tea mingled with the scent of parchment and lavender was home. Home, safe, and he suddenly remembered that there were so many more pleasurable things than the darkness.

“Are you back yet?” Hermione said against his lips.

“No,” He said, pecking her briefly. “It’s far worse this time.”

“You’re a good man, you know that.” She affirmed before kissing him again, her hands sliding up to sift through his hair.

“I injured one Weasley twin and nearly strangled the other.” He confessed.

Hermione pulled back, studying him with a frown. After a beat, she said, “But you didn’t mean to.”

“No.” He said flatly, and she returned to kissing him, chasing away the dark.

Eventually, Severus was able to bring his arms around her, feeling the darkness receding, slowly tucking it back to where it belonged, firmly behind his shields.

“Rory? Leo?” Hermione asked as her lips grazed his chin.

“The twins helped them escape.” He said. “Potter and Draco vanished before I could find them.”
“Are they with the twins?”

“Rory and Leo? Likely.” Severus said, stepping back a slight bit from his wife. She wasn’t disguised, thank the gods, and seeing her clearly helped ground and center him more firmly.

“Should we be worried?” She asked.

“No,” Severus shook his head. “I believe they will be safe. It was believed that Potter would be at the Burrow, but that is merely because, as far as the Dark Lord is concerned, he was sent there after the Death of Dumbledore. I feel pity for Petunia, she may be getting a visit she never wanted soon enough.”

“And you? How are you now?” She asked.

He sighed heavily. “Tired. Weary. Thankful I have you to help me through this.” He kissed her, though with less feeling and passion than he had earlier, the fatigue setting in.

Hermione chuckled against his lips. “Come, to bed with you.”

“Not tonight, dear, I have a headache.” He quipped, and smirked as she threw her head back and laughed.

“Hush, you,” She said as she stepped way, taking his hand and leading him to the bedroom.

———A———

There was a storm beating against her window, the rain pounding and keeping her awake. Or, perhaps, it was the events from earlier in the night that kept her mind buzzing. She used spells, with her own wand. What if it was pinged? What if someone at the ministry had noted it? But she hadn’t gotten a letter, or howler, or whatever it was that they sent when underage magic was used. Did they overlook defensive spells? Was it because of the war? If it was, then perhaps no one at the newly taken over Ministry would see that Aurora Snape had used magic at the Burrow.

But then there was the Death Eater who recognized her from the battle at the Ministry. And then there was the fact she used a spell of her father’s own creation. What if the Confundus didn’t do anything, and they questioned her Dad? Bloody hell, what if she killed that Death Eater?

Her mind raced and whirled, and she rubbed her face, trying to clear her head. It didn’t help.

Unable to sleep, her mind too busy, Aurora rose from her borrowed bed, tucking her wand into her waist band. Fred had shrunk a pair of flannel bottoms and a simple t-shirt for her and Leo each, and she adjusted it now before departing the guest room.

The barrage of snores that hit her when she left her room had her stumbling backwards, gripping the door frame for balance. A gentle laugh came from the kitchen area, and she turned toward it. Fred’s amusement was barely made out in the light of the moon and a single candle, a mug in his hand as he sat at the small island that marked where their small living room was supposed to begin. She padded toward him bare foot, scoping out whether there was a tea pot in the vicinity.

“I purposely put the silencing charm on your room, so I know it wasn’t George that kept you up.” He said before mumbling a spell to summon a mug for her.
“Sure that’s not Leo?” She asked, moving to the counter where the ever-hot tea pot rested, bringing it over to the island.

“He might be in there, too.” George said, summoning the cream from the fridge, setting it down next to her mug as she poured. “Two of them might be in competition. And George might only half hear how loud he is.”

Aurora smirked as she removed her wand and cast a quick stirring charm on her mug. It faded quickly, the events of the evening coming back to her. “How are you doing?” She asked and wasn’t fooled by the nonchalant shrug and the carefree smirk.

Fred seemed to have realized this, because he sighed and it all faded to a tired visage. “I don’t know. On one hand, I sorta want to hex your dad into oblivion, maiming George the way he did. But I get that it wasn’t intentional. Still, seeing him like that, seeing him… not like me. Not anymore. Can’t pull the stunt we did at the wedding anymore, can we?” He said this last bit with a bit of a smirk.

“Were you trying to test me?” She asked with a half-smile as she clutched her mug. “Seeing if I still knew the difference?”

Fred shrugged. “Was George’s idea, actually.”

“And you went along with it?”

“I knew you would know.” He said, turning his gaze first to the wall, and then to his tea. “You always have.” He took a sip, which prompted Aurora to do the same.

It was beyond bitter, certainly she’d had medicinal potions better tasting than this sludge. She wanted to spit it out, and her body reacted as if she would, but kept her lips pressed together and forced herself to swallow the liquid. She shuddered. “Merlin, that’s ghastly.” She spat, ignoring his quiet giggles. “If you brew your potions like you do tea, it’s no wonder the twelve-year-old could do better than the pair of you.”

“Nah, wish I brewed tea like I brew potions. It is truly nasty,” He said, sipping his tea unflinchingly, holding her gaze. She couldn’t help but laugh as his eye twitched slightly, and Fred spit the tea back in his mug when he smiled too wide. “Rory, I want to thank you,” He said when he sobered, and she frowned at him in confusion “For what you did for George.”

“You heard my Dad, I knew how to counter the curse.” She shrugged, looking down at her bitter sludge in a cup.

“Yes, true. But… but when he stumbled, you went to him. You helped him up. You protected him.”

“You protected my brother, of course I would do the same for you.” She said, feeling her chest tighten pleasantly as their eyes met once more.

Despite the rain pounding on the windows, despite the snores vibrating off the walls, being with Fred in the kitchen was like a throwback to their time together. When they would sneak down to the common room and spend time on the sofa. It was the same but different, from before a time when the threat of Voldemort was very real, and yet they had known there was a war going on when they began. The war was still waging, and his brother had lost an ear. They hadn’t heard from his family, as far as she knew, and her father had to put his hand around Fred’s neck to keep cover. She’d no idea where Draco was, or Harry. Nothing was certain at all, and that terrified her. But there, in the apartment above the joke shop, she was safe. They were safe.

Setting her mug down, she reached out and took Fred’s out of his grasp, setting it next to hers. She
could tell he was wondering what she was doing, but afraid to ask.

Without her heels, she had to get on her tip toes to reach him, to sift her fingers in his hair and bring his head down to her level. He came willingly, but still seemed to keep a distance even as she brought Fred’s lips to her own. It was like muscle memory, kissing him again. It had been over a year since the last time, and yet she still remembered him. How he moved, how he fit against her mouth. When her tongue ran against his lips, he pulled back abruptly.

“Rory, we don’t… you don’t… blimey, I need to the blood back in my brain, give me a moment.”

“Sorry,” She said, watching him carefully.

“No, bloody hell, don’t be sorry. Never be sorry. Just… there was a lot that happened tonight, and I don’t want… you don’t have to…. It’s still as it was at Christmas, that hasn’t changed, but I don’t want you to think…..”

“I think that we faced something quite terrifying in a place we should have been safe, and now I want to feel alive. I think I stayed up contemplating all the ways I might have hurt my father’s cover, and I couldn’t really clear my head until I was out here with you.”

“Ah, so you’re using me,” He winked, and twisted her face in an effort not to laugh.

“I just might be.” She countered, lifting a single brow. “So, tell me no, and I will go back to bed.”

Fred’s grin grew. “You’re leading, then?”

“Yes,” she said, already deciding how far she wanted to take this reunion. “But it doesn’t mean we’re getting back together, Fred. It’s… it’s a night. Just a bit of affirmation before things get worse.”

“Well then,” he said, clearing his throat. He then put his head to his forehead, acting as though he were swooning. “You saved my brother,” he said in a high-pitched voice, likely meant to sound like a woman, and Aurora burst out laughing. “My hero! How can I ever repay you?”

Brushing the tears from her face, she shook her head at his ridiculousness. “I’ve missed you.” She confessed, closing the distance between them again.

“Good,” Fred said as he leaned down and kissed her.

Using his shoulders for leverage, she caught him off guard, hoisting herself up and wrapping her legs around his waist before securing her arms around his neck. He caught her, grunting against her mouth. “You’re not light.” He said against her lips.

“I played a year as a beater; do you really think I’m some delicate flower?” She asked, arching her brow once more.

He shook his head. “Never did.” He said, kissing her again and carrying her down the hall to his room, where he kicked the door shut, silencing them from their brothers, and their brothers from them.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, I am SOOOOO sorry about the delay. I had to play host to family that makes my mental health go to crap, and it took me a couple days to clear my mind enough to get back to this. I tried to get it done before they arrived, but it didn't happen. The extra long chapter makes up for it, right?
Despite everything, she still couldn’t sleep. Fred had drifted off, and she had stayed in bed for a while, breathing him in, trying not to make comparisons. But after a time, she rose, pulled his t-shirt over her head, the one left unshrunk, and replaced her knickers before sitting in the alcove in which the window sat.

Diagon Alley had yet to come alive, and she was starting to wonder if it ever would. With the ministry down, it might mean that those who don’t side with Death Eaters would have to shut down. And that was likely many, when one considered how many businesses were already gone.

But it wasn’t the economics of the wizarding world that kept her up, and while Fred provided distraction and comfort, it couldn’t last forever. She was worried and becoming increasingly so as the night went on.

“Rory?” Fred’s drowsy voice said from the bed, and she looked over her shoulder to see him slowly get up.

“You don’t happen to have anti-patronus charms, do you?” She asked, chewing her lip.

“Not so lucky,” He said swinging his feet over the edge of the bed, reaching down for his pants before getting up. He moved toward her, squeezing in the seat by her feet. Fred copied her position, pulling his legs up, though he sat with his back to the window pan, and his legs were too long to properly rest his head on. “Worried?”

“A bit.” She confessed. “Not that I would have wanted the interruption, but I expected we would have heard from someone by now.”

“I won’t lie to you and say that everyone’s fine, they may not be.”

“Good, because I’d have called you an idiot if you had.” She retorted, leaning her head against the glass. “What are you two going to do now? With the shop?”

Fred shrugged. “Stay open until we can’t, I suppose. Not like it’s only jokes we got.”

“And you’re going to sell to Death Eater children?” She asked.
“Rory, I bloody hired a Death Eater’s child. I slept with a Death Eater’s daughter.” He said with a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Point of pride, is it?” She asked him with a slight snap.

“No. I mean, yes, but… you know there’s not a proper way to answer that, is there?” He asked, and she had to smile at him. “My point is, while I know your Dad’s not really… you guys aren’t. And they aren’t their parents either. Look at Draco, look what he’s done. He might love Harry, but that’s his family he renounced, and that’s before You-Know-Who came back.”

“You do have a point,” She sighed. “But what are the chances that they’re all going to have that same sort of logic.”

“Low,” Fred shrugged. “But it’s not like everyone on the side of ‘light’ is all sunshine and chocolate frogs. I mean, your dad has likely done some pretty nasty things, but he’s good. I mean, he’s an ear lopper, but…”

“No one is purely good or evil, I get that bit. I’m just… it’s Leo I’m worried about.”

“And he knows all of our products, just as well as we. If there’s something used against him, he knows how to counter them.” Fred reached forward, placing a hand on her shoulder. “You’re a better elder sibling than George or I ever were, but you don’t have to worry about him, promise. And as for your parents—”

The sudden appearance of a bright, silver lioness had Fred stopped short. It almost seemed to glare at him before turning to Aurora and opening its mouth.

“Eyre Cottage, tomorrow, use the floo. No apparition. Spread the word to the order.” Her father’s voice instructed, and then his patronus faded.

“Think he saw me in my pants?” Fred said as he leaned away from her.

“How the bloody hell am I supposed to spread the word to the order. Not like I can cast a patronus without drawing attention to myself.”

“Why do you think I wonder if he saw me in my pants? Had to know you were still here, didn’t he?”

“Yes, well, I’d like think he knows I’m smart enough not to just go off gallivanting once we were away from the Burrow.” She replied. “Patronus’ don’t provide two one communication.”

“Well, not with only one patronus.” He smirked, summoning his wand. “Expecto Patronum.” He said, easily calling forth the bright silver guardian.

“A ferret?” She half laughed.

“Don’t worry, I’m not planning on stealing your future husband from you. Ferrets are the mischief makers of the Weasel family. George has one, too.” And then, after instructing it to pass along the message from her father, he frowned. “What’s yours, anyway? I know you can do corporal, you’re too bloody smart and powerful not to.”

“A squirrel.” She replied.

“Really?” He asked. “Suppose Neville’s is the same.”

“I don’t think he can produce a corporal one.” She replied, feeling only a bit uncomfortable with the
mention of him. It was odd, after all, speaking of her former lover to her newer one. Or, perhaps it was former former lover? Bloody hell, she had multiple lovers, and that was off considering who she was. Probably had to be some sort of Snape family record to have more than one, considering how the looks tended to run, if not the personalities.

“I’m sorry,” Fred said after the silence lingered too long. “Gin told us why he left, but… but it can’t be … easy. And you’re probably hoping he’ll come to his senses.”

“Neville’s made it perfectly clear that the reason we parted ways, for him, will not change.”

“And what are you going to do next year, then?” Fred asked. “Because, Rory, I’m scared for you.” He said with a mirthless sort of laugh.

“Why?” She asked.

He blinked at her. “Aurora… you’re going in there with a target on your back, from both sides.”

“And you don’t worry about Leo?”

“No! The kid was sorted into Ravenclaw, which is at least seen as a somewhat neutral house. Add the fact that he has your dad’s sense of humor, he’s bloody too smart for his age, and he has not made any truly obvious alignments, he could get through Hogwarts with his head down. You have another two years, two years in which no one can ever really properly protect you. I’m bloody terrified of what might happen to you.”

“Me too,” She said softly. “And I don’t know what I’m going to do, how I’m going to play it. Dad will probably have some insight he can share tomorrow. And I can’t do anything about it until I have a bigger picture available to me.”

“Too true, that,” Fred sighed, leaning his head back. “It’s still late. Or, early, ‘suppose. Can probably get some sleep now that you don’t have to worry about your dad so much.”

“Maybe.” She agreed, rising from the ledge and heading toward the bed. She pulled back the covers and climbed in, burrowing a bit under the covers. She stilled when she saw Fred watching her.

“What?”

“Just… remembering. Taking in the details.” He said.

“The details?” She asked.

He shrugged. “It’s one night, right? And, well, not like we’re promised a tomorrow, what with all that’s going on. Just… you’re in my bed. You’re wearing my shirt. And I won’t say anything else that’s running through my head, ‘cause I understand. It’s a night, and that’s all this is supposed to be. But bloody hell if I don’t have a running stream of variations on how lucky I am right now.”

She smirked. “If you get over here, you might just get luckier.”

His eyebrows nearly touched his hairline. “Seriously?”

“Well, you know, there’s a war on, and all that rot,” She shrugged nonchalantly, not feeling that way in the least. “And… and it’s not meaningless to me. One night or not, I wouldn’t be doing this with just any bloke.”

“Always good to know,” Fred said as he got off the ledge. “Imagine how awkward it woulda been if you were with Draco or Harry when we all had to flee.”
“Well, I certainly wouldn’t be waiting for them to come back to bed.” She said, and Fred all but dived toward her as she laughed.

Leonidas didn’t understand a lot of things when it came to people. Social interaction had always been difficult, having been well above his standard age group in school most of his life. He had a hard time making friends, and romantic situations were well beyond his comprehension.

He understood his parents loved one another, and that that love was romantic. He understood that it was something many people strive for and hoped to obtain during their life, but he doubted he would be among them. And no, it had nothing to do with girls and the ridiculous notion of ‘cooties’, whatever that was supposed to be. It wasn’t that he had an interest in boys, at least not one that he noticed. He just wasn’t sure if it was something he would want. And if it was, it would be like that of his parents: strong, ever-lasting, the one and only time it would ever happen.

It was something he knew Aurora could never say she had. Not truly. After Fred left her, she was courted by that Longbottom numpty. And, well, he heard how that went. No one really thinks much of him being around when they talk, so he already knew the story of what happened simply by listening when no one thought he was.

Therefore, there was a small part of him that wasn’t too surprised to have found his sister in Fred’s bedroom.

What did surprise him was her borrowed pajamas on the floor next to those Fred would have worn, and how he was quite certain that, under all those blankets and limbs, they were quite naked. Which meant, logically, that they likely would have engaged in…

A hand covered his eyes, and he was yanked out of the bedroom with surprising strength from a man who claimed to be too tired to retrieve their siblings.

They were clear of the door way when George moved as quietly as possible, shutting the door, and looking nearly as pale as he had when he lost his ear and a large portion of his blood.

“Right. Right.” He said running his hand over her head, reaching to pull at his ear and coming up short when there was no appendage to latch on to. “Right, so, umm, we don’t tell anyone about this.”

“But… but doesn’t that mean they’re courting again? Shouldn’t the others know?” Leo asked.

George stammered, “Well, umm, Leo. You see… when two people… when there are urges….”

“I know the mechanics.” Leo deadpanned. “I read up on it after mum explained where children came from. I also understand that, socially, it’s considered prudent to wait until marriage. Or, at the very least, and engagement.”

“Well, that’s not the modern way of thinking.” George retorted. “Just, come on, shuffle off and don’t tell anyone.”

“Shouldn’t I have a firm discussion with him about the frailty of my sister’s heart, and his soiling her good name with his actions?” Leo said thoughtfully as they headed back toward the kitchen. It seemed sound, really. If Fred was going to be doing that with his sister, and not even promise her
marriage, shouldn’t he, the male Snape at the ready, be the one to scold him.

“No. Definitely, no. Remember that Rory’s a witch, and she can take care of herself. And never, ever breath a word of that to anyone.”

“Right.” Leo said, though he really didn’t understand why. It was intercourse, and apparently not something that had a prerequisite one must obtain before engaging in it. So, if it was a perfectly normal, biological function, why did it have to be kept secret.

Just as he was about to ask, her heard George mumble, “Bloody idiot, going to get something worse than an ear lopped off if Snape ever catches wind.”

Oh, right. That. Leo smiled, climbed up on the bar stool at the island in the center, and waited for George to get his cauldron corn cereal for him.

August 3rd, 1997

“Is this the official new meeting for the Order?” Sirius asked as he came through the floo, Draco and Harry following behind. “Because I must say, truly don’t mind not having everyone in my kitchen.”

“Our cottage has been severed from the ministry and made unplottable upon Hermione’s ‘Death’,” Severus replied, his eyes never leaving the fireplace. “It’s the safest place for all of us.”

Hermione noted the boys looked about the living room, Draco glancing up the stairs, the question in their eyes even if neither dared to voice it: where was Rory?

She had received the patronus from one of the twins quite late on the first, before Severus even returned from his Death Eater work. The children were with the twins, and they were safe and as secure as could be. But that didn’t mean Severus didn’t worry, nor that the others knew where anyone had went.

The floo flared again, and Molly and Arthur came through, followed by Ronald, and Ginny. Severus had tensed, and his disappointment was evident. The green flames returned, and Severus nearly bolted toward it, catching himself just as he shifted, as one of the twins came through. The twin stepped aside, and then Leo came through, the sight of him causing Hermione’s heart to swell. Aurora came next, and then the other twin, one missing an ear, apparently. Severus grimaced, looking at his feet, the relief of seeing his children gone after seeing the results of his accidental strike.

“Fred! Your ear!” Molly cried.

“What about it?” The twin with both ears said, reaching up and feeling his lobes. He looked to Aurora. “Did I put one on crooked this morning?”

“Oh, stop, you.” Molly said, smacking Fred’s arm before moving to George. “What happened?”

“Oh, this? Thought it might be a bit fun, get an earring like Charlie. Except, well, didn’t take, you
see. Whole ear came right off. Nothing to be done for it, you see.”

“Look on the bright side,” Fred chimed in as the floo flared again. “You’ll always be able to tell who is who.”

“Excuse me messier Weasleys,” Minerva said as she stepped around them, heading toward Hermione. “And how are you holding up, dear?”

“Lonely and could be better. Thank you for the books and shortbreads, though. It was actually a rather bright spot on my week.”

“Well, we need to do what we must.” Minerva said, squeezing her arm. “I will confess, not having had Albus berate us for not promptly returning to the school to prepare for the new term had me a bit misty eyed for a moment on the first. It didn’t last long, but did so long enough to remind me how much things have changed.”

“And we will discuss those changes in a moment,” Severus said as he came up to the witches, placing a hand on Minerva. “I believe nearly everyone is here now, we should make sure everyone’s comfortable. It’s going to be a discussion no one wants to hear.”

---------H---------

“It can’t be worse than it already is,” Remus said once the order was settled into the much-expanded library room. “Harry is already gracing the front page of the prophet as Undesirable Number One.”

“So, going to school would be a bad idea, then.” Harry said with a mirthless smile, glancing at Draco as the blond placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder from where he was perched on the arm of Harry’s chair.

Hermione’s heart warmed and tightened at the sight. The two looked so utterly opposite, Harry with his messy dark hair, his casual, muggle clothes. Draco with his immaculate locks, and fine, tailored oxford and slacks that was considered a modern style for a wizarding teenager. How far they came from the antagonism that initially burst between them. And then her heart twisted in a strange way as she remembered that might have been twenty odd years ago for her, but their animosity was only squashed a mere four years ago for them.

“You would be expected to.” Severus replied. “As of tomorrow’s Prophet, it will be publicly known that school attendance will be mandatory for all purebloods and half-bloods.”

“What about muggleborns?” Leo asked in a small voice at her side, and Hermione noted that despite her son’s stoic express, there was genuine fear in his eyes.

Severus looked as his son and hesitated, seeming to try and find the right words when there were none.

“It’s true then,” Alastor said. “The rumors.”

“I’m afraid so,” Severus nodded. “Muggleborns are meant to report and register, take an inquiry, and will likely be sent to Azkaban.”

“My dad!” Tonks said, eyes wide.
“You don’t have to worry about him,” Remus said gripping her shoulders from behind the sofa where he stood, seeming to keep her down. “You need to worry about something else now.” He said, and Tonks mindlessly placed her hand on her abdomen as she nodded.

Sirius watched them, “Congratulations are in order, then?” He said, and the couple startled then blushed.

“It’s early days, still.” Remus replied, shifting uncomfortably.

Sirius turned to Severus. “So, we don’t need to worry terribly about the muggleborn factor, as the only one we’d have likely worried about graduated much, much earlier than the rest of the lot, but what about Harry. What do you think we should do? I suspect, of course, that keeping him home would be the worst thing to do, but it’s not like you can protect him, either.”

“I’m not overly suicidal, no.” Severus replied. “I would have to be the utter worst I’ve ever been, especially to Potter, and that’s implying he even makes it through the doors without being brought to the feet of the Dark Lord.”

“Which can’t be done, as he has that… thing inside his scar.” Draco said, lip curling.

“I don’t think that’s going to make a terrible bit of difference.” Aurora said gently. “Not with the other cruxes out there.”

“Maybe we ought to focus on that,” Alastor said. “Stead of sending Potter to the school, lamb for slaughter and all, maybe he can find the other Horcruxes. He’s been near on, has had to live with one. Not like we’re much farther along in figuring out what they are, are we?”

“Actually, we have a bit of a clue.” Harry said thoughtfully.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, frowning as Harry reached into his pocket.

He pulled out a pendant on a chain, showing it off to the room. “Slytherin’s locket. Or, a fake of it anyway. A really good replica. But there was a note inside it.”

“From Regulus.” Sirius replied solemnly. “He tried to do something to stop Him. Which led to his death.”

“A cautionary tale for us all,” Severus agreed.

“While I agree we do need to find out more about the horcruxes if we ever want to put a stop to him, we were discussing the fate of the school, and in turn the students. What are we to do about young Harry? Should we really send him off to hunt for those things?”

“No offense, Professor, but I’d rather take my chances out there than walk into the school all but gift wrapped.” Harry smirked.

“Yes, but alone?” She countered. “If it’s mandatory for the students ….”

Draco interrupted her with a snort.

When it seemed those in the room were looking to him, he rolled his eyes. “Potter can barely function on his own, nor does he have the wit it will take to outsmart the Dark Lord.”

“Thanks, Malfoy.” Harry said to his beau, tilting his head to look at him.

“I’m being honest.” Draco retorted. “And still am when I say that I fully intend to go with you.”
“Me too,” Ron said.

“Oh no you’re not!” Molly stood abruptly, pointing a finger at her youngest son where he sat on the floor.

“He might be safer for it, Molly.” Severus said, earning the wrathful look of the Weasley matriarch. He merely shrugged at it. “I am to be Headmaster, but I will still need to play a part. I will likely have some say on who I hire for potions, that’s where an order spy will come in to play. But there will be Death Eaters in the school, of that you can be certain. Either as professors, or in the capacity of patrol. And they will be harsh, there will be zero tolerance for anyone who opposes the Dark Lord’s law and will. One small bit of defiance and anyone, regardless of their parentage, will be subjected to punishments. I will be attempting to implement a system in which I am the one to deal out the sentence, to prevent the worst of what could happen, but I don’t expect that whomever is placed there will to follow my leadership to the letter. Especially with blood traitors, worse with those who are known friends of Undesirable number one.”

“But they can’t!” Molly protested feebly. “Out there on their own? Severus, they… they can’t take care of themselves!”

“We can manage, Mum.” Ginny said.

“You’re most certainly not going out there!” Molly snapped, and Ginny opened her mouth to reply, or probably yell, George spoke up.

“You’ll have the trace on ya, Gin. Still have another full year of it.”

“We went to the ministry and fought. That was outside of school, and no one said a thing!”

“But if you aren’t seen at the school, Miss Weasley, they will use that trace on your wand to find you. And in turn, find Mr Potter, Draco, and you brother.”

“And me.” Aurora added, and Hermione looked at her daughter wide eyed.

“No.” Hermione said flatly, allowing no room for argument.

The stubborn thing looked at her with an arched brow, mimicking her father’s air of unimpressed. “No? If you were still their age, you’d have gone with them in a heartbeat.”

“If I were still their age, Aurora, I would have had no choice. I’d have been a known muggleborn, hunted down for who I was and who my friends were. You will be the Headmaster’s daughter, you’ll be safest there at Hogwarts.”

“That is utter bullocks, and you know it!” Aurora snapped.

The room went silent.

“Aurora,” Hermione said as calmly as she could. “Perhaps this is a discussion we should have another time.”

“H, it may be best to deal with this now.” Severus suggested. “Aurora will be returning to Grimmauld place when we’re through here, and any grievances should be dealt with before we are all separated once more.”

Hermione nodded, standing from her chair and gesturing with her head for Aurora to follow.
The petulant teenager did just that, using Draco’s leg as leverage to get herself to her feet. She led, and Hermione followed her into the adjacent room.

She waited until the smooth baritone of her husband could be heard, discussing other things, and then launched into her daughter. “You’re not even of age.”

“I will be in November.” She replied, shrugging. “You gave me a ring that would port me to Draco, who will be with Harry.”

“That’s not what that was meant for! It was to get you out of a dangerous situation when he wasn’t with you!”

“And what do you think Hogwarts is going to be for me, mum?” Aurora snapped back, barely keeping her voice under control. “I am a best friend of Harry Potter, and it’s well known. There was a bloody Prophet article on how I was supposedly one of his three girlfriends. I am the ex-girlfriend of not one, but two blood traitors. One who, if his demeanor and plotting is any indication of how he will act, will be one of those who defy the rules and the Death Eaters at every turn.”

Hermione shook her head, “Neville would never….”

“Neville had managed to set up with his grandmother a plot to get me to abandon my family and live with them within the two days between Dad leaving the school and us doing so.” Aurora half yelled. “Neville is not the meek boy you remember from your past, he is more than willing to face down those who are opposed to what he believes in! And if you think that Gin or I merely keep our heads down-”

“But you should! You should, Aurora, for your father’s sake, if not your own!”

“Harry Potter is one of my best friends, and you think people are going to forget that simply because he’s not there!? In his absence, you must realize that the defense association, the entire student body who are truly opposed to the Death Eater agenda, will be looking to those who were close to him?”

“That doesn’t mean you! “

“You’re right, it shouldn’t mean me! But it will, and that will draw attention.”

“I was a Gryffindor, an associate of the light, and the girlfriend of a Death Eater, and I managed to get by unscathed, as the daughter of-”

“Merlin, for a bloody know-it-all, you’re incredibly stupid, aren’t you?” Aurora snapped, and Hermione was shocked silent by the vehemence in which her daughter said it. Aurora continued. “You may have been his girlfriend, but no one gave two figs about you. Dad wasn’t important enough when he was a sodding student for you to draw attention. Harry’s parents weren’t undesirable number whatever, and don’t start on his mum being muggleborn, because at the time, no one was going to openly do anything about it anyway.

“I will repeat for you again, slower, because clearly you misunderstood the first time: I am Harry’s friend, and have been for nearly all my life. Thanks to you. I am Severus Snape’s daughter, and loyalty to him already cost me my boyfriend, because he’s so reviled, painted as the perfect Death Eater, that Neville had me choose between he and my family. Or, in his mind, Dark vs Light. And it’s going to come up, repeatedly, constantly, every day while I roam those halls. Because how can I be the good daughter and still be friends with those expected to go against him?”

Hermione opened her mouth, then shut it.
“Precisely the answer I thought you would give.” Aurora stated, turning around and making her way up the stairs to her bedroom. Hermione cringed a little as a door slammed shut, her cheeks flaming when she realized no one was speaking in the other room.

And then she was angry again. How dare she speak to her like that? How dare she compare their situations, and brush the past off as trivial? Aurora had no idea how bad it was back then.

Except, well, she had been able to be around Sirius, Remus, Lily, and never once was it questioned. She supposed that no one did pay attention to her, even during the year Severus was away and she remained at school.

But it wasn’t as bad as Aurora made it seem like it would be. It couldn’t be. She was friends with Harry, yes, but Harry had lots of friends, didn’t he? And she highly doubted that the reason Neville broke up with her was…. Neville had broken up with her?

No, she couldn’t dwell on that now. Right now, it was about keeping her children as safe as possible while heading into this war, and they were in the thick of it. Leo hadn’t argued, so why had Aurora? Couldn’t she see that, despite everything, she was just trying to keep Aurora safe?

“She’s right, Hermione.” Severus said, coming into the room, a hum of conversation occupying the one he’d left.

“You’re not supposed to say that, Severus.” Hermione said, as she turned, looking at her husband. “You’re supposed to be on my side, supporting me.”

“I can’t, not with this. It’s mandatory that she attend, true. But, once she’s of age, she doesn’t legally have to. That will be a loophole. There are other methods, one in which, while you two were seeing who can display Gryffindor stubbornness the best, I have discussed with Ginevra.”

“Severus, they’re kids. They’re just kids, and we’re-”

“You’re starting to sound like Molly.” He said in a warning tone, gently taking her by the arms. “I don’t like the idea of her being on the run any more than you do. But Hermione, she may truly be safer in doing so,”

“Severus, she can’t be. She can’t. Harry, he’s … and if he’s with Ron, and it’s not like he and Draco get along, so Harry will be a mediator more than anything.”

“Another reason for Aurora to be there. She and Draco are like Harry and the young Mister Weasley: friends who act like siblings. And the young Mr Weasley reminds me, at times, a lot of Lily.”

“In what ways, he’s ginger?” She asked, smirking a bit.

He nodded, “Along with easily envious, wishes to be the center of his friend’s world, loathes when he is not, or when there is too much attention on everyone else, and likes to carry a grudge. Three teenage boys, two of who are in a relationship, on the run constantly? Until we can figure out for sure what the horcruxes are, and where they might be? Yes, they are going to need a mediator. I’d send the lot of them, frankly, if I thought Ginevra and Miss Lovegood could get away with it.”

“Not Neville?” Hermione said teasingly, but the cold, dark look in her husband’s eyes made the smile quickly vanish.
“No.” He said flatly. As he went to explain, he grit his teeth, his left hand flexing.

“Duty calls, then?” She sighed.

“It would seem so,” Severus sighed. He leaned in and kissed her soundly, then took a step back and apparated away.

Hermione sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose, hoping he would be okay, and wishing Aurora had been down here when he was summoned. As it was, Leo wouldn’t have even had a chance to say farewell, and who knew how long it would be before any of them actually saw one another again. At least as themselves.

As Severus walked into the room where these meetings were typically held, he stopped short.

It wasn’t that there wasn’t anyone inside, in fact, it seemed to be that there was ample attendance, despite it being the middle of the day. The perks, he supposed, of having the ministry under their control.

No one was in masks, but then they hadn’t really bothered with them much as of late. That, too, was more or less because they had all but assumed they’d won, so why hide from one another.

What brought Severus up short for one second was the body of his colleague, Charity, hovering above the table, face to the ceiling, and seemingly unmoving.

“Severus,” The Dark Lord hissed, sounding pleased. “Join us.”

He was already heading to his spot on the Dark Lord’s right side, and he did his best to ignore the woman hanging from above. He took his place, nodded a greeting to his brethren.

Yaxley and Dolohov came in, taking their places in the remaining empty chairs.

“I wish to hear how it went.” Voldemort said curtly, staring at them. “Was the boy there?”

“No, my Lord.” Yaxley said. But if he were to go there, we’ll know.”

“Good, good.” Voldemort said, steepling his hands on the table. He then turned to Severus. “We have been having great difficulty finding the boy. Have you made contact with your offspring?”

“I have, my Lord.” He confessed. “My eldest has not heard from him, I’m afraid.”

“Your eldest was at the Weasley house.” Dolohov said sneeringly. “I saw her there.”

“Did you?”

“That bitch was at the ministry.” Dolohov retorted.

“Was she, indeed?” Lord Voldemort turned his cold gaze to Severus. He met it placidly.

“Yes, my Lord.” Severus replied. “She was, in fact, at the ministry. We had asked her from a young age to keep as close to Potter as she could. It would seem he deemed her worthy of friendship,
despite his clear and obvious disdain for me.”

Before he could go further, the Dark Lord ripped in this mind. He found what Severus had wanted him to, Hermione’s instructions to Aurora to keep near if she could. It changed to Potter’s normal challenging glare, as well as the arrogance he used to show so clearly. The Dark Lord then ripped through the rest, searching until he found Aurora after the ministry, in her hospital bed.

“You told me to stay close,” He had imagined Aurora saying enough times that it appeared real.

Voldemort retreated then, looking thoughtfully at his spy. “Do you trust your off spring? Is she as pure of moral as she is of blood?”

Severus was down-right laughing behind his occlumency shields. “She is, my Lord.”

“And you say she was at the Weasley house,” He asked Dolohov. When he received his nod, Voldemort nodded. “It is good, then, that we had someone there, for now I truly do not think the lot of you so utterly incompetent. The boy was not there. But we will get him.” He then looked to Severus. “And your search, Severus?”

“I believe I have found a worth candidate for the position of Potion’s master at the school. Or, should I say, mistress.”

“Who is she?” The Dark Lord asked.

“Helga Nikola, a relation to my former Master. She was briefly trained by him during my tenor with him, we had lost touch over the years, and I have recently relocated her while I was taking my … forced sabbatical from Hogwarts.”

The Dark Lord chuckled. “Forced, indeed. But no more. It will be announced soon that you will be taking over the school, my most trusted servant. But, I’m afraid, there will need to be a greater staffing change than expected.” The Dark Lord said, turning his focus once more to Charity. Severus did so as well, remaining impassive in the face of so many.

“Mione?” Harry said as he entered her where had retreated once Severus had left. She went to make tea, a way to calm the frayed nerves everyone seemed to have, and to hopefully lure Aurora down from her room.

“Yes, Harry.” She said, half turning to her godson.

He shifted nervously, glancing in the direction of the study where the majority of the order still was. “I want to go see Aunt Petunia.”

Hermione paused in her actions, the tea remaining un-made as she set the kettle back down on the counter before turning fully to face Harry. “You do?”

He shrugged. “The last thing said between us was how being out on the street was better than staying there. I never went back. And I just got this… this feeling that I need to be there. I need to go back.”
“It’s not going to be safe.” She said simply. “It’s very, very likely that there will be Death Eaters watching the house. Severus was summoned as it was, and he’s going to have to give them something.”

“I know.” He said, but… but I need to go. And I know Sirius would take me if I asked, but, well, I want you there, too. I’d ask Snape, too, but I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

Hermione shook her head, both in agreement and in disbelief that this boy would willingly go back to Privet drive to check on his Aunt. An Aunt who never wanted him, who treated him poorly, all because he inherited her sister’s gifts.

“Nightfall,” She said. “Ask Alastor and Sirius to come with us.”


He turned, heading for the door, then stopped, hesitating. Nervously, he turned to face her. “I’m going to need Rory with me, you know.” He said, seeming to will himself to meet her gaze. “I know you don’t want her to go, and I sorta get it. But, well, I need her. We need her. It’s not that I don’t need Gin and Luna, too, or that Neville isn’t more than welcome to come with us, but… I need her with me. Rory reminds me that there was a time when I wasn’t the Chosen One. That there is someone from this world who knew me before. He didn’t treat me differently because of my scar. She played marbles with me. She was my friend when Dudley made it hard to have any. Plus, we’re likely going to need to keep magic use to a minimum. Or, might be spells we don’t know and need to do things the muggle way. Be really helpful to have at least one other person out there that knows what life without magic is like.”

“Harry,” Hermione sighed.

“No, I get it. She’s Snape’s daughter, and she needs to keep up a role, same as him, same as you. But when she’s seventeen, no one’s going to be able to find her.”

She groaned. “Why must you all be so insistent on this?”

“Because she’s right,” Harry smirked. “Wanted or not, you’d have gone with us, too, if you were still our age.”

“Too right,” She relented. “Not like I could stop her, anyway.”

“No, don’t think you could.” Harry smiled, then turned back toward the sitting room, calling for Sirius.

She supposed she should go apologize to her daughter, but then thought better of it. Aurora wasn’t precisely without blame in this whole thing. She didn’t need to retaliate the way she did. But what if this was the last time she saw her before they went undercover?

Abandoning the tea altogether, Hermione turned to head up stairs and stopped short when Aurora rounded the corner to enter the kitchen. They stopped, staring at each other for a moment.

“I’ll apologize for my tone, but not the meaning behind my words.” Aurora said as she crossed her arms.

“I suppose that’s all I’m going to get from you, isn’t it?” Hermione countered.

“You’re the one who placed me in a school where Harry would be in attendance. You’re the one who encouraged me to seek him out. I’ve been put in an impossible situation. And when faced with
the options—”

“And you should go.” Hermione relented. “I’m enormously outnumbered on this. It’s just… I forget, sometimes, that you’re nearly all grown. And that things are not so simple for you. Leo, he has it fairly easy. You… you not so much.”

“Leo isn’t going to have it easy, either.” Aurora reminded.

And wasn’t that a terrifying thought, one that Hermione could merely nod in agreement with, turning and swallowing the lump in her throat. For one, small, fleeting moment, she could hear Albus Dumbledore in her mind saying “I told you so”, before she pushed it down and raised her occlumency shields. She forced herself to be strong, for her children, her husband, and herself.

This was war, after all, and like it or not, they were essentially soldiers.

They took no risks in taking Harry to check on Petunia. The used an illegal Port Key to get them to Grimmauld place, Draco insisting he join them as well. Molly put her foot down to any of her own children following along, and Aurora seemed to know it would be unwise to attempt to join them. She, instead, went with the Weasleys back to the Burrow, Leo joining Minerva in her cottage until Grimmauld place would be occupied by its residents once more.

From Grimmauld, they headed into London, Hermione rented a vehicle, drove to Surrey. By the time they had made the arrangements, got everyone ready, found the vehicle, and arrived two blocks from their destination, it was nightfall.

“Much prefer a bike,” Sirius grumbled as he got out of the car, stretching his back and having it audibly pop. Alastor shook his head as he hobbled ahead, pausing and waiting for the rest of them to file out and get into formation.

“Keep an eye out, constant vigilance.” Alastor instructed. “Likely going to encountered someone here. Hadn’t heard from Arabella since Dumbledore died, and that might mean trouble.”

Hermione withdrew her American wand and lightened her hair to the shade of Draco’s.

“Bloody hell, that’s unsettling.” Draco replied with a grimace. “Imagine that’s what mine and Rory’s children might have looked like.”

“Probably for the best that that won’t happen, then, if that’s your reaction.”

Harry smirked as Draco hummed in emphatic agreement, and then they started the walk to Privet drive.

The street didn’t seem off in anyway, not in the least. Except when they got to number four. It wasn’t so much something visual that gave Hermione pause. The lawn was immaculate cut, precise, like all the others. There were lights on in the window, and a car in the drive. Mail was not sticking out the slot, and it all seemed so perfectly normal.

Except for a feeling, a hum on her skin that she knew but couldn’t place. Alastor seemed to feel it, too. His magical eye was zipping in every direction, and his grip on his walking stick tightened.
“I don’t see anyone inside.” Harry frowned. “But they might be in the kitchen. You can’t see it well from here.”

“This is where you grew up.” Draco said, head darting around as he frowned, or perhaps grimaced, at the surroundings. “The Chosen One, Saviour of the wizarding world, and you lived in such a common place? It’s like someone cast a bloody doubling charm here.”

Harry ignored him as he walked up the drive, and the others followed him.

He attempted the knob, finding it turning and looking to Hermione and then Sirius with a mix of unease and uncertainty. He stepped inside, “Aunt Petunia. Uncle Vernon.” He called as he stepped inside. The rest followed. “I don’t mean to intrude, it’s just… you’re in great danger.”

Hermione took in the home as she entered, her eyes immediately zeroing in on a door beneath the stairs. The cupboard that Harry spent his youth living in. She took a deep breath, calming herself, knowing she couldn’t change the past.

“Dudley?” Harry called, heading toward the kitchen and stopping short in the doorway.

“Potter?” Draco said worriedly, coming up behind him as Hermione hung back and watched as Alastor looked around the house suspiciously. “Bloody hell! Aunt H!” He called, and Hermione went to the boys.

She involuntarily gasped as she took in the sight in the kitchen.

She’d never met Petunia Dursley, nee Evans. She didn’t attend her sister’s wedding and given what had happened when Lily and James passed, it had never crossed her mind to go pay them a visit as it had Severus’. She had never heard good things of the woman, either from Lily or Severus, but she was she hadn’t deserved to die the way she had.

It appeared, by the way that Petunia was twisted in such an unnatural state, that she was crucioed before she was hit with the killing curse. Vernon Dursley was purple, eyes huge as though they were threatening to pop form his head. She doubted they had a swift torture, either, and she briefly recalled Severus’ comment about Petunia getting an unpleasant visit.

“Dudley,” Harry said, turning around and pushing past her, tearing up the stairs.

“H,” Alastor called from the living room, and Hermione turned to head back into the living room. “We need to go, now.” Alastor said, and she frowned at him. He then turned and stared at a mirror placed on the mantel. Not above it, but in a small frame like a picture. It took her no time at all to know precisely what it was.

“Harry, we have to go!” She called and heard him moving about above.

There was a sound outside, a soft sort of pop, and then Draco came barging into the living room. “We’ve been found.” He said as calmly as possible.

“Harry!” Hermione yelled up to him at the same time Sirius did.

He came running down the stairs, wand at the ready. “Dudley isn’t here.”

“We’ll worry about that later, we need to go, now!”

“How? Where?” Draco demanded, as more pops sounded outside. “We’re surrounded, and a broom is faster than that bloody muggle contraption!”
“Got brooms,” Alastor said, reaching into his pocket and throwing what appeared to be a handful of matchsticks on the floor. He banged his walking stick against the wood one, and the matches resized to brooms.

“Hop aboard, Kitten. I know you’re not one for flying.” Sirius said as he mounted, patting the space in front of him.

“How are we going to get out?” Harry asked just as the door at the back opened.

Alastor hobbled as quickly as he could to the door way, shooting off a spell with his walking stick before pulling out his wand and aiming at the Death Eaters. “You go, I’ll hold them off. Make sure they don’t follow.”

Harry and Draco each took up a broom, and Hermione charged ahead, wand at the ready. The Death Eaters in the front yard may have blasted the door in, but she was quick with a shield charm. She causing the splinters and pieces to drop to the ground. There were only three of them in the front, and she whipped up the pieces and sent them zipping toward them. It knocked one out. She then found herself in a duel with one of the other two, sensing Draco and Harry behind her, the former peeking out around her.

As she finally for the upper hand on the one that meant to challenger her, knocking him out, Sirius zipped out of the house on the broom, grabbing her arm and swinging her up on his broom at the front. They wobbled a bit as he got them balanced, his hands replaced on the stick, then took off.

“Harry! Draco,” She said in a panic, nearly turning to see if the boys were close behind before remembering what she was on, and how high up they’d likely gotten.

“They’re fine.” He said. “It was Lucius Malfoy out there. He took one look at Draco and fell to his knees.” He said as the two young men zipped past them, heading for their meeting spot. “The used it at their chance to get away. There were four inside the house. I tried to help Alastor, but he insisted.”

Hermione nodded, daring to peek around him for Alastor, but she didn’t get a good look.

They flew undisturbed for the rest of the journey, landing at the Burrow in the back.

Aurora, Ronald, Ginny, Leo, and the twins were sitting out in the garden, a small fire going, watching them through the newly placed wards.

Hermione was surprised to find her daughter first to greet her with a hug when they passed through, and she returned it, grateful for the gesture, their earlier arguments put to rest, let go, to be forgotten. She was then greeted by Leo as Aurora went to hug Draco and then Harry, greeting her friends as the Weasley children had.

She stood with Sirius, stepping closer to wrap her arm around his waist and lean on him as they both watched the sky for Alastor. They waited and waited still even as the younger ones went inside, too cold or tired to remain.

They waited, moving to take over the chairs abandoned by the younger folk, eventually joined by Arthur, the three of them sitting vigil.

They waited until the sun came up, and then finally accepted the dreadful feeling in the pit of their stomach, heading back inside and not saying a word.
It was in the Surrey newspaper. The police couldn’t explain why Dudley Dursley, age 17, came home from an extended holiday with his mates, to find his parents dead from apparent torture. It was clear there had been a break in, though how the neighbors didn’t notice could never be explained. It was speculated that the unidentified man found dead in a nearby playground had a connection, as he was unknown to those in the normally peaceful neighborhood. But what they didn’t understand was how it looked as though he’d fallen from some great height, the earth beneath his body indented as though shifted through force.

It was enough, Hermione thought, to know he had made it out. To know he was likely attacked while escaping. That he held his own, and at least took the skies. But it nagged at her, a worry deep within, that it had been her fault he hadn’t made it. That it was Lucius, who made himself seem as though he posed no threat, that eventually struck the auror down.

And worse, she knew if it had been him that she couldn’t blame him.

Chapter End Notes

And so we start on the Deathly Hallows, officially. More soon.
Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 11th, 1997

For the first time since arriving at the age of eleven, Severus stared at Hogwarts and thought of just how wrong it was to be there. So, so very wrong. He hadn’t moved from where he apparated in for about fifteen minutes, scared to find out if the castle accepted him as Headmaster, equally hoping it would and wouldn’t.

There was no pomp and ceremony to becoming the head of the largest, most famous wizarding school this side of the Atlantic. It was a trip inside the ministry, easily done now that the search for him as a wanted man was called off, the charges cleared. He had walked across the atrium, headed for the office of the minister for magic, and signed the papers handed over to him by the Imperius Pius Thickness. That was it, a simple scrawl across and ancient, magically persevered document of vows and the like. His name, placed beneath his predecessor, the man he murdered, had been all that was needed.

He’d felt his magic link to the parchment, he felt the tingle of the wards on his senses when he appeared before the gate, but there was still a niggle of both doubt and hope that it was all a cruel, cruel trick.

Severus placed his hand on the gate, and nearly fell to his knees with the sheer warmth he felt in his soul. The school didn’t just accept him, it welcomed him, embraced him, was pleased to have him. Had Albus felt the greeting so intensely? And if it had, did it wane over time, with ever manipulation and deceitful act?

Bracing his other hand on the stone wall, Severus opened the gate, passing through to the place he called home nearly all his life.

He closed his eyes, taking in the silence, allowing his magic and his mind to become assimilated to the new presence of such a large and ancient presence. He could feel the teachers that were already there within. He felt Filius set new wards around his classroom, felt Pomona tending to her plants, Minerva in her office, pacing. He knew Poppy was there in the medical wing, and that the house elves were already preparing the next meal to be served to those teachers there making preparations. It was all so much, too much. But bloody hell if it didn’t leave him feeling at least a little high.

“Headmaster.” Hagrid’s politely cold greeting had him opening his eyes, looking at the Half Giant who showed him no signs of kindness.

“He bowed his head, refusing to allow his mask to be completely in place yet. “I am planning to make changes to the way we handle discipline this year. You will be called upon to supervise detentions.” He stated, allowing no room for argument. He turned abruptly, his robes billowing out behind him as he made his way to the front doors, back straight, head held high. He
could feel Hagrid’s eyes bore into the back of his head, and with a flick of his fingers, he wandlessly and wordlessly placed a shield around himself. A moment later, he felt something bounce off of it, but didn’t pause his stride. He didn’t want to threaten, he didn’t want to be the Death Eater when he didn’t have to be.

He entered the castle, ignoring the mumbled greetings from the nearby portraits. He stopped, just a moment, to look up at the ceiling. Planets, their alignment mapped out above his head. He recalled having never known they were there until he found his daughter and Miss Lovegood on the floor, staring up at it.

Severus continued, not slowing his stride until he stood before the Gargoyle guarding the headmaster’s office. It looked up at him, stared a moment, then bowed. “Headmaster,” He said, his voice gravelly.

“Guardian.” He returned with a bowed head.

“State your password, and I will allow no one entry but those who know it.”

“The lion and the dawn.” He said.

The Gargoyle bowed once more, then stepped aside.

He took the stairs up two at a time, entirely ignoring that fact that they would have moved anyway. When faced with the door to his office, his stomach churned. His life changed on the other side of that door. He had been twisted and forced on to a path he never wanted. He forced the nausea away, knowing there was nothing he could do to change the past, and perhaps despite the nasty turn, nothing he would really want to change. He opened to door and stepped through.

It was left alone since Albus’ death. Dusted, yes, but most of the eccentric little devices were still there. The parchments left on the desk haphazardly were likely the last things Albus had worked on, the bowl of blasted lemon drops still there on the corner. Fawkes perch was still placed near the entrance to the headmaster’s quarters, though the bird itself was absent. Had he perished, once and for all, when Albus had? Or did he simply take off, no longer feeling burdened to stay?

“Severus.”

That voice. Severus’s jaw tightened and his heart hardened at the sound of his name in that voice. Slowly, he turned to the wall of headmaster’s portraits, and there behind the desk, placed perfectly for the deceased fool to speak to his right ear, was Albus Sodding Dumbledore.

He stalked toward the painting, stopping before it, pulling his robes about him as he crossed his arms. “Albus.” He sneered.

“I want to thank you for the work you’ve done so far and remind you that we’re far from through.” The painting said in a lecturing tone. “You need to-”

“I need not listen to you. Not now, not ever again. You’re dead, old man. I killed you with an Avada so powerful, so keenly meant, that your body was thrown from the Astronomy tower to land, broken and bloodied, on the cobblestone below. Your plans, your strategies, your manipulations are done.”

Albus glared, and Severus nearly laughed at the acrylic on canvas that seemed to think he still held some sway.

“Well said.” Dilys Dewert said with pride.
“Here, here.” Phineas Black concurred. “And might I say, how wonderful it is to have a proper, Slytherin Headmaster here once more? Not one who truly believes that mudbl.”

“Do not say that word in my presence.” Severus snarled.

Headmaster Black looked at him in confusion, then shook his head.

“I am sorry to hear of Hermione.” Albus said, and Severus frowned. “I have a portrait at the ministry as well. I was Chief Warlock for a time, after all. And I have heard of her passing, at the hands of a man who loved her, no less.”

“Yes, yes,” Severus waved him off. “Lupin was dealt with, I assure you.”

He felt the wards tingle twice, heralding the arrival of two more professors. Aurora Sinistra, and his new Potions Mistress.

“There are to be staff changes this year, more than the norm.” Dilys said thoughtfully. “The Defense against the Dark Arts position—”

“Just the Dark Arts, this year, I’m afraid. One does not need to learn to defend against them when the ministry is so keen to use them when and wherever possible.” Severus interrupted.

“Your former position.” Dilys continued.

“And Muggle Studies, I’m afraid. Charity will not be returning.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. Where is she, I wonder? Do you know?” Armando Dippit asked conversationally.

“That depends on how long it takes for a snake to digest its food, and where it may expel its waste.” He replied casually, feeling that Aurora had gone to her tower, and that the Potions Mistress was coming right for the Headmaster’s office.

“Who will be teaching, Severus?” Albus asked with a touch of panicked concern. He turned to look back at the bastard and noted a panic in the paintings eyes. Ah, so he likely remembered, then, the parting words Severus had said. “Severus, you swore you would not allow this school to come to harm. You swore you would protect the students.”

“And I will.” He said simply, feeling the Gargoyle relay the message of a visitor’s presence. He mentally signaled the guardian to let them pass.

“Then who is taking your position? Who is coming in to fill these spots. Severus, you must—”

There was a knock on the door, and Severus turned to the portraits. “Silence from all of you,” he said before bellowing, “Enter” to his guest.

She entered, closing the door behind her before turning to face him. “Headmaster.” She said in her Russian accent, bowing her head of black hair, braided and twisted into a severe knot. She met his gaze impassively, her dark eyes behind glasses confident. She was not terribly tall, coming just to his chin, and she didn’t appear all that large as she practically swam in her robes.

He stalked toward her. “Madam Nikola.” He said, his voice a purr. “Welcome.” He moved around her, behind her, inspecting her. “How are your relatives?”

“My sisters do well, though we keep little contact since father’s passing. They did not approve of his
He smirked, leaning down, placing his mouth next to her ear. “And did you approve of them?”

He noticed the goosebumps on her flesh and reached up to grab hold of her bun.

“I believe we must do what is needed.” She said, gasping as he gripped the knot of her hair and pulled her head back, much more gently than the action might make one believe, and kissed her.

She giggled against his mouth and pushed him back. “Severus.” She chided, her accent making his name sound disjointed.

“Did not take you long to move on, did it?” Albus spoke up.

“It would appear that way, wouldn’t it? But I believe I demanded silence from the lot of you. You’re here as a courtesy, go against my demands again and you will find your frame here nothing more than ash.” He then turned back to the Potions Mistress, releasing her knot, moving to face her dead on. “It is flawless save for one thing.”

“Which is?” She asked with amusement.

“You react to me to easily.” He said, reaching out and caressing the length of her neck. “I barely near you, and you are electrified.”

“I have missed my husband.” She retorted, and he removed his wand from his sleeve. Waving it over her, he freed his wife from her disguise.

“And I have missed my wife.” He replied, grabbing the back of her head and kissing her fiercely. Much like their earlier reunions, he picked her up, having her wrap her legs around his waist as he brought her toward the nearest wall. As he pulled away to nip at her jaw, he said, “It will help, of course, if I have a mistress within the walls of Hogwarts. I cannot play the grieving widower with the Dark Lord, and Alecto Carrow is already nipping at my heels, trying to get my attention.”

“And were you having a torrid affair with your Master’s daughter during your apprenticeship?” She asked, offering her neck to him.

“I was. She was a blood know-it-all, much like the woman I left at home.” He said as he took her offer. “It was strictly carnal, however.”

“Don’t tell me I pined after you all these years?” Hermione said, leaning away and staring at him aghast.

Severus laughed. “Would you hate it so much if that was actually part of your history?”

“I’d like to think I’d have been a career driven woman. I love you Severus, but you’re hardly what one would call a heart breaker. I think Helga would look back on your time together with fondness, and perhaps a touch of wistfulness, but only because you could reach itches she simply couldn’t scratch on her own.”

“I suppose that’s fair. It’s not like I would have given her a second thought. Not with you around.”

“Good.” Hermione said with a nod, chin tilted slightly. “You had better not have been thinking of another woman when you were with me.”

“Bloody hell, witch, Helga’s not even real! And Ivan would have used my body for potions if I had
slept with one of his daughters. Might had teased me about trying to marry me into the family, but had I actually crossed that line.”

Hermione giggled. “Good thing you didn’t then,” She said, kissing him soundly on his lips before patting his shoulder. “Now let me down, someone might come to report in.”

A slow smirk crept on his face, causing all good humor to vanish from Hermione’s. “Oh. I don’t think so. I can sense them in the wards, you see. And besides, I have missed my wife terribly, she being dead and all. I need comfort.”

“Well, I suppose I should offer you that much, at least.” She said, kissing him again, more gently this time, losing herself in him as he did in her.

“Diary,” Professor Lupin said.

“Locket,” Harry added, “But not the one we found in the cave, the real one is out there somewhere.”

“Harry,” Draco said, his tone somewhere between defeated and pissed off.

“Severus suspects Nagini.” Sirius said, but we’ll never get close enough to the snake ourselves.

Aurora chewed her lip, cradling the mug of tea in her hands as they sat around the living room in Grimmauld place, an old landscape photo transfigured into a chalkboard where they had three lists: Confirmed and destroyed, possible, highly suspected or known.

Professor Lupin put Nagini under the ‘possible’ column, turning back to the room.

“Severus said the ring.” Sirius reminded, and Professor Lupin jotted down the ring under confirmed and destroyed.

“Professor Dumbledore must have said something to you, some hint of the others.” Aurora said, earning Harry’s attention for a moment.

“Does feel a bit like we’re harping on the same things.” Ron confessed. “And if we’re going to try and hunt these things down…”

“He suspected Hufflepuff’s cup,” Harry said. “He showed me a memory of Tom Riddle learning about it and the locket from a really rich witch who was later found poisoned. Problem is, like the locket, no one knew where it went. And he figures he’d been trying to come up with an item from all four founders of Hogwarts, so it’s probable that he has something of Ravenclaw’s.”

“Not Gryffindor?” Draco asked.

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore said the only heirloom of Gryffindor’s was the sword, and that’s been in the possession of the headmaster.”

“Does anyone know what the item from Ravenclaw might be?” Sirius asked.

“Mum would,” Aurora smirked, earning a snicker from Ron and Harry.
“Luna might,” Ginny said thoughtfully. “But she hasn’t been allowed to leave her home since the wedding. I doubt we’ll hear much of her until we get on the train for Hogwarts.”

“We can ask her then,” Aurora said. “It’s not like I’m not going to be meeting up with this lot eventually.” She said, gesturing to the cluster of young wizards to her right.

“Are you certain you don’t want us to go with you.” Sirius asked them, mostly Harry. “Plans can change, I don’t need to-”

“We’ll be okay, Sirius.” Harry insisted. “Remus needs to be with Tonks, and you’re going to be needed at Hogwarts.”

“Yes, not particularly looking forward to being called Snuffles.” He said thoughtfully. He then shook his head as if to clear it, then looked to the board. “So, Hufflepuff’s cup, and the girls will look into the Ravenclaw lead. That makes seven, doesn’t it?”

“But wouldn’t that be eight pieces of soul?” Draco asked, furrowing his brow.

“I don’t think he realizes he created one in Harry,” Professor Lupin said as he added the items on the board. “And we don’t know how long Nagini has been a horcrux, at the latest, it was just before Arthur’s being attacked.”

“The lot of you have discussed this all a great deal, haven’t you?” Ginny noted.

Sirius shrugged. “From about the time that he returned, and Harry was getting feelings, yes. The lot of you were so young when we started piecing all this together, we didn’t dare ruin what small amount of innocence you had left. Especially you, Harry. We still need to figure out how to get the Horcrux out of you without you coming to harm.

“There is a spell to transfer part of the soul into a receptacle,” Leo said from the other side of the room, nose in a book that he either was only half reading or merely pretending to. “Shouldn’t there be a spell to remove one?”

“I think that might be dabbling in dark magic, Leo. It’s something we want to avoid at all possible.” Sirius replied kindly.

“Do you know if Dad ever found any books on the subject?” Aurora asked her brother who looked away from his book.

“No,” He grumbled. “Or if he has, he didn’t bring them to his rooms, his office, or anywhere in the cottage. I’d know, I know every book we own, including those sappy little romance things you like to stuff in the back of your bookshelf.

Ron laughed.

“I wouldn’t laugh,” Leo said as he went back to his book, “At least my sister is literate.”

“Oi, I can read.” Ron protested.

“Can you?” Leo asked without turning away from the book. “I’d never have guessed the way the muggle juice box gave you difficulty in our kitchen last week. There were instructions, too, though those were actually meant for a child half my age.”

Ron blushed, scowling at her brother, and Aurora reached over and patted him on the back.
“So where will the lot of you be heading first?” Sirius asked. “Hunting for the cup? The whereabouts of the locket?”

“Clear of anywhere a snatcher might think to look for us.” Draco replied. “Probably figure it out from there.”

“Has Kretcher said anything?” Harry asked his Godfather who sadly shook his head.

“He swears up and down that he doesn’t have it anymore. That he did, that he tried to destroy it, but it was impossible. And that one day, when he was out gathering things from the market, the locket was gone.” Sirius shrugged. “I’d put my money on Mundungus, but it’s nearly impossible to say for sure. No one has seen or heard from him in sometime.”

“So, it’s extremely likely that he stole it, then.” Draco sneered.

“Yes,” Sirius agreed. “And if what Ginny says about the effects of a horcrux are true, I don’t want to know what it might do should it fall in the wrong hands.”

They were silent a moment, tea was sipped, the heaviness of everything hung about them.

“Ya think You-Know-Who is still looking for Harry?” Ron asked thoughtfully.

“As far as we know he is.” Professor Lupin replied, “But not quite as intensely.”

“One would argue that it’s best for you lot to head out before the train departs for school, but if they’re all watching for you to get on the train, it might work to your advantage to wait.” Sirius said.

“Because of the law saying all pure and half-bloods of school age must be in attendance.” Draco nodded.

“Exactly. And if you’re willing to wait, Severus came up with an idea on how to possibly distract the lot of them.”

September 1st, 1997

Aurora sat on a bench just outside the barrier to platform 9 3/4, Leo beside her.

“You have everything?” She asked.

“Yes, mother.” Draco mocked behind her in a voice not his own. He took on the form of a tall, lean muggle with a Scottish accent.

“Dad, Fred, and George helped us pack the bag,” Ron said, sounding utterly annoyed in his extremely deep, borrowed voice. Deeper than her father’s, that was certain. He was broader, darker skinned, much more handsome in this muggle form, Aurora had thought, though she didn’t voice it. He was leaned forward, appearing to be reading the paper.

Harry, who was beside Draco and looked to be a baby faced blonde, added, “We’ll be fine, Rory.”

As they sat, Harry potter walked toward the barrier, head held high and confident. She noted, out of the corner of her eye, movement from two men who would have appeared to be waiting for a train if it hadn’t been for the one boarding beside them. They inched closer, clearly confident that they
Ronald Weasley went through with Ginny, and the two men who perked up at a Potter seemed more confident now.

“Bloody hell that was weird.” Ron said behind her.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, watching as Draco Malfoy went through the barrier. “We’re off. Be safe, both of you. All of you.”

“You lot as well. See you in a couple months.” She said, standing, beckoning for Leo to do the same. He rose, neither having trunks to worry about. Their father came by to retrieve them the night before, dropping off the Polyjuice potion at the same time. It was up to the boys to find muggle hair, to find someone mundane who may just be waiting for a train.

As she and her brother headed for the barrier, she said in a low voice, “You’re going to have to avoid me.”

“I have ears, Aurora, I know full well it’s in my best interest to not align myself with anyone.” After a moment, he quietly said, “I’m going to be alone anyway.”

Her heart ached for him, for not having his one friend with him. She put her arm around him, giving him a little squeeze before the two passed through the barrier together. Heading toward the train, the two parted ways with a nod, Leo heading to one end, Aurora to the other. Ginny was waiting for her, George standing in the shadows, still in Ronald’s clothes, the vial of Polyjuice antidote still clutched in his hand.

“Where’s Fred and Bill?” She asked quietly.

“Bill had to dodge a few of the Slytherins, I lost sight of him. Fred looked a bit green after he changed back. Think something in the antidote disagrees with them.”

“Get on the train, you two.” George said, his voice sounding rough as if he had a cold. “Fred and Bill wouldn’t want you lingering for goodbyes.”

Aurora nodded, realizing that she was being foolish and hoping for just that: a goodbye, lingering or otherwise. She boarded the train with Ginny, glancing over her shoulder in hopes of catching George’s twin and not having any luck.

She allowed her friend to lead her through the cart and smiled as they spotted Luna.

The blonde waved pleased, said something to the person sitting across from her, and Aurora’s heart dropped to her stomach.

She knew who was there, just from the top of his head. Well, it wasn’t like they weren’t going to be facing one another eventually.

As they got closer, Neville stood, allowing Ginny to scoot into the seat next to him. He glanced at Aurora fleetingly, repeatedly, but did nothing more than wave.

“Hello, Aurora. How was your summer?” Luna asked with a grin.

“Good.” She replied. “Quiet, all things considered.”

“Did you and Leonidas escape the wedding with the twins? Daddy assured me he saw you with
them before everything went wrong, but I wanted to be sure."

She nodded. “Fred got us out of there. George... George was injured.”

“Not horribly, though.” Ginny noted. “He lost an ear, and now makes jokes about it whenever possible.”

“What happened?” Neville asked, turning to Ginny for the answers.

“Death Eaters attacked,” Ginny said, and Aurora withdrew her wand to cast a muffilato around them. It was as she did so that she noted the apprehensive looks from some of the other students. Some were borderline hostile, others much more uncertain, but no one seemed happy to see her.

“Bill, our oldest brother, had gotten married. We already knew the Ministry was going to fall to the Death Eaters that night, but they wanted to go on with it anyway. After the ministry fell, they came to the Burrow, breaking the enchantments and looking for Harry.

“Rory’s Dad told us what to expect, and most everyone got out. Those who didn’t were just questioned to see if they’d seen Harry, but since he was disguised, no one did.”

“I was spotted, though,” Aurora confessed. “Someone pegged me for being at the Ministry.”

“What happened?” Ginny asked.

Aurora shrugged. “He might have been the one I took down, or he might have been the one Fred did. Either way, we got out. And if they figured out who I was, Dad never said anything.”

Neville looked as though he wanted to ask a dozen questions and still ignore her all at once. She realized, then, that it would be a long, uncomfortable train ride.

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Alone in the compartment, Leo settled into this seat, placed as far into the corner as he could, hoping that if someone were to see him, they wouldn’t know who he was. Or cared, either was fine by him.

Once settled, he reached into his pocket and withdrew a muggle sheet of paper, the lines already faded, the creases where it was folded already softened and threatening to fall apart. He’d have to put a strengthening charm on it, ensure it wouldn’t crumble was he sought comfort from it.

He’d noticed it on a pile of mail in the kitchen of Eyre cottage when the lot of them went there after the Burrow invasion. His name in neat, lovely script, the muggle postage stamp in the corner. He’d known instantly who it was from and was eager to read it. He re-read it daily, sometimes more than once, trying to draw as much strength and comfort from it as he could.

Leo,

_When you get this, I’ll be gone, and I won’t be coming back to Hogwarts. Your Dad came by our home the other day and explained to my parents the dangers of what was to come, of what could_
happen to them, to me, to my younger brother and sister. He said he’d checked this book, and saw their names, too. I’m not sure how it worked, and I know my parents didn’t understand, but he recommended that we run.

My parents have family in New Zealand, and so that’s where we’re heading. We’re hoping it’s far enough away, we don’t know what else to do.

But I do know we aren’t coming back. This war has scared my parents enough that they don’t dare to. They don’t understand how we have magic, and while they do understand it’s in our best interest to learn to control it, they don’t think Hogwarts is where we should go. I’m going to miss it, but I’m really going to miss you.

Forever your friend,

Jane.

Leo refolded the letter, refusing to believe that now, of all times, he was getting misty eyed. He was happy she was gone, if only for the fact that she wouldn’t have to endure the inquiry that was bound to happen. She could be safe and learn about magic where it wasn’t so dangerous for her kind.

The doors to his car slid open, and he glanced up and noted a much older crowd, ones who would normally be down in the more communal parts of the train, coming in. He eyed them wearily. He was fairly sure they were all Slytherins, though he didn’t know if that would be for good or ill. He didn’t know if they were friends with Draco or not, and therefore didn’t know if they could be trusted. Despite knowing he wouldn’t stand a chance three against one with students his own age, let alone older, he palmed his wand all the same.

“Snape,” one said, and Leo turned his head just enough to look at the boy who spoke. “You okay?”

“Fine,” Leo replied a touch curtly.

“Good,” The girl replied. “We’re here to keep it that way.”

“Did my father send you?” Leo sneered, and their amusement only made him more miffed.

“No,” The other young man sitting next to him replied. “But I owe him a lot. I’m Theo, Theodore Nott. That’s Blaise, and that’s Daphne. We’re friends with Draco, too.”

“Well,” Blaise said, earning a smack from Daphne.

“We are.” She said through his teeth. “How can you still act like this after everything Theo told you?”

“Because my disdain doesn’t stem from prejudice.” Blaise retorted, straightening his collar. “It’s from a sheer lack of refinement.”

“Prejudice.” Daphne countered.

“No.” He retorted. “It’s refinement. If you can introduce me to a Muggleborn with class, who doesn’t act a buffoon, and knows how to look sensible, I’ll be happy to make their acquaintance.
Take the Weasleys, for example. The twins, whenever they’re seen in Diagon Alley, look well put together. Ginevra is lovely, if not a touch tomboyish. But you look to Ronald….”

“Yes, well, not all of us grew up well funded.” Theo retorted, shaking his head.

“I don’t understand,” Leo said.

Daphne smiled, and for the very first time in his entire life, Leo very nearly blushed at the pretty girl smiling at him. “All we’re saying it, we’re friends with Draco. And so, any true friend of Draco is a friend of ours. That includes your sister, but she seems to have enough people around her at the moment.”

Leo blinked, and then smirked as he realized what they were saying.

“Do you happen to have anything that stops an itch?” Theo asked him, looking at him sideways. “It’s one thing to keep pain at bay with occlumency, but an itch seems downright impossible. I may just rip my left arm to shreds if I don’t have something.”

“I may just have what you need,” Leo said, with a slight smirk.

The train chugged along, and for the most part they were all quiet. Nearly the whole car was. Aurora figured most of them didn’t want to be there, and how could she blame them. The Ministry fell, there was a war. So many of them in the car had family or friends on the run. It was odd to see Seamus without Dean, to not see Colin Creevy hovering nearby.

Ginny was quiet, possibly thinking of Ron, or her family. There was a worried crease between her brows, and she’d been biting her finger for at least a half hour. Luna was reading Beetle Bards, appearing far too engrossed in the fairy tale to be disturbed.

Neville was staring out the window and had been since the train started moving. Not that she thought he would talk to her anyway, but the silence was starting to get to her.

He flinched, then frowned, leaning in to Ginny’s space enough that she snapped out of her revere. After a puzzled moment, she ducked her head and tried to see what her seat mate had spotted.

Slowly, the train came to a stop, but there was no possible way they were already there. A glance out the window showed the English country side, or maybe possibly the Scottish. Either way, they were nowhere near the castle.

“What’s going on?” Someone in the car asked, but no one answered.

“Why did the train stop?” Leo asked.

“Probably just an animal on the tracks,” Blaise replied, flipping through a magazine. “Nothing to
Daphne attempted to give him a reassuring smile, but Leo could tell that, animal on the tracks or not, it wasn’t normal.

The door to the car was abruptly pulled open, not at all like the trolley lady would, and two men that most certainly didn’t work for Hogwarts came aboard.

“What do you want, Dolohov?” Theo said in a bored tone. “I’m supposed to be in school, remember?”

The man frowned, then was about to turn away when he spotted Leo. Intrigued, he started to creep closer, and Leo didn’t miss the way the wizard still had his wand in hand.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll leave us be. Now.” Theo said, meeting the wizards gaze dead on. “He’s in the car with me after all.”

The wizard said nothing, but when he left, he looked over his shoulder and gave Leo a grin that sent a shiver of dread down his spine.

It was shortly after the train stopped that obvious Death Eaters boarded it. Someone, though Aurora didn’t know for sure who, actually uttered Draco’s former favorite phrase. They were ignored, and it became obvious the moment the grabbed a dark-haired boy by the chin to twist him around to face them who they were looking for.

Aurora glanced to Ginny, wondering if she had the same, gut sinking worry that the twins and Bill were somehow found out. But Gin was calm, and Aurora knew she was being paranoid. She saw the Death Eaters at the station take the bait, knew it was likely that they saw him, wanted to make the grab for him, take him off the train and to the Dark Lord before getting anywhere near the school.

“Hey,” Neville said, standing and blocking the aisle. “Losers!” he got their attention. “He isn’t here.”

“Yeah?” One said. “Don’t think we’re gonna be takin’ your word for it, boy.” The older one with gray in his beard said, getting as much in Neville’s face as he could before giving him a little shove.

“Will you take mine?” She asked, standing up, squaring her shoulders, lifting her chin. The Death Eaters looked to her, and she arched her brow just like her father would. “He’s not aboard this train. Harry Potter, though perhaps lacking in book smarts, is fully aware that the lot of you would be looking for him. Tell me, gentlemen, if you were on the run from law enforcement, would you board a train you’d be suspected to be riding?”

“Mandatory to go to school.”

“Oh, yes. You’re absolutely right, how could I forget that? Oh course, he would cease his running and promptly return to school, as it is mandatory. Because one who is considered a criminal would always follow the rules, wouldn’t they?”

“And who do you think you are, talking to us like that?” The younger one said, grabbing her shoulder roughly from behind. She flared her nostrils.
“Someone you are going to regret manhandling if you do not cease this instant. Someone else may have said that their father would hear of this intrusion on our journey, but it is a guarantee mine will. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll remove your hand from my person this instant, and leave this train.”

The Death Eater that had a hold of her turned her roughly, raising his hand.

“Stop!” The older one said. “Let her go.”

“Think she needs a lesson.”

“I think if you touch her, we’ll be the ones getting the lesson. I still remember what Snape did to MacNair at the manor near twenty years ago. That was what he did when the Dark Lord allowed him to deal out his punishment just for accusing him.”

The one who had her frowned, then looked down at her. “Too pretty to be Snape’s kid.”

“I take after my mother.” Aurora retorted. “Now,” She pinched the Death Eater’s sleeve between her fingers and lifted his hand off of her. “I believe we have an education to get to. I would hate to think the future of the wizarding world would end up as stupid as you seem to be.”

“Why you-” He backhanded her, quite quickly, and with enough force to have her lip cut.

“You idiot!” The elder one said, roughly grabbing his companion and dragging him through the car. The door slammed shut, and Aurora watched them leave the train as she wiped the blood from the corner of her mouth. It bloody hurt, and her hand was shaking a bit as the adrenaline left her body. Her eyes misted, but that was all she would allow them to do as she sat back down. Moments later, the train started moving again.

“That was stupid.” Ginny chided, conjuring a handkerchief and handing it to Aurora.

She blotted at her swelling lip. “Maybe so, but it got them off the train, and did so before they saw you. Or tried to torture someone. Anyone.”

“Is your Dad really going to do something to that man for hitting you?” Luna asked, gently turning Aurora’s head so she could examine the cut.

“He might not have a choice if he reports it,” Aurora said. “And it’s likely he’ll want to know how this happened. Something tells me telling him I tripped on the platform won’t go over well.”

“Why would you lie to him?” Neville asked in the same tone he used on the Death Eaters. “Why would you cover what happened up?”

“Because he doesn’t exactly enjoy torturing people.” Aurora shot back.

“He might in this case.” Ginny mused.

“Or he might berate me for acting out the way I had.” She countered.

“You sounded different.” Luna noted as she let go of Aurora’s head. “You reminded me a bit of the Slytherins.”

“It’s how I always heard my mother speak around Aunt Cissy, I just used the same infliction.”

“Well, it worked, that’s for sure.” Ginny said before frowning. “Your lip is going to swell quite bad by the time we get to Hogwarts.”
Neville sighed, then grabbed his cooling cup of tea. “Congelo,” He said, tapping his wand against the cup. He then tugged on the handkerchief from her hand, opening it up and tipping the frozen tea into it. “Here.” He said, not really looking at her as he twisted the cloth shut and handed it to her.

“Thanks,” she said, pressing it to her lip, wincing as the cold heightened the pain. Feeling eyes on her, she darted her gaze up, finding Seamus and Lavender frowning at her in confusion. And, maybe, with more understanding than Aurora dared to believe they had.

S

It was so much less populated than he ever remembered it being. The Great Hall, normally filled with conversation and laughter and excitement, was a solemn affair. The majority of the students from three of the houses eyed him warily, but he didn’t fail to notice how Aurora was getting some odd looks from her own house. And, surprisingly, not necessarily hostile ones. He also noted the nasty cut and bruise on her lip and wanted to find out who the fuck was responsible for hitting her. Whoever it was was likely to face a cruel punishment, certainly not the benign ones he already had mapped out.

Minerva had just taken her place, the sorting of the first years, only a third of what they had been previously, already finished.

He rose and looks of disdain or indifference was turned toward him.

“I would like to welcome you to another year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. As has always been the case, the forbidden forest is off limits to students. Mr Filch has a list of those items that are banned posted outside his office, and there is to be no magic in the corridors.

“In addition, curfew will be strictly adhered to. Anyone caught outside their dorms past time will find themselves in detention. Anyone caught breaking the rules, disobeying teachers, or simply… stepping out of line… will be given a sentence determined by myself, and what I deem appropriate for the severity of the infraction.

“We also have staff changes this year. For Dark Arts will be Professor Amycus Carrow, Muggle Studies will be led by Professor Alecto Carrow, and Potions will be led by Professor Helga Nikola.

“When you are finished eating, you may return to your dormitories.” He said, scanning the crowd once more, noting his son was not alienated by those in his house, even if he did still seem quite alone. “Begin.”

The feast popped up on to the tables, and the hum of students chattering and gathering finally broke the silence.

“I still don’t understand why you would take the burden on yourself to deal with any blood traitors and miscreants.” Alecto grumbled from between he and the thoroughly disguised Hermione. “You are far too busy, far too important—”

“Much as you would like to wax poetic on the many reasons why I should not run the school, it is precisely what I have been put in place to do. If I am to have control over this school, if I am to keep the students in line, guide them in the direction that they will need to head in the future, then I should be the one dealing with the minutia. You and Amycus are the only ones who seem to truly oppose this. I would hate to inform our Lord that you are unable to follow direction?” He said, posing it as a
question and arching a brow at her.

Alecto blushed, and Hermione’s altered face sneered in disgust before turning back to her soup.

“I will obey, as the Dark Lord’s word comes through you.” She said, pushing the food on her plate around. “Do you miss your wife, Severus?” She asked, peeking at him through her lashes.

“No,” He said flatly. “I don’t. It’s hard to miss what’s not really gone.”

“She lives on in your heart, and she always will. But I’m sure she would want you to move on.” Alecto said, and her brother said her name in a low, warning tone.

Minerva snorted.

“She would, and perhaps I will,” He said, his eyes darting to Helga.

Alecto saw it, the small grin she wore dropping from her face as she returned her focus to her food.

Severus sighed. He was already getting a headache, and the school year had only literally just begun.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you all don’t hate me for the mass amount of character deaths in the last chapter. To make up for it, here’s another one! Might be a bit for the next one, though.
“A word,” Her father said, and she nodded, rising from her spot at the Gryffindor table to follow him out. They stood just outside the doors, away from view, and he gently cupped her face in his hands, tilting her head ever so slightly. “Who did this to you?”


“And how did you earn this?” He asked.

“Calling him stupid,” She retorted.

He stared at her for the longest time, expressionless, a dark glint to his eye. “Good,” he said with a smirk. “Was it in front of everyone?”

Aurora shrugged, chewing her lip a moment as she thought about it. “A lot from Gryffindor, probably some from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw as well. I can’t be sure, to be honest. I was mostly trying to avoid eye contact with anyone.”

“Probably for the best. Be wary, those who saw you may start to question what’s going on here. In reality, I would prefer it.”

“What about….”

“Leave them to me.” He cautioned, glancing over her shoulder.

“Is one already starting trouble, Headmaster?” An irritating female voice asked, and Aurora looked over her shoulder to see the two Death Eater Professors watching them with a sadistic glee, caressing their wands. “Shall we assist you in her punishment?”

“Lay a finger on her, and I will demonstrate on you the spell I created when I was her age. One that impressed the Dark Lord with how much blood was shed by a single casting.” He then turned to Aurora. “I will deal with the fool who dared to hurt you, and I will ensure they suffer deeply.”

“Thank you, father,” Aurora said with an effected voice, bowing her head. “Might I retire, now? I’m exhausted from the journey, and I feel as though I should set wards around my bed this evening.”

“You may.” He said, a tilt of his head.

For good measure, she turned to face the Death Eaters, “Professors,” She only inclined her head a little.

She was a little way past when she heard the wizard ask, “Shouldn’t she show you more respect? Or
us, for that matter. Bit insolent, she is.”

“My daughter may address you however she pleases, the fact that she showed you any respect is her own choice. The same will go with my son, and if I hear from either of them that you’ve caused them any sort of distress, I will have you removed from this school and our Lord’s favor so fast, you’d wonder if you’d ever had it in the first place. Are we clear?”

“Yes, Headmaster.” The said in unison, and Aurora made her way upstairs.

She bowed her head to the Fat Lady who eyed her warily but let her in when she was given the password. Aurora didn’t wait for anyone to show up, she simply went up to the dormitories, and found her bed. Sitting on the pillow was a jar of bruise salve, and she smiled at it before picking it up and carefully applying it to her face.

Ginny came up not long after, as had Romilda and the other girls. She was pierced with the cold gaze, and a slight smirk played on Romilda’s face.

But then Ginny waved her wand at the bed, and doubled its size, causing any sharp barbs to be halted.

“If you think I’m letting you sleep alone tonight, you’re out of your mind.” Ginny said pointedly. “Can’t trust they won’t hex you in your sleep.”

“I was going to put up wards.” Aurora smirked.

“Yeah, good idea, let’s do that, too.” Ginny said, and Aurora got to setting them.

“You trust that bitch?” Romilda asked. “Daughter of a murderer?”

“Were you there?” Ginny asked. “Did you see him do it?” When there was silence, she said, “well then, guess we don’t know what really happened, then, did we?”

Aurora wasn’t so sure it was a good idea for Ginny to so obviously side with her, but she was hardly going to argue against the added safety measure. The girls climbed into bed, and despite what Aurora had told her father, she wasn’t tired, not really. Her mind was racing, wondering if she was playing the game right, if it was possible to appear on one side when it mattered, yet let her true allegiance show to everyone else. There was only really two months of this game that she had to play, but it was a dangerous one, and one she was terrified of losing.

September 10th, 1997

—II—

As Helga, Hermione witnessed her students entering the classroom with tremors, something she recognized in Severus after a night when he’d endure punishment from the Dark Lord. Hogwarts with the Carrows as teachers was becoming something out of a horror novel.

“Your hands are not steady,” She would say in her spell made accent, then hand over a bottle of Severus’ special cure.
And those were just from the lessons, as anyone the Carrows determined needed detention would simply be used for demonstration. As long as blood wasn’t spilled, she supposed they figured they could get away with it. It made her nauseated.

She herself had sent over a dozen students to detention over things she wouldn’t normally consider an infraction. But this was supposed to be the beginnings of a regime, and she could never be sure who would have parents with ties, not these days. Simply talking during lessons often landed a student with a note in hand, a visit to the Headmaster for sentencing required.

Hagrid was nearly always busy in the evenings, watching over students in the Forbidden Forest as he tended to some of the animals, or they harvested potions ingredients. She’d quickly earned more stock than she would ever use, but it kept them away from the Carrows at least.

Then there was their relationship. Many times, Helga would be summoned to the Headmaster’s office, in front of the staff, with a leering look and a caress across her shoulders. But their evenings were often spent in silence, holding each other on the sofa, simply trying to hold on to their minds even though the year was young.

“Are you still so against Aurora leaving now?” He had asked her the night before.

“No.” She said. “No, I am not.”

She watched her son now, wishing there was somewhere she could send him, knowing that she could not have Leo leave now. If she had sent him to France, or ran with him to America, he’d be safe. But how could she put the safety of one child over the other? Aurora may very well be nearly of age, but she was still her child, and she feared what might happen.

Leo was only half focused on his brew, glancing off to somewhere on his left. He did his stirs, added his lace wings flies, set his rod down, then raised he hand.

“Mr Snape.” She said, and nearly the entire class shot their heads up, most in surprise or shock.

“Professor Nikola,” He said. “I might be mistaken, but… but I think that Hufflepuff student has a broken wrist.” He said, pointing to a young man who paled, at being singled out.

Hermione hadn’t seen it before, and she cursed herself for not being more observant. But sure enough, the student had been trying to hide his hand, and if she remembered correctly, was left dominate. He’d been working exclusively with his right.

She narrowed her eyes at the Hufflepuff. “Mr Smith, why did you come to my class if you are injured?” She demanded in a tone that brokered no choice but to reply.

He swallowed. “Pr-pr-professor Carrow told me I had to. I was not supposed to say anything.” He swallowed again, his voice shaking. “Please don’t tell the Headmaster.”

“That is exactly what I intend to do. Now.” She said, removing her wand from a glamored sheath in her bun, and waving a stasis charm over all the cauldrons. “The rest of you, report to the study hall in the great hall, now. Professor McGonagall will ensure you do not cause trouble. Are there any further injuries before you dismiss?” She asked, eyes narrowing, darting over each of them. When she saw none, and no one spoke up, she nodded once. “Mr Snape, kindly escort your peers to the great hall.”

Leo nodded, took his wand from his sleeve as he grabbed his bag, and then, very conspicuously, cast a shielding charm on himself.
“Mr Smith,” She said as the students, half a normal class size, where nearly out the door. “Come with me.”

She turned sharply, heading for the door, not looking back yet knew the boy was following her demand.

Portraits, students, and ghosts all watched them as she led the boy, now clutching his arm, up to the Headmaster office. When she arrived at the Gargoyle, she glanced around, seeing if there was anyone in the hallway. She spotted Alecto down the hall, smiling gleefully at the sight of them. No hope of whispering the password, not with the way she was stalking toward them.

“In need of punishment, is he?” She asked.

Hermione turned toward her. “What business is it of yours?” She asked.

“I am the deputy headmis-”

“Psh,” Hermione sneered. “You are nothing. Teacher of muggle studies. It is simple, muggles lack magic, makes them weaker. You cannot expand on simple knowledge.”

“Muggles are filthy animals that need to be put in their place.” Alecto countered.

Hermione shrugged. “They will know their place soon enough.”

The gargoyle stepped aside, and Severus’ looming presence took its place. He had his arms and robes crossed in front of him, and Hermione was almost certain Alecto actually swooned.

“What is the meaning of this?” He asked in a bored tone.

“Mistress Nikola was bringing that brat to see you. But she’s said some interesting things while we waited for you, Headmaster. Things that make me think she is not loyal to our cause.”

“Has she now?” He asked, arching his brow. “And what makes you say that?”

Alecto puffed up, grinning maliciously at Hermione before turning to Severus. “She thought there was nothing more to teach the children about muggles. That we knew all we needed. That -”

“I’m fairly certain, Alecto, that if you were to manage to conjure an actual thought, let alone an intelligent one, your head would simply implode. The fact that a potions mistress, one that has had an extensive education, as well as conversations with intellectuals has an opinion, one that I think was more related to your usefulness here than the cause, is of no real concern. Now, she has clearly come for a reason, that reason involving a student. Do you not have somewhere else you need to be?” Severus asked, somehow making his presence larger as he spoke.

“I believe, Headmaster, that I should be-”

“You do not get to decide where you should go, Professor Carrow!” He snapped, and the Hufflepuff boy jumped and jostled his wrist, making him turn momentarily green with the pain. “Be gone!” Severus said.

Alecto’s pig-like nose flared for a moment before she turned and sauntered off, chin abnormally high.

“I hope she falls down the stairs.” Hermione said, and Mr Smith gave a strange little yelp.

“Indeed, but we cannot be so lucky. Come, to my office.” He said, leading them upstairs. Once they
were inside, Mr Smith in a chair, clutching his arm to his chest, Severus and Hermione standing, he asked. “What has brought you and Mr Smith to me?”

“He has had his wrist broken by the other Professor Carrow and told to suffer with it. Your son, I want to note, pointed it out to me.”

“Five points to Ravenclaw,” Severus said with a nod, then turned to the boy. He softened just a bit in that moment, and Hermione watched the young man go from terrified to utterly confused in a near instant as Severus knelt before him. “Mistress Nikola, kindly summon Madam Pomfrey if you will.” He then made sure Mr Smith was looking at him. “We are going to repair your wrist, Mr Smith, but you will still need to be resting it in a sling. You are not to tell anyone it’s repaired, understood? Not. A. Word.”

Hermione went to the floo, calling for Poppy to come through, and the Matron did so and went to work.

Hell, utter hell. Where else would needed medical attention be done in secrecy? Where else would a young man need to have a glamor put on his healed wrist to make it appear as if it wasn’t? Only ten days in, and already Hogwarts was an unsafe place where the students clearly didn’t know who or what to trust, or where or who they could go for help.

———L———

It wasn’t so bad for him. He kept his head down, kept his mouth shut, and went through the paces as needed. He missed Jane terribly, especially when there was no one for him to simply stand next to at his potions station. He wasn’t supposed to be trusted, given who his father was, but it didn’t really matter. He was always more than willing to point out to a Professor he knew was safe that a student was trembling, cut, bruised….

But a broken wrist was new.

A broken wrist was awful. And it was impossible for him to let it slide.

He sat with the Slytherins, the study hall actually for the sixth and seventh years who didn’t have class, when he explained to Professor McGonagall why Professor “Nikola” had sent them there, she merely nodded and told them to find a spot to work quietly.

“What was it this time?” Theo asked once the commotion had ceased.

“Ben Smith had his wrist broken. I didn’t think the magic lashes were that hard, I was going to say he cut himself, but the bruising….”

“Carrow broke bone!!?” Daphne asked, eyes wide in shock, a sneer on her lips. “Sadistic bastard! Smith is a pureblood, too. There is no excuse he could have made.”

“He didn’t want to practice on the half-bloods.” Leo said quietly, a bout of shame coming over him. “I didn’t either, but… I didn’t get in trouble.”

“It’s the name.” Theo said. “It’s pretty much the same reason I can get away with not doing anything. I already proved myself.” He said with an eye roll. He shook his head, scanning the room with his eyes, stopping as they focused on someone.
Leo followed his gaze, seeing the Gryffindors. Namely, Aurora and her friends. “My sister is off limits.” He said simply.

Theo snorted. “I’m not interested in Malfoy’s beard.”

“His what?” Leo asked, though he was ignored.

“I need Longbottom.” Theo stated.

“Wrong tree, mate.” Blaise said without looking up from his work.

“Don’t need him like that. Had a thought, want to run it by him. Though, your sister might be helpful. And the Weasley girl.”

“What are you planning?” Blaise asked carefully, slowly lifting his head to look at his fellow Slytherin.

Theo stared at Neville Longbottom nearly unblinking as he said, “Nothing no one hasn’t done before.”

September 12th, 1997

She sang the enchantment over Ginny’s shaking arm, the poor thing pale and green all at once. It wasn’t the Sectumsempra, but it was awfully close. All because Ginny merely said that a jinx was considered dark arts, and so therefore everyone had already dabbled in it. Professor Carrow did not take that well.

“No offense,” Ginny said, her voice hoarse and quiet, “But I’m going to be glad when you’re gone.”

Aurora laughed mirthlessly. “I imagine,” She replied. “But then who will fix up Ginny Weasley when I do?”

“You shouldn’t need to fix her as it is!” Neville said, pacing wildly behind them. They were tucked in an abandoned classroom with Luna, hiding as best as they could after dinner, one in which Ginny couldn’t eat. So many of them couldn’t eat anymore, not properly. “Those lunatics are running about, doing whatever they please-”

“Dad’s trying.” She replied as she finished the enchantment, Ginny’s gash sealing the last little bit, her tremors from shock fading.

“Snape isn’t doing anything!” Neville snapped back. "He’s up in his tower, only showing up for meals-"”

“He sent you to Hagrid for detention.” Ginny growled as fiercely as she could. “Seamus was placed with McGonagall when Hagrid was too overwhelmed. I heard of the Hufflepuffs being made to scrub cauldrons with Nikola. As long as Snape deals out the punishment, no one gets hurt.”
“He was overseeing our defense class yesterday,” Luna said. “Professor Carrow wasn’t nearly as awful with the Headmaster watching.”

“Don’t call him that.” Neville said pointedly, jabbing a finger in her direction.

“And what else should she call him?” Aurora sighed. “It’s what he is now, whether any of us like it or not. And no, things are not perfect, but imagine the special sort of hell we’d be in living in had one of the other Death Eaters been put in charge? And at least he’s not alone here. He has my mum, and Sirius is wandering the grounds.”

“And you really believe ‘Nikola’ is your mum?” Neville asked wearyl.

“Neville, shut it.” Ginny said, growing stronger. “We were there when the plan was made up. It’s why we know that black dog wandering the grounds isn’t just a random stray.”

Neville still scowled, but Aurora could tell he was thinking things over.

Finally! About bloody time, Aurora thought to herself before feeling her wards tingle. Someone was outside the door.

Wand at the ready to disillusion the others if necessary, an excuse as to why she was in a classroom alone on the tip of her tongue, Aurora moved to the door and did a quick revelo charm. Three people outside. Wait, no… four. A firstie, perhaps? Taking a risk, she lowered her wards without disillusioning the others, and opened the door.

“Aurora,” Theo Nott bowed his head in greeting. Daphne Greengrass gave a small wave, and Blaise Zabini looked like we wanted to be anywhere else. Leo smirked from behind Theo.

“You led them here?” She asked him.

He grinned. “Theo taught me a spell which helps track family magic, and I used it to find you!”

“I inquired at the door to Gryffindor tower, but Brown informed me that you, Longbottom, nor Ginevra Weasley were inside. It’s when I went to attempt to locate Lovegood and found Leo instead.” He then squared his shoulders. “I have business to discuss with Longbottom, and you, if you’re interested. May we come in?”

She could hear the whispered arguing behind her between Neville and Ginny. The former wanting to send them away, the latter demanding they be given a chance.

Aurora had to agree with Ginny.

“Come on in,” She said, stepping aside, waving them through.

It was funny how, once more, there was a secret meeting of sorts within the school, and the Hufflepuffs were left out. Three each of Gryffindor and Slytherin, and two Ravenclaws, but not a single yellow tie.

“We really need to make some Hufflepuff friends.” Aurora said as she hopped up on desk.

“They aren’t our friends.” Neville countered.

“No, we aren’t. But I was part of your little club a couple years back, remember? Your DA? Defense Association, isn’t that what you called yourselves?” Theo said, leaning against an opposite desk, crossing his arms. Blaise and Daphne stood on each side of him, and Leo wandered to where Luna
was still with Ginny.

“What of it?” Neville asked, mimicking Theo’s posture.

“We should start it again.” He replied. “Only this time, it’s not only to learn how to defend ourselves, it’s so we can defend ourselves.”

“They never point their wands at you,” Neville scoffed.

“No, but it’s only a matter of time, isn’t it?” Daphne countered. “And only today my little sister Astoria returned to the common room with a mark on her face. Because she didn’t want to curse a firstie for no reason. Because, according to those bloody Carrows, she was not showing herself to be a true member of the Pureblood ranks. Or of the wizarding culture.”

“Oh, so now that you lot are being cursed and hexed, you want to take them down?”

Theo snorted. “We aren’t stupid enough to think we can. But there are a lot of others who aren’t learning proper defense and have nowhere to go to either figure it out, or just to get away from those who actually believe the bullshit.”

Neville remained impassive for a few seconds, then feigned surprise. “Oh, you expect me to believe you don’t?”

“Neville.” Aurora snapped, gesturing to Ginny to stay down when she tried to get up from her chair. Instead, Aurora stood, waiting to see what Neville would say.

He turned to her. “I do actually listen to what you say, you know. Just because I don’t choose to believe your point of view.”

“My point of view, is it? Not what actually happened? Bloody hell, Neville, how the hell did I ever believe you and I would have ever worked out, I will never know. You’re so bloody blind to everything you can’t open your eyes and see things the way they are. So, they’re Slytherins, that doesn’t make them automatically loyal to You-Know-Who. And Gryffindors are not immune from falling to the side of wrong. So, get off the thestral’s back and deal with the fact that maybe sometimes our choices are made for us. After all, technically Draco and I never broke off our engagement, but it wasn’t one we willingly.”

She glanced at the Slytherins as the snickered and did so long enough to miss all the superiority in Neville fall away to a more ashen, terrified visage.

“You and Draco….”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist.” She retorted.

“Yeah, no, but…” He stuttered, ignoring the jib, “That means that when… when you and I ….”

“It’s not like he didn’t do it first with Harry, so I don’t think you have to be worried about a duel for my honor.” She rolled her eyes.

“Alright, ignore those two,” Ginny said, waving at them as if her flimsy, shaky gesture could physically remove Aurora and Neville from the room. “What is it you had in mind with the DA? Might as well talk to me, if you can stomach it, as Rory won’t be around come November.”

Neville’s eyes widened, and his jaw dropped, but before he could start on another tirade, Blaise cut in.
“And where are you going that you won’t be around?”

“I’m testing out.” Aurora said nonchalantly.

“Bullocks.” Blaise countered. “You don’t trust us.”

“It’s more like my reasons are my own. And my whereabouts will not be mine alone to divulge.” She countered.

“You’re going to be with Draco.” Daphne said, understanding.

“He is still my fiancé. Where he goes, so should I. Once I’m of age, anyway.”

“So, then, Weasley. What do you say? Should we reinstate the DA?”

Ginny barely hesitated. “I make the parchment up, with my stipulations as to what would be the jinx, and how to activate it.” She said, lifting her chin.

“Done, though I should let you know I had Blaise and Daphne sign the original. Draco had left it in my possession, though I can’t for the life of me fathom why. Well, now I suppose I do.”

“I have only one stipulation of my own.” Blaise said, stepping a bit closer to Ginny and Neville. “Understand that not all of us have a good opinion of Muggles or muggleborns. Not because of their blood status or lack of magic, but their crass and uncouth behavior. Their appalling way of dressing during their time off. Robes may be becoming a bit old fashion, but it’s another to dress so… terribly.”

Ginny snorted, her lip lifting just a touch. “As long as you aren’t going to start throwing around slurs because you don’t like their outfit.”

“I can be civilized. Most of us can.” He then looked to Neville, seeing the apprehension on the oldest Gryffindor. “We do believe we need to preserve our way of life, but that doesn’t necessarily mean keeping mixed blood and new blood out. It means having them adapt to our ways. Realize that by being born magical they are not muggles, and therefore really should not live like one, nor try to push their former ways on us.”

“You don’t think they steal magic?” Neville asked.

“That’s ridiculous.” Leo inputted. “Any dunderhead who really believes that a magical core can be taken is just…”

“A dunderhead?” Aurora offered.

“Yes,” Leo growled. “Don’t mock me for being lost for words for once. Other’s idiocy does that to me.”

“The DA will have to be much more secretive this time,” Luna said, startling the Slytherins who seemed to forget she was there. “I don’t believe the Carrows would take us all working together too kindly, and things will be much worse should someone get scared and try to rat us out.”

“Remember what happened to Edgecombe when she blabbed to Umbridge,” Ginny reminded. “Whatever is done this go, the punishment will be much worse than some spots across their face.”

“That was you?” Blaise asked, suddenly very intrigued. He took another couple steps toward Ginny. “That was downright cunning. Just apparent enough that everyone could read it, but so subtle that
one had to wonder if those spots had always been there, and were, perhaps, magically rearranged.”

Daphne turned to Luna, a question about charms and something she didn’t understand, while Theo went to Leo and struck up a quiet conversation.

Neville looked around the room, at each pair, then to Aurora.

She shrugged smugly, “Get used to it, Neville. Perhaps this is how a revolution will begin?”

It was hard for Aurora to understand how Neville Longbottom, a bloke who called Death Eaters names to their faces, was ready to storm the castle and take out all the perceived villains, could also be so cowardly that he would owl his ex-girlfriend to meet him in the common room after curfew.

Well, she supposed it did take a certain amount of guts to write the note and send it off. But since he stormed out of the abandoned classroom just as everyone was finding common ground, it spoke too much of him not wanting to face her. Not unless it was on his terms. Well, bully for him. She’d gone up, changed into her night clothes, then returned to the common room and waited. She played and lost a few games of wizard chess with Seamus, who still seemed weary of her but hid it for the most part. She read her herbology text, because education was still important even if she would be a drop out in a few months. And she was still pants at plants, a black thumb through and through.

She waited, and when ten past midnight came, she started to get up, ready to go to bed, when there was a tap on the window.

“Merlin’s gnarly beard,” She cursed, hand clutched to her chest as she went over to investigate the owl. Brown, nondescript, and very disgruntled for being made to carry a letter this late by the looks of things. Not a school owl, she was sure.

Opening the window, Aurora sat on the window seat as the little brown fowl hopped in, dropped its letter, and left without so much as a gentle hoot or a nip for an owl treat. Something better must have been waiting for its return.

Aurora closed the window, though it didn’t make it all the way when she noted the handwriting. Fred.

Chewing her lip, she debated on whether or not she should open it. She wanted to, badly, but was terrified by what might lie within. They hadn’t really talked about what happened the night they spent together in his flat. They woke, they kissed quickly, dressed, and left the room. It felt… final. Normal, like they’d done it all the time, like they would for the rest of their lives, but it also seemed so, so final. And afterword, they didn’t act differently toward one another. Even when the twins and Bill polyjuiced themselves before heading to King’s Cross, it was merely a quick good luck, and off they all went.

But bloody hell wasn’t she drawn to that stupid bit of ink and parchment, dying to know what he would dare to write with all the cloak and dagger needed by them all.

She broke the seal, and a tiny box fell out on her lap. She frowned at it, then set it aside and read the parchment.
Rory,

There were drips of ink before the first line, tiny ones that noted how long his quill had hovered.

We’ll be closing the shop, soon. All well in good when there was business to be had, but George and I noted a few unsavory folk lingering outside the shop lately. Might be safe for now, but I don’t think it will last much longer. Lee, he’s going to go with us, where ever that will be.

But before we go, I’m entrusting you with a bit of merchandise. Don’t worry, Ginny’s getting a letter, too. Only need one of us to write, don’t she? But this lot is for you to take with you when you join Ronniekins and the lovebirds. Some extra protection for your peace of mind, and mine.

I love you, Aurora Snape. In case this is the last time I get to say it, or the last time you can receive it, I love you.

Be safe.

She smirked, caressing the last words on the page.

“I love you, too,” she whispered, barely loud enough to be heard by her own ears, but she’d said it. And it felt oddly freeing to do so. With a heart heavy sigh, she set the parchment down, picked up the tiny box, and tapped it with her wand.

It was an Aurora box, or at least it probably would have been if the production of it had finished. It was the right shape and size, the right dark walnut the latest models had, but she doubted very much that this was the thing he would have entrusted to her. Opening up, she beamed, a bit of maniacal glee escaping her lips as she laid eyes on the products inside. Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, Decoy Detonators, Befuddle Bombs, Screams in a bottle, jinxed fake wands. A kit of defensive tools. And….

She leaned in, smelling the box. It was definitely the same scent that was in the boxes in the shop, though away from everything else, she could get a clear whiff. It was grass and flowers with that damp edge from an early morning. There were notes of parchment, but the sweet part wasn’t honey, it was warm butterbeer. And the last bit….

She blushed and slammed the box shut, closing her eyes, controlling her breathing.

“I didn’t think you showed,” Neville said, startling her and nearly having her drop the box. She righted it on her lap, cleared her throat, and turned toward Neville who was standing at the sofa by the fireplace.

“I’ve been waiting.”

“Over there?” He asked, coming over to join her.

“There was an owl. The twins are running, Gin’s either got the note from George or she will in the morning.”

Neville nodded as he sat next to her. “So that’s from… Fred.”

“If it was, what would it be to you?” She asked calmly, looking at him dead on.

He nodded. “I deserved that. I actually been thinking a lot about the way it ended between us. I still don’t trust your Dad, not entirely. But…. But that doesn’t matter, I can….”
“I’m not getting back together with you.” She said firmly. And When Neville glanced at her letter from Fred, she snatched it away. “It has nothing to do with Fred Weasley, either. So, you can end that line of thought right now. I’m about to leave in two months to go gallivanting with Harry, Draco, and Ron, looking for the very important things we mentioned. I can’t be … I refuse to be tied to someone while I do.”

“Why not?” Neville asked.

“Because of what Gin will have to do while I’m gone. I can’t force a charade on her like that.”

“What if no one knows?” Neville asked quietly, and Aurora huffed.

“Your sentiment about my father remains unchanged.”

“And so, do my feelings for you.” He retorted. “I still love you.”

“How can you?”

“Because you’re not him, Rory. You’re different. You’re bright and kind and caring. You’re smart without speaking down to others.”

“Neville.” She huffed. “No. Please, no. Don’t put me in this position.”

His shoulders dropped, and he gave her that shy, bashful smile she always loved. “Thought I would try, one last time before the war gets too bad. I was a bit hot headed when it all came to pass in June. I was… I was scared for you. I forgot, for a moment, that you had a brother. I just saw your father walking out with all those Death Eaters, and Harry screaming… and your mum….”

“Who is in this school right now.” She reminded him.

“I don’t really believe you.” He smirked. “Helga’s not as pretty as your mum.”

“That’s sort of the point,” She smirked back.

They were quiet for a moment. “Can we at least be friends again?”

“Yes,” She replied without hesitation. She did miss him, love him, wanted him in her life. Ah, love. Aurora snorted and shook her head, realizing now what a fool she was about this whole mess. She smirked at the Amortentia laced box filled with defense items, her mind understanding what her heart was always trying to tell her.

“What’s in that?” Neville asked, gesturing to it. “It looks like one of those Aurora boxes.”

“It would have been, I think, if they didn’t have to run. Here.” She turned the box toward Neville and opened the lid. He sniffed, blushed, glanced at her, then looked in the box.

“Those could be useful.”

“I won’t use them here, Gin’s supposedly got the box meant for Hogwarts. This is for on the run.”

“Right.” Neville nodded. “I just got to ask, why does it smell like the greenhouse?”

Aurora laughed, a sad, wistful laugh, and closed the box.

“Goodnight, Neville.” She said, carrying the box and her letter upstairs, leaving it for the potions dunderhead to mull over and maybe come to figure out on his own.
Everyone was snoring softly when she entered the dorm, though she did note that Ginny did indeed have a fairly large, distinctly not an unfinished Aurora box beside her bed that hadn’t been there before, as well as a letter clutched in her hand. She was probably attempting to stay awake, to ask if she’d heard from the twins, but the fatigue of her earlier injuries wouldn’t allow it.

Aurora climbed into her own bed, neatly folded her letter from Fred, and placed it inside her box. She inhaled deeply, drinking in the scents she’d know, plus the lightly musky scent that lingered on skin and in hair, and then closed and warded it shut.

They’d been having a quiet evening in, attempting some form of normality. Books, tea, biscuits, a comfy fire with two reading chairs.

He was tired, his head ached, and he could feel Dumbledore staring at him from a portrait he shouldn’t be in on the far wall. One would think after the display back in August, the old codger would know to leave him well enough alone when his wife was present. The other former headmasters and mistresses did, at least. Especially in his private chambers. The feeling of painted eyes on the back of his head was making his lip curl and his jaw clenched. Couldn’t he just have some peace?

“Severus,” Hermione said, and he glanced at his wife (looking like his wife) and lifted a brow. “Do you have that potion antacid potion you brewed for me?”

Severus frowned. “I believe so.”

“Good.” She sighed, tossing her book down haphazardly as she went toward the loo. “I’m nearly constantly nauseated. I don’t know if it’s the spell or the people I’m forced to endure….” She trailed off as she ventured further into the adjacent wash room, and Severus slowly set down the book he was reading.

His mind was oddly quiet despite the warnings screaming in the back of his mind. Occlumency had taken over without his wanting or asking it to, an automatic defense mechanism. He stood, mechanically, closing the book and setting it on his chair.

He walked in measured steps to the bathroom, seeing Hermione leaned up against the counter, vial in hand, relief etched into the features of her face. He made that specifically for her, with just a touch of crushed up bezoar to counter act any and all substances she shouldn’t ingest. An antidote to all poisons, without prejudice.

He withdrew his wand and startled her when he pointed it at her, causing Hermione to drop the vial. It shattered on the floor.

“Severus, what’s gotten-?”

He waved his wand, wordlessly casting the spell, screaming it inside his mind. Hermione glowed white for a pause, then it faded.

Severus’ heart dropped into his stomach, dread filling him. It couldn’t be, not now.

“Severus,” Hermione said in a shaky voice, “Was that-”
“You’re pregnant.” He said, all the air escaping him at once before he dragged his hand down his face, slumping against the door. “You’re pregnant.” He repeated in disbelief. “How…. Why?”

“Oh, Merlin.” Hermione said, her hand resting on her stomach. "I can’t be that far along, can I? We’d have known before hand?”

“When did you last…?”

“It was… it was August, just before I took up the identity of Helga.”

Severus ran his hand through his hair before tucking his wand away. He did the math, counting, trying to figure it all out, but the shock was addling his brain.

A baby. Pregnant. Bloody hell, could there not be a worse time? He was becoming infinitely glad he hadn’t voice those sentiments to Lupin, for he had indeed thought the pair of them fools for procreating in the midst of a war. And here he was, doing it for the second time no less. Why hadn’t they used protection? They had to have known with Albus’ meddling finally coming to an end that… that they could….

“May.” She said softly. “I’d give birth in May.”

“Hermione…” He said.

“I know.” She closed her eyes, her lashes dampening. “I know. Severus, what are we going to do?”

The tremor in her voice broke him out of his own befuddlement, and he found himself standing beside her before he could blink. He wrapped his arm around her, placing his hand on her abdomen. “We hope for the best. Either for the war to be over before May comes to pass, or that you can somehow leave before this child enters the world. Either way….”

“Either way… you run the risk of never knowing this child.” Hermione said, meeting his eyes, placing her hand over his. “I won’t let that happen.”

“I know you will do everything you can to try.” He said.

“And Rory….”

“May not know her own sibling. Yes.”

“She might stay if we tell her or Leo.” Hermione said thoughtfully. “She might not go with the boys.” Hermione barely had her lip between her teeth before she said, “So we don’t tell her. Or Leo, not until after Rory is gone. I won’t be able to hide it forever, and … and she needs to be out there. I know that.”

Severus took a deep breath, then nodded. “And so, for now it will remain our secret.”

Chapter End Notes

It's getting near the end. Probably no more than 10 chapters left. Until next time.
The room of requirement was quickly becoming a haven most hadn’t expected to find. It started with the original DA group, Ginny sending out the message over the quills to get them to show up and sign the new waver. Since the quills were too nice to rid themselves of, everyone still within the castle walls showed up.

At first, those outside of Gryffindor eyed Aurora with suspicion and weariness. But all it took was her healing their wounds and offering potions that she would sip form first to earn their trust. It was desperate times, and the needed some relief. Leo quickly learned a few healing spells as well, though his wand work and magical core weren’t up to the big spells like his sister.

When Slytherins started to find their way to them, albeit in much smaller numbers, established trust was required.

“We need something,” Aurora huffed. “Something that tells everyone what they need to know without coming right out and saying it. People can be suspicious all they want, they will act according to those suspicions.”

“You mean… to tip them off. About your dad?” Ginny asked.

“Considering what you need to do? Yes, it’s necessary. Gin…”

“No, I get it, don’t need to explain it.” Ginny replied.

Neville tapped his quill against his knee as he sat sideways in his chair. He looked to the three girls and Theo who all say around a table at the front of the room, then behind him at the people who had congregated. Who whispered despite the constant reassurance that the room was safe.

Utterly safe. Carrow Proof. No one loyal to them or the Dark Lord were able to enter, that was the stipulations requested when they made the door appear. As long as someone was in the room, it would keep those exact specifications. And the best part was, the room did not care whether that person was a student or not.

The black dog that everyone had seen wandering the grounds over the last month lay in front of the fire, head on his paws, sound asleep. He was the keeper of the room, as far as anyone was concerned, and while it had never really been part of Sirius’ plan, he gladly took it. Better than
Hagrid constantly trying to coax him to his hurt with various and unknown meats.

“Wh-” Neville started then stopped, frowning. He opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again.

“Starting to look like a fish, Longbottom.” Theo said, getting the Gryffindor to frown at him. “Just say what you’re thinking and be done with it. I promise, no one will think less of you. It’s an impossibility.”

“Theo,” Ginny chided.

“That wasn’t very nice,” Luna said in her normal dreamy tone. “Neville is one of the bravest and fiercest among us. He’ll be regarded a hero when all this is over.”

Theo snorted. “I’m sure you think that, Lovegood. And maybe you’re right. But right now, he’s being a dunce.”

“I was thinking we need to show somehow we’re all being punished. Rory’s so certain he’s sending people where he does one purpose.”

“He is.” She said firmly. “He’s certainly not allowing what you’re seeing.” She said, gesturing at the room at large despite the fact most of the injuries had been healed.

Neville frowned, made to do something, then stopped. When Theo looked at him with utter boredom, rolling his hand as if he were asking Neville to continue, the Gryffindor rose jerkily, moving to the wall and closing his eyes as he placed his hands on the stone. Slowly, ever so slowly, a tapestry began to slowly unravel from where it magically formed hanging from the ceiling. The room, which had been a buzz of white noise, was suddenly very quiet.

As the tapestry unraveled, it became apparent that it was a chart. The four primary house colors showed up at random, green being the least represented but there. And then Aurora realized that the listings were infractions, punishments, and who assigned them.

*Gryffindor - Speaking out of turn - detention with Hagrid - Headmaster*

*Hufflepuff - refusal to participate - Cruciat - Carrow*

*Gryffindor - refusal to participate - Cruciate - Carrow*

*Gryffindor - failure to turn in homework - detention with Hagrid - Headmaster*

*Slytherin - failure to participate - Whip - Carrow*

*Ravenclaw - Speaking out of Turn - detention with McGonagall - McGonagall*

*Gryffindor - out after curfew - detention with Hagrid - Headmaster*

*Hufflepuff - Failure to follow instruction - detention with Nikola - Nikola/Headmaster*

“Bloody hell you lot have a difficult time with authority.” Blaise commented, glancing at the Gryffindor trio from the corner of the room in the shadows, and there was a nervous titter from the room.

“Not so much authority as it is for torture.” Ginny counter. “Not to mention the need for a midnight snack.”
“It’s what the house elves are for.” Blaise countered. “You just have to ask.”

“Not all of us had house elves growing up to remind us of that simple solution.” Ginny replied.

“Fair enough.” Blaise nodded, eyeing the chart. “How does this work?” He asked as another listing appeared.

A Hufflepuff was caught trying to head into the kitchen, but the punishment was constantly changing. Lashes or detention, Carrow or Headmaster. It seemed the room waited with baited breath. For a long moment, the Carrow punishment remained with the Headmaster as the assigner. And then, it shifted: off with a warning.

There was a sudden uproar, confusion and hope laced with disbelief and excitement.

Aurora took a deep breath, fighting with her weak occlumency walls to make sure she didn’t smile too brightly.

“Merlin’s beard.” Neville said, frowning at tapestry.

“How did it do that?” Blaise asked again.

“Hogwarts is sentient.” Aurora reminded him. “What Neville asked for, I really don’t know. But Hogwarts knows what’s happening within its walls. It’s how an appointed Headmaster or mistress, like Umbridge, can be denied the title. It’s how the stairs will move just so if a student is in desperate need to get somewhere, or a room like this exists. It hears, in a way.”

“I asked for an anonymous way to show what’s been happening to everyone and who caused it.” Neville said as another name appeared. “Didn’t realize there’s been over a hundred in a month.”

“But nearly all of them were sent to Hagrid or Nikola,” Theo noted. “And those that were were often placed there by the Headmaster.”

“Anyone else notice how Professor McGonagall and Professor Nikola seem to have the ability to assign detentions?” Justin, the representative from Hufflepuff, asked as he pointed to the board.

“I think the sorting hat very nearly put you in my house, Justin.” Luna said as she tilted her head. “In fact, I think if it weren’t for a family tradition, you would have been. But your loyalty swayed it.”

Justin frowned at her. “Actually, yes. That’s about how it happened.”

“Thank you, Neville.” Aurora said, and he turned his attention toward her. “Doing this, it shows—”

“I didn’t do it for him.” He said firmly. “Or you. I did it so that prat doesn’t think me a dunce. It was a bit hard to put into words what I was thinking, and this way no one physically or verbally have to admit to everything. Besides…” he turned to the chart and smirked. ‘I think about half those Gryffindor listings are me.”

“Are they?” She asked moving to stand beside him. “Impressive.” She said bumping him with her hip.

“Well, sort of.” He said. “Gran would be proud, though.”

“I think she might be. Takes bravery to forget one’s homework.” Aurora teased, earning a ribbing from Neville before he lifted his arm and dropped it around her shoulders. She leaned her head on his shoulder, and relaxed, pleased that their rift was closing.
“Are you really leaving next month?” He asked after some time.

Aurora blinked, lifting her head, noting that, while she didn’t feel it through her cardigan and blouse, he’d been caressing her arm. She turned to him, finding his face much closer than she expected, and her heart stuttered. She removed her gaze from his lips and forced it to his eyes. “Yes.” She said.

“Why? Harry, Ron, Draco, they don’t need you. They can do what they need to, they have everything they need between them. We need you here.”

“How am I going to be helpful here?” She asked, glancing around her.

“You know how to heal everyone.” He said.

“So, does Leo, and Ginny’s learning, she’ll be able to pick up where I will leave off.”

“You’re a peacemaker,” he said again. “We wouldn’t be here, all of us together, if it weren’t for you.”

“Actually, I was secondary.” She smirked. “Theo was coming for you.”

“What about me?” he finally got to the point. “What if I need you?”

“You don’t need me.” She said, putting her hand on his chest, over his heart. “You think you do, and where that notion came from, I’m not sure. But you don’t need me, not at all. Harry and Ron don’t think logically, and doing what they’re doing out there, they are going to need logical. They’re going to need a healer. They’re going to need help.” An idea struck her. “Come with us!”

“What?” Neville asked.

“You’re already of age, it’s all I’m waiting for; for the trace to come off. Yours is already gone, so come with us.”

Neville had a moment of elation before it steeled into resolve. “No.” He said. “Because if we go, Rory, we’re leaving everyone here defenseless. Who else is going to keep standing up to the Carrows and Snape?” Neville said, gesturing to the board.

“My Dad is the one assigning those benign punishments, remember?” She pointed at the board while taking a step back.

Neville followed, putting his hands on her shoulders. “I know, I know-“

“He wants me out there with them.”

That took Neville aback. She could see there was an idea coming to light in his mind, and that she wasn’t going to like it.

“Nev, can you come here a minute?” Ginny asked, and he retreated back to the table.

As he sat, Luna stood, skipping over to Aurora. She looped her arm through hers, and gently began to lead her around the room and away from the table.

“Ginny doesn’t feel comfortable leading this little fraction.” Luna explained. “I’m not sure why, really, considering she’s supposed to be you soon.”

Aurora stopped her, turning to look at her blonde friend.
“Oh, was that secret?”

“How did you even know?” Aurora asked in a harsh whisper.

Luna shrugged. “I just do. Like I’ve known a lot of things about you. Like how you and Nev-”

“Don’t finish that sentence.” Aurora pleaded. “Not in this room, not here where he can hear you. Potentially.”

Luna frowned. “Why don’t you want him to know?”

Aurora shook her head. “I don’t know. I want him to figure it out for himself. And I don’t want him trying to fight harder for me to stay.”

“He will, though. Until you finally leave, he will.” Luna said resuming their stroll. “I also know you’ve been wanting to ask me something but didn’t know how. You don’t have to worry, you know. You can ask me anything, I’ll never think you’re using me. I know there are some things you and Ginny don’t tell us because you can’t. If Daddy wasn’t so against it, I would have asked to join the order as well. I suppose in a way I am, being here and all.”

Aurora smiled, and as she had done with Neville earlier, she leaned her head on Luna’s shoulder. “In a way, yes.” She then straightened and looked at her whimsical friend. “I need to know if there was ever anything that Rowena Ravenclaw had that might be considered an heirloom of hers. Something really important, like a book or a piece of jewelry.”

“There’s the lost diadem of Ravenclaw.” Luna said with a smile. “You should have known that, Rory. You grew up in Hogwarts. Didn’t your mother read *Hogwarts: A History* all the time?”

Aurora nearly smacked herself in the face. “Bloody hell, how could I have been so stupid?” She asked herself more so than Luna. She then gave Luna a hug. “I’ll be back!” She said, turning and running out the room, ignoring Neville and Ginny’s questions.

—H—

Hermione frowned down at her stomach. Nauseated again, only this time she seemed to figure out that, while the intolerable circumstances were a big part of why she was sick feeling, it was also the really rich foods served in the Great Hall.

“Would it be considered suspicious if Helga suddenly stops eating in the Great Hall?” She asked her husband as he sat behind the Headmaster’s desk, writing out another half dozen detention reports.

“I don’t think anyone would notice, dear one.” He replied absently. “But you do need to eat, now more than ever.”

“I wasn’t about to stop.” Hermione countered. “When I don’t feel like I’ll need to run to the loo at any moment, I’m certain I could out-eat Ronald Weasley.”

“Good to hear that your appetite is as it should be.” He said as he dipped his quill in the ink pot. “How do you plan to continue teaching? The glamour won’t disguise your… condition.”

“I haven’t gotten that far, yet.” She replied with a sigh. “On one hand, everyone already believes
you’re likely having an affair with Mistress Nikola. Alecto is not what one would call quiet, and
greatly lacks the Slytherin quality of subtle.”

“Yes, this is true. However, I think the Dark Lord would find it suspicious that I wasn’t more careful
with a woman who was, indeed, nothing more than my mistress.” He said, making a vicious scrawl
across one of the sheets before him.

“May I make a suggestion?” Dumbledore said behind Severus, and his face darkened as he scowled.

Only half turning to the portrait, Severus sneered, “Suggest we end the pregnancy, and I will burn
you.”

“No, not that. I believe I’ve made enough meddlesome decisions when it comes to your family life.
No, I was going to suggest that, perhaps, Mr Black could take over as Helga.” Dumbledore replied.

“It won’t work,” Hermione shook her head. “He’s keeping the room of requirement safe.”

“And why don’t you replace him?” Dumbledore asked. “Not as a dog, of course. I understand that’s
not a particularly smart idea when one is pregnant.”

“Hermione is thought to be dead.” Severus countered. “Which is why she’s here as the bastard
daughter of my former master. She-” He stopped, suddenly, lifting his hand as if others were also
speaking and needed to cease. “This conversation must be put on hold.”

Hermione frowned, and before she had a chance to ask why, the door banged open, startling her,
terrifying her as she was undisguised.

Aurora was in the doorway, huffing, catching her breath as she shut the door. “Ravenclaw’s
Diadem.” She said, out of breath.

“Aurora, did you run here?” Hermione asked, getting up and catching her daughter as she slid down
the closed door a bit.

“Yeah,” She said. “Because we’ve been stupid! Think about it, what do we know about the
horcruxes?” She asked.

“Excuse me, Miss Snape. The what?” Dumbledore’s portrait asked, a touch of disbelief to his tone.

“Horcruxes,” Aurora said without looking at the former Headmaster. She straightened her uniform as
she straightened herself, then moved on shaky legs to sit on the corner of her father’s desk, much to
his irritation. “Harry said the locket was Slytherin’s, yes? And we all figured out the Dark Lord
likely wanted something from each founder? Well how did we not think of the lost diadem?”

“Because, Rory, it’s there in the name: lost.” Severus countered.

“Yes, but that’s the thing! We know from Hogwarts: A History, that Rowena’s daughter likely stole
it when she ran away from her mother. So where did she run to? Where would it be?”

Severus tapped his fingers on the chair, pursing his lips. He then turned to the portraits behind him.
“Summon the Bloody Baron to me, please.” He said, then looked back to his daughter as all of them
but Dumbledore obeyed him. “How are those in the room?”

Aurora smiled smugly. “Finding hope.”

“Are they?” He asked but did not get an answer as the Bloody Baron floated into the room,
respectfully from the door.

“Headmaster,” She said, his voice echoing.

“You are meant to answer any and all of my questions, are you not?” Severus asked, tapping his finger against his lip.

The baron straightened. “When you were made head of Slytherin, it was my duty then to report to you what I knew, and answer what you ask. It is more so now that you are headmaster.”

“You were sent to fetch young Helena Ravenclaw when she fled, were you not?”

“I was.” He said, and Hermione could tell the poor ghost would have blushed with shame had he not been dead.

“I know the details, merely verifying. Where did you find her?”

“Albania, Headmaster.” The Baron replied. “I had used a locator spell to track down dear Helena. When I found her, she was kneeling by a tree, and I seemed to have startled her. We argued, and then-”

“Baron, I would not make you recall the details. I simply needed to know where you found her. Do you know of where in Albania? Somewhere one might begin to look for something that Helena may have hid there?”

The baron closed his eyes and focused. “It was near the sea, very close to Greece, I believe. I was… I vaguely recall wondering if I would come to have difficulty with the ministry of the region. I believe there was a small village nearby that she had intentions of staying in, or perhaps already was.”

“Thank you, Baron. Have you anything to report on the Slytherins?”

The Baron shook his head. “Nothing new, Headmaster. It is as it was. Less and less are appearing in the common room, and those that are tend to be… twisted of mind, if I were to try and articulate their conversations.”

Severus nodded, the Baron nodded back, and then he left.

Severus then looked to his daughter. “I think you and the boys will know where to search first.”

“Maybe, but they might already have a horcrux they’re searching for. I realize there’s still a month, but-”

“Miss Snape, how do you, or any of you, even know about the Horcrux.”

Severus, his back still turned to his predecessor, gave a half grin of wicked anticipation. “Aurora, please return to where you came from.”

“Yes, Dad.” She said, hopping off the desk. She then glanced to Hermione and smiled. “Good to see you, Mum.”

She chuckled. “Yes, cheeky one. Remember to finish your potions homework, too. You may be helping the revolution, but education still should come first.”

With a sarcastic salute, Aurora left.
When the door was shut, Severus stood, slowly circling his desk, tapping his finger thoughtfully against his lip. “You never had the intention of telling us about them, had you?” He started, looking to the portrait. “It was all part of your little game, wasn’t it? Tell the children all about the horcruxes, or at least Potter. You likely thought he’d tell Ronald Weasley, perhaps Draco, and they would possibly go with him. But let’s not tell the grown-ups, no. It’s not an adventure if everyone works together, is it? It’s not ‘hero building’ if those who are able to can and do help, correct? Only, you see, we all figured it out. A conversation among us all when Potter started sensing the Dark Lord. Remember that bit, Albus? How you brushed it and him off? You did not know he came to me, did you?”

The portrait of Albus Dumbledore was stunned silent, eyebrows high and mouth a touch agape.

“Oh, did you mention the portion where we figured out he likely expected Harry to die, Severus?” Hermione asked.

“No, dear one, I did not. Thank you for reminding me of that. That was your intention, wasn’t it, Albus? To raise the boy like a pig for slaughter? That’s truly why you didn’t want him in the wizarding world, wasn’t it? He’d form bonds with people, and those bonds would lead us all to try and find a way around that little caveat. “

“There is no other way to destroy the horcrux living within Harry. He must die, at the right moment, by Tom’s hand.”

“Oh, must he? The right moment? And when would that be? When the others are all destroyed? Tell us now, Albus, did you know what they were?”

Dumbledore’s mouth moved, but nothing came out. Eventually, the portrait deflated with a scowl. “I did not.” He conceded. “I believed that they were objects that once belonged to the founders of Hogwarts, and I believed that he’d have hidden them in places that meant something to him. Harry and I retrieved the locket on my last day alive.”

“Actually, you retrieved a fake.” Hermione inputted. “Regulus Black defected from the Dark Lord and managed to steal the real locket.”

“Defected? Had I but known?” Dumbledore shook his head.

“He defected for the sake of his house elf, not for your cause. He’d have been a more reluctant spy than I.” Severus retorted. “Now, be gone. I have no use for you now.”

Hermione frowned as she watched whatever Dumbledore was about to say die on his lips, but he did not obey the command to leave. He did appear frustrated, which was mildly amusing, but she wondered if he had a sort of clause in his paintings that limited the power the headmasters of the future actually had over him.

“Back to the original topic at hand,” Severus said as she strolled over to her, kneeling in front of her, placing a hand over her abdomen. “What are we going to do when this gets to be a problem?”

She smirked. “Can the glamour make me fat? I could just say I gained a pound or two. Or, maybe, the child isn’t even yours? I am early enough in my pregnancy that we could say you were aware of my condition when we began our affair, but the child belongs to someone else?”

“Oh? Sirius Black, per chance?” He smirked, then frowned thoughtfully. “Much as it pains me to admit it, there may have been a valid argument in having you and Sirius change places. You are thought to be dead, but it’s not as though you are going to leave the school.”
“It may work. But Sirius is utterly horrid at potions.” She countered.

“Horace wasn’t precisely the professor of the year, either. We’ll write down the recipes as I have been teaching them, and then show Sirius the incantation that transfers the recipe to the board in the classroom.”

“Lectures?”

Severus shook his head. “Assign reading. Have them write essays, we will mark them.”

“We? Severus, you have enough on your plate. I think I can manage grading essays while hiding in the room of requirement.”

“Then that’s what will happen.” He conceded. “You don’t normally begin to show until you’re around four or five months along. By then, Aurora will be gone, and she won’t know of the switch.”

Hermione sighed, her chest constricting as her eyes pricked. “Bloody hormones.” She sniffed. “Merlin, I hope we all make it through this, Severus.”

“As do I, love. As do I.”

October 10th, 1997

“No,” Aurora said bluntly to Amycus Carrow as he stared her down. No, she would not turn her wand on anyone, let alone a first year dragged in from Muggle Studies because he corrected Alecto on something she was wrong about. And knowing her and the way she truly thought Muggles behaved, the correction was valid.

“No?” Amycus snapped back.

It wasn’t the first time, or even the dozenth time she’d denied a Carrow an answer or an instruction. And normally it would simply take a haughty tilt of her chin, or a scowl to remind them who she was, and they would back down. But today, she sensed, she would not be that lucky. Neville had come back from his class with Amycus quite beaten but far from broken. He and Seamus boldly flaunted their wounds, telling their stories of insulting and belittling the Professor for the whole Great Hall to hear. Others had chipped in, offering tales from their classes with either of the Carrows until her father called for silence, and reminded them that it was meal time.

But that didn’t take away the hateful, vengeful looks the Carrows gave the students. It was only a matter of time before one of them would reach their limit with her, and it would appear that for the male of the siblings, that would be today.

Aurora carried on as she normally would.

“Yes, that is what I said. I know how to repeat it in French, but I think that might confuse you more.”

There was a titter through the classroom, and the poor firstie looked at Aurora like he was about to see her killed.
Amycus threw the student he was holding by the collar on the floor and took a menacing step closer to Aurora. She tilted her chin, meeting his gaze.

Ginny and one of the Slytherin girls managed to direct the firstie out the door as discreetly as possible while Amycus was distracted. It was because of the little boy’s escape that Aurora allowed the leering gaze the inbred half-twit dared give her. Something on her hand drew his focus, and when she glanced down to see what it was, he snatched her left hand and brought it close enough to his face that his hot breath lingered on her fingers.

“I must respect authority.” He said with a sneering grin. “Heard about Umbridge, thought that black quill o’ hers was a right good idea. I can think of all kinds of things to have people write out to be punished with.”

“But you’re not able to spell, so how in the world would you know it was done right?” Aurora said as she pulled back her hand. “Now, you will not touch me again. My father will hear about this.”

There was a snicker in the corner of the room where the Slytherins sat, but a darting scowl from their supposed professor silenced it. He then turned back to Aurora, smiling, teeth more yellowed and crooked than even her father’s. And what was his excuse for such a thing? Her dad was raised poor in the muggle world, his teeth grew in that way.

“You’re a little Princess, aren’t you?” He said. “Daddy’s king of Hogwarts up in that office, and here’s his precious little girl, mouthing off to authority because she knows we can’t touch her. But you know what princesses have? Whipping boys. Someone to take their beatings for them so they don’t have to have their pretty skin marred. Now, let me see….”

Quicker than she’d ever seen him move, Amycus Carrow grabbed Ginny by the arm and pulled her in front of him, his wand pressed to her neck. “How many lashes, princess? Fifty? Seventy-five?”

Aurora’s heart pounded in her eyes as she looked her best friend in the eye. She knew what she should do, because Ginny Weasley was considered a blood traitor, and already had enough infractions to her name that she could never be written off as different than her family. Aurora knew she should shrug, be unaffected, wave him off to do what he must to her friend because she wasn’t supposed to truly be friends with her.

Ginny stood firm, brave, lips quivering slightly as she repeatedly mouthed, “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

Aurora inhaled. “I also heard him tell you that anything that causes my displeasure would mean your punishment as well. If you must lash out at someone, do so on me.”

“I hit you, it’s my neck.”

“You hit her it’s your head, and I will be sure of it.”

“Fine.” Carrow said, shoving Ginny aside. He was tensed, coiled, but straightened his robes and turned to face the board.

Ginny straightened her own robes, slowly returning to where she was standing before, looking warily between Aurora and the Carrow. She shook her head, and Aurora could practically hear her berating her for being so stupid. For risking appearing to be anything but the perfect Death Eater’s daughter.

It was the collective gasps that caught her attention long before the sting of her cheek, looking as she was to her friend and not to her professor. The warm feeling of trickling liquid ran down her cheek, and Aurora raised her hand and flinched away as she felt the deep gash across her cheek.
“I hope it scars.” Carrow grumbled, probably thinking she couldn’t hear him, but she had.

“She refused to let me beat the blood traitor for her, Sir. Swear it.” Amycus Carrow pleaded, his sister, extra limb of his that she was, stood just behind him and had the audacity to appear as though she were somehow the better of the pair of them.

“The last of our brothers to touch my daughter was placed under a tickling charm for an hour. He wet himself, twice, in front of everyone at the gathering. Do you remember that, Amycus? The others who allowed Potter to escape were given the cruciatus, of course. But our Lord has allowed me, his favorite, his right hand, to punish those who wrong me. He punched her, left a bruise. She was marred, cut. If she scars, I’ll have a harder time marrying her off to a worthy family come June.”

“I’ll marry her, sir.” Amycus immediately offered.

“Will you? I thought you were already promised to Alecto?”

The witch laughed, a snorting, pig like laugh that had her bending at the waist.

“Silence!” He snapped, and she ceased abruptly. He turned his attention back to Carrow. “If Aurora has no desire to do the demonstrations, she will not. I’m sure you have enough volunteers among the student body for you to not force the task upon every student. I will allow this… incident to pass. This. Once. Harm her again, either of you, and I will have you at the end of her wand. And believe me when I say she has learned how to place pain and suffering without ever having to resort to the blunt, simplistic use of Unforgivables. Leave.” He dismissed them, and while Amycus quickly got up and scrambled for the door, Alecto lingered.

He attempted to ignore her.

“Headmaster,” She said in what he assumed was a tone meant to entice.

“I do believe I said to leave,” he said to the assorted papers on his desk.

“It’s just… you seem tense.” She said, slowly moving toward him.

“Which is why I expect Professor Nikola to be up here shortly. To help relieve some of the tension. Leave.” He said again, looking up at the witch expectantly.

“Why would you wish to have such a … lesser witch for your-”

“Stop.” He raised his hand. “Alecto, you attract me as a Knockturn alley whore would attract a unicorn. Not at all. Leave.”

Alecto turned, her cheeks reddened and head hung low. She finally left, and his shoulders sagged before he shuddered violently.
“Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Ginny said after she jabbed Aurora in the cheek for the third time.

Wincing, Aurora sucked in a breath through her teeth, allowing Neville to squeeze her hand even if it didn’t hurt that badly. But it had started to bruise as well, and that wasn’t something her father’s spell would fix. Seal the wound, retract the blood, remove the dark magic, absolutely. But the bruise would need paste.

“You don’t actually have to touch it, Gin.” She reminded, attempting to smirk before the swollen cut made her wince again.

“I’m proud.” Neville said, and she shifted her gaze to him. He’d been patched up, by her and Ginny, looking better than he had at lunch. He beamed at her. “You standing up to them? Not letting them take it out on Ginny.”

“I wasn’t about to let her take up some medieval position because of who I am. I can take worse.”

“It might scar.” Ginny said, worrying a bit.

“Pretty sure I can handle it.” Aurora smirked, then frowned. “Alright, try again. I can take worse, but it still bloody hurts.”

“Let me do it!” Leo said, exasperated.

“Ginny has to learn.” Aurora countered. Ginny began the enchantment again, and Aurora closed her eyes as she felt her friend’s magic attempt to heal her again. It was comforting, soothing, and she felt herself relaxing as her skin mended. After a time, Ginny stopped, sighed, touched Aurora’s cheek.

No pain, at least none like before.

“It did scar, just a little.” She said regretfully. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Aurora replied. “Do you have bruise paste? Did your brothers send any?”

“Yeah, their blend.” She said getting up and moving to the other side of the room of requirement where the enchanted tapestry, continually updating the students and their punishments, hung above a large trunk filled with healing salves, potions, and anything else that might be needed to heal.

“Let me see?” Neville asked, gently turning her head with his other hand, not letting go of her as he turned her gently by the chin. He inspected her cheek, gently running his fingers over where the gash had been. “Not too bad. You’re not going to be the next Harry for scar infamy.”

“That one is pretty hard to beat.” She agreed, attempting to withdraw her hand. Neville relented, though she could tell he didn’t want to.

“Got the paste,” Ginny said as she returned.

“Wait!” Leo said, holding up his hand and reaching for the paste Ginny opened. He brought the jar to his nose and sniffed. He frowned. “I didn’t brew it.”

“How can you tell?” Ginny asked.

“I add a touch of mint to the brew when I make it. Fred and George never remember, but it does speed the healing a touch more than their formula had. And, admittedly, they had a good formula.”

“You actually brew for them?” Neville asked.
“Did you just pay the twins a compliment?” Aurora asked, more surprised than Neville over the words coming from her brother.

He shrugged. “Luna told me I should be nicer to them. Something about maybe regretting not doing so someday. I tend to listen to her, she has an eerie way of being correct despite her nonsense about … Wrackspurts.” He said with a curl of his lip.

“Where is Luna tonight?” Neville asked, seeming to suddenly realize that they were missing someone.

“She’s with Theo.” Ginny said as she took the pot of paste back from Leo and began to dab it along Aurora’s cheek.

“Doing what?” Neville asked.

Ginny smirked. “I didn’t ask, but she seemed to be looking forward to it.”

“Isn’t Theo… ya know? Like Harry?”

“I think Theo is one step above Harry.” Aurora said. “Blaise is like Harry.”

“What the bloody hell are you lot going on about?” Leo asked.

“You don’t want to know.” She retorted, smiling at her put out brother.

“Most likely.” Leo said, turning and heading toward a group of bag chairs and plopping down, reaching over the side and grabbing a book.

Aurora watched him for a long moment, drinking in the simplistic image of her brother reading. “Look after him for me, please?” She asked her friends without looking at them.

“Gladly,” Ginny said. “I wish my brothers were more like yours sometimes. Oh!” She said, and Aurora turned sharply toward her, only to have Ginny turn her head back the other way. “Paste worked better than I thought it did. Bruise is already gone.”

“Huh,” Aurora said, but somehow, she wasn’t surprised at all.

November 2nd, 1997

She’d vomited twice before she started her sixth-year potion class. She wanted to blame the pregnancy, and maybe that was a big part of it, but Hermione doubted it. She was sure it had everything to do with the knowledge that it might very well be the last time she saw her daughter alive. And it would be as a different woman who couldn’t show affection. It would be as a woman who would regard Aurora Snape as nothing more than a student, and the daughter of her lover.

Hermione set them to brew and simply stared at her eldest, recalling the first time she stood behind a cauldron. Four, and Severus had hovered over her like she was going to explode the thing at any
moment simply by looking at it. She recalled her first day of muggle school, and how excited she
was to have a little brother until she suddenly wasn’t. She remembered Severus lamenting her turning
thirteen, relaying how he watched her in his class that day and couldn’t reconcile having a teenage
daughter. She’d laughed at him, because it was so unlike him, or them, to get maudlin over silly
things like that.

And here she was, doing the same as she realized that, come midnight, her daughter would be an
adult witch. The trace would be gone, and so would she. Off to who knew where with the boys.
Boys, she recalled, who were reckless even with Draco’s rational influence.

“Professor Nikola,” Ginny Weasley spoke.

“Yes,” She said, turning to the ginger, only to note that all the students were looking at her
expectantly, bottled potions on their work stations next to their cauldrons. Well, if transfiguring
herself into any wouldn’t be bad for the baby, she might have considered becoming a cat.
Apparently, she could completely forget herself and time itself. “Dismissed, I will gather the
potions.”

The class began to file out as Hermione shook her head at herself, turning to grab the collection
basket off the desk before suddenly realizing that they were leaving.

“Miss Sna-“ She stopped short as she turned back around to find Aurora waiting for her.

“I wasn’t going to go without saying anything.” She said when the door closed. She then came over,
wrapping Hermione in a hug that she quickly returned.

Hermione sniffed. “I’m proud of you, you know that, don’t you?” She asked, leaning back so she
could cup her daughter’s face with both hands. “I’m so proud of who you are and what you’ve
become. I know I’ve been hard on you and had stupid expectations. But I am so, so proud.”

“I know.” Aurora nodded. “Still don’t know what I’m doing when this is over.”

Hermione chuckled, sniffing again, eyes clouding with tears. “It’s alright, Love. Plenty of time.” She
blINKed, and realized Aurora was frowning at her. “What is it, Poppet?”

“You’re not normally this emotional.” Aurora noted. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

The simple question made her heart ache, and without thinking, Hermione placed her hand on her
abdomen. “No,” She sniffed. “No, it’s just….”

“The war. Yeah, Bloody treat, that.” Aurora smirked. “Just… be safe.”

“You too, love.” Hermione said, kissing her daughter on the forehead. “Now go, don’t be late for
Aunt Min’s class.”

Aurora nodded, gripping Hermione’s wrists, giving them a squeeze before returning to her desk,
grabbing her bag, and leaving the classroom.

After Aurora left, Hermione promptly vomited a third time, feeling like she was truly letting a part of
her soul leave the world without a clue as to what might happen to it.
He felt their eyes on the back of his head, and he frowned at his plate. Why were the Hufflepuffs staring at him? Again? It was sporadic at first, throughout September, and he chalked it up to morbid fascination. He was the son of the dreaded Headmaster, who was running a school under the orders of the Dark Lord. He was friends with a muggleborn from their house who never returned. But the more the year went on, the more they did it, and there were more of them doing it. He’d guess about a dozen of them were doing it now. He just wanted to eat his dinner!

Turning, he put on his most Snape-like scowl and glared at them. They smiled.

Smiled! The nerve of the lot of them.

“Leo,” Aurora said as she came up to him. He noted she did a double take at the cete, confused by it all as he was, and then turned back to him. “Can I speak to you a moment?”

“I haven’t finished eating.” He replied. “It’s been a bit… difficult to do so.” There was a flash of hurt in Aurora’s eyes as she nodded, and it suddenly hit him why she would want to talk to him. “Can you go to Dad’s classroom, and I will meet you there?” He asked her, and she was taken aback.

“Umm, yes, of course.” She shook her head. “I’ll see you there in a bit.” She glanced at the badgers again, then left.

Leo attempted to resume his meal.

Spoon to mouth, consume soup, attempt to ignore them. Repeat. Add the addition of bread, and figure one more of the yellow ties were at least glancing at him.

He turned toward them again, and this time one of them had the audacity to wave at him. Wave! Wait, why were they waving at him? This didn’t correlate to anything he could possibly have done. He did not speak to any of them, at least not outside the room of requirement. And the most those interactions entailed was “where and how does it hurt?”

Not knowing what else to do, he gave a subtle wave back. There were smiles, a tittering of laughter, and his spine straightened as he whipped back around and focused on his meal. He was starting to get a headache from keeping as much of his reactions and emotions tucked away throughout the day. The last thing he needed was to be a mockery of some kind.

When his setting was cleared, he rose, heading straight for the exit without looking at anyone, determined to make it to his sister before she would have to leave for the tower.

“Umm…. Leo, right?” A voice behind him stopped him, and he instantly had his wand in his hand. Uncle Sirius had admitted to being his father’s bully in their much younger days, and the reason behind it. No, he wasn’t a Slytherin, and he might have had a better upbringing than most. But he was smart and awkward and aware of it, so after only having Jane for a friend for so long, he suspected a bully would crop up eventually.

The boy he spoke he realized was the same one he ratted out last month for trying to brew with a broken arm. He tightened his grip on his wand.

“Umm, look. I just… what you do for us. We, umm… we appreciate it. Jane always said you were good. Well, actually she said you were incredibly sweet and sort of handsome, but we always just figured she fancied you quite a bit. Umm, but, anyway. So… so thanks, and um…”
“I do need to go meet my sister.” Leo said to the stuttering boy.

“Just… thanks. And, you know, if you need us to, we’ll have your back.”

Leo tried to see if there was any way he could be bluffing or trying to trap him for a Carrow. But, really, that would be far above the thinking capacity of the two dunderheads supposedly teaching the youths of tomorrow. Leo smirked, nodding to the boy before turning and heading to the abandoned classroom by the hospital wing.

He noted that Nearly Headless Nick was hovering outside, and that had him hesitate. But when the ghost spotted him, he nodded, his head flopping more than it normally would, and he waved him inside.

Leo entered, glancing back out the door before closing it and turning to his sister.

She was sitting on one of the tables and patted the spot next to her. “I haven’t been in here since Draco figured out mum’s secret.” She said as he joined her. “Then Professor Lupin came in, and he thought… well, I suppose he thought what most professors would think when they see two teenagers together in a room.”

“Something I have yet to fully understand the appeal of.” Leo said, smirking as his sister chuckled.

“I used magic on Dad here. Disarmed him. He was so beside himself when he came in, seeing me with Professor Lupin. Draco had left by then, so I think Dad just jumped to the worst conclusion. It was a pretty bad year for him.”

“Is there a point to this trip down memory lane?” Leo asked.

“No at all, just… I saw mum and dad’s initials on the table, and I was momentarily homesick. I haven’t even left yet.” She turned to him then, taking a fortifying breath. “Be good while I’m gone. And respect Ginny like you would me, got it?”

“I know,” He conceded.

“And be safe, please! Don’t do anything reckless.”

“Like you?” He asked, gesturing to the fading scar on her cheek.

“Yes, like me.” She conceded. Then her eyes watered, and she blinked, looking away. “And know that I love you, okay? I don’t say it often, none of us in this family do. But I do. So, take care of yourself and be safe, and just… survive.”

Leo looked at his sister, his big, brave sister. He watched her take on Death Eaters with the twins and heard what had happened at the ministry. She flew on a broom and swatted bludgers, all while earning herself a reputation for being small but fearsome. He never fully realized how proud of her he was until now, nor realized how much the sentiment was returned.

And she was scared, just a little.

“You survive, too.” He demanded. “Don’t do something stupid, okay?”

She snorted. “Harry and Ron leading, bound to be something idiotic,” She smirked, going for levity, and it nearly worked.

“Then stop them.” He said.
“I’ll try.” She said, hoping off the table and hugging him. “And make sure mum’s good, too, okay? Something’s off with her.”

“You noticed, too?” He asked.

She nodded. “Whatever it is, she won’t say. It can’t be that bad, or mum and dad would have told us, but still.” She shrugged as she stepped back. “Make sure they eat.”

“Bloody hell, Rory, I’m one person!”

“So, get your fan club to help,” She countered.

He rolled his eyes and hopped down from the table. “Are you not going to the room tonight?”

“No,” She shook her head. “I have to make sure I have everything, and what needs to be left behind will be. Nev and Gin might be there for a bit.”

He groaned at the mention of the Dunderhead. “What did you ever see in him? And please tell me all those little interactions I’ve seen doesn’t mean….”

“There’s a war, Leo. I’m not with anyone.”

“Good. I think. But then… what was that thing with Fred?”

She paled. “What thing?”

Leo blinked, suddenly recalling George saying to never say a word about finding she and Fred in Fred’s bed.

“Leo, what thing!” She demanded.

“Nothing.” He said, knowing he was caught out anyway. “Just… Pretend I said nothing. Merlin knows I hardly think about it. You likely don’t either.”

She blushed.

“Or you do, it’s not business.”

“You didn’t say anything to Mum or Dad, did you?” She grumbled as they headed toward the door.

“I’m not an idiot, Aurora. I like Fred, I wouldn’t do something I know full well would lead him to a painful death at our father’s hands.”

“Good.” Aurora said, stopping at the door and looking down at him. She reached out and ruffled his hair. “Bye, Leo.”

“Bye, Rory.” He returned with a nod, and remained in the classroom, watching his sister leave.

“———A———

“You have everything?” Ginny asked as they, along with Neville and Luna, were in the Gryffindor
common room. It was ten to midnight, and time was up. She would need to leave, and soon.

“Yes,” Aurora said, shouldering her backpack. “You have my hair brush?”

“Tucked away in my nightstand drawer, warded.” Ginny nodded.

Aurora nodded as well, glancing around the room again.

“You can’t stay, Aurora. They need you.” Luna said, stepping up and hugging her tight. “We’ll see each other soon.”

“Will we, though?” She asked, her voice cracking just a bit.

“Of course.” Luna said as she stepped back, an honest, calm smile on her lips. “And before you know it, we’ll all be back here at Hogwarts together.”

“I’d like to believe that, but it might be a stretch.” Ginny said. “But don’t worry about it. Go look after the boys.” Ginny said, shooing her away before stepping up and giving her a hug. “And happy birthday, few minutes early anyway.”

Aurora laughed as she and Ginny rocked together before stepping apart. She sniffed. “Yeah, of course.”

Neville shifted about, glancing at Ginny and Luna sideways.

“I think Neville wants us to give he and Aurora space.” Luna said as she took Ginny’s arm. “Come, I’m quite tired, and there’s no way I would make it back to Ravenclaw tower without getting caught. And I’ve always wanted to sleep over here.”

Ginny chuckled and then, after a small wave and a lingering moment, she led their best friend up the stairs, to likely sleep in Aurora’s bed.

Neville watched them go before taking her hands in his. “Stay.” He said simply.

“I can’t.” She said, shaking her head a tiny bit.

“Of course, you can;” He smirked. “You just put down your bag and don’t go.”

“Neville,” She started to argue.

“We need you here, too.” He said, squeezing her hands gently.

“I think you want to say that you need me here.” She countered, and he had the decency to look chagrined. “My place isn’t here.” She said, looking to the corner of the sofa instead of at him. “It’s out there with the others.”

“Why can’t it be here? With me? With—with Gin?”

She smiled sadly. “Because I can’t keep up the appearance anymore, Nev. I can’t, it’s not in me. I’m going to out my father, or he’s going to have to disown me in the eyes of the Death Eaters. That little stunt I pulled last month with Gin? The one that earned me this scar? It’s going to get worse. And I don’t mean for me, because I don’t care about that. But I won’t throw away twenty years of my father’s hard work because I can’t act the part perfectly. With me gone….”

“Please.” Neville said, cupping her face. “Please.”
“No,” She said, getting on her toes and attempting to kiss his cheek, catching the corner of his mouth and part of his lips when he turned his head. “Bye, Neville.” She said, then darted for the door before he could react.

Aurora shut the door as quietly as possible, noting the sad look on the Fat Lady’s face. She frowned, finding it odd for a moment before she figured that the portraits likely heard the plans for a while now.

She crept through the castle minutes before midnight, disillusioned, silencing charm on her shoes. It was dark but for the moonlight creeping through the windows. The castle was assisting, it seemed, keeping the stairs moving precisely where and when she needed them.

The entrance hall came upon her quicker than she was expecting, and Aurora paused.

She looked up to the ceiling, remembering when she and Luna had laid on the floor and looked upon the map of the solar system before her father hurried them away. She remembered watching Fred coming toward her with that self-assured smirk she hated that she liked as he asked her on their first date. She recalled coming up from the dungeons on a nervous Neville’s arm, feeling older than she was.

She had stood in this spot more times than many, had more memories of this room from being no more than three, coming in from the forbidden forest, holding her father’s hand, to this moment alone in the dark minutes before her seventeenth birthday. So many people called Hogwarts their home, but so few understood what it was like to have truly lived here. And now she was leaving.

Somewhere within the walls, a clock began to strike twelve, and she carried on.

She rushed across the grounds, not wanting to risk getting caught at this point, knowing it would be that much more difficult to try again. Aurora could have sworn she’d seen a light near the gate and froze for a moment. But she watched the spot and saw nothing, so she continued on, reaching the gate, and hoping the door would move when her hand wrapped around it.

“Wait.” Her father’s voice had her yelp, swearing her heart had gone into her stomach, frozen in spot while her body twitched with the startle. She looked to her left, only just noticing his opposing figure in the dark just three feet away. “Dad,” She gasped out.

“If you thought I would allow you to leave without at least saying happy birthday, you are terribly mistaken.” He reached into his robes and pulled out a box. “Tradition dictated that a watch is given on this occasion. Your mother and I have had this set aside since before you started Hogwarts, but we have added some special enchantments to it.” He explained as Aurora opened the black, velvet box to reveal the rose gold and silver watch inside, the moonlight shining on the band and numberless watch face. “Should you need to return, for whatever reason, simply say cor domus. It will also act as protean charm, in which you can communicate with myself and your mother.”

“Handy.”

“Indeed.” He gave her a sad quirk of the lips, then handed her a bag. “While I trust Draco to have packed provisions, I do not trust Weasley nor Potter have not gone easy with them.”

“Thank you.” She said, taking it and placing it inside her expanded satchel.

“Ensure that Potter keeps his mouth shut when it comes to the Dark Lord’s name. I’m aware Dumbledore was liberal with it, but to do so now will cause disaster.”
“I’ll remind him.” She said, glancing at the castle briefly to ensure no one was coming.

When she looked back at her Dad, the sight took her aback and made her heart ache. She could have sworn there were tears in his eyes, which only made the pained expression he wore that much worse.

“Be safe.” He said, stepping closer and pulling her into his arms. He held her like something precious, her head cradled in his hand while his strong arm held her about the waist. “Never in my life would I have thought you’d be safer outside these walls. Never in my worst nightmares had I thought you were better off away from me.” He gasped. “I love you, Rory. Remember that whatever happens, I love you more than my own life.”

“She said, feeling the lump in her throat growing bigger by the second. He kissed her forehead much like her mother had, and then the hand on her head left. She heard the gate open as she pressed her head against his chest, feeling the scratch of the wool, hearing his heart beat, breathing in that herb and smoke smell that she’d always associated with her father. Aurora felt the hand at her back gently push her toward the gate, and once she was past it, it shut between him and her.

She took in the sight of him, worried she would never see it again. He looked like hell, but he was still her Dad. He was half of home.

Aurora took her wand, summoned the bravery she was supposed to have in abundance, and touched it to the ring on her right hand.

The world swirled and rippled, twisted and compressed before expanding and righting itself in a whole new spot.

There was a tent, and a campfire, and three boys sitting around it momentarily stunned. But she didn’t see it long, for her first breath in this new location turned into a sob from the ache in her heart.

Severus felt the single tear escape his eye before he raised his occlumency and forced his grief, anger, worry, and pain of loss behind it. He had to believe she would be fine, and that sending his little girl out into who knew where with three teenage boys was the best option for her.

He also knew that there was someone watching, someone he knew had been keeping an eye on him from the moment he arrived at the gate to await Aurora’s departure.

“I trust, Hagrid, that that has satisfied you? You trust Minerva now when she says it is all a ruse?”

The half giant lumbered out of the shadows. He had the decency to look shamefaced, but Severus could also detect the ache he knew was lingering at seeing Aurora leave.

“Apologeties, Headmaster.”

“I’ll need you to take a Wand Oath that you will not repeat what you saw to anyone who does not know the truth. As far as anyone here not aware is concerned, Aurora is still here, though her attendance will be sparse.”

Hagrid pulled his pink umbrella out from where it was tucked in his belt. “You’ll have it.”
“Good.” Severus nodded, looking back to the gate. Apparently, there were some pains that even occlumency couldn’t completely contain. “Perhaps we can proceed in your hut. I believe you keep a strong fire whiskey? I could use a night cap.”

“Right this way,” Hagrid said, and just this once, Severus allowed the pity he’d caught in those normally warm brown eyes.

Chapter End Notes

So, this took me longer to get out than I thought it would. Hopefully not as long for the next one.
Until next time.
“Breathe, Rory, breathe.” Draco tried to soothe her, rubbing her back, trying to coax her up at the same time. But she just couldn’t stop, not now that the flood gates were open. Apparating had her drawing her attention away from occlumency, and once it had, that had been it. Aurora was a mess.

“It’s alright, you’re safe.” Harry said from somewhere nearby, his hand on her back, too, but her mind couldn’t figure out where he’d have been.

“She’s gonna pass out if we don’t do something.” Ron said, genuine worry in his voice.

“What do you think we’re trying to do, here, Weasel?” Draco snapped back.

“Nothing that’s doing any such good.” Ron retorted.

“Guys, please, not now.” Harry sighed, exasperated.

“He started it,” Draco and Ron said in unison, and suddenly, the sobs changed to laughter. Then laughter became hysterics.

Because wasn’t this exactly how everyone knew it would go? Harry being the peacekeeper between his best friend and his boyfriend, who were from rival families?

“Oh, Merlin, she’s lost it.” Ron said. “Splinched her brain.”

“Can’t splinch your brain,” Draco replied. “And if you did, your whole head would be gone, so it wouldn’t matter.”

Aurora continued to laugh, and through the blur of her tears, she noted Harry smirking.

“Has it been that bad?” He asked.

“You have no bloody idea.” Aurora replied, rubbing roughly at her eyes.

“How’s Gin?” Ron asked with a nervous lilt, and Aurora turned toward him.

“Surviving.” She said, knowing as an older sibling herself that sugarcoating or lying would do him no good. “She’s getting ready to take over as we talked about in the meetings.”

“Hogwarts?” Harry asked, and Aurora turned to him.

“Hell.” She said, gesturing to her cheek. “It’s a war, even there. The Carrows, the death eaters that were assigned to teach, are utterly horrid. They seem to get their jollies from torturing those who
oppose them in such small, simple ways. And the more who rebel, the more who put their foot down and say no, the worse it is. Dad’s trying, sending people to Hagrid, or Mum, or Aunt Min, but they sneak it. If they think they can get away with it, they’ll punish the students how they see fit.” She sniffed, “I had to leave. I was going to blow Dad’s cover if I didn’t.” She sniffed, then cleared her throat, noting she was sounding raspy. “The twins took off.”

“I know,” Ron said with a proud sort of grin. “They’ve been hosting Potterwatch with Lee.”

“Potterwatch?” Aurora said, frowning.

“Yeah, a way to keep the faith, now that the ministry’s always reporting all the wrong stuff, nothing real. Took it up when they went on the run, I wager. No way they’d do it if the shop was still going.” Ron frowned. “How’d ya know if you didn’t know about Potterwatch?”

“Fred wrote me,” She replied as Draco got up, heading to the fire. “George wrote Gin.”

“Sirius?” Harry asked as Draco returned to them with a cup of what she guessed was tea.

He handed it to her, and she sipped the hot liquid before replying to Harry. “He was the guardian of the room of requirement when I left. He was hanging around the grounds, but I think he got fed up with Hagrid trying to adopt him.”

“The guardian of what?” Draco asked, glancing at Harry.

The three boys frowned at one another as Aurora took another sip. “The room of requirement.” She replied. “Neville’s got it all set up so no one who supports a Carrow can enter, nor anyone who supports them or the Dark Lord. It’s a safe haven for all the houses, away from those who are for the new order. You need to sign a waiver to stay, of course. A jinx like Gin had for the DA, but… it was Theo Nott’s idea.”

Draco smiled. “Knew there wasn’t any way he was a real Death Eater.”

“Unless it’s a set up.” Ron countered.

“You heard Aurora, it’s been set up by Neville.” Harry said, giving a look to Ron that was clearly a warning of some variety.

She glanced between them. “What’s been going on here?” She asked.

The three of them exchanged a loaded look, Harry appearing all the world like it was the last thing he wanted to relive.

“It’s been….”

“Dreadful,” Draco said.

“Bullocks,” Ron added.

“Not the best.” Harry agreed. “We started off trying to head south, away from Hogwarts.”

“Which was fine until I imagine it was realized we weren’t in attendance.” Draco sighed, rubbing his nose. “We tried to stay at a muggle motel.”

“Didn’t work out so well.” Ron said. “Couple of pure bloods who never had to live without magic.”

“You’ve been seventeen for an all of eight months,” Aurora snorted. “As the oldest, mind. Not like
“You could use magic outside school.”

“You would think that they’d be used to it,” Harry agreed with a smirk. “But Ron had Molly to cook up a meal in no time, and Draco just had to ask the house elves.”

“And why couldn’t you use magic there?” She asked, taking another sip of her tea.

The boys exchanged another look. “We were trying to blend in.” Draco confessed. “Only it turned out we weren’t the only wizards there.”

“A family with muggleborns.” Harry said.

“Youngest had some accidental magic.” Ron said. “Worst is, they knew what it was, and that it shouldn’t happen.”

“Uncle Severus was mentioned.” Draco added.

“We were in the motel lobby. Smallest one was throwing a fit. He wanted crisps.” Harry said, shaking his head.

A sinking feeling began to fall on Aurora’s shoulders. “Please tell me there wasn’t a blonde girl.”

Harry met her eyes with surprise.

“Please tell me they got out.” She said, looking to Draco who solemnly shook his head.

“We tried to stop the snatchers.” He said, resting a hand on her shoulder. “But-”

“Malfoy went for self-preservation.” Ron glared.

“I went for protecting Harry!” Draco retorted. “Sorta need him to fulfill the prophecy set in motion, and what’s more, we have a job to do!”

“They were kids!” Ron shouted back.

“I’m aware, Weasel! And one of those kids was Leo’s friend. Think I like having that on my conscious?”

“We don’t know what happened to them,” Harry growled. “The Dad pulled out a gun before Draco apparated us away.”

“To his mum’s place, of all spots.” Ron rolled his eyes.

“Like the first place you’d have thought of would have been somewhere other than the Burrow?” Draco retorted.

“Narcissa allowed us to stay for a time, but then… well….”

“Bloody France, Aurora!” Ron grumbled. “French everywhere! An’ not like Harry or me knew a translations spell.”

“Vous pauvre bouffon,” Aurora retorted, and Draco snickered at the shock on Ron’s face.

“Seriously?”

“My mother was supposed to be a daughter of a French witch,” Aurora shrugged. “She had Leo and
I learn.”

“So, we left France. Wasn’t really the best place for us to be, anyway.” Harry shrugged.

“They’re actually trying their best to stay out of it.” Draco added. “Hearing us talk had them glaring and palming their wands.”

“So, you lot decided to go camping in the middle of …. Where?” Aurora asked, draining her cup.

Draco took it from her. “Same place Aunt H used to take us when we were kids.”

“The Forest of Dean,” She said. “Why?”

“Why not.” He shrugged.

“We’ve been trying to figure some things out.” Harry said. “For instance, we know where the locket is.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” Aurora asked.

“Because… not like we really know how to get it short of storming the ministry.”

“And that is suicide.” Draco proclaimed from just inside the tent.

“I’d have to agree.” Aurora sighed.

“Where’s your Gryffindor bravery?” Ron asked.

“Sitting comfortable with my common sense.” Aurora said. “What was your big plan? Polyjuice?”

Harry blushed, Ron shifted from one foot to another.

“Yes, their big idea was Polyjuice.” Draco said as he returned to them. “Steal hairs from some ministry worker, knock’em out, and then pose as them.”

“Oh yes, that sounds brilliant.” Aurora said sarcastically as she got up, glancing over at Ron and down at Harry. “And suppose said ministry worker was, say, being investigate for something? Or tasked to do something you couldn’t stomach? You could ruin their lives for the sake of an hour.”

“The ministry is mostly Death Eaters,” Harry countered.

“Mostly, but not all.” Aurora reminded. She then sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Look, I’m here, and I’m with Draco on this. But I can’t think right now, I’m knackered. Just… just… where’s the locket? You say you need to storm the ministry to get it, but where is it? Department of ministries?”

Harry grimaced. “Around Umbridge’s neck.”

—S—

It was bizarre, seeing Aurora down at the Gryffindor table, knowing full well it was not Aurora. Longbottom kept eyeing her warily, clearly unsure how to approach this new version of his former
flame. Lovegood carried on a conversation with Ginevra the same way she always would, with their backs to one another. Yet, he could hear her calling her Rory, so she was following the rouse as much as she could for appearance sake.

He felt Hermione’s magic wash over him, and he barely doted his eyes toward her.

“This isn’t right,” she said in the fake accent. “This isn’t right when it’s not our daughter.”

“That may be,” he replied without looking at her. “But until the holidays, this is the best option for keeping both girls as safe as possible.”

After a pause, he risked a better look at his wife, her disguise doing little to hide her heartbreak.

“How was she?”

“Brave.” He replied, “keeping herself together for our sake as much as her own.”

“I should have been there,” Hermione said. And he subtly shook his head.

“It was risky enough my being there. Hagrid was watching, we’re lucky he was the only one.”

“I know.” She relented.

Her magic was canceled, and the noise of the Great Hall came over him a bit louder than it had before. He glanced over the student body, trying to figure out how many were missing, how much of the day’s breakfast was being sent to the room of requirement.

“Headmaster.” Minerva’s cold brogue greeted him, and he inclined his head in his usual acknowledgment. Once she had her tea and toast, awaiting her usual eggs, she asked. “How are you today.”

“Utterly miserable.” He replied, keeping his face passive, thankful for the Carrows’ absence from the morning meal. “And you?”

“Could be better, thank you. Professor Nikola, how are you?”

“Wretched.” Hermione replied in the thick, fake accent that seemed to put emphasis on the word.

“Quite.” Minerva replied, sipping her tea.

Severus glanced down, noting that Filius and Sinistra were having a very animated conversation, Rolanda and Septima a whispered one, and Severus took advantage of their preoccupation.

He cast the muffilato this time, causing Hermione to startle somehow. “Min, I would like for you to send a message to the order.”

“The order?” She asked, taken aback, momentarily forgetting herself and how she was supposed to appear to hate him. “And what should I tell them?”

“To visit Honeydukes, Friday night. Sometime near midnight, I think. The backroom is where they keep the most secret items.”

“And what about anyone wanting to spoil this little venture?” She asked,

“Leave them to me.”
“How’s our plan suicide, but yours isn’t?” Ron asked, pacing in a short line.

“Because ours doesn’t lead Undesirable number one straight into the ministry with nothing more than Polyjuice for protection,” Aurora retorted from where she was sitting on the log, scribbling in a note book her father left her in his bag of provisions.

“Nah, just following Umbridge home, where we’re gonna break in and swoop in and steal from her.” Ron countered.

“It’s not following her home.” Aurora scoffed. “It’s going there and waiting for her. No following required.”

“She’s bound to have wards.” Ron countered.

“Yes, quite likely.” She said glancing at her watch again. She’d sent the request to her father an hour ago, but as she had no idea where his link to the protean charm was, he may not get the message for a bit.

“So, how are we getting past those, hmm?” Ron crossed his arms and peered down at her.

She glanced up to him. “We break them.” She said with a shrug.

“We break them?” His voice ticked up a notch, and she glared at him, shooting a scowl between he and the tent. He glanced at it, becoming a bit pale, before finally sitting down on the log across from her. “Don’t know how you can acknowledge they’re in there… together.”

“Probably because, while I know what they’re likely doing, I don’t particularly care. Why does it bother you so much?”

“Because it’s Malfoy!” Ron said, gesturing to the tent. “Because he was a prat for so long. He’s still a prat!”

“You’re a prat.” Aurora countered. “Don’t think I don’t know how you treated mum before she disappeared. Or forgot how you treat me. Blimey, you still don’t always play nice.”

“Neither do you.” He countered.

“Because you start it, you numpty. Your sister is my best friend, and your… I’m friends with your brothers as well. I like your family just fine, I have no prejudice against them, nor they me. All except you.” She sighed, rubbing her forehead. “Look, Sirius and Dad didn’t always get on well, but now they’re mates. Yes, it took mum bridging the gap for it to happen, as well as Professor Lupin, but they put the stupid house rivalry in the past.”

“Not just about the houses,” Ron sighed. “Malfoys have always treated the Weasleys terribly.”

“So be the better wizards. Start a new way of thinking. Uncle Lu may not ever see you as anything
but a lesser, but it’s just him. Just him, and maybe Aunt Cissy, but after that, it’s Draco. And right now, it’s looking like your best mate is very much not going to let him go. So, deal with it, put the old animosity aside and just… be.”

Ron stared at her thoughtfully. Eventually, he nodded, looking to the ground between his feet. “Mione would have said the same, I’m sure.”

“Well, she did raise me.” Aurora quipped, causing Ron to smirk.

Her watch vibrated then, startling her as it wasn’t something she’d expected. She glanced at the face and saw the address of the witch in question appear in a color slightly off from the rest of the watch. She beamed, then quickly turned to a blank page at the back of the book and jotted down the address before it faded. She smiled at Ron.

“He had it!?” He asked.

“Hogwarts has the information for all the staff that worked there. Even if she had relocated, it would have updated automatically, as it’s linked with the ministry.”

“Bloody hell, so … so we can go there and… what, exactly?”

“Well, I imagine we would probably go in, stun her, swap the lockets… what happened to the one Harry had gotten? The fake?”

“Gave it to Kretcher. Belonged to Sirius’ brother, after all. Poor thing was so grateful, he ended up packing double the food we asked him to.”

“Oh, how sweet. Stupid, but sweet.” Aurora said.

“Why?” Ron asked. “Double the food, Aurora.”

“Yes, but we could have used the locket to replace the one Umbridge has. Now we have to copy it, and since it is a horcrux, it might not let us do so that easily.”

“You’re ‘Mione’s kid, don’t you have a copy of *Hogwarts: A History* in that bag o’yours? Bound to be a picture of the locket in there you can make ahead.” He asked, gesturing to the bag at her side.

“I’ve no idea. Doubt it, though.” She said to the bag before looking at Ron. “Tell you the truth, I hated the bloody thing. She made us read it, of course, long before we even got our letters, but… well, I spent the first five years of my life there. Portraits talk. A lot. And if you ask them one thing, you could get an entire two-hour lecture that is far less dry than anything written in that blasted book.”

“Hear from your Dad yet?” Harry’s voice came from by the tent, and Aurora glanced over to see his hair far messier then normal and his glasses a bit askew.

“Yes.” She smirked. “We got what we need.”

“Brilliant,” he beamed as Draco came out of the tent, appearing immaculate, buttoning the cuffs of his oxford. “Where do we go?”


“Seriously? A flat?” Draco grimaced. “Thought she’d have a town house or something.”

“Well, she may act like a posh pureblood, but I don’t think she is. Not really.” Aurora replied. “No
one bloody likes her.”

“Doesn’t matter where she is.” Harry said, straightening his glasses. “We’ll go, and we’ll get the locket from her. Then bring it back here and figure out how to destroy it.”

There was a murmur of agreement, and it seemed everyone was on the same page except Ron who simply stared at Harry.

“What?” He asked after a moment, seeming as unnerved by Ron as Aurora was.

“Mate,” Ron said, narrowing his eyes. “Is that a love bite?”

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November 7th, 1997

Stop looking, Aurora scolded herself mentally as her eyes drifted the shop that was once Weasleys Wizard Wheezes, the face of Fred still on the outside of the boarded-up building. She sat outside the Leaky Cauldron, her father’s spell over her as she waited until after Umbridge would likely be at the ministry. And she wasn’t alone at the table.

Harry was blonde, with grey eyes, his scar faded enough by the glamor that one had to really look at him to see it.

“There a reason you keep looking that way?” Harry asked with smirk.

She glared at him, then forced her eyes back down on the notebook in front of her.

“Take it Neville didn’t-”

“What’s Neville to do with anything?” She asked, glancing up at the Weasley shop, then forced herself to look at the flat above Florish and Blotts. She could see the silhouette still moving about behind the curtain.

“Did he ever get that it was all an act?”

“We’re talking about this out in public, why?” She asked, meeting the fake grey of Harry’s eyes.

His smirk turned to a smile. “Your hair is ginger.”

“Right, so? Yours is blonde.”

“I’m just saying that, well, you have ginger hair and you’re staring at Fred and George’s shop. No one’s going to know who we are.”

“Harry.”

“I’m just… I want you to be happy. Alright? I’ve got Draco, Ron’s got Lav.”

“Luna doesn’t have anyone.”

“Or she has everyone,” Harry countered.

“And what about Gin?”
“I want her happy, too. Just, I don’t know. You put on a brave face and all, but I could tell what happened between you and Neville really bothered you.”

She rubbed her forehead, putting her sight strictly on Umbridge’s flat. “We’re good again, I think. Not together, but friends. He asked me to stay.”

“But you didn’t.” Harry stated.

“No. I wouldn’t stay for him or anyone. I said I was going to join you, and I’d be damned if I did anything less. What you’re doing,” She shook her head. “I wasn’t needed at Hogwarts. And I wasn’t really needed here, either. But the lesser of two evils is here, with you. This way, at least Ginny can be safe. At least this way I can’t or won’t ruin my father’s cover.”

“We needed you.” Harry said in a way that brokered no argument. “It was getting very clear that Ron and Draco were always a breath away from hexing one another. I mean, I get it, Ron probably felt he was playing gooseberry, and Draco just wanted to be alone from time to time, but still. You bring balance.”

“If you say so.” Aurora said as the lights in the flat went dim just after a flare of green. “That’s the floo, she’s gone.”

They waited a moment before getting up from the table and heading to Florish and Blotts. Harry went inside while Aurora went around scoping out the building. There was a balcony in behind, not very large, but it appeared to be aligned with Umbridge’s flat. Closing her eyes, she pictured the part she saw and apparated herself there.

She fell to the hard, stone surface, jarring her ankle that had been broken at the ministry, causing her to slip and fall sideways with a grunt. Her arm ached, and if she didn’t break it, she certainly bruised it well. Gritting her teeth, she pushed herself up, and headed for the very pink door. A glance into the window told her what she needed to know.

Pulling up a rickety old metal chair, Aurora plopped down and waited, gently pressing against her elbow to ensure she had just been a klutz and not a complete idiot. She glanced up, seeing the top of the hat on the side of a certain building, the scowled at herself.

Aurora startled at the sudden appearance of Draco and Harry, their coloring swapped still.

“Is the door warded?” Draco asked.

“I didn’t check, to be honest.” She replied, getting up.

They headed to the door together, pausing as the tingle of wards started to brush on their skin.

“Ron’s in place, yeah? In case we cock this up?” She asked Draco as they got out their wands. Harry shifted to stand behind them in defense.

“He’s in place, plenty of decoy detonators should we sound the alarm and cause the whole place to know what we’re up to.”

“We’ve put up wards,” Aurora said, rolling her shoulders. “We put them up, we can take them down, right?”

“Rory,” Draco said in a warning tone.

“Sorry,” She said, taking a breath and closing her eyes. She could feel all the nasty little dark things
lurking for those who dared to try and trespass. But, oddly enough, they didn’t feel terribly complex. Still, it would take time.

While Draco worked on the alarm system, Aurora focused on bringing up and reading the runes associated with the spell, shifting and changing them to disarm the wards as quickly and smoothly as possible. Harry stood steadfast at their back, not once moving or complaining despite how long it was taking.

Fatigue was starting to wear on her, but Aurora persisted, taking a quick pause to drop her glamour to add more magic to her core instead of diverting it where it wasn’t needed. A swift glance at Draco saw him doing the same, and the two continued.

“Can’t quite get this one,” He said through gritted teeth.

“Hold it,” She asked, ending the last of the defense spells, then bringing up the runes for the alarm. “There it is,” She said softly to herself, rearranging and deactivating the alarm. When the wards fell, she let out a huff of relief, dabbing her forehead despite the chill in the November air.

“Anyone ever tell you you should be a curse breaker?” Draco smirked. “You made that look effortless.”

“Hardly effortless.” Aurora said as she went to turn the doorknob, only to find it locked. She whined, “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Alohomora,” Draco said, waving his wand at the lock, the door opening a touch. “Drained?”

“Completely,” she said as she stepped inside, moving to the far window and peering outside.

Ronald was sitting on a bench with a Daily Prophet in his hand, his dark hair and darker skin making her eyes skip over him twice before she reconciled him to be who he was.

“All good?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” She said, “we just need to-”

The floo flared, and the most grating “umm hmm,” announcing the tenant of the flat’s arrival. “What do we have here? Intruders? Oh!” She said as she looked at Draco and Aurora, then frowned. “You should be at Hog-”

“Stupify!” A trio of voices shouted at once, and the blast of it knocked the pink toad back into the mantel where there was a hard-sounding smack before she dropped.

Aurora stared at her in horror. “Did we just… did we just kill her?” She asked, looking at the boys.

“Is it really a big deal if we did?” Draco asked curiously.

Aurora opened her mouth, ready to argue that yes, it was a very big deal if they had, but then stopped. Was it? After all she did to them? She glanced at the scar on her hand, the legacy left by the pink dementor, one of the obvious pieces of evidence against her being the model daughter of a Death Eater and exhaled slowly.

“We didn’t kill her,” Harry said as he went to her. He grabbed the locket, pulling it over her head. “Knocked her out cold, probably won’t remember our being here.”

Aurora glanced around, finding a scroll of parchment on a nearby table and placed it on the ground,
rolling it just so. She then adjusted it, making it look as though the thing had rolled along the floor and conveniently found itself in front of the floo when Dolores would have made her way home.

Draco took the locket from Harry, “gemino,” he incanted, barely catching the duplicate locket as it appeared close to the original in his hand.

Harry took the duplicate and put it around Umbridge’s neck just as a detonator went off outside.

“Think someone’s actually wondering if she’s alright that fast?” Aurora asked with a touch of amusement.

“Not sure.” Draco said as he grabbed her and Harry just as the back door banged open.

She didn’t even look to see what the disturbance was, ensuring the wouldn’t be caught, Aurora willed for a silent disapparation to the first place she could think of.

Panting when they landed, she looked at the boys, desperate to make sure she didn’t splinch them. “We’re alright,” She asked when she couldn’t see anything.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

Draco groaned as he got up, “You’re missing a bit of your hair, though.” He pointed out as he for to his feet, reaching down to help Harry.

Aurora patted the back of her head, following her locks down until she noted that, just past her shoulders, she was missing a rather large portion.

She didn’t have time to do anything before there was a crack of apparation and a wand pointed to her face. She looked past the wand into the cold, hard brown eyes of its owner.

“George!” She said, throwing her arms around his neck.

“Whoa!” He said, pushing her back. “I need proof that you’re Aurora, first. Where did you go after the wedding?”

“Here,” She replied, confused.

“And where did you sleep while you were here?”

She arched her brow as his cold demeanor faltered only slightly to amusement.

“Not the room you gave me.” She replied, smirking as his smile came through. He pulled her into a hug, laughing as he lifted her off the ground for a moment.

“What are you doing here, sis? Place is abandoned, after all.”

“It’s why we’re here.” She replied.

“It’s why we’re here.” She replied.

“Aurora whipped around, only just realizing that Harry had dropped his glamour at some point, and noting he was holding up the locket, keeping it at arm’s length.

“It’s this.” He said to George. “It’s the horcrux we’ve been trying to find.”

“We should head back to camp, Weasel’s probably there waiting for us.” Then Draco smirked at
Aurora. “Why’d you bring us here, anyway?”

“Apparating three people to a place I’m not sure I would remember perfectly? Got to be kidding me.”

Draco snickered before he took Harry’s hand. “Use your ring to get back.” He said, disappearing with a crack.

Aurora looked to George. “How’s he?”

He grinned. “Doing alright.”

“You guys are keeping safe, then?”

“Safe as houses.” He replied. “Worried about you, me thinks. Probably would have been the one to come here if he wasn’t tied up with something.”

“Sorta glad he wasn’t.” She admitted. “Easier, I think.”

George nodded, humming in agreement.

“I should head back.” She said, “but… keep safe. Both of you.”

“You lot, too.” George nodded.

She smiled, then touched her wand to her ring and disappeared back to the camp.

With every step he took deeper down into the castle, the more he felt his skin crawl. Severus didn’t want to be anywhere near this part of the castle so long as it was occupied by such low creatures, but there wasn’t much else to be done for it. This was as good a plan as any, and much better than his original one of simply Imperio-ing the pair of them, demanding they forget his involvement and hope the Dark Lord didn’t summon them. He’d never admit it, but sometimes his wife had some pretty good, if not simple ideas.

Looking at the bottle in his hand, he sighed, then knocked on the door.

It swung open, a scowl in place at first that turned into a bright, wondrous grin. “Severus!” Alecto cried with glee, Amycus seen peeking around his arm chair.

“I had thought that tonight we could share a drink or two and enjoy one another’s company.” He said, showing her the bottle of Fire Whiskey in his hand. Fire Whiskey that had a little something extra in it to up the potency of the liquor.

Severus noted that, should he ever need to intoxicate the pair of Death Eaters again, it may be worth
it to banish most of his drink when they weren’t looking, and then follow it up with a sober-up potion. The neutralizer had the whiskey tasting awful, and despite the numerous freshening charms and swigs of breath freshening draught, he could still taste the nasty, bitterness on his tongue.

He also knew, now, that he didn’t really need to add anything to the liquor at all. He never bothered to stay at the revels, otherwise he’d have known that the Carrows were lightweights, the pair passed out in their chairs after only a tumbler each.

Heading up from the dungeons, he spotted Minerva headed toward him at an awkward speed. When she stopped, she stumbled ahead a touch with a hushed grumble from a couple of whispered voices behind her. She glared, then looked to Severus and shook her head a minute amount.

He shook his head as well, then gestured for she and their guests to follow him through the castle.

He approached the Gargoyle. “Headmaster,” he greeted, and then waited for the password as it was instructed to do.


Minerva frowned, a confused smirk pulling at her lips. “Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Leonidas and Aurora.” Severus replied. “The lion and the dawn, though I may need to change it.”

“We won’t tell anyone, sir.” He heard a Weasley twin speak, unable to tell precisely which one without seeing him. He led them up the stairs, hoping that they would get the hint that waiting for stairs was not on the agenda for the evening.

They entered the Headmaster’s office, Hermione already there with her disguise down, Sirius sitting as a human in a chair, sipping tea.

“Neville will remain within for the weekend.” Sirius said as Severus shut the door once the sensation of people passing through ceased. “The room will stay as is. Ginny is there as herself right now, too.”

“Thank you, Sirius.” Severus said, withdrawing his wand and canceling the disillusionment charm on the order.

Kingsley, Fred Weasley, Arthur, and Lupin appeared before him.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said in a warning tone, and Severus flicked his wand behind him to silence the portrait for the time being. He then conjured a couple more chairs before putting his wand away.

“Everything alright, Professor?” Fred asked, a nervous lilt to his voice that he tried to hide with grin as he plopped down in a chair.

“Yes, and no.” He said, and when the twin’s smile faded, he sighed. “We need to make some… changes.”

“How so?” Minerva asked. “I thought Miss Weasley fit in as Aurora quite wonderfully.”

“That is not how I mean.” Severus said, glancing at Lupin then shaking his head. “We’re with child.”

“You mean I’m with child.” Hermione corrected.

“Don’t get technical, wife. It’s all the same.”
“You’re pregnant!?” Minerva gasped out, first covering her mouth then crossing the room to place a hand on Hermione’s slightly rounded belly. “The timing could be much better, of course, but at least… you must be far along if you’re willing to say anything.”

“It was Albus’ meddling that was the cause of the previous miscarriages.” Hermione reminded. “But I am about three or four months along.”

“You’re not far behind Dora.” Lupin commented as he took a seat. “It wasn’t planned, was it?”

“Yes, Lupin. It was our utmost desire to have an off-spring within the age range of your own.” Severus quipped.

“So how are you going to handle Hermione being pregnant?” Sirius asked. “That glamour won’t…?”

“No,” Severus replied. “It won’t. But, I believe we can use it to modify you.”

“Me?” Sirius replied.

“Yes.” Severus nodded. “And Hermione will take your place.”

“But everyone believes she and I are dead.” Lupin pointed.

“And I’m not saying she goes strolling into the room of requirement at Hermione Snape, either.” He snapped. “She could very well simply disguise herself as a student for at least a month or two, but afterward….”

“She doesn’t need to go in as Hermione Snape, but what if she goes in as Hermione Granger?” Fred asked, and the room all looked at him with various levels of disbelief. He shrugged. “Not saying you de-age or anything, pretty sure that’s not good for the newest Snape to be. But… your ‘death’, if it’s even really known, is much more unbelievable when you pair it with ‘and oh, by the way, I’m actually thirty-seven now, not seventeen like you thought.’

“Thirty-eight,” Hermione corrected on reflex.

“See, even better. Or worse. And if Hermione Granger, once brightest witch of her age, muggleborn, former friend of Harry Potter isn’t just the Headmaster’s wife, but also Rory and Leo’s mum, well… can’t hurt to help with keeping order, can it? You can’t tell me that every person in this school is suddenly completely clueless and can’t piece together what’s going on?”

“It’s not so much that, Mr Weasley,” Minerva said with a sigh. “I believe the students do know that it is really only the Carrows that mean harm, but there is still mistrust in Severus. Mr Longbottom himself still does not hold trust.”

“Coarse he doesn’t,” Fred said, and Severus frowned at the off tone in the twin’s voice before shaking it off.

“Much as I hate to admit it… Fred might have a valid idea.” Hermione said, causing Severus to look at her sharply. Her eyes were darting from side to side, seeming to be reading her own thoughts. “We never actually worried about everyone knowing who I was in my old life, so the only ones who knew, really knew, was, well… was Harry, Ron, Neville, the Weasleys. No one else from the students. There’s no need to hide, no need to explain the pregnancy. And Fred is right, it might help align the students with you. Perhaps even the reminder of who I am will aid Neville in coming to terms with what transpired. That you can be trusted.” She looked up and met his gaze. “It could be beneficial.”
“Indeed.” Severus agreed.

“Wait a moment, would my taking over for you release me from my life debt to you?” Sirius asked, looking to Hermione.

She frowned. “Yes. I believe it would, at least. I say that it will, so… so I suppose the life debt, accidentally created though it was, will no longer be.”

“Excellent.” Sirius smirked.

“Not that I don’t think it’s important for us to remain open with one another, but why call as many of us here as you can, Severus. Surely not just for this?”

“Indeed, I did not.” He said, pulling out a pocket watch he had tucked inside his frock coat. “I received word from Aurora. She met up with the boys four days ago, as was planned. They have since collected a horcrux, and now have it with them. I’ve yet to find where the basilisk fangs we retrieved are, and someone,” he glared at Dumbledore’s portrait who glared back, “refuses to say where it is.”

“Couldn’t they simply incinerate it?” Kingsley asked.

“No,” Sirius answered, shaking his head. “Our house elf, Kreacher, had actually been in possession of it for a long time. He promised my brother before his death that he would destroy the bloody thing, but unfortunately he never could.”

“We know Harry destroyed on horcrux with the basilisk fang.” Hermione said thoughtfully. “But we also know that Dumbledore destroyed the ring with the sword of Gryffindor. Could we not just deliver the sword to them?”

“We could, most certainly, if I knew where the real one was.” He said, gesturing to the one in the case. “I suspect that is a fake. Lupin, you’re adverse to silver.”

Lupin scowled but rose, heading to the case hesitantly. He lifted the lid, stuck his hand inside, and snorted. “Most definitely a fake.” He said. “I could smell it wasn’t real silver the moment I opened the case. It’s just steel.”

“And so, we are at an impasse with this. We could, of course, go down to the chamber of secrets again, but we do not know how to open it, as none of us speak parsletongue.”

“So, it’s find where Albus hid either the fangs or the sword,” Minerva sighed, “Or-”

“Or we open a room impossible to open.” Arthur grinned. “Nothing too difficult there, is there?”

“One must wonder what Albus’ plans were, if this is the way things are going for us now.”

“As we’ve pointed out before,” Sirius said, “A grand adventure.”

“Well, as grand as this all sounds, I should be getting back to Molly.” Arthur said, rising from his seat.

“How is she?” Hermione asked.

“She’s as well as Molly can be, knowing her children are on the run, better off away from us than with. I’m sure you can relate to the sentiment.” Arthur then smiled. “She’ll be terribly sad to hear she missed your announcement. I know it’s not the best of times, but best wishes and congratulations all
“Yes, congratulations, both of you.” Lupin said, turning to the floo. “I should return to Dora, now, as well.”

“I wouldn’t mind catching up with Kings if… if that’s alright?” Sirius asked, looking to Severus with that blasted, mischievous grin. “Will the Headmaster permit it?”

“Go but be back here as discreetly as you can be in order to take Hermione’s place come Monday. I will need to teach you the charm, and ensure you focus solely on the Helga disguise.”

Sirius nodded, departing the office with Kingsley.

Hermione rose, Minerva taking her arm, leading her down out the door and down the stairs, the hush of a conversation left in their wake. Severus didn’t have to guess what Minerva wished to chat about, and he was at least glad that Hermione had someone else to voice her fears to, as well as the ones he knew she wouldn’t share.

“Mr Weasley, I’m surprised to find you still here.” Severus said, turning to the twin who did indeed remain seated.

Fred appeared amused. “Well, don’t really have anywhere else I need to be right now.”

“Indeed,” Severus said as he leaned against his headmaster desk, folding his arms and staring down the ginger. “Nevertheless, one does not simply stay in my company for the pleasure of it. You wish to speak on something, I would assume.”

“I would.” Fred’s smile faded, and he straightened himself, squaring his shoulder. He cleared his throat, “I wanted to ask you something important.”

“Which is?”

“Permission for Aurora’s hand. In marriage.” He inhaled sharply. “I want to ask her to marry me.”

Severus tensed, trying to reconcile the question to what he knew of to be fact. “I had not been made aware that you and she had rekindled your romance.”

Fred snorted. “We haven’t, though that’s not without lack of trying on my part. Aurora doesn’t want to feel burdened to anyone, not until this is all done.”

“And so why ask permission when you don’t even know if she would consider it?” Severus asked, slowly stalking toward the young man.

“Because I love her.” He said simply. “And I’m certain, now more than ever, that she is the love of my life.”

“How so?”

“Just a feeling,” Fred said. “Here, near the core and all. Just… I thought I was doing right by her, letting her go when I left Hogwarts. I even thought I was right to push her toward someone else. But in the end, all that’s done is left me broken hearted and her confused. And if her confusion was simply because of my pursuit, I’d have stopped but Aurora, she….” He stopped, paling a bit as he glanced to Severus fleetingly.

Severus narrowed his eyes at the man, wondering what, precisely, his daughter had been up to to
make Fred Weasley actually pale in his presence, but let it go. She was a grown witch, and even that hadn’t been the case when he suspected what might have happened had taken place, he was in no position to take a moral high ground. And Fred Weasley, terrified of whatever truth he was hiding, was still baring his soul to the loathed headmaster of Hogwarts, and father of a girl that wasn’t even entirely his.

Which made Severus frowned. “What makes you love her so much that you would risk humiliation in this request?”

Fred smiled, his eyes taking on a far-off look. “She’s bloody brilliant. In everything. Keeps up with George and me, that’s for sure. Her wit is …. And she’s good. Even if she has your snark, sir, and uses it liberally where she will, she’s good. She doesn’t purposely set out to hurt or belittle. She’s no problem telling you when you’re being an idiot.”

“Suppose she’s beautiful as well?” Severus arched a brow.

“You’ve seen her flying,” Fred said, and Severus was surprised that he truly meant it. “First time I realized I was actually infatuated with her was that summer of the World Cup. Pick up quidditch in the field behind the burrow, and she was…. ” He chuckled. “Look, I know my chances with her, or even having your favor is slimmer than a bowtruckle’s arse. But, sir, I want to spend the rest of my life with her. Or, at least, know I have made all the intentions I have for her perfectly clear with everyone that matters, including her, before she heads off into the sunset with Neville. Bloody hell, I might get offed tomorrow, for all I know. Might not ever have the chance to ask, but I-”

Severus held up his hand, and the young man stopped speaking. He stared at Fred for a very long time. “I will never think anyone truly worthy of Aurora,” he said. “And I know what Hermione would say to all this. But you came to me, not her. So, if Aurora will have you when this is all done, then you may ask. If there is one thing I know, it is that I can trust the young man who was willing to let her go so that she may have a chance at a happier life, over the one who tried to make her stay.”

Fred’s jaw dropped. “Bloody hell, I didn’t think you would actually say yes.”

“Are your intentions true?”

“Already bought a ring.”

“Presumptuous.”

“More daring, I think.” Fred grinned.

“Either way, my answer stands. Now, leave, before I begin to rethink it.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you!” He said, dashing out the room. And if there was a slight spring to his step, Severus ignored it, smiling, remembering once what it was like to ask family for permission, all the while not even certain he’d still have Hermione to ask in the end.

It was then that the pocket watch, still tucked forgotten in his hand, burned. He clicked it open, watching as the engraving on the inside of the cover, normally his initials, changed and shifted until they became a message.

_We’re off to Albania in hopes to find some answers. All are safe. Love you._

He smiled sadly at his daughter’s message.

“Albania?” He said aloud to himself, confusion marring his brow for a moment before he shook it
off, leaving the office with the intention of finding his wife and Minerva.

Chapter End Notes

Until next time.
Chapter 63

November 10th, 1997

Hermione’s mind was all over the place as she headed for the room of requirement. Severus granting Fred Weasley permission to ask for Aurora’s hand, something Hermione had been absolutely certain would never transpire ever. The fact that Aurora, Draco, Harry, and Ron were now, likely, somewhere in Albania, trying to make it to the small wizarding village the Bloody Baron barely recalled in hopes of finding out something about the diadem. And, of course, the mystery of how to even destroy the horcruxes in the first place, seeing as how Albus sodding Dumbledore did everything he could to hide what they needed.

If she were still within her original time line, she was fairly sure she’d have wanted to kill Dumbledore herself at this point. And that was providing they even had all the information needed.

The door came upon her, and even though it was barely sun up, she still checked over her shoulder to make sure there wasn’t anyone following. The only thing she spotted was a grey tabby cat with rim like markings around her eyes that gave Hermione a little nod from the top of the stairs. Nodding back, Hermione opened the door, closed it promptly, and then took in the magnificent way the room provided.

Larger than any room she’d ever known it to provide, the back wall held bunk beds. Tall, six beds high, and more than she could easily count at a glance, she could see the full spectrum of house colors represented among the bedding, on the walls around the room, in the colors on the large canvas declaring the infractions and punishments of all of Hogwarts. Under that, a table covered in medical supplies, and beneath that, a large box which likely held the rumored goods sent by the twins.

She went to inspect it, finding herself oddly surprised to see that it was precisely as she expected. And, what’s more, upon sorting through it she found there was nothing for mischief making but everything for defense and healing.

“Hermione!” Neville’s voice came from behind her, and she turned to see the young man sitting up in a chair, rubbing his eyes, staring at her in disbelief.

She smiled warmly, not having realized he was there. The front of the room was littered with various chairs and tables, and of course he was in the one she would never have known was occupied when she’d first came in. She rose, a task getting more difficult as of late, and headed to an empty chair next to Neville’s.

“Hello,” She huffed as she flopped down. “This isn’t a terrible set up you lot have.”

“No.” He said, still sounding unsure. He looked around the room, down at himself, to the fire for a
“What are you doing here? Sirius all right?”

“Yes, he’s fine.” She said. “But... Sirius needs to take over for me, so I’m doing the same for him.”

“It’s the baby, isn’t it?” Luna said as she came over, yawning daintily just before she skipped toward another empty chair in the group.

“How-”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t tell Aurora. I knew you and the Headmaster were keeping it from she and Leo.”

“Baby?” Neville frowned. “With him?”

“You forget, Neville, both my other children were with Severus as well.” She shook her head.

“Can’t you let it go?”

“No,” He said shaking his head. “I can’t. I just… can’t.”

“I’m not sure why you won’t let go, Neville. Your aura would be much clearer and brighter if you would.” Luna smiled.

“Take it under advisement.” Neville sighed. “So... you’re pregnant, and you’re here because...?”

“Potions and babies don’t precisely mix, Neville. And someone has to hold the room as it is while you lot are all in class.”

“So, we’re suddenly going to have a new potions master?”

“No, Helga will still be there. She’s a glamour, nothing more.” Hermione said, hearing whispers to the side. She turned, and found not one but three groups of students all looking at her in confusion.

“Professor H?” Seamus said, and Hermione stood as he ventured forward. “Thought you were dead?”

“It’s a very, very long story, but no. I’m very much not dead.” She smirked.

“Did I hear you’re pregnant?” Lavender Brown asked.

“Yes.” She said. “Too far along to be wearing a glamor and teaching all of you potions.”

There was an increase in the whispers for a moment before Luna stood up from her chair and skipped over. She put her hand on Hermione’s arm. “Can I ask why your name was never placed on the Muggleborn list?”

Dead silence, and a glance about showed that everyone was in shock, or perplexed.

“Because the ministry thinks I’ve either left for the states, or was born to a pureblood family on the continent.” And then, taking the opening Luna offered. “Hermione Granger either hasn’t been to Hogwarts for the last four years, or she’s been a graduate of it for the last nineteen.

“Hermione… Granger?” Lavender said, creeping closer, taking in her features. Hermione wondered what she saw, seeing as how this witch hadn’t laid eyes on her as a roommate for quite some time. And, in reality, the years had been kinder to some of Hermione’s less flattering features.

“Merlin’s balls, it is Hermione!”
“How didn’t we see it before?” Seamus asked squinting at her.

“You accepted that I was a thirty something professor, and the girl you knew was your age simply left.”

“How?!” Lavender asked.

“An accident with a magical device. I went back in time twenty years.”

“And you hooked up with Professor Snape of all people?” Parvati asked.

Hermione smirked. “Severus and I are a tale for another day. Now, I do believe the lot of you need to trickle out to have breakfast.”

“Any recommendations as to who I should be today?” Ginny asked, holding the potion bottle in her hands.

“Who do you think?” Hermione asked, and Ginny smirked before taking a swig of the Polyjuice.

Lavender cringed as she turned away, looking once more to Hermione as Ginny transformed into Aurora. “So… you’re … and Aurora is your daughter. But she’s off with Ronald, and the love birds, so… so you couldn’t be her and Ginny couldn’t still be herself?”

“Aurora Snape would be expelled for getting Pregnant,” Hermione countered. “I’m already at the end of my first trimester.”

“Do they know?” Seamus asked.

“We’ve known about ‘Mione since the end of fifth year,” Neville said. Then, smirking, added, “She came into the hospital wing to tear a strip off us.”

“Alright, enough. All of you out. Questions later. Right now, breakfast and class. I’ll be here for the foreseeable future.” Hermione said, shooing them toward the door. She watched the lot of them file out, heading off morosely or nervously to breakfast.

She sighed, wishing the feeling of being completely free to acknowledge her entire identity was more liberating than it was currently sitting. As it was, it just made her more tired, more heart heavy, longing for her daughter to have been there where they could have had a good laugh at it together. She glanced at her wrist watch, hoping for more word from Rory, and finding none.

November 19th, 1997

“‘This was a stupid idea.” Ron said, making his protests well known for the dozen time since their
arrival in the small village four days ago. She’d lost count of them since leaving England.

It had been a long twelve days since they retrieved the locket.

Their first argument was how to keep it safe, and Harry had suggested around their necks taking turns. It wasn’t long before that idea was vetoed by everyone, Harry having had his connection to Voldemort enhanced, let alone open for the first time in over a year. This was followed swiftly by Ron becoming irrationally jealous over Draco. It was then agreed that they would place it in a pouch to be worn around their neck, Aurora and Draco putting any and all protection spells and wards they could possibly think of on it.

They waited around Britain for two days in case her father sent her a message regarding a means of destroying the bloody thing, but when nothing happened, they went on. Muggle methods were the easiest to get out of Britain, though far too time consuming. France would not allow them to use a port key out, but Germany did. Though it only helped get them to the country, where they needed to be, where the small village the Baron had spoken of was, was at the other end of the country.

Magic and muggle methods combined, they finally found their way there just after dinner on yet another rainy night. A room with two beds was rented from the local inn, where a spat between Ron and Draco had followed over the sleeping situation.

Ron did not want to sleep with his brother’s ex-girlfriend, knowing it would only be asking for trouble. He also did not want to sleep with Malfoy. Harry was reluctant to leave his boyfriend, but also didn’t feel comfortable sleeping next to Aurora. It left only one real option for everyone where no one was particularly pleased, but nor were they overly put out.

Their days, for the last three, were spent in the small library the village had to offer, going over any and all newspapers they could find after the years in which they guessed Voldemort had left Hogwarts. But the library was kept up by a very elderly witch who really could do no more than oversee things, which meant that the books and papers were all over and out of order. It had made for a frustrating hunt that only irritated the perpetually hungry Weasley who was certain his library days had been over once Hermione had disappeared as their peer.

“Had you thought of a better one, then?” Draco demanded, giving Ron a side eye as he sat back in a chair and read a newspaper.

“Anything had to have been better than this!” He protested, gesturing to the varying stalks of papers and books around them.

“Yes,” Aurora said as she looked over an ancient Dark Arts text, hoping that maybe there was something in it about a horcrux and how to destroy it. “I suppose we could have, I don’t know, sat huddled around the tent day in and out, hoping to either stumble across the diadem, or find some way of destroying the locket. You’re absolutely right, Ron, that sounds infinitely better.”

“We’re missing Potterwatch this far out. How do we know Fred and George are alright?”

“Fred’s fine.” She said absently, turning the page in her book and increasingly thankful for translation spells.

“How do you know?” Ron demanded.

“Just do,” She said as she thought she spotted something in her text.

“Wait,” Harry said at that same moment, and Aurora momentarily tore her eyes away from her page to see a wide-eyed Harry skimming the paper. “I think I found something.”
“What, mate?” Ron asked eagerly, scattering some papers to the floor in his rush to get to Harry. Aurora glanced down at them as she got up, holding her place in her book with her finger, noting that the pages Ron had been looking at were very old Quidditch scores.

“Here, right here! Look, Missing Local Boy found in Forest: A young man who went missing from a sea side village during the early summer this year, was recently found dead in the wooded area not far from the village itself. Villagers had combed the woods many times in search of the young man, but it wasn’t until recently when a burst of accidental magic from children playing caused the reversal of a transfiguration spell on the body could it be found. Details of the death are being kept quiet, as it was apparently too gruesome to detail. The children who found him had to be obliviated for fear of addled minds. This is it! This is the incident! We just need to ask the villagers if he was here just before the summer of ’46, before the boy went missing.”

“And how exactly do you plan to broach what is likely an extremely delicate subject?” Aurora asked. “This village is not overly big, something like that is not forgotten nor passed off so easily as to be mentioned in casual conversation.”

“But we won’t be asking about the boy, just Riddle. This is a small village, Rory, and now we have fairly good proof he was here. So, it’s likely they’d remember him.”

“So why didn’t we just head to the pub and ask our first night here?” Ron whined.

“Because we’re foreigners. British foreigners, at that. It’s not as though our welcome was warm. There are spying charms on our room, for Merlin’s sake, as well as a ward that detects the dark mark.” Draco gripped.

“Just imagine what it would have seemed like if we went in there and started asking about Tom Riddle, and if he was here, prior to knowing what we do now.” Aurora said, gesturing to Harry’s paper with her book. “We’d have been hexed on spot, if not worse.”

“What do you have, Rory?” Harry asked, looking at the text in her hand.

“Oh, it’s a thing I was going through. Doesn’t have anything, just mentions that horcruxes are the most evil of magics and should never be used.”

“How informative.” Draco said, folding up the paper in his hands and setting it aside. He stood, adjusting his collar, then strode toward them. “Shall we grab some dinner, then? I have a feeling that once we get our answers this evening, we won’t be much welcome around here.”

They sat at the same table in the corner that they always did, near the back door, huddled together but keeping their eyes peeled. And as was the same every meal they took in the tavern below the inn, various older wizards, and a few witches, eyed the lot of them wearily.

“Where are we going after this?” Draco asked quietly, pushing the last of his meal around on his plate.

“Not sure,” Harry replied. “Any suggestions.”

“I have an idea, but no one’s going to like it.” Aurora smirked.
“Don’t callonsisnofench.” Ron said around a mouth full of food, and at Aurora’s disgusted scowl, he merely rolled his eyes and clamped his mouth shut.

One of the bar maids was passing by, and Harry perked up as she did. “Excuse me.” He said quietly, though since they were watched so carefully, she stopped very suddenly and turned toward them. “We were wondering… was there once someone here, and I don’t mean to be rude asking this, I’m not thinking that you’re… anyway, was there a man that came here about fifty years ago going by the name Tom Riddle?”

Nearby conversation ceased, which had the rest of the tavern quiet immediately, all eyes on the four young strangers.

“Why do you want to know that?” An older man who sat at the bar asked when the room was still too silent, his accent still heavy with the translation charm in place.

Aurora tensed, palming her wand as she noted a few of the older wizards got up, glaring at them.

“We’re trying to find ways to stop him.” Draco replied when Harry seemed to realize the gravity of the situation. “We had reason to believe he might have hidden something here.”

“Only thing that man hide was our Lorik. Lorik was … so in love. So smitten. And he murdered that boy for dark things, then hid him.” The bar maid said, her voice cracking.

“And those dark things we’re looking to destroy.” Aurora assured. “We think he took something from here, something that might have once belonged to a founder of Hogwarts.”

“Hogwarts.” Another man said in confusion. “We know that name.”

“Many, many, many years ago.”

“It is why the forest is cursed. Why we tell children not to play there.”

“Death is in there.”

“Lorik was one-”

“But many, many years ago, there were others.”

“Two.”

“Two?” Aurora asked the general room as it was various people who told what was happening.

“Young woman who came to village. British. Beautiful.”

“And a young man, who wanted only to find her.”

“He murdered her.”

“Then killed himself.”

“Was she a Ravenclaw? The girl?”

“Ay, yes. That was her name.”

“And she was in the woods?” Aurora asked. “That’s where she was killed?”
A few of the men exchanged glances.

“Big tree, hundred so paces from here. Hollow, old, said to be home of elves and pixies. She was found there. So was Lorik.”

“What are the chances that he hid the horcrux where he found it?” Draco asked.

“Not sure, but ... he did come to an Albanian forest after he tried to kill me,” Harry said. “And if the locals feel the forest is where death is.”

“He might have come here, to this forest.” Aurora said. “Maybe even to try and find a way to activate the horcrux in the diadem.”

“You leave now.” One of the men said, stopping their conversations. “You know what you need, now you leave. Leave us be, in peace.”

“Alright mate,” Ron said as he got up slow. “We’re gone. Let us go get out things, and we’re gone.” He headed to the stairs, and Draco went with him, signaling to Aurora and Harry to stay. It was tense while they waited, but no one fired anything at them. When Ron and Draco returned with their bags, the four of them left the tavern, and headed out toward the woods.

“A hundred paces from here.” Harry said.

“So, let’s go get the diadem, if it’s still here.” Ron said. “Get out of here before someone hexes us.”

———L———

“You’re with child!?” Leo demanded of his mother, not even bothering addressing the fact that she was in the room of requirement in place of Uncle Sirius. Who, of course, was positively rubbish at potions, and how he taught classes Leo wasn’t in was beyond him.

“Not the way I wanted you to find out,” His mother grumbled, setting down the book she was reading. “It’s not like we weren’t going to tell you.”

“I don’t properly care how I found out, although hearing it from a group of Hufflepuffs wasn’t the best, it’s still the same in the end: you’re with child! During a war! And when I’m already at Hogwarts!”

She smirked. “So, what has you bent out of shape, darling? That you will no longer be my youngest, that the timing was off, or that you found out from the Hufflepuffs?”

“Mum!” He groused, and she had the nerve to chuckle. “Does Rory know?”

Her smirk lost all its weight. “No,” She replied. “No, Aurora doesn’t know. We didn’t want her out there, away from us, with one more thing on her mind.”

Oddly enough, that did make him feel a bit better.

It was the same Hufflepuff boy who approached him when his sister left, Ethan something-or-other, that gave Leo the new by promptly congratulating him on the news that he was to be an older brother. Which was confusing until he heard one of the older Ravenclaws not far from him, someone he was pretty sure was called Chang, gossiping about the Hermione Granger now being in her
thirties and married to Snape. It was amusing when, after a bit of high cackling of disbelief, she and her mates turned to him, the product of that union, and paled. He merely waved at them, smirking all the while, finding great amusement in it all, and went back to his breakfast.

And then understanding of what Ethan-the-Hufflepuff had said, and he promptly turned to glare at Professor Nikola. Who gave him a roguish grin and a slight wave.

“How is she?” He asked, sitting in the empty spot next to her on the sofa.

Not a lot of people had come in from their common rooms yet, and a flock of students post dinner heading to the seventh-floor corridor was out of the question. Therefore, there wasn’t a vast amount of filled chairs yet, but Leo still wanted to be next to his mother.

“Your father and I heard from her about an hour ago. They’re starting their journey out of Albania, but they aren’t sure where to go next. They had no luck finding the diadem, and nearly were hexed and cursed for their troubles.”

“I’m guessing Dad knows about this, or are you keeping it from him, as well.”

“Leo,” She chided in a warning tone.

“It was a legitimate question,” he assured. “You might have been worried about adding one more thing to his long list of troubles.”

“No, he’s known for quite some time. As it had been with you, and the children we lost before, we waited to inform people.”

He looked down at her abdomen. Something in his mind thought his mum was still too small to be certain there was a child in there. Yet, what did he really know about these things?

“Do you know what my new sibling is?” He asked.

She smiled, placing her hand low on her belly. “No, we didn’t cast the spell to find out. With your sister, it was no surprise to me. Your father snuck the spell when I was sleeping to learn about you, and, well…. We didn’t dare to this time. Not with so much unknown.”

He nodded, thinking of his sister out there somewhere, alone and cut off from the rest of them. She didn’t know about their future sibling, or maybe even get to meet them for some time. She didn’t have mum to lean on when she was unsure or rattled. She didn’t have dad to help her feel safe.

He eyed his mother’s stomach again, and hoped beyond hope that the little one growing within wasn’t going to enter the family not ever knowing about the eldest sibling. That, somehow, the babe within wasn’t going to end up being a sort of replacement.

November 25th, 1997

“Where the bloody hell are we?” Ron asked as they trudged through yet another wooded area, this
time one Aurora had chosen.

“Where I apparated us,” She retorted, more snap than she meant to have, a bit of huff from both annoyance and hiking.

“Seriously, Rory, where are we?” Draco asked, and she glanced over her shoulder to see all three boys looked apprehensive, palming their wands.

“Could only get the Port Key from Tirana to Italy, so I got us as close to the safest place I knew of within the country.” She could sense the prickle of wards already, and she paused. “We’re going to have to form a train.”

“Why?” Harry asked, and by the way he was glancing around, she would say he felt the wards, too.

“Because you’re going to blow yourselves up if you don’t,” She smirked.

They all looked uneasy, but eventually Harry shrugged, came forward, and took her hand. He reached back, Draco instantly taking his.

Aurora looked to Ron he shifted about. “Mine or Draco’s, or you can spend the night or the next week out here in the woods, hoping that there aren’t any werewolves or worse out here to deal with.”

Ron grumbled under his breath, then reluctantly took her hand.

They moved ahead much more slowly, navigating the uneven land, fallen branches and what not. Aurora felt as the threat the wards possessed passed over her, warming her skin as if to say she was lucky to have been her, and once she was cleared of them, she made sure the wards hadn’t bothered the boys. They did hiss a little, curse a bit as the heat allowed them to pass as an extension of her.

“Bloody hell that wasn’t fun,” Ron grumbled.

“It’s not meant to be.” She shrugged, dropping his and Harry’s hand now that everyone was clear, and the hint of a lawn and a grand house could be peeked between the trees.

Just as they cleared the trees, the well-maintained lawn and the estate home before them, a salt and pepper haired with apparated to just in front of them, wand pointed at them and a scowl on her face.

Aurora startled, though not nearly as badly as the three wizards who all yelped and fell back on one another.

The witch arched one, sardonic brow. “Please don’t tell me that Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived, is startled by a bit of apparation?”

“Well, in fairness to him, I don’t think that was quite the welcome we were expecting.”

“And what did you have them expect? Hugs, and kisses, and pinched cheeks?”

“No, but I don’t think they’d have through a wand in the face an excellent form of introduction.”

“Really? A shame, it’s how I great all those who arrive on my property, especially when they came through holding on to my granddaughter.”

“You’re Snape’s Mum!?” Ron half screamed and yelped, and Aurora turned toward him, crossing her arms.
“Why does that surprise you, Ronald?”

“Not Fred?” Eileen said as she put her hands on her hips. “Oh good, I had every intention of taking you aside and giving you a firm talking to. That one had best not be Neville.”

“No, that’s Draco Malfoy.” Aurora said, indicating Draco who bowed to the lady of the house.

“Ah, yes, I should have known. Young Harry’s picture has been in the *Prophet* enough in the past that I recognized him. Once it started printing this *Undesirable* rubbish, I stopped paying attention.”

“You bother with the *Prophet*?” Aurora asked as her grandmother turned sharply, starting to cross the garden. The boys all shrugged, and when Aurora began to follow, so did they.

“I had for a while. I wanted to see what the climate was over there, what your father was getting himself into. I saw the articles on him, both good and bad. Honestly, I was surprised he didn’t murder the old man much, much sooner.”

Ron tripped, and when the Snape women turned to look at him, he was red faced and indignant. Harry rested a hand on his shoulder, getting him to focus, and after a moment Ron released.

Eileen rolled her eyes and then continued.

“I trust he’s running Hogwarts among those Death Eater fools?”

“More like around. Where he can, at least.”

“You mother made him soft, but that’s a good thing.” She commented before they entered the house from the patio door. They were inside the sitting room, and as Aurora and the boys dropped their bags and took a seat, Eileen instructed an elf to bring them tea and sandwiches, and then to take the bags to the guest rooms. She then sat down in a long chair, scanning them all, noting how Draco and Harry sat close together, no doubt. And how Ron was on the opposite end of the sofa she had chosen. “So why are you lot here in Italy and not at Hogwarts where you should be?”

“It’s a long story,” Aurora sighed.

“Not like I would have made it to Hogwarts, anyway.” Harry smirked.

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t have.” Eileen said as the elf popped back in. It poured the tea, handing it and a plate of sandwiches to each of them before disappearing. “What do you need, Aurora?” You couldn’t have come here if there wasn’t something I could do for you.”

“She may have just wished to see you while we were in the area.” Draco reasoned.

“Our family is not the type to visit one another for each other’s company.” Eileen replied casually, sipping her tea.

“I was hoping you might have had some books that might be helpful to us. Did Dad ever come here to find a few texts that Leo might have snooped through?”

Eileen shook her head. “No,” She said. “At least, not that I know of. Your father has come by to look through the library, of course, but I believe he mostly was looking through books on spell creation. I could be wrong, though. Severus was always quite careful to keep his academic pursuits detailed and private. I can only guess what he looked through based on the one or two books I’d found there afterward.”
“Don’t suppose you’d mind if we stayed here for a day or two while us more academically inclined search the library?”

“Stay as long as you need.” Eileen waved to the room in general. “No one magical is going to get through the wards. Muggles take one look at the property and get such an intense desire to turn and run that we’re never bothered. And even if for whatever reason the Italian ministry might suddenly feel the need to help the poor excuse of an English one, the house is Unplottable.”

“You really don’t mind our staying?” Harry asked. “If you’re ever discovered to have-”

“Mr Potter, I would not have extended the invitation if I thought the risk to myself would be too great.” She replied in a bored tone. “You’re just a boy, as far as I’m concerned. Hardly someone of any importance aside from being a friend of my granddaughter. No, I don’t mind your staying unless you plan on making yourself a self-important martyr while you’re here.”

“Guess we know where Uncle Severus got it from.” Draco smirked.

It faded quickly, though, and the boys paled as Eileen Prince gave a half smile that was so much like the one they had known their professor to give that it clearly reminded them that this was not a witch to be taken as kindly.

———S———

“Remove your hands from me at once!” Aurora’s voice demanded from around the corner, and Severus stopped in his tracks for just a fraction of a moment before carrying on to investigate.

He’d not had any interaction with Ginevra as Aurora, and therefore wasn’t quite as used to it as Hermione may have been, or even Sirius. He’d see her every other day or so at the Gryffindor table, and it was only a testament to how incredibly stupid they were that the Carrows hadn’t made her for a fake. Ginevra hadn’t changed any of her personal habits as Aurora, and could still be spotted sitting as she would with her back to Luna in order to make conversation with the Ravenclaw. Thank Merlin that they were teaching subjects in which both girls were doing about the same.

He rounded the corner and noted Alecto had a rather tight grip on his imposter-daughter’s arm. Just the sight of it, despite the difference in expressions from Ginevra to Aurora, enraged him.

“What,” He snapped, earning their attention before speaking in a more smooth, controlled voice. “Is the meaning of this?”

“I saw the Weasley brat come up this way!” Alecto half screeched. “And then your little Princess came around the corner. The lying bitch had to have seen where she went!”

Severus arched his brow. “Indeed. Or, perhaps she didn’t? There are spells, after all, that make one invisible to those not paying attention. I see a book in Aurora’s hand, was she, per chance, reading when you found her?”

“She shoved me up against a wall, father.” Ginevra spat with vehemence, righting her posture and tilting her chin. “I was merely studying when this… this brute all but forced me against the wall!”

“Where did the blood traitor go?” Alecto hissed.
“I don’t know,” Ginevra replied. “I wasn’t watching for anyone as it is not my job to keep tabs on those around the school. I believe that task belongs to my father.”

“Enough,” Severus raised his hand, ending the tiff before the wild looking Alecto lost her temper completely. “Aurora, be gone. Go study as you have been.”

“Yes, father,” Ginevra said, giving a little bow and keeping her head down in an effort to hide the smirk she was wearing.

He watched her go, then turned back to Alecto. “Why?” He simply asked.

“I need that blood traitor whore to serve her detention, and I know I saw her come this way!”

“Alecto, may I suggest simply leaving it?” Severus asked. “She is nothing and no one, and if she misses her detention, which, by the way, was not passed through me, then she would simply have an extension on it.”

Alecto’s lip curled, but he knew she was caught out. Because she hadn’t brought the detention forward to him, which meant she was not following the rules as she was supposed to. She hugged, then turned sharply away stomping down the halls, likely looking for another student to torture.

He wanted to stop her, but how many times had he hindered the sadistic siblings as of late? Walking the tight rope, making sure not to be too suspicious, was becoming more challenging. He refused to allow the school to fall under the torture and bloodshed filled reign those two had wanted, but if he didn’t allow them somewhat of a loose leash, there would be talk.

Sighing, he continued on his original path, heading toward his office where he intended to meet his wife now that the students would be filling up the room of requirement.

She wasn’t inside the office, and so he went to his private rooms.

He could hear her from the bathroom, humming a little song that spoke to him as familiar, yet he couldn’t place where he’d heard it from. He moved toward the doorway quietly, smiling to himself as he took in the sight of Hermione in the simple, clawfoot tub. There were more bubbles than reasonable, as there usually was when she simply went for a soak, and her curls were pinned on top of her head, barely kept out of the water. He then moved in slowly. Her eyes were closed, and so when he ran his hands into her hair, she startled a moment before relaxing once more.

“Sorry,” She said on a groan, closing her eyes again. “I’ve been back for a bit now, and a bath just sounded so brilliant. It’s been so long since last I was pregnant, I’d forgotten how much my body ached.”

He gently massaged her scalp, kissing her neck as she tilted her head further back. “I won’t begrudge you what little relaxation you may find, wife.” He placed another kiss, just a touch lower than the first. “Did you get Aurora’s message?”

“No?” Hermione frowned, her eyes still closed. “Is something wrong?”

“She’s with Ma.”

Hermione’s eyes opened, and she blinked in confusion before she shifted out of his touch to look at him. “Your mother?” She said.

“Yes. I would imagine they will remain there a few days. Perhaps she will have better luck with locating those texts our son managed to both find and lose within the library there.”
“Hmm,” She hummed in agreement before they heard a “Severus” called from the office.

Sighing, he left Hermione to her bath, leaving the bathroom, then their chambers so that he could see what Black had wanted.

Sirius was lingering near the mantel when he emerged, concern marring his features. “We have a problem.”

“Which is?” He asked.

“I am utter pants at brewing potions, and there was, apparently, a particularly brutal Dark Arts class. We’re out of a lot, even dipping into the potions the twins had sent to their sister.”

“And, of course, as you are Professor Nikola, they are coming to you now, aren’t they?” He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Ask the room for a potions station for Leo, Lovegood was also surprisingly proficient as well, as was Miss Brown. They can brew, the ingredients would likely just come from my—” He stopped as he heard the wards tingle, declaring someone very much not permitted to come and go as they pleased. He sent out a mental connection to the Gargoyle, but found he was obligated to allow passage.

“Carrow,” Severus said, palming his wand and wordlessly casting the glamour of Helga over Sirius.

“How the bloody hell did they get past the gargoyle?” Sirius demanded in the fake accent as Severus looked to the door, debating locking it as he heard the stairs moving.

“I don’t know,” Severus managed to say, hearing the loud voices on the other side of the door, before he felt Black’s hands on his face, in his hair, bringing his attention back to him as he pulled his head down.

Sirius kissed him. A part of his brain in a fraction of a second recoiled before logic took over. It would be the first and last time Alecto would have the nerve to try and barge in, not wanting to witness another witch having whom she desired. And, well, he did do far worse things in the name of the light and keeping his cover.

So, being the spy that he was, he wrapped Black in his arms and gave a good show of getting into it. Sirius went momentarily slack before the door banged open and Alecto gasped out. Giving Black a slight shove, Severus whipped his head toward the intruders with a scowl that was nearly lost when he spotted Minerva barely controlling an urge to laugh behind the sibling.

“What is the meaning of this intrusion!?” He demanded, shooting a glare at Minerva as she nearly let slip a chuckle.

Alecto blushed deep red. “H-h-headmaster,” She gulped. “I, well, I had found….”

“She found a student roaming the corridor.” Minerva said, starting to get herself under control. It took a cleared throat or two, but she finally recovered. “What she lacked in knowledge was that said student was just leaving the detention you gave them with me. She attempted to accost the student, and I intervened.”

“Alecto,” Severus said calmly. “Given the conversation we had earlier about my being the one setting the rules of punishment, I believe this may need to be taken to a … higher authority. I’m sure our Lord would be most pleased to hear how well you’ve been adhering to his demands and my own. Now, be gone. Both of you.” He said, shooing Minerva and Alecto out of his office with a flick of his hand. Both obeyed with a boy of their heads, but Minerva’s was done to hide the renewed smile.
The door closed, and he heard the stairs begin to move.

“I must say,” Black said as he dropped the glamour once more. “I finally understand what Kitten saw in you all those years ago. You’re a brilliant kisser, Snape.”

“Flattered as I am, we shall never speak on this again.”

“You always said it was more likely I’d pine after you than Hermione.” He smirked.

“Don’t. Start.”

“Wait until Remus hears how brilliant you are.”

“I will deny it ever happened.”

“You should be proud! Kissed a few blokes in my day. I’d say you’re the top five, ten at least, and you weren’t even trying. Had you given it a real effort….”

“Black, shut it if you know what’s good for you.”

Sirius giggled before sighing, clearing his throat. “So, ask the room?”

“Yes,” Severus sighed. “Now, is that all? I would like to return to time with my wife, especially now since I will have to see the Dark Lord as soon as it’s convenient.”

Sirius sobered, looking to his feet. “Any word from Aurora? About Harry?”

“They’re in Italy right now, at the family estate. I know nothing more than that. Not what may or may not have happened in Albania, or what their plans are. Just that the four of them are fine.”

“I suppose there is that.” Sirius sighed nodding. “Well, good evening,” he said before that roguish smirk came back, “Darling.”

Severus sent a wordless, wandless stinging hex to Sirius as he left through the floo.

Taking a deep breath, ready to shove the nights events deep behind the occlumency shield, he turned around and saw his wife slowly materialize before him. She had a towel wrapped around her body, and a smirk that told him she’d seen everything.

“So,” She smiled. “Anything you want to tell me.”

As he rolled his eyes, she laughed. He crossed the room, scooping her up along the way, ignoring how she had gotten a bit heavier as of late.

Chapter End Notes

Until Next time.
Aurora and the boys had taken the remainder of the previous day to rest. Honestly, it was worth it, what with the large manor boasting elves that really only had Nan to look after. They were more than eager to cater to the quartet’s every whim and wish. Aurora doubly so as her mother wasn’t around to purse her lips and frown, denying any and all want or need of help. But now that she had a full night’s sleep in a bed that she didn’t have to share, in a space that didn’t have a male presence, she had to get to work.

She wouldn’t begrudge Draco’s not wanting to come to the library as early as she had. Aurora had no doubt that he was tucked in bed with Harry, relishing their own time alone without Ron’s hovering. And, well, she supposed even Ron was enjoying the solitude.

But she hadn’t been on the run as long as they had, and so she didn’t feel right waking them or even disturbing their own little atmospheres at hand. They figured out where the locket was, perhaps she could figure out a way to destroy it.

The library in the Prince Manor was vast, much more so than Aurora had remembered. It was little wonder that her father hadn’t found whatever book it was that Leo stumbled upon. How long would it take her to comb through all of them, looking for something? How long before the boys annoyed her Grandmother to the point where her welcome would wear out?

She entered the room slowly, enchanted wall to her right allowing the natural light of day inside without damaging the books, the pillars along it making the mind believe it was a wide, open space overlooking the garden. She moved toward the desk on the far end, the one with the deep purple, almost burgundy, chair that she knew her father favored whenever he came here to do research. There was nothing there, the elves having long tidied up any parchments or books he’d have left. She turned, facing the rows of near floor to ceiling shelves, six in all, all quite wide, rolling ladders resting on either side of the double-sided cases.

Thousands of books. There were spells, of course, that could help her find those that would possibly contain what she needed. They would say which ones had dark leanings, which ones were on spells, curses, hexes, but there wasn’t a way to find something specific.

It would take her the better part of a month to go through all of it, and that was if she had the help of all three of them. Ronald wouldn’t do it. Harry would, but not well. Draco would, but even so, a month here wouldn’t do any of them any good.

There was the Felix Felicius potion. Carried with her at all times in the unbreakable vial her father had gifted her. Two hours of luck, to help them get through the war. Well, this was for the war,
wasn’t it? What was a drop or two to get that book faster?

Heart pounding, Aurora pulled the vial out of the back pocket of her denims, uncorking it, and stuck out her tongue. She carefully dripped two drops on the awaiting muscle, then quickly closed her mouth, swallowing as she replaced the cap.

Within seconds, she felt light, a bit fuzzy headed, and like she could do anything she wanted. Anything at all. And what she really wanted right now was to find the book her brother discovered.

Where did Leo like to hide here? That odd, dark little alcove tucked into the back corner, farthest from the door. She never understood it, herself. Aurora had always preferred one of the lush reading chairs near the enchanted wall, but her brother was quirky, and she long accepted that. Actually, she thought it quite endearing.

She smiled, moving to Leo’s not-so-secret spot where only a few floating candles offered light over what might have been a window seat at some point. She plopped down in it, getting a sort of silly pleasure over entering her brothers sacred sitting area swinging her feet as she looked around the room from what would be his perspective. She even ducked down a bit for the full effect, trying to get herself down to his height.

It had the perfect view of their mother’s favorite spot in the vast library: an old, uncomfortable looking set of arm chairs on either side of a round table. She hated those chairs, the look of them, the way they had no give whatsoever. Yet, she felt compelled to see if her memory of them were accurate.

She got close, seeing that the house elves, per her mother’s wishes, left things the way they were when she left them. After all, she would be considered the next Madam Prince, married to the heir of the estate as she was, so they felt the need to please her. Vaguely, Aurora wondered if Uncle Lu had any inkling of how affluent the Princes actually were, or if he merely assumed that Leo, as the male, would be the only one the inheritance would be given too.

But that didn’t matter, she was supposed to be looking for a book, after all. And there it was, on her mother’s borrowed reading table, sitting on the top. *Magiks Moste Heinous*.

“Well, that’s an unsettling title.” She said to herself as she plopped down in one of the awful chairs. As she opened the book, she glanced at the pile, doing a double take at the next one. *Hogwarts: A History*. It was a very old looking version, likely one of the very first editions. Aurora snorted, wondering how it was this particular copy had managed to stay within the Prince library. Nan must have charmed the lot to makes sure none of them could leave her possession, given the type of bibliophiles that ran in the family.

She returned her attention to *Magiks Moste Heinous*, flipping through the beginning casually, trying not to look at any of the illustrations for too long. She didn’t particularly feel like reading every little thing, and noted the magic of the potion was beginning to fade, so Aurora flipped to the back of the book, and then opened it to a page about a fourth away from the back.

…. would break away from the whole, sending itself into the object the caster/creator would deem worthy of encasing it with the previous mentioned spell. It’s recommended, of course, that once the soul is placed within that enchantments and protections are put in place to deter meddling with the horcrux.

*Once the soul fragment is placed within the object, it will remain as a tether to the world of the living, ensuring death will be avoided at all costs, so long as the object holding the soul fragment not*
be destroyed beyond repair.

“Beyond repair.” She said aloud. “Yet basic spells…. But then, even most spells, the damage done could be repaired.”

“Talking to yourself?” Nan’s voice startled Aurora, and she closed the book, setting it aside. “Just like your mother, you are. Can’t keep a thought to yourself.”

“I can keep plenty to myself,” Aurora smirked as her grandmother came and sat with her.

“I thought there was supposed to be at least another one more academically inclined.” Nan commented, looking at the books.

Aurora shrugged. “He is, but since this is the first time any of them has had any real privacy in months, I can’t begrudge his wanting to be with his boyfriend.”

“Yes, I did figure that out fairly quickly. Sad, really, considering the ludicrous set up his father made with yours. I do hope now that things are so muddled, you two are no longer betrothed?”

Aurora tilted her head. “We never officially ended it. Though, our dating other people probably is enough. Considering when our ‘betrothal’ took place I was already seeing someone, I doubt it stuck.”

“A Weasley.” Nan said, drawing the name out in a way that made Aurora homesick for her father. “I do hope he is better than that ill-mannered troll currently eating enough food for three in my dining room. With his mouth open, no less.”

“Much better.” Aurora said, feeling her cheeks warm.

She felt Nan’s eyes on her, and she took a deep breath, half chewing her lip and trying to will her features to remain neutral.

“You love him.” Nan said simply.

“I might.” Aurora said to the books.

“I might.” Aurora said to the books.

“Good.” She said, and Aurora frowned at her. Nan was still looking at the books. “Love is something this family has always lacked. I was thankful when your father met your mother. That girl from across the river thought herself too good for him, and I don’t think Severus would have ever willingly saw it if it weren’t for someone more suited to him coming into his life.”


“I had wondered.” She said, nodding.

They sat quietly together for a moment, and Aurora looked to the Hogwarts: A History sitting on the top of the stack.

“Stay a day or two,” Nan said. “A week if you’d like. I know it can’t be for the whole war, but the lot of you looked wretched when you showed up yesterday. Take some time to not worry about being spotted or hunted, rest, come up with a plan, and then set back out.”

“Thank you, Nan.” Aurora said, watching her grandmother rise from her chair.

“No thanks needed, Rory,” She said, looking down at her granddaughter with as close to an
affectionate smile that Eileen Prince ever had. “I didn’t always get to do right by your father, and by
the time I had means to, it wasn't possible for him to benefit. In what ways I can, I will always help
you and Leonidas.” And with that, she swept from the room.

Aurora watched her leave over her shoulder before sighing, picking up Majiks Moste Heinous once
more before sighing and setting it back down. It didn’t really offer anything more, only solid proof
that they had to find a way to render any and all magic inert as well as destroy the receptacle. Which,
of course, had her stomach churn as she realized that meant Harry might have to….

She picked up Hogwarts: A History, and began to flip through it, using it as a distraction from her
not-so-pleasant thoughts.

What intrigued her, and kept her reading, was the fact that this book was not at all like the one her
mother had forced her to read before. In fact, it was much more in-depth on the ancient history of the
castle. Things, like stories of the founders and their families, that would have long been taken out to
hold information regarding newer people and places involving and within Hogwarts as the centuries
went in.

She shifted through the pages until she got to Ravenclaw, then avidly read the stories there. She
nearly dropped the book when she saw the painted depiction of Helena Ravenclaw with her mother
and brothers.

“Oh, bloody hell!” She said, shifting about in her chair and scrambling to pull her wand from her
back pocket, fumbling, she had to take a few deep breaths to clear her mind so she could properly
articulate the information to her parents.

There was someone in Hogwarts already that might be able to shed a bit more light on the diadem,
that might know where it was. And by the magic of the castle, she would have no choice but to
answer her father’s questions.

After all, the Grey Lady was a ghost of the castle, and what's more, she was Helena.

November 29th, 1997

“Severus,” Voldemort greeted after all perfunctory bowing and hem kissing was done and over with,
and Severus couldn’t help but notice that he finally got the hissing under control. He’d have
congratulated the thing before him on overcoming such a speech impediment, but thought it would
be best not to. “You come here with the Carrows and leave the school unattended?”

He let his eyes flit around very quickly one last time, taking in who was currently ‘at court’ as it
were, for they were in the Malfoy’s ballroom, standing before a throne that sat the Dark Lord. Lucius
was there, of course, and Nott senior, the two disgraced off to the side. Yaxley was there, given that
it was the weekend. Bellatrix was on the floor by the throne on the right, sitting with her head against
the arm of the gilded, over-large chair.

“My Lord, I have asked Mistress Nikola to oversee things, as I hope our meeting here this evening
will not take terribly long. She understands how things are meant to be done at Hogwarts, and I
know she will not disappoint me.”

“And why, my loyal servant, have you asked for a meeting with me this evening, and with your brethren?”

Severus took an imperceptible deep breath, knowing he would have to play this very, very carefully.

“My Lord, they have been disobeying me and your word, and I felt, after months of this going on, that I should take my grievances to you.”

“And how is this so?” Voldemort asked, red eyes narrowing.

“My lord, Snape is-” Alecto attempted to speak out, but was silenced by the sharp, harsh snap of the Dark Lord’s eyes to her and a hand raised in her direction.

When Voldemort turned back to Severus, he shrugged. “This is, I’m afraid, a prime example of the sort of disrespect I am receiving from Amycus and Alecto. I had stated, very clearly, and before you, my lord, that I wished to oversee all punishments, to assign all detentions. A firm hand is needed, of course, to ensure those who have the foolish notions started by my predecessor do not believe themselves capable of rising up. But that sort of order cannot be had when students, purebloods even, are being dragged from one class to another to be used as an example, or a practice dummy, for lessons in Dark Arts. I believe you once said that education is important, and I’m afraid if even those children of your loyal followers, your supporters, fear going to class and being at the end of a magic lash because they have yet to build up their magical abilities-”

He stopped immediately when Voldemort raised his hand. The snake-faced monster then ran his finger over what might have been his lips, looking pensively at Severus. He waited, prepared, for the burst of Legilimency.

He was then surprised when those sharp eyes went to Amycus, and watched as the wizard’s knees buckled under the intrusion. The Dark Lord then turned his attention to Alecto, who gave a slight yelp of pain and surprise, but stood more firm than her brother had.

The Dark Lord smirked as he turned back to Severus. “It is as you say, Severus, they are disobeying our agreement. Amusingly, it would seem Alecto has dark intentions for your lover.”

Severus did nothing more than arch a brow, appearing entirely indifferent. It made Voldemort laugh.

“Indeed, you are more concerned with the school, are you not? I have seen those who continually rise up are being punished, perhaps not so severely though. And yet… yet there are not as many uprisings as I had thought there may be. Apparently, the old fool’s reach did not extend beyond his Gryffindors.”

“No, my lord, I do not believe it has. Which is precisely why I do not wish to sway those who are not against us to do so.”

“Indeed, Severus.” Voldemort agreed, nodding. “But there must be retribution to those who go against the rules.”

“Might I make a suggestion, my Lord,” he offered as the thought came to him in that instance. He blinked rapidly, going through the idea, seeing the merits of it. He very nearly had his cover slip as the Dark Lord ripped into his mind unexpectedly, and he focused solely on the idea.

As the Dark Lord withdrew from Severus’ mind, he giggled, then cackled, then outright guffawed in childish wonder, shaking his head at Severus with such pride in his snake features.
“My Lord?” Bellatrix asked, the witch having stayed oddly quiet through the meeting.

“It is an utterly wonderful idea, Severus. Do you know what he suggests?” He asked the few Death Eaters in attendance, all obviously knowing nothing and therefore remaining silent. “He believes it better that we should torture the parents to keep the children in line. Isn’t it wonderful? Show them that being a blood traitor will only hurt those who taught them these ridiculous orders. That until they fall in line with our new regime, believe that magic if might, is valor, that those they … love… will suffer for them.”

Bellatrix smiled a large, gleeful, twisted smile as she clapped her hands like a little girl who was told that Christmas would come early. Well, he supposed, for her it would. Because who else would be sent out to the homes of these parents to oversee the torture.

It was not the best of compromises, and he wished it wasn’t going to be out of his hands. But then, was it entirely? He could send a warning to those he would know to be in danger, for he knew the Carrows would rat him out in a moment should he not send a report. Especially after this.

“You would like that, wouldn’t you my dear Bella?” The Dark Lord asked as he reached over and stroked Bellatrix’s chin.

“Yes, my Lord.” She said in a husky voice that made Severus want to shiver in revulsion.

“Then you may practice on our dear Amycus and Alecto, for they need to be reminded of their place.” He then turned to the offending siblings. “You do not get to question those of higher rank than you. You are fortunate, indeed very fortunate, for had those two fools over there not made such disgraces of themselves, they would be where you are. Disobey Severus again, and they will be.” He then turned to Severus and stood, which Severus already knew would not bode well for him. “I regret, despite your wonderful idea, and your excellent job in running the school, you will need to be punished as well. This matter should never have had to come to me, and you must be firmer with those in your employ.”

Well, it had been a bit since he had his nerves shot to hell, he supposed. Severus mentally prepared, nodding. “For your displeasure, my Lord, I deserve it.”

The Crucio came swiftly, and maybe it was because he was so submissive, but it didn’t seem as bad as it normally was. Oh, it still hurt to high heaven, and if he didn’t have a stronger sense of will, he might have screamed in agony. When it was over, minutes later, he was breathless and twitching, but otherwise functioning. The same couldn’t be said for his colleagues currently under Bellatrix’s wand.

“It pains me to do this,’ The Dark Lord had said before sitting back on his throne. “Return to the school, relieve your lover of her burden. I’m afraid your professors will not be back quite so soon.”

Severus stood on shaky feet, bowing unsteadily, before turning and walking slowly and wobbly to the doors so he could apparate back to the school.

He landed in his rooms, and apparation unfortunately had him losing control of his bladder. A quick flick of his hand had the mess cleaned and gone before Hermione entered from the office and saw it. He didn’t want her to know how bad it was, nor worry over him.

“That well?” She said fretfully as she knelt down and helped him up, helping guide him to the loo.

“The Carrows are still there, and they are being dealt with by Bella. All in all, it went terrific.” He said, grunting in pain as he was set down on a closed lid toilet while Hermione ran a bath for him, pouring his muscle relaxant in the water and then diffing through the potions’ cabinet for his
cruiciatus aid. When she had set everything out, he added. “We are going to need to warn the Weasleys to run. Augusta. Maybe Lovegood’s father, the Finnigans.”

“How?” Hermione asked.

He stood, grunting and groaning. He then began to work on the buttons of his frock coat despite the tremors. “You might want to sit down, love.” He warned. “I may have done something a bit… reprehensible.”

December 6th, 1997

The snow had stuck a bit, but that was fine. The tent they used was well crafted, warm, and dry. Outside they were able to build a fire, the wood damp and perhaps a bit too smoky, but the wards would take care of any chance of it being seen. Not like they really needed it much during the day, anyway. Warming charms and blankets were used to keep the chill at bay while they kept watch of the woods. The fire at night was for light, something Aurora still childishly needed despite everything she’d faced in the last couple years.

Brave Gryffindor indeed.

But, if she were honest with herself, it wasn’t all that long ago that the simple fire wouldn’t be enough, especially in the woods at night, with only a quarter moon to bare any form of light.

She stared up at it now, thinking of her parents, Leo, her friends left behind at Hogwarts, of those out on the run as well. It had been a few days since she’d heard from her parents. A mere acknowledgment of the information she passed along in thanks, a note to always be careful, and that was it. She was sure they were okay, that all was as well as it could be, but despite being with Draco, Harry, and Ron, she still felt incredibly lonely.

Shaking it off, she took a sip of her tea, setting aside the tin mug before she reached for the wireless and fiddled with the dials. When she got to the odd, rhythmic static that usually heralded a broadcast, she withdrew her wand from her pocket and tapped the wireless. “Granger,” she said, and the static slowly turned into voices.

“…Muggleborns not in the clutches of the ministry have had the common sense to flee.” Lee said as Aurora set the wireless down, angled in such a way that the boys inside the tent might catch snippets of it.

“Yes, much smarter than those who actually went and turned themselves in for interrogation.” Fred said, and Aurora smiled. “Not that we don’t applaud their brave attempts at getting them to see reason, but the Pink Toad was never known for her intelligence.”

“Indeed not.” Lee said. “And now we go over to Romulus who is here with us this evening to share some important news with us all. Romulus?”

“Thank you, River.” Professor Lupin said in that ever-polite tone, though it was heavy with the weight of bad news. “We have received word from those inside Hogwarts that there will be a new
method of punishment for those students who resist the new regime. Listeners, if you have a child in Hogwarts, and you hear a crack of unexpected apparation. If you hear a knock on the door, run. It's been noted that since the resistance within hasn't broken under the fists of the Death Eaters, they intend to go after the children's family in order to keep them in line.”

The boys had come out of the tent, staring at the wireless with worry.

“Sounds brutal.” Fred said, a break in voice. “Now, it’s time we clear up a few of the myths and propaganda that’s going around….”

“Going after the families.” Draco said. “Do you think that means…?”

“Your mum is safe.” Aurora assured. “You already said she was in France.”

“Yes, because I didn’t go to school. What if they track her, what if….”

“I don’t think you have to worry about her, Malfoy.” Harry assured, giving Draco’s shoulder a squeeze. “I remember the looks we got while we were there, and we were just kids who happened to be English. Imagine what would happen if actual Death Eaters entered the country and tried to track her down.”

“And your dad would never allow anyone to know about the house there. Hell, I barely knew about the house there and we’re practically family.” Aurora assured.

“All well and good for the lot of you,” Ron snapped. “Malfoy’s mum all tucked away out of reach, Sirius in Hogwarts, your bloody parents in Hogwarts, one bloody well acting like he’s all part of that Death Eater nonsense. Well, what about my parents, eh?” Ron demanded, his voice breaking much like his brother’s had earlier. “What about my mum and dad, huh? Dad might well be alright on the run, but mum? She’ll worry herself sick. Never be able to cope with it all. Something were to happen to our home, to the family, and she wasn’t there…. And how do we know they’d be safe, huh? On the go like that? Bad enough got Fred an’ George on the run, but….”

Aurora got up, moved swiftly toward Ron, lifted her arms, and hauled him to her. Ron fought the tight embrace for a few seconds before he finally gave in and shook, his body trembling as he weakly hugged her back.

“None of us really know if our family is safe.” She said softly to him, petting his hair as she thought she heard him sob. “None of us. Dad might be being tortured for not having a better hold on the school. Aunt Cissy might slip back to England for her sister and get caught with a blood traitor. Sirius might leave Hogwarts and not return, we don’t know, and we may not know for a long time, not for certain. But remember, if your parents do have to run, you know what it means? Means Ginny is still giving those bastards hell.”

He chuckled and after a moment, Ron let go, taking a step back. He gave her a watery smile, his eyes red rimmed, and while she knew he would never say anything to her about what happened, it seemed as though something in his mind clicked. He gave her a nod before turning his head. Aurora’s jaw nearly dropped as she saw Draco step up to Ron and give him a half hug, clapping him on the back. “They’ll be alright, Weasley. Your Dad’s spry, and if your mother is anything in a fight like she is planning for a wedding, then I’d hate to see what Voldy’s followers would look like after facing off with her.”

“You’re right about that.” Ron agreed with a weak laugh. “Be begging, they would.”

“Too right,” Harry agreed with a smile.
“That’s all for today’s broadcast.” Lee’s voice carried. “Remember to keep the faith, don’t surrender. Our next password is Dursley. Until then.”

The radio broadcast cut out, and the static that filled the void was the regular sort.

December 12th, 1997

Hermione smiled to herself, rubbing the ever-growing bump at her abdomen as she looked around the Room of Requirement. She’d asked the room when the students had left for classes for the day if it could do something festive to cheer them all up. Severus didn’t think it wise to decorate for the holidays around the school, Hagrid most disappointed that he would not be tasked to find the best tree possible for the Great Hall. Yet, she knew, it wasn’t precisely good for morale to have the students’ spirits low. She herself was finding her mood far too melancholy as of late.

It had been six years since Aurora was with her at home for the bulk of the holiday season, and yet she felt it much more keenly this year. A part of her soul was out in the wilderness, and she was never absolutely certain she was alright. Updates only did so much, after all.

But they needed to carry on, and while she was sure no one in the Order was bound to have a merry Christmas, that didn’t mean it had to extend to the scared students who were missing home.

The room created an alcove in which one of the tallest trees Hermione had ever seen stood, decked out in the four house colors, twinkling merely. Around the room were thick swaths of pine garland, hung with white ribbons. Even the mantel was decorated, the fire in the hearth seeming extra warm and cheering. It was not a typical Hogwarts Christmas, but it would do.

Slowly, students began to trickle in for their after-class refuge, dinner likely finishing in the Great Hall. Each time, there was a pause in their step, wonder in their eyes as they looked up and around. Even Leo, who was not one for things like this, paused in awe when he entered.

“I’m surprised,” He said as he came up to her. “Why?”

“We needed this.” She said simply. “There’s been too much despair, too much sorrow in the last few months. I thought anything might help.”

“I think you might be right.” Leo said, turning to look at a group of students that ran for the tree. He smiled a little half smile, and Hermione turned to see what had him doing so.

A group of Hufflepuffs were gathered about, smiling and talking, jumping about despite there not being much to the tree at all. Hermione then looked back to her son, and noted the smile grew.

“You’ve made more friends.” She said simply.

“In a way,” he said with a shrug. “We more or less all look out for each other. But then again, I suppose that’s what everyone in this room is doing.” He was then tapped on the shoulder, a first year
holding up her injured arm. Leo nodded at the little Slytherin, then gestured to the table set up near the make-shift potion’s area that Sirius had requested of the room on one of his odd visits since she’d taken over.

Sighing, she glanced over her shoulder, seeing the chair she tended to occupy was still empty, then took a few steps backward in order to sit down.

“How are you, Mrs. Snape?” Theo Nott asked as he came and sat beside her.

Hermione smirked. “Can’t bring yourself to call me by my name?”

“I didn’t refer to you as anything but Granger prior to my knowledge of who you were, I’m not really about to start now.”

She chuckled. “I’m fine, Theo, thank you for asking.”

“You’re beginning to show, I’ve noticed.” He said, gesturing to her abdomen. “What will you do when the baby arrives?”

“I imagine Severus will try to send me off with his mother, or perhaps to the woman who took me in back when I had my accident. Provided, of course, that she’s still in hiding. I haven’t heard from her, and my foster brother has disappeared as well.”

“You real parents?” Theo asked.

Hermione shook her head. “I convinced them to relocate to Australia for the time being. They aren’t supposed to be in the country, and I doubt very much they’d have been hunted, but I wanted to be sure.”

Theo nodded. “You always were smart.”

They sat in silence for a time, and Hermione wondered what was on the young man’s mind.

“It’s funny. For so long, there’s always been rivalry among the houses that, frankly, went beyond points and quidditch. I remember being told by my father that Gryffindor was an utter disgrace, and that even being in Hufflepuff was better than getting sorted in a house full of blood traitors. And yet, some of the best people I’ve met while here were in Gryffindor. Draco, who was a practically a prince in Slytherin, fell hard over a Gryffindor. Our head of house, former anyway, wasn’t just married to one, but she’s a Muggleborn to boot. You take away last names, you take away the houses, you put all of us in a room without any inkling of placement or status, and we’d be nothing but a bunch of kids. Kids who have magic.” He shook his head. “That’s all that’s happening in this room, a bunch of magical kids find refuge, commonality, in a time when so many people are trying to pit us against one another.” He looked down at his lap. “The end is going to come, isn’t it? Ginny hasn’t said much, but I do understand that Rory, Draco, Potter, and Weasley -- they aren’t here not just because they ran away, but because they’re searching for a way to end this, aren’t they?”

Hermione met the young man’s gaze. “Yes.” She said. “They are.”

“And where and when would you predict the final battle to happen, Professor?”

She smiled sadly. “I haven’t been your Professor for a bit, now.”

“No, I suppose not.” Theo conceded. “But I know for a fact that Madam Snape is a Mistress of Arithmancy, and one of the best in the country. So, when is this all taking place.”
She chuckled mirthlessly. “I haven’t run the numbers. Been too afraid to, frankly.” She gave her abdomen a rub. “The last time I ran a calculation to predict an outcome involving any of this was when you were in your fourth year, and Harry’s name ended up in the tournament. You understand how well that went.”

“I’d want to know.” He said. “I’d want an idea of when this shite would be over, one way or another.” He then rose from his chair, joining Blaise and Daphne as they spoke to some of the younger ones. Hermione wasn’t sure what the topic of discussion was, but given the mesmerized way the children paid avid attention to their elders, they would guess it was a story.

Sighing, she rose from her chair, flooing to the Headmaster’s chambers.

Severus was in his office, his baritone as he spoke to someone echoing gently into their room. She went to the writing desk in the corner, sitting in the chair, picking up the quill. She brushed the feather over her chin, back and forth, debating.

She missed her daughter. She was pregnant with another child. There was so much unpredictability, so much she didn’t know, would never know, and yet….

Without allowing herself to over think it, Hermione put quill to parchment, mapping out the very beginning of what might be the most important equation of her life.

Chapter End Notes

Beta’d by Joot from FF.net (thanks Joot!)
He watched from the window of Ravenclaw tower as the majority of the students left for the holidays. Among them were his sorta friends from Hufflepuff, and he worried they would end up like Jane, never to be seen again.

Leo sighed, leaving the common room and heading for the room of requirement. He didn’t need to be there, he was the Headmaster’s son, and therefore would be expected at the castle, but he wanted to be. It was where those who didn’t have parents to go home to were heading instead of on the trains like expected. It’s where he wanted to be for the time being.

“Would you like company for the walk,” Luna said beside him, and while she did startle him, he hadn’t shown it.

“Company would be nice.” He agreed, and was somewhat taken aback when she looped her arm through his. “You didn’t go home to your father?”

“No,” She said. “I’m not supposed to go home yet. If I try now, it might cause a problem, you see.”

“Indeed,” Leo said, though he had no idea why or how Luna would believe that. “At least this break will allow me to catch up on making potions.” He said in way of conversation.

“Yes, though I must admit, it’s quite lovely that we are going from pain relief to sleeping and calming draughts.”

“In what way?” Leo asked, looking at this strange girl beside him.

“Because easing the mind and the soul is better than needing to ease the physical. Feeling calm and well rested means less people try to be reckless. And more people pay attention, which lessens the anger of the … stricter professors.”

“I suppose, perhaps.” He relented as they made their way up.

Luna had a slight smile on her face, and the more Leo glanced at it, the more intrigued he became. He and his father, they’d always remained expressionless. Yet here was Luna who had a near perpetual smile, and there was no possible way she could always be happy. Was she occluding, but in a different way? Or was it sort of like his mother used to tell his sister, and Luna had just smiled so much her face froze that way?

It would be rude to ask, so he decided not to.

“Do you miss Rory?” She asked as they were nearing the seventh-floor stairway.
“Yes,” He said without hesitation. “But I also know she’s out there doing what she can.”

“She is. I’m fairly certain Ronald would have left by now if she hadn’t gone with them. At least this way, they will all stay together.”

“How do you know he hasn’t?” Leo asked, arching a brow.

That perpetual smile of Luna’s merely ticked up, becoming a knowing thing instead of a dreamy one. It had the hairs on Leo’s arms and neck standing on end.

They entered the room of requirement, the door providing itself without asking, and looked around at the starkness of the room. There were so many less beds, the room so much smaller. The only large thing that remained was the tree, while the room adjusted to accommodate the smaller population that would be there over the hols.

Theo Nott had gone home, but Blaise and Daphne remained. They were speaking to Ginevra, free from the potion that would turn her into his sister, and Longbottom.

“Oh, are you all discussing how we should resume teaching defense after the holidays?” Luna asked, letting go of Leo’s arm and skipping over to them. “I don’t think we can do as well as Harry had, but it is worth a shot, I think.”

“Theo had mentioned these classes to us,” Blaise acknowledge. “And since Weasley here had shown us a corporal patronus, I’m inclined to believe that maybe Potter had been a decent teacher, as Theo said.”

“But are you willing to go against the Death Eaters if it comes down to a fight?” Longbottom asked.

Blaise scoffed. “The Carrows? We can over power them.”

“And the war?” He then challenged. “Are you going to fight on our side or theirs?”

“You’re asking us to go against our parents.” Daphne said, hugging herself.

“Speak for yourself,” Blaise replied in a bored way. “My father’s long dead, and my mother wants nothing to do with the Dark Lord and his minions. The only reason she has yet to dissolve her marriage to Theo’s father is she’ll get nothing out of it.”

“Alright, fine. It’s not like my parents are out there getting branded, either, but it’s not the point. And it’s not like it’s only Slytherins who have parents who support You-Know-Who. You’re asking us to -”

“We’re asking that you stand up and show them that you don’t agree with their rhetoric.” Ginevra cut Daphne off.

“Perhaps you don’t need to fight if it comes to that,” Leo said thoughtfully, and the rest of them finally looked at him, seeming to have forgotten he was even there. “Aunt Poppy is the only medic at Hogwarts, and we already know she’s constantly over-run with so many of the worst cases, or those that are so homesick they can’t function. It’s why we’re doing so much of our own healing. But it’s not enough.” He frowned. “Muggles had battlefield medics during their wars. Someone there on the front lines to mend those that managed to get to them. Or they would go out with the cover of the soldier to try and help where a soldier had fallen. Perhaps, for those unwilling to fight, we can teach them to heal. Or, I could.”

“And risk our necks to heal someone stupid enough to get hit?” Blaise countered.
“They’re less likely to get hit if they’re trained.” Ginny noted.

“We fought Death Eaters at the ministry.” Longbottom reminded. “And I think the only reason we needed back up was because so many of us got hurt. And oddly enough, it wasn’t because we were hit by spells. The only one who had legitimate spell damage was Draco. Everyone else just happened to be at the wrong spot when an outside factor occurred.”

“I wanted to be a Mediwitch anyway.” Daphne said thoughtfully.

“So, when everyone returns, it will be two categories. Fight or heal.” Longbottom said, nodding his head as if his word was actually what was final.

“I think maybe there should be an age cap.” Ginevra said thoughtfully.

“And what would you say that should be?” Leo asked. “Because I would be the second-year teaching healing spells, so it would be quite unfair to those my own age ….”

“No active participation.” Blaise said. “They can watch, practice if invited, but they cannot actively train. Wherever the war ends up taking place, anyone not of age will be allowed to participate, I think we all know that.”

“I can concede to that.” Leo said.

“Can you?” Blaise smirked, and Leo rolled his eyes.

With the plans in agreement, the lot of them fell into a comfortable, companionable silence. Blaise played chess against Leo, the girls had a conversation Leo could have cared less about, and Longbottom stared into the fire wistfully. Leo could only guess as to who he was thinking about, given the time of year, and he felt bad for the bloke.

But he would never, ever admit it.

December 24th, 1997

“Please?” She asked, hands folded before her, eyes wide and pleading.

Severus raised an eyebrow, “And what about this?” He said, placing his hand on the little, round bump that could be distinctly felt beneath Hermione’s robes.

“A bulky winter cloak will cover it.” She assured. “It’s just… well, I… please? You need to be here anyway.”

He sighed, that heavy sort of sigh he had just before he was about to give in to her. So, Hermione waited, careful not to say anything, merely look as pitiful as possible.

“Fine,” He relented, and she clapped. “Just be sure to go there and back, no more than fifteen minutes. Any longer, and I’ll have to worry that you chose to stay with them, which I do not need on
top of everything else.”

“Thank you,” She said, kissing him hard on the lips, a promise of further thanks to be had later, and then grabbed the basket resting on the table beside them. “Fifteen minutes, and I’ll be back.”

He smirked, bemused. “I’m timing you.”

She grinned, withdrew her wand, and tapped a ring on her right finger as she said, “Aurora.”

The crack of apparition had she, Draco, and Ron scrambling out of the tent, but when there was not shouts or sounds of spell fire, the eased up.

Aurora’s heart went into her throat, and tears pricked her eyes as saw Harry wrapped up in her mother’s embrace. She then moved across the distance in record speed, arriving in time her mother to give up Harry and welcome her.

Her mother’s arms wrapped tightly around her, squeezing her more than she’d felt in years.

“My darling girl,” She heard her mother say before she leaned back, switching from hugging Aurora to cupping her face with both hands. She smiled. “You don’t look too bad for being on the run.”

“It helps that we haven’t been in a tent the whole time.” Draco mused, and Aurora allowed her mother to give Draco a hug, then Ron as well.

“Yes, you all look quite well, no sign of anyone trying to kill the other, always a bonus.”

“No signs,” Harry smirked. “But that doesn’t mean it hasn’t nearly happened once or twice.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that at all.” Hermione replied with a grin.

“Not that I’m not loving seeing you, but why are you here?” Aurora asked, noting the basket on the ground a foot or two away.

Her mother glanced at it, her grin changing to something soft. “We’ve had some contact with Molly, Cissy, Sirius, of course, and, well. It’s Christmas. We couldn’t let you all go without Christmas.”

“Seriously?” Ron asked, smiling. “My parents? You heard from them?”

“In a way,” Hermione nodded. “Your mother has gone with Bill and Fleur; your dad is out trying to find any resistance while being on the run. I’m not sure where any of your brothers are.” She said regretfully.

“We heard the twins earlier on Potterwatch,” Draco said.

“Well, there is that.” She agreed, then turned back at Aurora. “Your father would only allow me fifteen minutes before we would start to worry, and I’m afraid if I stay much long, I may just not want to.”

“Alright,” Aurora said, stepping toward her mother and hugging her again, relishing in the embrace one more before her mother startled, then pulled back abruptly. “Mum?”
“It’s fine,” She replied, her hand nearly touching her stomach and stopping. “I have to go. Happy Christmas, the lot of you.”

“Happy Christmas,” Aurora said, echoed by the boys as Ron took the basket and brought it toward the tent.

Aurora lingered outside, watching her mother step back and apparate away.

In the cool night air, Aurora remembered how odd her mother had been acting before she left, and an idea lingered in the back of her mind. She turned, heading inside the tent where the boys could be heard going through the basket.

Once inside, the heavenly smell of Hogwarts cooking filled the tent, and the boys were loudly appreciating the various things packed inside said basket. And not just food, it seemed there were gifts as well.

“Presents, Aurora!” Ron exclaimed as if she couldn’t see, but then again, she supposed after so many months without a touch of home, they were bound to be over excited about everything.

“How about you, Harry?” She said as she sat down between Ron and Draco on the floor. “Did you notice anything different about my mum?”

Harry frowned as he was part way through opening something that looked like a sweater. “I don’t know, why?”

“Nothing,” She said, shaking her head.

She went about opening the gifts that were tagged for her, despite the food wafting out from inside the basket seeming far more appealing. A Weasley sweater was the biggest package. She’d never had one before, and a glance at Draco’s stuff told her she had one, too. Harry, she knew, had been receiving one annually since his first year at Hogwarts. Hers was burgundy, with a dark yellow A in the middle. Draco’s, she noted, was green with a grey D. Next was a package from her parents, which turned out to be a wand holster, styled so she could merely flick her arm out to the side and her wand would slide into her palm. Infinitely better than keeping it in her back pocket. The longer she looked at it, though, the more she realized the quality of it. Her initials were finely stitched into the leather, which felt butter soft to the touch. She rolled up her sleeves, glancing at the boys who fawned over the simple gifts from their parents as well, then put the holster on her arm.

It disappeared.

She could still feel it against her skin, but it was invisible to the eye. She grabbed her arm with her other hand, and was struck with the disorienting sensation of feeling it and not. Possibly because she knew it was there. She removed her wand from her back pocket, then hovered it near her exposed arm, wondering how she was going to holster it on something she couldn’t see. The problem was solved for her when her wand moved as though summoned, to disappear somewhere along her arm. Aurora looked back at the box, seeing the tiny slip of parchment in the bottom.

So, you’re never unarmed.

Her father’s writing, which made her wonder what other sort of enchantments were placed.

“Draco?” She said, bringing his attention from the fine robes he was holding. “Disarm me.”

“What?” He asked, frowning severely.
She smirked. “Please?”

“What are you on about?”

“Just do it.” She huffed, rolling her eyes.

He withdrew his wand, “Expelliarmus.” He said, flicking his wand at her.

She felt her arm burn, though not painfully, just before her wand started to be pulled from its holster. It was nearly out of her reach when she managed to snatch it, then with a flick of her wrist, it was back in place, a light, cooling sensation dancing on her skin when it was returned.

“It’s all defensive.” Harry said, sounding nearly disappointed. “Our gifts from our parents, it’s all… defensive.” When the others looked at him, and he at them, Harry continued. “Rory’s … whatever.”

“Holster.” She supplied.

“Holster,” he repeated, waving his hand at her seemingly bare arm. “It keeps her wand on her. Safely. Ron, you got your hip version. Draco’s robes, he said they were similar to his father’s which were charmed for battle. Sirius sent me these boots. He said in the note that they were dragon hide, which is… well, it’s defensive, isn’t it? It’s all gifts for battle.”

“Think of the times, Potter.” Draco said.

“Yeah, I get it.” Harry half snapped. “It’s just… it’s Christmas, isn’t it? And no, it’s not the best situation and all, but I woulda… I woulda thought….” He shook his head. “Can’t even be properly merry.”

Aurora sighed, sympathizing.

“I want to go to Godric’s Hollow.” Harry said, loud in the silence of their tent. “I want to go see where my parents are.”

“Potter, you must be daft.” Draco started to say, but Harry shook his head.

“I wanna see them. I just… I have to. I have Sirius, and it’s great, but you lot all got something from your parents, and it’s all this stuff that will help us with the war, and it’s just got me thinking. I lost my parents to this war, I might lose you, too, all because I was marked there. I want to go there, I just want to see them. And if this is the last time—”

“Don’t talk like that!” Ron and Draco said in unison, though where the former said it pleadingly, adding a “mate” on the end, Draco very near shouted.

“I want to go to them. At least once.” Harry finished, unperturbed. “You don’t have to come with me.”

“You damn well better believe I will be going with you.” Draco snapped. “I’m not going to allow my boyfriend to risk his neck to snatchers who are very likely waiting for you there.”

“If not the Death Eaters themselves,” Harry retorted with a weak smirk.

“You’re worried about us dying, yet it’s you that’s going to be the death of me.” Draco grumbled as he got up. “You lot coming?” He asked Rory and Ron.

Ron looked longingly at his cauldron bakes and bag of homemade toffee.
“I’m staying here.” Aurora said firmly. “For one, who knows if we’re going to get any more visitors, welcome or otherwise. And second, if you guys don’t come back, someone with communication to the… more practiced members of the Order should remain in order to inform them of your disappearance.”

“Wise,” Draco said, turning to stare at Ron.

He appeared startled, looked between Harry, Aurora, the cakes, Draco, the cakes. “I’ll stay here and watch Rory’s back.” He said, which caused Draco to roll his eyes, pushing open the tent flap and stomping out.

Harry rose. “We won’t be long.” He said.

“Be safe.” She countered, and Harry nodded as he followed Draco out. A moment later, there was the crack of apparition, and they were gone. “Should probably go out and take over the watch.” She said, reluctantly getting up.

“’Ere,” Ron said, already starting to stuff his mouth full. “Got your name on it. Thought it was mine, bag and all. Only saw ‘Ro’ at first. Then I tried to open it and got a bit of shock.”

Aurora took the bag from Ron, already feeling it was likely candy. Frowning, she opened the bag and peered inside. After a glance at the contents, she checked the handwriting. And smiled, snorted, then went out to do watch and enjoy her treat: a bag of jelly slugs with all the yellow ones removed.

December 25th, 1997

Crack!

“Get the bloody hell off me!” Harry raged.

“I saved your life, you ungrateful prat!” Draco shouted back. “He was there. He was outside the house, and if I hadn’t stayed so bleeding close to you, that snake out have had you!”

“You didn’t need to drag me away over your shoulder!” Harry retorted.

Draco scoffed. “I did so! Otherwise, you’d have been stupid and actually tried to fight it!”

“The snake is likely a horcrux!”

“That we have no way of killing!”

“How hard could it be? It’s a snake!”

“Oh, bloody hell, Potter. Fine, go back, get yourself killed. Lose us this war and make everything we all gave up pointless. Go on, go be a Gryffindor and get yourself killed.”

“Oi,” Aurora said, startling them both out of their tense, near fighting positions. “I’m a Gryffindor. I don’t do stupid things.”

Draco nearly laughed. “Don’t get me started.”

“Oh? Go on, start your list. I’m sure I have a counter to most of it.” She replied calmly, crossing her
arms. She very nearly smiled in satisfaction as Draco turned back to Harry.

“You can’t take risks, not like that, not yet.” He said much more gently than anything said, and Aurora thought she could see him shaking in the low light.

Harry seemed torn between wanting to fight and wanting to comfort, and Aurora took that as her cue to quietly head back inside the tent. On her way, she flicked her wrist, summoning her wand to her hand, and then tapped her watch.

*If you hear anything, Harry and Draco are back and safe. If not, nothing happened. Either way, I know I wasn’t involved.*

Severus snorted as he read the message on the pocket watch, shaking his head. Insomnia kept him up long after Hermione went to bed, which allowed him to feel the warmth of his protean charm relaying a message.

His wife had been chaotic in her emotions upon her return from seeing Aurora and the young men. She missed her child, seeing her filling Hermione with both joy and heartache. She was half crying for already missing their eldest when she suddenly declared their unborn kicked her for the first time while she was there. She then promptly sighed, huffed, and declared she was going to bed. And there went Hermione into their quarters, and he was left to stay awake. He already knew sleep was fruitless, his mind racing, wondering if or when the Dark Lord was going to be calling on him.

Yet it was not the searing burn in his mark that told him it was finally time for his Yule tide greeting, but rather the cold dread of feeling a very malevolent presence approach his wards. Wards set to admit those who bare or control the Dark Mark, as he had little option otherwise.

He moved quickly. Mentally asking the castle to seal of his chambers to the headmaster’s office, while allowing Hermione an exit into the room of requirement. And as he mentally conversed with the castle, he had tossed aside his book and moved to the floo. The castle, listening as it was, had let the flames to green for him, and he stepped through without hesitation.

He’d heard of what it looked like, and if it were not dire, he’d have marveled at the lovely set up. But as it was, he was focused on the faces of a dozen or so terrified and confused teenagers in the room of requirement.

“No one, not a single soul, leaves this room for any reason until myself of Hermione say otherwise.” He then turned his focus to Longbottom who seemed the most horrified of them all. “Are we absolutely clear? No one.” He then turned to Ginevra and Leonidas. “Should I need either of you, I will inform you. Otherwise.”

“Yes dad,” Leo said as Ginevra nodded. He then promptly turned around and entered through the floo back to the Headmaster’s office.

And he did so in time to know his unexpected and unwelcome visitor was just outside his door. Moving as swiftly as he could, Severus returned to his chair, though wasn’t able to sit before the door opened, and Lord Voldemort entered. So, he improvised, and dropped to one knee.

“My Lord,” he said.
“Severus,” The Dark Lord said with a touch of surprise. “I had not expected such a respectful greeting so quickly. I know it would have been difficult for you to meet me at the gate so quickly, still.”

“The Wards on the school allow me to know precisely who is entering the castle grounds.” He replied. “So long as I am on premise, those who are not students or staff may enter.” Severus replied as Voldemort beckoned him to rise.

“Ah, I had always wondered.” The Dark Lord said, looking around the room. “I can only imagine what it must be like, to be so wholly connected to this wondrous, and ancient structure.”

“You are to Lord over all of wizarding kind, my Lord. You will know something much greater, indeed.”

“Yes,” He said with what likely passed for a smile. “Indeed, I will. Of course, I must destroy Harry Potter first, and prove that there is not a soul who can defeat me. I nearly had him this evening.” The Dark Lord said, and Aurora’s message began to make sense. And piss him off. How, how did that happen? He supposed he was going to get his answer, and impatiently waited for it. “In Godric’s Hollow, where this nonsense truly began. It would have been poetic, killing the boy where he should have died the first time. Did I ever tell you that Wormtail had asked me to spare the parents? The father, really, but the mother, too. He believed they would see reason. It matters not. The boy escaped. But while he has done so this time, his leading me there allowed me to glean some information I had not been able to previously. I’m unsure how long I will be away. Have the Carrows fallen in line?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Severus said with a slight bow of his head. “And, in having done so, the students too, now fall in line.”

“Very good, Severus, very good. I intend to take Bella with me, she’s always a bit more mischievous when I am not there to guide her. That, of course, leaves you to oversee things during my absence.”

“I am honored to have your trust so implicitly, my Lord.” He said, once more feigning fealty by offering a slight bow.

“It is Yule,” The Dark Lord said. “Be merry, Severus.” And with a pat on his cheek as though he were a favored son, Severus watched the Dark Lord exit the office.

Severus closed his eyes, focusing on the movement of Tom Riddle. There was a moment’s hesitation near the seventh-floor stairway that had cold fear run up Severus’ spine, but then the Dark Lord continued the way he was supposed to go, and soon he had left the school Once the presence was gone from Hogwarts, Severus relaxed, not realizing how hard or fast his heart was pounding until he was able to truly breath. He then went to check on Hermione, though only a crack of the newly revealed door proved she’d slept through the whole thing. He’d forgotten how much she snored during pregnancy.

He then went to the floo, and like before, the castle granted him passage to where he wanted to go.

“Our unexpected visitor has left.” Severus said wearily to the teenagers who did not move from where they had been before. “You may move about now.”

“Sir,” Longbottom said slowly, quietly. “How did you get in here?”

“I flooed, Longbottom. Perhaps you did not know, but when the flames are green, one may travel through them.”
Longbottom scowled, and Severus was nearly impressed. Would have been, maybe, had he not been so weary after Voldemort.

“I meant that this room prevents anyone loyal to You-Know-Who in! So how did you get in here?”

And now, that slight spark of admiration was gone. “You already answered your question, have you not?”

It was like standing in front of the dunderhead in potions, clueless despite the instructions before him, incomprehension where there should be none. Did he need to spell it out?

“Oh yes,” He drawled. “I do recall Aurora explaining that she ended your courtship over your inability to comprehend my true loyalties. I entered the room, Longbottom. Even as Headmaster, I cannot overrule the room of requirement. Therefore, the obvious conclusion must be drawn. Now, a reminder, for your safety, as well as the safety of everyone in this room, I will once more become a cruel, hateful bastard once I leave. Though, admittedly, you make it very easy to fall in the role.”

Longbottom’s eyes burned, and Severus very nearly wanted him to try something. He didn’t know if it would help or hinder, but he added, “I believe you know a bit about playing a similar part as well, do you not? Or was it not how you intended to come across when it came to my daughter?”

Longbottom turned red, but instead of lashing out, he appeared subdued. Helped, it would seem. Severus looked to Ginevra, “There will be gifts for the lot of you, the house elves will leave them beside the tree. Inform the children all when they inevitably wake you that they should look there.”

“Yes, sir.” She nodded.

“Attempt sleep.” He said to the rest. Miss Lovegood, Zabini, the elder Miss Greengrass, Mr Finch-Fletchly, Finnigan, Leonidas, Miss Chang, a few more that would guarantee knowledge that he was on their side. Subtle though it may be.

“Sir,” Ginevra said as he turned around. He looked over his shoulder, eyebrow raised in question. She smirked. “Since you know of the room, shouldn’t you sign the paper to swear you won’t reveal it?”

He smirked. “I think you know as well as I, Miss Weasley, that should knowledge of this room become known. I would be dead in a matter of moments. For what other secrets would there be revealed, especially seeing as how I’ve known about this room from the beginning.”

“You did?” Longbottom asked.

“Who do you think allowed the House elves to bring food here?” He simply said before heading for the floo and reentering into his office.

He didn’t need to remind the numpty that his wife and one of his best friends had been acting as the room’s guard. He didn’t need to remind him that his son still sat within, and his daughter had been a part of the set up. If the boy was foolish enough to not think of all such things, well….

And for a moment, he felt utterly awful for treating the boy so harshly. And more so, for throwing his failure to keep Aurora because of his blindness. It couldn’t be easy, being so in love with a girl - young woman - whose heart was very much likely in someone else’s hands.

December 27th, 1997
He completed his rounds, pleased that no one was out in the corridor causing mischief. Not that there were many that would be, mind. Since their revelation of his loyalties in the early morning of Christmas day, Severus could only guess that the students remaining would abide by the rules as they were set.

Either way, it didn’t really matter, not to him, anyway. He was not about to deduct house points or assign detentions during the hols.

He entered the office first, then moved straight for his chambers. He could hear Hermione before he even entered, and so slowed and lingered in the doorway, wondering who she was speaking to, and why it was so rhythmic.

“…. Before they could cross, however, they found their path blocked by a hooded figure. It was Death and he felt cheated. Cheated because travelers would normally drown in the river, but Death was cunning.”

“What are you doing?” He interrupted her, and despite her little jump and scowl, she answered.

“Reading.”

“Yes, I did realize that much. I was wondering why you were reading a child’s tale, and out loud, no less, when our youngest has long out grown such fairy tales. And is not even here.”

She grinned, rubbing her belly. “Our youngest is right here, actually, and it is them that I am reading to.”

“Is that so?” He arched a brow.

“Yes, I did it for Aurora and Leonidas, I plan to do it for Adelaide.”

“Adelaide?” He frowned. “We are having a girl?”

“I have no idea, I’m just trying on names for size.” She said, scrunching her face. “I’m not sure I like it.”

“I most certainly do not.” He said, moving into the room toward the bookshelf. “Well, do not let me stop you. Continue reading to Edward.”

“We are not naming our son, if it is a son, Edward.” She said, and he smiled at the vehemence in her voice. Hermione cleared her throat, and as he browsed the bookshelf for something to entertain himself, she continued. “He pretended to congratulate the three brothers on their magic and said that each had earned a prize for having been clever enough to evade him.

“The oldest asked for a wand more powerful than any in existence so Death fashioned him one from an elder tree that stood nearby. The second brother decided he wanted to humiliate Death even further and asked for the power to recall loved ones from the grave so Death plucked a stone from the river and offered it to him….”

Severus had just started to reach for a tome when he stopped something about the story sparking something in his mind. His eyes searched unseeing as Hermione continued.

This was the tale of the Three Brothers.
Which was also the tale of the Hallows.

“A foolish fumble, putting that ring on. It only took seeing that faded symbol, and I was but a boy of twenty again. A hallow in my hand, and I forgot for just long enough that it had been tainted.”

Dumbledore’s words on the day of his death echoed in Severus’ mind, and suddenly he ran from the room, books and wife forgotten.

He moved swiftly to the desk that was now his, ignoring the questions and concerns of the previous heads of school as he opened various drawers and searched the contents quickly and haphazardly before slamming them shut and trying another. It was in a bowl of lemon drops that he’d shoved away in one of the larger drawers that Severus found the ring that nearly killed Dumbledore. He brought it close to examine it, vaguely hearing Hermione asking what was wrong.

There, there it was. The triangle with the circle and the line. He’d seen it before, not just in some versions of the book where it was sketched out, but in a very old photo over twenty years ago in the very room where his son was now hiding.

He rose, turned to face a defeated looking Albus Dumbledore, and shook his head. “A fairy tale.” He said.

“No,” Albus said. “I’m afraid it’s very, very real.”

“Why?” Severus asked. “Why then, why now? Why even … why!”

“I was hoping that, as a way to save Harry, he could become the master of Death.”

“The master of- are you bloody insane? No, it’s quite clear that you were insane long ago, it just finally caught up to you, hadn’t it? Now, tell me, oh master, how was this plan of yours going to fall into place, if Potter did not have the stone, cloak, or wand?”

“He has the cloak, I’m sure you’re familiar with it. Invisibility cloaks do not last long, certainly not long enough to be handed down from parent to child for generations. As it stands, James Potter entrusted it to me.”

“Entrusted it?” Severus said through his teeth. “Or did you take it when you took my God son from his home long before I got there to bring him home with us!”

“Entrusted.” Dumbledore insisted. “And as promised, I gave it to Harry, though I admit to hoping he would have given it to me should I have asked. I had, after all, already had one hallow in my possession.” When Severus frowned, the painting sighed. “My wand. It was not the one I bought from Olivander at age eleven, but the one I won of Gellert when he challenged me to a duel all those years ago. He had stolen it from a wizard known as Gregovitch, back when we were boys.”

“Yes, I have seen the photos. I do vaguely recall your wand being in the other lad’s hand. I’m surprised you did not swipe the cloak from Potter, then, if you had the stone and the wand already. Being ‘Master of Death’ meant you may have been able to save your skin.” Severus sneered, feeling Hermione’s hands on his shoulders. He reached up, placing one of his hands over one of hers, feeling the connection.

“No,” Dumbledore shook his head. “It was not meant to be.”

“Allow me to understand,” Hermione said from behind him. “You and Grindlewald chased a fairy tale in hopes to gain power, and thereby caused and international wizarding war?”
The painting smiled a twinkling sort of smile. “My dear, you must have realized by now that all those fairy tales that children so love are based a bit on truth. You and Severus, much as I hated to admit it while alive, share one of those fairy tale aspects. Your bond, much like all truly loving couples across wizarding Britain, is something established as early as a first kiss. Nothing as fancy or telling as stories would have you believe, but it is there. Cemented. The Hallows were along the same vein, but I’m not sure all of them in the possession of one would make them the master of death.

“You cannot hide from death, as I quickly learned, but you can hide yourself with that cloak from those who wish to cause your death. The wand is supposed to be the most powerful in the word, and yet holding it will not mean you are unbeatable. Merely, it provides just a touch more strength in battle. The stone will not bring loved ones back to the realm of the living, but isn’t it wonderful to see a friendly face waiting to greet you before you even left the mortal plane? Harry has used the cloak to remain hidden many times over, and it has saved his life. I had hoped, perhaps, that if I gave him the other two, he would be able to use the wand in battle, and somehow over power Voldemort. And yet, if he should not, he could have the stone to call upon his parents for strength and courage should he need it.”

“And where in all this did you decide to abandon it?”

“I was intending on you finding a way to get the stone to Harry. However, despite my plans for the afterlife, Mr Nott disarmed me on the tower. He is, now, the master of the elder wand.”

“Which was buried with you,” Hermione retorted. “As all wizards are buried.”

“Perhaps it is for the best,” Dumbledore relented.

December 31st, 1997

For as long as he could remember, there’s been fireworks to herald the new year of Hogsmeade. He half expected when Hermione dragged him up to the astronomy tower that there wouldn’t be this year, yet as they arrived that first spark lit the air a dazzling green. Still, it filled him with none of the usual hope or joy. Just being up there was enough to make him weary. Did he have any love for the old man? None, but that doesn’t mean he wanted to kill him. He remembered all too well what it felt like casting the curse, and he hated remembering how much he wanted to keep doing it.

But Hermione was in his arms, and his hands rested against the roundness that contained his third child. One who would kick at his palm once in a while as if to remind him that there was still good to come. Either that, or it was a warning that he or she would be more trouble than two masters combined.

“Ingrid.” Hermione said.

“You keep suggesting female names” Severus pointed out.

“Fitzwilliam, then.”

“No, and no.” Severus said, hearing the tinkling of Hermione’s giggle just beneath his head. After a pause, he said, “Lilia.”

“Oh, that is pretty.” Hermione agreed. “Lily for short, then?”
“No,” He said, shaking his head against her curls. “While Lily is very dear to me, to us, and I do like the idea of honoring her, I do not want something so direct. Not in this case. There may come a time….”

He couldn’t say it, not with the lump in his throat.

There may come a time, _should Harry survive_, that he may have a daughter of his own, and would wish to name her for his mother. Severus may have cared deeply for Lily, she being his oldest friend, but he couldn’t take the privilege away from Harry. He simply couldn’t.

And thank the stars and any deity that listened, Hermione said nothing. She merely turned her head and kissed his chin in understanding.

They were quiet for another long pause, watching the distant fireworks, hearing a clock strike twelve somewhere in the castle.

“Happy New Year.” He said softly.

“Happy New Year,” Hermione repeated twisting to be able to kiss him properly. “And we shall see the beginning of the next. All of us.”

“You sound certain.” He said, running his thumbs against her waist.

“Positive thinking.” She said with certainty. “If I believe, truly believe, we will all make it out, then we will.”

He shook his head, then pulled her close, embracing her, hoping she was right.

Severus could see the glowing grey of a ghost behind Hermione, and turned his attention to it.


Helena gave a sad little smile. “No one has called me that in many years. And the last who did….”

“I appreciate you coming to me. I know I told Sir Nicholas that you did not have to report right away, but I was beginning to fear you had neglected your duty all together. We were hoping that perhaps you could have provided us with an idea as to the whereabouts of the diadem.” He said gently. “You didn’t, per chance… tell someone else about it?”

Helena rung her hands. “He was charming, flattering. He seemed to understand… to sympathize.”

Severus nodded. “It’s my understanding that that is how he turns most to his cause.”

Helena nodded. “I did tell the young Tom Riddle about the diadem, where I hid it before the Baron found me. Many years later, he returned. And when I saw him, I saw he had the diadem. I had thought he was here to return what once was lost, but he had turned it into something horrid. How he perverted such a relic… I felt foolish.”

“Did…” Hermione started, pausing as Helena’s attention turned on her. “Did he leave the school with the relic?”

“No,” Helena shook her head. “He did not. It is still within Hogwarts, but where, I do not know.”

“Thank you, Helena. Your aid is most appreciated.” Severus said, bowing to the ghost. She curtsied in turn, then floated away.
“It’s still within Hogwarts.” Hermione said, reaching for and gripping his arm tightly. “Severus, it’s here!”

“Yes.” He said. “It is. The children have the locket. The ring and diary are destroyed. I would bet most anything that there is an item, likely the Hufflepuff cup, in one of the vaults Bellatrix has access to. And the Diadem is here, though where is still a mystery.”

“We can do this.” She said with determination and eagerness. “We can, we just… we need to either find a way into the chamber of secrets to get another fang, or….”

“Or figure out where the old fool tucked the ones we had already harvested away. All in all, though, it could very well mean that this is the last New Year the Dark Lord will ever see.”

Chapter End Notes

A bit lighter than the last, I hope. We're going to start seeing the end of the horcruxes, the tying up of loose ends, and the final battles soon.
I hope I didn't lose too many of you. I know some of the relationships took a turn one way or another that some people didn't enjoy, and i hope that didn't deter everyone and you're all just reading without comment, which is 100% okay.
Until next time!
Chapter 66

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January 3rd, 1998

__________________________H__________________________

Hermione watched as the older students attempted to duel each other, some succeeding more than others. And those who didn’t want to fight were huddled together learning some quick Mediwizardry, Poppy coming into the room to show them a bit before she would once again have to stay in the infirmary, lest the Carrows grow suspicious.

Then again, that would require a brain.

There was parchment on a book in Hermione’s lap, a self-inking quill in her hand, as she tried to calculate the date of the final battle. Any attempts before had only led to inconclusive results. Which only made sense as she didn’t have all the facts. But now, in a way, they did. They knew where the diadem was, it was merely a matter of figuring out where in the castle Riddle would have hidden it. They had a hunch that the cup was in Gringotts, because Severus quite clearly remembered the Dark Lord giving Bellatrix something at the same time he’d given Lucius the diary, and since the LeStranges’ property was all turned over to the ministry upon their arrests, and no heirloom of Hogwarts found, she’d likely have had it tucked away. It was all a matter of having a way to destroy it all, and, well…

Inconclusive, but it was looking to be somewhere near summer time of this year. Soon, then. They wouldn’t have to wait for years for all this to end. By this time next year, their family will be on the other side of the war, come what may. One thing Hermione had no desire to calculate was everyone’s chances of survival.

As a few of the sparing pairs took a break, Hermione noted Neville weaving his way over to her. She banished the parchment and quill to her desk in her chambers, and then watched expectantly as the young wizard took a seat in the chair next to hers.

“You’ve improved quite a bit, even since last year.” She complimented with a smile.

Neville seemed proud. “It’s been a bit necessary,” he shrugged.

“Either way, you’re doing a fine job.” She assured.

His smile waned as he nodded, looking down at the floor. “’Mione, if… if when I see her again… if I apologize….”

“Neville,” Hermione said wearily, but relented when he held up his hand.

“Neville,” Hermione said once more, more firmly this time. “You’re a nice boy, a sweet boy. And
I’m sure Aurora’s feelings for you, whatever they may have been, likely haven’t altered all that much since your parting ways. But I also can’t speak for her. I don’t know what sort of chance you’d have with her in any capacity. But I did teach her to forgive, so I’m sure she will at least do that much.”

“Do you think she’ll come back?” He asked quietly.

“Before the end of the war? No, not unless it’s to fight. They’re doing well out there, really. She’s helping them balance, and helped us get information we really needed. She’d not have found a place here so easily.”

“She could have helped teach others to heal!” He said instantly.

Hermione laughed, shook her head. “And this is why you need to adjust your thinking before you approach her. There are a lot of ways she could have helped here, it’s true. But it was Aurora’s choice, and she needed you to support her in that choice. Neville… you can’t… you can’t simply decide things for a girl. It’s very sweet that you wanted to make sure she was okay after everything that happened with her father and Dumbledore, but to have written you grandmother, and then assumed because she said Aurora could be with you that Aurora would. Make plans, have a contingency, it is the smart thing to do, but then just assuming she would go on with those plans? No, that’s not how it works.”

“I get that now, I do.” Neville said. “But I just wanted to keep her close, safe. I know she doesn’t need someone to keep her safe, but…”

“You love her.” Hermione said in understanding, and then felt terribly for the young man. She opened her mouth, thinking to warn Neville of Fred’s hopes, but then stopped. She could not decide for Aurora one way or another, nor could she attempt to play favorites with the young men who courted her any longer. Both had changed since her days at Hogwarts. Fred was now a mature young man, who showed he was more than she remembered him to be. And Neville was no longer that timid boy she recalled, the one who was willing to fight the boys to keep them in their room and not duel Draco, but only meekly. She had not been their age for many, many years. She had no personal understanding of them anymore.

“I do.” Neville said. “And I think she loves me back, but I really can’t be sure. I want to be. I even thought asking her to stay would help me know, but.”

“If you really love her, Neville, let her go.”

“But I have.”

“But you haven’t,” Hermione countered. “She initiated the end of your relationship, I know that much. So, when I say ‘let her go’, I mean don’t keep running after her. Don’t keep begging her to stay. Wait. She will choose for herself, one way or the other. If she does love you, she will choose you.”

“And if she doesn’t?” He asked in a small voice.

“Then why would you want to keep trying to be with someone who doesn’t love you? Remus hung on to the hope something would happen between Severus and I for twenty years. He held on to hope for so long, he lost someone who really loved him. Who would have done anything for him. Now, well, now he has someone who cares, of course, and does love him, but it’s not the same as what it could have been. Don’t let that be you.”

Neville nodded. “I won’t,” He said, nearly sounding defeated. But then he smiled, bright and honest.
“Anything I can do to help her? Maybe bring her back here to all of us sooner?

“I don’t know,” Hermione confessed. “But I’m sure as soon as Severus and I think of something, we’ll let you know.”

And it was then that she knew he heard him, because when she had said Severus’ name, he didn’t flinch, he didn’t sneer, he didn’t have one negative reaction. He learned. And if he ever wanted a chance with Aurora, this was a step in the right direction.

January 11th, 1998

The Dark Lord was still away, his pets in tow, and it provided Severus an opportunity he’d been mulling over for the last couple weeks. He waited until after all of the Holidays purposely, to just before the students would have been returning to the school. The Carrows had returned, and he’d informed Hermione and those in the room of that fact so they wouldn’t be caught roaming the halls without him there to run intervention. But their return meant that there were even fewer people around that might witness and thereby be suspicious of what he would be doing there.

He apparated outside the gates, once more despairing at how much Narcissa’s lack of presence had caused the once fine Malfoy Manor to fall into despair. His dark mark still granted him access to the grounds, and he strode up the walkway, shoulders squared, head held high. He walked into the manor like he owned it, and he supposed as he was considered by the Dark Lord to be the highest of rank with he and Bellatrix away, he did.

A house elf hopped from foot to foot nervously, pulling on its ears.

“Mr Malfoy?” He asked the elf.

“Sir, Master who is not Master, Master Malfoy that is, he is in his study, sir.”

Severus nodded his head to the elf and headed toward the place he’d known well for many years. He passed no one on the way, which was all the better, and simply opened the door when he came to Lucius’ study.

The man was as far from put together as Severus had ever seen him, though he was still meticulously dressed. But there was a lack of finery to it, which somehow emphasized how matted his hair was becoming. Too many cleansing charms, not enough proper care, something Severus recognized from experience. The man was sitting with his feet on his desk, crossed at the ankles, fire whiskey in hand, staring at the family portrait, one that was still as the occupants were all still living.

“I have to make sure,” He said as Severus walked in and closed the door. “I stare at it whenever I can. I fear the day I walk in here, and either Cissy or Draco smile at me. Or scowl, I’m never sure how my reception would be.”

“I wish I could give you assurance one way or another, but both keep their feelings close to heart, for the most part.” Severus said as he sat down in the guest chair.
“Would you like a whiskey? I can’t imagine the last few weeks have been easy for you. Then again, you moved on quick enough.”

“If you’re referring to my affair with my potions mistress, it’s not a matter of moving on, so much as a stress relief. After all, running a school full of hot headed teenagers, as well as overseeing a pair of sadists can be trying.”

“Hmm,” Lucius hummed in agreement. “Oh, that I don’t doubt at all. I had nearly hoped, actually, that … that perhaps the Carrows, or at least one of them, would cross a line once more, and I could take over their position.”

“But then, how would you see your painting?” Severus quirked a brow, and Lucius merely shook his head.

Glancing about the room, Severus carefully took out his wand, keeping the movement hidden from Lucius, and placed a Muffilato on the room. He then scanned for any spy devices, startling the blond when one went up in flames just by the window.

Severus grinned, “It would appear you aren’t trusted. By whom, though, becomes the question.”

Lucius scoffed. “I believe that would be Bellatrix.” He said before taking a hearty sip of his whiskey. “She thinks I know where Draco and Cissy are. She tried to find the villa in France, but as it is secret kept, she had a difficult time discerning its whereabouts.”

“I believe she’d have been smart to investigate that particular abode. I believe that Cissy was there, as well as Draco for a time.”

Lucius’ head whipped around and he stared at Severus. “Was he?”

“Yes.”

“With?”

“Friends.”

“When he should be at Hogwarts?”

Severus shrugged. “I believe the company he keeps is not completely welcome in Hogwarts, and one he is particularly fond of would likely be killed near on sight.”

Lucius tapped his finger against his glass, pursing his lips. “He always did go on about Potter far too much for anything healthy. I’d like to think I’m a modern thinking wizard, that such relations do not bother me. And, I suppose, they don’t. It wasn’t so much seeing Draco at the ministry in the arms of a man, but more being in the arms of the enemy. I knew I lost him then. That, somewhere along the way, he took a look at what he’d always been taught, what I’d always been taught and so on, and decided he did not like it. What could have changed his mind….”

“Perhaps,” Severus said, clearing his throat, “it was discovering that one he always thought to be pureblood was, perhaps, not?” Severus quirked a brow.

Lucius scoffed. “He’s always known your blood status.”

“Perhaps I wasn’t speaking of myself.” He offered. When Lucius frowned, he shook his head. “It matters not. The point is, Draco is now very firmly on the side of light, though that is not precisely the most accurate description. The question you must now ask yourself is if you ever want a chance
to see him again.”

“Of course, I do,” Lucius snapped. “He and Cissy, though why she ever felt the need to change sides, as it were….”

“She did it for the same reasons you would: for Draco.”

“To follow Albus Dumbledore?”,

“No, to follow Harry Potter.”

At this Lucius narrowed his eyes in thought and confusion. He took his feet off the desk, set down the tumbler of whiskey, and leaned toward Severus. “Is there a difference?”

“A large one, actually.” He replied. “For one, Albus Dumbledore was nothing more than another Dark Lord in saint’s robes.”

“Yes, Potter is the enemy of our Lord.”

“Perhaps, but the enemy of my enemy is my friend, is it not?” And when Lucius looked ready to argue, Severus held up his hand. “Consider what you do not have because you were so set on pleasing the Dark Lord. You lost your seat on the board of governors because of the incident involving Miss Weasley and a certain diary. You then lost your home to the Dark Lord upon his return, as he needed a base of operations. Though it’s hard to determine if that came before or after losing your wife and child because you were sent to Azkaban. You have since also lost your wand, and whatever dignity you might have had. Your guest, the man who took over your manor, has been gone who knows where for two weeks now, and yet I find you in the one place you can still truly claim as your own.”

“And what would you have me do, Severus?” Lucius asked. “I very well can’t turn him out of house, now can I? It would be my head. I would like to live to see the end of this war.”

“Regardless of the outcome?”

“I, frankly, at this point do not care if the Mudbloods run rampant and destroy our way of life. I want my wife! I want my son! I want the Malfoy name to mean something once more instead of being nothing more than a disgrace.” He pounded the desk. “I lived nearly fifteen years keeping my mouth shut and my opinions to myself to remain civil when needed. It was not idea, but it was a better life than the one I have been living. My ideals, desires, for our world may be in place, but to what end? I did not say I would give up my family, my life, so we could have a pure world.”

“And purity would be the end of our kind as well, surely you must know that.”

Lucius scoffed. Then he frowned. Severus watched as he seemed to mull over what was said, considering the implications.

“I was the only heir to my line. My father was… and now Draco. Yet the Blacks… but then the Parkinsons. The LeStranges.”

“The LeStranges are essentially no more. Both brothers have inclinations that don’t tend to lead to reproduction. If Bella were to ever fall pregnant, it wouldn’t be with her husband’s child.”

“No,” Lucius agreed, a sneer of revulsion curling his lips. “It certainly wouldn’t.”

“If you truly do not care who the victor of this war would be, then I have a small favor to ask of you.
To be done preferably before the Dark Lord and Bellatrix return.”

“I suppose that depends on the favor.”

“It’s quite simple, really. I believe Bellatrix was given an item at the same time you were, all those years ago, but the Dark Lord. I assume you likely know where it’s being kept, and more so, you’d be able to retrieve it. You were considered the holder of the estates once the LeStranges went to prison, were you not?”

“I was,” Lucius frowned. “And to my knowledge, none of them were aware of it in order to reverse the decision.”

“Good, this will allow you to retrieve the object without question.”

“And why do you want it, Severus?”

“Because much like you, I want this over, once and for all.”

“Well then,” Lucius said, picking up his tumbler and downing the last of his whiskey. “Let’s not waste time, shall we?”

They strode to Gringotts, Diagon Alley relatively quiet considering the time of year. But then, most everything was boarded up, the owners on the run or in hiding. Entering the bank, they barely got more than a glance from the goblins, and the witches and wizards present seemed hesitant to go near the pair, let alone look at them.

Lucius walked to the main desk, head held high, a bit more presentable than he had been in his office thanks to a couple of well-placed glamours. He cleared his throat, and when the head goblin looked at him, he stated. “I wish to enter my vaults.”

“Your wand?” The goblin asked in a bored tone.

Lucius handed his wand to the goblin who measured it. After a time, he said, “This is not the wand we have had on record for many years.”

“My family wand was… destroyed.” Lucius replied, a light tint coloring his cheeks.

The goblin glared, but said, “Which of your vaults do you wish to access?”

“The Malfoy, Black, and LeStrange vault.” He said, tilting his chin. “I trust that won’t be a problem?”

“Of course not, sir.” He then eyed Severus wearily. “Your companion?”

“Will be joining me, but I understand he is not able to enter the vaults, except, of course the Malfoy vault, as it is strictly my own.”

The goblin nodded, seeming to decide he did not care one way or the other so long as the Gringotts rules were adhered to. He then waved for another to escort them.
They climbed into the rail car, and began their journey down to the lowest levels of the bank. It struck Severus that he hadn’t been down that deep into the vaults. He’d never bothered to access the Prince vaults, since his mother was still alive, and any inheritance left by his grandmother that was insisted upon him having was transferred to his own vaults. He didn’t need the Dark Lord to know what he had access to.

As the thief’s downfall came upon them, he heard Lucius grimace. Severus braced himself, closing his eyes and trying not to hold his breath as they were dowsed in the liquid, and then once they passed, promptly dried himself off. Lucius did the same, his glamor having been removed as they’d gone through. He didn’t seem to care one way or another right now.

“Which vault will we be visiting first?” Lucius asked their escort.

“The Black vault is first.” Was the reply, and the continued their rickety journey.

Severus stepped out of the car as the others did once they arrived at the correct platform. He merely stood, waiting, watching as Lucius disappeared into the vault of the Black family. He didn’t take long, and if he removed anything, it was a mystery that he had no care to solve. They then reentered the cart, and traveled deeper into the cavern.

“The LeStrange vault is next, I assume.” Lucius asked.

“Yes,” The goblin said simply.

Severus eyed him, wondering whether or not he could be trusted. Still he wouldn’t do anything until after they left.

They pulled up to the next platform, and everyone once more disembarked. The goblin opened the LeStrange vault, and Lucius slipped in. He seemed to take longer this time, an irritating long time. Severus withdrew his pocket watch, checking the time, sighing. Within the vault there was a clatter, Lucius cursing, and then a strange, continuous rattle of metal hitting the floor. Lucius darted out, and the goblin quickly closed the door.

“Crazy bitch placed a bloody gemino curse in there.” Lucius explained as he smoothed out his hair, trying to make himself appeared less ruffled.

“How in Merlin’s name is beneficial?” Severus asked as they moved down the platform toward the Malfoy vault.

“I suppose if someone didn’t know, they would end up being crushed beneath the weight of it all. It only activates as something hit the ground, and I wouldn’t put it past the insane … witch to have purposely placed the bloody plate I toppled over precariously on purpose.”

“Perhaps that was how she hoped to be rid of her husband.” Severus smirked, and Lucius did the same as they waited for the goblin to open the Malfoy vault.

“We will not want or need an escort, do you understand.” Lucius told the goblin sneeringly. “You accompanied me within the vaults where I was merely a caretaker, this is my property.”

The goblin gave a malicious grin. “As you wish.” He said, waving Lucius inside.

The stepped within, and Lucius’ face visibly fell at the sight of the vault. It was virtually empty inside, with only about a dozen medium bags of coins, and a couple of family paintings. There were a couple pieces of antique furniture that likely wouldn’t have had a resell value, due to the Malfoy family crest adorning the edging, but in every other way, Severus had never seen such an empty
“I was rich.” Lucius said in a confused tone. “I was one of the wealthiest wizards... the LeStranges have not suffered as I have, not like this. How can I ever... there is nothing for Draco. Nothing.” And then the heartbreak that began to emerge turned to cold fury. “I have been used. I was punished by being forced to languish in Azkaban. I was punished by the loss of my family and giving up my home. But my money, my wealth, should not have been squandered to such a degree!” He turned to Severus, withdrawing something from within his robes, his pockets obviously expanded to hold such an item. “Take this, do whatever it is you mean to do with it. If it brings the fall of a man who would abuse those who pledged their loyalty, that takes everything of them, all the better. Mudbloods and blood traitors be damned.”

Severus took the cup, something clearly not as dangerous as the ring since Lucius was handling it without protection. He could sense the pure darkness coming off it, and put it within the inner pockets of his own robes with great apprehension. He suppressed a shudder at the feel of having something so purely evil so near his heart, but in the face of Lucius, he appeared impassive.

The two men then promptly turned and left the vault, following the goblin as he brought them above. As they were leaving the cart, just before they reentered the main bank, Severus turned toward the goblin. “Obliviate.” He said, and the goblin stood stunned a moment, long enough for Severus to slip back into the main bank. He was followed by Lucius, and they moved out of the bank together, into the quiet streets of Diagon Alley.

“There a reason you wiped the mind of the goblin?” Lucius asked.

“Yes, he will not recall us being there. He will claim, if ever questioned, that you were denied access to your vault because of your lack of proper wand.”

“Confusion, then?” Lucius smirked, “The Dark Lord will not tolerate such confusion among them.”

“No, and I trust your occlumency is strong enough to prevent him from knowing one way or another?”

“I believe it is.” Lucius said with confidence. “Though I think he will tend to believe me without legilimency over the creatures.”

“Indeed.” Severus agreed. “I must return to Hogwarts, lest the Carrows happen upon a student that they feel slighted them somehow.”

“Until we meet once more.” Lucius said, turning to apparate away. Just before Lucius disappeared, Severus cast a quiet Confundus. Lucius wouldn’t know why, precisely he went to the vaults, but he will know what had become of them. He will not know why his sentiments had changed, but will assume it was because of Draco. He will not remember his visit with Severus, and it’s best that he didn’t.

Because when they were so close to the end, Severus would not risk his cover being blown when this all eventually came to light.

He apparated back to Hogwarts, and when he did, he realized his one flaw in his plan: he had no way to destroy the bloody thing now that he had it.
“Tell me where they are, old man!” Severus demanded of the portrait before him, though the depicted figure merely smiled.

He’d been waiting the last four days for Albus-sodding-Dumbledore to reappear in his portrait so he could ask. He knew attempting to summon the portrait wasn’t likely to work, not with whatever enchantments the former headmaster had applied to his portrait.

“Why do you need to know?” He asked in return, and Severus pulled at his greasy locks, trying to find some small bit of calm.

“Why do I need to know? Why? Well, it could be that my child, god children, and their friend are in the possession of one horcrux, and I have one currently stuffed in the desk drawer. There is a third somewhere within these walls! Now we collected basilisk fangs, and I know full well you did so with the intention of using them to destroy these blasted things, so, where are they?”

He was having a stare down with a portrait that was meant to obey him, and yet the stubborn old fool was keeping his mouth shut.

“Do any of you have any idea where they could be?” He asked the portraits.

There was a hum of ‘no’, which only frustrated the Headmaster more. Of course, he wouldn’t have announced it to the room at large, that would be too easy, wouldn’t it?

“We will need to break into the chamber of secrets once again and hope that carcass hasn’t decayed to the point where the fangs lose their potency.”

“And how do you purpose to do that?” Albus asked. “The chamber is sealed, and only one he can speak parsletongue will be able to open it.”

“I’m sure I can find a way,” he said before there was a knock on his door. “Enter.” He said, turning away from the portrait to face the door, watching as Amycus and Alecto dragged in a clearly beaten Longbottom and Finnegan, both who still looked geared for a fight. The siblings looked eager, likely thrilled to hear him threaten the students’ families as opposed them themselves.

Severus sighed, already nearly too weary to deal with them, but knowing he had to.

January 23rd, 1998

“Where are they?” Severus asked, as he had every day for the last twelve days. He was getting fed up with it all.

Dumbledore’s portrait refused to speak, merely smiling.

“Fine,” He said, then turned away, summoning the memory of his wife and children at Christmas two years ago. “Expecto Patronum.”
They’d been eating an extremely late breakfast inside the tent when a silver glow drew most of their attentions. Ron yelped when the lioness strolled up to Harry, which promptly had Draco and herself laughing. She did sober quickly, however, when she realized her father was sending whatever message he had this way instead of through her watch.

He’d told her nearly two weeks ago to wait for word from him before they did anything else. That he’d found another horcrux, but had yet to find a way to destroy it. They’d celebrated, but after that, it became a bit pointless. Finding them was a big deal, of course, but it was destroying them that would ultimately become the greatest victory.

“Send me your patronus at midnight, relay how to open the chamber of secrets through it.” And promptly, the lioness disappeared into a silver mist.

Harry blinked. “I have to what?”

“Are you that dense?” Draco teased.

“No, it’s not that. It’s just… you need parsletongue to open it. So… do use the patronus to say it, or…?”

“I think you answered your own question.” Aurora smirked.

“Well,” Ron said. “I could probably open it. You talk enough in your sleep, mate, that I could likely figure it out.”

“Really? You understand what Potter’s saying when he speaks snake in his sleep?” Draco asked.

“Well, I was down there with him the first go, wasn’t I?” Ron countered. “Can’t really forget that, now.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Aurora said. “Whatever Dad needs it’s in the room, and Harry can open it.”

Harry nodded, looking thoughtful. “The basilisk would still be down there, wouldn’t it? The skeleton of it?”

“Probably,” Draco reasoned. “If it’s as big as you say, it would take a bit for it to break down.”

“Unless You-Know-Who went down to check on his pet and found it dead.” Ron said thoughtfully.

“I think we’d have heard something of the sort by now, if it truly upset him.” Aurora said, gesturing to Harry.

Harry nodded emphatically, then sighed heavily. “Where are we now?” He asked, looking at the walls of the tent as if it would somehow tell him the answer.

“Near Hogsbreath,” Aurora said as she returned to her cereal.

“Hogsbreath?” Ron asked, at least remembering to close his mouth.

“Yes,” She replied. “It’s where most butter beer is brewed. Mum took us camping here once or twice when Draco and I were really young. Felt like a good place to go.”
“Mione took you lots of places, didn’t she?” Harry asked with a smirk.

“Aunt H thought it was important for us to be independent. I suppose it was more accurate in my case, needing to wait for everything, like food, instead of demanding a house elf for it.”

“It was also for us to be one with nature, to understand everything around us.” Aurora replied. “That, and I think that she missed doing the same with her own parents when she had her accident.”

They were quiet for a bit before Ron said, “think we could go get some butter beer?”

“I don’t think it’s really worth the risk.” Draco countered.

“No? I dunno. Might lift some spirits, boost morale.” Ron said with a decisive nod.

“Not worth it.” Aurora said, setting down her spoon and picking up her tea. “You can go if you’d like. Risk snatchers and the like.”

“Beginning to think that the snatchers aren’t actually a thing.” He grumbled.

She cocked and eyebrow but said nothing, sipping her tea.

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“Sure this is a good idea?” Sirius asked as he eyed a giggling Moaning Myrtle who hovered nearby and kept making kissing noises and giggles that Severus supposed was meant to be flirty.

“We don’t have any other choice.” He explained to Sirius. “We have to destroy the horcruxes in order to defeat the Dark Lord. In order to do that, it must be beyond repair.”

“Wonderful,” Sirius rolled his eyes.

“You know,” Myrtle started. “If you-”

“Be gone.” Severus said in a bored tone. “I’m aware you can haunt other places in the castle. Go, and leave us.”

Myrtle pouted, then wailed as she disappeared into a toiled with a might splash. Before the water could hit him, Severus drew his wand and cast an umbrella charm, protecting him from getting drench.

Sirius, however, was not so lucky. Smirking, Severus ended his charm, then wordlessly dried his comrade.

“Thanks,” Sirius said, still flicking his arms, likely trying to get the feeling of toilet water off of himself.

January 24th, 1998
It was then that the stag sauntered in, its ethereal ears twitching. Slowly it approached Severus, opened its mouth, and a hissing sound emerged.

“Bloody hell that’s freaky.” Sirius said just before the sinks in the center of the room began to click and shift, slowly creating the passage way to the Chamber of Secrets.

“Can’t you tell us?” She asked the portrait of Albus Dumbledore now that there was no Severus in the room. She was exhausted, but after being in the room of requirement for so long, with nothing more to do than simply nap or read, she was determined to be of more help.

“Tell me, Mrs Snape.” The portrait said thoughtfully. “Have you run arithmic equations to determine parts of the war?”

Hermione snorted. “Of course I have.” She replied. “It would be utterly foolish not to.”

“And when do you predict this all coming to an end?” He asked.

“It’s inconclusive,” She said with a shrug. “But the estimate would be soon, near the end of the school year.”

“Quite. And if you were to destroy the horcruxes soon? What then?” He asked.

She frowned. “Well, I wouldn’t need to run the equations to know it would likely come to blows earlier. Of course, we still need to figure out how to remove the horcrux from Harry before he faces Riddle.”

“No, my dear. Harry must face Voldemort, and he must die by his hand.”

“Oh yes, I had heard this bit from Severus. A sacrificial lamb. Well, you’ll excuse me if I would much prefer my godson to make it through the war. Perhaps marry Draco?”

“I’m afraid that may not be possible, my dear.”

“Oh, do stop with the ‘my dear’ nonsense.” She snapped. “You never cared one wit for any of us, so don’t try to pretend otherwise. Now where in the bloody hell are the basilisk fangs?”

“You know,” Dumbledore’s portrait said, stroking his beard. “I had thought it would be utterly magnificent to have Harry destroy one with the sword of Gryffindor.”

“You can’t plot anymore.” She roared. “You’re dead! Stop pretending you have any control over this and help us! Ow.” She grimaced, sitting down in Severus’ chair and clutching her abdomen.

“Something wrong?” Dumbledore asked.

“Just this one putting up a fuss over mummy’s yelling, I would say.” She said, rubbing the spot that hurt while taking a breath. She then glared at Dumbledore. “Don’t think I don’t know what the legend of the sword of Gryffindor says. That it must be taken in instances of great valor. Why risk Harry’s life further, when we already know a way to destroy the things, and had one? You hid them, we know you did, Albus, so be helpful. And if you won’t or never have any intention of doing so-”
He cut her off by raising his hand, sighing. “Alright, I will impart this much to you.” He said, and the other portraits all seemed to lean in to listen, anticipating what would be said. “All I will tell you, and you alone, is that I placed the basilisk fangs in the Room of Hidden Things.”

She blinked. “Honestly, the Room of Hidden Things? Oh, that sounds promising.”

“It is where I placed them, shortly after I realized that I wouldn’t be able to guide Harry through his journey to find the horcruxes, not in the way I wanted or intended to.”

“So where is this room?” She asked.

“Oh, that I’m afraid I can’t tell you.” He said with his annoying little secret smile. “But you’re intelligent, Mrs Snape. I think you can figure it out on your own.”

She growled in frustration as Albus casually sauntered off out of his portrait, clearly stating that, to him anyway, the conversation was done. Then, she realized, she’d gotten more information out of him than Severus had. Now she just had to wait for her husband to return from the chamber of secrets.

Hermione had an inkling where the Room of Hidden Things was, and they would need to think of a plan to move the children hiding away.

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He’d been ungracefully thrown to his feet, nearly his arse, as he came down the slide. It was better than the first time when he had landed on his arse, and a rat skeleton had stabbed at it.

Severus stepped aside, waiting for Sirius to appear, shaking his head at the grown man laughing at the journey before being unceremoniously deposited on his posterior.

“Fucking hell, that hurts!” Sirius cursed, causing Severus to smirk.

Lighting a quick lumos, he pointed his wand down toward Sirius before offering his hand. Sirius was still grumbling as he was pulled to his feet, grimacing as the bones crushed beneath his feet.

“Come, we must get going.” He said.

“Why?” Sirius asked as he lit a lumos as well. No one should be awake at this hour. We shouldn’t have to worry about the pair of flubberworms.”

“Perhaps not, but we also don’t know what will happen when one of these things are destroyed.” Severus retorted. “Albus was likely too weak to fight something too nasty, the curse already having partly done him in. Potter said the diary bleed, possibly ink, possibly something worse.”

The continued, passing the large basilisk skin. Sirius shuddered. “I can’t believe Harry faced down something this size alone.” He said, carefully weaving his way past it. “Actually, I can’t believe something like this was left alive after fifty years. Albus had to have known what was down here. I get not knowing how to enter, but why not just get Harry to say ‘open’ or whatever once he knew it was roaming about again?”

“In this case, I believe he genuinely didn’t know where the Chamber of Secrets was.” Severus
replied as he carefully navigated his way around the rubble. “Salazar Slytherin had kept this quite concealed and secret. It wasn’t known at all where the chamber could be or if it was even real.”

“Still, Harry shouldn’t have-”

“Wait until you see the remains.” Severus said as they got to a door with seven snakes decorating it. He brought out his pocket watch, tapping his wand against it, then waited.

“Have you figured out why You-Know-Who has traveled off?” Sirius asked as they waited.

Severus shook his head, but before he could say anything, the silver glow of the stag once more galloped toward them, stopping by Severus and opening its mouth. Once more, the hissing sound of Harry’s voice came from its mouth, and it disappeared as the large, stone snake began to make its way around the circumference of the door.

Sirius jumped when the first head retracted, and when the slithering stone disappeared once again, he let out a violent shudder.

“No offense, but this is all so, utterly creepy.”

“How in Merlin’s name would I take offense?” Severus asked as they went through the now open door, and down the short ladder. “I didn’t decorate nor create the bloody room.”

“No,” Sirius said, “But you are a Slytherin. Snakes are sort of your thing.”

“Do you decorate your home with lions? Wear them? Have them placed wherever you please?”

“Well… no.”

“Then why should you think I have such an affinity for my house’ creature of choice? I was placed in Slytherin because that’s where I fit in, not because I liked the aesthetic appeal.” He retorted as they moved calmly down the long, corridor like space lined with snakes, leading to the large sculpture of Salazar Slytherin’s head.

“He certainly did.” Sirius said, looking around, turning about to get a good look. “It’s a bit much, I think.”

“Yes, I would tend to agree.” Severus said, moving toward the large, long skeleton at the end of the chamber.

He waited at the mouth for Sirius to catch up, arching a brow when his companion reared back a bit at the size of the skull. He then cautiously moved toward it, hand reaching out toward the fangs.

“Stop!” Severus said, snatching Sirius’ wrist. When it was clear Sirius wasn’t going to attempt to grab it anymore, Severus let go. He then reached into his robes, removing the set of dragon-hide gloves he brought. He handed one to Sirius before donning the other. “The venom of a basilisk is deadly, and there’s no readily available cure. These will protect you should you hand slip.”

“And what are we going to put them in?” Sirius asked as Severus grabbed a hold of a fang.

It snapped away, as was expected, but it seemed brittle. Frowning, Severus took the cup from within his robes, set it on the ground, and stabbed at it. The cup was pierced, but then nothing happened.

“That’s it?” Sirius asked, looking between Severus and the cup with the fang still in it.

Severus watched it, waiting. But there was an inkling in his mind, something that told him it would
be of no use. The flesh of the basilisk was gone, and as such, the venom sakes would have been
dried up long ago. There may still be some deep in the marrow of the fang, perhaps enough to kill he
or Sirius, but not enough to destroy the cup.

_You’re going to fail your daughter_, a voice whispered inside his mind. _Your wife will need to hide,
flee, raise the child in her belly on her own. You will never know him. Your son will think you a fool.
All this has been for nothing. You will never win. It's useless. Just give up, give in. You're already
there, at the Dark Lord’s side. Do you really need to win to be happy?_

He kicked the cup away from him in range. Vaguely, he heard Sirius thank him for doing so, but the
words didn’t properly penetrate. Instead, Severus pointed his wand in the direction of the cup, and let
the rage that began to bubble within out in the form of a great, roaring fire.

“Bloody, hell, Severus, what have you done!?” Sirius demanded, the waters around the room rising
up, bubbling like geysers.

“What we came down here to do, Black! Destroy the fecking thing!” He said, focusing his energy
and magic on controlling the fiendfyre raging, beckoning the creatures that emerged to do his
bidding. He swore he saw the face of the Dark Lord, appearing as it once had when he was younger,
rise within the flames. He waited until the roar of the fire ceased, then, with all his might, started
whispering the counter curse to ended the spell. The flames retreated back toward his wand, ceasing
the flames destruction. The basilisk was half charred, smoke rising from the ash produced by the
burned bones.

Severus couldn’t remember a time he’d been that sweaty, or that exhausted, but as he panted in the
aftermath. He bent, hands on his knees, trying his best to recover from the task.

Movement out of the corner of his eye made him stop, and through the dampened tresses of his hair,
he noticed the grey, serpent like creatures emerge from the soot, slithering toward the corner.

Severus snorted, and then he started to laugh, throwing his head back as he stood upright, clutching
his gut.

“I thought you’d gone mad casting a spell like that, but this just confirms it.” Sirius said with
annoyance.

“Oh, but don’t you get it? Ashwinders! And what is it doing? Going off to lay eggs. And what did
that bumbling old idiot always used to try and push on us? That love is more powerful than darkness
and all the rot? And what did I just destroy but a horcrux.”

“And it could have been us with it!” Sirius half yelled.

“I was in complete control of the flames.”

“How could you know for sure you would, though? Stronger wizards than either of us have lost
control of fiendfyre.”

“Yes, stronger, perhaps, but maybe not ones with a tendency for darker magic.” Severus countered.

“Either way, when Kitten finds out what you’ve done, your arse will be spent on the sofa, mate.”
Sirius said as he ventured forward to collect the cup.

Severus went to where an ashwinder slithered to. It was still curled up, its eggs already laid, but it
was already losing its own luster. Severus cast the freezing charm on the eggs, and then levitated
them into the bag that was originally intended for the basilisk fangs. He repeated this for the other
two ashwinders, then once the eggs were collected, he met up with Sirius once more.

“So much for Hufflepuff’s relic.” He said, holding up a near-flat, very misshapen, blackened former cup.

“Indeed.” He said, huffing. “Come, I will lower the anti-apparation wards for us, but you’ll have to do the leg work.”

“Burnt out, are you?” Sirius teased, and Severus rolled his eyes before closing them, focusing on the wards of the school. Before he had the chance to open them, he felt the pull of the spell.

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“This was not worth it,” She whisper-yelled, and she and Ron took off from the brewery.

She could hear them behind them, chasing after them, and her heart pounded. How did she allow Ron to talk her into this? Yes, it was after dark. Yes, the village and brewery were closed. No, it wasn’t likely that they would notice a case of butter beer gone missing. But there were still dangers lurking about, still ways to be caught out.

And yet after Harry sent the second patronus off to her Dad, they all became antsy. Soon, they might be able to destroy the collected horcruxes. Soon, they might be closer to the end of the war, to maybe going home. And the way Draco and Harry were eyeing one another left little to imagine what would be their preferred activity to work off the extra tension.

So, she and Ron left the tent.

And then he managed to convince her that they should go to Hogsbreath after all. To give the couple space, to have an adventure.

To not be such a stick in the mud like her mother.

It was likely that had her practically skipping her way to the village.

They’d been quiet, careful to place silencing charms on their shoes. They considered disillusioning themselves, or maybe even a notice me not charm, but there was so little moon light, and there was cloud cover, they didn’t think they’d be seen. And they weren’t, not on their way to the brewery. They snuck inside, the wards practically child’s play at disabling. The grabbed one case, a small one, shrunk it down, and placed it inside Ron’s coat pocket. They left the brewery, re-established the wards, and was creeping to the edge of the village. It wasn’t even their fault they were caught, there was a dog howling down the road, the opposite way. But as the stupid snatchers looked up from whatever it was they had been focusing on before, they happened to look in their direction first. If they’d just been out for a walk, like they had tried to make it seem too late, they probably wouldn’t have been bothered. But as it was, they looked exactly as they were: thieves in the night. When their rouse was clearly not working, Aurora knew they had to move.

Leading them away from the camp, she kept glancing behind her. They were fast, but the snatchers seemed just a bit faster.

One apparated before them, causing Ron to stop short, and she to nearly crash into him.
“Why ya runnin’?” The snatcher before them said.

“Away from the stench, of course.” Aurora said, wrinkling her nose at the toothless, unkempt man before them. If her father was known as a greasy git, he would have had to take lessons from this foul-smelling cretin, and still have lots to learn.

“Now, now, that’s not nice lovely.” Someone said behind her, and she flinched away as she felt a hand run down her back.

“Don’t you touch her!” Ron yelled.

“Oh, ho ho, your girlfriend is it?” The third asked, pulling Aurora to his side as his friend grabbed Ron.

“I would get your hands off me now, if you have any idea what’s good for you.” She warned, squirming in his grip.

“Better do what the lady says,” Ron said with a scowl.

“Why? Seems odd, pair o’ya running off like ya are. Might be muggleborns. What’s your names, anyway?”

“Stan Shunpike.” Ron said.

“And yours?” The snatcher that had her said as he ran the tip of his wand down her neck, moving lower.

“Luna Longbottom.” She said quickly.

“Think they’re faking?” One asked, and the one that had the hold on her stepped away, keeping his hand on her arm as if it would somehow deter her.

“D’ya check the list?” He asked.

“Shunpike and Longbottom’s pureblood names, thought, ain’t they?”

She met Ron’s gaze incredulously, and even he seemed flabbergasted by how stupid these guys were. She flicked her wrist, her wand appearing in it, and after seeing the lot of morons were still trying to figure out who they were, not paying attention, she mouthed to Ron, “close your eyes.” He frowned clearly not able to see her that well in the dark, so she mouthed it again, closing her eyes for a few seconds for good measure. As soon as she opened them, Ron closed his.

“Lumos maximus.” She said quickly, turning her head away from her wand tip and shutting her eyes a moment. The moment she felt the snatcher let go of her, she grabbed Ron, pulled him toward her, and touched her ring.

She landed in front of the tent, and was instantly greeted by a very irate Draco.

“And what the hell do you think you were doing!” He yelled. “Do you know how worried we’ve been, pair of you going off like that? No word, no warning!”

“Thought you two would be busy.” She said as she let go of Ron and brushed herself off. Flicking her wrist, re-sheathing her wand, she added, “And besides, you don’t need to berate us. Who went to Godric’s Hollow, after all?”

“Oh, don’t make this a competition between stupid ideas, Aurora, you won’t win.”
“Dark Lord, snake, and snatchers, versus just snatchers.” She countered.

“We were caught, though.” Ron reminded sheepishly.

“Not because we did anything ridiculous.” She countered.

“You were caught?” Draco roared, and that brought Harry out of the tent, along with a couple others.

“Relax, we got out of there.” She snapped back.

“Yeah, practically blinded us in the process.” Ron grumbled.

“And what were you thinking? Stan Shunpike?”

“Oi! Better than Luna Longbottom!”

“You used Longbottom for a name?” A voice that had Aurora’s heart nearly explode said, and she turned away from Ron and tried to see past the light of the tent.

“Well, couldn’t very well use my real name.” She countered, barely containing a smile. “And there’s no way I could pass for a Weasley.”

“Not that you should.” Fred said as he stepped around Draco, hands in his pockets. “Bunch of blood traitors, the lot of us.”

She feasted her eyes on him, his eyes, his smile, his hair.

“You’re on the run in a suit?” She asked, looking him up and down.

“Well, gotta look sharp, don’t I? Never know who you’re going to run into.” He countered, inching closer.

“Oh, bloody hell, another set.” Ron grumbled. “Rory and me stole butterbeer, if anyone wants any. Snatchers were too stupid to search us, so we still got it.”

“Ooh, contraband,” George said somewhere behind Fred. “Always tastes better when it’s free.”

Their voices faded as the disappeared inside the tent, and Aurora glanced at Draco.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” He said in a warning.

“Not stupid, am I?” Fred countered with a smirk and a wink, causing Aurora to smack him even when she was trying not to laugh. Draco merely rolled his eyes, entering the tent just as there was a cheer from within.

Aurora watched the flap close before she looked back up at Fred who suddenly seemed nervous. Her grin grew, and she closed the space between them to hug him as tight as she could, feeling his arms wrap around her as well.

“You’ve been careful, haven’t you?” She asked against his neck.

“Careful as we can be.” Fred replied as he fingers weaved into her hair, his other arm around her so snug that his fingertips were nearly against his stomach. “More careful than you by the sounds of it.”

“We got out.” She said.
He stepped back then, smiling weakly as he put his hands in his pockets. “Longbottom.”

“Luna Longbottom,” She said.

“Still, first name you thought of.”

She snorted. “First name I thought of that wouldn’t bring us immediately under suspicion. Oh, using Snape might have had them pissing themselves, but it might also put Gin in danger. And, as I said, couldn’t pass for a Weasley. Hair’s not the right color.”

“Could’ve married in.” Fred suggested, looking at his feet and kicking at the snow.

“Suppose.” She said with a shrug. “No ring, though.” Fred glanced up at her then, and Aurora swore she saw his breath quicken. “How’d you find us?” She asked.

He shrugged. “George, Lee, and I were trying to find a safe spot that hadn’t been searched and guarded yet. Keep getting ran out of everywhere we go. Can’t stay long either, with the radio signal. Got a little portable transmitter so we can be a bit more mobile, Dad’s tent that he borrowed and never returned.

“Anyway, we were just wandering about here, and I just kept… well, I had a feeling. Sort of a hunch that we were in a good spot.”

“Good hunch.” She said, stepping toward him. “So, are you going to stay long?”

“Dunno.” He said. “Smaller groups are better, of course. Four and three, well, that’s not so bad. Seven… that’s a bit much.”

“Yeah.” She agreed, not letting her disappointment show. “But… you aren’t taking off tonight, right?”

“Not now, not with you and Ickle Ronniekins causing trouble.”

“We led them away from the camp, thank you.” She said, daring to reach out and touch his arm. Her fingers trailed down, touching the skin and hair of his hand. He withdrew it from his pocket, his fingers wrapping around hers. “But I think… I think I’d rather you stay.”

“Yeah?” He said, shifting slightly toward her. He leaned in and whispered, “Bit crowded if you were thinkin’ ‘bout…”

She lightly smacked him on the chest with her other hand, stepping closer. “Wasn’t thinking that at all.”

Her watch burned, and she looked down at the face of it.

She smiled. “Dad destroyed a horcrux!” She said, beaming up at Fred. She grabbed his face, quickly placing a kiss on his lips before darting inside the tent. “Dad’s destroyed a horcrux!” She announced again, not caring at all about the confusion on Lee’s face. The rest of the boys within cheered, raising bottles of stolen butterbeer in a toast, smiles all around. She headed to the table, grabbing to bottles and turning as Fred entered the tent. She handed one to him, and he withdrew his wand and tapped the tip against his and hers, uncapping them.

“To the end of the war,” He said, tilting the neck of his bottle toward her.

“May it come quickly!” She beamed, clinking her bottle to his.
“Couldn’t agree more,” He said before they each took a drink, then rejoined their friends at the now-crammed table inside the tent.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so, here’s the thing. I was curious if it were actually possible for the venom to have still been around after five years. All the research I did turned up that, a) even an elephant would decompose in a year, so the basilisk being bones like in the movie is 100% likely. Also, venom has to do with the soft tissues, so I'm going on the assumption that the skeleton wouldn't have any. Fun fact, if they milked the venom it would likely still be good after decades.

Also, Hogsbreath is a nod to the Flying Cauldron brand of Butterbeer, where they have a little story on their packaging of their origins.

I am figuring there are still only four chapters left, but I will adjust to more if need be.
“You did what?” She snapped, giving a glare in warning to a smirking Sirius before turning back to her tired husband.

They were convened in the Headmaster’s office, Hermione behind the desk as if she belonged there, Severus collapsed in a guest chair, Sirius standing to the side of it.

She knew the portraits were all there for the show, except one, and frankly did not care. The moment they returned with a pop, Severus practically collapsing until Sirius had him seated, she was worried about what might have gone wrong in the destruction of the horcrux. Then Sirius and Severus told her what went on in the chamber of secrets.

“Fiendfyre, wife. I shouldn’t have to repeat myself.”

“Are you out of your mind, Severus Snape? Curse fire! How did you know you could control it?” She asked, crossing her arms, resting them at the top of her belly.

“Because I did, Hermione. This may have escaped your notice over the years, but I am skilled and adept at dark magic. One might even go so far as saying I am a dark wizard.” Severus said in such a blasé attitude that realized that he was exhausted.

“I suppose you are, just a bit.” She conceded, and when Sirius shifted, her eyes were drawn to him. “Were they really inert?”

“It pierced the cup, kitten, but nothing happened. Whatever power the basilisk possessed is long gone now.” He said regretfully.

She nodded, “Then it’s more important than ever to find the Room of Hidden Things.”

“The room of what?” Severus asked, palming his forehead.

“I managed to get Dumbledore to talk while you were in the chamber. I think it might have been the baby finding my kidney an amusing spot to kick, or perhaps my sheer annoyance at him. Either way, he confessed he hid the fangs in the Room of Hidden Things.”

“I’ve never heard of it.” Severus said.

“Nor I,” Hermione sighed. “Which makes me wonder if he was pulling my leg, but still, it’s better than the silence he has been giving us.”

“Now’s not the time to think on it.” Sirius said gently. “We need sleep, Severus especially.”
“Fine,” Hermione conceded. “You’re right, Sirius. It’s just… frustrating. We’re so close in so many ways.”

“What if that’s also where the diadem is?” Severus asked absently. The attention of the others was put on him, but he seemed to stare at the floor unseeing. “We’ve had everywhere we could have logically checked done so. We know it’s here. Albus may have not noticed it when he hid the fangs, or perhaps he merely wanted to have one more thing for the Boy-Who-Lived to do. His search for the diadem.”

“How long was Dumbledore expecting this whole thing to drag on for?” Sirius muttered. “Because if it’s all of us unable to find everything.”

“Let’s not think on that tonight.” Severus said as he got up from the chair on shaky legs. “I need sleep.”

As Severus headed toward their chambers, Hermione turned to Sirius with a slight grin. “Harry would have made it through, I’m sure.” She assured. “Because he would have told us everything, and we’d have still all been looking.”

“You think so, Kitten?” He asked.

“I believe so.” She said. “But then, perhaps I don’t know him as well as I had thought.”

Sirius snort-laughed before heading toward the door. “I don’t think any of us know the teenagers as much as we’d have liked to.”

He left, and as Hermione watched him leave, she couldn’t help but agree with that. Even if she would never say it out loud.

“Welcome witch,” Fred said, and Aurora rolled her eyes and shook her head, trying not smile. “Owl trainer?”

Aurora shook her head again, but this time the smile broke through. How could it not?

Everyone stayed in quartet’s tent, which seemed like a brilliant idea at first until they all realized there were only three beds. Ron had to do watch, so he gave up his own, but it didn’t really solve the problem with an additional three people.

A quiet conversation consisting of nothing more than stares and facial twitches fell between the twins, and George volunteered to keep their younger brother company. Lee crashed.

And Fred?

Fred was with her. He had tossed off his jacket, vest, tie. He’d unbuttoned his cuffs, sleeves rolled up. He undid his collar and top button, had kicked off his shoes and socks, but that was the extent of his undress. And Aurora had changed in her usual night time fare: a large, Gryffindor quidditch jumper, and black sweats.

Fred was stretched out on his side, head propped up with his arm, looking down on her as she lay on
her back, tucked as close to him as possible. Her arms lay across her stomach and behind her head, and instead of getting the sleep she really needed, she was talking to him. They had a silencing charm around them as to not disturb the others, all snoring as they were, but they still tried to keep their voices low out of habit.

She was tired, they both were. The twins and Lee had been trying to find safety and a good place for shelter all day, and had one less person to keep watch.

But still they pressed on, keeping themselves awake talking about anything and everything they could think of.

“Why are we doing this?” She asked him.

“Why? Gotta start thinking of the future. Your Dad’s got one down, you lot have one ready to be destroyed. We’re getting our dragon’s in a row. Oh, Dragon keeper. Could introduce you to our brother Charlie.”

“You know, great as that sounds, I’m almost as good with animals as I am with plants.”

“Yes, right. There was a reason I didn’t want to give you a pygmy puff.” Fred smirked, and she giggled. “Alright, then. Writer.”

She pursed her lips. “Suppose that’s a possibility. But I think I might have to be desperate.”

“Snake charmer.” He said, eyebrows twitching. She smacked him gently on the chest, and his free hand snuck out and captured it. “Bad idea that. Don’t much like the idea of you out there charming snakes.”

“Imagine what my father would think, then.” She said, mimicking his expression as she shifted her fingers to interlock with Fred’s.

“Ah, see, there. Head of Slytherin’s daughter. No snakes to be charmed then.”

“What do you see me doing? Honestly?”

He stroked his thumb against hers, eyes peering into hers. “Honestly? Honestly, I think it would depend on what you wanted. If this whole hunt for dark things and destroying them is something you like, Curse breaker. You could go into politics, if peace keeping’s your thing. Must be good at it, Ronniekins not killing anyone yet. And … and if you wanted to be creative, you could come work with me.”

“I’m not being your shop girl,” She retorted with a smile.

“You know, never did say shop girl. Might not have your brother’s potions instinct, but I know your charms are good. I bet you could dream some up, given a chance.”

“I’d expect to be made a partner.” She teased, feeling a little bit worried with the way he tensed. All the air seemed to leave Fred’s lungs on a breath.

Aurora blushed. “Sorry, that’s… sorry. Politics, you say? Suppose I must be good at those, bridging house rivalries and the like.”

Fred laughed mirthlessly. “Could be Minister for Magic, skills like that.”

“Oh no,” She said firmly. “Couldn’t pay me enough for that. Suppose it’s a toss-up, really. I sorta
like the idea of a curse breaker. But then again, going into business with you and George would be interesting. If for no other reason than the look on Ron or Leo’s face when I tell them. Or, I suppose, I could go in business against the pair of you, make some competition for you.”

“Well that’d never work. You’re witty, Darling, and quite intelligent, but you’re missing the spark of mischief.”

She giggled. “Then why bring me in?” She challenged.

He brought her hand to his lip, kissing her knuckles. “Because you’re witty, and intelligent. And a joke shop should appeal to everyone in some way. Be hilarious to sell something with the Snape name on it, too, you know.”

“I bet.” She conceded, stroking his thumb again. “But we need to get through all this first.”

He shook his head. “No idea how much I want-” Fred caught himself off with a yawn that instantly caught on to Aurora. “Blimey.”

“No,” She groaned afterward, feeling her eyes grow heavy. “I don’t want to sleep.”

“Probably should, though.” He said, slipping his hand from hers. “Would do us no good to be tired.”

“No,” She agreed, smothering another Yawn as Fred shifted about, tucking the arm that had been supporting his head beneath the expanded pillow. “It’s my turn for watch tomorrow night.”

Fred hummed in agreement. “Wouldn’t be smart to yawn on the show, either.”

This time Aurora hummed as her eyes seemed too heavy to stay open. “Fred?” She whispered his name, forcing herself to part her lids to see him. “Kiss me goodnight?” She asked softly.

He reached out and gently cupped her cheek, sliding across the pillow to very delicately place his lips against hers. Aurora’s eyes shut, and she nearly came to tears with how sweet it was. How wonderful. How it very much tasted like a goodbye. She remembered goodbye kisses from Fred, and it had the same flavor.

She didn’t want that.

So, Aurora put her hand on the back of his head, and pressed back a little more firmly. A promise. Words she couldn’t bring herself to say, lest they be reduced to impulse in the climate of war.

And she thought maybe he understood that with the way his own tactic changed.

But then it faded, and she was getting hazy, certain that they were about to fall asleep just as they were.

———H———

“Hello, and welcome to this evening’s episode of Potterwatch.” Lee introduced the show, and the Room of Requirement was utterly silent.

“And we have a very special treat this evening.” One of the twins spoke, and Hermione glanced at Neville as he stared at the wireless. It was an accidental habit started the moment Fred had asked
Severus his request. Potterwatch came on, Hermione would covertly watch Neville. But he never showed anything other than focus on the show, and it seemed nothing had changed after their discussion the other day.

The twin continued, “While on our own adventures, finding exotic local and interesting guests to bring you news and advice, we stumbled across someone very special.”

“Uh, hi everyone.” Harry’s voice came through, and the room was in a new uproar. Hermione quickly drew her wand and silenced them, shifting a bit on the edge of her seat.

“Now, in case you don’t know this man’s voice, let us say he’s quite… Undesirable.” The twin joked.

“Number one, even.” Lee added in.

“So, Mr Undesirable, what you have to say to all those listening?”

“Uhh,” Harry started. “Well, I want to start off by thanking everyone out there who is currently fighting the rebellion. I know it’s hard, and I know things look bad, but… they’re going to get better. Second, try and trust more. It was a mistake I made earlier in my life, trusting the wrong people. Instead of listening to words, look at actions. And, umm, third… third is, uh… don’t wait. We’re keeping up to date with what’s going on, we’re listening to this show. We hear and know of so many people gone before their time. So, don’t wait to tell anyone anything you’ve been meaning to say. Take the leap. Because there’s a chance you might not be able to again.”

“Wise words.” The twin said. “And so, we leave you here tonight-”

The air went silent. Hermione met Neville’s eyes as understanding quietly dawned between them. Understanding, and fear.

“Does the dark still bother you?” Fred whispered in her ear as he held her from behind. Aurora was keeping watch, as she was supposed to. Everyone else was inside the tent, George and Lee hosting the show, Harry speaking on it. Maybe Draco and Ron would join in, too. But it left them alone outside. And while, perhaps, not the politest way to sit, Aurora couldn’t complain about being seated between his legs with his arms wrapped around her. She was warm, content, enjoying his presence.

“Yes and no,” She replied, her hands on his. “It’s… it’s hard to describe. It still makes me nervous, I still don’t like it much. But there’s so much more to be afraid of. I have faced more frightening things.”

“Yes, you have,” he agreed, pulling a hand out from beneath hers and brushing her hair away from her neck. “Done things I could never do.”

“Anything I could do, you could do. Perhaps not better.”

“Eh,” he said, and she laughed, hearing his own chuckle. “Though I admit, much as I want think I would have been there at the ministry, not sure I would’ve gone.”

“Why not?”
He shrugged. “Well, for one, I knew who ‘Mione was. And I wouldn’t have believed You-Know-Who would have had her.”

“I knew who she was, too. All Harry kept saying was that she looked different.”

“Well, I suppose in that case, I would have gone.” He relented, brushing all her hair to one side. “But I didn’t plan on running. It never even crossed my mind that we might have to, not until we saw that mangy lot hovering outside the shop. You volunteered right from the get go, ready to go about, no idea where you’d be or—” He stopped short, and Aurora frowned. She felt his fingers graze her cheek. “Rory, when did you get this?” He said, running a finger along her cheek.

“When I pissed off a Carrow.” She replied. “He wanted to beat Gin for something I said, and I told him if touched her I’d have Dad kill him. It was her or me. He was actually smart for once.”

He gently kissed her scar. “That was stupid.”

“She told me as much,” She smiled, and she felt him grin as well. “Fred, I—”

The snap of the twig had them both up and on their feet, wands drawn instantly, Fred’s back to hers. Aurora strained, trying to listen, hearing a rustling. And then cold dread as she felt someone messing with the wards. She looked over her shoulder at Fred, and he nodded, running for the tent.

Aurora stayed, lifting her wand, trying to add strength to the wards. She closed her eyes, focusing her energy, hearing as the boys quickly packed up behind her. Draco would pack the tent with a few swishes and flicks of his wand. Harry would double check the hip pouch containing the Horcrux was secured to him. Ron would then grab the bag that was the tent and shoulder it. But there were others, too, and she didn’t know how long it would take the twins and Lee to pack up their equipment.

Her wards were failing. Pissed off, Aurora pushed more of her energy into them. They would not be caught like this. They would not be ensnared by snatchers because her wards failed! It was her fault they likely even found them, all because she was the one who allowed Ron to convince her to pilfer a beverage. There were three attacking the protections, and while she pictured the idiots from the night before, they didn’t seem to know how to cast a lumos between the lot of them, let alone have the skills to dismantle complex spells.

There was sweat on her brow, and she was starting to fatigue. She hadn’t been of age long, and while it was starting to show that she was likely to have her parent’s power levels, they weren’t there yet. Her knees were trembling.

“Rory, let them fall.” She heard Fred beside her.

“Can’t,” She said through gritted teeth.

“Aurora, let them fall, we have you.” He said, more forcefully.

She peeked up at him seeing him standing by her protectively, wand drawn. He said we, though, and she looked to the other side to see Draco watching her.

The wards were weakening, blurring, allowing the image of a half dozen snatchers very close by to break through in spurts.

“Everything’s packed, drop the wards.” Fred said again.

“Not until you three get out.” She countered, beginning to feel dizzy.
“We can’t, Rory. They’ve got their own wards up.” Draco stated. “Drop them. We need to run.”

She patted her pockets of her jacket, feeling the items she placed there. “On three. One… two… three!”

It was violent. The wards falling so suddenly while they being attacked caused a slight, magical backlash. Fred, presumable Lee and George, as well as Draco and Ron shot out spells the moment they could toward the snatchers. Aurora withdrew the darkness powder she had in her pockets and threw it, creating a wall of black in front of them.

They turned and ran, Aurora already out of breath but not properly caring. She reached into her pockets, and withdrew the odd shaped, grey-tinted bottle. She paused for a moment, turning and throwing the bottle off to the right, angled away from them, then turned and kept running. The screams unleashed as the bottle broke sounded eerily like their own, and she smirked when she thought she heard less footsteps following them.

Something grazed her leg, burning, but she pushed on. She noticed they were stopped up ahead, Fred saying something to Ron in a shout she couldn’t hear over the pounding of her heart. She jumped a fallen tree limb, her leg burning when she landed, her wrist burning with a message. She was nearly there when she felt something hit her back. Then she was paralyzed, unable to move. Ron had her around the waist just as someone grabbed her leg.

Then they apparated.

Aurora heaved a bit when they landed, her mind fighting desperately against the blackness. She wanted to pass out, but something told her not to.

“Oh Merlin, is that a hand! Whose hand is that?” Ron exclaimed, a bit loud since hit was near her ear.

“I think it’s one of the snatchers’,” Draco replied, and the room began to spin. “Was still inside the apparation wards when he grabbed Rory. But why’s there so much-”

“Shit!” Harry exclaimed, and she heard and vaguely felt the boys moving her about.

“S-s-s my leg, isn’t it?” She asked, her jaw trembling. She was going into shock, shaking. She didn’t dare look down, she didn’t want to make it worse.

“It’s … it’s not so bad.” Ron tried to say, though he looked a bit green.

“We should tell your parents.” Harry tried to say, but she shook her head.

“She-s-s jusst a sp-splinch, isn’t it? Bloody hell, it’s cold.” She said, shivering.

“You got hit with a slice hex before we went through. Apparation messed with it a bit.” Draco said, a touch pale. “I, I don’t know what to do right now.”

She shivered. “Warming charm. Dit-dit-dittany. S’in my beg.” She instructed. She wasn’t sure who laid the warming charm on her, but it didn’t help as much as she hoped. She tilted her head up, for apparently, she was laying on a sofa, and tried to see who was going to get the potion. Aurora made the mistake of seeing her leg, and very nearly wretched. She could see a peek of her leg bone. “S-stop.” She huffed. “Dittany… not going to help.”

“What do we do?” Harry shouted.
“We could use Repairo.” Ron suggested.

“It’s not meant for skin, it will scar.” Draco retorted.

“Don’t care ‘bout a scar.” Rory said, her vision going fuzzy. “Going to black out, can’t-can’t stay-”

She screamed as hot pain shot through her body, pulling her out of her unconsciousness. Aurora let off a litany of words she’d heard her father use on rare occasions, usually in the Cokeworth accent that only came out under the pain of cauldron burns, which had three figures in her blurry vision rear back from her.

“Oi, you kiss my brother with that mouth?” She heard Ron say.

“You try having half your leg ripped off then laced back together.” She panted, looking down at her now red and raw looking leg. “What did you do?” She asked, fatigue making her voice heavy. She could make out Harry and Draco down by her feet, not far from Ron who was down by her leg.

Ron shrugged, “I did a repairo.”

“Which was stupid.” Draco snapped.

“Which was the only thing any of us could think of, ya prat.” Ron snapped back.

“We could have sent a patronus to Hogwarts.” Draco yelled in retaliation.

“And have Snape or ‘Mione kill Harry?” Ron said, gesturing the blurry version of Harry.

“I’m sorry, Rory.” Harry said, and he sounded distressed. “It was my fault this happened.”

“Yes, because you apparated four at once.” Draco snapped.

“She was already hurt.” Ron defended.

“Yes, and Potter was a bloody idiot for not allowing us to go in pairs. Only one of us side-alonging her would have saved a minor cut from becoming a chunk of her leg.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Aurora said closing her eyes. “We’re all safe, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Harry said, a smile to his voice. “Better off than the snatchers.”

“Good.” She said. “We can’t stay here.”

“And where do you think you’re going to go?” Draco asked, his tone not losing the fight in it.

“Not here, they’re likely watching.” She stated.

“And you aren’t rightly in the condition to apparate again. Floo’s probably being watched from all the houses of blood traitors, so what’s you plan, Aurora?” He demanded.

“I don’t know, but we can’t stay here!” She snapped.

“We can for a night.” Harry said. “Just tonight.” Harry said. “We sleep here, then we’re gone. House is still warded, we stay in the living room we can ward this room a bit more.”

“Right,” Ron said. “Right, let’s get started, then.”
Aurora didn’t even see what sort of wards they were setting, she passed out shortly before the boys got to work.

“Sorry about that, folks.” One of the twins’ voice came through, and since he sounded so cheerful, Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. “We had a bit of a snafu out there. But don’t worry, we’re back. Undesirable Number One isn’t with us any longer. Unfortunately, he and co had to run.”

“Quite literally,” Lee said.

“And I’m afraid it’s all the time we have for tonight. Next password is … is Borealis.”

And then the relief became uncertainty. For the most part, a lot of the passwords were the names of order members that had fallen, or such obvious blood traitors, that giving their names away meant nothing. But Borealis? She knew who that was meant to relate to, and with that came a terrifying uncertainty.

February 4th, 1998

Severus loved his wife. He’s loved his wife since they were fifteen years old, maybe even fourteen if he thought on it long enough. Over the last twenty-three years, they’d been through his needing to turn double agent, a near-two year separation, a bonding and two weddings, two children, a stint in Azkaban, and nothing had ever dampened their affection.

And, in reality, nothing had yet to.

But the last two weeks of dealing with a pregnant, emotional, worried Hermione had left him a bit harried. How could a password be cause for such alarm? And never mind that their daughter already said she was fine, because Hermione wouldn’t believe her. The fact that Hermione was, in reality, too far along in her pregnancy to be apparating didn’t help either. Because now she couldn’t check on her daughter, and ensure that she was, in fact, okay.

He’d been kept up with her troubles for two weeks, earning him very little sleep. So, it wasn’t particularly surprising to himself that he was the utter bastard to the student body most had come to expect. In the last two weeks he’d deducted more house points, and set more detentions himself than he had since September.

It’s also why when he found a cluster of students in the hallway, wands drawn and pointed at one another, he instantly and silently cast a disarming charm, causing all their wands to fly toward him.
“Please do tell what a half dozen Slytherins, students from the noblest house within our school, are doing having an altercation in the hallway?” He asked the lot of them, crossing his arms instead of pinching his nose, feeling eyes watching him and them.

“It’s nothing, sir.” Parkinson said, a nasty little grin on her face as she shot Greengrass a look. “We were just having a conversation.”

“With wands drawn?” He asked.

“It took a threatening turn.” Greengrass said.

“We were just wondering where you three always ran off to.” Parkinson countered.

“And as I have told you, countless times, it’s not your business, Pansy.”

Before Parkinson could reply, Severus cut in. “Enough. Squabbles such as this will not be tolerated, twenty points from Slytherin a piece, and you will all report to Professor Nikola for detention this evening. You will get your wands then.” He stated, ignoring the eyes he knew were burning more fiercely into him.

“But sir!” Parkinson shouted. “We have charms! And Dark Arts this afternoon.”

“If Professor Flitwick and Carrow have an issue, they can take it up with me. Otherwise, you’ll just have to lose out on the practical time. Mr Nott, Miss Greengrass, and Mr Zabini, as Head Boy and prefects respectively, I would have thought to expect more of you.”

“Apologies, Headmaster,” Mr Zabini spoke. “It was not our intention, however, I’m afraid the wands were drawn on us first.”

“It matters not who drew them. As demonstrated, there is a spell to withdraw them. I suggest as the authority figures around here, you keep that in mind.” Severus then turned, continuing his purposeful stride of avoiding needing to speak to his wife.

He could hear the busy-bodies rushing to catch up.

“Crabbe and Goyle are my best students.” Amycus said in a panicked tone. “What am I going to do in class since you brought in the stipulation that they had to agree to the demonstration?”

“I suggest you teach them, as is your job. Assign the class reading or, Merlin forbid, and essay.”

“An essay!” Amycus retorted. “But that means-”

“Grading? Yes, I’m aware of the concept, having been a teacher for the last eighteen years. Although, I suppose grading would be a problem for you, as I’m sure even most first years have a reading and writing comprehension level well above your own.”

“Your daughter said something like that to me once.” Amycus sneered, and Severus stopped short, turning abruptly and having the siblings stumble in their pause.

“Yes, I’m aware she has. She is, after all, an intelligent girl. Now, is there a reason you’re following me other than a need to complain about your job? If that is truly what you wanted, I have authority while the Dark Lord is still away. I could terminate you from the position, if you wish?” He asked, arching a brow.

The siblings wisely took a step back.
“We wouldn’t dream of it, Severus.” Alecto swore.

“We love doing this.” Amycus agreed.

“In fact, we’ll go see right now what Amycus can do since misters Crabbe and Goyle aren’t available to, umm, help.”

They promptly turned and left, and Severus let out a sigh. He heard a meow, something moving around his feet, and looked down to see Minerva weaving around.

“You’re shedding.” He said, and the damn tabby just rubbed up against his legs more. He sighed more heavily, then carefully stepped around his friend, continuing his stride. “I must wonder at Slytherin’s dueling one another in the corridor.” He said the un-responding tabby that kept pace with him. “It’s more likely that the Gryffindors would likely be the ones to do such a thing.” Minerva hissed. “You must concede to that being true. The Slytherins would typically take out their grievances in the common room. But this brashness is worrisome. I can’t be any more restrictive, else it may come under suspicion as to why I am not allowing what one would consider a blood traitor be… corrected. And yet, what will happen to the students should I not?”

Minerva changed fluidly from cat to human, still keeping pace with him as they made their way toward the Astronomy tower.

“I’m finding less and less of my students turning up for class. Some being those we know can be relied on.”

“Fourth year and older?” he inquired, and at her nod, he said. “They are learning defense when those who learned under Potter are free to teach.” He said.

“Truly?” Minerva said, eyes wide.

“Indeed. Hermione supervises, of course, corrects form from a distance. But that is why they are missing out on lessons. The room of requirement is a safe place for the lot of them.”

Minerva shook her head as they climbed the stairs. “I’d never known a room such as that existed.” She said, taking his arm when he offered it to assist her. “I always heard Albus go on about chamber pots and storage spaces appearing, but given his nature, he was never very specific as to where it showed up. I wonder, though, if perhaps the chamber we are seeking now is also on the seventh floor?”

Severus shook his head. “No, I’m afraid not. Nothing up there, aside from the room of requirement, then old guest rooms that aren’t used. Well, I shouldn’t say aren’t used, but perhaps not for their intended purpose. I found one where it was clear students have discovered it. There was even a pair of socks left willy nilly on the floor. Bold.”

Minerva chuckled. “I would guess a Hufflepuff.”

“You would. You would never allow your house to take blame, would you?” He said as they approached the railing. The cold wind bit at his skin, and while Minerva cast a charm to not be bothered by it, Severus allowed it. He breathed deep, feeling the chill in his lungs, reveling in it.

“Severus,” She said after a time. “I’ve been thinking, what if the Room of Hidden Things, and the Room of Requirement are actually one in the same?”

He frowned. “It’s a possibility. In fact, it is quite likely. But then there poses yet another problem.”
“Which is?”

“Where do we move the students taking refuge? The room is remaining as it is because Hermione stays there during the day. It’s becoming more unnecessary at this junction, there are usually always a few students within. But if they all leave, what then? Yes, we get access to the room we are likely in desperate need of, but then we have a hundred or so children who are terrified to go back to their dorms, or as I discovered today, rightly shouldn’t return.”

Minerva smirked at him in a very cat-like way, and he frowned.

“Severus, you’re the headmaster, and the castle likes you.” She said, resting her hand on his shoulder. “All you need to do is ask it, and I’m sure it will accommodate you as best it can for a temporary solution. All they need is a space where they can hide for an hour or so. I’m sure you can think of a spot somewhere in the castle the idiots wouldn’t look. Now, I’m cold, let’s head back inside.”

Severus offered his arm to her automatically, his mind already turning over multiple possibilities as to what could be done. And where.

Februrary 14th, 1998

They were running out of places to go that they hadn’t already been before. As it was, they could see the Burrow in the distance, and if that wasn’t dangerous, Aurora didn’t know what was.

“Do you think we could go back to your Gran’s?” Ron asked as they all sat around outside, warming charms placed and surrounding a fire. After the incident where the snatchers very nearly got to them, none of them very much liked the idea of them all staying inside. Not like before. Their sense of safety had been destroyed.

“We could, but that means leaving the country. I’m not about to let any of us risk apparating that far.” She said, her leg giving off a phantom ache at the memory of being splinched.

Ron winced, rubbing his arm where he did the same not two days ago when they relocated. At least his was just a matter of a bit of dittany to heal, but that didn’t lessen the pain of the experience.

“Dudley might be away to school.” Harry said thoughtfully.

“Would he bother?” Draco asked. “He’s the only one left in his family, wouldn’t he stay?”

“His Aunt Marge probably took him in after his parents were killed.” Harry said, sad and thoughtful. “Dudley wouldn’t have been of age in the muggle world, he’d have needed a guardian. And, really, had Godric’s Hollow still been standing, I don’t know if I would have wanted to live there after what happened.”

“Suppose the cottage wouldn’t be monitored,” Draco said, looking to Aurora.

She shook her head. “Leo and I are supposed to be at school, remember?” She said. “It’s not
monitored now, but considering my mother is supposed to be dead, it would look oddly suspicious if there was suddenly some sort of activity going on there.” She turned to Ron. “Where would the twins and Lee have gone?”

Ron shrugged. “All they said was they were roaming about like nomads.”

“Sharply dressed Nomads, I think is what they said.” Draco corrected, straightening his own collar.

“Probably opposite wherever we go.” Harry said. “Especially now that I’ve made that broadcast.”

“They need the password, though.” Aurora reminded. “Anyway, point is we need to figure out where to move, and where we might be able to stay for more than a day.”

“And we need to restock on food.” Draco said, a slight glare flashed in an oblivious Ron’s direction.

Harry sighed. “This is getting hard.”

“Suppose it could be worse though.” Aurora said thoughtfully.

“Let’s not imagine it, shall we.” Draco grumbled, getting up and going to the tent. Aurora watched as he flung open the flap and stormed in. She was certain that if it were possible, he’d have shut it with a slam.

“What’s got his knickers in a twist?” She asked Harry.

He shrugged. “It’s… well.”

“No!” Ron said vehemently, standing up to look down at Harry. “Very well aware of what the day is, mate. Malfoy can get agitated all he likes over not having any time alone with you, but it’s not like Rory and I can be with our—”

“Whoa!” Aurora cut him off, gesturing for him to stop. “Flattered that I am that you’re considering my possibly feelings in all this, I’m not with anyone.” That earned a snort and scoff from Ron and Harry and she frowned. “What’s that about?”

Harry smirked. “Might be the way you and Fred weren’t any more than a few feet away from each other the entire time they were with us.”

“Or that you two were found in your bed awfully close together.” Ron added.

“Doesn’t mean we’re together.” Aurora argued weakly. “You can’t tell me that you wouldn’t find a little comfort where you could, if you could.”

Ron seemed to mull over that one, where Harry just shook his head. “You aren’t like that, Rory.”

“I might be.” She said, crossing her arms and tilting her head back.

“So, you’re just stringin’ my brother along then, are you?” Ron rounded on her, and she glared back at him. “Fred’s bloody in love with you, and you’re, what? Just fucking around with him when you get the chance?”

“Unlike some people, I have the decency of keeping my clothes on when there’s other in same space not fifteen feet away.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry snapped.
“Oi, don’t you start talking to Harry like that!” Ron yelled.

“And who the hell made you the authority of how I speak to anyone?” Aurora said demanded, getting to her feet as well, stepping a touch into Ron’s space.

“Back off, Snape.” Ron growled.

“Hey, don’t start that now.” Harry yelled, getting to his feet as well.

“She just insulted you, and now you’re defending her.”

“Who the hell said I was referring to him when I made the comment?” Aurora countered.

“What the hell ya gettin’ at?” Ron growled. “’Cause from where I stand, you’re nothing but a two-timing slag.”

Before Aurora could hex him, Harry withdrew their wands. She didn’t even realize she had hers in hand, but it didn’t matter, she decked Ron. Who, apparently, had no problem with her being a girl, because he suddenly launched himself at her and tackled her to the ground. Small as she was, Aurora still managed to push him off her, and the two tumbled on the ground, fruitlessly trying to get in a hit or pin the other down.

“Stupify!” Draco’s voice snapped through whatever Harry was yelling, and Aurora and Ron found themselves rolling apart, limbs frozen in such a way that she imagined they looked like Mrs Norris when she was petrified. After a moment, Draco released them form the spell, but kept his wand pointed at them. Harry, clutching Ron and Aurora’s wands in his own hand, looked torn between chastising them and his boyfriend.

“None of us mean this.” Draco said.

“Pretty sure I do.” Ron said.

“No, you don’t!” Draco snapped back. “It’s that.” He said, pointing to the bag currently around Harry’s neck containing the horcrux. “It’s got to be that.”

“How?” Harry asked. “I have it around my neck all the time.”

“Yeah, but you’ve also been living with one nearly your whole life. You’re used to the… whatever coming off it. But us? Longer that’s been with us, edgier we’ve all gotten. Especially around holidays. Think of Christmas, and the stupid thing we did? Think of now? Ron’s probably the worst off of all of us, since he hasn’t seen Brown since before the summer. And he’s about to kill Rory simply because she’s not officially with Fred.”

Everyone sort of looked at one another, to the bag, each other once more, weary.

“We need to destroy it.” Draco said. “Or at the very least, ask Uncle Severus to take it off our hands. Being on the run is one thing, but doing so when something is clearly messing with our heads is another.”

“Draco’s right.” Aurora said.

“How d’ya know?” Ron asked, only a small bit of fight left in him.

“Because when you grow up in a home with dark tomes, you start to understand that it has an effect. Our parents ward them for a reason.”
“Maybe we should have warded the bag.” Harry said, lifting it up to examine it.

“I did.” Draco said. “But it would be like sitting next to the warded bookshelf all the time. You always feel it, but after so long….”

“Wards would lose their effectiveness at keeping the paranoia or worse at bay.” Aurora nodded. “And it would explain why Ron’s the most affected.”

“Hey.” Ron growled.

“It’s just a fact.” Aurora said, huffing out a breath after. “Shall we all take pot shots at it? Work off some of the frustration? Who knows maybe we’ll get lucky.”

“Couldn’t hurt, could it?” Harry agreed. “At the very least, we can blow off steam.”

It was not a very good day. On what was usually a day of, well, pink, all Leo seemed to see was red. He wished it was because of insipid notes on heart-shaped parchment, but it was more in the way of wounds.

The Carrows were extra vicious the last week, more than likely because his father had been out of the castle more than he was in. And while Uncle Sirius was left in charge, even as Helga he had no authority. The Carrows were the deputies, and as such, when his dad was away… he supposed to the demented duo they were playing.

Leo was exhausted, feeling drained, and wearily taking his third energy potion. Even with Daphne, Ginevra, and Luna helping him, there were still so many injuries to attend to.

“What has you so mopey?” Leo asked Longbottom who sat on the floor against the wall, out of the way and relinquishing his usual chair to those who might need it.

“Thinking of your sister.” Longbottom replied, rolling his wand between his fingers. “Was a year ago we-”

“Not rightly interested.” Leo said.

“You asked.” Longbottom countered.


“Thank yo-”

“I was stating a fact, not paying a compliment. Get up, come with me.” Leo said, beckoning Longbottom to rise. When the older wizard merely smirked, Leo said. “I will transfigure my robes to look like my Dad’s.”

Longbottom chuckled. “Your Dad doesn’t scare me anymore, hasn’t for a bit.” He said as he got up.

“Good, it was a ridiculous fear.” Leo said as he led Longbottom over to a Hufflepuff girl who was likely also in seventh year. “Bones, wasn’t it?” Leo asked, and the girl nodded, looking from him to
“This is Neville Longbottom. He’ll help you patch up the first years.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll what?” Longbottom asked as Leo attempted to walk away.

He turned, face devoid of any emotion. “I’m a thirteen-year-old burnt out after three potions. You’ve seen me, Ginevra, and Luna heal enough people enough times, you likely know the spells and potions as well as we do. If I attempt any more magic, I will either pass out, do more harm than good, or likely both. You’re a decent defense instructor, I’m sure you’ll make a passable healer.”

Leo then turned on heal and moved toward the bean bag cushions. The one he had his eye one was suddenly occupied when he was not more than five feet away from it, and he groaned in frustration.

“Alright, that’s it, come here squirt.” Ginevra said, taking him by the shoulders and steering him toward the fireplace.

He whimpered. “Did you truly just call me ‘squirt’? How insulting.”

“Yes, well, deal with it.” She said stopping before the mantel and reaching into her robes pocket. She uncorked the vial of Polyjuice she always had with her, and took a hit. Leo watched with rapt fascination as she bubbled and shifted, nearly melting into a perfect copy of his sister. “Now, let’s go see the matron.” Ginny said, her voice sounding more like Aurora’s then her own.

Ginevra took some floo powder and activated the green flames. They stepped through, and Leo nearly stumbled back in when they appeared in the hospital wing to find the Carrows hovering near a Slytherin who was clutching their badly broken arm to themselves.

Amycus gave Ginevra a leering smile. “Hello, Princess.” He said. “What are you doing here?”

Ginevra ignored him, turning toward Aunt Poppy. “It would seem Leo’s been trying to copy me again.”

“What?” Leo snapped. “I was doing no such-”

“Attempting sixth year magic. Wandlessly, of course.” She said with a teasing smile that wasn’t quite his sister’s. “He’s a bit burnt out, and I caught him quaffing an energy potion.” She said as she steered him toward one of the other beds.

“And you came through the floo, did you?” Alecto asked in a suspicious tone.

“Well, I’d gone to my father, first, of course. But he wasn’t in his office. Typically, if he isn’t there, he’s brewing or… preoccupied with Professor Nikola.” Ginevra said, and Leo would have smirked at the red-faced fury Alecto displayed had it not been for his well-established occlumency.

“It’s good you brought him, Aurora.” Aunt Poppy said, taking over the steering of Leonidas to a bed. “Now, be honest, young man. How many energy potions have you had.”

Leo mumbled the answer, but he could tell by the lecturing gaze the matron gave him that he was heard nonetheless. He watched as Ginevra looked to the young Slytherin, then to the siblings. “This may be a surprise for you to learn, but Madam Pomfrey is able to heal us without your hovering about.”

“Watch your tone,” Alecto said, stepping forward, though Amycus’ arm shot out and stopped his sister.

“You’re right, Princess.” Amycus conceded, and Alecto looked at him, betrayed. “Perhaps we
should all leave the matron be. I’m sure, if you’ve nothing to do, you could—"

“...assignments to work on, Professor.” She said, tossing Aurora’s hair in such a way that was not Aurora that, if anyone who actually knew her was watching, they would know she wasn’t the real Headmaster’s daughter. Leo then watched Ginevra leave, then eyed the two professors until they did as well.

“How bad is it,” Aunt Poppy asked him quietly as she began tucking him into bed.

“A bit more than we can handle.” He admitted. “But none of them want to leave the room.”

“And I can’t go to them, not until your father has returned.” She sighed heavily. “Where is that man’s mind these days?”

“Are sure this tunnel will lead to the school?” He asked, examining the open space behind the portrait. “I’m aware of most all of the tunnels in and out, and know of only one that actually leads to Hogsmeade.”

“Well ya don’t know everything.” Aberforth said, crossing his arms and partly glaring. “It leads to the castle, but you need to ask for the entrance in.”

“Or out?” Severus arched a brow as he closed the hidden door. Ariana Dumbledore blinked and smiled down at him in an eerie way that promptly had him looking at the old man.

“Why out?” Aberforth asked. “Any of those kids seen outside the school would be tortured within in an inch of their life, if not worse.”

“My calculations say the final battle confrontation will likely take place at Hogwarts.” Hermione said from beneath her cloak.

“You might forgive me for not trusting the divination of a dead woman.” Aberforth said as he went about fixing a few drinks.

“Arthimic calculations.” Hermione retorted. “Divination is an inaccurate magic, at best.”

“Yes, well. I want to agree with you. However, there was that rot about the prophecy.”

“You were never one to follow your brother’s word,” Severus said as he helped Hermione sit on a barstool before taking one himself. “Why start taking his side on things now?”

“His killer is asking me this.” Aberforth said as he set the fire whiskey in front of Severus before handing Hermione a butterbeer.

“Only because he ordered me to do it.” Severus said. “Though I’d be lying if I said I took no pleasure out of the task.”

“Albus was never one to treat people like people until he no longer had the chance to do so.” Aberforth sighed. “We were never on best terms after Grindelwald. I only agreed to help the order after his death because he claimed it would be in shambles, and that Harry Potter himself might be looking for aid. Had me keep a two-way mirror here, and the boy has never looked at it.”
“The boy was never as in the dark as Albus would have liked to believe.” Severus said, taking a sniff of his drink before taking a sip.

Aberforth smirked. “Trying to see if you were going to be poison?”

“A force of habit that has always told me you dilute your drinks.” Severus countered.

Aberforth chuckled, shaking his head. “So why out?”

“If the confrontation is at Hogwarts, there will be underage witches and wizards that will need to get out.” Hermione said as Severus took another drink. “Our son included.”

“And what about you?” Aberforth asked, nodding to her obvious bump. “You’re not fit for battle, and hiding won’t do you one lick of good when they all come calling.

“I think I will likely stay and help heal where I can. Most of the students know of my continued existence.”

Aberforth shook his head. “Albus is rolling in his grave.”

“I’m not sure about that, but he does continually glare and scold me from his portrait.” Severus said, rising, setting a galleon more than the drinks were worth on the counter. “The school becomes a living hell if I leave too long. When the time comes?”

“I’m not railway station for people to come and go as they please.” He grumbled.

“But you will aid us, will you not?” Severus asked.

“If it means I’ll get to live in peace at the end of this all, then yes.”

“Good.” Severus nodded, offering a hand to help Hermione down. He put her hand on her back, “We’ll keep in touch.” He said over his shoulder.

“Don’t.” Aberforth shot back, and Severus smirked as he paused long enough for Hermione to disillusion herself, then continued out the door.

There was a curfew in Hogsmeade, but he set off no alarms because of his mark. He held Hermione’s hand as best he could with the spell, hoping he would run into no one that may see them. Some of the Death Eaters did spot him, but merely waved, clearly not seeing anything out of sorts. It was snowing, just enough that any odd shimmer Hermione might give could be blamed on a trick of the eye, and impervious charm on her cloak and hood allowing the snow to gently glide off of her and not stick.

When they were cleared of the village, Hermione asked, “And where to hide the children? Have you figured it out?”

“Yes,” he said, “though I will need some time to allow the current imbalance and upset to settle. I have spent too long trying to find an alternative, considering the shrieking shake, the boat house. But no, it must be done inside the school. Aberforth was my last alternative, but I can see that he is too open. I suspect you may have even been spotted this eve, though no one will be able to say for sure you were there, with the cloak up. Just a mysterious patron who somehow entered without setting off the caterwauling charm. Likely a member of the order, there to spy on me.”

“When truly the spy is Sirius.”
“Who spends far too much of his time outside of the castle with Lupin, if I must say.”

Hermione chuckled, and he felt her rest her head against his shoulder as they entered the castle.

He led them up, and her confusion was palatable when, instead of leading her to the Headmaster’s office, he brought her to the hospital wing corridor.

“Severus?” She whispered, and he lead her down the hall and across a threshold they had not crossed together in many years.

It always struck him oddly that the room would remain unchanged for so long. There were spots where the dust was lighter, evidence of trespassing, but he had a feeling that it was his children who had done so. He moved to the table where he and Hermione had graffitied the surface with their initials. He took out his wand, then carefully cast two slicing spells to remove the piece from the table.

He held it in his hands, looking down at it, caressing it with his thumb.

“Do you recall when this was done?” He asked.

“Yes,” She said, a smirk playing on her lips. “It was after our initial attempt at having sex. You refused to speak to me after thinking you’d poisoned me.”

“There have been many times over the last twenty-two years where I feared I had lost you. This wasn’t even the first. And it has been… a long time since the fear of your leaving me has even crossed my mind.” He said, moving toward her. “And somehow, even in these last few months, I did not have that fear. But Hermione…”

“Don’t think I’m going to leave you now.” She said, shaking her head.

He put his hand over the bump where their baby was. “When this all comes to blows-”

“No!” She said, cupping his face with both her hands, shaking her head. “I’m not leaving you, Severus. I won’t.”

“Think of the baby,” He said gently.

“I do. I think of this child every day. I think of how they may not know their father, their sister. I can’t, Severus, I can’t leave Hogwarts, I can’t take refuge somewhere and worry the entire time that something has happened to you, or Aurora, or Merlin forbid Leo. I have to stay, I have to.” She said with tears in her eyes.

He held her gaze, his heart and head warring with one another. “If something were to happen to you,” He said quietly, his fear of the unknown showing only for her.

She kissed him, firmly, passionately. He put one arm around her, bringing her as close as her body would allow.

“We will get through this,” She said against his lips as they parted, foreheads pressed together. “We will, and if Merlin forbid we don’t, at least will have been together when the worst happens. You’re the love of my life, my best friend. I don’t want to live without you, I’m not even sure I can at this point. But I do know if we’re forced to say goodbye, I want to be as near you as I can.”

“If you must, witch,” He relented.
“So why did you further deface school property?” She asked after a moment, sniffing as she pulled back to look at the chunk of table in his hand.

“A memento from our youth, something tangible from before this all went to hell. It’s something I didn’t want destroyed one way or the other.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

“I’ll show you,” Severus smirked as he stepped back. He pulled out his wand, drew his strength, then went to work.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we see the destruction of the last to Horcruxes (aside from Nagini and Harry), and I think you all know what that means.
Severus waited, watching from the Astronomy tower as the figure that Lord Voldemort made his way to the tomb of Albus Dumbledore. He never came to the castle, which was probably for the best. He had sent Hermione to the room when he felt the wards trip, signaling that the Dark Lord had entered the grounds. She would keep those within the room from leaving, much like before. If the Carrows knew of their master’s arrival, he was unaware.

The shadow with the pale spot stopped, and Severus cringed as the large, heavy stone of marble was levitated off the surface. It was utterly taboo to mess with a wizard’s grave, but then it wasn’t as if the Dark Lord cared much for what was really considered sacred in the wizarding world. As much as Severus wanted to, he couldn’t look away after there was a bright flash, the distant sound of stone breaking. What was the Dark Lord doing? He didn’t dare think on it too much, not wanting to imagine the vile things the once-man could think to do with the corpse of his greatest enemy.

He waited, watching, trying not to wonder, when suddenly there was a bright light, and a powerful blast of lightning coming directly from the point where the Dark Lord was standing. It would be too much to ask the fates to strike him down for them, so it was likely he himself who conjured such a storm. But to what end?

The Dark Lord left, taking off into the night propelling himself who knew where.

There and gone, with not a word.

Something didn’t feel right, though what it was, Severus couldn’t tell.

He’d already had a quick meeting with the Dark Lord the night before. He’d been summoned, which was already odd. He gave the report of the school, the Dark Lord pleased with what he heard. And in return, he merely asked Severus to remain at the school for the weekend, as he had something he had to do, and was in need of his headmaster to be on grounds. Bellatrix had looked put out, so it was safe to assume whatever it was Voldemort required, she didn’t know about it. He had expected to be summoned when his “master” reached the gates, but it did not happen.

At least he didn’t enter the school.

Checking his pocket watch, Severus noted that it was not yet midnight, though still very late. The Carrows likely had indulged in their weekend spirits, which meant they were likely in a drunken stupor. This was the best time to enact his plan.

Walking briskly, he returned to the Headmaster’s office, moving for the desk. He paused only briefly with his hand over the map, wondering if perhaps tonight was not the night to do this. Ah, but he couldn’t hold it off any longer. Aurora had sent him a message just earlier that day in hopes that they
uncovered something, anything that could destroy the horcrux in their hands. She’d said they’d done
every spell they could think of in hopes of demolishing it, but it only seemed to egg them on worse.

There was a knock on his door, and his shoulders sagged. Opportunity lost, it would seem.

“Enter,” he called, not sure who to expect at this hour.

Sirius walked in, closing the door behind him. His mood seemed ominous, as there was no devilish
grin, no cavalier attitude.

“What is it?” Severus asked, not unkindly.

Sirius cleared his throat. “Ted Tonks was caught and killed today.” He said quietly. “Early morning.
Dromeda got the letter from the ministry informing her….” He stopped, clearing his throat again.
“He was on the run, muggleborn and all. It’s said he wasn’t the only one, but we aren’t sure who he
was with. Not yet.”

Severus took a deep breath. “That is unfortunate news. How is Nymphadora?”

“About as grief stricken as her mother. Remus is worried about the baby, of course. You can’t blame
him, his only child and all. I know Tonks is a tough witch, but she’s so close to due.”

“Indeed.” Severus agreed, sitting down in his chair.

“Are we there, yet, Severus?” Sirius asked, pacing the room. “I mean, I will dress like a witch and
give out reading assignments for as long as you need me to, but… how many more are we going to
lose or risk losing?”

“We are close.” Severus said, standing once more, looking over his desk. “I was about to ask our
fearless leaders of the room to escort the occupants to my old lab.”

“In the dungeon?”

Severus quirked a brow. “The one I had when we were students.” He said.

Sirius frowned, and then his face lit up, only to frown again. “That space is not large enough, not
even half so.”

“I asked the castle to make an exception.” Severus said, waving off Sirius’ concern. “And once
they’re all in there…”

“Once they’re all in there… what?” Sirius asked.

Severus tapped his finger on his desk. “It has only just struck me that the only students that know of
the horcruxes, that I am aware of, are Leonidas and Ginevra. Yet for the two of them to go over what
may just be a vast space is likely not the best way to go about it. I will not permit Hermione
anywhere near a basilisk fang, not in her condition. I cannot go in, for if the Carrows suddenly
decide the need me… not to mention we’ve no idea how long it will take to search the room.”

Sirius nodded, glancing behind Severus. “And I see our supposed leader has vacated his frame.”

“Yes,” Severus said, glancing behind him. “He’s been more absent then present since he divulged to
Hermione where he placed our only chance of destroying the horcruxes without risking destroying
our selves.”

“Would you like me to go in there with them?” Sirius asked.
“No,” Severus replied. “In fact… in fact, I may just extend an olive branch, if you will, to Mr Longbottom.” He then tapped his lip.

“Send Neville in?” Sirius asked, his eyebrows nearly disappearing behind his hair.

“And Miss Lovegood.” Severus added. “It is their friends, after all, who went on a hunt for items and information.”

Sirius seemed to mull over it a moment. “What do you think of including the Slytherins?”

“In the evacuation, yes.” Severus replied. “But in the search and destruction, no. It may be more beneficial for Messers Nott and Zabini, along with miss Greengrass, to stay with the students in hiding. They were part of forming the rebellion, it would be good to keep them in view.”

“I suppose.” Sirius agreed.

“Good.” Severus said. “That said, would you mind terribly going to get the leaders, as it were?”

“Of course.” Sirius said, heading for the floo.

Severus waited, looking down at the map, noting that Minerva was doing rounds with Filius, that the Carrows were, in fact, in their chamber unmoving. Thankfully not together. Severus always did wonder if their closeness meant a bit too close.

The floo flared, and he looked up to see Sirius come through, followed by Longbottom, Miss Lovegood, Nott, and Mr Flinch-Fletchly. The four stood in front of his desk. Only the Hufflepuff seemed worried, and only the Gryffindor slightly suspicious.

“What I’m about to ask of you, you will not like.” He stated to start. “I’m going to ask you four to evacuate the room of requirement.”

There was an instant uproar. Only Lovegood remained silent as the three young men started to protest. Severus rolled his eyes, allowing them to get their knee-jerk reactions out before he bellowed, “Silence!”

The boys, at least fell silent. One looked sheepish, one stoic, the other pissed off. Oddly, it was the Slytherin, Gryffindor, and Hufflepuff respectively.

“I need you to evacuate the room,” he paused, making sure they would keep their mouths shut. He reached for the map, turning it toward them. “And I need you to bring everyone here.”

“Is that Harry’s map?” Longbottom asked.

“No, Potter has his copy. This is a replica, as one of the original creators, and one of the secondary creators are within the walls of this castle.” Severus explained.

“What’s that room, sir?” Lovegood asked.

“It’s a spot that has been warded against discovery, expanded to fit the population of students, and outfitted for a comfortable night’s sleep.” Severus replied. “Because this will not be permanent. For after the room is vacated, Mr Longbottom, Miss Lovegood, I wish for you two to report back here, to me, with Miss Weasley and Leonidas.”

“Why them, sir?” Theo asked.

“Because, Mr Nott, I believe it would be best for you to oversee the safety of the students, along with
those in Slytherin who are already within the rebellion. So, too, would it be best for Hufflepuff to be seen as a house that can be relied on to protect as much as the others.”

He nodded, seeming to know that it was not the entire truth, but it was the truth he needed to know. “And when would you like this done, sir?”

“Tonight.” He said. “It appears the Carrows are already in their cups, it never takes long. The process should take no more than an hour, and you can have the youngest settled into bed and asleep soon enough.” When none of them made to move anywhere, he simply said, “be gone.”

Longbottom and Lovegood did so, but Flinch-Fletchly and Nott stayed. When Severus was about to ask why they weren’t doing as asked, he noted Nott glancing at Sirius.

“Do not worry about him,” He said. “He’s been teaching you potions for the last four months.”

“Truly?” Flinch-Fletchly asked. “How is this achieved? Polyjuice?”

“A glamour, and an underlying desire to be a witch for a while.” Sirius quipped back with a roguish grin. Nott snorted and turned away, heading for the door. Finch-Fletchly merely appeared thoughtful as he followed.

When they’d gone, Severus looked to Sirius. “Are you returning to Nymphadora and Lupin?”

Sirius seemed to consider it. “No.” He said. “They have each other.”

“It’s not as though I or Hermione are alone here.” Severus countered.

“Maybe so,” Sirius agreed. “But here I feel less adrift.” He frowned. “Hogwarts, as they say, will always be here for those who need it. When Harry was here for most of the year, I was never phased. I had the odd investigation to make on Dumbledore’s behalf, though the truth is he hardly ever trust me with anything more than listening in to conversations at a tavern. I had tasks, of course, a house to run. But now that things aren’t good for anyone not following You-Know-Who’s word, I find I have nowhere to truly go. I am adrift. And if I must be so, I wish to drift where I have always felt a sense of home. And with people I like. You, Hermione, Minerva.” He then smiled half-heartedly. “The end is neigh. And if it is to be, then I wish to be with those who have been there for me, even if I wasn’t always worthy of it.”

Severus nodded. “Then you may also make yourself useful. Many of the children have some to rely on Longbottom, Lovegood, and Ginevra as someone to rely on. They will be absent during a time when said children will be worried and scared. Help Hermione comfort them.”

“Yes, sir.” Sirius said, devilish grin in place before he turned and sauntered out the headmaster’s office.

He was nervous, though he’d never admit it. Watching Longbottom pace in front of where the room was, seeming in silent meditation with the castle, had Leo’s heart racing. Having Ginevra and Luna on either side of him made him feel older, bolder. Aurora was out there having a proper adventure, and that was fine for her. But right now, he was about to have one for himself. A small one, his way to contribute.
When the door reappeared, slightly different than before, Leo had to take a deep breath. Occlumency was well and good, but this was beyond any emotion he’d experienced for far in his life.

“Okay,” Longbottom said, shaking out his arms. “Let’s do this.” He opened the door, and waved the rest of them to enter.

Inside the room was an utter disaster. There were piles of random junk, stacks of furniture, random rugs dotting the floor, lanterns hanging from the ceiling.

“This is mad.” Longbottom said, head tilted back as he looked around the room in awe. “Suppose we could just accio the things.”

Leo, who was admittedly also gob smacked, sobered to look at Longbottom. “Yes, let’s have sharp fangs laced with incurable venom hurtle through the air toward us. It’s a superb idea, truly.”

“Do you talk like this to everyone?” Longbottom almost snapped.

“I told Fred and George they were being complete idiots at least a half dozen times a day when I was working with them. I speak like that to anyone who says stupid things.”

“Oh, like you’ve never said anything a bit ridiculous?” Ginevra teased.

Leo felt his face flush. “I may have.”

They ventured just a bit further in.

“It may be a good idea for us to split up.” Luna said, eyeing the piles. “It may take us a few hours to go through all these piles.”

“And what if one of us finds them?” Neville asked.

“Well, one would think we would call out for the others.” Leo replied.

“How? It’s only Gin and Luna who can create a patronus.”

Leo took out his wand, keeping his face impassive as he lifted his arm in the air and shot off a bang of blue sparks.

“Right,” Longbottom said.

“That doesn’t help, though.” Ginevra said. “If we’re behind a stack of something, we won’t see the sparks. And the bang, in a bad spot, might be dangerous.”

“So, we work in groups, but on separate piles.” Luna said with a gentle smile. Near enough that we can see and hear each other, but not wasting time one the same space.

And so, they went to work. Leo could honestly say he’d never seen so much junk in all his life. Everything from broken wands and destroyed textbooks, to old shoes and (thankfully) preserved pumpkin pasties. He’d heard Ginevra cringe and whinge when she had the unfortunate experience of sticking her hand into a mystery substance, which was quickly banished. Longbottom had small pile of cauldrons fall on him. Luna was busy collecting small odds and ends like butterbeer caps and safety pins.

Deeper and deeper into the room they went. There were more chairs inside than Hogwarts could have use for, likely something from the past that was deemed no longer needed but too good to toss out. Cluster of brooms in unknown condition. A rattling box of quidditch balls where clearly didn’t
have the bludger locked in.

“Beginning to think this room should have been called the room of junk disposal.” Longbottom groaned as they dispersed as a group and moved on to the next set of stacks.

“Wouldn’t sound as clever or tempting, would it.” Ginevra said, starting her ascent on her chosen pile.

Leo moved around, his, circling, getting an idea what was there, when his heart stopped. For a moment, he forgot to breathe.

“You lot,” He said, his voice not very loud. He continued to stare at the item on the bust, feeling something like joy and panic. The others continued grumbling. “You lot.” He tried again, and his voice broke in a very unbecoming way. When no one even had the audacity to comment, he withdrew his wand and sent up the blue bang.

“Ah!” Ginevra shout. “Leo, what the hell!” She said, a few things falling off her pile. She stomped over to him, brushing herself off, but in his peripheral, Leo could also see she stopped short.

“That’s what I think it is, is it not?” He asked her.

“Luna?”

“Yes, dear?” Luna said as she skipped over to them. “Oh, you found the lost diadem. Well, I suppose it’s not really lost anymore, is it? It’s been found. Good job, Leonidas.”

There was a loud thud, and then, “Guys! Guys, I found them!” Leo was reluctant to pull his eyes away from the silver diadem with the splendid blue gem, but he managed. He followed the girls around his pile to where Longbottom knelt in front of what looked to be a broken vanishing cabinet. There was a small chest at his feet, and inside were six pristine basilisk fangs. The velvet lining of the box interior was stained black.

“No one touch those without dragon hide gloves.” Leo said, pointing at the box. He then darted around the pile behind him, facing the diadem once more. He took a breath, then another. He took out his wand, then as an afterthought, the small vial of liquid luck. He considered drinking it, but then thought better of it. Keeping it in hand, he focused. “Wingardium Leviosa,” He said quietly, and watched as the diadem lifted off the bust. He smiled, laughing quietly to himself as he brought it down backing up so he could guide it to where they were.

He was surprised when Ginevra snatched it out of the air with her bare hand, a basilisk fang in the other wrapped in nothing more than an old sock.

“What are you doing!” He asked, unable to determine what seemed more outrageously dangerous: the way she held the fang, or the bare skin touch to a horcrux.

“I carried around a bit of You-Know-Who’s soul for the better part of a year. I slept with it, connected with it, poured my soul into it until it was literally draining the life from me.” She said with steeled determination, setting the diadem on the floor, kneeling before it. “There’s always been a part of myself that I hated for how easily I was manipulated. I had Rory, it was hardly as though I was friendless. Yet that thing drove me to be solitary, to do things I’ve never forgiven myself for. Harry destroyed that piece, and good for him. He had a lifetime of misery because of Volde-…. But that-that snake faced demon messed with my life, too. And I damn well am getting back at him for it.” She said, facing screwing up with determination before she stabbed the diadem with the fang straight through the jewel.
Black mist trickled out of it, which was punctuated with a long, painful sounding scream.

“Grab the box,” Leo said, gesturing to Longbottom while never taking his eyes off the mist that started to form something like a skull.

Longbottom closed the box and stood just as the mist swirled around and started tipping the nearby piles of things. No one needed to say they should run, all four of them turned and took off toward the entrance the second the mist started attacking them.

Leo ran, cursing himself for being so inadequate in PE, trying not to let on to the others how if he were to trip, he wouldn’t be coming back up. He pushed, and it was getting ridiculously hard to outrun the towers of falling stuff, but to just be lagging behind the older students.

And then it happened, he tripped. It might have been on something, or his own two feet, but Leo hit the floor hard and rolled. He ached, fairly certain he’d cracked his elbow a bit too hard, and that was the reason he couldn’t push himself to his feet. Things were falling closer. The piles of things near him shaking, smaller objects hitting the ground around him, one or two hitting him in the back. He staggered, getting up finally, but knew in his gut he wasn’t going to move fast enough.

If his father was in a situation like that, he’d still keep going. He’d still fight. He’d defend himself.

“Protego!” Leo shouted, crouching down as things started hitting his shield. He covered his head with this other hand, still clenched in a fist, even though nothing came through. He panted.

“Protego,” He kept whispering to himself over and over again, too afraid to look up and see what was hitting his shield, less he psych himself out and cause the spell to drop. He heard Ginevra, Luna, and Longbottom shouting for him in varying degrees of distress, but he couldn’t respond. Responding would mean distraction, distraction would mean the failure of his shield. The failure of his shield would mean….

The items began to slow, fewer and fewer things hitting his shield until finally it stopped. Refusing to lower his shield just yet, Leo slowly straightened, taking in his surroundings with wide eyes. He was standing in a crater no bigger than four feet in diameter, the walls at least two feet over his head. It was utterly silent except the odd toppling of something further in the room, and Leo turned about to take it all in. There were no more piles, and it was likely he was standing on the only clear patch of floor left.

He giggled. Then the giggle turned to a snicker, changing swiftly to a chuckle. The chuckle grew to a laugh which turned damn near manic as he opened his tightly clenched fist and noted the vial had cracked, likely as he tripped, cut his palm, and leaked the potion into his hand. He fell to his knees, hyperventilating with laughter as Ginevra, Luna, and Longbottom appeared above him on the brooms they’d passed on their way in.

“I think he’s lost it.” Neville said.

“No,” Luna said, “He’s merely high from luck as well as adrenaline. You two did think he likely died, after all.”

“I thought your dad was going to kill us.” Ginevra said as she lowered her broom toward him. “And then your mother, and then your sister.”

“Oh, wait until I tell Rory about this. This, this is my war story,” he said as his laughter finally started to die. He climbed on the broom behind Ginevra.

“The time you took on the stuff no one wanted and lived.” She teased as she brought them into the
“It’s better than I’m sure most will get. And I was in the presence of the destruction of a horcrux. Utterly fascinating that was. By the way, the box of fangs and the diadem?”

Longbottom turned in the air shakily on his broom, showing the box stuck to his broom with a charm. “Lost the diadem though.”

“Allow me!” Leo said, and despite Ginevra’s protests, he extended his wand, which made him chuckle a little as he realized it should have snapped but didn’t, and then shouted, “accio destroyed diadem of Ravenclaw!”

There was a rattle, and suddenly the mangled relic came soaring toward them. Ginevra caught it once more, and then turned them toward the door, leading the other two over the mass collapse. Luna shot a spell at the door, and they opened just enough to let them out.

Lucky, that.

March 1st, 1980

———-A———-——

“Happy birthday, dear…”

This was where the song got mixed up.

“Ronald!” Harry sang.

“Ronniekins,” Aurora teased.

“Weasel,” Draco sang with a smile.

Ron, for his part, merely laughed and shook his head. He sat at the table inside the tent, a small cupcake from a grocer before him. Aurora had gone for the food the day before, and still feeling bad about punching him, purchased the heavily discounted pink frosted treat. She might have stolen the candle. But Ron didn’t seem to care one way or the other, grinning at it as he was.

“Happy birthday to you!” The three sang in unison once again. Ron blew out the candle, they applauded, and he removed the still smoking candle and shoved the treat into his mouth, barely removing the paper.

Harry was still smiling and laughing as he went outside, back to watch the parameter, while Aurora and Draco tidied up the remains of dinner. They were just giving their dishes a rinse in the basin with their wands when they heard a crack outside. Harry shouted something, and Aurora looked to Draco, then they looked to Ron. After a pause, the three of them abandoned whatever they were doing, turning or rising to leave the tent when Harry came in looking a bit sheepish.
“Harry, what?” Ron started to say, but stopped when someone followed.

“Dad?” Aurora said, surprised.

He quirked his eyebrow and smirked. “Well I’m not your mother.”

“What are you doing here, Uncle?” Draco asked as he and Aurora moved to join the others.

She watched as her father reached into his robes and pulled out a small bag. He pulled on the draw strings, put the mouth of the bag down on the table, then tipped the contents gently out on to the surface. Three large fangs quietly clinked on to the wood.

“These were preserved,” He said, “So there is still some venom to them. I would handle them with dragon hide gloves, to be safe, but I don’t believe they pose a threat so long as you don’t puncture your skin.”

“Basilisk fangs.” Harry said, awe and fearful at once.

“Indeed.” He father nodded. “Once you lot have destroyed the horcrux you have, all that will remain is the one in your scar, and the snake. The Dark Lord was seen at Hogwarts just the other day, though he did not come to the castle. I doubt he forgot where he placed the diadem, but suffice to say that was not what he came for.”

“And what are we going to do after we destroy it?” Aurora asked.

“Wait for further instruction, and stay out of trouble. If you can manage.”

“Sir,” Harry said, still eyeing the basilisk fangs. “Rory read that the only way to destroy a horcrux was to… to destroy the container beyond magical repair. So… so what’s going to happen to me?”

“No,” Her father replied honestly. “Short of a dementor’s kiss, there is no known way to extract a soul. And while dementor’s are in abundance around the grounds of Hogwarts, I’m afraid the piece inside your scar has been around for nearly all your life. And as such, should it have been possible to extract it, it would have likely been removed back in your third year when you and your godfather were attacked by the loathsome creatures.”

“You and mum didn’t…?” Aurora asked.

She stopped when her father shook his head, “I believe you read the book back at your grandmother’s? It was the only tome your mother could find on the subject, and while it gave a detailed account on how to make one it did not say how to remove the piece of soul. Merely that one could heal their soul if they were truly repentant over what they had done.”

“I don’t think Tom Riddle will suddenly feel guilty for all he’s done.” Harry smirked in a self-depreciating way.

“No, I do not believe he would.” Her father agreed. “I cannot stay long. I must return to the castle
before it is discovered I am missing.” He turned to Harry, who smirked before handing him the second wand in his hand, something Aurora hadn’t noticed beforehand.

Aurora frowned, “Why didn’t mum come then?” She asked as her father tucked his wand back up his sleeve.

He remained impassive, stoic as ever, but there was something off in his posture. “She was unable to leave her post.” He said simply. “Be safe, the lot of you.” He then turned and left. Aurora heard the crack of his disappearance shortly after he left, and she looked to Harry.

He was deep in thought, his eyes shifting about as he mulled over something. She turned to Draco, and she could see he was trying his damnedest not to get into something. A glance at Ron said he was just as confused as she was.

“You know something,” She said to Draco. “You know what he’s-”

“Today’s not the day to discuss-” Harry interrupted.

“Then when will it be, Potter?” Draco asked in an eerie calm. “If not today?”

“Let’s get rid of the Horcrux, alright?” Harry half-snapped. “We’ll all think more clearly when we do.” He turned and stormed out the tent. Draco huffed then followed, leaving Aurora and Ron alone together.

“So you have any idea what’s going on?” She asked quietly.

He shook his head. “No.” He admitted. “But I get the feelin’ when we know, we aren’t going to like it.”

“Probably not.” Aurora agreed, and he waited for her to come around the table before grabbing the fang. “Whoa!” She snapped. “Dad said Dragon hide!”

“And do you happen to have a set of gloves on you?” Ron asked.

“Well… no. I don’t think so anyway.” She examined how Ron held it inelegantly in his hand, the cuff of his sleeve acting as a barrier. “Set the fang down.” She said, and Ron did so. She took his dominate hand, “Impervious,” she cast, Ron’s hand glowing a moment. “Shouldn’t be a problem now.”

He picked up the fang then head out, holding the flap back for her. Harry and Draco were standing opposite one another, the locket already laid out on a flat rock between them.

“I’ve already destroyed one,” Harry said. “So, I think it should be one of you three. Rory?”

“I’m good, thank you.” She said, crossing her arms.

“One would think you’d want to biggest stab at it.” Ron said with a smirk too wide for him not to have realized his own, terrible joke.

Aurora couldn’t help but smile back. “I don’t know why I would. Yes, the Dark Lord has been a big, lurking shadow over my life, but it was much worse for Draco. I at least knew my father was only pretending to be loyal. Draco grew up practically worshiping him.”

“Not him,” Draco said firmly. “And not even his rhetoric. I did it to try and please my father, because that’s what he always believed. Once you slipped Aunt H’s real blood status, everything sort of fell
apart form there. Couldn’t imagine wanting the approval of a man who would suddenly hate a witch
we adored simply because of who she was born to. No, Weasley. I think it should be you.”

“Alright.” Ron said, then frowned. “Why?”

“Your family was given some of the worst grief from mine, and others. Your sister nearly died at his
hands. Your father. George lost an ear because of the attack on the Burrow. Your family has lost so
much to this war. Rory, me, we haven’t. Not like that. So, do it, Weasley.”

Ron shifted about, frowning. “Rory should.”

“Why?” She asked.

“’Cause I just do.”

“Should be Draco.” She countered.

“Weasley,” He retorted.

Harry huffed, then went back inside the tent. The three looked to one another wearily, silently
seeming to agree that they should apologize to Harry. Before they could, the tent flap whipped back
open, and Harry was holding a fang in each hand.

“Are you mad!?” Aurora said, gesturing to the fangs in Harry’s hand as he came up to her.

He shrugged. “Your Dad said it was probably fine.”

“Not taking my chances.” She said, casting an impervious on her hand before taking the offered
basilisk part.

Draco did the same as Harry came up to him with the second, and he took it wearily, watching Harry
as he made his way back to the locket.

“Alright, you three,” He said, beckoning them over. “Now, we could stand here all day, and all have
a reason why they shouldn’t be the one to do this. And we can all think of reasons why we should.
Doesn’t matter who, everyone, no one, someone, when I open this, stab it. It’s going to fight back,
the diary did. Just-”

“Open the bloody thing and let’s get this over with, shall we?” Draco said, a slight tremble to his
hand that betrayed how his sharp tone was a side effect.

Harry nodded, looking to Aurora and Ron to make sure they were ready. He then made the same
eerie hissing noise he made when he sent the patronus to her father, and Aurora watched at the locket
sprang open, and two eyes looked right into her soul. They darted to Ron, and then black smoke
emerged, filling the air around them, suffocating them.

“Stab it!” They heard Harry shout, but Aurora was unmoved. The darkness had stunned her in a way
it hadn’t in too long, paralyzing her.

“I’ve seen your hearts, and they are mine!” A sickening, hissing voice said through the smoke,
caressing her ears, filling her heart with cold dread. “I’ve seen your dreams, and your fears.”

Something in the smoke changed, though Aurora couldn’t make it out.

“Least loved by the mother who craved a daughter.”
The smoke shifted.

“Ignored by a father who only wanted an heir.”

And then it was before her, whatever it was, and she saw her mother and father.

“The disappointment of parents who strive for perfection.”

“Stab it!” Harry yelled, “someone stab it!”

Aurora was bordering on hyperventilation. Something about that made sense. She wasn’t as academic as they were. Smart, yes, but learning wasn’t a passion. She didn’t have a post-Hogwarts goal like they did, or even an urge to do a mastery in a particular subject. She wasn’t the genius her brother was, and while more athletic than either of her parents, she would never make anything of it. She was a disappointment; how could she not be? Aimless, talentless, stubborn Rory.

“Don’t listen to it!” Harry screamed.

But it was right, wasn’t it? Well, not entirely. She was stubborn, and sort of aimless. She may not have been the most talented in the family, at least not in the way her parents and brother were. But where did that leave her?

“I’m proud of you, you know that, don’t you? I’m so proud of who you are and what you’ve become.”

“I love you, Rory. Remember that whatever happens, I love you more than my own life.”

Words from her parents echoed in her memory, reminding her that despite her differences from them, she was still loved, and they were always proud of her.

She lurched forward, and she felt her hand brush someone else’s. Ron’s or Draco’s, she never knew. She was tossed away with a back-lash of magic, the roar of a pained scream piercing the silence of the woods. She hit the ground hard, the wind knocked out of her, her back surely bruised. She managed to keep the fang away from her when she landed, but only just.

The smoke dissipated, and Aurora found herself staring at the blue-grey sky above while the snow began to soak into her clothes. Off to the side, she heard what was likely Harry rushing to someone, probably Draco, and then the grunts and groans of someone very stiff and in a lot of pain being brought to their feet.

“Ron? Rory?”

“Yeah,” She said, barely able to keep the strain out of her voice.

“You alright?”

“Been better, mate.” Ron grumbled.

With great effort, Aurora pushed herself up, then slowly got to her feet. When she noted Ron was still on the ground, she went to help him. “Where’s your fang? She asked, reaching down to help yank him up. He grunted, brushing himself off before looking around, and then behind him.

He grimaced. “Luck nothing was on the tree.” He said, and Aurora peeked around to find the tree directly behind him stabbed, its needles changing to brown, the branches losing strength.

“So that’s it then.” Draco said, looking at the fang in pieces on the ground near where he landed.
“Pretty much have it all done, don’t we?” Ron said.

“Except the snake,” Aurora conquered. “Which I doubt we can.”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” Harry suddenly screamed, falling to his knees and clutching his forehead. His fingers were tight in his hair, and his face as contorted in pain. Aurora moved as Ron did to Harry’s side. She was with Draco, soothing his back, when she noticed him opening his eyes despite how much pain he still seemed to be in. For a moment they flashed red, but despite reverting back to their normal green, even if they were a bit muddy, there was something wild and sinister in them. His heavy breaths were more like snarls as his teeth gritted, and after a moment, he closed his eyes and seemed to relax. He slumped against Draco’s legs, clutching on to them.

“Potter, what is it?” Draco asked, stroking Harry’s hair in off-rhythm strokes.

“It’s Voldemort-” Draco slapped his hand over Harry’s mouth.

“Try again without our having snatchers sent on us.” He said in a gentle but chiding way before pulling his hand away.

“He knows.” He said, panting. “He knows about the cup. He… he went to the vaults with Bellatrix. He had a feeling. An… an ache. He went and they found the cup gone.” Harry swallowed, still panting a bit.

The weight of the statement had Aurora rear back, looking up to Ron, then Draco. He shook his head, looking down at Harry, and Aurora forced her urge to worry aloud about their families as Harry continued.

“He’s going to check the others. He’s going to find the locket gone. Then the ring.”

“But he’ll think the diadem is safe.” She said.

“Unless he goes back to the school.” Ron said, a slight tremor in his voice.

“We can’t worry about that yet.” Draco said.

“Malfoy’s right,” Harry said, climbing back to his feet. “But maybe we should pack up what we don’t need, be ready. I’ve got a feeling things are going to start happening quickly.”

March 3rd, 1998

The scene gave him pause as he walked into the ballroom of Malfoy manor. Lucius was shaking, Bellatrix was half curled into a ball on the floor, and between the entrance and the spot where the Dark Lord stood facing his throne, there was a pile of bodies. Goblins, one, maybe two wizards. All of them Gringotts employees. Chaos and uncertainty, indeed. But Severus hadn’t been counting on the whole lot of them being brought forth and murdered.
He strode around the body’s, then dropped on bended knee where the floor was still clean. “My Lord.” He said, bowing his head, readying his strongest shields.

“Severus,” he said. “How is it that you are here and the Carrows are not yet?”

Severus frowned. “It is the privilege of being Headmaster, my Lord, that I am able to get to you much quicker. I did not know the Carrows were summoned as well.”

The Dark Lord nodded, then looked down at the wand in his hands.

Severus’ blood ran cold. That was Albus Dumbledore’s wand, but if that were true, then…

He swallowed thickly, tucking away this new-found information and fear.

“There has been an unfortunate development, Severus.” The Dark Lord said, finally turning toward him. He seemed taken aback, and then smiled in a disturbingly affectionate way. “Rise, Severus.” He beckoned, and Severus obeyed him, slowly and cautiously.

Just as he got to his feet, his deputies came marching in, nearly tripping on the Goblin bodies before finally kneeling down instead of trying to logically moving around the corpses.

Voldemort glanced at them, but otherwise paid them little attention.

“Severus, it’s come to attention that some important items have been stolen, perhaps even tampered with.” The Dark Lord lovingly caressed the wand he’d pilfered from a corpse. More footsteps, and Theo Nott came in to the room, not sparing a glance at the still kneeling deputies, and then came around the carnage to Severus’ side. He knelt, his face impassive, and waited for instruction.

Voldemort glanced at him, but much like the Carrows he did not command Theo to rise.

“I want word sent to me the moment, the very moment Harry Potter steps foot in Hogwarts, on its grounds, or anywhere in the vicinity.”

“My Lord, forgive me, but I thought that was always to be the case.” Severus said, glancing at Bellatrix who had shifted about, no longer curling in on herself but watching.

“It was, yes.” The Dark Lord agreed. “But now it’s much more imperative. He’s slipped from my fingers too often, and I believe he is behind the destruction of my most treasured creations. If there is even a whisper of his whereabouts, I must know at once.” He looked down at the Goblins. “He has someone smart with him. Someone who knew to disguise themselves as yourself and Lucius. For while the Goblins, the guard, all seemed to believe you were there, Lucius’ mind says he was not.” Red eyes met Severus’ black ones. “You were not there, were you?”

His mind was invaded, and he let the Dark Lord in, keeping the bad behind his walls, showing him his regular routine. For fun, he even showed the contemplation of going to Gringotts, only to be interrupted by the siblings. Any memory with Lucius was heavily inspected, but he refused to bear his visit with the blond before the Dark Lord.

Withdrawing, the Dark Lord nodded. “It is as was expected. The Goblins lied.”

The Dark Lord paced, running his hand over the wand’s knots.

“I want Potter.” He said, slowly turning to walk through the carnage. Blood stained his pale, bare feet, and the snake slithered out from behind the throne. “This needs to end. If anyone at the school knows where he is, if he somehow finds his way there, I want to know immediately.” He ignored the
chorus of ascent from those present. He, instead, hissed at the snack, clearly speaking to it. She launched herself at the wizard, and they both disappeared with a pop.

“Does your daughter know where Potter is?” Bellatrix asked, getting to her shaky feet.

“How would she?” Severus asked.

“Because she’s been with him the whole step of the way. A traitor, just like her dear ol’ Daddy.” She attempted to saunter over, but her balance was hard to come by. “I could get it out of her. Or you, I don’t particularly care which.”

“Bella, Potter has been on the run. My daughter has been in Hogwarts, where she should be.”

Bella scowled, then limped away, mumbling something about needing to check on her husband.

Severus turned to the still-kneeling Carrows.

“Go. You’re needed back at the school. As the Dark Lord said, he wants Potter. This would give him the chance to slip in.”

The Carrows rose, then left the ballroom.

“Sir?” Theo asked, and Severus looked to the young man.

“We shall discuss your… position at a later time. Go.” He said, and Theo nodded, leaving the ballroom as well.

“What are you up to, Severus?” Lucius asked, carefully coming around the carnage that covered the floor of his once-home.

“I’m merely following the Dark Lord’s plans.” He said with an air of nonchalance.

Lucius hummed, looking Severus over. “How is Draco.”

“Fine.” He retorted. “I must return to the school.”

“Indeed,” Lucius agreed, continuing to eye him suspiciously. “Well, don’t let me keep you.”

Severus smirked, just barely, and turned to leave.

“Oh, and Severus.” He stopped, looking over his shoulder. “Perhaps next time you should obliviate the elf who answered my door as well? Prevents them from knowing there are memories to restore.”

“Really?” He said casually. “If I ever obliviate anyone with an elf, I will remember that.”

Lucius shook his head but said nothing, a hint of a smile on his gaunt, overly care worn face before he turned away and noted the mass death once more. Severus turned and left, leaving him to it.

He had other things to worry about.

He apparated to the gates instead of directly to his office. He wanted time to think, and didn’t want to imagine his wife waiting for him, not yet anyway. Because Hermione would ask a dozen questions, want to run calculations, demand answers, and Severus just wanted to think.

Voldemort had stolen Albus Dumbledore’s wand. The Elder wand. Did that mean he was going to try to find the other Hallows now that he knew his horcruxes were being destroyed. He kept the
snake close, which was the perfect confirmation that she was, in fact one. But if he were trying to become the master of Death, he wasn’t eager to see out the other two hallows. One which was on Potter’s person, the other in the drawer of the Headmaster’s desk.

Did he even know about the whole Hallow stories, or was he just interested in the wand? It was likely the latter, for why would he have used the resurrection stone as a horcrux? No, he likely only wanted the wand. The unbeatable wand.

Severus strode inside the castle, moving through the quiet corridors, pondering.

It would make sense that Voldemort would want the unbeatable wand, for his wand was of no use against Potter. And why risk Lucius wand not responding as it should?

He moved up the stairs, giving the mumbled password to the Gargoyle. He went into his office, stopping in the middle room, and stared at the floor.

“Severus?” Hermione’s voice called to him, but he instead turned to the portraits on the walls, and looked to one in particular.

“Does the Elder wand obey the one holding it, or its proper master?”

“It must be earned by defeat.” Dumbledore confirmed. “Otherwise, it will not work as it should.”

“Severus, what is it?” Hermione asked, and he turned to her. She stood worried, perched with one hand on her belly, the other at her lower back. Her wide eyes were filled with worry, and he couldn’t imagine what he must have looked like to her to have caused it.

“As soon as we can, my must rally the order.” He said. “We must hold a meeting, we must get everyone on the same page. It’s vital.”

“Why?” She demanded now.

“Because the Dark Lord now knows we’ve been destroying Horcruxes. He knows there are some missing. He stole Albus’ wand from his grave, and now he is demanding that any of his followers alert him the instant they see Potter. He, Aurora, Draco, none of them will be safe anywhere until this is over. So, it ends. As soon as we can, it ends.”

Hermione frowned, a grim determination wiping away the worry that had been before. In an instant she removed the hand from her back and thrust in the air, wordlessly and wandlessly summoning a paper. She marched to his desk, the weight in her front causing her to waddle more than stride, and bent over it as much as she could. Grabbing a quill, she started jotting down something.

“Dear, sit.” He said, and thankfully she did so, not pausing in her task to do so.

He waited, glancing at the portraits, noticing some of them actually attempting to see what she was doing by changing frames or craning their necks.

After an undetermined amount of time, she sat back and looked at what she’d done. She placed a hand on her belly and rubbed, not frowning, not really smiling, either, but there was something positive in the way she sat, something that spoke of a good outcome.

“Before, I always predicted May.” She said. “Before we had everything destroyed, it was constantly the outcome.”

“And now?” He asked.
“Now, one week, two if we don’t call them home. Here at Hogwarts they will be safest, out there something will likely happen that will cause them to be found.” She sighed. “It has to be here, Severus. We have to call them home. Here we can set up a defense, here we can… we can be prepared. This is everyone’s best chance of survival.”

He nodded slowly.

“Then let us ready who and what we can. When we near the end, we’ll call the children home.”

March 10th, 1998

Come home.

The message burned on her watch face, and Aurora chewed her lip as she contemplated her reply.

All of us? She sent back, unsure if it was a request from one of her parents, and bad news awaited her, or the call to arms they were expecting.

Yes. The reply made her think of her father, and she could nearly picture him rolling his eyes and getting frustrated with her.

“It’s time,” She said simply, and the boys looked up from whatever task was occupying them. Draco closed his book, Tales of Beetle Bard, set it inside the bag. Harry had been lightly dozing, but now sprang up and waved his wand to summon and gather what he could. Ron regretfully banished the last of his dry cereal, they went to work helping Aurora clean the dishes.

It was odd, really, that they would take so much care to clean up. Despite the practice of changing location so often, they each went about the packing up slow, careful, as though it were the first time any of them had done the spells. She supposed, though, it was because they were all quite reluctant to leave.

Yes, returning to Hogwarts would mean seeing their friends again, their family. But it also meant that the end of the war was dawning, and ready or not, they were about to see the end of it.

There was still the horcrux within Harry to handle, though she noted that if it was even slightly hinted at, a tiff would begin between Draco and Harry. There was also the snake, which she supposed could only be taken care of during the fight anyway.

Before any of them knew it, the tent was as emptied as it would get, and they were standing outside it, looking at it.

“It’s been fun.” Ron said as if he weren’t entirely sure. “Grand adventure, this.”

“One last one.” Harry said.

“Don’t talk like that.” Draco retorted.
“Why not?” Aurora asked. “Pretty sure if we all make it through this, boring is precisely what we’d all want. Or at the very least, not have to worry about dying before the end of year exams because of You-Know-Who trying to take over the world.”

“End of year exams?” Ron wrinkled his face, turning his over-large grimace toward her. “You’re bloody jokin, aren’t you?”

“You can skip out on your last year if you like, but I would still technically have had another year after this.” She reminded.

Ron said nothing to that, merely shaking his head at her as if she were mental. Draco snorted, then waved his wand and packed the tent, shrinking the bundle and tucking into his bag.

“Right,” Harry said. “Are we ready?”

With the murmur of ascent, the boys each gripped Aurora’s left arm, and with her freely moving right, she tapped her wand to the surface and said, “Cor domus.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this took a lot longer to get out than I expected. Also, you may have noted the increase in chapters listed above. As we enter the final battle (nearly two months earlier than canon), I am going to try and split it up between two if it gets too long, a follow up chapter, and an epilogue.
Severus and Minerva watched as the white light in his office grew before four, slightly disheveled teenagers appeared before them with gear in hand.

“Well,” Minerva said. “I must say you four have looked better.” She smirked.

“Thank you, Aunt Min.” Aurora beamed as they all dropped their stuff as if they’d had to carrying while traveling the muggle way from wherever they were hiding before.

“Severus, what-” Dumbledore started to say, anger in his voice.

Severus rolled his eyes, turning to the portrait. “Why should they be on the run when all that remains is what they could never get to?” He challenged the art piece.

“You knew Harry could not know.”

“Know what?” Potter deadpanned. “That one of my best friends’ father, the husband of a woman who was once also my best friend, was actually on my side? Or that there’s a Horcrux in me, and the only way anyone can figure out how to destroy it is by killing me?” Harry asked as if he were merely relaying the weather. Draco’s face contorted between a sneer and upset as harry spoke, but he said nothing, merely clenching his fists.

When the silence was thick int he room, Aurora asked, “Where’s mum?”

“She’s … with your Aunt Poppy, preparing.”

“How soon are things happening?” Ron asked.

“Not quite yet. When it does, it will happen quickly.” He said, darting a glance to Minerva who nodded. “I want you four to go to the room of requirement, you can use the floo. Ask those leaders of the houses to round up anyone under age and get them there. Most will already be within, but it’s imperative that any witch or wizard below fifteen should be ushered out. I will only allow those fifteen or older to aid in the medics, should they have been trained. Ask the room for the exit to safety, and it will be granted.”
“Dad, Leo?” Aurora asked.

“Make sure he gets out.”

“Sir,” Potter said. “What are we doing after we get them out?”

“We are going to use you as bait, Mr Potter.” Minerva said with a smirk.

“The order?” Ron asked.

“Will be coming through the room as well.”

“Dad, why not keep everyone there, in the room?”

“Because if something were to happen to the structure it may prevent the room from functioning. The path that will lead from the room will bring them to a safe spot, one where we know they will be able to hide for the duration of the battle. One outside the castle.”

Aurora nodded, then looked to Draco, then to Harry.

There were so many things Severus wanted to say, just in case this was the last time he had the chance to say them to her. But he withheld, for this was not the moment for sentiment, not for him.

“Go,” Minerva said. “Lingering will do none of us any good.”

He watched as they each went to the floo, grabbing a pinch of powder, calling for the room. When the last of them left, he turned to Minerva.

“You know the spell?”

She grinned. “I’ve been hoping for an excuse to use it for years.”

“Good,” Severus smirked. “I will summon the order, you ensure the students that should leave do. After that, follow the plan.”

She nodded, heading for the fireplace.

“Minerva,” He said before fully realizing he was going to. When she stopped, looking over her shoulder with a questioning frown, he added. “Thank you.” It was for so many things over nearly two decades.

He noted the witch’s eyes mist for just a moment before she pulled herself together, nodded, and then left.

“Severus,” Dumbledore said, and he slowly turned to look at the portrait. He expected a rant, he expected a lecture. Instead, he got a completely defeated Albus Dumbledore. “You’ve done well, all of you.”

He turned away from the portrait, not needing its praise or approval, and summoned multiple lionesses to go out to those who were waiting with instructions in what to do.
The room was already in an uproar of joy when she came through the floo behind Ron. Harry seemed to be bombarded by everyone, welcoming him back, asking so many questions that they all became white noise.

She looked around the room, shifting to the side as she had been taught to when coming through the floo. It wasn’t the eyes she was looking for among the crowd, but they found her nonetheless.

“Rory,” Neville said with a warm smile.

“Hey, Nev.” She replied, unable to smile in return. He stepped toward her, and she met him part way, hugging him in greeting, glad to be back. She didn’t get to say anything, though, for once the brief embrace was over, she was partly tackled. Barely keeping to her feet, she supported the body that crashed into her despite its arms wrapping tightly around her.

“I stabbed a horcrux,” Leo said against her arm. “Well, no, I didn’t stab it. But I found it, and I was there when it stabbed, and then it almost killed me, but I’ve been practicing a shield charm, so all the stuff just bounced off it, and I was in the crater, and I broke my vial of liquid luck.”

“You what?” Aurora said, trying to look at her younger brother but unable to move where he had her arms pined and was putting so much of his weight on her.

“I broke it. But I was, well, lucky, because some of it seemed into my blood stream when the glass cut my hand.”

“Leo, let go of me.” She said, and he did, beaming up at her. She smirked. “I actually did stab a horcrux. And I broke into Umbridge’s apartment, and I stole butterbeer.”

Leo’s eyes widened. “You’ve turned to a life of crime?”

“There are worse things.” She shrugged, turning her attention to the place where the tapestry marking supposed infractions was and noting it was now a door. And that there were people coming through it.

It took her no time at all to spot him, and it would seem it was mutual. Fred Weasley only just got through the door when he found her. He crossed the room quickly, gently nudging people out of his way until he was before her. In an instant, he had his arms around her, and her him.

“Knew you were alright. Lee kept saying you weren’t looking good when you left, but I knew you were okay.”

“Okay is a matter of opinion,” She said as she stepped back. “I had a fairly nasty splinch on my left leg. Ron did a repairo on me.”

“He did what?” Fred asked, head whipping around, clearly searching for his brother.

“You have part of your leg ripped away, and tell me you would care how it was put back together.” She said, and Fred seemed to ease up a bit.

“You’re okay now, though?” Neville asked.

“Bit of a scar, but pretty sure we all have those now.” Aurora replied to him with a cheeky grin.

A whistle cut through the chatter, and even though there were still people coming in, everyone turned to face Harry and Aunt Min at the center of the room, standing on a table.
“Alright, listen up.” Harry shouted. “I know this is all exciting, but there’s very real danger coming here soon. We’re going to face down You Know Who here at Hogwarts.” There was mild chatter, but it quieted when Harry raised his hand to silence them. “Anyone under fifteen, you gotta go. There’s no question about it, you have to. If you’re under seventeen and not been learning how to heal, you have to go.”

“Oi, that’s not fair,” Someone said. Another person grumbled, and then more followed suit.

Aurora’s eyebrows nearly hit her hairline when she watched her brother get up to stand with Aunt Min and Harry. Everyone quieted down again, though this time she suspected it was more out of curiosity than respect.

“You lot may not like it, but you’d be idiots if you tried to stay.”

“Shut up, Snape.” Someone yelled, and before Aurora could stand up for her brother, she watched as he rolled his eyes, crossed his arms, and looked in the direction with utter boredom.

“How long did it take you to come up with that utterly scathing remark. ‘Shut up’. Yes, well, if you don’t want to listen to me, you’re more than welcome to have your guts ripped out by Death Eaters.” Aunt Min looked ready to lecture him, but stopped as he continued. “And they will rape your guts out, make no mistake on that. Harry has faced them, of course, but so has my sister. The Weasleys, all of them currently here. Well, except that one, I’m not sure who he is.” Leo said, and Aurora noted Percy Weasley standing with his father and elder brother. She felt Fred grasp her shoulder, and she glanced behind her to see both he and George were utterly shocked at the sight. “I know he’s a Weasley,” Leo continued. “Hard not to tell. But the Weasleys faced them, Longbottom, Luna, Draco, they fought them. And if you think that the Death Eaters went easy on them because they were underage, you’re wrong. They don’t care about that. Hell, I don’t even think they care about your houses anymore. You stand up to them, they’re going to try and kill you. Frankly, it’s likely they will. Leave the fight to those who can. Who are older. This isn’t an adventure when you can be like Harry Potter, this is war, and it’s real. It’s not cowardly to run when you can’t fight to begin with.”

“Well said, Mr Snape.” Aunt Min said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You see the door so many came through before, leave through it. A man named Aberforth Dumbledore will be waiting for you all.”

“Follow me!” Daphne Greengrass called out, “I’ll show you out, make sure you get there safely.”

“Should we…?” George asked.

“Definitely,” replied Fred, and he released his hold on her shoulder to join George in going over to Percy.

“I guess they’re making up.” Neville said, standing with her as she watched the twins talk to Percy.

“Good.” She said. “It’s not the time to hold grudges.”

“Yeah,” Neville said. “So, it’s probably a good time for you to know that I’ve… well make up with your Dad implies we were on good terms to start with, but…”

“I’m glad to hear it, Nev.” Aurora said.

“Yeah?” He asked, and as he was about to add something else, he was cut off by Ginny.

“I should have you know your brother nearly killed himself multiple times, despite my trying to make
sure he didn’t.” She said as she came up to Aurora and gave her a hug.

Aurora returned it happily. “He told me a bit about it.”

“He was quite brave,” Luna’s voice joined them, and Ginny stepped away from Aurora to allow their other friend to hug her.

“I have no doubt that he was.” Aurora replied, stepping back and noting Harry coming toward her.

“Rory,” He said, “I’m apparently going to go with McGonagall, but after, well, we’ll still need to figure out a way to get to the snake.”

“Meet near the entry hall?” She asked.

Harry nodded, “I’m going to pass it on to Ron.” And he took off.

“What about the secret tunnels and entrances?” Aurora thought out loud, then charged toward her Aunt Min. “What about the secret tunnels in and out?” She asked.

“Well, I would suggest that perhaps you, Mr Longbottom, and perhaps Mr Finnegan take to blowing them up.”

“We might be able to help with that.” George said as he and Fred joined them.

“Yes, I would say you two certainly would.” Aunt Min agreed with a smirk. “Well, get on it, the lot of you.”

“Harry,” Aurora said, touching his arm as he came up to his Professor. “Your map?”

Harry dug into his pockets, pulling it out. “You need it?”

“No,” The twins said at the same time Aurora and Neville said “Yes.” Harry merely smirked before handing it over, heading out of the room with Aunt Min.

“I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.” Aurora said, touching her wand to the map. She watched the enchantment take hold. “We could probably do this best in pairs. Maybe Seamus with -”

“I think a Fred and I should split between the lot.” George cut her off, and she frowned.

“You’d want to split up?” She asked.

“Only got one map,” Fred said. “And we know the ins and outs best.”

She smirked. “Which would make the map rather useless if we know all of them.”

“Hand it to Gin.” George suggested. “She’s not going to be fighting.”

“Like hell I’m not!” Ginny replied vehemently.

“You’re not of age.” Fred reminded.

“I could just Polyjuice myself as Aurora and no one would know the difference.” She retorted in challenge.

“That’d be unsettling.” Fred said, grimacing.

“I think it’s up to Gin who she fights as,” Aurora said. “And if the pair of you want to split up, fine.”
She handed the map to Ginny. “Maybe you two could make sure all the younger ones get out safe. And, perhaps, note any would be Death Eaters that might still be lingering inside.”

“I can help with that.” Blaise said as he came up behind Ginny, touching her shoulder. “I would know which ones are putting on an act for the Gryffindors and which ones are genuine.”

“Thanks.” Ginny said, smiling up at him a touch too coyly for there not to be a little bit of a history between them.

“Right, well.” Aurora said, turning back to the others.

“I’ll go with Finnegan, you with Fred and Neville.” George said rather quickly.

“Right.” Aurora said, her smile a bit too weak to be properly meant. “Let’s do it.”

“Amicus! Alecto!” Severus barked, halting their pointless patrol. The turned sharply, confused. “We have had word that Potter has been spotted in Hogsmeade,” He said, beckoning for them to come along.

“What are we to do, Headmaster?” Alecto asked, looking all the world as though she wanted to cling on to his arm.

“We are going to do what we should,” Severus replied, “we are going to assemble the staff, ensure they know what they are meant to do.” He said, leading them back out of the dungeons and up toward the entrance hall.

It was as they entered that Minerva was coming down the stairs, seemingly alone.

“Minerva,” Severus said in a silky tone that might have spoken of danger and warning.

“Severus.” She said curtly.

“There has been a sighting of Potter in Hogsmeade.” He said, eyes darting about her, wondering if perhaps the boy didn’t follow the plan after all. “We are to convene the staff, ensure they know that should he be spotted, he must be brought forth to me.”

“And if I don’t?” She asked, her lips pursed in such a fashion that she might have appeared petulant, if not for the crinkle of humor near her eyes.

“If you don’t.” He said slowly. “There will be… a punishment. Tailored, of course, to the severity of your infraction.”

The Carrows behind him snickered.

“It seems, despite your exhaustive defensive strategies, you still have a bit of a security problem, Headmaster.” Potter’s voice came from somewhere beside Minerva, and he sensed the Carrow’s drawing their wands, looking about for the intruder.

“Indeed.” Severus said, just as Potter pulled off his cloak, wand drawn.
Severus turned, wand in hand, ready to stun the Carrow’s along with Minerva.

They dropped, and as they did, Theo Nott came in from the Great Hall. He looked at the bodies on the floor as if they were nothing more than tracked in dirt, then looked to Severus. “The medical ward is ready.” He said.

“Good,” Severus said, then turned to the woman he considered family. “Minerva, your arm.”

She frowned, hesitantly raising her right arm. He clasped it at her elbow, forcing her to take his in something that mimicked the Unbreakable Vow. Her eyes widened in worry.

“I, Severus Tobias Snape, being of sound body and mind, to relinquish control of the wards and the castle, to Minerva Isobel McGonagall, instating her as Headmistress of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

A swirl of red, green, yellow, blue, and purple magic wrapped around their arms, starting from Severus and ending at Minerva, transferring his power to her. His mind slowly started to feel eerily silent, and he felt the school mourn his loss while celebrating another worthy head.

“Severus… I… I don’t…”

“As long as I am headmaster, the school may let them in, as well as prevent you from doing what will be needed. I believe for now, until the right moment, I should still appear as though I’m on his side. At least until the snake is slaughtered. If I can deter him, throw the other Death Eaters off Potter’s scent, it will buy more time before the true end of this happens. Besides, it should have always been you.”

“I don’t know what to say, lad.” She replied, her brogue thickening.

“Say nothing.” He replied.

“Well,” She turned, looking around the entrance hall. Spreading her arms apart, she boomed, “Piertotum Locomotor!”

The statues and armor all started to shift, coming to life, causing Theo and Potter to step a bit closer to the pair of professors as those that were part of the walls landed with a rumble to the floor.

“Hogwarts is threatened.” Minerva told them. “Man the boundaries, protect us! Do your duty to this school.” They continued marching one by one in two lines out the front doors.

It was an amazing sight, one that had Severus in awe. Never had he seen the charm enacted on such a scale, and to see all of the facades and common place decor from the castle rise and follow the call to arms lifted his soul a bit. The witch giggling beside him didn’t hurt either. He turned to Minerva, arching a brow, a smirk lightly playing on his face. She turned to him with a giddy smile.

“I’ve always wanted to use that spell.” She said, voice breaking with joy.

Severus snorted, shaking his head and no longer keeping back the smirk.

He then turned to Potter. “Before I go, I wanted to give you this.” He said to the boy, reaching into his robes, hesitating a moment, and then withdrawing the stone he had placed in his inner pocket before leaving his office.

He was very careful not to turn it three times, barely rolling it between his fingers. He didn’t want to give it to him, because giving Potter the stone meant conceding that the old man was right. Be he
knew the moment he saw Voldemort with the wand in his hand he had to do it.

“What’s that, sir?” Potter asked as he stuffed the cloak in his pocket and held out his hand for the stone.

“A token.” He replied. “Should you find yourself facing an impossible task, turn the stone three times, and you will find the comfort you’ve always needed.”

Potter frowned, but then pocketed it within his jacket.

It was sort of a relief to know he had it, and with that done, Severus turned to Theo. “ Summon Voldemort.”

Theo stiffened. “Did… did you just say-?”

“His name? Yes. It’s such a ridiculous moniker, and deserves to be ridiculed. Even if my only means of doing so is simply speaking it.”

Theo huffed, rolled his eyes, hesitated, then pressed his hand to his dark mark. “He’s here.” He said, and then looked to Severus. He nodded to the young man, then looked to the Great Hall. His wife was there, and he should go say something to her. He should give a parting word, just in case. But he couldn’t, he couldn’t do that to her. She would be worried enough as it is, having not seen Aurora yet, knowing she was going to be part of the fight.

“I will help the professors and the order secure the wards,” He said to Minerva. “And then until I am called on, which I’m sure I inevitably will be, I will try to ensure that no one who somehow make it onto the grounds get into the castle.”

“Be safe, Severus.” Minerva said. “Your child will want to meet their father, not just hear about him.”

With a nod, Severus left, forcing himself not to look back at the Great Hall.

She stood with her wand drawn, same as Neville and Fred, at the last possible tunnel on their side of the castle. With George taking Seamus and Dead with him, they divided the task in literal half, though it was taking longer than anticipated simply because of travel between and the secrets in getting the tunnels to open.

“Do you hear something?” Neville asked, and Aurora strained to hear. There was a murmur, something like voices coming from a distance.

“Nice night for it, isn’t it?” Fred shouted down the tunnel, and the voices suddenly grew louder. “Yep, someone down there.” He said, raising his wand.

“Wait,” Aurora said, holding his wand arm. “There’s people down there, shouldn’t we just block of the entrance?”

“Aurora, love, I’d get over the apprehension over killing someone right now. ‘Cause it’s us or them.”

She narrowed her eyes but knew he was right, and instead brought her hand away.
“Toss the charge in in three, two, one….”

She and Neville tossed in the little charges normally used for the fireworks the twins made, and at Fred’s command the tiny things exploded with more force than they probably should have. The tunnel collapsed, sealing off the shouts and cries to run that were louder than expected.

“There we are.” Fred said, brushing his hands together and looking at them with a grin. “Now, what’s next?”

“We need people stationed about the castle,” Kingsley told them as he and Remus passed by.

“I’ve got to go with Harry.” Aurora said. Turning first to Neville, then to Fred.

“Watch your back,” Fred said, holding her gaze.

“You, too.” She said. Aurora almost said more, but decided against it. Fred held her eye even as he stepped away, and then he was gone, jogging after Kingsley.

“Mr Longbottom,” Aunt min shouted from the end of the hall. “Could you team up with Mr Finnegan and do something about the bridge to the Quidditch pitch?”

“Yes ma’am.” Neville said, then turned back to Aurora. “Be careful,” He said, cupping her cheek.

She took his wrist, bringing his hand down to squeeze it. “You too.” She said and then turned away in search of Harry.

She froze when the Castle seemed to turn eerily cold, the light from the torches and candles dimming.

“I know you are preparing to fight,” A chilling voice arrested Aurora. “Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood. Give me Harry Potter, and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you will be rewarded. You have one hour.”

The voice stopped, the light returned, and Aurora hurried on to the entrance where she was meant to meet Harry.

She was startled by the physical change, of seeing the stone guard at the entry. She looked around, wondering where the others were.

“Rory,” Ginny called, and she turned to see she and Luna coming over to her. “Where’s Nev?”

“Gone to take care of the Quidditch pitch bridge. Have you seen Harry, Draco? Ron?”

“Draco went to help get the younger Slytherins out, Ron the Gryffindors. I think Harry was with….”

“I’m here.” He panted. “Sorry, was… was talking to Remus and Sirius.”

“Where is Sirius?” Aurora asked, only having just now realized she hadn’t seen him.
“Did Harry see me?” Hermione asked Sirius as he came to where she and Molly were. They’d put up wards around the Great Hall, as strong as they could, with the help of Cissy and Dromeda. This would be a safe spot for the injured. A place where….

She couldn’t even think on it. Didn’t want to, not if it might mean someone from her own family, extended or otherwise, could end up there. But it was nearly inevitable, wasn’t it?

“No,” Sirius said, shaking his head. “At least, not the part you were worried about. He asked me about the stone Severus gave him, and what it might mean.”

“And did you tell him?”

“I couldn’t.” Sirius said. “I wanted to, but the words failed me.” He cleared his throat. “I can’t lose hope, not yet. I don’t know if I believe in all this fairy tale nonsense, but if even if just a sliver of it is true.”

“Babbity Rabbity gives me pause that there’s any truth to them,” Hermione smirked.

“Yes,” Sirius agreed. “But am I foolish to hope.”

“No,” Hermione said. “I don’t think you are.”

The first boom signaled an attack on the wards, and Hermione reached out a hand to balance herself on Sirius.

“You really shouldn’t be here, not in your condition.” Poppy chided.

“Much as you’re probably right, I’m not leaving my family.”

“You sound like Nymphadora.” Andromeda said from a few cots over.

“Where is she?” Hermione asked.

“At the tavern, making sure no one gets clever and thinks to go searching about.” Andromeda replied.

Hermione then looked to Narcissa who was staring out the windows forlornly. She moved to her friend, placing a hand on her shoulder, which Narcissa reciprocated by putting hers over top. “He’s out there.” She said quietly.

“Yes.” Hermione replied.

“I longed for a possible reunion. But never under these circumstances.”

Hermione didn’t know what she could say to that, so she merely stood still, silent, watching as the wards were attacked, and slowly failing.

“They’ll be here soon.” She said to break the quiet.

“I can’t stay here.” Sirius said, earning Hermione’s attention. He smiled at her sadly. “Good luck, Kitten.”

“You too, Sirius.”

He smiled a touch more genuinely, approached her, and kissed her on the cheek. She smiled, returned the gesture, then turned her gaze back on the window. The wards were burning hotter,
almost undone, and she took a deep breath. Her heart pounded, and she fought down the nervous fear that cropped up in her. She should have been out there, fighting, protecting her family. Instead, she was foolish, forgetful, and while she already loved her third child, she regretted the timing. But what was done was done, and there was no way she could go back and stop it.

The first years were shaking. The second years not much better. Most of the third years were trying to put on a brave face, and were trying their best to comfort the younger ones. The fourth and fifth years, and even some sixth years, were impatient and restless. A few already moved back through the tunnel, sneaking into the fight despite their dismissal from it. Idiots, the lot of them.

The witch, Nymphadora, about as heavily pregnant as his mother, was trying to help where she could while still acting like she was going to defend them all. Maybe she would, she was an auror after all, but she moved slow.

And then there was a surprise he hadn’t expected when he led them through to the tavern: Grandma Delia.

Oliver had apparently heard what was happening, and when he told his mother, she came as well. For her late husband and Ollie’s father, who likely would have been up at the castle if he were still alive today.

“Leo, dear.” She said as he came up to her.

“Is there anything I can do?” He asked.

Grandma Delia looked over her shoulder at the mass of children huddled together, cringing and whimpering with every bang, every loud noise. Her sternness faded, and her lips gave a slight down turn. “I don’t know, sweetheart.” She said.

“We should distract them. Maybe make a patronus?” Nymphadora suggested.

Delia shook her head. “I was barely able to make a non-corporal before my husband died. Not all that great with them now.”

“Yeah,” Nymphadora sighed, her hand making circles on her belly. It struck Leo in the heart, the action similar to what he’d seen his own mother do countless times. He was momentarily homesick.

He took out his wand, looking it over, remembering going to Ollivander’s with his parents to get it. And then threatening Fred Weasley promptly after while his parents got lunch for he and Aurora. He also remembered when the twins, namely Fred, taught him the charm they used for the Aurora boxes.

It was a bit dim inside the tavern, dusty and grimy, and very much no a settling place. Pointing his word upward, he murmured, “Et Aurorae.”

The crowd went into sighs and gasps, wide eyes looking up to the ceiling where the various colors danced and weaved along.

“Well that’s a nifty trick.” Nymphadora said, smiling.
“It’s a start.” Leo shrugged.

“They’re all probably a bit hungry.” Delia said thoughtfully. “Thirsty perhaps.”

“Aberforth isn’t the best cook.” Nymphadora countered.

“No, but I was never too bad at it. Had Severus Snape gone from twig to… well, not so twig like a few times over the years.” She said as she moved behind the bar, taking a look at what he had. “I’m sure I could do something.”

“What about watching the door?” Nymphadora asked.

An older student, one who looked familiar in an odd way, stood up and pointed their wand at the door, banishing it. “What door?” They said, earning a bit of a chuckle.

After this, other were more calm, and the girl who banished to door seemed to notice Leo staring at her. He knew he should have looked away, especially since he knew he was being rude, but he couldn’t help it. He knew her, but really couldn’t place her,

“Daphne said you were odd, but I didn’t think she meant quite like this.” The girl eventually said.”

“You know Daphne?” Leo asked.

“I would hope, she’s my sister.” Astoria, he now knew, replied with a smirk.

“Yes, well, you look just enough like her that staring became necessary, if only for me to run your face against all the ones I’d known.” He countered with a smirk. She nodded, then returned to her friends, and Leo turned to see Grandma Delia demonstrate muggle cooking methods to purebloods who probably had never even seen an elf cook.

Another boom filled the night, much louder than the last, but it didn’t shake them for long. Not for now, at least.

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Much as they wanted to, they couldn’t attempt to find and destroy the snake right away. An hour, it seemed, would fly by when chaos begins to reign. What’s more, she was fairly certain that Voldemort had not even given them a proper hour, though without having known the actual time his message was brought and when the first spell made contact, she couldn’t be sure.

Either way, it wasn’t long after Aurora and Harry were joined by Ron and Draco that the attack began. Death Eaters and Snatchers, anyone on His side, was storming the castle. Yet despite expecting him to be leading the charge, Voldemort was nowhere to be seen.

“How are we going to find him?” Ron had asked during a brief lull in the fighting.

“Potter could find him.” Draco said, turning his wand and stunning a Death Eater that was heading in their general direction.

“Think it a good idea to do that here?” He asked, his sentence punctuated by an explosion somewhere in the castle.
“We’ve got you,” Draco said, and without needing to be told, Aurora, he, and Ron circled Harry protectively.

A few more Death Eaters spotted them, and they entered into a duel almost right away. Aurora parried, and then when she knew they were about to get vicious, she transfigured the wizard into a harp. His counterparts were stunned enough that it allowed Draco and Ron to take them out.

“He’s… he’s at… the lake. He’s at the boat house.” Harry replied.

“Not even fighting, then,” Aurora ground out.

“No, but at least we don’t have to go too far, come on.” Harry said, and they made their way through the castle toward a side exit that they knew would get them closest to the lake. It would mean running to the boat house in the open, more exposed, but it could have been far worse over all.

The turned down the last hall near the exit, when a familiar voice had Aurora and Ron arrested, bringing Draco and Harry to a halt. Fred, along with Percy and Lee, were parrying with a group of Death Eaters. And they were winning.

So why did something feel utterly ominous?

It felt as though everything was moving in slow motion. She’d seen a Death Eater, a snarl on his face, point the wand above the trio’s heads. He was just forming the word, *Reducto*, and it didn’t take a mastermind to understand his plot. The Trio may have been winning, but they were just under a thick alcove, beside a support beam that had clearly already taken hits. She knew, without a doubt, what would happen when the spell cast. Lee had a shield up, Percy was just out of what would likely be the worst of it.

Fred was in ground Zero.

The spell left the Death Eater’s lips, the tip of his wand glowing before shooting off the beam.

Thrusting her wand out, Aurora’s voice was shrill, loud, broken. “Accio Fred’s Jacket!”

He lurched just as the spell struck the wall, but rubble from the castle still fell on him. Dust kicked up around them, and she could barely see his red hair through it.

Something like rage and fire built within her, and before she realized what was happening, Aurora was throwing curses and hexes violently at the Death Eaters. Ron was right beside her, and whether it was him or her that caused the bastards to bleed, she didn’t rightly care. They weren’t humans, they were monsters. Monsters who killed their own kind because they thought them to be lesser, no more than base animals. Yes, part of it was that they had ….

She didn’t even want to think it.

Death Eaters gone, she moved to where Percy was desperately trying to call to his brother, where Lee looked on shocked, Where Ron fell to his knees.

Aurora did the same, shaking her head, her heart pounding, her throat closing, she wanted to touch him, but didn’t dare to.

“No,” She said, “no, no, please, no. No.” She was panicking, looking him over, His legs were crushed, his left arm appeared to be under the stone as well, his eyes were closed and there was a nasty gash on his head. She touched that, she could bring herself to do that, her hands shaking all the while. If she could try to heal him, she could know, one way or the other. If she could only steady
her hands.

“He’s alive.” Ron said with a high-pitched voice. “He’s got a pulse. Barely.”

“Get the rock off him.” Lee said quickly, and Aurora stood back, not wanting to be in the way if they might be able to save him. She could see more blood than was healthy seeping out from beneath the stone, and Fred looked far more pale than he should.

“Go with Harry, Rory.” Ron said.

“No,” She shook her head, unable to tear her eyes away from Fred. Unable not to glance at the shifting stone and see the blood.

It was Ron’s hands on her shoulders that broke her gaze away, and she looked into his fearful, pleading eyes. “Go with Harry. Get rid of the snake. Fred wouldn’t want you seeing him like this. And if… an’ if….”

“You better keep him alive, Ronald Weasley.” She threatened in a broken voice.

He squeezed her shoulders. “Keep Harry alive.” He said, and with that understanding between them, she stepped out of his grasp and rejoined Draco and Harry who were nearby. Draco put his hand on her shoulder, glancing back at the mess and grimacing. She didn’t want to know, and was thankful when Draco gave her a little push and staying at her side on the way out.

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“Lucius!” Narcissa’s gasp had Hermione looking up from her patient with a deep gash to the man she once thought to be the epitome of rich pureblood. But the man before her was not the Lucius Malfoy she’d remembered. He was gaunt, greyish instead of merely pale, his hair an absolute disaster.

He looked around the room, at the people inside, all so young, and barely acknowledge his former wife. Instead, his eyes met hers. And they were utterly apologetic.

“He’s gone to see the Dark Lord.” He said barely above a whisper. “You’ll… he’ll be in the boat house. By the lake.”

Hermione’s heart dropped and all the air left her lungs. “He’s….” She couldn’t finish the sentence, because she knew as well as Severus what that would likely mean for him. What conclusions Voldemort may have drawn.

“Has anyone tried apparating?” She asked, looking around at those in the room.

“No, but Hermione, even if you could,” Narcissa said, looking at the round bump at Hermione’s abdomen.

“I can’t precisely run through the grounds and get there, either, and I have to.”

“Hermione,” Lucius said regretfully. “I’d passed Severus a while ago. He’s… he’s already well on his way there. He’s probably already-”

Hermione threw a silencing spell on Lucius, startling him.
“I refuse to believe that.” She said, and then closed her eyes, and focused. Destination, Determination, Deliberation.

But nothing happened.

She covered the desperate sob with her hand, trying to think of a way to get to her husband.

Lucius then came up to her, his hand in his robes. She watched, waited, un-silenced him, and hoped his gentle smile meant something.

“You can’t run through the grounds now.” He said kindly. “But there may be a way you could still be there.”

“How?” She asked, tears prickling her eyes. “Lucius, how? I can’t… I have to try and do something.”

He nodded. “I never forgot you,” He said, and the odd change in topic made Hermione rear back, shaking her head. She needed to get to Severus, not a trip down memory lane. “Not who you were,” Lucius continued, “before you were the arithmancer Hermione Snape. Still, it took me some time to understand, to make the connection, between you and Hermione Granger. She vanished, never to be seen or heard from again. And then you appeared in the ministry records, only twenty years earlier.”

Her eyes widened. “How long have you known?” She asked, not bothering to hide the truth now.

“Since just after the attack on Arthur Weasley, when I was trying to find a way to please the Dark Lord, and give him a lure for Potter.”

“And you kept quiet?”

“You’re family,” He replied. “Severus is the closest thing I have had to a brother, let alone a friend. And you are his wife, which makes you family in my eyes.”

Hermione shook her head, not sure what to say.

He then withdrew a gold chain from his robes. “Severus and I went to the vaults not long ago, and I found this within the LeStrange vault. I doubt anyone in the family even knew what it was, what it was truly capable of. But you do, don’t you?” He asked, arched his brow to say she shouldn’t try to deny it.

“How can I ever repay you for this?” She asked as she took the time turner from his hand.

“Destroy it when you’re finished.” He said. “Let us not have to worry about this ending up in the wrong hands.”

She nodded, putting the chain around her neck. “Thank you,” She said, trying to hug him as best and quickly as she could before sending herself back four hours, just before everything began.

Never had his footsteps made him think of a death march before. He often knew they spelled doom for misbehaving students. Sometimes, if he was feeling in need of amusement, he would run the imperial march in his head and adjust his stride. He’d walked to meet the Dark Lord dozens of times,
but never more than now did it feel like he was marching to the gallows.

The moment he saw the wand in the Voldemort’s hand was the moment he knew it was likely going to be his end. He didn’t say anything to Hermione, but he had a hunch she might have suspected. Because he did, after all, kill Dumbledore. But he didn’t disarm him, that had been Nott. And then, he disarmed him, preventing an inter-house fight.

Which he thought nothing of, and still didn’t, the day he brought the fangs to his daughter and her mates. He’d appeared just before the tent, the extra wards around it preventing him from getting inside directly. He hadn’t known Potter was at his back until the shout came, but by then it was too late. Potter had disarmed him, then sheepishly apologized.

But despite it all, it was perfect. Because once he saw Voldemort had the wand, he understood what Albus had meant when he said Harry had to die, and it had to be by Voldemort at the exact right time. Because the old coot planned it, the fairy tale end for the legend of the Boy Who Lived. It was as the plotting menace had always wanted, Harry was the Master of Death, and he didn’t know it. He was the master of an unbeatable wand, which was likely not to hurt him.

Yet, Severus also understood this: it was always Albus’ plan to have him killed by Voldemort’s hand as well. For how could the sadistic bastard ever be confident enough in the wand’s allegiance if he did not kill the man that murdered Albus Dumbledore.

Severus thought of his daughter. Aurora had grown into such a brilliant young witch, and he had no doubt that she would be cared for for the rest of her life. He thought of his son, how Leonidas had started to find his way at Hogwarts. He would be a great man one day. He thought of the child he wouldn’t meet, pondered a boy or a girl. Liliah, for a daughter. And for a son, perhaps Alastor. He did owe the late auror so much.

He thought of Hermione, and how different his life might have been had she not been brought to him. He couldn’t imagine he’d have had the same amount of love, the same amount of joy that he got to experience through her. It wasn’t always perfect, but he wouldn’t change a thing with her, not even a little. He hoped all his children found love like that.

As he entered the boat house, he cleared his mind one last time, and gave his final act.

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It had been harder to get to the boat house than any of them expected. Resistance everywhere, in more forms than they could have possibly imagined. It was unspoken that all three of them were glad Ron wasn’t with them when they encountered the giant spiders. Harry seemed to refer to them as Aragog’s children, but Aurora didn’t rightly care what they were as long as they either died or went after someone else. Awful as it sounded, she may not have shared Ron’s phobia but wasn’t terribly fond of spiders, either.

They made it to the house, and moved as silently as they could, disillusioning themselves, creeping up to the windows, ducking down regardless of the impossibility in being seen.

“There is no wand more powerful,” Aurora heard her father’s voice on the other side of the windows, and she frowned. First looking to Draco, who was as surprised as she, and then to Harry, who had a fearful look in his eyes. “Ollivander himself has said it. Tonight, when the boys comes it
will not fail you, I’m sure.” There was a pause, and Aurora peeked through the window to see her father’s back, and Lord Voldemort standing not far from him, the snake at his side. “It answers to you, and you only.”

There was a pause, and the snake faced demon sort of smiled. “Does it?” He asked.

Another pause, and Harry put his hand on Aurora’s arm as she frowned. “My Lord?” Her father questioned.

“The wand, does it truly answer to me?” Voldemort asked, and Draco put his hand on Aurora’s shoulder as an ominous feeling began to come over her. The Dark Lord was beginning to circle her dad, and with each pass, she grew more nervous. With every word, more fearful.

“You’re a clever man, Severus,” Voldemort continued, “Surely you must know… where does its true loyalty lie?”

He stopped his circling, but moved a good distance away from him.

“With you,” Her father replied, his hands still behind his back, though now his wand appeared in it. “Of course, my Lord.”

“The Elder wand cannot serve me properly, because I am not its true master.” Voldemort said, and Draco’s hold on her tightened. “The Elder wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner.”

“No,” Aurora said as what all she was seeing actually meant fell into place.

“You killed Dumbledore, Severus.”

“No, Dad, no.” Aurora said, and before she could launch herself in the direction of the door, Draco seized her around the waist, halting her.

“While you live,” The Dark Lord said, “The elder wand cannot be mine.”

“No, no, let me go, no,” She said struggling against Draco.

“You’ve been a good and faithful servant, Severus,” Voldemort said, and Aurora struggled all the more, her wand arm pinned down, a silencing charm placed on her just before Harry joined Draco in holding her back. She screamed at the top of her lungs, thrashed about, needing to stop what was happening.

“Bit only I can live forever.”

“My Lord,” Her father said, and he moved, like he was about to strike or shield, and then the Dark Lord moved his arm, and Aurora’s father slumped down. There was no spell, no light, so it wasn’t the unforgivable. Aurora stopped for a moment, hoping to hear the crack of apparition, her heart pounding wildly in her chest.

“Nagini, Kill.”

“Noooooooooo!” Aurora’s voice made no noise, but her throat still ached from the scream, the hold on her by the boys nearly not being enough. She didn’t want to hear it, the sounds of the blasted reptile striking her father over and over while he remain literally just on the other side of the pane. She didn’t want to think that it was his blood she was seeing and not being able to do a damn thing about it. And then the screams tapered off into a sob.
The sounds stopped, there was a hiss, and then the sound of an apparation.

Draco and Harry let go of her instantly, and she tore through the door.

“Daddy,” She wept, running to his side. He turned weakly toward her, his eyes wide and terrified as she collapsed beside him. “Please, no, please, I can’t…” She said, pressing her hand to his neck where the worst was, raising her shaky wand hand, trying to chant his healing spell.

There were footsteps, but more than just Harry and Draco coming in. They were heavy, and sounded as though they were trying to go faster than they were able to.

“You stupid man,” Aurora whipped up to see her mother, pale, terrified, tears down her cheeks, and very, very pregnant. “You stupid, bloody man coming here as you did.”

“A-ro-a, Her-min-ie.” He replied, his voice raspy.

“You are not dying!” Aurora startled at her mother’s very vehement reply. She watched a wife reach into her husband’s robes and pull out vial after vial: blood replenisher, dittany, something fluorescent green. “You’re going to endure a long, torturous lecture for submitting to the whims of that-that bastard! You’re likely going to have scars for life, but by god, Severus, you are not dying tonight! Aurora, make your father drink these while I do the enchantment, you’re too shaken.” She demanded, and Aurora immediately did as her mother commanded.

“Fred’s barely alive.” Draco said, his voice quivering. “We just saw that before coming here.”

Aurora’s father’s eyes met hers, apologetic and regretful, but it didn’t matter. She eased open the vial, helped him tip his head back as she and her mother worked as a team to heal him.

Aurora sniffed, “You should find him.” She said as she glanced at a shaken Harry. “You should find him and kill the snake. You and Draco.”

Harry seemed to snap out of whatever he was thinking, looking at her for a moment before nodding. He looked to Draco, who looked to them.

“You sure you two have this?” He asked.

Aurora looked at her father’s neck, seeing it slowly closing.

“Yeah,” She said, nodding more viciously than she probably needed to. “Go, you two go. We still have a job to do.”

They left, and it was just the three of them.

“You’re pregnant.” Aurora said, meeting the stern yet embarrassed glance of her mother. “I knew something was off when I left, but I would have thought you’d have told me that you were having another baby. Does Leo know? No, of course he does. He was here the whole time. Bloody hell, your timing…."

“Rory,” Her father said in a raspy voice, and she turned her attention to him. He shook his head ever so slightly. “Not now.”

“Sorry,” She said.

Her mother finished the spell and collapsed backward, sweat dotting her head. She winced, rubbing her baby belly.
“Am I going to have another brother, or are you finally giving me that baby sister I kept asking for?” Her mother chuckled, grimacing. “We don’t know.”

Something about the night grew darker, and Aurora leaned in toward her father as she looked skyward.

“You’ve fought valiantly, but in vain.” Voldemort’s voice echoed through the night. “I do not wish this; every drop of magical blood spilled is a terrible waste. I therefore command my forces to retreat. In their absence, dispose your dead with dignity.

“Harry Potter, I know speak directly to you….”

“Go back to the school,” Her mother grimaced. “Go check on those there. We’ll… we’ll be with you as soon as we can.”

“Dad?” She said, turning to her father.

“Go,” He assured, his voice still quite raspy.

It may never be the same again, but that didn’t matter. Not really. Kissing his cheek, then her mother’s forehead, Aurora left the boat house, and started to make her way back to Hogwarts.

As soon as Aurora was out of ear shot, Hermione groaned. Grimacing through it, she panted when it ended, then looked to her husband who eyed her knowingly.

“It’s too soon,” He said, his wonderful smooth, rich voice a rasp. She still loved it, because it meant he lived.

“I know,” She said, grimacing again. “But magical stress….” This time it was much stronger, and they were happening too close together.

“Hermione,” He said as harshly as he could.

“Healing you, yes… and… and this.” She said as she pulled the time turner out of beneath her clothes. “I had to get to you. I had to make sure you lived.”

He looked utterly flabbergasted, and Hermione had to chuckled before the pain became too much. When it passed, she turned her wand on the boat house, and scourgified as much as she could. “I’m not going to make it back to the school.” She said. “We’re going to have to do this here.”

“Too soon.” He said again, panicking.

“Severus,” She scolded, grimacing. “We’re both dead. We ward this place, and I have this baby, because it’s too late to stop it. With luck… they come as fast as Leo did.”
When she walked into the Great Hall, Aurora was hit with the full devastation of what the battle had brought. There were so many injured, so many dead. She weaved her way through the people, heart dropping as she spotted Kingsley among the dead, near the beginning where they were laying them out. Just a short way down from there, Romilda. Aurora may not have liked the girl, but she didn’t deserve to die. She would have only just turned seventeen no long ago, either. She stayed to fight, and paid dearly. A postmortem respect began to form for her, but Aurora did not linger.

She continued, and then stopped as she spotted the Weasleys. Mrs Weasley was weeping over someone, not Mr Weasley, he was standing his arm around Ginny. Not George, he was standing, just blocking the sight of who it was. She couldn’t make them out. Ron spotted her, glanced down at the body, then started coming toward her.

Aurora started shaking her head, scared, terrified. She had said the word ‘No’ more times during the last few hours than she likely had most of her years at Hogwarts, but still the word slipped out, scared and desperate.

“Hey,” Ron said, eyes red and wet. “It’s not Fred.” He said firmly. “It’s not Fred.”

“Then who?”

“Percy.” Ron said with a sad smile.

“I’m so sorry.” She said, pulling him in for a hug.

“Bloody git just made up with us only to get himself killed.” Ron said with a sniff, hugging her back with a surprising fierceness. “Happened as we were trying to get Fred free.”

“Trying?” She said as they stepped apart.

“We got ‘im out.” He said. “He’s over there with the injured.” Ron gestured, and Aurora saw him on cot that was on the floor, lying next to Bill, Fleur at her husband’s side. “He got attacked by a werewolf.” He explained without her asking. “Says he’s fine, but….”

“Precautions.” Aurora nodded. “I’m going to…..”

“Yeah.” Ron said, squeezing her shoulder one last time before returning to his family.

She made her way through the Great Hall, heading to the injured Weasleys. She smiled at Fleur who greeted her warmly despite everything, and then she turned to Fred. His legs were covered with a blanket, or at least what would have been his leg. She had a feeling they weren’t there anymore.

“There she is,” He said in a scratchy voice. “Woman who destroyed my best jacket.”

“It was a match to the trousers,” She quipped. “Besides, jacket doesn’t look so bad.”

“Collar’s gone right off.”

“Better than your neck.”

“Suppose there’s that.” He said, and she stepped closer, kneeling down beside him. “You look like hell.”
She sniffed, giving a mirthless laugh. “An orphan in the eyes of Voldemort now.” She said.

“How’s your dad?”

“He’s alright, I think. Mum was pretty pissed, though, so that might change.”

Fred chuckled, his hand reaching toward her but never touching. “Your mum was always scary.”

“Rory,” Ron said as he came over to them, looking nervous. “You see Harry?”

She shook her head. “Not since he and Draco left me and my parents in the boat house, why?”

“Cause Malfoy just walked in.” Ron said. “And he’s alone.”

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Not to be a pessimist or anything, but there's still the next half to go.
Aurora took just over fifteen hours of labor to bring into the world. Leonidas took four. And the youngest baby Snape took just over an hour.

The moment Hermione landed back in time, she knew something was wrong. Still, she didn’t have a whole lot of time for head space to dwell. Severus was going to need her.

She had reappeared in an empty Great Hall, disillusioned herself, and moved.

It wasn’t until she was hiding on the lower level of the boat house that her water broke, and she understood what was wrong. Lucius was standing over her head when it happened, and it explained why she’d felt so little movement from her youngest child.

Two months too young, he still squealed as he came into the world, albeit not as loud or strongly as his siblings.

Severus wrapped their little boy in his robes, cleaned and torn down to a more appropriate size, leaving Severus in just his ruined frock coat. He gently cleaned off his son with tearful eyes, and then ran a diagnostic spell on him.

“His lungs are weak, to be expected.” He rasped, reaching into his robes and uncorking a bottle with his teeth. He offered the babe a couple drops of the strengthening potion, and smiled slightly as his cries, after a brief pause, were much healthier.

“Let me see him,” Hermione said, extending her hands toward her husband. He didn’t let the baby go right away, but moved to sit beside Hermione on floor. Only then did he pass the baby to his mother, and Hermione did as she did with their children before him, and nursed him to calm him.

“He’s perfect.” She said. “Bit small, but that’s, well.” She shrugged, brushing her thumb along his cheek. “Severus, I want to name him Alastor.”

When her husband reared back, she was ready to give her explanations. It was the astonishment on his face that had her pause.

“You wanted to name him that, too?” She said after a moment, and Severus nodded. “Huh, we finally get to name a child neither of us knew the sex of, and we actually agree. Especially since we only had a girl’s name chosen.”

They looked down on their boy, already drifting off into his first sleep.

“Take him,” Severus rasped. Hermione looked over at him, and saw the longing and resignation in his eyes. “Take our Alastor, and go. It’s not over.”

“And leave you? Aurora?”

“Go to Leonidas. Take him to his brother.” Severus said, stroking the baby fine black hair on his
son’s head. He then looked once more to Hermione. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She said. “So, don’t go ruining all my hard work.”

“I’m dead, where else should I be but the Great Hall?” He asked, quirking his eyebrow. When she was ready to lecture, he added, “I will help Poppy.”

She nodded, feeling her lips turn down as her postpartum hormones reared themselves up again. He then grabbed his head, and pulled him toward her, kissing him with as much love as she could.

“You don’t die while I’m gone, do you hear me?” She said.

“Yes, dear.” He rasped with a smirk. “Straighten up, I’ll help you and Alastor into the boat.”

Severus and she got to their feet, shaky though they both were. He vanished the mess of near death and new life, and Hermione straightened her dress while holding her new son close. She and Severus descended the stairs, and then he helped her into the boat.

Hermione watched him over her shoulder, feeling the cool tingle of disillusionment. Alastor fussed a bit, but settled quickly, and she cast a Notice-Me-Not on the boat itself. It felt like not time at all and forever before she was at Hogsmeade, the village quiet and appearing vacant as she carefully got out, clutching her little one tight. She moved through the streets to Aberforth’s tavern, only to find there was no door. Perplexed, she moved to see that there were still windows, though they were frosted.

Knocking, she waited and hoped they could see her through the panes of glass where she could not.

The door appeared where it should be, and Tonks opened it up to look at her with a baffled expression. “Remus said you were due after me.”

“Things change.” She said. “But Alastor and I need shelter.”

Tonks narrowed her eyes. “How do I know—”

“Dora, it’s cold, I have a newborn infant, I literally only just gave birth no more than a half hour ago, let me in or I swear…”

“Mum?” Leo’s voice said as he ducked out.

“Hello, Sweetheart.” She said, smiling at him.

He narrowed his eyes. “Where did I nearly break my arm when I was four.”

She rolled her eyes. “That would be at home when you tried to climb a tree in an attempt to get your sister to stop flying. You fell off the branch trying to reach her.”

“It’s her,” he said, stepping back inside. Hermione quickly followed, keeping Alastor close as possible.

“A

“Draco?” Aurora said as she and Ron went over to him together. His cheeks were stained with tears, his eyes red rimmed, but aside from that he appeared as if nothing in the world was wrong. He
sniffed, looked up at her, and shrugged.

“Always had to be the bloody hero, didn’t he?” He said with a disdain that reminded Aurora of how he used to act. But she knew, much like it was then, that this was merely a façade, a way to deflect how he was really feeling.

“Where’s Harry, Malfoy?” Ron asked, more worried than angry.

Draco laughed mirthlessly, “He went to forest, of course. ‘I have to, Draco,’ he said. ‘You knew it was going to be this way’ he said. We’ve discussed it, here and there. How the prophecy was worded, what it meant with him being a horcrux. So, Voldemort made his demand, Harry and I, we went up to the Headmaster’s office where Harry told off the portrait of Dumbledore. He then kissed me goodbye, temporarily stunned me so I wouldn’t stop him, then took off.” His eyes glistened as he shook his head. “Bloody idiot.” He swore, voice cracking.

“He … he went to the forest?” Ron said, disbelief in his voice.

“Harry didn’t?” Ginny’s voice hard them turning toward she and Luna, horror on Ginny’s face while Luna had quiet resignation on hers. “He didn’t, he…."

There was noise outside, something that had the entire Great Hall quiet to listen.

Marching, people marching to the castle.

Aurora felt all the air rush out of her, and she looked to Draco, seeing him stand, holding his head high.

“Let’s go and face the end, shall we?” He said, putting his arm around her.

Aurora did the same, and they all went out of the hall together, following the others that were able bodied outside.

Neville looked as though he was prepared to face the army on his own, standing among the rubble with something brown, and leathery in his hand. Sirius was just behind him, he and Remus clasping on to one another, or perhaps it was more Remus ensuring Sirius didn’t go charging out there. Ron charged past them, only to be stopped by his father and held back. Ginny and Luna came out side by side, the former gasping, shaking her head, eyes watering as Luna hugged her.

Aurora found she had to lean on Draco as she spotted Hagrid, ropes around his neck held by four Death Eaters, and she had absolutely no doubt who was in his arms.

“Harry Potter is dead!” Lord Voldemort declared, and Draco pulled Aurora just a bit closer to him.

There was a murmur from the crowd, Sirius looked as though he nearly escaped the stronger man’s grasp, but he didn’t make it.

“Harry Potter is dead,” Voldemort repeated, slowly stalking toward them, the bloody snake slithering near his feet. “From this day forth, you’ll put your faith in me.”

No one moved, no one breathed, it seemed.

The Dark Lord seemed giddy in his euphoria, and with a disturbing large grin, he declared again, “Harry Potter is dead!” The Death Eaters behind him laughed, and he giggled with the glee of it. “And now it’s time to declare yourself. Come forward, and join us… or die.”
There was silence.

“Draco,” Uncle Lu called, trying to wave Draco over. “Draco… Aurora, come. Come on.” He tried, and desperately looked around behind them before looking to them once more.

But Aurora nor Draco moved, and as she looked up at him, she could see the disgusted scowl on his face as he shook his head, his eyes prickling with tears once more.

But a shuffle caught Aurora’s attention, and she looked down, eyes widening in disbelief as Neville limped forward.

“Well, I must say, I’d hoped for better.” Voldemort said, earning another laugh from the crowd. “And who might you be, young man?”

“Neville Longbottom,” He replied, and the crowd laughed again.

“Well, Neville, I’m sure we can find a place for you in our-”

“I’d like to say something.” He said, and it was clear that Voldemort was using so much of his patience, likely gleaned from his good mood, to not just kill or curse Neville where he stood.

“Well, Neville, I’m sure we’d all be fascinated to hear what you have to say.”

“Doesn’t matter that Harry’s gone.”

“Stand down, Neville,” Seamus said, and Aurora watched Neville turn slightly to face him.

“People die every day! Friends, family. And yeah, we lost Harry tonight. But he’s still with us, here.” Neville said, turning more to face to whole crowd. “So’s Percy, Cho, Cedric, all of them. They didn’t die in vain.” Neville turned back to Voldemort hobbling forward a little more. “But you will. Because you’re wrong. Harry’s heart did beat for us, for all of us.” And then he reached into the hat, and pulled out a gleaming, silver sword. “It’s not over!”

A few things happened all at once.

Harry rolled out of Hagrid’s arms, to the shock and joy of many, and causing the distraction of the Dark Lord and his followers.

A few of them apparated away, but Uncle Lu charged toward the castle, not with the look of a fighter like a few of the Death Eaters that remained, but of a desperate man on a mission.

Those who oppose the Dark Lord found renewed hope and strength, shifted forward. Aurora and Draco were among them, wands at the ready, prepared to take on those who would see them fall.

Neville swung the sword down, and decapitated the bloody snake as it lunged toward him.

Aurora ran toward him, stunning and taking out a couple of Death Eaters on her way to him. “You’re bloody awesome, Neville Longbottom!” She said grabbing his head and giving him a quick kiss. “I’m telling my Dad you avenged him!” She teased before taking off, glancing over her shoulder and laying at the flabbergasted Neville.

Reaching in her pocket, Aurora pulled out the last of her Felix Felicius, prying the cork out with her teeth. She only got a drop on her tongue before someone bumped her, sending the remainder to the ground.

“Not lucky, that,” She said just before the potion started to kick in.
She dove into the fray, buoyant and rejuvenated. Fred survived, her Dad survived, Harry survived. The stupid snake that nearly took her father’s life, Mr Weasley’s life, Harry and Draco’s, was dead. Which meant that this could be over soon, they just all had to get through this.

She ran, sliding under a few curses, then incapacitated a few Death Eaters as she got to her feet. She spotted Theo who had quite clearly turned on the Death Eaters and was taking them down. One was coming up behind him, and stunned the gnarly looking wizard. Theo turned as he fell, glanced up, gave her a nod, and went back to it.

There were a couple more, not much older than her, who engaged her in a quick skirmish before she deflected one’s spell toward the other and then took out the remaining with a stunner.

There was a disturbing giggle behind her, and instinct told her to step aside. She did, feeling the heat of a spell whiz by. Aurora turned around and was greeted by the insane, sadistic grin of Bellatrix LeStrange.

“Didn’t get the chance to take out your dear ol’ Daddy.” She cackled. “But I’m sure you’ll see him again really soon.”

Aurora ducked before the witch even had a chance to fully point her wand, which was probably saved her as the jet of green moved through the air where her chest had been before. She didn’t even hesitate. It was a defense reflex, really. She shot her wand toward Bellatrix, and hissed out the spell. Thinking of Neville’s parents, of him at the ministry. She considered how often this particular, sadistic bitch likely had her father in agony. The special sort of hell she nearly put Harry through by nearly killing Sirius.

“Sectumsempra.” She cast, and watched as the woman stood stunned for a while. It appeared nothing happened, and she sneered, moving to cast again, when her wand arm fell off. And then her legs began to fall beneath her, and then Aurora had to turn away, not wanting to see exactly what she’d done.

Aurora stood, feeling the effects of the potion waning. She turned, and saw someone coming toward her. Angry, vengeful.

“Where’s your wife?” Lucius asked Severus as the pair of the guarded one door of the Great Hall, making sure those few who tried to enter to do damage didn’t get to those where were injured or desecrate the dead.

“Safe with our sons.” Severus replied, stunning one of the few Death Eaters that were actually stupid enough to try and get through. His voice was still no more than a rasp, but at least he was able to speak. “How did you even know Hermione was alive?” Severus asked then, frowning.

Lucius scoffed while effortlessly taking out one of his brothers. “If Hermione had really died, you’d have been devastated. As a man who truly loves his wife, I knew there would be no way you would take up with another woman so shortly after she was gone.” He replied.

“Well, there’s that, I suppose.” Severus replied.

And then there was pain. Blinding pain and agony that seemed to come from his left arm and spread
everywhere. It burned as though he’d dunked it in a boiling cauldron and held it, churning his stomach and making him dizzy. He’d fallen to his knees, and Lucius against him before falling off to the side. All the Death Eaters collapsed, and then it was over. As if nothing happened, as those few seconds did not exist.

He looked around, lost, confused, wondering what was happening. Wands from the order, and those fighting with them, were pointed at the fallen Death Eaters, spells to bind them put in place as wands were taken.

“What?” Lucius said as Severus unsteadily got to his feet.

“Voldemort is dead!” Someone cried.

“Harry killed him,” Another.

“It’s over,” someone else, and Severus collapsed against the door frame. Over twenty years of his life, and it was done. His double agency, his deception, his hiding, it was done. Hermione could come back to life in the eyes of the wizarding world, they could move on with their lives, with their children.

Harry came into view, looking over at him, worry in his eyes. He headed toward Severus, and for the first time ever, he opened his arms to the Boy Who Lived. Smirking, Harry actually walked into them.

“Your mother would have been proud.” He said to Harry as they embraced for the first time. “And, I suppose, so would your father.”

“I know.” Harry said as he stepped back. “I left it somewhere in the woods, but that stone you gave me… when I turned it, they were there. Mum and Dad, and … and they said the same thing. That they were proud.”

“Good.” Severus said, feeling a small measure of pleasure in knowing that Lily got to speak to her boy at least once, and that somehow Albus Dumbledore’s ridiculous plan actually worked.

Harry then looked to Lucius. “Thank you, for lying out there.”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Lucius replied, a touch of a scowl on his face.

“No,” Harry agreed. “But I thank you all the same. You knew Draco was alive, it’s all you wanted to know. You could have….”

“I intend to attempt to repair the relationship I have with my son, should the powers that be allow my freedom. Having his… paramour,” Lucius sneered, “die because of me would not bode well.”

Harry nodded. “Have you seen Draco?” He asked, and then turned to Severus, “Or Sirius?”

“No,” Severus replied. “But I suppose now that the battle’s done… people will be convening here. For ill or bad.”

“I will go to Hogsmeade,” Andromeda spoke up, brushing past the three men. “I think the children that stayed, as well as Dora, will want to come back now that they can.”

“Hermione will be there, too.” Severus said.

Andromeda nodded, “I’ll bring them all back, don’t worry.”
“Alastor Ivan Robert Snape,” Delia said as she smiled down at the sleeping baby in Hermione’s arms. Someone found a clean rag behind the bar for Hermione to transfigure into a nappy for the little one, and she had torn the ripped robes in half once more, transfiguring one half into a set of jams, the other into a blanket. He appeared another tiny Severus all wrapped in black as he was.

“Yes,” Hermione cooed, smiling at her boy.

“Bit of a mouthful, that.” Delia teased.

“Feels right, though,” Hermione said. “Bob was a very dear part of my life, and I had wished to pay respect to that.” She said as she looked to Delia who smiled wistfully.

“Bob knew you loved him.” She assured. “And it’s not like Ollie doesn’t carry part of his name.”

“Maybe so,” Hermione said. “But he meant a lot to Severus, too. This little man now carries the names of all his father’s mentors, the ones that truly helped shape him into who he is.”

“You don’t think?” Tonks asked nervously, and Hermione shook her head.

“He’s alive.” She said with certainty.

“Why didn’t you give me those names?” Leo asked, frowning at his younger brother.

“Well, aside from Ivan nor Robert pairing well with your first name, when this is over… it will be over one way or another. If our side has won, your father won’t have to pretend anymore. If we haven’t, we’ll all have no choice but to flee. Your brother can bear the names because we won’t have to worry about the wrong wizard realizing who he’s named for.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Leo said, running a hand over his brother’s hair. “I hope he has it easier than the rest of us.”

“Perhaps he will.” She said.

Tonks snorted, and Hermione darted her eyes to the pink haired witch. She shrugged, “he was born in the boat house in the middle of the war just after his father was on the brink of death. Little Al there hasn’t had it very easy yet. Not to mention he’s two months too early.”

“We should have had you both looked over.” Delia cursed.

“Severus ran diagnosis. Alastor is small, but he’ll be alright.”

There was quiet around them, be it from students sleeping, or merely not speaking. Hermione turned
toward the Castle, but couldn’t see it through any of the windows. She gnawed her lip, thinking of the others, wondering how they were.

“Who were gone so far?” Tonks asked.

“You don’t want me to give names,” Hermione said softly.

“Mione.”

“I won’t, not here.” She said firmly, glancing about, noting a few of the older ones who were still awake darting glances toward them, clearly hearing but not wanting to be seen. “I don’t know everyone, for one. And for another… no one needs to know the finality of it. Not yet. When it’s over….”

“And what if you didn’t know Snape was okay, huh? Or Rory?” Tonks snapped.

“Oi, watch it.” Delia snapped back.

“Don’t.” Tonks hissed.

“Yer worried, and I get it. But Hermione’s right. It’s not the time. And don’t you dare try and say I donnea know what it’s like. My boy’s up there, my only child aside from this one here.” She said, pointing to Hermione. “My sister in law, my granddaughter. I got family up there, just as you. I wanna know if they’re gonna make it out okay, too. But ya know? There’s lots here who got family up there, as well. And do ya really think they’d be calm and stay here where it’s safe if they thought—”

“Yes, okay,” Tonks huffed. “But I should have been there, up there with Remus. I should be fighting with him.”

“And leave your child without either of his parents?” Hermione asked, shaking her head.

“Are you telling me that you wouldn’t be up there with Severus if you could?” Tonks countered.

“If it weren’t for Alastor, you’re right, I would be. But my children would have known us and understood why we did it. Your child… they would understand, too, eventually. Remus wouldn’t have wanted you to leave them.”

Tonks nodded, then shook her head.

“I’m just so worried about him.”

“It’ll be over soon.” Hermione said, certain that that would be the case.

More silence, a bit more restlessness.

Then a wolf patronus pranced into the tavern, stopping before Tonks. “It’s over,” Remus’ voice, tired but relieved, said. “Harry’s won. Your mother’s on the way.”

Relief hit Hermione hard, and she suddenly found herself weeping. Tears of joy, of exhaustion. Twenty years of her life playing one part or another, hiding who she was, watching her husband have to do the same, over.

“Mum,” Leo placed his hand on her shoulder, peering at her. “Are you alright?”

“Very much so.” She said, nodding.
“Crying would say otherwise, but if you’re sure.” He smiled. “Can I hold my brother for a bit? Until Mrs Tonks arrives to help bring us back to the castle?”

Hermione nodded, then gently extended her youngest son to her oldest. “Mind his head.”

“He’s quite small.” Leo said, face scrunched. His brother did the same, giving a grunt, before settling again. Leo studied him. “Potions, Alastor.” He said, “It’s far superior to anything our sister will try to say is, including flying, and especially quidditch. Strive for intelligence, and if mum and dad put you in muggle school, try to make nice. I’m an example of doing the former but not the latter. Don’t be like me, be better.”

“Giving him advice now before he can understand it?” Hermione smirked.

“Who says he doesn’t?” Leo asked thoughtfully.

Hermione hummed in agreement, looking out the window as she spotted Andromeda in the distance, Rolanda and Septima with her.

“Alright, hand me your brother. It’s time we head back to see your father and sister.”

The dead were being carried in and sorted, Death Eaters to the court yard, the others to the Great Hall. Severus had long stopped shaking his head physically at the loss, but mentally it was continuing. Colin Creevy, too young to be fighting in the first place. Finch-Fletchly, Sinistra, the bodies were piling up. There were a few, too, that he did not recognize from the auror department, though he wondered if that was because Kingsley had called them in at some point, or if they just happened to understand the gravity of everything that was going on.

He wondered if Sirius knew of Kingsley yet, or where the mongrel even was.

Harry had seemed, calm, however, so Severus simply assumed that the boy had found his godfather. As it was, he and Draco were crouched near Fred and William, the surviving Weasleys surrounding the pair. Well, except for Ronald, though Severus knew he was fine, having seen him shortly after the battle was finished.

Lucius stood off with Narcissa, the two having a private conversation aided by spells, Minerva was nowhere to be seen, Hermione had yet to return with Leonidas.

He’d no idea where Aurora was.

So, he went to the Weasleys and company, because there seemed to be the place he’d feel most welcome, and less like a man adrift.

They were laughing about something as he came up to them, but didn’t stop on his account.

“Hello, Sir.” Harry said.

“Potter.” He inclined his head, then smiled at Draco who was standing with his arm around the hero of the day. He wondered if the boy’s smug grin was because he knew full well that he was to be the envy of many witch and wizard. Likely, actually.
They continued chatting, mostly sharing stories of Percy whom Severus had noticed among the fallen earlier. He didn’t really have anything to share, so he merely offered comfort to the family.

“Severus,” Sirius said behind him, and he turned, not really liking the tone that Sirius had. His heart dropped in his stomach at the utter devastation on his friend’s face.

He had no idea where Aurora was.

But he had a feeling he was going to find out.

He shook his head, begging Sirius in his head not to be telling him what he was certain he was. Sirius clasped his shoulder, and it was clear that there were no words of reassurance.

Severus turned toward the doorway then as Sirius did, and spotted Longbottom, tears streaking down his face, lower lip quivering, standing beside a pale, stunned looking Ronald Weasley, as both levitated…

“No!” Draco screamed out for the two of them, silencing the Weasleys who all stood and shifted to see what was happening. It then came a gasp, Ginevra collapsing into sobs on the ground, hand clasped over her mouth as her father knelt beside her. Harry was supporting Draco, and Sirius was suddenly the only thing Severus could hold on to.

Longbottom stopped, and Ronald turned, walking backwards to bring Aurora and lay her down gently on the floor.

“No,” Fred started to say, “no, no, no, no.”

Severus watched in stunned, uncomprehending silence as Fred pulled himself over, half crying for the pain such movement must have caused his crushed legs, half in grief.

“Fred,” Molly sniffed, “Fred you shouldn’t…”

“Shut up.” He choked. “Just … Shut up.” He used his good arm to move himself around to be next to her. Ronald stepped in, helping support him as best he could, George doing the same until Fred was hovering near Aurora. “She can’t be dead.” He said, and Severus could see through misting eyes the young man’s lip quivering. “She can’t be dead!”

“I checked for a pulse.” Longbottom said, voice cracking as he sniffed. “I… She’s gone.” He laid a hand on Fred’s shoulder. “I don’t want to believe it, either.” The younger man breathed out, his face crumpling.

“No!” Fred yelled, and Severus sneered, nearly telling him off when Fred added. “The last thing I ever said to her was a remark about her mum, how she ruined my jacket when she saved my sodding life, and I refuse to believe that that is the last thing I say to the woman I love. She’s not dead because she can’t be! She can’t.” He said.

Severus looked to the pale form of his daughter, and gave a scrutinizing once over. There were cuts and abrasions, but all seemed relatively superficial. It was possible… but then, there were only three people who knew the spell, aside from himself.

All the breath left Severus’ lungs in that moment, his heart aching with hope. “Weasley,” He rasped out, and the flock of gingers all looked at him. “Fred,” he amended, and when it looked like Molly was about to lay into him for disturbing her very injured son, he lifted a hand and halted her protests, locking eyes with the grief-stricken twin. “Do you hurt?”
He sniffed. “Had my legs crushed, and Aurora died. Yes, sir, I hurt like hell.”

“No,” he shook his head vehemently, then gestured just below his ribs where the core of their magic was believed to be. “Do you hurt here? Does it feel like you’re tearing apart?”

Even if it wasn’t… there might be a life debt with her saving the twin. He was apprehensive to hope, terrified to let it consume him. But it did. For the first time in a very long time, Severus had true, genuine hope in his soul and he begged Merlin, Nimue, any Deity that would listen that this hope wouldn’t be crushed.

Fred appeared to be thinking it over, really putting in an effort. He shook his head. “No.”

A fresh set of tears welled up in Severus’ eyes as he turned his gaze to his daughter, withdrew his wand, and pointed it at her. “Iterum vivere!” He gasped out, falling to his knees as the power of his spell zapped him of his strength and caused him to fall from Sirius grip.

Aurora’s eyes popped open as his knees hit the ground, a deep breath of air filling her lungs, and it was nearly as though she was born all over again for the sheer joy Severus had at having his daughter alive again. Potter had to hold Draco up, though that seemed to be too much for the Boy-Who-Lived-Again. Ginevra let out a fresh sob, and Longbottom started laughing.

Aurora coughed violently, struggling to catch her breath, and once she finally had she fell back, her unfocused eyes blinking and darting about before they suddenly seemed to find their focus. “Dad?” She said, “Coughing again,” before looking about. “Fred?” She said in confusion.

The young man smiled as he cried, clutching her hand, “bloody hell don’t do that to me again.”

“Can’t promise when I dunno what happened.” She said, coughing again.

“Breath.” Severus rasped, his lips quivering. He ignored the commotion around him as he scooted to his daughter, and soothed her similar to how he had Hermione nearly a year ago. Running a hand up and down her back, supporting her, he waited until her breaths were even again before asking.

“What do you remember?”


“Theo,” He said, but his voice gave out before he could say more. Frustrated, he darted his eyes about, trying to find Remus among the crowd, cursing quietly when he couldn’t.

“What is it, sir?” Potter asked, and Severus glanced at him, mouth moving, but knowing that even if he could get the boy to understand, he couldn’t explain it to him.

“I sliced Bellatrix LeStrange to pieces.” Aurora suddenly said, causing everyone to look at her. She was slipping into unconsciousness, her eyes already three-quarters closed, her voice slurring. “Wanted to kill you, so killed her instead.” She said before she was nothing more than dead weight in his arms.

He looked at his daughter, and the pride that surfaced had brought a smile to his face.

Longbottom shook his head at her in awe, “Just when I thought I couldn’t-“

“Aurora!” Hermione’s screech stopped Longbottom short, and there seemed to be a pause in the commotion around them as she half stumbled toward them, Leonidas clutching her arm as if to try to balance her while Hermione held Alastor to her.
Severus shook his head, trying to reassure her, but she was too focused on the gesture and the limp Aurora in his arms, the scene surrounding her really no different than it had been before the realized she was alive.

“She’s alright.” Harry assured, Draco nodding though he looked like he really couldn’t take anymore. Then Potter frowned. “Weren’t you pregnant when you came to the boat house?”

Hermione gave an incredulous laugh as she knelt carefully, wincing a bit. “Astute observation, Harry. I was indeed.” It was then that Alastor gave a cry in protest, and probably hunger, which had many heads in the Great Hall twisting about to see where there was a baby in all this mess. “And I will introduce you all to Alastor properly, soon. But I think for now I need to find a quiet place for him to relax.” She then bent down and kissed their daughter’s forehead, then turned and placed one on Severus’ cheek.

“Uncle Severus was saying something about Theo before Aurora came back to life.” Draco blurted, and Severus was thankful that he lacked tact in that moment despite the fact that all the color left Hermione’s face in an instant.

“He said something just before she did, and incantation in Latin.”

“Th-th-that would be the counter to the spell he created. To fake a death. Theo… he must have used it on Aurora. Where is he, maybe he used it on someone else?” Hermione said, looking about.

“Theo’s gone.” Miss Lovegood said as she came from seemingly nowhere, arm wrapped in a bandage and placed in a sling. “He was arrested just after the end, when all those who had the dark mark collapsed. He was shouting for someone to find Aurora, for someone to say she wasn’t dead, but it seems you all figured that out already. I would have come by earlier, but Blaise insisted I have my arm checked out. Probably good that you thought to try, as I think Aurora’s time would have almost been up.”

Severus nodded, smiling a bit more to himself, already mentally preparing a case to get Theo Nott out of Azkaban as soon as possible. Not just because he likely saved his daughter, but because the boy had deserved it anyway. And he shouldn’t have been taken into custody in the first place.

“Severus,” Poppy said as she came up to him. “With your permission, I’d like to move those who need medical attention to the hospital wing, now that the battle is over. I have been told by the ghosts and portraits that nothing there was damaged.”

“I’m not in charge.” He mouthed, smiling all the while. He then cast about and found Minerva speaking with Filius and Nymphadora, and then pointed at her.

Poppy followed his gesture, then smiled. “I’ll go ask Minerva, then. But you might want to detach Mr. Weasley from Aurora before he’s sent up.”

Severus looked down, and noted that Fred Weasley had also fallen into unconsciousness, his fingers still locked with Aurora’s.

Chapter End Notes
There will very likely be another post today, if not tomorrow to wrap things up, followed by the epilogue. Until later
She came to in her own bed in her father’s chambers, a place she hadn’t spent the night in what seemed like forever. Aurora frowned, trying to recall what happened and how she got there, but the last thing she clearly remembered was the battle, and she recalled the Great Hall in fits and spurts. Her head pounded, but not as much as it had before, that much she knew. There was a bottle of headache cure on the bedside table, which she took as soon as she was able to get herself upright. Closing her eyes, she felt the effects start to get to work, grateful she didn’t have to deal with that part of what ever happened to her anymore.

Gingerly, she shifted out of the bed, her body aching a bit as well. Well, pain relief would get to that eventually, and it wasn’t unlike the day after an intense quidditch practice.

Padding to her door, she opened it gently, unsure what she would find on the other side.

Her mother’s voice sang softly, a lullaby that hadn’t been heard in their home since Leo was a child, and it brought a smile to Aurora’s lips. Her mother was already singing to her youngest sibling, and she came out to the sitting room, fully expecting to see her mother facing the bump she sported in the boat house.

She was taken aback by the tiny baby where said bump should be.

“Exactly how long was I out for?” Aurora asked, startling her mother.

Song was replaced by a laugh, and her mother patted the spot on the sofa beside her. “Not as long as you think. Come meet your brother, Alastor. He was so eager to meet you, he arrived not long after you left us.”

Aurora went over, her grin growing as she looked at her brother. “He’s quite ugly in a very cute way.” She said.

“He’s a newborn, he’s still all squished.” Her mother defended. “Give him time, the smush will fade, and he will be just as lovely as you and Leo were.”

Aurora took in her mum, happy, smiling, in love with the newest member of their family. “He’s going to have more freedom than any of us had, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Her mother said with absolute certainty. “But then, now we’re all quite free to be how we want.” She glanced to the fire, and Aurora followed her gaze, noting the half-melted gold chain sitting on the logs. “My accident is known, your father’s true allegiance, and yours and Leo’s blood status.”
“The Carrows?”

“Arrested.”

“And… and Voldemort?”

“He’s likely ash, now. They were burning the corpse this morning.”

“Who…?”

him.”

“I did, and Kingsley and Cho.” Aurora nodded.

“There was Daphne Greengrass, too. Crabbe and Goyle, but they were the only Slytherins, I think.
Lavender Brown said Daphne saved her, she was quite distraught.”

“Ginny, Luna?” Aurora asked. “Draco? Harry?”

“All survived.” Her mum said, momentarily distracted as Alastor shifted about. “You didn’t ask
about Fred or Neville.”

Aurora stiffened. “Should I have? I thought I remembered them….”

“They did.” Her mum assured. “Fred was moved to the hospital wing. I’m fairly certain Poppy said
he would lose his legs.”

Aurora nodded, looking about the room before turning to her brother. Without asking, she scooped
him up, cradling him against her. He was warm, and comforting, his small breaths just further
establishing that they made it out on the other side.

“What is Dad going to do now?” She asked. “Or you?”

“Well, I will take some time to be with Alastor, and establish myself as alive again. Your father, well,
I don’t imagine he will stay here much longer. His voice is still weak, it comes and goes, so I doubt
even if he had a passion for teaching that he will be able to.”

Aurora nodded, absently running her fingers over her brother’s fine black hair.

“I’ve been thinking,” She said after the silence stretched for a while. She turned to her mother who
turned to her, patiently waiting to see what her daughter would say. “I like the idea of being a curse
breaker, but I don’t particularly fancy the danger. I like runes, and I want to be able to apply that
somewhere. And I must say, many of the wards we encountered were quite shoddy.”

“And?” Her mother asked with a smirk.

“And, well, what if I merged a few things? Like how muggles have security systems, find a way to
make a set of wards that a witch or wizard could place around their business, key it to them
somehow. There’s got to be a way to do something like that. I mean, if Fred and George can charm
candy and wands, why not have something charmed for that. And really, if seven teenagers can
make their way through the department of mysterious without too much trouble, and Ronald and I
can pilfer butterbeer without breaking a sweat, then it’s safe to say security is lacking.”

“You stole butterbeer?” Her mother half yelled, clearly appalled.
“I stole food, too, here and there. Technically. Few notes and pounds might have disappeared.”

“Aurora Eileen…”

“And how would you have kept up with the stomach of Ronald Weasley, as well as three other people?”

“I wouldn’t have stolen.”

“And you would have starved.” Aurora smirked, her mother clearly not having a counter argument to that. “Security, efficiency. Help keep people feeling safe.”

“It’s peace time, Rory.”

“For now. Until the next dark wizard comes along, a lesson you actually taught, mind. And it’s not just threats to worry about, but general livelihood after all.”

“And where would you get the funding to start such a business, should you actually get this scheme of yours to work?”

Aurora shrugged, smirking, “I’ll marry a wealthy wizard, if one will have me.”

“Aurora,” Her mother chided, and she laughed,

“Well, it’s one idea if Nan decides not to allow me my inheritance. And I’m sure you and Dad must realize that now that we’re in peace time, as you put it, the Prince money will be dropped on us whether we want it or not.”

“Yes,” Her mother sighed as if it was some terrible burden. “I have no doubt she will. And your father will protest it.”

“Maybe he’ll surprise you.” Aurora said, looking down at her brother, still asleep, his little mouth moving in a way that reminded her of a fish. She smiled, kissed his forehead. “Alastor.”

“Alastor Ivan Robert.” Her mother supplied.

“Al.” She said, smirking as she heard her mother sigh in exasperation. “You get to experience life as Leo and I never did. It’s going to be fantastic, you’ll see.” His face scrunched. “Oh, he doesn’t like that.”

“Hand him over,” Her mother chuckled. “He’s hungry.”

“Now that’s something I can’t help with.” She said as she did as instructed. “Where’s dad?”

“Brewing. He and Leonidas have been in the lab with a few others, trying to stay on top of everything Poppy needs.”

“Good,” Aurora said as she got up, brushing her hands on her denims, only just realizing now that someone had scrougified them. She was still in the clothes she fought in, and it made her skin crawl a bit.

“Why?” her mother asked, shifting about to nurse Alastor as Aurora stepped around the sofa.

“Because I’m going to go get cleaned and changed. And then I’m going to take care of something else that I’d been thinking about, and I would rather not have Dad get through all of this just to wind up in Azkaban for murder.”
“So, what’s next?” Sirius asked as he walked with Severus from the hospital wing. The former had been there to help comfort and calm some of the injured, to help parents who flocked to the school find their children.

“Next… retirement.” Severus said, his voice having regained a bit of its former strength, though was still gritty. “From teaching at least. I was not able to be around my first two children during their infancy as much as I would have wanted, with Alastor I now have that chance.”

“Moody would have hated that you named your son after him.” Sirius smirked.

Severus grinned. “He’d have acted like he did, but there would be a touch of pride there under all the gruff.” They walked a couple paces. “And you? What with Kingsley having passed.”

Sirius sighed. “I do miss him, but it wasn’t love. I ache, of course, and I mourn his loss, but I don’t feel as if I can’t go on. Frankly, I’m not sure what I will do now. Since my unorthodox release from Azkaban, I was always burdened by some task or another. I want another motorcycle, pretty sure the one I had will be useless after Hagrid’s had it for some time. Perhaps I will tour the country like a muggle for a time.”

“And what of the Boy-Who-Lived-Twice?”

“I have no idea. I suppose that’s for he and Draco to decide. I would prefer if he finished Hogwarts, even if that does mean repeating another year. With Arthur overseeing the ministry for the meantime, I doubt he’ll allow any free passes to anyone looking for work.”

Severus paused at the end of the staircase, frowning at Sirius. “Arthur is in charge of the ministry?”

Sirius shrugged, “Only for the time being. He’d the only one we know for absolute certainty that wasn’t working for You-… for Voldemort.”

“I suppose there is that. And what of the aurors?”

“I think Tonks is overseeing things. Not getting involved, just overseeing.”

Severus nodded, and they continued their trek.

“Will Minerva really let you go so easily? Who could possibly replace you?” Sirius asked after a beat as they made it to the entry hall.

“Minerva will let me go,” Severus said, his eyes darting to movement coming from the corridor opposite the Great Hall. He saw Longbottom come out, head held high, a confidence he hadn’t seen
in the boy ever. “As to who takes my place,” He looked away as Aurora emerged, turning toward them. “I suppose she’ll have to drag Horace out of retirement.”

“Hey Dad, hey Uncle Sirius.” Aurora said as she came up to them, a smile lightly playing on her lips.

“How are you feeling?” Severus asked, looking over his daughter, trying to find physical evidence of anything.

“A bit drained, but not terrible.” She said. “How are you? Mum said you were brewing with Leo.”

“I am, it’s where I’m returning now. I think it’s safe to say we’re all a bit tired, but we’ll manage.” He replied. Then, without regard of who would see or what it might do to the reputation he’d had his entire adult life, he kissed his daughter on the forehead. “Don’t strain yourself gallivanting through the castle. When you get to the hospital wing, stay there for a bit.”

She was taken aback, blushing a touch. “How did you know I was going there?” She asked.

He merely smirked and arched his brow at her, informing her that he knew full well why she would be going there.

She cleared her throat then looked at her feet. “Fine, I’ll stay there. Might get uncomfortable, possibly, maybe, but… I’ll stay.”

“Good,” He said. “Now, go.” He watched as she rolled her eyes but went anyway, marching up the stairs with determination. He sighed. “It’s finally over, and she’s all grown up.” He said to Sirius while still watching Aurora until she rounded the corner and was out of sight. “I’ve missed so much of her life, and now… now she’ll branch off and start her own.”

“She’s still young yet,” Sirius reminded him.

“Even so,” Severus sighed, heading to the stairs of the dungeon, turning back to Sirius as he remained in the entrance hall. “She’s learned what it’s like to face death and come out surviving. Anyone who’s done so knows that it makes you look at the bigger picture, and makes you strive for what you really want.” He then turned and headed back down stairs, heart heavy but proud of the witch his daughter became, and prepared to return to the young wizard who was still learning who he would be.

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“Rory,” Neville nearly shouted as she’d come up from the dungeons. “Can I talk to you?”

“Umm,” She said, trying to find per patience among her nerves. “Yeah, sure.” She said, moving to join him, following him as he led her toward the courtyard. For one, morbid minute, she thought he was going to bring her to where she’d glimpsed a bunch of bodies on the ground, but thankfully turned away from the courtyard, keeping her int the corridor around the corner. He leaned up against the wall, and she did the same.

“I was devastated when I thought you died.” He said. “Heartbroken. Sorta like Fred, I was just… reining the last interaction we had.” He shifted toward her, and she hesitantly turned her head toward him. “You kissed me.” He said.
“You killed the snake that tried to kill my father. I was quite grateful.” Then with a smirk she added, “And maybe a bit bitter that you got to it before I did, but I don’t know if that counts because I didn’t think of much after that. Bitter is more of an afterthought, really.” She looked away, seeing Ron and Luna coming from the opposite direction, glancing up at them. Only Luna waved, but Ron didn’t have a hostility like he would have once. Peace time indeed.

“Well, you took out Bellatrix,” Neville replied. “You said you sliced her to pieces.”

“Well, Felix helped, but-”

“Who?”

“Luck potion dad made us. I took a hit before making it to her. “

“Well, doesn’t matter. Point is, I get the bitter. Woulda loved to have killed the bitch after what she did to my parents. So, I understand. Suppose we’re even then.”

“I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.” She chuckled. “She nearly killed me, actually. Probably would have if I hadn’t had a touch of illicit aid.”

Neville’s hand reached for hers, taking it, catching her off guard. “I’m glad she didn’t.”

“Nev,” She said softly.

“Hear me out.” He said, and she took a deep breath before nodding. “I love you.” He said carefully. “I always have. And I want nothing more than to make you happy. I’ll even try and get along with your dad, fresh starts and all. Just please give me a chance again.”

“Neville.”

“I don’t need you to say anything right now.” He squeezed her hand. “But I want you to think about it. And there won’t be any hard feelings you don’t, but it’s all I want. All I ask for. A chance, one more chance, to be better this time.” He then leaned in and kissed her cheek, hovering near her face before letting go and stepping away, moving far too quickly for the Great Hall so that even if she wanted to stop him, there was no way she could.

She took a moment to clear her mind, collect her thoughts. His offer still lingered in the back of her mind as Aurora pushed herself off the wall, and continued in her previous trajectory.

“—L—"

“What do you mean you’re getting married?” Leo asked Draco, gaping at him as though he’d just informed his pseudo brother that mistletoe was a healthy snack. Because, honestly, even thinking about marriage seemed as stupid as merely chomping down on the poison berries.

“I haven’t asked him yet,” Draco retorted. “But, I still got a bit of that liquid luck your father made us. It’s not cheating when you take a drop before asking a very important question, does it?”

“I suppose that would depend on who you ask.” Leo said, still staring incredulously at the blonde while shaking his head. “And what about my sister?”

“What about her?” Draco laughed. “The war is done, and I’m certain by now father has figured out
we have no intentions of actually marrying each other.”

“Wouldn’t it hurt her, you ending the betrothal?” Leo asked, frowning.


Leo nodded, looking back to the ingredients he was cutting. “I wanted you for a brother.” He confessed.

“Marriage into your family or not, I have always regarded you and Rory like siblings.”

“Still,” Leo shrugged. And then a terrible thought came over him. He opened his mouth, nearly giving voice to his fears of who might just be his brother, but he quickly shut it again. He didn’t want to make it happen by saying it out loud.

They were quiet, chopping and brewing side by side, the only ones still down there, the other volunteers taking a break. He thought of Jane, of what Draco had told him of what happened to her. He would try to write her later, already knowing there was a chance his owl would come back undelivered. Still, it would be good to know if she escaped. He thought of Ethan and the other Hufflepuffs, of how they weren’t quite his friends, but probably as close as he would get. Maybe next year, a fresh start, would allow him to make proper friends. Third time was the charm and all. He knew it was unlikely that his father would be at the high table, and impossible for his mother to be. Aurora would still be around, but maybe without the imposing presence of his parents he’d be more approachable.

Luna returned, her arm still bandaged from where a nasty curse burned hot enough to splinter her bone. Her extent of volunteer work was bringing ingredients from the various stores and what she could get from the vendor in Hogsmeade, but it was still a help.

“Your sister is awake and moving.” She said with a serene smile. “Ronald and I saw her talking to Neville.”

“And did Ronald reunite with Lav Lav?” Draco asked, and Leo scowled at him. What was a ‘Lav-Lav’, and did he even want to know.

“Only to end things, apparently.” Luna replied, setting down her basket and sorting out the vials and loose ingredients one handed. “Which is quite interesting when you consider how many people are coming together, and making things official.” She said, eyeing Draco with a knowing smile, then turned that smile to Leo.

Who only frowned more.

“And what about you, Luna?” Draco asked. “Are you getting together or making anything official?”

Luna’s smile returned to her normal serene one, and she merely shrugged her shoulder before beginning to hum.

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The hospital wing wasn’t nearly as full as she was expecting it to be. It was only the truly, severely injured who were here. She spotted Seamus with a bandage wrapped around his head, covering his
left eye. Devon from Slytherin with his skin covered in burns, but then he was laughing with Hufflepuff who appeared to be missing an arm.

She spotted Aunt Poppy in her office, but didn’t stop by, she was there for a reason. Sucking in a deep breath, pulling up her courage, she went to the bed hosting the person she was there to see.

Fred was next to Bill who was awake and reading the Daily Prophet, Fleur asleep in the chair next to him. He smiled at Aurora as she took her place in the chair beside Fred’s, only realizing a moment later that there should have been at least another Weasley or two hovering about.

“Mum and Dad are arranging the service for Percy.” Bill explained, obviously understanding the confused frown Aurora had a moment ago. “George went to floo Charlie in Professor McGonagall’s office. Ron was by earlier; Gin I haven’t seen for a bit.”

“Ah,” Aurora nodded, hand twitching her in her lap, her eyes darting to the sleeping Fred.

She startled when the curtain behind her began to shift close, and she looked up again to see Bill winking at her with a smirk before the curtain fully enclosed she and Fred behind it. Her nervous energy seemed to double, and she nearly got out of the chair and bolted, being the coward that she often could be, but she stayed resolute. She studied him again, then reached out and gently brushed a few strands of hair that were caught in the bandage wrapped around his head. She then looked down, and her heart broke a bit for him when she noted a flatbed beneath the sheets where his long legs should have been. It appeared uneven, and she hazard a guess he lost one at the knee while the other a bit above. Still, he lived, and maybe that was what he would focus on. Not his loss, but what he still had. She couldn’t imagine a man as full of fun and life as Fred Weasley being downed by a couple missing limbs.

There was a rustle, and Aurora’s eyes darted back to his face. Fred’s eyes slowly blinked open, and the corner of his mouth rose in a sleepy smile. Then he frowned.

“You were dead,” he said thoughtfully. “How are you already up and about and I’m not?”

“Well, I may have been dead, but I didn’t lose both my legs.” She replied, deadpanned.

He smirked again. “Suppose there’s that,” He said, attempting to shift up. She helped him, arranging his pillows and offering a hand for leverage where he didn’t have his feet to push him. He didn’t seem too put out by the lack of ability, and it had her grinning.

“It’s over now.” He said, “And we survived.”

“We did, didn’t we?” She said, suddenly quite nervous again, her grin fading.

“Ron was by.” He said, and she nodded.

“Yeah, Bill said.

“Ronniekins mentioned he saw you and Neville having a bit of a chat.”

Aurora tilted her head, bemused. “That was maybe a half hour ago, you couldn’t have been asleep that long.”

He shrugged. “Keep passing out. Potions they’re giving me are great for that.” He smirked, and she laughed, relieving only a bit of the storm of feelings that stirred about her soul. “So, Neville.”

“Yes, Neville.” She sighed, “Had to exchange the ‘thank you’s for killing the creatures that tried to
kill our parents. He, well, to be honest he asked me to give him another chance. To think about it, and… and the thing is I’d already been putting a lot of thinking into things, and I realized, um, well, that, what I want is…. She rubbed her hands on her legs, ignoring her increasing heart rate, trying to keep her breath steady.

“It’s okay,” Fred assured, his lips still up turned though the life had faded from it. “You can say it, Rory.”

“I can?” She asked, not really believing him.

“I just want you happy.” He swore.

“Yeah?”

“Of course.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

“Great.” She said, nodding as though she were a bobble toy, twisting her fingers about in knots. “Good. Good, so, well… umm… marry me.”

Fred blinked rapidly. “Sorry, potions got my head all fogged up. Say that again?”

She blew out a breath as her heart started pounding harder. “Marry me.” She said more steadily, but Fred just kept staring at her dumbly. “I mean, it’s not like I was thinking of tomorrow, or anything. I still have school to finish, and a career to start. And you! You’ll want to get on your feet again. Not, that… bloody hell that was stupid, but you know what I meant. But the point is, I love you, and I know you, and —”

“Accio jacket.” Fred shouted, startling Aurora as his ruined jacket came from the night stand that was probably closer than anticipated. The fact that it half smacked him in the face didn’t seem to faze Fred as he frantically moved about to the pockets, rummaging around and grumbling a bit to himself before retracting his hand with a triumphant grin.

He then held out a ring. Rose gold, two pale yellow stones on either side of the diamond. Gryffindor colors, but not the way they were normally represented. It was actually quite lovely, and Aurora felt herself smile, giggling a bit before she realized what it meant.

“I asked your father for permission a while ago,” he confessed. “I didn’t think I stood a chance, but I had to ask because you know I love you.”

“You didn’t think you stood a chance, and yet you still bought a ring?” She asked, sucking her lips in so as not to laugh.

“You didn’t think you stood a chance, and yet you still bought a ring?” She asked, sucking her lips in so as not to laugh.

“Wanted to be prepared in case the moment struck.” He said. “And speaking of prepared, how d’ya know I didn’t have a whole speech planned out, too? Beat me to the punch, you did. Bloke’s supposed to be able to ask these things, ya know.”

She hummed, “Yes, but most blokes also get down on one knee, which might be a bit hard to do since one is all you seem to have left.”

“And who do I blame for that?” He teased cheekily.
“I’d say the Death Eater that blew up the wall, but I’m fairly certain in the many years ahead of us, it’s going to be my fault, isn’t it?”

“Many years, you say?”

“Well, that depends on if you give me that ring, I suppose. I did ask a question, and you’ve been avoiding giving me an answer.”

“Not avoiding, just wanting to be sure I’m not still asleep.”

She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant despite being the farthest thing from. “You won’t ever be sure, so you might as well answer the bloody question.”

Fred nodded, then with a shaky hand reached for her left one. He slid on the ring, and then just stared at her hand,

“What?” She asked, trying to find what was wrong with it.

“You’re going to be my wife.” He said as though the thought just occurred to him.

“Yes, I will, future Mr Snape.” She teased, getting up and sitting next to him on the bed.

“Nope,” he said, shaking his head. “No, can’t happen.”

“Oh? Why not?” She asked, taking his other hand in her free one.

“Can’t break up George and me like that. If I’m a Snape, he’s gotta be one, too.”

“I see your point. Fine, Aurora Weasley it will be.”

He let go of her hand and gently placed his fingers in her hair, holding her still as he leaned in and kissed her. And kissed her again. And again. And then Aurora’s hand found its way into his hair as well, and they were lost in one another.

“No!” They heard Bill say sometime later, startling them apart. “He’s fine!”

“Then why’s the curtain drawn?” Molly’s voice came from the other side as well, And Fred’s eyes widened a fraction.

“Because he wanted privacy.” Bill retorted.

“Well, what could he possibly have wanted privacy for? He’s healing, and I should check.”

“For Merlin’s sake, Molly. Fred haz just become engaged to Rory, and zey just want to be left alone.”

A pause, in which both Fred and Aurora remained perfectly still.

“Fred and Aurora are getting married!” Molly cried out in absolute glee, and the couple cringed as Molly drew back the curtain to announce it to the hospital wing.
“I can’t believe you’re going to be my sister.” Ginny said, her arms still wrapped around Aurora’s neck and shoulders, having not let go of her once since Aurora told them. Luna was examining the ring again, holding it up to the setting sun and tilting it this way and that.

“I still can’t believe you asked him.” Draco said, shaking his head, Harry’s arm slung around his shoulders.

“I can.” Ron said. “Fred’s had the ring on him for a bit. Least that’s what George told me when we ran into him in the woods.”

Aurora couldn’t help but glance at Neville then, who was nodding to himself.

She was kind. She didn’t let him find out with the rest, and had approached him as soon as Molly allowed her to leave the hospital wing. They talked, there may have been a raised voice or two, but in the end, Neville understood. And Aurora apologized. It was nearly like breaking up all over again, or maybe as though they hadn’t made up at all. But now they could truly move forward, and now that Neville wasn’t clinging on to something that would never be, maybe they could truly be friends again.

“When’s the wedding?” Harry asked.

“Not before yours.” She replied, she and the rest chuckling at Harry and Draco blushed. Ginny catcalled, and so did Ron for good measure while Luna whistled.

They settled, looking out over the lake as the sun set red over the grounds. And there they stayed for hours, only giving the odd comment here and there, until finally it was too cold, and they went inside.

May 2nd, 1998

She and Severus sat under their tree by the lake, basking in the warmth of a sunny day, Alastor asleep in the carrier she had strapped to her. Not far from them, Leo was sitting with his back against a log, re-reading his letter from Jane and clearly trying not to smile. Hermione assumed it was good news, though Leo remained tight lipped on that. She never expected he would have a secretive side, even as a teenager, but she supposed it was bound to happen.

Across the lake, she spotted Aurora walking with her fiancé, though she still couldn’t wrap her mind around it. Fred was using both Rory and a cane for support, still getting used to his new prosthetics, but doing well besides. Hermione could tell, even from the distance between she and them, that they were smiling, joking, happy.

“We need another daughter.” Hermione said after a time.

Severus looked over at her, “We just had a child, perhaps we can wait a bit before deciding on a fourth? We’re much older than we were the last time we had a newborn, and the lack of sleep is much more… difficult to deal with.” His voice was nearly back to where it was, though she was certain there would always be a slight rasp underneath the baritone from now on.
Hermione shrugged. “We’re going to gain another son,” She said, tilting her head to where the lovebirds were walking.

“In-law.” Severus said pointedly. “He will not be our son.”

“He’s going to call you Dad,” She warned.

“He already does, the bastard.” Severus said with a touch of affection.

“Fred Weasley is coming into our family, we have two sons of our own, we need another daughter.”

“Fine, I shall see if there is someone willing to marry Leonidas.” Hermione smacked him, and he chuckled. “I did understand what you meant, wife. And I also know you will be far more critical of any witch who dare try for Leonidas’ hand than I was for Aurora.”

“I will not.” Hermione protested. “Now, Alastor on the other hand….”

Severus chuckled, snaked his arm around her, and pulled her closer. He kissed her, and she smiled against his lips.

“I have been considering the name for the apothecary,” he said. “I had originally thought to name it for Master Nikola, but where I have honored him through my healer name, and you through giving the name to Al, I figured I should reconsider. It is a new world, one in which we are trying to establish equality. I thought my own way of getting in a little dig to old notions might be to remind many what my blood status actually is, as well as getting in a dig at those who should have been closest to me by discarded be because of my blended heritage.”

Hermione frowned. “Something to do with Half-blood.”

“The Half-Blood Prince Apothecary.” He smirked. “The sign shall be placed on the store front within a week or two, and we will open in time for those who need to shop for Hogwarts to do so.”

“What did your mother have to say about it?” She asked.

He shrugged. “She didn’t say she hated it, so I suppose she approves.” He looked out on the lake, or perhaps across from it. It was hard to tell. “I first realized I loved you here,” He said. “And here is where I asked you to marry me.”

“It was.”

“It feels odd to know we will not revisit this spot again. That these grounds, the castle, has been our home for nearly thirty years of our life.”

Hermione looked to the castle just over her shoulder, standing tall and proud once more, the repairs completed for about a month and a half now. The school had paused term, and was set to start again in June rather than September, allowing those who needed to catch up on what was missed the opportunity to do so. It would continue into the summer, and resume its regular time table come September. It also allowed patients like Fred the chance to recover in a familiar space, and Minerva time to find replacements for those lost or terminated. Or, in Severus’ case, retired.

“It does feel odd.” Hermione agreed. “But now we can move on. Start anew, away from Hogwarts and its memories, good and bad.”

“Indeed.” He said, quiet engulfing them once more. “You realize we’ll be shopping for supplies in Diagon Alley when we’re near fifty? And here for Al’s graduation when we’re almost sixty, which
means, of course, if we have another it likely that we will be in our sixties. Bloody hell, we’ll never be rid of this place. We’re going to be here. Always,” He ranted, and Hermione laughed, accidentally waking Alastor as she did.

“Oh, I’m sorry, don’t fuss little mister.” She said, kissing his hair and calming him back to sleep quickly.

“At least I’ll have you.” Severus said. “And, at least the memories to come will be good.”

“They will.” She agreed, resting her head on his shoulder.

The calm of the day, the serenity of it, and the (indeed) sleepless nights had Hermione’s eyes drifting shut. The last thing she heard before drifting off to sleep was a grumbled, “We’re going to end up seeing our grandchildren on the train as we see our own children off.”

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue will actually post just after this.
“Come on!” Alastor Snape called, and Hermione crossed her arms and rolled her eyes at her third child, though being seventeen he paid her absolutely no mind what-so-ever.

“Are you in a rush?” Hermione teased, repressing a smirk as she knew there was a very good reason why her son wanted to get on the train. He and Teddy Tonks-Lupin were both hoping to court the same young witch, a Hufflepuff in their year. Who, as fate would have it, just happened to be the muggle born daughter of Sirius’ muggle partner. Maeve was a lovely girl, with golden brown hair and bright blue eyes. It probably didn’t help that they both happened to notice she was a girl about the same time, despite the pair having known her nearly all their lives.

Alastor straightened his Slytherin tie, looking sideways at his mother as he lifted his chin. “Of course, I’m not.” He said as if he meant it.

She nodded slowly, before craning her neck to look up at him. “Who were all those witches simpering after you?” She asked.

There had been a gaggle when they first arrived at the platform, all blushing and batting eyelashes with a “hi Al.” They then proceeded to squeal and go into a minor fit when he barely gave them a wave.

He sneered, “Dunderheads, the lot of them. Not a full brain among them.”

Hermione had to admit that, while baring the same demeanor as his father, Alastor could get away with it simply because of his looks. He was, like his elder sister, the best parts of she and Severus. His hair was black, kept short, and slicked in such a way that made his greasy sheen to his locks look part of the style. He had his father’s nose, but it wasn’t so predominant like it was on Severus, balancing out his strong, lean face. His eyes were her eyes, amber and honey. And he was tall, so much taller than even Leo had been at seventeen, and built just slightly wider. That, she figured, was due to his placement on the quidditch team. Beater, like his sister and brother-in-law.

“So not in your NEWT class, then?” She mused.

He snorted, “Like Professor Snape would ever allow those idiots near a cauldron.” He smirked.

“Yes, well, your brother does have a reputation to uphold.”

“One he stole from father.”

“No, but no one need know that. Just plays into the vampire myth.”
Alastor snorted, and a smile nearly broke out just then.

It was in that moment that a large crowd came through the barrier, and the reason for the slow entry was clear.

Little Lilia Snape was holding on to her big sister’s hand, yammering away excitedly, pointedly ignoring her nephew as he tried to get her attention. Despite being weeks apart, Lilia acted as though she were years older than William, and had from the very moment it was understood that she was his Aunt.

Will, on the other hand, was quite adamant that she was no better than he, and deserved none of the respect he afforded all of his many uncles, and his few aunts.

“Sorry,” Severus said as they all met up. “Lil was adamant.”

“I do hope you aren’t going to do that at school.” Alastor said to his little sister. “If you hold Leo’s hand like that, you’re bound to get detention.”

“Leo wouldn’t let me to start with.” Lilia countered, little chin pointed high.

She was Hermione in miniature, except for her the pin-straight hair that is. Not quite as much of a know-it-all set to prove she fit in, but sometimes acting nearly a pretentious as Draco had when he was a child, believing that her family status should mean something. It was something that Hermione and Severus had frequently tried to deter, but they hadn’t had much luck. They each blamed each other for it.

“Lil,” They both warned in unison, causing their daughter to blush and bow her head.

“Hi Uncle Al,” William said, giving a wave.

“Will,” Alastor smirked, crouching down. “And what sort of contraband are you going to try and sneak in?”

William blushed. “None. Dad wouldn’t let me.”

“Darn right, I wouldn’t.” Fred said, making his way over with Gideon on his shoulders, leaning only a slight bit on his cane.

The boys, both of them, were auburn instead of having the famous, easily spotted Weasley hair, and both had their parents’ brown eyes. William, though, was appearing to have more Snape features than Weasley, which was the way Gideon tended to be leaning.

“Oh because I warned you not to even think of it.” Rory smirked, lifting her arms for their younger son to come down from his father’s shoulders to give him a rest.

“Well, you wouldn’t be wrong, would you? Just remember that when Fred and Roxanne start, they aren’t going to be going empty handed.”

“And George will get all those lovely howlers from Aunt Min when he does.” Rory countered.

“Right, yes, that was the other reason we weren’t sending things in.” He nodded, then looked down at Will. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” He said.

“You have everything?” Aurora checked.
“Yes, mum.” Will groaned.

“Good.” Aurora said, kissing him on the head and ruffling his hair. “Now, go on. Might as well head off. We’ll still be here until the train goes anyway.”

“Well if he’s going, I’m going.” Lilia said, turning her parents. “Love you.” She said.

“Have a good time, sweet pea.” Hermione said, bending down to hug her daughter, kissing her cheek. As Severus did the same she turned to Alastor who promptly put his hand up, face stern.

“Don’t even think about it.” He said.

“Love you,” She said anyway, and he rolled his eyes.

“Love you both,” He said just loud enough to hear, then quietly followed behind his younger sister and his nephew, a silent guard ensuring that they got on the train safely.

The turned as another large crowd came through the gate, and Maeve rushed by in a near blur, dashing for the train.

Sirius shook his head, his partner Alan merely sighing, this rush to the train becoming a common habit for the lot of them.

The blonde and black haired wizards that came through with them, however, seemed much more harried.

“You have your books, all of them?” Harry asked the little blonde wizard.

“Yes, Dad.” James had replied.

“And your cauldron?”

James glared at Draco. “Why aren’t you asking Sev if he has everything?”

Severus cringed, never enjoying the reminder that Draco gave one of their sons his name, and it just had to be the one that looked like a Potter.

“Because Severus didn’t leave his trunk to pack until this morning, now do you have everything or not?”

“If I don’t, you’ll just send it to me anyway.” James retorted.

Hermione sucked in her lips and pressed her face to her husband’s shoulder, barely keeping the laugh in.

“James.” Harry sighed.

“Yes, you are. We love you,” Harry said, and there was the quick shouting of returned affection before both boys took off.

Harry and Draco came to join them. “You watch,” Draco said to Aurora as he came up beside her. “Next year, that will be Will.”

“Nope,” She said adamantly. “That’s your family, entirely. I don’t think one spec of Luna ended up
“Sev most definitely didn’t end up like his name sake.” Harry smirked, glancing at Severus.

“Watch it, Potter.” He warned, and Harry snickered.

Hermione then turned back to the train, the whistle to signal the near departure cutting through the noise of the crowd. She glanced around, spotting Theo Nott a ways down with his daughter, sending her off. Third year, Hermione thought. He didn’t keep in touch that often, but she couldn’t blame him. Severus, much as he was an aid, was also a reminder of a dark time for him. A ways past him, Nymphadora and Remus helping little Kingsley with his trunk.

“Have you heard from Gin?” Harry asked, and Hermione half listened as she looked at the crowd, taking in the moment.

“She and Luna are somewhere in South America.” She heard Aurora say. “And did you hear?”

“About Ron and Astoria? Yeah, though now Molly will start harping on Ginny to settle down and give her grandkids.” Harry retorted.

“Mum’s already got seven actual grandchildren, plus your little’ens as extras. Does she really need a full dozen to be happy?” Fred asked.

“Course she does,” Aurora said. “And just think, if we told her our news before Ron and Astoria said anything.”

“Yes, let’s keep the attention on them for a bit,” Fred agreed, and Hermione smirked as Aurora laughed, having been let in on that secret a couple weeks ago.

“Don’t know why you would want more than two.” Draco said. “Sometimes I think my parents had it right with one.”

“Just the other day you were trying to convince me that we should look into another surrogate. And have another.” Harry countered.

“That was before James reminded me that he and Severus are very nearly teenagers, and frankly, I don’t think I want to go through it again.”

“We did.” Severus reminded him.

“And look what happened. Grandchild was born two weeks before your youngest.” Draco retorted, but no response came.

The whistle blew, the train would be departing, sending the next generation off to Hogwarts for another peaceful, boring, uneventful year of school.

She hoped.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone who read this story to the end, whether you were with me for the whole year and a half, or binged it now that it's complete. I appreciate you getting
through this with me.
I don't foresee a sequel, BUT, if you want to know about something that happened during the seventeen years, literally anything at all, I will share the ideas I have of what took place in between.
Thanks, everyone, again. You're the best.
Chapter Notes

There was a mass request for just a bit more. What I did was compose a small sample of the headcanon I had for what happened after, just little glimpses, and not with everyone. I don't have anything with Lilia or Alastor growing up, as they weren't characters that "steeped" with the rest of them.

Below that, I have the lineage that others have asked for. There are a lot of children after all.

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**Draco**

“White suits you,” He said to Aurora as she straightened his bow tie.

“Thank you, as do you.” She said, smoothing out his lapels. His robes were more ivory than white, but he’d let it slide. A compliment was a compliment, regardless of its accuracy, he supposed. Rory took a step back, looking him over before turning and retrieving her bouquet. “Ready?” She asked, fussing with the short skirt of her dress.

“As ever.” Draco said, offering her his arm before turning them toward the entrance to the Great Hall.

He and Rory walked down the aisle between the rows of guests, many whom he didn’t know and likely wouldn’t remember after tonight. They kept a steady pace as they made their way to where the head table would normally be, where instead there was a groom nervously waiting for the important part of the ceremony to start.

Draco didn’t need to look at his parents to know his father would be trying very, very hard to suppress the sneer, and his mother would be busily dotting her eyes, erasing the evidence of happy tears lest anyone believe she could feel that strongly.

They got to the front much more quickly than he expected, and they stopped to face the ministry officiant as the music the marked their procession ended.

“Who gives away the hand of the bondee?” He asked with a wide grin.

“I do,” Aurora said, placing Draco’s hand in Harry’s before kissing each of their cheeks, then took her place as best witch behind Draco. There was a chuckle from the crowd, and Draco felt a smug bit of satisfaction at getting one final dig at that ridiculous arranged marriage they were supposed to be in. He looked at his father then, who was grinning just the slightest bit, shaking his head, knowing full well what they did.

And for the first time in a long time, Draco felt a swell of pride for impressing his father, even if it was in a very unusual way.
He parked his motorcycle outside the muggle diner just after the sun rose. After Harry’s wedding, he decided it was time he saw other parts of the British Isles, and made his way to Ireland. It was beautiful, and it helped take his mind off of things.

He missed Kingsley, but he still thought of Remus more often than not. Remus who was his first proper crush, whom he had managed to kiss for the first time just after Hermione and Severus had confessed to marrying in private, before their public ceremony for the sake of the order. Remus whom he quickly fell into bed with shortly after, and who he remained with until he was in Azkaban. Who was also the first person he was with when he came back out.

Leaving him was hard, and it was a wound that stung for so long, he was nearly certain that he was the actual one. And that’s what made his marriage to Dora after the war that much harder. Sirius supposed that there was a part of him, deep down, that had hoped that once little Teddy was born that Remus would realize what he’d done and come back. Well, he did, Sirius supposed. It was just with conditions, like how Remus had to be with Dora, too. That was when Sirius walked away for good. They remained friends, but it was strained. Perhaps the time apart would help mend that bridge.

Heading inside, the waitress greeted him with a smile and directed him to a small booth. There wasn’t really anyone else inside, and he had expected as much. Just what appeared to be a father and daughter having an early breakfast just them two. It was a really small town, probably more village; it was just a place to stop to get something to eat before he continued onward.

He picked up the muggle newspaper and gave it a skim until he felt eyes on him. He looked up, seeing the little girl had turned around leaned over her booth seat, smiling at him.

Sirius smiled back, making her giggle. He then pressed his fingers to his lips, making sure she understood to be quiet. When she nodded, he glanced around, seeing the waitress was in the kitchen, then waved his hand at the salt and pepper pots. The minimal contents in both began to swirl around, little tornadoes within, and the little girl giggled. Sirius smiled, but it faltered when the little girl stuck her hand out.

The pepper pot, just the pepper pot, began to float, twirling a bit in the air like the tornado inside it.

“Maeve!” Her father shouted, more panicked then angered, and the pepper pot crashed down on the table. It didn’t shatter, thought it spilled its contents. “Sir,” The man came around half sliding into the bench across from Sirius, partially blocking Maeve from his sight. His eyes were wide, pleading. “I’m sorry, I swear, it’s not something-”

“Is fine.” Sirius replied as he righted the pot, banishing the spilt pepper with a flick of his wrist, smirking as the man’s eyes widened. “You have a very special little girl.”

The man’s eyes darted from the now clean table to Sirius and back again. “Tell me about it.”

Sirius snickered.

“No, serious.” The man said. “Tell me about it, because you obviously know.”
“Maeve’s mum was a friend,” Alan, Maeve’s father, had told him late at night over a pint. Sirius had explained what he could about magic over breakfast. He told them about Hogwarts over lunch in their back garden after Alan invited him over when they left the diner. Sirius shared his story, or what he was comfortable with, during dinner, and now that the little one was tucked in bed, Alan felt it was his turn. “One night, we had a few and decided that it might be a bit of fun to mess about. Thing was, it wasn’t just messing about for her, and I just didn’t feel that way ‘bout her. Or any woman, really. Think I was just ….”

“I get it.” Sirius smirked, making Alan laugh.

“Yes, well. She got pregnant. Wasn’t able to afford to go where ya had to to…. Anyway, I wanted her, Maeve. I took her. Didn’t want strangers raising her when I could. Well, didn’t hear from her mum once after the babe was placed in my arms. She took off.”

“She wasn’t a witch?”

“Nah,” Alan shook his head. “Maeve only just started doing that stuff. Keep telling her it’s going to scare people. Lucky you’re a … a wizard?”

“Yes,” Sirius said. “That I am.”

He didn’t think much of Remus for the rest of his trip, but he did think a lot of Alan. He’d stayed in the village an extra two nights, the last in Alan’s bed. He promised to stay in touch, if only to help him understand his daughter’s gift. But instead of calling, as Alan asked, or even simply writing, Sirius apparated to Ireland three times a week once he returned to England. He was soon bringing Alan and Maeve back to his place, introducing them to Harry and Draco, then to Severus, Hermione, and the kids.

He bonded with Alan a year before Maeve got her Hogwarts letter.

Neville

It took some time for him to lick his wounds, so to speak. He hated Aurora for not telling him that she loved Fred Weasley enough to propose to him, but he hated himself more for not really listening to her. He’d fallen into old habits, putting his wants before hers, not considering her feelings. He had always just assumed that because she continued to be with him after his Gram’s demands of a proper courtship, that Aurora had thought they were going to marry like he had.

But by the time school resumed in June, he was virtually over her. Oh, it still made him a bit heart
sick when his eyes fell on her engagement ring, but he would swallow it down, and carry on.

And when Hannah Abbot asked him out to Hogsmeade, he accepted.

By the time he got the invitation to Aurora’s wedding, he had no trouble attending, not with the former Hufflepuff on his arm.

He stayed at Hogwarts, first as an apprentice to Professor Sprout, then as her replacement in Herbology.

Fred

Breathe in, breath out. It was a mantra he’d been repeating to himself since he first woke up that morning. He tried to treat it like any other day: get up, put his legs on one at a time, get dressed and get going. But this wasn’t any other day, and it was driving him a bit spare.

“I’d ask if you were getting cold feet, but that would require having them.” George said quietly, leaning in so no one would hear him.

“Feet I have are always cold,” Fred retorted, straightening his sleeves unnecessarily. He blew out a breath of air, looking about. “Bet she came to her sense.”

“Oh, stop.” George said, elbowing him. “She didn’t change her mind, run off, or disappear. You’re gettin’ impatient. Still early, it is.”

“But everyone’s here.”

“Snape’s not.”

“Suppose there’s that.” Fred said, looking at the front row where the Snape family, minus two, were sitting. Hermione had Al sitting on her lap, but the toddler couldn’t care less about anything but the enchanted butterfly hovering near his head. Leo just kept looking around at everything with wide eyes, seeming uncertain how he wanted to judge the white, canvas enclosure or the people within it. And then there was Eileen Snape, who seemed to know exactly how she wanted to judge everything and everyone, and it wasn’t a positive one. That woman had made him more nervous than he ever remembered being. He was certain she didn’t think too highly of him, and he knew Rory thought the world of her. Maybe she convinced her granddaughter that she deserved better than a legless wizard who didn’t even graduate from Hogwarts.

“Stop it.” George said, and Fred took another deep breath and let it out.

“Never thought it would be him doing this first,” Lee said. “Always thought it’d be you, actually.”

“Free spirit, me.” George said, straightening his tie. Lavender in color, like the flowers adorning the seats.

Fred resisted the urge to straighten his own. Red, Aurora’s favorite color.

And, he realized a second before he was likely meant to, the color of her lipstick. A beat later, a
melody he didn’t hear began to play, and his eyes was on the witch being walked down the aisle by
her father.

Her dress was white, no shoulders and lace for sleeves. It wasn’t big and puffy like Fleur’s had been,
but more subtle. Her hair was in a braid over her shoulder, and her eyes glistened as they met and
held his. Then she became blurry and he had to blink to see her a bit more clearly, completely
ignoring how his face felt a bit damp. Or that George was quietly laughing at him.

When the music stopped, she was close, so close, just across from him. He hadn’t seen her for more
than a day, which felt like far too much.

When she returned to Hogwarts to take her end of year testing, and then begin her final year, he was
still supposed to go to Hogwarts at least once a week to see Madam Pomfrey about his recovery.
Learning to walk with fake legs took time, and there was always worry that there was more damage
done than they could see. So, his regular checkups meant he would see her more than expected.
Added in that, to make up for the lack of freedom during the Death Eater reign, every weekend was
Hogsmeade weekends for those in sixth and seventh year. And it just so happened that he and
George were in the processes of buying out Zonkos and opening their own shop.

And once she graduated, Aurora worked out of their shop, using their experiment room to figure out
her warding system. Therefore, he saw her every day. Dinner with the Snapes on Saturday, family
dinner at the Burrow on Sunday, more and more nights spent together rather than apart.

He felt lost without her.

But now he didn’t have to go through it again.

“Who gives away the hand of the bondee?” Minerva McGonagall asked, and Fred was sure she was
probably smiling.

“I do,” Severus Snape replied, and he placed Aurora’s hand in Fred’s. Who then jumped when the
dark wizard leaned in and said, “take care of her.”

“She doesn’t need me to do that, sir.” He said, never taking his eyes off his future wife.

—F—

He was exhausted. Dancing was hard when they weren’t your proper feet doing the movements.
Plus, after they bonded, it felt like nothing by a non-stop party. Now that the evening was winding
down, he didn’t really have the energy to do much more than sleep. That would probably change
when Rory took off her dress later, but for now he was knackered, and the best fantasy he could
think of was curling up in bed next to his wife and sleeping.

But first, there was her surprise.

“Fireworks,” She said, leaning her head against him as she looked up at the sky.

“Not just any,” He said. “But Aurora Weasley’s Sky Fire.”

She smiled, “I get a product named after me? And it’s not even marketed as a corny date enhancer.
Aww, you truly do love me.”
“Corny date enhancer? I will have you know that was the most romantic thing I could think of then.”

“Mmm,” She hummed, “For the best, then, that I didn’t want an overly romantic man.”

He shook his head at her cheek, finding himself falling just a bit more in love with her, if that was even possible. He held her cheek as he stole another kiss, the guests distracted by the display in the sky.

“I love you,” He said against her lips.

“I love you, too.” She said, kissing him again and again, melting into him. Waking him up.

He apparated away from the reception, and if anyone actually noticed, he never heard about it.

Severus

Running an apothecary ended up being far quieter than Severus had expected it to be. Yes, his name and reputation meant he had a steady stream of customers buying ready-made brews and salves, but they were in and out relatively quickly. He brewed on Tuesdays and Thursdays, allowing Hermione complete peace and quiet most of the work week by taking Alastor to the shop with him. His boy, now, was coloring at a small table Severus had set up for him out of the way.

He was pre-measuring ingredients, the rush for Hogwarts supplies still a month away, but he wanted to be prepared.

When the chime charm signaled someone coming in, he leaned away from the work table behind the counter to crane his neck to see who it was.

“Hi dad,” Rory said, moving toward him and around the counter to sit on the stool he had for times when he needed to rest his leg.

“Rory,” He greeted with a smile. “How’s business?”

“Steady.” She replied. “Madam Malkin wanted me to work on something for her to ensure no one swapped the prices on the bolts. Apparently that’s been a thing that’s been going on for a while.”

Severus hummed in agreement. While he was always excellent at ward, he himself had his daughter’s specialized system within his shop. Spy though he may have been, his senses were dulled a bit by the venom that was in his system. No, it didn’t pose a threat to his life, but there were still some effects from it. He wore reading glasses, and found he didn’t hear the softest sounds anymore. It’s how he didn’t realize, until Aurora’s charm, that people had added a bit more ingredients to their supposedly pre-measured jars.

“So, what brings you by this afternoon? Or did you forget the day of the week, and wondered why I hadn’t shown up for lunch?”

“No, I remembered.” She smirked, and then seemed to be nervous, or perhaps a bit shy. “Actually, I came by to tell you that I wouldn’t be needing my potions.”

He frowned, and then his eyebrows nearly reached his hairline. “Something you wish to tell me, Mrs
Weasley?” He asked.

She blushed. “We’re … attempting.” She said simply.

“Attempting?”

She shrugged. “There’s been lots of my classmate’s who’ve had trouble.” She said. “Luna had to take a few potions just to be able to carry the twins for Harry and Draco.”

“Yes, I know.” Severus said. He brewed them for Miss Lovegood at Draco’s request. But then, there had already been a few requests for his fertility potion, one that was finally able to be presented and patented properly now that the war was truly over. “But neither you, nor Fred were hit with anything serious, to my knowledge.”

“We don’t know the effects of your spell.” She countered.

“Your mother was pregnant with Alastor months after she was placed under it.”

“Still.” She said. “It keeps out expectations low. I haven’t taken my contraceptive for a couple months.”

Severus stepped toward his daughter, understanding now why she was much more apprehensive about saying they were going to start a family. He kissed her forehead, a gesture he hadn’t done since before walking her down the aisle and giving her away. “You’re going to make a wonderful mother.” He promised her, and the slight smile to her quivering lips let him know it was exactly what she needed to hear.

—S—

“Severus,” Hermione said in a tone of voice that always belayed possible bad news. He lowered the newspaper, and turned to Hermione as she stood chewing her lip, twisting her fingers.

“Hermione.” He said, hoping she would come out with whatever it was she was afraid to say.

“It turns out I’m not in early menopause after all.”

He frowned, and then groaned, running a hand down his face. “Bloody hell.”

“Well, I always did say I wanted four! And really, it’s not as though Alastor is going to be sooo much older than his younger sibling.”

“I knew this would happen,” Severus said to himself, though loud enough for her to hear. “I knew. I hoped it would never be true, but here we are.”

“Severus?” She said, sounding more worried this time.

He sighed, put the paper down on the table by his chair, then stood and moved to his wife. He took her hands in his, and met her worried gaze.

“I was not supposed to tell you this, as she was going to say so this evening when we had Leonidas here as well, but Aurora needed a particular potion brewed for her, and the sooner the better.”
“What potion?” Hermione frowned.

“A supplement for pregnant witches.” He said, arching his brow, watching her expectantly.

For one brief moment, Hermione was elated. And then understanding came. “Oh Merlin, our grandchild will be the same age as….”

“I knew it was going to happen.” He said, leaving his stunned wife where she stood to go in the kitchen and fix himself a cup of tea. With a shot of fire whiskey to celebrate as much as it was to cope.

Leonidas

It had been ten years since the war, and there were still legends about the Great Dungeon Bat. And as Leonidas stood behind the door, adjusting his collar and his robes, he fully intended to make those legends live again.

He took his potions apprenticeship right out of Hogwarts, but while he enjoyed the work and was good, he realized his only options for work were teaching or working with his father. He had no intentions of opening a rival business, and while he was able to take over his father’s contracts with St Mungo’s, he didn’t want to be at the hospital all the time, either. So, he asked Aunt Min if Horace Slughorn wanted to go back into retirement, and found himself a job when she said she didn’t care if he did or not. After all, Hogwarts prided itself on being the best wizarding school in all of Europe, and in order to maintain the reputation, potions NEWTs and OWLs needed to be what they were when a Snape was teaching.

And so, Leo saw no option but to take on his father’s legacy, not that it was a daunting task in the least. He’d already adopted his father’s way of dressing, including the coloring. His hair was a bit longer than his father’s was, and his nose not hooked in the same way, but he still looked very similar to his Dad at the same age.

Enough that Professor Longbottom did a double take and stumbled back a bit.

Yes, he would likely have to teach his brother and soon-to-be sister, as well as his nephew. And Draco’s children. And yes, they might give away that he wasn’t the original Professor Snape returned. But for now, while the legends still lived, and some of the oldest students had the tales from elder siblings fresh in their minds, he would take up the mantel once more.

He banged open the door, startling his first batch of first years. “There will be no foolish wand-waving or silly incantations in this class…”

Ginny
“Oh, Bloody hell,” Ginny cursed, looking over the letter from home. Luna looked up from her notebook, ignoring the strange, exotic bird that had taken a liking to her since they entered the jungle a month ago. The cabin, one that also housed one Rolf Scamander who was also in search of crazy creatures, was just off a river and placed high in the trees.

Ginny hadn’t been sure about leaving the Holy Head Harpies for such an odd venture, but as far as athletes go, she’d been getting up there in age. She’d been injured too much to be fast, and while Ron retired to the shop with the twins, Ginny knew leaving the team would mean constant nagging from her mother to settle down like all her other siblings. Well, except Charlie. Which was what made her pack her bags and leave. If Charlie being in Romania meant freedom from their mother’s need for them to be all be married and procreating, then a tour of South America with Luna was just what she needed.

Along the way, she found herself writing articles and guides of the things she’d seen and learned about the locals and the sights. She ended up selling the stories, and the galleons she earned from it helped fund her end of the expedition.

“What is it?” Luna asked.

“Ron’s going to be a dad, now.” Ginny said, tossing the letter home on to the pile.

“But just last week you were excited for Fred and Rory? Why is Ron different?”

“Because now it’s only me left. Me and Charlie, and Mum wrote him off as a lost cause ages ago.”

“You could always just tell her that you don’t want children.” Luna said serenely, shrugging. “I don’t think it’s ever occurred to her that you wouldn’t.”

“Are you going to be there when I have this conversation with her?” Ginny asked, only being a little sarcastic.

Luna took her hand over the table and gave it a squeeze. “I’ll always be there for you Ginny.” She smiled, and Ginny felt just a bit better. “Oh, I think I smell cake. It’s nice of Rolf to bake us cake for breakfast.” She said, practically gliding as she skipped into the cabin to investigate the sweet smell in the air. The weird bird followed her inside, and Ginny merely shook her head before sipping her morning coffee and relaxing. Luna was right, she should just tell her mother the truth, or at least a good chunk of it.

Not wanting children or to settle down was one thing, the things she’d gotten up to on her little tour, well, those were best left unsaid.

Families

Severus and Hermione: Aurora (Weasley), Leonidas, Alastor, Lilia

Aurora and Fred: William and Gideon (plus another on the way)

Harry And Draco (With Luna as Birth Mother): James and Severus Malfoy-Potter

Sirius and Alan: Maeve
Tonks and Lupin: Teddy and Kingsley

Ron and Astoria: ???

All other families remain canon, so Bill and Fleur's children, George and Angelina's, etc.

Leonidas never marries, so he does not have children. Alastor and Lilia were too young to think that far ahead. Ginny and Luna are too busy having fun in the jungle to think of children, and may or may not have some of their own (together or separate, up to you guys to decide where you want that to go).

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