At the Headmaster's Discretion

by Desert_Sea

Summary

500 points from Gryffindor! The largest single point deduction in Hogwarts history. Headmaster Snape is determined to make Hermione Granger earn the points back . . . the hard way. But the big question is 'Why?'

Notes

A/N: So this Severus has been wanting to make himself known for a while. He is darker than any of my others so consider yourselves warned. The truth is that I won’t be able to write anything else until he has been allowed to express himself fully. Having said that, I will understand if people want to sit this one out. Dark Severus means there will be dark smut. But if you’re game, come with me on another ride . . . DSxx

P.S: Thanks to the lovelies who left final comments on Sense and Insensibility. I will respond directly soon but know that I love you. DSx

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Headmaster

They’re only books. Ink on fibre. Twenty six letters arranged this way and that, forming words that flow or stick or roll around one’s mouth and head. But each also happens to be an expression—always personal—a manifestation of the basic human need to communicate. And regardless of the author’s intention, the words give themselves away. Always.

Hermione Granger is an addict. Her fuse is lit easily. Anticipation is often enough. The promise of being opened up by the words of another she finds both cognitively thrilling and viscerally arousing. But the act of reading, itself, heightens her further. Some books she can simply absorb, her mind rendered porous by the gentle cajoling of a talented wordsmith. They take her swiftly, completely, and she returns from the literary abduction changed, often with a set of new memories, so vividly encoded that they feel like her own, new understandings to draw from without even having to engage. These are the shortcuts to experience, to life, that are sometimes, for Hermione, better than life, itself.

But when a book challenges her, as this one does. When the words grate and the meanings hide within themselves, requiring multiple attempts to unlock their secrets, she is helplessly bound. Her mind is not her own. Her body is not her own. She is both infected and incarcerated. And she welcomes it—being dragged into a world so deep and powerful, so savage that she will be left with scars. It is this evidence of suffering that she seeks. But also of healing. She needs it. She needs them both.

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Pressed against her ribcage, the book’s sharp corners prodded Hermione into action, infusing her tired steps with an urgency that was well and truly founded. It was Tuesday night after all. In fact it was Wednesday morning. Her curfew of 9pm had been and gone hours before, unnoticed. The air within the café basement had been loaded, thick and electric. Time hadn’t mattered. Nor had the obvious threat. What had mattered was meaning . . . and purpose . . . and transformation.

She had been amongst Muggles. A small group. Young men and women much like herself . . . mostly. Simply exchanging, postulating, marinating in thoughts and ideas, in a shared journey through books. And now this book. She lugs it, pressing it heavily against her side. She would have shrunk it but the burden had seemed appropriate. She’d secreted it, instead, under her transfigured robe—one that would allow her to blend with them, to shed her magical status for just one evening.

Why it mattered so much, Hermione wasn’t sure. It had always been made clear to her that a witch was superior to a Muggle. But somehow she wanted both. Both worlds. Her parents’ Obliviation and her separation from her earliest friendships had disconnected her from what she now recognised to be indelible roots. And the Mudblood/Muggle derision had only served to consolidate her deep-seated indignation.

She had begun seeking out opportunities to reconnect. Muggle café’s, bookshops, libraries. There had been brief exchanges . . . gazes brushing hers over steaming coffee cups, or skimming her like the glossy magazine pages. Sometimes she breached the antisocial skin and engaged in idle chat. She liked people—even watching them. She was, in fact, the consummate observer. But she wanted more.

The fortuitous flyer had been tacked to a café notice board. ‘Books in the Basement.’ Inviting like-minded souls to unite and appreciate. Ron would have thought her sad. Harry would have encouraged her. Both had moved on—Ron to what most considered a rather hopeful career in
Quidditch and Harry to Auror training.

Hermione’s return to seventh year, along with only a handful of others, had felt rather forced and hollow in the wake of so much destruction. The lessons remained engaging but there was no longer the anchor point of her friends—of their shared purpose. She was drifting. She had needed something. And she’d found it.

Her bi-monthly escape felt subversive and yet it wasn’t. It had been allowed. Professor McGonagall had sanctioned it and even negotiated a curfew with the other staff of 10pm. She had argued that Hermione’s ‘Head Girl’ status should allow her certain privileges.

But that had changed two meetings previous. She had returned at 11pm—as she had on at least three other occasions without incident. But this time she had been caught. Any reasonable person may have let her off with a warning. But this particular captor had not been so inclined. In fact, she doubted Professor Snape had been inclined to moderacy ever.

He had materialised out of the shadows, looming over her like a Dementor before spitting the time in her face. His iron grip upon her arm had not let up until he’d dragged her to Professor McGonagall’s chambers to demonstrate how misguided the older woman’s trust had been. The punishment had been a humiliating apology in front of the entire school. As headmaster, he’d stood imperiously beside her, his black eyes seeming to drink in her degradation.

So why had she done it again?

There wasn’t an easy answer. And this admission Hermione found mortifying. She could provide little explanation beyond the desire to indulge her nebulous needs. Professor McGonagall had argued for her to be given a second chance, a tightened curfew, and she’d betrayed her trust . . . again.

Hermione’s heart knocked against her chest wall, as though attempting to alert her to her obvious shortcomings, reminding her of how much trouble she could be in, or perhaps it just wanted to escape while it still could. The castle, shrouded in a collar of mist, seemed more ominous as a result. Hermione took the front steps two at a time, her hand resting upon the cold brass handle as she drew a steadying breath.

Her hope was that the extent of her curfew breach would ensure that everyone but Filch was asleep. She had been given her own room at the start of the year and could navigate there quickly and quietly. It had seemed like a reasonably sane plan. Until now.

Hermione cracked the door open, peering into the gloom, before nudging her body slowly through the gap. She had mastered the art of creeping with Harry and Ron. Even Ron had become quite adept. Casting a silencing incantation was always an option but the way that it hollowed out the air around objects could be identifiable to a practised ear. She preferred to creep.

Soundlessly, Hermione tiptoed up the stairs. She’d worked out how to cushion her footfalls to prevent scuffing against the stone such that it was muffled against even her own ear. Reaching the top, she congratulated herself on her efforts before being struck in the throat.

“Don’t. Move.”

She would have cried out if not for the shock of trying to swallow as her throat rattled like a drainpipe.

She choked.

“Miss Granger,” a voice hissed in her ear. “You have one chance to explain yourself.”
What felt like a wand continued to constrict her airway. Twisting her head, she felt his breath on her face, but she could see nothing.

“I . . . I’m sorry, headmaster” she rasped. “I didn’t—”

“Enough!”

The side of his hand pressed roughly against her mouth.

“You clearly consider yourself beyond reproach . . . above rules and regulations, no matter how much they have been distorted to accommodate you. Your flagrant disregard for this school, its staff and the students for whom you are supposed to be a mentor is reprehensible. I am therefore left with no option but to impose . . . the heaviest of sanctions.”

A bright light suddenly blinded her. She lifted her hands to shield her eyes but he grasped her wrists and slammed them against the wall.

“Give me your wand.” His words buffeted her face.

“I can’t . . . I need to reach—”

“Where is it?”

“My pocket.”

“Which . . . one.”

“Jeans. Back.”

She stiffened as he suddenly released one wrist to slip his hand behind her. He could have asked her to turn, or simply to retrieve it herself, but he didn’t, seemingly determined to execute the confiscation himself. The sensation of him leaning over her, his malevolent black eyes roving her features as his fingers trailed across the denim of her buttocks, felt disturbingly claustrophobic but she didn’t dare object.

Suddenly he withdrew, her wand now in his hand.

“What are you carrying?”

Her breath caught.

“It’s . . . nothing.”

He pursed his lips with derision. “Even you are above that, Miss Granger.”

Using his wand, he lifted her robe aside to reveal the book clamped against her ribs.

“Give it to me.”

“But—”

He quickly relocated the wand to her throat. “You mistake me for someone who wishes to . . . negotiate.”

Swallowing with difficulty, Hermione reluctantly handed over the book. He didn’t look at it, focusing on keeping his wand trained against her jugular.
“From now on you will not be permitted to leave the school grounds for any reason. You will not be permitted correspondence with anyone outside of Hogwarts. And . . . I will be subtracting five hundred house points from Gryffindor.”

“What?!”

“Perhaps you will look beyond your own selfish desires in the future,” he sneered.

“But . . . that’s insane! I have returned late twice! I’m nineteen for Merlin’s sake, I’m not a child!”

“You suppose I haven’t noticed?”

_Noticed?_ Hermione squirmed self-consciously as his gaze drifted lazily down her.

He leaned in closer. “I have noticed that you have returned late _five_ times. Not two. You fail to realise, Miss Granger. That I . . . know . . . everything.”

Hermione’s chest ached with despair. “But you’re punishing the whole of Gryffindor for my mistakes. That isn’t fair.”

“What isn’t fair,” he jabbed his large nose at her, “is the fact that the student who should be most trusted in this school, who has been awarded the position of highest regard for that very reason, who should be modelling the behaviours that we expect from not only a final year, but an ‘adult’ in her very own words, and whom should be looking out for the best interests of both her house and her fellow students, has chosen to pursue her own interests on multiple occasions, and resulted in the largest point deduction in Hogwarts history.” His voice that had been gradually swelling suddenly dropped to a whisper. “They have every reason to despise you.”

With a final spiteful twist of his lips, he extinguished his wand and swept away into the darkness.

Hermione slid down the wall. And wept.

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The next day Hermione lay low. Door locked, she read, completed assignments and took a few miserable bites of the stale cauldron cakes that Mrs Weasley had sent her a week or two before. There were a few knocks on her door but she didn’t answer them. She’d nearly opened it for Ginny until her friend had mentioned the point deduction and cried ‘What the hell happened?’ through the keyhole.

She would have sought out Professor McGonagall but it had been clear that the Gryffindor house mistress had done everything she was prepared to do after Hermione’s previous transgression.

Whichever way she looked at it, Hermione couldn’t see a solution beyond approaching Snape and begging for an opportunity to redeem herself. She couldn’t allow the deduction to stand. It was an impossibility. She would never be able to show her face again in the Great Hall and she certainly couldn’t look the younger students in the eye—those who had achieved, those who had strived to do their best for Gryffindor, only to have her squander it all. The thought made her physically ill.

She waited for an hour after dinner had finished, then dressed in her school uniform. He was already questioning her loyalty to the school, so she hoped that it would amount to a small appeasement. Wrapping a robe around her shoulders, she appraised herself in the mirror, searching for her most contrite expression. Despite her inherent dislike and distrust of him, she would have to swallow her pride and do as she was told.
He might even surprise her. Harry had forgiven him . . . there must be some good in the man.

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“Who is it?” His voice rang out clearly from behind the door.

“Hermione Granger.” She attempted to make even her name sound repentant.

“What do you want?”

“I . . . uh . . . may I speak with you please?”

Hearing an audible sigh, Hermione bit her lip, waiting for the rejection. Instead the lock popped and the door creaked open. Pausing, Hermione leaned forward a fraction, wondering if she was supposed to enter.

“Hurry up,” he snapped. “Unless you wish to converse from out there.”

Hermione quickly slipped inside and closed the door behind her.

He was sitting at his desk, scribing on a piece of parchment with a black quill. He didn’t look up.

She waited.

When he didn’t acknowledge her, she quietly cleared her throat.

After another full minute, he stopped writing to spear his quill into its holder and cross his arms. Finally he regarded her, his countenance one of unmitigated disdain.

“Well?” The upward jerk of his eyebrows punched home the question.

“Oh . . . um.” Hermione averted her eyes, blinking to compose herself. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m truthfully extremely—”

“I’m not interested in your apology. It changes nothing.”

Hermione’s mouth hovered open, trying to reform into other words that she hadn’t prepared.

“If that’s all?” He uncrossed his arms, reaching for his quill.

“No, I . . .” Hermione scrambled. “I hoped you might afford me an opportunity . . . to earn the points back.”

He halted, his outstretched fingers twitching slightly before returning to tuck under his bicep.

“In what manner?”

“Well, I thought perhaps I could do some extra tuition? Or additional assignments? I could even clean—perhaps the potions storeroom needs rearranging or . . . something else? I could help staff to prepare for classes or—”

“Has it escaped your notice that this is supposed to constitute a punishment?”

Hermione looked taken aback. “I don’t—”

“No doubt extra assignments would set you in the pit of despair, Miss Granger,” he sniped sarcastically. “Extra tuition would have you delirious with remorse.”
Hermione opened her mouth to respond but nothing came out.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

Her brow creased as she regarded her clothing in confusion. “This is my uniform.”

“I am aware . . . My question is, why are you wearing it? No senior student would wear their uniform at this time of night.”

It was true. It had been a mistake. “I’m not sure. I just thought—”

“Did you want to show me something?”

It took a moment for his words to sink in. Her eyes flickered up to his face which betrayed nothing before she looked away. “No, sir.”

“Are you . . . positive?”

Her mouth was desert dry. Her heart thrashed wildly. *Had she tried to appeal to him in that way? Subconsciously?* It didn’t seem likely.

But perhaps this was it. The compromise. The punishment.

“I don’t think so. But . . .

“But?” He shifted slightly in his seat.

“Is there something . . . you would wish to see?” She forced herself to look at him.

His jaw rolled subtly, as though he was sucking a boiled sweet. “Lift your skirt.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at his directness. Her hands hung limply by her sides, unsure of how to move, where to move. This was so far from what she had ever expected—a level of intimacy that made no sense to her at all. It was like flirting with a shark. *Could she do it? Was it worth it?*

She was well aware that once she did it, she couldn’t undo it. They would be indelibly bound by that moment. *Could she ever face him again?*

But then she thought about the students—all the others she would have to face if she did nothing. At least if they saw the points returning, knowing she was earning them back, they might start to forgive her. And it wasn’t as though he would tell anyone. It would stay between them. Their dirty little secret. Until she got her N.E.W.Ts and she could tell him in no uncertain terms to go screw himself.

Hands trembling slightly, Hermione grasped the front of her skirt and scrunched it in her fists before lifting. The woollen fabric grazed against her bare legs as she slowly brought it up, stopping just before she reached her knickers. She felt herself swaying with the labour of her breathing.

His eyes were down there. Staring. Her cheeks burned.

Then the fingers hooked around his arm flexed slightly and he lifted his chin. “Higher.”

She closed her eyes momentarily before continuing to expose herself. She couldn’t even remember what knickers she’d put on that morning. It could be any pair.

As she lifted, he watched her like a hawk, lips pressing together almost imperceptibly as her knickers—black when she glanced down—were revealed. She stopped at her waist, holding her skirt with
white-knuckled fists, her legs jellified as he continued to stare. She didn’t imagine it could be particularly fascinating but he kept her like that for an excruciatingly long time before his gaze finally dragged up to rest upon her face.

“Five points to Gryffindor.”

She exhaled shakily as she dropped her skirt. “Thankyou.”

Neither moved.

“Another twenty five if you . . . touch yourself.”

“Touch?” She tried to read his face.

“Masturbate.”

“Oh.”

“Over me.”

“Oh.”

Her second ‘Oh’ was high pitched and strangled. Masturbate over him? She could barely tolerate speaking to him. What made him think she would be that desperate? And shouldn’t he be concerned that she would tell someone? He could be totally disgraced, lose his position at Hogwarts. He might even face prosecution. Why would he take such a risk?

But, then again, who would believe her? After receiving one of Hogwarts’ most extreme punishments the previous day, it may simply appear as an attempt to discredit him. No doubt that’s what he would claim.

“I could scrub cauldrons?”

“No.”

“I don’t mind working hard.”

“I expect you to work hard.”

She stared at him. Surely there was something else she could do. Anything.

“Can’t I do something else?” She could hear the note of pleading in her voice.

“No. Traditional punishments are either easy or enjoyable for you,” he stated simply.

She was desperate to object but unfortunately his appraisal was accurate. She enjoyed working hard, physically and mentally. She enjoyed helping people. She didn’t even mind writing out lines—it had become rather meditative in the end.

But he was offering her twenty five points for what?—the most improper and personal exchange she had ever endured? What would she have to do for the entire five hundred? Did she even want to know?

Hermione felt the agony playing out on her face and he clearly seemed to be enjoying it, black eyes shining as he reclined in his seat to watch her. If she declined the offer, she would be stuck with a four hundred and ninety five point deficit, attracting uniform hatred from her housemates for the
remainder of her time at Hogwarts. If she accepted, she would have to endure something excruciating but of limited duration.

Releasing a shuddering sigh, she reached for the clasp to her robe.

“Where do you want me?”
Snape’s long fingers interlaced before his chin, his steepled index fingers a target that he levelled at her before delivering his instructions.

“Take off your top and knickers. Your skirt and shirt can remain on . . . Then come to me.”

Hermione eyed him warily. Those words—so exceedingly improper to pass between a Headmaster and student—rolled off his tongue too easily. How often had he said them before? What exactly had he done to people in his past? As a Death Eater?

As he sat there, elbows balanced elegantly on the arms of his chair, Hermione considered the black frame of his arms, buttoned to the hilt, hiding everything beneath including the Dark Mark. It felt like a metaphor for his entire existence. The concealment of his true identity as a spy, his shady past under Voldemort’s tutelage, his closed off, obstructive demeanour. Why had he even returned to Hogwarts after everything that had happened?

Hermione realised that she was as angry with him as she was afraid. The severity of his punishment did not fit her transgression whatsoever. But she had been stupid enough to invite his wrath—twice. And it was also she who had approached him about redeeming the massive point deficit. She didn’t seem to have a lot of choice over how the penalty would be meted out, but what she could choose was the manner in which she responded—the level of fear that she showed him. And she was determined to show none. He got off on it. She knew that. And he would be looking to get off on a lot more judging by the intensity of his hard, black gaze that continued to bore into her from across the room.

She had been through a lot in recent years. She’d been forced to Obliviate her own parents for fuck’s sake. What was the worst he could do? Hermione chose not to contemplate the answer as she suspected that her own frame of reference for such things was not even in the same ballpark as his.

With quick, efficient movements, she did as instructed. Her eyes strayed away from his, sitting up to his right. He’d removed the portraits. In fact, apart from the books, the entire room was depressingly bare, far moreso than when Dumbledore had occupied the space. Less personality. Less warmth. Less . . . soul.

After removing her knickers, she tossed them on top of her cloak and jumper—nonchalantly she hoped—then approached him, standing before the desk, hands clasped behind her back in a manner that belied the thunderous beating of her heart.

“I want you on the desk. Standing.”

Her eyes widened in alarm.

“You will climb up from this side.”

His hands unclasped and one sank down to grasp the arm of his chair. The thumb and ring finger of the other hand delicately touched together in what looked like anticipation.

Hermione couldn’t help closing her eyes momentarily, an attempt to reframe what was going on, to reaffirm her confidence in being able to deal with the situation. Her stomach was roiling, and it wasn’t just fear, she was starving, the stale cauldron cakes were all she’d managed to consume. She knew she couldn’t face entering the Great Hall without having restored at least some of the deficit and earned back a fraction of her housemates’ trust. So for the sake of eating . . . and tolerating the
remainder of her time at Hogwarts, she would do it. She had to.

Opening her eyes and keeping them carefully trained on him as though he were a snake liable to strike, she rounded the desk until she was standing directly beside him. His gaze lingered on her for a moment before he waved a hand, relocating the parchment, quill and ink to a neat pile to the side, before nodding for her to proceed.

No doubt he expected her to kneel awkwardly on the desk, her bare arse in his face, before rising to her feet. But Hermione ran every morning—she’d devised a course of obstacles that she climbed or leaped over on her track by the lake. So she simply placed a hand on the desk and vaulted up, exposing nothing.

Turning, she looked down expecting to see the familiar grim fury on his pale face. Instead his lips twitched with rare amusement. She doubted, however, that he had anything particularly humorous in store for her.

“I’m going to blindfold you.”

Fuck!

“Why?” She could hear the shivery fear in her voice.

“It is required. It will enable you to concentrate.”

“What if I fall?”

“I’ll be here.”

What did that mean? She would fall on him? He would watch and laugh?

It happened so quickly that she had no time to react. One moment she could see, the next she couldn’t.

The sensation of being up high and now blind was extremely disorientating. She already felt as though she was falling. Her arms flung out from her sides to steady herself.

“Just breathe. Take a moment to adjust.”

His words came from below her. Again, delivered with such instructional authority that she couldn’t help suspecting that she wasn’t the first. She shivered.

His chair creaked. Silence. It creaked again.

What was he doing?

“Move forward. Slowly. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

Her entire body tensed. He was ordering her to trust him—instructing her to act against every single instinct that was currently blaring its dire warning through her psyche. She didn’t trust him. And she was beginning to suspect that the mental torment that she felt was quite intentional.

“Don’t be afraid.”

His voice had softened. Had that been his special role? Was it he who had gained their trust? Weaving his hypnotic spell with words alone? With that voice? Lulling them to submission before the torture, before the end?
“Closer.”

She held her breath. Her toes edged forward a fraction. She shuffled one foot toward him and then the other. It felt too far. Too close.

An iron hand clamped around her ankle and she cried out.

“Enough.” The word was whisper quiet.

His hand instantly vacated, but the skin on her leg was left prickling with gooseflesh.

She was breathing through her mouth. Oxygen was in short supply.

“Tuck up your skirt,” he instructed. “Into your waistband.”

He could probably see up her skirt already—he was directly below her after all. She suspected he’d also shifted his chair further into the desk recess beneath her. She imagined his breath on her thighs.

Reluctantly she lifted the front of her skirt again, feeling the cool air creep over her exposed skin, even chilling her generously-covered mons as she tucked the material into her waistband.

“Pull your shirt down . . . tight.”

Slipping her hand down the front of her skirt, Hermione yanked the fabric of her shirt down.

“Tighter.”

Biting her lip she repeated the gesture with a jerk of irritation.

She definitely felt it that time. The tickle of breath. Against the inside of her knee.

“Spread your legs.”

She shook her head faintly. Twenty-five fucking points. She should have bargained for more—much more. Shit. Hissing out an exasperated breath, she finally slid one foot sideways, and then the other.

“Keep . . . going.”

It was excruciating—every moment of that slow, exposing reveal brought his face closer and closer to her frighteningly open apex. But she did it.

“Well done.”

She released the breath she’d been holding. Somehow the gentle praise brought her a soothing sense of accomplishment.

“What?”

“When you come—do you squirt?”

A word like ‘squirt’ didn’t belong in Snape’s vernacular under any circumstances. And in this context it was so vulgar, so dirty, that it shocked her.
“No, of course not,” she muttered, her face burning with humiliation.

“When you orgasm, it’s not possible that I will . . . taste it?”

She opened her mouth but only a rasping wheeze emerged.

“Pity.” The word faded, as though he were turning away.

There was further creaking from his chair.

“Show me how you pleasure yourself, Miss Granger.” His voice had dropped impossibly low, drifting up from below her like smoke, curling into her so that her abdomen squirmed. “Thrill me.”

She hesitated. She could kick him in the face instead. But where would that get her? Expelled? He hadn’t forced her there. He wasn’t keeping her there. This was her choice. So why did she feel trapped?

Because he knew that she was too stubbourn, too desperate, and too . . . Gryffindor to back down.

Clamping her teeth firmly together, she slowly lifted her right hand and brought it around to her front. The curls of her bush trembled beneath her fingertips but she proceeded downward, sliding her index finger into her slit and locating her clitoris. Feeling like her joints had been welded together, she began to rub.

After a few strokes, she heard him inhale deeply. “You’re very restrained.”

What the fuck did he expect? And if he thought that pointing it out would help, he was mistaken.

Suddenly she felt his fingers on her wrist. “This is too tight.”

He pressed into both sides and it hurt but she felt something release. “Better.”

Hermione took a shuddering breath—the way she did after she had been crying for a prolonged period—but was recovering. It was a peculiar realisation.

She continued to rub, expecting it to be dry and detached but it wasn’t, the heightened awareness afforded by the blindfold, the sense of him watching her so closely seemed to automatically draw the liquid from her, like the sweat that was already gathering under her armpits. It became warm and extremely fluid quickly. Too quickly.

“You seem rather enamoured with your clitoris.”

She wished he would shut up.

“Your efforts are so very unobtrusive. So . . . superficial. Do you never venture inside? There is so much more happening in those depths, Miss Granger. So much to explore. I can see it from here.”

Her mouth sprang open again. More air was needed.

There was a strange susurration from below. Light. Like a gentle chuckle through his nose.

Something brushed her inner thigh. Fingertips? Hair? Or was it—

“This is why female arousal is so enticing.”

She felt the touch again, further up, closer to the hand that continued to jiggle at her nub—the one
desperately trying to get her off, to get her out of there.

“Male arousal is so bold. So overt. There’s no mistaking the intention of a man’s cock at full mast. It seeks to dominate, to invade, to . . . plunder.”

She felt each word enacting just that . . . each deeply visceral penetration.

“And yet a female’s desire is to make it so—to encourage his violent discharge into her. Her entire body drives it.”

Hermione was desperate to disagree. She felt strangely offended by the suggestion.

“Even now, your nipples seek to betray you—so audaciously erect under that shirt.”

She tipped her head forward stupidly as though she could see.

“They anticipate and urge the rub of his chest. They seek the attention of his hands, his . . . mouth.”

The final word was delivered with so much tongue, she could almost taste it. She had never imagined Snape so lascivious . . . so loquacious. The effect was completely disorienting, both disturbing and arousing such that she felt her legs starting to shudder under the weight of it all.

“Even that clitoris that you’re troubling so relentlessly amounts to little more than a hopeful bystander—its desperate erection simply increasing its chances of being caught in the crush, of being pounded as he heaves himself into you.”

Hermione could feel herself floating dangerously.

“But it is what you would seek to hide that is most compelling—the pot of nectar that glistens before me now, ready to grease his phallus, to receive him, to usher him directly into your tight heat, the enticement so absolute that he must return, more desperately each time.”

Hermione’s hips rocked despite herself, a moan escaped her as her fingers sped up.

“The manipulation is ingeniously covert, executed deep inside.” His words came faster. “The artful grasp—the hold that you have upon him. Each flexion urges him closer, each suck and moan pulling him in until he is helplessly trapped, bound to give up his bounty, his reckless load.”

Hermione’s head pitched forward, her jaw fell open as her body prepared for her release.

“You are responsible for it.” He ground out darkly. “For making . . . him . . . come.”

Suddenly something was thrust up inside her.

Hermione was too close to stop, she cried out as she came, her pussy dissolving around what felt like a single long digit deeply embedded, moving against the tide of her stuttering pelvis. The darkness meant that her world was filled with urgent gasps—her own—her body was bucking enough to pitch her over the edge. And still his finger remained boldly rooted inside her, driving into the waves of her orgasm until she heaved to a shuddering halt. Then he withdrew and Hermione was left feeling utterly depleted, ragged breaths wracking her body, her mind swirling with a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts and emotions.

He was silent.

She didn’t want to face him. Not after that. Not after what he’d done . . . what she’d done.
But she needed to leave—to get as far away from him as possible.

Reaching up, she removed the blindfold, blinking into the lamplight.

Despite her reservations about facing him, Hermione was shocked to see Snape between her legs, head bent over the parchment, his calm, fluid quillstrokes continuing as though she weren’t there, as though she’d never been there.

She stared at his hands. One index finger glistened with her juices. He hadn’t wiped it off.

She wanted to know why. She wanted to ask what the fuck he thought he was doing. But he seemed so consumed in his task that, absurdly, she didn’t feel compelled to disturb him.

Instead, she dropped the blindfold beside his hand, turned and vaulted off the far side of his desk. Walking on stiff, unsteady legs, she crouched down and picked up her clothes before heading for the door.

“Twenty points to Gryffindor.”

She turned. “I beg your pardon?”

“Twenty points only.” He didn’t look at her, continuing to write. “You could have given . . . more.” Then the hand that was doused in her orgasm picked up the blindfold and curled into a fist, his pale knuckles releasing an audible ‘crack’.

Hermione stared. She was absolutely incensed but she was also completely overwhelmed. Feeling hot tears prickling her eyes, she turned and departed, hugging her clothes tightly to her chest.
Hermione averted her eyes from the house point hourglasses on her way to the Great Hall the following morning. Witnessing the dismal pile of rubies, unceremoniously drained, would do little to improve her mood. In fact, after everything that had happened, she considered that there was very little that would make her feel better beyond a gargantuan bowl of porridge. But as she passed through the hall, the progressive build-up of accusing stares, the cheery conversations that fell to sniggers and furtive whispers in her wake, instantly twisted her stomach.

She felt the weight of collective disappointment as she approached the Gryffindor table. A number of students shifted to give her room. It was only when she sat that she realised they had left, the vacant penumbra around her only adding to her humiliation.

Sighing, she spooned porridge into her bowl, pouring over milk and a drizzle of honey.

“You’ve got balls,” Ginny muttered in her ear before sliding into the seat beside her.

Hermione’s gaze flickered from her bowl to survey the rows of faces that were conspicuously turned but still obviously watching.

“I heard you broke curfew.” Ginny kept her voice low as she tore a piece of toast in half. “It wasn’t that book group again was it?”

Hermione snatched up her spoon. “I really don’t feel like discussing it at the moment, Gin.”

Ginny eyed her, taking a bite of toast and chewing it. “I hope it was worth it,” she remarked thickly.

Hermione scooped up a mound of porridge and blew hard on it, sending flecks flying onto the table. “Of course it wasn’t worth it. I just didn’t consider . . .”

Unable to finish, she suddenly shoved the porridge in her mouth, the steaming lump nearly choking her, forcing her to quickly pour a glass of pumpkin juice.

“If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you had a death wish,” muttered Ginny. “I mean, after what happened the first time, didn’t you think Snape would have it in for you?”

At the mention of his name, Hermione’s eyes strayed across to the staff table. He was sipping from a mug, little finger cocked slightly, eyes roving across the crowded room. She looked away just before his gaze met hers.

“I didn’t expect it to be that . . . extreme.”

Ginny popped more toast into her mouth. “Five hundred points? I’ll say that’s pretty bloody extreme.”
Hermione didn’t respond. She could feel the tell-tale heat rolling up from her throat as the memories flooded back. Since returning to her room the previous evening she’d thought of little else, replaying the sensation of his slick finger penetrating her over and over again. She could feel it now.

“There was a meeting in the Gryffindor common room last night,” Ginny informed her. “Everyone was really upset. They want to know what you’re going to do.” She ducked her head, trying to catch her friend’s eye.

“I’m going to earn the points back,” Hermione murmured.

“All of them?” Ginny’s eyes widened as she slowly wiped her mouth on a napkin. “How?”

Hermione’s gaze returned to Snape who was now watching her overtly. Others in the hall had also noticed the headmaster’s stony appraisal of the head girl. Everyone knew that he had her number. And he wanted them to know.

“Just tell them . . .” Hermione turned to Ginny. “Tell them I’m getting the points back.”

***

Two days passed and Hermione was still unable to bring herself to return to Snape’s office. Just thinking about it flooded her body with hot sensory gushes that were both confusing and disturbing. She was disgusted by him. There was no doubt that she found his behaviour abhorrent. But there was also a part of her that found his actions so shocking that she became damp just thinking about them. His unwavering confidence was part of it. That and his words. Normally such explicit revelations would render a person vulnerable. But not Snape. They made him seem bizarrely knowledgeable, even if she found much of it offensive. And the style of delivery—low and aggressive, meant that she was having trouble dislodging his deep resonance from her auditory memory, like schizophrenic utterances, urging her to do things to herself.

She was scared of him. And he knew it. But she was also a Gryffindor so it wasn’t an insurmountable barrier. The main issue, however, was that she was also scared of herself, of discovering that she wasn’t the person she thought she was, the person she wanted to be, that everyone knew her to be—Gryffindor’s golden girl.

But maybe Ginny had been right about her death wish. She’d been fully aware of the risks, and yet she’d given up that golden mantle—killed it off—with little consideration in the end. Could she have even brought this upon herself . . . purposefully?

***

There were only seven of them. Seven had returned for Seventh year. They were all close and so none sought to make her predicament worse. Still, Hermione timed her arrival at classes to avoid conversation as much as possible. She knew she was failing as a friend, as head girl, and her swotty student status was also at risk. But she didn’t feel capable of addressing any of her shortcomings at that moment. It was terrifying to think it had taken only three days . . . three days for everything to fall apart.

She entered the potions classroom late.

“Miss Granger.”

Her heart stopped.

What was he doing here?
“I would have considered tardiness a transgression that you would be at pains to avoid under the current circumstances.”

She stood motionless, staring. *No point deductions. Please. No points.*

“Sit. Down.”

Moving swiftly, Hermione made her way to a desk, tucking her skirt self-consciously around her legs as she sat.

When she looked up, Snape was watching her. Everyone else would have observed a meaningful glare. She saw heat. And she wasn’t imagining it.

His eyes finally left her.

“Prior to being rudely interrupted, I had been in the process of informing you of Professor Slughorn’s absence. Thus, I will be teaching this class until further notice.” He began to pace slowly, hands locked behind his back. “I understand that you have been working your way through the Advanced Potions text. I would, therefore, expect you all be able to brew a quality Depilatory potion.”

Hermione saw Neville’s eyes widen in alarm.

“Without . . . a recipe,” Snape finished.

There was a collective inhalation but no one dared inform him that it was unlikely.

“Get on with it,” Snape commanded sharply, turning toward the blackboard before flicking his wand across it to reveal the potion name and functional requirements.

Hermione had a reasonable idea of what to do. She’d never brewed that particular potion before but she’d read the text book enough to recall a significant part of the recipe.

Collecting her ingredients from the store room, she returned and began her preparation, pulling the petals off a calendula flower with her fingertips.

“You’re fortunate that this preparation calls for a delicate touch,” Snape murmured as he peered over her shoulder. She tensed so much that her fingers turned stiff and clumsy. “I doubt you could manage anything more . . . robust.”

She knew he was referring to her masturbatory efforts. He was taunting her. She didn’t respond. *What could she say?* Sweeping away, he proceeded to throw blunt, mainly derogatory, remarks at her classmates as they attempted to deduce the instructions to a potion most had likely never read. Hermione chewed her bottom lip, conjuring the image of the book page that the potion was written on. Her photographic memory had always served her well but the cyclic return of Snape’s looming presence was still incredibly distracting.

Working quickly, Hermione finally had all of her ingredients prepared and began adding them to the cauldron, stirring gently with the stirring rod. Suddenly a large hand clamped around hers.

“Counter . . . clockwise.”

She looked up with a gasp. His face was mere inches from hers. He moved her hand in the opposite direction, his forearm flexing against hers, bicep against her shoulder. The sensation of his body moving against hers set her heart to warp speed.
“Aren’t you fortunate that I came at precisely the right moment?”

The emphasis on ‘came’ wasn’t lost on her.

She blinked, then spoke quietly, “Thank you, Professor.” His upper lip curled into a faint smirk before he finally released her and moved away.

Hermione closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead with her fingers, trying to calm herself. He was determined to fuck her up. She knew it. And she of all people should have the mental fortitude to withstand it. But still the sensation of his touch stayed with her, a tangible residue of the most intimidating presence she’d ever known.

Mercifully she managed to complete the remainder of the potion without having to engage with him further. But as she looked around at the other cauldrons she noticed that none of the brews looked the same. Luna shrugged at her and Hermione subtly shook her head in response.

“Disappointing does not come close to describing the sum total of your efforts today.” Snape frowned at them from the front of the room. “Utterly pathetic would be far more accurate.”

He advanced slowly toward them.

“Only one potion was a success—that belonging to Miss Granger.”

She felt a tiny bit of relief flood into her. Points reward. Please. More Points.

“And that was only because I was able to step in to avert yet another disaster.”

Bugger.

“Clear this muck away. Now.” He swept his hand dismissively across the cauldrons. “Everyone except . . . you.” He pointed a long finger directly at Hermione.

Her lips moved subtly around the silent word, ‘shit’.

Snape crossed his arms, his ominous glare sufficient to herd everyone silently from the room.

The door closed.

And then there were two.

His black gaze returned to her.

She held it. There was little else she could do.

“Am I to assume,” his index finger trailed lightly up and down his bicep, “that you are no longer seeking to redeem your deducted house points?”

“No, sir,” Hermione responded.

“No, sir what? Is my assumption incorrect, or have you chosen to allow the deficit to remain?”

“I . . . I wish to continue to redress my errors but . . .”

“But?” He lingered dangerously over the word.

“I would ask that you inform me before doing anything like . . . like you did last time.”
His finger stopped tracking and flexed into the muscle of his upper arm. “You will have to remind me.”

Hermione’s gaze dropped to the floor with her stomach. Why did he have to make everything so bloody difficult?

She took a deep breath. “You put your finger inside me—without warning and without permission. I would ask that you don’t do it again.”

He stared at her, eyes shuttering slightly. She wasn’t sure how to interpret it. A concession?

“No.”

She was taken aback. “But—”

“Miss Granger, your issue is clearly one of control. You manage people and circumstances to ensure that your control is not threatened. Your flagrant disregard for the rules of this school indicates that you have taken your sense of power in that regard to new heights. I will not allow you to control proceedings in my domain.”

Hermione couldn’t quite believe that in ‘his domain’, her rights didn’t matter.

“You can’t just do with me as you wish,” she demanded.

“You’ve masturbated since.”

Her eyes jagged up to his before flicking away.

“Did you penetrate yourself?”

Hermione couldn’t look at him but knew that he would be absorbing her red flush like a vampire.

“How many fingers?”

Her jaw stuttered open.

“How many fingers, Miss Granger?”

“Two.”

“Of course,” he murmured, taking a step toward her. “This is how you respond when I challenge you, Miss Granger—when you accept your punishment. Do you understand?”

She drew a shuddering inhalation before delivering a small nod.

“I will, therefore, satisfy your need for redemption by affording you another opportunity.”

A desperate voice in her head was screaming at her to get out. But there was another part, even more determined, that wanted her to stay . . . that needed it.

“Knickers and skirt off.”

In some ways she felt she no longer had control over her limbs. It was as though she was bound to follow his directive. By choosing to be there, she was choosing this.

Fingers trembling slightly, she released the buttons of her skirt and dragged it down with her
knickers, noting with some embarrassment the significant wet patch in her gusset. Stepping out of them, she folded both quickly before placing them on her chair.

When she straightened, Snape was closer.

“It would be a shame to waste that perfect potion.” His eyes went to her cauldron. “Use your fingers to apply it.”

“What?”

“For functional rather than aesthetic purposes . . . I want your pubic hair removed.”

She glared at him incredulously.

“Twenty points.”

*Twenty points?*

It was as much as she’d been awarded for masturbating. *But this was worse wasn’t it?* It felt more extreme. Then again, it would grow back . . . *wouldn’t it?*

“Unless you would prefer for me to do it?” His eyes were on her bush.

“No,” she responded quickly.

“Then make haste.” He turned away. “I have other business to attend to.”

Hermione watched as he made his way over to the desk to consult a small book.

Her gaze returned to the cauldron. She really wanted the points. It had been too long since her initial gain. But she was also fearful of what conceding would mean, what sordid plans she would be agreeing to by taking that step. Wriggling her fingers nervously, she blew out a long breath. She could leave at any time. This cage was of her own making. Not his. She just needed to remember that.

Tentatively, she moved forward and dipped her hand into the pale pink mixture. Scooping up a little, she brought it to her quivering mons. *What was the worst that could happen?* Again, she chose not to answer, quickly daubing the creamy fluid over her springy coils and watching them literally disappear. Returning for more, she continued the application until the entire area, including her labia, was smooth and bare. It looked so clean . . . so . . . young.

“Nowhere to hide now . . . Miss Granger.”

Hermione looked up to see that he had cleared off the desk and was sitting casually on the corner of it.

“Come here.” His hand slid from his thigh to rest upon the desk. “Show me exactly what you have learned . . . and I will give you thirty points.”

Thirty points. That was fifty points total. Ten per cent of her deficit all at once. It was significant—enough to show the others that she was trying.

Despite the intense embarrassment that was already twisting her insides, she comforted herself somewhat with the knowledge that she had already been through this with him before. It was nothing he hadn’t seen . . . except that, as he’d indicated, there would be no chance of hiding . . . anything.
Moving quickly before she lost her nerve, Hermione made her way over to the desk.

“All fours.”

She stopped, scanning the desk top to assess what he was asking of her. It was going to be physically uncomfortable kneeling on the hard wood, and with only one arm to support her, the pressure on her knees was going to be extreme.

“Can I possibly transfigure my skirt?” she asked. “To provide a little padding?”

Snape stood. “I doubt you would have much success after being stripped of your wand.”

Locking eyes with her, he brought his hands to his chest and, without a word, began unbuttoning his coat—long, nimble fingers rippling down his front. Hermione realised then that she had never seen him without it—rain, hail or shine. Until now.

With a flourish he removed it, draping the thick garment over the desk before proceeding to unbutton the cuffs of his white shirt, rolling each over with a smooth flick to expose his pale wrists. Each action conveyed a sense of economy, of ominous preparation. The fear rose again. But with her trepidation, Hermione was shocked to feel a tiny spark of something else . . . Excitement? Anticipation?

He inclined his head to the desk and she swallowed hard before placing her palms on the smooth surface, lifting one knee and then the other onto it. Crawling forward, she positioned herself on top of his coat, spreading it out a little to ensure that she was sufficiently cushioned.

She waited for more specific instructions but was greeted by nothing more than a heavy silence. The awkwardness drove her to slide her knees apart, resting her weight on her left arm before lifting her right hand between her legs.

She could see him standing directly behind her, hips positioned between her feet. Either he was incredibly short sighted or he was planning something. She already knew the answer. Clamping her bottom lip between her teeth, Hermione willed herself to continue.

Lowering her shoulder so that she could reach further, she proceeded to slide her middle finger between the fleshy lips of her labia, now oddly smooth, skimming over her clitoris before locating the silky pool at her entrance and gliding easily inside. He’d been right, she hadn’t often had her fingers inside herself and the sensation was still novel to her; both her tunnel and her fingers were unaccustomed to it and a little unsure of what to do. She did it the way she had in her bedroom but she’d been on her back then, and more able to tilt her pelvis. On this occasion, it amounted to little more than poking herself but she hoped it would be enough to satisfy him.

There was a loud huff behind her.

Apparently not.

Suddenly she felt him grasp her wrist, yanking her arm down and pushing her up far more deeply inside herself.

She gasped, her chin dropping to her chest in shock. Then he curled his fingers around the back of her knuckles and forced the heel of her hand to grind against her labia and clitoris as he thrust her finger up until the webbing stretched. He pushed so forcefully that her entire pelvis began to roll with each incursion. Squeezing her eyes closed, a breathy whimper burst through her lips.

“You need to learn how to fuck yourself,” he muttered. “Properly.”
The dark timbre of his voice, roughened by the coarseness of his words, the bold intensity of his actions, his rhythmic breathing as he grasped and drove her was entirely too much on its own, but suddenly he changed his grip on her hand, and what he did next caused her elbow to buckle beneath her, sending her face-first into his coat.

Drawing her finger out of her pussy completely, she felt his own long digit slide up behind her small one, spooning it as his large hand wrapped around her own. The intimacy of that gesture had her stomach clenching in confusion, such that she attempted to turn to see what he was doing. But before she could catch a glimpse, his other hand clamped tightly around her hip, holding her in place as their united digits were suddenly thrust inside her. Her left arm collapsed.

The stretch was entirely deliberate, she could feel both her rim and walls stinging and straining with the powerful surges and flexions of his finger. But despite his aggressive assault on her pussy, she gradually became aware of his equally deliberate, slippery caresses of her own entrenched digit—gentle, almost seductive, causing her channel to spontaneously tighten around both of them, drawing them together within her in yet another bodily betrayal.

A muffled groan seeped from her into his coat as his disconcerting digit suddenly curled inside her, his knuckle reaming against her back wall. Simultaneously, his fingertip pushed down against her own, forcing hers against the front wall of her vagina, curling it into the spongy tissue there in a way that suddenly had the pressure in her pelvis pumping up like a pressure cooker.

“This is what you should be attending to,” he ground out emphatically. She could imagine his face ticking with disapproval, disgusted by her ignorance.

But she could do little more than drag her forehead onto her collapsed forearm and moan like Myrtle. Meanwhile, he continued to pressure her, forcing her to stroke at that same patch with increasing vigour whilst somehow managing to simultaneously grind her clitoris with the base of his hand against hers.

The intensity and depth of the sensations shocked and scared her. She’d never felt anything like it. And suddenly she sensed that she was about to lose control of everything, the mounting burden on all of her passages no longer possible to restrain.

With a strangled, ‘No . . .’ she attempted to pull her hand from his but he was too strong.

“Don’t fight this,” he growled, his own finger now rubbing hard inside her.

Sparks of light crackled along the edges of her vision, she was hyperventilating, on the verge of collapsing entirely.

An unearthly wail began to build in her shuddering chest before she strained her head forward and emitted her final raw invocation, “Gods!”

She came.

Less like an orgasm and more like a possession, Hermione detonated, her entire body seized by a torrent of such violent eruptions that she felt like something had burst inside her and was leaking out in jerky fits and spurts. Aware of nothing and everything, her mind atomised by an impact more deep and powerful than she could possibly consciously endure, she could do nothing more than gasp and gape through the convulsions. And every time she felt herself on the verge of reconciling, of landing back inside herself, he ground that button again, triggering a new round of arcing and seizing, gasping and moaning, until her body was wracked and wrung out into a boneless pile on the desk.
Finally he left her.

She lay with her eyes closed, the only movement from the ratcheting gears of her mind.

_What did he want from her?_

_An apology? An admission of guilt? A plea of ignorance . . . of fear?_

She would willingly give it, if only she knew.

Or perhaps this wasn’t about her at all. Perhaps it was about him. _But what could he be getting from it apart from the obvious opportunity to dominate and humiliate? Was her punishment that important to him?_

As it was, she was incredibly confused by his inconsistent and unpredictable behaviours. Some moments he seemed to loathe her and others he seemed to be trying to communicate, to connect. This latest episode, itself, felt like a forced epiphany, the emergence of a whole new inner world, brought from her depths like a volcano from the ocean. In some ways she felt she should be grateful to him, but his hostility and relentlessness meant that it amounted to little more than an assault.

So perhaps she had been correct about his ultimate desire from the start. Perhaps the aim of all of this really was to fuck her up.

“You may wish to amend your previous claim.” His voice was back to its usual calm precision.

Cracking her eyes open, she finally looked at him.

He lifted the heel of his hand to his mouth, sucking it as he watched her, before flicking the cuff of his shirt back down. “You do squirt.”

Her breath caught in her throat.

He approached.

His face was a mask again. There wasn’t even a twitch as his fingers trailed over her bare mons.

“I won’t ask you again.” His voice was dangerously low. “From now on you will come to me for redemption.”

Her abdomen fluttered as his fingertips ghosted over her mound. She nodded faintly.

He lifted his nose a fraction. Then, with a sudden yank, he pulled his coat from under her, rolling her away such that she had to claw at the desk to stop herself from falling to the floor.

Breathing rapidly, she jerked her head around to see him scoop up his books and stride coolly from the room without a backward glance.
Her points were there. Hermione checked the hourglass ledger on her way back to her room and saw that all seventy five points that Snape had awarded her over the past three days had been accounted for. It didn’t stop her from being pissed off but at least the humiliation of his indecorous departure—and potentially without even the compensation of house points—was somewhat lessened.

She’d always known Snape to be caustic and cantankerous but her latest interactions revealed a level of sordidity that shocked her—so much so that she was tempted to simply stay as far away from him as physically possible, relegating his actions as those of a depraved fantasist, a debauched, power-hungry pervert. But in some ways that assumption felt too simple—as though it would be naïve to dismiss his intentions so easily.

The problem was that there was too much about his approach that didn’t feel particularly sexual. There was a pervading sense of focused instruction . . . and a strange cryptic anthropology. It challenged her . . . both mentally and emotionally . . . and whilst she understood that there was an intensely psychological component to sex, she couldn’t shake the sense that his purpose extended beyond her sexual degradation, beyond even atonement.

But was this simply more evidence of her naiveté? Was she actually affording his actions a dangerous level of justification?

Hermione loved complexity. She always sought to consider that which lay beyond the obvious. Was it a mistake to give this man any leeway whatsoever? Was she simply fuelling his sick and twisted fantasies, perpetrated under the flimsy guise of punishment?

She sighed as she climbed yet another flight of stairs. Every time she settled upon a safe way to categorise his behaviour, a clear anomaly rose. There were too many contradictions, too many inconsistencies, whether deliberate or unconscious. Considered in its entirety, his actions to date had all the hallmarks of an attempt to derail her. But could it equally evidence his own derailment? Was this, in fact, a manifestation of his own trauma, enacted or projected onto her?

Hermione drifted wearily into her room. She was giving him way too much headspace . . . and yet he commanded it. Closing the door, she leaned against it, her hand instantly venturing between her legs, clamping the naked mound beneath her skirt.

The bizarre, and somewhat disturbing, side-effect of all this was that she felt far more sexual than she ever had in her life. It was as though all of the taboos, all of the sexual questions that may ever manifest in her mind, could be explored without her even asking . . . in fact they’d occurred to date mostly without her consent. And even though he dominated her, she was surprised to discover that she didn’t feel particularly diminished.

It was because she expected him to be a bastard. She’d rarely seen him as anything other. But there was another aspect that made her feel surprisingly potent—the notion that an immensely powerful and exceptionally intelligent wizard such as he would wish to concentrate his time and intensive
efforts on making her come— on teaching her how to . . . fuck herself.

She squeezed her mons.

Her sexual experience to date was extremely limited. She and Ron had gone nowhere . . . fast. There had been a couple of others—nothing serious. And then there was the book group . . .

A pang of yearning surged through her.
She needed to get her book back . . . and her wand . . . and her freedom.
And then there were the points . . . over four hundred more. She’d told Ginny she would get them back and she would.

He might be using her to gratify some perverse sexual vice but she had an equal amount to gain, or at least to restore, including her integrity which she still felt capable of redeeming despite what she’d exposed herself to. She would engage . . . until it was impossible—until he made it so. And she had to admit . . . the way things were progressing, that might not be far off. Then she would be forced to fight him for it.

***

She arrived to find him looking out the window. He didn’t turn when she entered, standing perfectly still, hands a pale knot against the small of his back.

He knew she was there, he’d admitted her after all. But he chose to make her wait.

“Why have you changed?”

Hermione hesitated. He hadn’t yet looked at her. How did he know? She rubbed her palms nervously on the back of her jeans.

“You commented . . . last time you indicated that it was unusual for a senior student to be dressed in their uniform at this time of night.”

Finally he turned, swivelling on the heel of his black boot.

“I merely questioned whether you had done it purposefully, whether your intention had been to . . . seduce.”

Hermione’s jaw tightened at the word, at the insinuation. The suggestion that she’d brought all this upon herself was insulting . . . but she wouldn’t take the bait.

“Clearly that is not your intention this evening,” he continued, throwing her a disparaging look before returning his gaze to the window.

Hermione frowned. For some reason she found this even more insulting.

“What do you wish of me?” His voice seemed to echo off the dark panes.

Despite her irritation, Hermione felt her pulse instantly accelerate.

“I come seeking redemption, sir.”

In profile she saw his eyebrow lift, as though he were considering her response but still unwilling to attend to her. “How much do you seek?”
Hermione took a deep breath. “Fifty.”

It was bold. Risky. Stupid.

He nodded faintly.

“I expect you to give considerably more than you have to date.”

Hermione caught the side of her mouth between her teeth and bit down. *More? What more could she give?*

“Are you prepared for such?”

He finally addressed her, arms slipping out from behind his back to hang at his sides. It wasn’t a relaxed pose, however. Rather it had the appearance of preparation, a taut readiness.

Hermione wriggled her toes in her shoes, not wishing to reveal her agitation.

“I feel I may have already reached certain . . . limits.” She heard the tell-tale rasp of tension in her own voice.

“Limits?” Snape frowned as though it were a word he’d never encountered before—one he’d never entertained. “Stepping outside of the meagre margins of your comfort zone can hardly be considered a threat to your ‘limits’. ”

“Stepping?” Hermione repeated. “I have hardly stepped, Professor, I have been pushed, forced—”

He snorted. “Forced? Why, then, are you here? Were you bound? Did I drag you here against your will?”

“Of course not.” Heat flared in her cheeks. “But I have been given no choice.”

“Have you not?” Snape’s hands retreated behind his back as he took a few paces toward her. “You could always choose to do nothing.”

Hermione shook her head. “I can’t bear the thought of my actions disadvantaging so many others . . . including many of my friends.”

“You can’t tolerate their disappointment?”

That was fairly accurate. Hermione levelled her eyes at him. “No . . . I can’t.”

“Have you disappointed in the past? Someone significant?” He lifted his chin to consider her. “Have you perpetrated something . . . unforgiveable?”

*Did he know about the Obliviation of her parents? Is that what he was driving at?*

“I’d like to make a start, if you don’t mind.” Hermione crossed her arms.

He paused, considering her for a long moment.

Finally he spoke, “What are you afraid of?”

She wasn’t expecting the question, or the gentleness in his voice.

“I don’t want you to hurt me.” Hermione’s own voice was barely a whisper.
“Have I hurt you so far?”

She stared at him intently for a moment before shaking her head.

“Then that is unlikely to be your primary concern.” He flexed his shoulders dismissively. “Tell me what you are really afraid of.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Nor should you.” His response was immediate.

“But what you’re doing to me requires trust.” Hermione ground the words out . . . they felt raw, as though he’d tapped into a well of emotion that she didn’t quite understand.

“No it doesn’t. It requires a willingness to surrender.”

Hermione thought back to what had transpired in the Potions classroom. She had attempted to fight him, but in the end she’d had to give in. And the result was that her body had released far more than it ever had in her life.

“I don’t . . .” She shook her head. “I don’t know how to give more.”

“You give more, Miss Granger,” his voice lowered and thickened, “by allowing me to take more.”

Hermione was terrified—more even than she could explain. He was right. She was very much used to being in control. And yet when she recalled the feelings she’d had after the previous two encounters with him, despite his bastardly ways, she’d felt a pervading sense of relief.

*Is that what she was giving him? That burden? The burden of control?*

“If I do . . . how do I know that you will honour the agreement—fifty points?”

“You’ll just have to trust me.” He flexed a sardonic eyebrow.

*Back to square one.*

“Fine.” She sighed shakily. “Just do it.”

He tilted his head to the side as though deciding upon a course of action, then proceeded to pull up one impossibly tight sleeve and then the other, exposing a little more of each hand. Four slow, deliberate steps had him stopping directly in front of her. She willed herself not to tremble.

As he reached forward, she simultaneously jerked back, unable to override her automatic defensiveness. With unusual patience he waited for her to return before trying again. This time he undid the buttons of her cardigan. It was done with the economy of action that comes from having undone more buttons in his life than probably anyone alive—not at all seductive—more like a parent undressing a child.

Peeling the cardigan from her shoulders, he tossed it aside before grasping the bottom hem of her top and proceeding to lift it. She raised her arms, again like a child about to take a bath.

It reached that point in the removal that she had always hated, that claustrophobic moment when the fabric tightened around her neck, her breathing was obstructed, her vision completely obscured.

Then he stopped.
He proceeded to pull both sleeves inside out also, so that her wrists remained inside the cuffs but her hands were covered.

Without receiving a single word of instruction, Hermione was guided forward. She felt her hands being lowered down to the edge of the desk where he indicated with pressure over her fingers that she should hold on. The material covering her hands meant that the sensory input through her skin was significantly muted, as was the visual input which had been reduced to a small window at the end of a shadowy tunnel of material.

The entire experience was extremely disorientating; she felt dangerously disconnected from what was happening behind her. And considering he was there now, hands gripping her hips as she bent over, she felt incredibly vulnerable.

There was a little pressure just above her pubic bone, followed by a loosening. Then her jeans and knickers started to descend. His fingers were responsible for driving them, skimming down the outsides of her thighs, her knees and then her calves. But he took them no further, leaving the gathered material to shackle her ankles.

“I don’t imagine these receive much attention either.”

Despite the layer of material and hair bushing over her ears, she could hear him perfectly. His voice cut through everything. Always.

There was a slight pinch on her back and then she felt her breasts drop as her bra sprang free.

His hands were instantly there, taking the weight of both, lifting them, fingers gently moulding her modest contours.

“Do you touch your nipples?”

Despite the distinct awkwardness, Hermione was grateful that her humiliation was currently hidden within what could only be described as a tunnel of shame.

His fingers gradually worked their way forward, capturing both tender nubs and gripping firmly. Snagging her lip between her teeth, she bit down, trying to stifle the moan that was threatening to burst free. She would have expected someone as dextrous as he to be reasonably adept but the way he was rolling, squeezing and tugging each one, plucking and milking as though he knew exactly how it would feel, how to make her insides plunge and surge, how to make her pussy ache, she soon found her face clinging to the damp material, soaked in her ragged respirations.

“I’m afraid that I missed your response, Miss Granger,” he purred, tweaking more emphatically. “Do you touch your nipples . . . like . . . this?”

Her head dipped forward in embarrassment before she yelped, “No”, as another sharp tug jolted through her.

“Will you do so from now on?”

The answer, of course, was ‘yes’, she would do it to herself . . . exactly the same.

She nodded in her cocoon.

He chuckled. The sound was unexpected enough but the sensation of his abdomen beating gently against her bare buttock felt overwhelmingly intimate—as though she’d accidentally discovered a person buried within that cold shell.
“You should.” He finally released her. “Their response is . . . titillating.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. What was that? A pun?

She tightened her grip on the desk. Laughing and joking Snape was certainly not what she had been expecting. And she hardly felt it appropriate under the current circumstances. It only served to make her feel like he was deliberately softening her up . . . for the blow.

“It is rather coincidental that you should mention limits.” She heard his voice change, tightening somewhat as he shifted position behind her.

Fuck. What now?

“As you would be aware, the capacity of the vagina . . . the birth canal . . . is far greater than is immediately evident.”

Hermione was suddenly aware of what felt like his thumbs prising her open. She imagined he must be crouching or kneeling. His breath tickled its way inside her.

“In fact.” Bursts of heat continued to buffet her slot with each word. “Both female openings are incredibly amenable to manipulation . . . to insertion.”

Her entire body stiffened.

“One could almost interpret it as a deliberate facet of design—the placement of one highly sensitive passage immediately adjacent to the other.” She felt him grip both of her ankles, pushing them as far apart as possible. “A deliberate act of enticement.”

What was he talking about?

“The female anatomy is, in fact, perfectly constructed to accommodate two duelling males. Two bucks—stags, fighting for supremacy inside the ductile arena of her body.”

There it was again, the inherent implication of the female. As though by virtue of her body alone, she was somehow willing or complicit in fuelling male desire, male fantasies. It was entirely untrue and thoroughly incensing but now his finger was inside her and she was having trouble remembering exactly what she was incensed about.

“No doubt, you’ve felt it.” His voice had caramelised, and was suggestively coaxing her. “The desire of two males . . . both wanting you . . . both desperate to take you.”

Hermione closed her eyes. She didn’t want to feel it but his finger was now thrusting so languorously inside her that she did.

“But of course to accommodate both combatants, to feel the sensation of them jousting for supremacy inside you, you will be required to surrender this—”

“Uuhhh.” Hermione’s own breath steamed her face as something, another finger, was pressed into her anus. He pushed insistently. Her breath caught.

“Lubrication is often unnecessary if one is willing to wait—if one is able to hold back the need to penetrate in order to prime.”

His emphasis on each ‘p’ word, was driven home by simultaneous thrusts from his fingers into both holes, making her whimper. Hermione was also beginning to doubt the truth of his claim as the dry
sting of her sphincter came over and over again with each rhythmic stretch.

“The rectum produces its own secretions. It simply requires more stimulation, more distention.”

Hermione’s head dropped toward her chest, the fabric adhering uncomfortably to her face as she felt her walls being reamed more forcefully.

“Certainly it will require more preparation than this slavering quim.” His finger slithered around inside her in a crude demonstration of how loose she had become. “This particular slot is clearly hungry for more . . . in fact, judging by the way it is attempting to devour me, I’d say it hasn’t been filled properly in a very long time.”

Hermione gasped and gripped the desk as a second of his substantial digits breached the rim of her pussy, sliding up to join the first. The resulting level of fullness was completely foreign to her. She had obviously experienced elements as part of her normal bodily functions but somehow this felt completely different—things were moving as they shouldn’t, as they never had before. Sometimes he alternated the thrusting into each passage, sometimes he synchronised it, but he was stretching her in all sorts of ways, entering her from different angles in a manner that kept the sensations flaring until she could no longer hold back. A throaty moan surged from her. It was so raw—magnified by the close confines of her material chamber—that she barely recognised it.

“I’ll take that as an indication that you are ready to give me more.”

She wasn’t. She couldn’t.

Further stinging pressure flared at her anus, making her retract her hips as another finger was pushed inside her.

“I can’t,” she whimpered.

“Relax,” he commanded. “Your body’s automatic response is to eliminate, to expel, but as you allow it, as you submit, your muscles will stop fighting and you will gradually accept me—accept that you want this.”

But she didn’t—she was positive she didn’t.

And yet the sounds she was making, the needy mewling, the wanton groans pressing against her face, the way her pelvis was desperately rocking to accommodate his advances, made her wonder what she really knew of herself, her true desires.

“Can you feel those two cocks? Battling for ownership, looking to stake their claim on you, inside you?”

His fingers drove into her, twisting and thrusting in a way that left very little to her imagination. The combat was very real—as was the third finger that he had somehow managed to wedge inside her pussy. In fact, his actions had brewed such a fierce sensorial storm inside her that her whole body was starting to shake.

*Why did it have to be so intense? Why did he have to push her to the very brink of that abyss over and over again?* His constant references to competition and ownership made her suspect that his intentions ran far deeper than he’d admitted. *Was that really what this was all about? Living out his past failures? Projecting them onto her so that he could punish her for them?*

But she was unable to give his motivation further thought as her body gathered, aching from the monumental strain caused by his intense and protracted build-up.
“Each wishes to mark you, to fill you.” His voice was breathy and rhythmic, surging in time with his hands. “To deposit their load, their male essence as deeply inside you as possible.”

Hermione choked on her breath as the tension became unbearable.

“And when you urge their collective seed to erupt, when these passages pump and squeeze as they are now, you become responsible, you provoke and claim their ejaculate . . . but then you must ultimately choose, one or the other and, in turn, accept that you are theirs.”

The frenzy of plunging reached breakneck speed.

“Do you accept it?” he growled.

Hermione cried out.

“Do you?!”

“Yes!” she shrieked as both her pussy and rectum simultaneously detonated around his pistoning digits.

If her previous orgasm was intense, this one was apocalyptic. Vaguely aware of warm spattering down her thighs, she bucked and jolted on quaking legs, artlessly rearing and convulsing as her ears rang with her otherworldly wailing, face boiled like a dumpling by the hectic rasps of her steaming breath. And, as before, he continued to wring her out, curling and shaking inside her holes as the paroxysms ripped like lightning through her pelvis. In some ways she was surprised that she managed to hold out so long as, with one final seismic surge into her core, her legs gave way. But before she could fall, he suddenly vacated her, leaving both holes shuddering and ticking, and surprisingly bereft.

Strong arms lifted her. Moments later her knickers, jeans and bra were back in place. And finally her top was inverted, pulled back down into place. He cast a cooling charm over her before looking her intently in the eye.

“Are you all right, Miss Granger?”

She nodded hazily, lifting a hand to trail it over the knotted matting of her hair.

He immediately released her, stepping away before pulling a white handkerchief from his pocket. For some reason she was expecting him to give it to her but he didn’t. Instead, he used it on himself, screwing the silken cloth around each finger in turn—like a well-to-do mechanic who had just administered a grease and oil change. He could have easily Scourgified but it wouldn’t have had nearly the impact. He had serviced her. And he clearly wanted her to know it.

He sat down in his chair, turning his fastidious attention to his nails which he proceeded to polish as his eyes lifted to hers.

“I believe that was worth fifty points.”

“Thank you, sir,” she rasped. “I happen to agree.”

Suddenly his eyebrow lifted a fraction and the corner of his mouth quirked up subtly in amusement.

“You are dismissed, Miss Granger.” There was an unusual lightness to his voice, a rare glint in his coal black eyes.
She inclined her head before turning and walking gingerly toward the door.

“Miss Granger, I think you may have forgotten something.”

She sighed inwardly, wondering what else he could possibly come up with. As she turned, her cardigan suddenly buffeted her in the face.

“Return it to your grandmother,” he muttered. “She needs it more than you do.”
Hermione lay on her bed. She’d only intended to sit on it for a brief moment to peruse her timetable but, as was increasingly the case, she’d succumbed to the insistent pull of her thoughts which ended with her flopping backwards onto her quilt to stare at the ceiling. According to the discarded parchment beside her, she was supposed to be in the library finishing off her assignment on Norse runes but instead she was running her eyes in a feverish loop up and down the ceiling’s wooden slats as she brushed her thumb distractedly back and forth over one cotton-clad nipple.

Things were muddy. She didn’t enjoy muddiness of any sort. She loved problems—problems with solutions. But her current predicament was complex in an unsatisfying way, labyrinthine—made so by the increasingly tangled array of unanswered questions—that and the intense feelings that swamped her without warning, that seemed to arrive unbidden and take hours to leave.

Right now she felt like she desperately needed to make herself come. She could do it easily—as she had numerous times over the past week—but she was attempting to improve her self-discipline after deciding that it was a most unproductive way of spending her time. She’d become rather obsessed with herself . . . her functions . . . her sensations. It wasn’t her natural predisposition at all. Her body had always been secondary to her mind in everything. In fact, much of the time she’d felt that it was simply a vehicle for carrying around and sustaining her brain. She’d barely ever considered what it did, or even what it looked like.

Now she was doing all sorts of things to it—hunting about in her room for items to try out on (inside) herself. It was probably a good thing she’d had her wand confiscated—who knew what she might have transfigured and tried to shove up herself otherwise? As it was, there were an array of toiletries that she’d had to scrub quite intensively, and with a good dose of humiliation, in the basin of her small bathroom. What the fuck was wrong with her?

Despite her mortification, she continued to lightly rub her nipple. There was an odd comfort to it. A power. A connection. It was titillating (though she tried not to use that word) and curiously exciting. The possibilities in that sphere had become vast. She should be pleased. But the manner in which her sexual epiphany had been realised, that and the person responsible, were still sources of extreme disquiet.

Snape.

Her skin prickled and crawled simultaneously, attraction and repulsion in equal measure. How was that possible? How did he incite conflict in even her most primitive impulses?

She had no doubt that it was all quite deliberate. He clearly had an agenda, and one that was surprisingly well orchestrated for an apparently spontaneous response to her request for point redemption. Had he done this before? Was this his preferred mode of ‘punishment’ for girls (or even boys) who transgressed? The thought made her feel even dirtier—as though her very personal awakening was nothing more than the forced opening of another callow neophyte, made to ‘explore themselves’ by a man who got off on the power.
But then there were parts that seemed quite personal—as though they were about her. The mention of two bucks, ‘stags’, for example—was that simply a reference to two archetypal males in the wild? Or was it more than that? James Potter’s Patronus was a stag. As was Harry’s. Was he suggesting that two males had wanted her? Harry and Ron? Or was this actually about Snape—referencing his conflict with James Potter over Harry’s mother, Lily? Or was it none of these—just another example of her remarkable ability to over-cogitate and over-interpret.

The other confusing part was that he had gone to considerable efforts to humiliat and objectify her, using a relatively crude brand of domination to reinforce the frosty distance between them. But then he’d also been considerate . . . even gentle. He’d shown concern. There were even examples of his own personalisation—such as when he’d stated that she would eventually ‘accept him’. He had been referring to his presence in her arse at the time, but it was an unusual turn of phrase all the same.

She sighed. Her arse. Why would he go there? What was he getting out of it?

She’d not seen a hint of a hard-on at any time—although he had made it very difficult for her to see very much of him at all. And why did he use his hands and voice so much? Did he want everything to remain ‘manual’, instructional, detached? Would it be overstepping some ethical boundary to use any other part of himself? Did he even have ethical boundaries?

For some reason she kept coming back to the problem of whether or not he actually liked her. She wasn’t even sure why it mattered. After all, there would soon be a clear end to their interactions. There were five hundred points to redeem and then it would be over. It was transactional. She didn’t have feelings for him. How could she? But what if he had feelings for her? Would he let her go so easily? She needed to ensure that he was left in no doubt that she was there for the points. Nothing more. Which she was . . . almost entirely.

He’d turned her away the last two times she’d gone to see him, citing a busy schedule—although he hadn’t looked particularly busy.

Her fingers twisted her nipple, making her writhe. Finally she succumbed, lifting her heels onto the bed and slipping a hand down her knickers.

She just needed to get this whole thing over and done with—sooner rather than later. She might even need to up the ante—create some opportunities . . . and be prepared to chase the big points.

***

“I have come to the conclusion,” Snape had his back to her and was returning an armful of books to his bookcase, “that, to date, there has been very little ‘earning’ on your part.”

Despite his words immediately having her on edge, Hermione remained quiet.

“Therefore, I will be seeking to make you work considerably harder for your next points reward.”

“How many, sir?”

He paused without turning. “I will decide. Based upon effort, stamina and . . . resilience.”

That didn’t sound promising. He could give her nothing at all.

“I ask that you decide quickly or leave,” he added tersely. “I am a busy man.”

“Yes, sir—I’ll try,” she responded quickly.
He turned with an impatient huff but it didn’t fool her at all—she saw the lithe roll of his shoulders . . .
. the unmistakably dark heat to his gaze. He was clearly anticipating something . . . significant.

As his eyes flickered up and down her body, she was relieved to see the snide displeasure gone.
She’d worn her uniform again—it had seemed the safest option.

“Everything from your waist down . . . off,” he ordered before making his way over to his desk chair and sitting down.

She did it quickly without embarrassment, realising that too much had gone between them for that part, at least, to be uncomfortable.

She stood, bare legs pressed together, toes curling against the cold stone flags.

“Come . . . here.”

The dark reverberation of his voice alone was enough to send a shiver ricocheting through her vertebrae.

Knees quivering from a combination of cold and apprehension, she approached.

“You will kneel here.” His hands slid smoothly along the arms of his chair. “Facing away from me.”

_Fucking hell. How was she supposed to do that?_

He raised an expectant eyebrow, hands tightening around the worn leather.

There was only one way she could do it without touching him. Turning, she climbed onto the desk with her back to him. Then, twisting her head around so that she could see, she proceeded to extend one knee backwards, setting it on the chair arm after he’d languorously removed his own. Pushing back with her hands, she placed the other knee on the opposite arm and proceeded to shuffle backwards until both shins were lying flat and her feet were touching the back of the chair.

Her legs were spread extremely widely above his lap and her bare arse and pussy were literally in his face. She kept her hands on the edge of the desk for balance. Whatever his intention was, she could already tell that it was going to be bloody difficult.

“You run,” he stated mildly. “I’ve seen you by the lake.”

She nodded, swallowing hard.

“Yes.” The word was little more than a whisper as his hands skimmed silkily up her taut hamstrings before coming to rest on her buttocks.

“You will now use my fingers to bring yourself to orgasm.” She felt his thumbs curl under her, spreading her labia even further apart. “And this time I expect you to do all of the work.”

Hermione tilted her head down to try to see what he was doing but realised that, although his body was visible below her, he had managed to hide his face from her once again. She stared at his crotch. Not a twitch.

Dipping one thumb down, he proceeded to massage her clitoris. The vast spread of her thighs meant that the firing from that single button felt like an electrical super-highway, sending shockwaves rippling through her entire body. Her legs tensed, attempting to hold her still.

“I see evidence that my instruction has not been wasted.”
Oh, shit. Could he?

“You’ve had objects inserted inside both holes. It has been rather protracted and, on occasion, quite . . . vigorous.”

Hermione had a sudden desire to fall unconscious. She would gladly risk the head injury to avoid the mortification flopping around inside her like a dying fish.

“Who was he?”

He?

Snape rubbed her clitoris more insistently. “Tell me.”

“I don’t know who you mean.” Her response was hoarse.

“Who were you thinking of when you were doing it—when you were reaming yourself? Whose cock was it?”

“No one’s. I just . . .”

He sighed, slipping two fingers into the entrance to her pussy.

“The female orgasm is considerably more mental than physical. This is not a difficult concept for you, of all people, to grasp. You were thinking of someone . . . and I want to know who it was.”

Hermione closed her eyes. He was a Legilimens. There was little point in lying. “I wasn’t thinking of anyone’s . . . cock . . . I was thinking of their . . . their . . . hands.”

“Whose . . . hands?” he demanded.

She chewed her lip before releasing a pitiable rasp, “Yours.”

He let out a long breath. “Then that should expedite the current process.”

“Unnnhhhh!”

Both fingers plunged in to the hilt.

Then stopped.

“Now. Fuck yourself.”

Despite being in a rather compromised position, Hermione found herself on the verge of suggesting that he do the same. However she quickly thought better of it, drawing a steadying breath. She’d managed to take everything that he had thrown at her so far without resorting to his level of coarseness, and without allowing him to visibly anger her. It gave her confidence that she could continue . . . that she would be able to perform as instructed.

Gripping the desk with both hands, she slowly rocked her body forwards, feeling his fingers slip from inside her. As she pushed herself back, her tunnel gradually filled with him again. It took a few repeats, forward and backwards for her to get a sense of her range of movement. She readjusted the position of her knees and then began rolling her hips as she thrust forward. It was like nothing she’d ever tried to do before. Backwards fucking. Normally the forward thrust would fill her and the backwards would leave her empty but this was the opposite. She really had to concentrate.
Smack!

A sudden stinging pain across her backside had one of her knees slipping off the arm. He caught her and slid her back into place.

“Furthermore . . . you should be aware that every time you present your buttocks to me, there is a chance that I will spank them.”

Spank? How old was she? Five? Even her parents had never spanked her. It was utterly ridiculous.

As she pushed back onto his fingers again, the palm of his free hand landed with a hard slap on her other cheek.

“Fuck!” she cried out, her chin curling into her chest.

“This will give you an opportunity to reflect upon the nature of your remorse.”

Remorse? What fucking remorse?

It came again, that bright flash of pain, and she jerked forward, away from him, his fingers slipping out of her vagina entirely.

Breathing heavily, Hermione stared at the desk. She’d paid for it. She was still paying. There was no reason for her to continue to feel guilt-ridden, whatsoever.

But she did. Of course she did. It was her default state. It had been for a long time.

In fact, it had been her attempts to divest herself of that thorny cloak of culpability that had led to much of her reckless behaviour in the first place. She’d mistaken guilt-free for carefree, consequence-free . . . it hadn’t quite worked out . . . obviously.

The sting had died down leaving a few glowing embers prickling her cheeks. It wasn’t a particularly severe pain but the shock of it, the unexpectedness of its arrival, the innately disciplinary nature of each short, sharp visitation made it feel worse than it was— that and the fact that he knew. He somehow knew that the crippling burden of remorse was not only very much present, but she suspected he was also aware of how firmly it had rooted within her. The sword in the stone; impossible to dislodge.

She could leave. She doubted he would attempt to stop her.

Perhaps he would even allow her to return in the future . . . perhaps not.

But the points redeemed to date weren’t nearly enough, she was still without her wand, and she couldn’t even leave the castle.

There was too much at stake. She had to at least try.

If she put in a reasonable effort, Hermione knew she would be awarded points—she trusted him that much at least. And whilst everything to date had been extremely difficult, she had to admit that she had learned a surprising amount . . . not only about sex but about herself. And whilst she wasn’t under any illusions about whether this was normal sex—the sort of thing that she would do with someone she loved—it was somewhat less disconcerting because it was so extreme . . . almost out of the realm of anything relational entirely. And his cold and detached delivery certainly helped to make it so.
Regardless of what his intention for her was, she would ensure that she gained something from this experience. She wasn’t a masochist after all . . . was she?

Biting her lip, Hermione gradually slid herself backwards again, his fingers driving all the way inside her. The slap didn’t come this time, so she curled her hips and glided forward, focusing on the sensations manifesting in her pussy and attempting to build enough stimulation to make her want to come. It was going to be tough. There were so many distractions. Her thighs were already starting to tire from trying to hold her body up whilst being stretched so widely. He’d stopped stimulating her clitoris. She was beginning to doubt whether it was even possible.

Then they came again. Sharp slaps. Two of them in quick succession. Hermione cried out but kept pumping her hips, trying to maintain a rhythm.

“You like to come, don’t you?”

Hermione’s insides clenched. She was always shocked by how viscerally his voice affected her.

“I can tell by the animalistic way you thrust. You’re very primal . . . So at odds with how you seek to present yourself.”

Hermione lost her rhythm. He was right about the mental nature of the female orgasm. And he happened to be totally fucking hers up right now.

“Perhaps I should provide some assistance.”

The spanking suddenly became more vigorous. Every time she pushed backwards, her cheeks parting before him, he landed another, sending her forward with a reflexive jerk, her throat closing and her breathing coming in ragged gasps.

“Remember what you have learned about surrender,” he coaxed . . . so gently that her eyes stung. “It is an act of strength . . . of courage, not weakness.”

She shook her head in refusal, but at the same time she couldn’t stop the hot tears that squeezed out from under her eyelids. Sniffing loudly, she continued to rock. The whole thing seemed futile. She wanted to simply collapse, curling into a howling ball of guilt-ridden grief on the cold flags.

But then she heard him speak again, one word, “Good,” murmured quietly, followed by his palm soothingly rubbing her burning rump.

His approval released a confusing gush of warmth that instantly had her admonishing herself, and then he did something completely unexpected, something that finally did her in.

When she finally gathered herself to push backwards, accepting his fingers into her and expecting to feel the sharp bite of his palm once more, she was shocked instead by a sensation that made her gasp audibly. It was his mouth—it had to be—a sinuous pressure, impossibly soft and feathery against her clitoris. She remained there, unmoving, not paralysed by it but drawn irrevocably to the silky warmth.

It was wrong. He’d crossed the line. A line. Some line . . . surely. Was there a line?

There must be. But was this really so different to anything else he’d done? Hermione wasn’t certain but it felt different. Very different. It was too gentle. The soft caresses between her swollen lips, sensuous strokes up and down her throbbing clitoris, the way his tongue seemed to beckon her back into his mouth.
She wasn’t thrusting at all now, simply grinding against him, his fingers pressing deeper inside her, his tongue laving more insistently. The spanking started again but this time she didn’t shy away from it—she remained open, exposed, and as she hovered, precariously balanced between the agony of his hand and the soothing ecstasy of his tongue she felt herself rapidly building, her core winding ready to come.

Her mind began to drift. She remembered something . . . an experiment. A baby monkey in a cage. It was offered two mothers, one made of wire but harbouring a bottle of milk; the other made of soft fur but offering no nourishment. The monkey chose the soft mother. Even though its survival was compromised.

The need to be nurtured is so ingrained, so fundamental, that it overrides all other instincts.

But Hermione had chosen the other. She had enforced it. When she’d Obliviated her parents she had chosen survival . . . and the cold rejection that came with it. Part of her had died that day . . . and the constant ache in her chest was worse than anything.

Raising her face to the ceiling, Hermione wailed mournfully. The pain was what was driving her now, coaxing her out of herself, pushing her over the edge. What Snape had done—what he was still doing—was undoubtedly wrong but something about it gave her permission . . . permission to feel.

She cried out as she came, jaw dropping open as her pelvis heaved and jerked. The release was so wild, so emotional that fresh tears sprang from her eyes, hot breaths choking out with each convulsion. If her previous orgasm was akin to a possession, this was an exorcism—a whole-of-body rejection of some festering malevolence buried within.

Her shaking limbs finally gave in. She fell.

Snape instantly grabbed her, hooking his arm around her waist as he stood. She was slumped over the desk, all of the weight of her lower limbs taken by him. She couldn’t stand, her legs completely drained.

They remained that way for a long time, her only sense of him the steady pressure around her pelvis as she gradually regained the use of her legs.

Finally she attempted to stand. Her knees buckled once, twice, before they locked. She took a step sideways. Then another. Despite her unsteadiness, she was determined to leave.

She needed to think.

Without looking at him, Hermione squeezed around the desk, staggering a little on her way to the door.

“Fifty points.”

She didn’t respond. She couldn’t.

Placing a hand on the door handle, she suddenly felt the sensation of her clothes wrapping back around her body. She’d forgotten them. She would have left the Headmaster’s office without them, her glowing buttocks on show for all to see.

*How had it come to this? What the fuck had happened to her?*
Brandmaster

“Shit.”

Hermione grimaced at her grimacing reflection in the mirror. Her hair was a complete nightmare. And without her wand it was proving even more ridiculously unruly. She tugged a brush through the knotted ends which instantly frizzed. If only she could leave the castle to buy a potion, or even some Muggle product to help. It was getting to the point that she may even need to cave in and ask another student to purchase something for her.

And her refractory mop was only the start of it. Everything was taking far longer than it used to. All of the mundane tasks that she would previously attend to with a flick of her wand were now filling her days with time-consuming tedium and, as a result, she was always running late.

The steady rumble of feet on the stone flags outside indicated that the procession to classes had begun. She wasn’t even dressed.

Huffing irritably, she began to apply foundation. Of course a Glamour would have been far easier and more effective. As it was, the dark hollows under her eyes were barely masked, making her appear almost as deranged and zombie-like as she felt.

Sleep had eluded her once again. After the events of the previous evening, her mind had refused to stop churning through endless reels of memories and scenarios and interpretations. It was all so confusing. Actually, that didn’t even come close to describing it. It was a total mind fuck. And she was becoming increasingly convinced that much of Snape’s intention was simply that . . . to fuck her up, to leave her confused and bewildered and questioning everything . . . including her sanity.

But why? Just because he could?

He’d licked her—used his tongue to pleasure her. Why would he go to such lengths if he despised her as much as he pretended? Or was she, herself, being used as some form of punishment—was he seeking to achieve some bizarre redemption of his own? It seemed unlikely but, then again, with Snape anything was possible.

The other option was that he actually did like her, that he was attracted to her and this was simply his perverse way of making sexual advances toward her.

And that annoyed her. A lot. Why not be a man about it and own his feelings? Why try to pretend that it was all about her . . . that this was her doing entirely . . . that she’d brought it upon herself?

And if he did like her why was he such a fucking bastard about it? Like a school boy who couldn’t express himself and so resorted to punching the object of his affections instead.

But then there was the catharsis. The release. If he was simply attracted to her, why was he forcing her to confront so much, to endure such emotional turmoil? He was pulling and pushing her so forcefully that she could feel her inner fabric breaking. But could it ever be restored in a healthy way? After everything that had happened, she doubted it was even possible for her to be knitted together into anything resembling a whole.

His methods might be forcing her to discard some unhelpful coping strategies but they were called coping strategies for a reason. Without them there was a failure to cope, a hopelessness and devastation which was deeply traumatising in its own right. She wondered then if his intention was to heal or, rather, to create more wounds. Did he really believe that trauma could be eliminated with
trauma? And if he happened to be the paragon of success in that regard then God help her . . . God help them both.

Knock, knock.

Hermione’s eyes jagged up to the door reflected in her mirror. She had seen barely anyone, taking meals early or late to avoid running into people between classes. She didn’t even feel like talking now, especially considering her current level of agitation, but she knew she was being obviously evasive. It would have been noticed.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Ginny . . . I thought you must have left already.”

“No, I haven’t,” Hermione muttered under her breath as she strode over to the door, unlocked and opened it.

“Are you sick?” Ginny’s mouth dropped open.

“No . . . why?”

“You just . . . you don’t look well. And you’re not dressed . . . don’t you have classes this morning?”

“Yes I’m running a bit late, that’s all,” Hermione snapped, closing the door and turning away.

“Why do you have an ‘S’ on your bottom?”

What the fuck?

Hermione returned to her desk and lifted her nightie, turning to look at her bottom in the mirror. The curve of one cheek peeked out from under the elastic of her knickers, and emblazoned on the pale flesh was a small S-shaped bruise. Quickly yanking her nightie back down, she attempted to dismiss it with a hand wave.

“I fell over on my run yesterday, I must have landed on a rock or branch or something that had a pattern a bit like an S.”

“A lot like an S,” Ginny remarked.

Hermione turned to her cupboard and started pulling clothes out, hoping that Ginny hadn’t noticed her flaming cheeks. “How’s everything going for you, anyway?”

“Oh, it’s fine. You know, usual school stuff,” Ginny responded evasively. “Uh . . . you realise you missed the Gryffindor house meeting again?”

“Yes, I was busy.”

Ginny was quiet for a moment.

“People are worried about you, ‘Mione. I’m worried about you.”

“I thought people were worried about themselves,” Hermione replied, more nastily than she’d intended.

“No one cares about that anymore.” Ginny approached her. “It was just the initial shock. You’ve earned heaps of points back. They just want to see you again—the younger ones especially. They
really look up to you.”

Hermione nearly burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

“Look. We’re having a few drinks tonight in the common room . . . Seamus has managed to get hold of a bottle. Please come.”

“Maybe. I’ll see what else I have on,” Hermione responded non-committally.

“I also wanted to show you my dress,” Ginny said.

“What dress?”

“For the ball next weekend. Remember?”

Hermione’s heart sank, it was the last thing she wanted to think about.

“You’re the Head Girl. You get to start the snowball waltz. Have you thought about who you are going to pick yet?”

“Can I pick you?” Hermione finally lifted her head and smiled wearily at her friend.

“I guess so.” Ginny grinned back. “If you want to start a few more rumours.”

“What’s a few more to add to the mill?” Hermione sighed.

Ginny quickly closed the gap, wrapping Hermione in a tight hug. “Please come tonight, ‘Mione. It’ll be fun. We’re all missing you.”

Hermione felt tears pricking her eyes. She quickly blinked them away.

“I’ll try,” she promised. “Now let me get dressed or I’ll be up for another detention.”

Hermione kept her face carefully averted as she snatched up her skirt and began to dress.

“Fine. See you later then?” Ginny backed towards the door and, receiving no further response, sighed softly before leaving.

Instantly striding back to the mirror, Hermione pulled her knickers down. Her entire backside was covered with S-shaped bruises, many overlapping in frenzied piles, like the work of a mad brander. Fucking hell!

Her sadness instantly dissipated, and her tiredness, agitation and indignation melted into a glowing ball of red-hot fury. How fucking dare he!

Throwing on her clothes in record time, she stormed out of her room and headed toward his office. She’d like to see him try to explain this.

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Rapping loudly on the door, she waited only a millisecond after his acknowledgement to bluster in.

He managed to ignore her twitching agitation, finishing off another two lines of script before looking up and delicately placing the quill into its holder.

“To what do I owe this charming intrusion?”
Clearly he’d picked up on her mood, but had still chosen to let her fume.

“I come, Headmaster, requesting your honesty,” Hermione responded with as much control and dignity as she could muster.

“I did not claim that you could trust me.”

Hermione was stumped for a moment. She couldn’t quite believe that this was his defence. Still, she persisted with the line of argument she’d cobbled together in her seething mind on her way there.

“This is not about trust. It is about truthfulness and what you claim to be your intention. I think it rather disingenuous of you to pretend.”

“Pretend?”

“That you don’t like me.”

He frowned, looking disparagingly down his nose.

“Is it a requirement?”

Her brow rumpled in confusion. “A requirement for what?”

“Do you consider ‘liking you’ a requirement for the current process?”

“No, of course not. However, I feel that you have been conducting the ‘current process’ under the guise of pure correction and atonement and I really don’t believe it to be the case. Now, I’m asking you again, Professor, are you doing all this because you are, in fact, attracted to me?”

He stared at her. “I hardly consider that to be any of your business.”

She was taken aback again. Then she huffed and actually stomped her foot a fraction.

“I happen to disagree. The motivation for your actions is very much dependent upon the answer, and it would further explain much of what has occurred to date.”

“And I would consider an ‘explanation’ beyond what you deserve,” he sneered.

Hermione could feel her hackles rising further.

“Then I suppose you would not indulge me sufficiently to explain . . . this.”

She pulled up her skirt and yanked down the back of her knickers to expose one cheek, mottled with S-shaped bruises.

He gave an exaggerated squint, his brows pulling together.

“I’m afraid my eyesight isn’t what it once was. You will have to come closer.”

Jaw firming in irritation, Hermione backed up a few paces.

“Closer.” He pursed his lips around the word, entirely unperturbed.

Hermione stormed all the way over to him, turned and dropped her knickers again.

She glared at him but his eyes were on her buttocks.
“Ahhh. It appears that my ring must have . . . slipped.”

“You don’t wear a—”

Hermione stopped when he held up his right hand to reveal a gold ring with an S-shaped insignia. She’d never seen it before. She was positive it hadn’t been there previously. She’d always paid a lot of attention to his hands . . . particularly lately.

“Despite what you would claim. I believe this to be entirely deliberate,” she stated hotly. “You intended it.”

“Enlighten me,” he drawled, using the thumbnail of the same hand to slowly slide the ring around, demonstrating its propensity for ‘slipping’.

“This was a clear attempt to mark me . . . with your initial . . . S.”

He leaned back casually in his chair. “And why would I be compelled to do such a thing?”

“Because you are obsessed with ownership. You talk about women as though they are possessions to own, trophies to earn, to fight for. You have an absolutely out-dated sense of appropriate relational dynamics between the sexes and you have clearly not heard of women’s rights or even the concept of gender equality.”

He raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“You act like women are responsible for the attention they receive—as though they seek it just by being female. You absolve males from any responsibility—as though they have no agency whatsoever. Do you think so little of your own gender?”

His mouth quirked up slightly. He was clearly amused and it made her even more furious.

“And you have the audacity to comment upon my clothing when your own attire is firmly rooted in the previous century. I happen to feel very comfortable with my clothing choice, comfortable enough not to have to wear the same garments every single day, and will continue to wear cardigans even if they are not appealing to the male gaze . . . which may I add is another point of insult . . .”

He settled back in his seat as though enjoying watching her get so worked up. She felt her throat starting to close in indignation.

“I can lend you a few books on feminist principles if you like. Perhaps then you might understand that women have a more important role to play in the world than to simply satisfy the male need for some pretty, brainless object to wank over.”

He snorted, before allowing his hand to flop insouciantly down onto the arm of the chair. “Whilst your fascinating feminist declaration is endearingly ardent,” he responded, his tone rich with sarcasm and condescension. “You have still failed to explain why I would wish to place my mark upon you . . . of all people.”

Of all people?

Was she really that unworthy? The bottom of the barrel?

Hermione clenched her fists as she responded in a low growl,

“Because you have no one.”
The amusement seeped from his eyes.

“No one would want you.”

She wanted him to be angry. Furious. Heart thundering, she waited for the explosion. But it didn’t come. Instead, what transpired was somehow much worse.

Eyes slipping down to the desk, he inhaled deeply.

In a voice that was as devoid of emotion as humanly possible, he spoke,

“You are to leave now, Miss Granger.”
Hermione arrived late to her Runes class but could do little apart from watch anyway. Most teachers had modified the requirements in class to accommodate her lack of wand but it mostly involved her not being particularly involved. However, this time she happened to be grateful to be on the outer, as the knot in her stomach hadn’t abated since being unceremoniously ejected from Snape’s office.

The opportunity to finally tell him exactly what she thought of his actions had been all too liberating, and his smirking derision had driven her to want to hurt him. He had said and done some awful things to her but she didn’t expect to be able to wound him in return. She’d thought him impenetrable, untouchable. Apparently not.

In some ways she was annoyed at herself for caring. He had perpetrated some absolutely unconscionable acts against her as his student but she couldn’t seem to shake the sense that she had gone too far. It was mean of her to suggest that no one would want him but he’d basically said exactly the same thing to her only moments earlier. Still, she didn’t feel good about it.

And that tiresome lump of guilt didn’t let up for the entire day. By the time evening came around, she was almost delirious with fatigue but knew she wouldn’t sleep with so much to validate her relentless self-flagellation.

She needed a drink. Or many.

And so she ended up in the Gryffindor common room with a half bottle of Firewhisky of her own, a little later than everyone else but nevertheless warmly welcomed.

They were nice to her—lovely really. All of them. Fun and funny. But they were also couples. Luna was sitting comfortably on Neville’s lap in one of the armchairs. Seamus and Romilda Vane were together by the fire. They had been seeing each other since the beginning of the year—even though she was a bit younger and had snubbed him for Harry a couple of years earlier. Then there was Ginny. She was alone but, of course, had Harry who would be accompanying her to the ball the following weekend. The redhead was clearly excited, modelling her elegant black dress with a twirl, and Hermione felt genuinely happy for her.

But being in the presence of so many couples brought with it further challenging emotions—memories of her last night at the Book Group—and yet another pang of longing.

She remained on the fringe throughout the evening. Talking little. Drinking a lot. More than the rest. They didn’t seem to notice, or if they did, they didn’t mention it. It was pretty typical of her life now—watching the world pass by as a somewhat distant spectator, rather than experiencing it. And when their laughter hit her—tinny, echoing, like that from a television . . . she drowned it out . . . with another drink.
She left the common room last, feeling hot and light-headed. Standing had been the catalyst. Whilst sitting, she could almost convince herself that she was only tipsy. But standing she was drunk—undoubtedly. It felt surprisingly good. Despite being without her wand she felt powerful, recklessly so, aggressive even, like she could easily punch someone in the face. If Draco was about she might do it again. Pity he wasn’t. She suddenly found herself missing him, and not simply to put him on his arse again . . . strange.

As she ambled up the corridor toward her bedroom door, she glanced both ways, hoping to see someone. She had too much energy—too much volatile blood was pumping through her. An odd excitement was also pulsing within her chest, infusing her muscles. As she entered her room, she realised she didn’t want to be there at all, and despite her massive sleep deficit, she knew she couldn’t possibly go to bed.

There was only one person she wanted to see in that mood. And it was the one person who least wanted to see her. But that aversion also happened to be the chief attraction . . . Danger. What could he do to her when he was angry? What was he capable of? The thought made her so horny she found herself grasping her pussy and wincing. She didn’t want to think about how wrong it was. It was such a mundane Hermione Granger thing to do . . . she could hear her own voice admonishing herself and it pissed her off. Gryffindor’s Golden Girl . . . get fucked!

Even sloshing about in her drunken haze she wondered again at what she had become. Had he done this to her—made her like this? Or had she done it to herself? She had been so adamant only that morning that he was wrong, but now the wrongness was all she wanted . . . to be taken out onto that ledge again, held breathless over the swirling abyss . . . and set free—if only for a moment.

But how could that even be? How could his actions both oppress and liberate her? It was difficult enough to fathom in the best of circumstances. These weren’t the best of circumstances.

She would focus, instead, upon the points. Her friends had assured her that they didn’t care about them but she would never let them go—she couldn’t. Mainly because she wanted to balance the ledger . . . with him. She wanted nothing owing—no evidence that she had been found lacking. Lacking in what exactly, she couldn’t really tell anymore . . . she was no longer the best judge of what mattered.

Feeling increasingly morose, Hermione knew that if she kept at it she would start crying again. She still felt bad . . . like a bad person. Perhaps she could just go, make her apology, and return. Maybe that would be enough for her—and for him. There were warning bells going off all over the place but she was drunk and gave herself permission to ignore them.

Clumsily peeling off her clothes, she dressed in her nightie, her lust-and-alcohol addled brain considering it the best attire for apologising in, before pulling her thickest robe from her wardrobe and wrapping it around herself. Slipping into some equally inappropriate flimsy flats, she left.

As she traversed the freezing corridors, she came to the conclusion that this was likely to be one of the stupidest things she’d ever attempted in her life—on a par with confronting a troll, or fluffy the three headed dog. In fact, this felt far worse. His potential for damage went far deeper.

She made good time—or lost track of time. Whichever it was, she eventually found herself passing the Potions classroom door, dark and silent, realising then that she had no idea how late it was.

Rounding the corner, her steps slowed as she approached the shadowed door to his chambers,
recessed into a shallow alcove. Her earlier bold conviction seemed to evaporate exponentially with each step until she felt unnervingly sober by the time she stopped. Just the thought of Snape had the capacity to suck the innocent pleasure out of just about anything.

Drawing a deep breath, she raised her fist and delivered a tentative knock.

After a long moment of silence a voice came from within,

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Hermione shivered, but she managed to stop herself from turning and running.

“Why have you come?” His tone was infused with an odd heaviness.

“I wish to speak with you, Headmaster.” Her lips brushed the door as she leaned in.

“Then speak.”

Hermione pulled the robe around her. It was bitterly cold.

“Would . . . would you permit me to enter?”

There was another long silence.

“These are my personal chambers. What happens in here is a matter of privacy. Not to be disclosed to anyone . . . for any reason.”

It was a warning.

Hermione knew that she should leave. But there was something holding her there. Some need, deeper even than self-preservation.

“I understand, Headmaster.”

The silence grew heavy. She could feel him contemplating.

Suddenly there was a scrape of metal and the door jolted open, swinging inward a fraction to reveal a thin sliver of amber light. Pressing her palm against the smooth wood, Hermione opened it to reveal a smallish room, lit only by an open fire and two low lamps. Snape was seated in an armchair angled toward the hearth, his features rendered shadowy and indistinct by the firelight. The fingers of one hand balanced a wine glass; draped from the other was what looked like a long cigarette, a thread of smoke meandering upwards and dissipating in a bluish haze above his head.

His eyes didn’t shift from the fire. It was the greeting she had become accustomed to. None.

Slipping into the room, Hermione closed the door behind her. And waited.

Snape took a long swallow of burgundy liquid then drew deeply from the cigarette. The aroma was odd—woody and mildly herbaceous. Not like anything she had smelled before.

Remaining by the door, she took the opportunity to rake her eyes over the dusky room. Books. So many of them. Everywhere. The shelves were crammed and sagging under the weight but there were even more stacked on tables, on a desk at the back of the room, and even piled on the floor. There was little else to speak of apart from a small square table with two chairs, one chair stacked with books, and a second armchair nearer the fire but propped against the wall in a way that suggested that it was rarely used. Clearly he didn’t entertain much.
Her gaze trailed down to the base of his own chair where she could see one empty wine bottle and another only a third full. Like her, she suspected he’d had quite a lot to drink.

She was increasingly realising what a bad idea this actually was.

Dragging from the cigarette again, he flicked the ash at the fire before finally turning his head to appraise her.

“Did I fail to make it clear to you this morning . . . that your presence is neither required nor welcome?” Small drifts of smoke curled ethereally from his lips with each word.

“That is . . . actually that’s the whole . . . the . . . um . . . main reason I’m here,” Hermione faltered, trying her best to sound eloquent and failing disarmingly. She couldn’t tell if she was slurring or not. “I . . . um . . . I just . . . really wanted to apologise.”

“Did you, now?” he muttered sarcastically before taking another gulp of wine. “Realised what a pickle you’d be in did you?” It was such an odd word to come from his mouth but the way he disdainfully spat it at her was most effective. “Realised your plans to bravely resurrect yourself—from the ashes like some fraudulent phoenix—rekindling the hopes of the gormless Gryffindor initiates . . . that it might all come to nothing?”

Hermione’s stomach clenched at his bitterness. Clearly she had struck a blow earlier.

“I . . . I am simply seeking to restore what was lost. Nothing more.”

“Really? That is all you seek?” His black eyes skimmed unnervingly over her.

Hermione could feel sobriety bringing with it an unpleasant vulnerability that she had enjoyed shedding, if only for a short while. She wanted that brash courage back, the one that had come so naturally, so easily, when she was younger—invoked by the constant barrage of dangers they had faced, and driven by their shared sense of purpose, but that now could only be generated through artificial means it seemed . . . and only under circumstances in which she sought to deliberately incite it.

“That . . . And perhaps a drink?” she suggested.

Hermione felt a surge of fear at her own blatancy, her blunt audacity. She desperately wanted to slide back down into that haze, into the mindless oblivion that alcohol could provide. But she was also an adult. Their interactions to date had been so one-sided that part of the balance she sought involved re-establishing herself as a woman in her own right. And maybe, just maybe . . . she sought to provoke him.

Brows drawing together, he glared at her as he pursed his lips around the cigarette and drew another expansive lungful. Then he proceeded to rest the wine glass on one arm of his chair and lay the cigarette on the other before standing. He was dressed all in black, trousers and shirt. Bending to pick up the partially full bottle, he allowed the smoke to seep from his lips before sauntering toward her. A panther. She was suitably intimidated, the gooseflesh rolling over her as though she’d just been dunked in iced water.

“Take off your robe.”

Hermione hadn’t moved from her place against the door. The way he approached suggested he wasn’t asking her to make herself comfortable, so she simply obliged by slipping the robe from her shoulders and allowing it to slither down, pooling at her feet. Her sheer nightie clung to her; she didn’t even need to look to know that her nipples were straining against the fabric, projecting
traitorously toward him.

He closed the distance between them until he was looming over her, propping one hand disconcertingly close to her head and lifting the other to hover the neck of the wine bottle between her breasts.

“And I see you’ve brought with you your fervid feminist principles?” he remarked snidely, dipping the bottle down to trail the open mouth over one jutting nipple and then the other.

Hermione’s hands felt for the door behind her—something solid to cling on to. She swallowed, feeling every bit the fraud he claimed her to be.

“How honourable . . . to extol your righteous principles when convenient and silently discard them when not . . . when it suits your . . . needs.” He hooked the lip of the bottle under one nipple and rolled it upwards making her eyes flare open.

“I’m afraid I—”

“Why don’t you just admit that you haven’t the faintest idea what you want anymore?” His baritone was heavy as he continued to grind the rim around her nipple. “You no longer know what you stand for . . . or even who you are.”

She opened her mouth to respond but only a whimper emerged—as much a result of his words as the mounting sensations.

“You don’t have all the answers, Miss Granger.” He leaned closer. “You never did. I attempted to make that clear to you despite your desire to prove otherwise.”

He slid the neck of the bottle up her own neck, gliding the smooth glass over her chin to rest the lip against her own. He began to tip the bottle.

She opened her mouth.

“Do you really consider it appropriate for a Headmaster to ply his students with alcohol?” He slid the mouth of the bottle sideways to rest upon her cheek. She tried to follow with her lips but he continued to drag it away from her. “Surely that would be deemed . . . improper?”

It was clear that his intention wasn’t for her to drink so she stopped searching and simply waited as he continued to tip the bottle up until the liquid began trickling over her jaw. It streamed down her neck and chest before soaking into her nightie, blossoming like blood over one breast. Thin runnels continued over her ribcage, down her stomach to further soak her knickers.

“Now, if you had come here with the intention of offering me wine from your breast I might have been more pleased to see you,” he murmured. “As it is, I will have to make do.”

Suddenly he pushed the bottle against her face, forcing her to look away from him, her other cheek thrust against the wood of the door. Then she felt the sensation of his warm mouth over the soaked material covering her breast. He began to suck, tongue creating a tight seal that enabled him to draw the wine from her nipple so forcefully that it almost hurt.

She inhaled sharply, her fingernails curling against the door.

Then his mouth was gone. The bottle was gone. Strong fingers locked around her jaw, twisting her back around. His nose was so close to hers, she could barely focus. All she could see were the black pits of his eyes.
“Why are you really here?” The words rolled out, dark and disturbingly restrained.

“To apologise,” she blurted desperately against his lips.

She felt his boot slip between her feet, forcing her legs apart. Then his hand followed, reaching under her nightie. Wandlessly, he removed her knickers, tossing them aside before his hand returned, fingers gliding over her mons before delving between her lips. In no time he was inside her. His eyes were still locked on hers, penetrating her in equal measure from above.

“Is this your apology?” His lip curled as he slithered two long fingers through her copious arousal, making it slosh crudely.

She tried a feeble shake of her head but he was gripping her jaw too tightly.

Withdrawing with a soft sucking sound, he brought his glistening digits to her mouth. “Taste yourself . . . then dare to tell me again.”

Both fingers were simultaneously pushed between her lips. She moaned at the intrusion before allowing her tongue to slide hesitantly between his fingers. The combination of her sweet, silken arousal, together with the smoky oak suffusing his skin was overwhelmingly arousing in its own right. She sucked more vigorously, drawing their essences together before finally swallowing.

Fingers stroking her tongue in a manner that was both sensuous and strangely erotic, he murmured. “Tell me.”

She could barely speak.

“For redemption, sir,” she responded thickly.

“Indeed.”

Her breaths came in shallow burst around his fingers.

“Now suck me,” he ordered. “Make me believe you.”

She did. Using her tongue, she proceeded to clamp his fingers against her palate and suck, rocking her jaw as she did so. Watching his face closely, she attempted to gauge his response but he suddenly turned her away again, positioning his mouth against her ear. She could feel his breath tickling into the canal.

“It begins as nourishment, comfort—the compulsion to suckle a mere reflex,” he murmured, the fingertips of his other hand lightly caressing her jaw. “But it evolves. Over time it becomes more. You discover that your mouth holds power. Power beyond mere words. Power to give, to draw from another. And whilst a cock, and the vestigial object to which it is attached, a man, may be enamoured by the draw of a hot, tight cunt—its deeply carnal cavorting, its liquid desires—the mouth can give more, take more.” Hermione found his words strangely hypnotic, her mouth responding to his tone and pace with more forceful servicing of his digits. “The tongue, incomparably agile, soft and muscular, can both caress and penetrate, with the capacity to cajole and plunder in equal measure.”

She was so focused upon her own efforts and the rhythm of his words that she cried out in shock when his own tongue suddenly thrust into the canal of her ear. It twisted sinuously, probing with sharp, wet crackles into her intimate tunnel as though he was attempting to burrow into her brain. The problem was that he was already there, already boring into her, through her, taking root inside her.
When he finally withdrew, her eyes were screwed closed, she’d stopped breathing. But he simply continued his silky utterances as though nothing has happened, his breath now threading coolly into the moist cavern of her ear.

“But the most powerful draw is not from the mouth at all . . . but from the eyes.”

With a swift jerk, he twisted her back around to face him, his fingers now so deeply embedded in her mouth that she was struggling not to gag. Blinking furiously with the effort, she was nevertheless drawn in by his impossibly intense gaze, dark tunnels that stretched on forever.

“Windows to the soul . . . or simply a reflection of what one wishes to see,” he murmured. “When you show a man genuine desire, a need for him, and him alone, a desire to taste him, swallow him, satisfy yourself, even nourish yourself with him, you have returned, once again, to the beginning . . . to that base need . . . and that, alone, can be everything. Enough to come back for again and again . . . for that look.” He stared searchingly into her eyes. She stared back. *What was he hoping to see? Anything? Nothing?*

Pulling his fingers from her mouth, he gave her a long, complex look before dipping downward and returning with the bottle.

“Lubricate it,” he ordered, holding the bottle to her mouth.

She did as instructed, trailing her tongue around the neck and sucking on the rim despite her jaw and tongue aching from her previous efforts.

He watched her closely.

“You’ve never been with a woman before,” he stated with cool assurance. “There are two opportunities here and yet your proclivity is phallic. Your tongue is yet to delve inside. You haven’t sought to taste its depths. Her depths. You should. The experience is rather . . . intoxicating.”

Hermione tentatively dipped her tongue inside the slick tunnel of the bottle.

“Imagine her squirming with desire as you penetrate her—her sweet warmth just like yours, like tasting yourself.”

He rocked the bottle gently into her mouth, forcing her tongue rhythmically into the neck as though she was slipping into someone’s pussy. And she simultaneously sensed how it would feel within herself, prodding into her core. It was so bewildering and yet so hot that she was forced to close her eyes again, unable to stand the way he appraised her efforts, the way he absorbed the erotic imaginings playing out on her face.

“And now I believe you’re ready . . . to feel,” he breathed.

Her eyes flew open as he lifted the hem of her nightie, raising it up to her neckline before tucking it in place so that her entire lower half was bare and exposed.

Cupping a hand behind one of her knees, he lifted her leg sideways, opening her wide before pinning it in place with his own knee, propped against the door. Hermione’s shoulders began to rise and fall with the effort of breathing—she wasn’t used to having so much of his dark, rigid body pressed so close to hers.

Then the bottle reappeared—trailing a moist path down her abdomen, riding the curve of her mons before slipping between her lips, the smooth rim settling over her swollen clitoris.
She didn’t even need to ask to know what he was going to do.

“How many points?” she rasped breathlessly, hands fisted against the door.

“None,” he responded, threading the firm ridge back and forth over her electrified bundle. “This will be your apology.”

He relocated the bottle mouth to her entrance. There was a brief pause as Hermione wondered if she could possibly get away . . . or if she even wanted to. Then it was too late. She gasped, her head pitching backwards and her knees buckling as he suddenly thrust the bottle inside her.

Her hand automatically clamped around his wrist, an attempt to limit the incursions of the long neck which felt incredibly bold and unyielding, reaming along the walls of her soft passage.

“Tell me why you want me to push this inside you.” His mouth was by her ear again, his breath ghosting across her cheek.

Did she? Is that really what she wanted?

His wrist flexed inside her grasp, twisting the bottle a little at the end of each thrust, stimulating her further as the flared shoulder stretched her opening. It was so raw, so forceful, so shocking that Hermione found herself torn between passively succumbing and actively receiving. But when she realised that her body was definitely responding in the latter, her hips naturally thrusting to meet him, her legs widening to accept him, she knew that he spoke the truth.

“I want you to . . . challenge me.” She was definitely slurring now. No longer alcohol-induced but a reflection of her mounting arousal. “To push me. To stretch my . . . limits.”

“Tell me how hard you want me to do it.”

Her response was immediate, “Hard.”

He plunged the bottle into her so solidly that the remnants of wine sloshed up the sides, spilling into her. She groaned and clutched his wrist harder.

“You would enjoy having your cup filled,” he murmured, his voice fluctuating with his efforts. “A skinful inside your skin, full body within your body, rich juices melding at the perfect temperature . . . blending masterfully, each heady aroma ripening . . . breathing. And then the eager mouths would seek you out . . . connoisseurs . . . burrowing into your cellar, tapping your barrel, drinking deeply from you.”

Hermione was being sucked into a sensorial whirlpool. The low growl of his voice and his carnal provocations had completely commandeered her mind, his bold thrusts were stretching her pussy to its exquisite limits, and now his other hand was attending to her clitoris, thrumming it so expertly, so perfectly, she wondered if he could actually feel her, whether he could somehow occupy her skin.

“I accept,” he whispered, his lips brushing her cheek. “I accept your apology.”

She lost all control of her vocalisations, her hoarse sobs rending the air as he drove her to the brink before suddenly slowing down, stretching out the ecstatic agony, holding her breathless, shuddering, on the verge of implosion, before finally teasing her over the edge.

He had told her it was time for her to feel. And so she did—deeper even than the solid insertion that her body attempted to crush as it came with such force that she screamed. Convulsing uncontrollably, she clutched his wrist in desperation, burying her nails into it like it was her lifeline, the only stable
object in a chaotic tempest that was threatening to tear her away . . . like a not-so-innocent Dorothy . . . a Dorothy pleading to the Wizard for courage, a heart . . . for home. She rode the bottle for so long and so violently that her thighs were drenched—with what she couldn’t say. And her face was the same. The tears had come again without her realising. Everything had been wrung from her that could be. She had nothing more to give—nothing more to take . . . or so she thought.

Then she cracked her eyes open to see him looking at her with such naked concern that it choked her anew. Gradually withdrawing the bottle from her exhausted pussy, he brought it up to her parched lips and gently tipped it up. She drank. The wine was rich and warm as he’d said it would be, infused with her body, with her most intimate essence.

And somehow he’d managed to remain separate from it all once again, orchestrating every part but participating from a distance, making it all about her. But it wasn’t. She knew it wasn’t.

Flinging her arms up, she hooked them around his neck, pulling him down with all of her strength so that his mouth was crushed against hers. She pushed her tongue inside him, forcing the wine into his mouth and feeling it running in fresh rivulets down her chin.

Finally she broke away, gasping with exhilaration. He stared at her, lips dripping with red—his expression so uncharacteristically confounded, that she was both pleased and disappointed. She was clearly not the only one who didn’t know what they wanted. Giving him a shove, she snatched up her robe and yanked open the door, squeezing through the gap and breaking into a run.

From behind her came the explosive sound of shattering glass.
Ropemaster

Chapter Summary

A/N: Again, RL has had me busier than I would like and these chapters are also a bit longer than the usual. As always, thank you for your patience and your inspiring words. I really love them.

Also a smut warning for this chapter folks . . . again, the clue is in the title. DSxx

Snape was impotent.

That’s the conclusion that Hermione had come to after a weekend of heavy duty over-thinking, hyper-ruminating and endless day-dreaming with her legs propped against the wall and her head hanging off the side of her bed. Not only was it childishly comfortable but the blood pooling in her brain provided for extra mega-cogitation.

Basically she had thought of nothing and no one else. And any time she might have been tempted to consider another topic like, say, the fact that she was supposed to be studying for her upcoming N.E.W.Ts (without a wand), the physical reminders of his attempts to make a carafe out of her nether regions were enough to bring her smartly back to the topic at hand . . . Snape’s cock.

There were too many clues. The hands. The voice. The constant hypnotic recitations. The wine bottle proxy phallus. The absence of even the suggestion of active penis—indeed, there hadn’t been the remotest twinge, the faintest whiff, of anything.

She had entertained the thought that perhaps he might not want to be that physically intimate with her. But whilst she certainly didn’t consider herself necessarily to his tastes in that regard, she couldn’t shake the sense that he was attracted to her. Attraction and intimacy were, admittedly quite different beasts, but the level of intimacy he’d engaged in thus far had been rather extreme, suggesting that intimacy per se might not be the issue.

Then there was the possibility that he had some moral or ethical objection to introducing his cock into the equation. However, the notion of an exceedingly scrupulous Snape in the current context wasn’t particularly credible.

*Perhaps he considered that indulging his penis would nullify his claims to be focusing on her own atonement? That was more plausible . . . if it was, indeed, a deliberate choice.*

*But what if it wasn’t? What if he couldn’t get it up?*

It would certainly explain a lot.

He’d been very close to her in their last engagement. She would surely have felt him stir against her if he’d been at all aroused. But, then again, she had been extraordinarily distracted. And despite the intensity of that moment, parts of her memory were now quite hazy, permanently smudged by the alcohol.

One thing she did remember, however, was the sound as she’d escaped—that jarring crash and clatter as the bottle had smashed.
Was it deliberate — borne of anger? Frustration? Or had it been an accident — shock at what she had done? Or simply a very un-Snape-like case of butterfingers?

He was so full of barely restrained... something. It might be anger. But it felt like something more. All of the references to forgiveness, trust, surrender... in his own fucked up way if felt like he was trying to communicate. And even more bizarrely he seemed to be getting through... perhaps more subconsciously than consciously... but she definitely felt different. More aware. But also more fragile. She wasn’t confident that she was going in a good direction, but it was movement at least... better than the inertia that had had its claws in her since the end of the war... making her feel like she was wading through life... constantly kicking through the detritus of the past, the remains of those she had left behind.

So how must it be for him?

Somehow Snape had survived. The news had come as a shock to everyone, especially Harry, Ron and herself... they’d witnessed his death after all—or at least thought they had—and in that moment had discovered a very different man to the one they had thought they’d known. But his surprise return to Hogwarts had somehow wiped both the bravery and vulnerability of the man from her immediate consciousness. He had come back with only the worst of his original traits and seemed to be hell bent upon stamping his overbearing authority on the place... as though he was trying to make a point, channelling his hyper-vigilance into something that no longer required it.

Everyone just wanted to finally relax, breathe, rejoice in the fact that the war was over but he didn’t let them, his presence alone was enough to remind them of those terrifying years, not to mention his existence in the role of Headmaster being synonymous with the death of their beloved Dumbledore.

And the question of why he had even returned was a valid one. What had been done to ensure that he was fit for the post? Surely survival and exoneration alone wouldn’t have warranted it. Had the school been his reward—his apology after all that had been forced upon him?

Everyone knew that Professor McGonagall should have been given the role, including McGonagall herself, although she was too professional to imply anything beyond the occasional puckered huff or withering glare in the wake of another of Snape’s dogmatic demands.

But surely the biggest question of all was why Snape had accepted. Only a matter of months after almost dying at the hands of Lord Voldemort, as the castle was still being rebuilt, he had returned. Hermione understood that he was still a relatively young man and had demonstrated immense fortitude throughout Voldemort’s reign of terror, but no matter how resilient he was, there was no way that he could have come through it all unscathed. It was impossible.

And perhaps that was what she was seeing... snatches of what he had been left with after all that destruction, after everything else had been taken from him. Perhaps Hogwarts was his anchor. She understood that. And perhaps he was holding so tightly to it because he was just as afraid of losing it, of drifting away, as she was.

She’d kissed him to see more. And she had. She’d seen upon his face a fleeting glimpse of that man in the Shrieking Shack. The confusion and doubt, the vulnerability... but he was still so unpredictable, so aggressive (she believed he did smash the bottle on purpose) that she could never afford to trust him. Indeed he’d warned her not to, himself.

Perhaps he did possess some degree of insight after all.

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“Just make something else,” Snape muttered over his shoulder.

*Something else?*

Hermione was incredulous. He had already instructed that, in preparation for their N.E.W.Ts and in keeping with the complexity expected of seventh year students, they were to brew an invisibility potion.

It was the second last potion in the text with good reason—a proper challenge. She’d actually been looking forward to it for years. In fact, since she’d first read the book cover to cover. But it required a wand. And she didn’t have one.

When she’d pointed this out, he’d dismissed her with those three feeble words—‘make something else’.

What was this? Play time? She couldn’t afford to be wasting her classes brewing potions using only the magic imbued in the cauldron. That wouldn’t prepare her for anything.

She tossed her spatula down and began to seethe.

He was ignoring her too.

Ever since she’d entered the classroom, he had kept his back turned to her. He hadn’t looked directly at her once. Even her question had been acknowledged with only a half turn of his head.

What was he playing at now? Mind-fuck phase two - the dismissal?

“I need my wand back, Professor.”

She had followed him to the front of the class and uttered the words quietly enough so that the others wouldn’t hear.

His broad back stiffened but he didn’t turn.

“You do not.”

Hermione swallowed down the hurt and frustration that had started to bubble up. She was feeling victimised and it wasn’t helpful.

“I’ll earn it back.” Her voice was barely a whisper. “However . . . you wish.”

This time he turned.

His hard, black eyes scanned the room to gauge if anyone was listening before settling upon her. He wasn’t pleased. At all.

“You will do as instructed and brew an alternative potion,” he muttered under his breath, lips barely moving.

“But—”

“And you will see me . . . after class.”

The words caught in her throat. She nodded faintly.

“In my . . . office.” He bared his teeth with the last word.
With a shiver she ducked her head.

No doubt he already saw it in her eyes... the fear... the anticipation.

***

“Get yourself wet.”

Hermione had been in his office all of fifteen seconds. Clearly, he wasn’t mucking about.

She assumed he wasn’t asking her to wet herself but gauging by his demeanour—sweeping around the room as though he had one hundred more important things to do—she knew better than to attempt a facetious comment.

“What are your plans for me?” she ventured instead.

He stopped abruptly, robes swishing fiercely, his gaze drilling into her.

Finally, his lip curled into a sneer. “I would urge you to at least be honest about what you want.”

She frowned in confusion. “What I want?”

He tossed the book in his hand onto the desk with a loud thud.

“You have asked me to describe my intentions because my voice turns you on.”

Her breath caught. Was she that transparent?

It was, of course, true. His voice would get her far wetter than she could achieve under her own steam. She’d hoped he would indulge her. Just not like this... moving stealthily in her direction... making her feel... hunted.

“Say it.”

She swallowed, feeling herself regressing back into a naughty school girl. It was impossible to avoid.

“Headmaster... I find your voice... titillating.”

He wasn’t amused.

He closed the distance between them in two swift strides.

“Say it!” he demanded, hand shooting out to squeeze the back of her neck.

“Your voice turns me on,” she gasped.

The pressure on her neck subsided slightly.

“It’s hypnotic... spell-binding...” she continued, looking intently at him. “Sometimes I masturbate to your voice, your words... feeling them... penetrate me.” His nostrils flared slightly, his breathing had deepened. “I’ve imagined coming on your words... in your mouth.”

His jaw muscles flexed as his eyes widened. Had she... stirred him?

Suddenly he grabbed her, spinning her away from him.

Both of his hands reached around, grasping the front of her shirt from behind before tearing it open,
causing the tiny buttons to catapult off, bouncing across the stone floor. She cried out from the shock of it. Then each successive garment was removed with an equally rough yank until she was left completely naked—from the ankles up.

“I told you to get yourself wet,” he growled, hot breath scorching her neck. “Instead you vacillate between flippancy and flagrant obsequiousness. You may think yourself clever, Miss Granger, but what I’m taking from you subverts all of that, renders the trivial understandings of your overzealous mind obsolete.” He proceeded to guide one of her trembling hands to her breast and the other down between her legs. “Now stop trying to play with me . . . and do yourself instead.”

Drawing laboured breaths, Hermione grasped her stiff nipple and began rolling it between her fingertips, slipping the other finger between her labia to jostle her clitoris. She felt him retreat. There was the sound of a drawer opening behind her.

Moments later, he returned.

“You are fortunate, Miss Granger.” He was close . . . just above her right ear. “I’m prepared to offer you a choice . . .”

She closed her eyes, hoping for something favourable.

“. . . In which hole shall I insert this?” She felt the tip of something—her wand—trailing lightly down the side of her neck.

She swallowed as it skirted her throat. More insertion . . . she might have guessed. It wasn’t quite as she’d hoped, but he’d never offered her a choice before so perhaps it was progress.

“I’ll occupy . . . the other,” he continued, his tone turning low and ominous.

The other? With what? She wondered if he would finally bring it out.

“Which will it be?”

She hesitated before responding, “My . . . front . . . my vagina.”

“Then I will take . . . thissss,” he purred in her ear, running a single silky digit up the crevice between her cheeks, brushing the puckered skin and causing her hips to jolt forward.

If she wasn’t already wet, that would have been enough to do it—more than enough.

“Have you ever been tied?”

She was taken aback. Her lips fluttered around the response before finally releasing it, “No.”

“It is both confronting and powerful. Through it you will demonstrate that you are ready to receive . . . your reward.”

Suddenly her arms were pulled back and she felt something being skilfully wrapped around her wrists—a rope, strong and waxen, threaded in what felt like a complicated knot. When he jerked it tight, her shoulders retracted, her breasts simultaneously thrust forward.

Finally moving to stand before her, she saw that he held her wand in one hand, his own in the other. Bringing the tip of his to hers, he muttered a few indecipherable words, causing her wand to instantly transform, shortening by almost half and thickening. Tapping it again, he started the stumpy rod jiggling about, vibrating feverishly in his palm.
Grasping it by the base, he brought the thick, shuddering tip to her protracted nipple, making her
gasp as it flickered against her.

“Will you be using this to stimulate yourself in the future?” He cocked his head slightly as he
continued to slide the vibrating shaft over her.

She nodded without hesitation.

A hint of approval flickered across his lips. “It’s so much easier . . . isn’t it . . . when you’re honest
with me?”

If she hadn’t been so apprehensive about what he was going to do to her, she would have suggested
that he would do well to heed his own words. But she didn’t. She didn’t speak at all. All she could
do was watch as he raised his own wand to the ceiling, causing four long ropes to materialise and
slither down, hanging on all sides of her like ribbons around a maypole.

She’d stupidly assumed that she was already tied. Not . . . even . . . close.

Weaving his wand in a complicated series of spirals and flourishes, he set the ropes in motion,
winding and curling around her naked body. All four twined together, forming intricate knots that
pressed into her skin and pulled at her limbs. He continued to orchestrate their serpentine movements,
wrapping around and upon themselves, until the final two plaited and slung together under each of
her buttocks leaving her hanging like a trussed up turkey, her knees pressed tightly to her chest, her
legs spread apart.

Swinging gently, she tried to take stock of her precarious predicament. She couldn’t move at all
except for small vertical increments of her head; even breathing was difficult, her thighs framing her
tightly bound breasts.

His dark eyes roamed over her, drinking her in, as though admiring his own efforts. Then, raising his
wand, he performed a few delicate flicks, cinching her further upward until she was at eye height,
level with him.

“Miss Granger . . .”

She almost choked in disbelief. It was ridiculous for him to address her as such—as though they
were meeting at some sort of pleasant tea party.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Of course not,” she rasped, trying unsuccessfully to draw a deeper breath.

“Good.”

*What the —

“Are you . . . aroused?” He took a step closer.

He could see it. Despite the web of ropes interlaced across her body, her pussy was relatively spared,
in fact it was the main showcase and she had no doubt that her open petals were glistening with the
evidence. The feeling of being totally constrained but impossibly open drew all of her attention to the
throbbing fissure between her legs—it was erotic beyond words . . . of course she was aroused.

“You’ve made your point,” she muttered hoarsely, swallowing with difficulty past the rope
encircling her jaw.
His lips ticked up momentarily. If he could award himself house points, no doubt he would have.

But then his face turned serious.

“You have risked your life . . . to hide something.”

She was momentarily baffled, wondering what he was talking about. What was she hiding?

“You took it on as your mission . . . to protect another.”

He began to circle her, his voice dropping into that same hypnotic rhythm as their previous encounters. She couldn’t follow him, the restraints wouldn’t allow it. All she could do was listen.

“It worked out . . . You should be relieved . . . But you’re not.”

He must be referring to Harry . . . and the end of the war. But why? And how did he know that she

“You’ve hidden others . . . in different ways . . . ways that further wound you.”

She closed her eyes. He knew.

“Sometimes we are forced to live this duality—to make impossible choices . . . unconscionable decisions. And sometimes the internal rupture becomes too great . . . too vast to reconcile . . .”

He had stopped in front of her but she couldn’t open her eyes—she couldn’t look at him.

“The result is that one then risks losing . . . oneself.” His fingertips brushed lightly over her mons.

Oneself? He was talking about himself . . . she felt it with certainty. About his journey . . . and its parallels with hers. This was about them both . . . they were both lost.

She exhaled in noisy gusts through her nostrils, trying to maintain her composure despite being on the verge of unravelling, like the ropes binding her . . . from the inside out.

“To find oneself is more difficult,” he continued. “Especially when one refuses to acknowledge the past.” His fingers tracked down further, skimming over her labia. “Sometimes it must be forced—the deliverance. A frank purge of the need to protect . . . to conceal . . . to bury . . .” His fingers slipped gently inside her. “Can sometimes be sufficient to break everything open . . . exposing exactly that . . . which one seeks.”

She suddenly groaned and tried to move but it was impossible. He had relocated the wand to her opening and was now using it to replace his fingers. The furious vibration that he’d instigated set her entire nether regions aquiver.

“Look at me,” he demanded.

She cracked open her eyes, upper and lower lips trembling in unison.

“You will keep this secreted inside you.” He pressed the agitating wand deeper. “You will give no indication as to its presence. No words . . . no vocalisations whatsoever will pass your lips . . . until I permit it. If you fail, your wand remains with me. Do you understand?”

She felt the sob welling inside her but she wouldn’t let it pass her constricted throat. She managed a faint nod.
He leaned forward, watching her intently as he worked the reverberating rod between her crudely spread legs, the enhanced ridges on the vine wood rubbing demandingly against her walls.

“The most difficult object to hide is that which desperately wishes to make itself known,” he breathed, thrusting the feverish phallus deeper. “Or that which others are so desperate to find that they will stop at . . . nothing.” He drove in further before gradually pulling out, fucking her with agonising precision. “You may do everything in your power to conceal it . . . divert, dissuade, even sacrifice . . . but sometimes fate is decided . . . beyond your determination, your will . . . your capability.” He plunged deeper still. “Sometimes you are powerless. And you are simply left with the burden . . . of survival.”

Her throat ached with the need to cry out. The pulsing phallus that he’d finally buried completely inside her was sending seismic quakes through her entire pelvis. But his words affected her even more viscerally. This was about Harry . . . about Lily and Dumbledore, and her parents, and everyone else . . . this was about permission to accept the losses, permission to survive when others hadn’t. He was giving it to her. But had he ever really accepted it himself?

She squeezed her eyes closed, clamping her bottom lip between her teeth in an attempt to hold in everything that was desperately trying to burst forth.

“Good,” he whispered, his thumb trailing softly over her mouth, soothing the crushing ache. “It is not enough to simply give in. There is more to pursue. But you must be prepared to fight and lose . . . and to come back for more.”

She needed air. Her shallow breaths—now panting through her open mouth in lieu of the deranged cries that she knew would come if she engaged her larynx—were making her feel faint and disorientated.

But still he persisted.

“And then there are entanglements . . . with words alone . . . words that arouse . . . written . . . verbal . . . they connect and take hold, ensnaring and captivating. But equally they manipulate . . . provoke and cajole. Indeed, it may be those that rend you in the end . . . that encourage you to spill, to reveal against your wishes . . . opening you up before it is time.” His finger slid down to prod at her anus. “So you must be cautious . . . beware of the man who entices you with his honeyed . . . tongue.”

There was only one honey-tongued man she knew of and he happened to be the one dripping maddening words about honeyed fucking tongues into her ears.

“Could you resist him?” he murmured huskily, continuing to trouble her tight opening with short, insistent incursions.

She winced. Of course she could—if he would only give her a tiny bit of respite . . . verbally . . . physically. He wasn’t irresistible after all . . . he wasn’t . . . he couldn’t be—

Fucking hell!

She stopped breathing.

The sensation at her back passage had abruptly changed. His finger was gone. Replaced by something slick and firm, sinuously probing inside her.

Beware of the honeyed tongue.

And when she opened her eyes, the sight that greeted her turned her breaths harsh and raspy,
ratcheting from her chest like sobs. She couldn’t resist . . . she just couldn’t . . .

He was kneeling, holding the ropes around her buttocks with both fists and pulling her into him, swinging her rhythmically into that hot muscle that never stopped moving. His dark, penetrating eyes were upon her, his tongue inside her, laving, tasting, knowing her in a way that no one else did. She could not imagine anything so devastatingly intense, so overwhelmingly intimate.

Both the ropes and gravity were forcing all of her blood, all of the tension, into that part of her body and his tongue was delving inside her, as though probing to release some pressure valve. The solid reverberation inside her pussy hadn’t let up, in fact it felt more forceful than ever, perhaps due to the fact that she was coiled as tight as a spring. And when he released one rope to lift his hand to her clitoris, she knew it was all over.

She hadn’t uttered a single vocalisation. She had harboured her charge, protected it deep inside her as instructed. But she could do it no longer. It was now beyond her . . . and she would ultimately fail.

But as her lips parted, ready to surrender, she heard his silken whisper in her ear, “It is time.”

Then she fell off the world.

The ropes were gone.

She was in his arms.

Body convulsing helplessly, limbs pathetically weak, she nevertheless clung to him, grasping handfuls of his robe as the orgasm raged through her. Repeated detonations of her core sent shockwaves through her muscles, sensitised by the pressure from the ropes, so that she felt her entire body being drawn into the release. In her ears, the desolate howling was so foreign, so raw, that she barely recognised it as her own voice—it was as though everything that had been waiting to come out had tangled into a ragged ball of noise that wouldn’t let up, even as she buried her face in his chest. And she remained there—even as the seizing waves finally ebbed away, leaving her ticking and gasping like a dying fish.

At one point she became vaguely aware of the wand being removed from her. And much later, when her insides had turned to exhausted mush, she realised that she was faintly rocking. Face still pressed against his chest, she heard herself repeating two words in a husky, mindless mantra.

But when she worked out what they were—“I’m sorry . . . I’m sorry . . .” she instantly stopped, both shocked and confused.

She had no idea why she was saying them. Or to whom they were directed.

Then his fingers released hers from his robe, setting something in her hand. It was her wand. Clean. Restored. As it had always been.

Grasping it, she finally looked up at him.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He didn’t respond. Eyes dark and watchful.

Suddenly overcome with the need for some sort of reaction, she wrapped her hand around his neck but he turned away.

“Don’t,” he growled.
“Let me touch you.” She tentatively stroked his cheek. “You can trust me.”

Suddenly he turned and unceremoniously dumped her in his chair before sweeping away behind it.

Hermione grasped the leather arms in frustration.

“You can’t keep doing this,” she cried. “You can’t keep pretending!”

She couldn’t stop the tears from coming . . . she was just too overwhelmed.

“You talk about honesty but you haven’t shown a single drop of it.” Her words were choked with emotion. “Why can’t you just admit it—that you need this as much as I do?” Her breasts heaved with the effort. “I believe you smashed that bottle on purpose . . . because you can’t cope with your feelings. I understand. Of course I understand. But you can’t keep stripping me down, leaving me like this, and acting like you’re merely an observer . . . some self-appointed fucking therapist. I didn’t ask for this!” she shrieked into the silence.

Face tight with anguish, she twisted around in the chair.

The silence grew.

He was gone.
Master Plan

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hey folks, just letting you know that I’ve taken a prompt in the SS/HG smutfest so things might be a little delayed as I try to get that done also, DSxx

Driving measured, misty breaths into the crisp morning air, Hermione hurdled one fallen log and then another, winding her way in and out of the earthen track skirting the banks of the Black Lake. Footfalls light, muscles springy, she felt stronger, more agile than she had in a very long time. She’d barely broken a sweat and was almost half way through her usual circuit. In fact, she was seriously considering going around a second time if she could manage to fit it in before breakfast.

Over the past few days she had discovered a new level of focus. Perhaps it was the joy and relief of finally having her wand returned—she had certainly been revelling in the efficacy and efficiency that the reunion afforded her . . . they’d been inseparable for nearly eight years after all.

But perhaps it wasn’t her wand at all—or even what she’d been inspired to do with it since her last encounter with Snape—perhaps it was something more . . . an understanding . . . a realisation . . . but not one she could necessarily articulate.

It had taken her an inordinate amount of time to leave his office in the end. Partly because she could barely walk as a result of the tremulous fatigue in her muscles, induced by the intense pressure of the rope binds, but there was also the fact that she had had to hunt down her far-flung clothing before carefully restoring the seams that Snape had skilfully disintegrated in his frenetic disrobing.

The other delay was caused by her failed attempts to find the book. She had perused his entire collection, or at least the ones located in his office; clearly there were many more in his private chambers and Merlin knew where else.

Eyes and fingers trawling over shelf after shelf, she’d paused to ogle and marvel at more than a few. In fact, she was stunned to discover that he possessed one of the most eclectic and extraordinarily rare book collections she had ever encountered. Constantly surprised by the seminal and exotic publications, Muggle and Wizarding alike, she began to sense not only an extremely refined, but diverse range of interests.

He had amassed the most comprehensive selection of pre-eminent potion-making texts she’d ever seen, as well as intriguingly ancient books on the dark arts, charms and spell-casting. Muggle books included those on, astronomy, botany, entomology, anatomy and various other scientific pursuits. However, there were just as many texts on history, arts and literature, culture, philosophy and a set of autobiographies from both men and women . . . artists, politicians, even musicians. Between those there were a smattering of assorted others from cars and clocks, to linguistics and anthropology.

Finally she discovered a single shelf of fiction books—mostly classics but others that weren’t—adventures, mysteries and love stories that she could never imagine him reading. Perhaps he hadn’t . . . although there was no evidence that he collected on a whim. Judging by the rest, even these had been carefully selected for some perceived value.

It struck her, as she considered these tellingly sentimental tales amongst the patently erudite, that it
was quite a risk having them sitting on display for others to potentially see. They revealed a side to
him that he seemed to be at great pains to hide. Or perhaps he admitted precious few, staff and
students alike, into this space—and the titles were, admittedly, difficult to read from any distance—
she’d had to pull his desk chair over, standing on the arms to see them properly.

In the end, Hermione had found the entire literary exploration to be a surprising antidote to her earlier
hurt and anger. By the time she reached the final publication, despite the absence of her own book,
her frustration and fury had ebbed away and she was left with an odd contentment, an acceptance
that had eluded her in recent months . . . and a deeper understanding of Snape in the language that
she knew all too well—books.

Her overall feelings about him, however, were still somewhat confused. She was now convinced that
he was trying to instruct her . . . that he was attempting some sort of therapeutic exchange through
what she would still consider to be entirely unconventional and somewhat inappropriate means. This
latest interaction, however, was the closest he had come to explicitly articulating that he considered
her issues to be traumatically induced . . . whilst inferring perhaps certain parallels between their two
circumstances.

But then he had dropped her . . . literally. She’d barely touched him and he’d fled. It was as though
he was harbouring two entirely different personalities—one cold, confident and detached but with
the potential to be both overbearing and vindictive, the other unsure and quite vulnerably fearful—
one perhaps protecting the other. And it made for a frightening combination . . . he was both
unpredictable and explosive, like a damaged but deadly wild animal.

And that’s exactly why she wasn’t finished with him.

Heaving with exertion as she pushed herself to sprint back up the hill, she reflected upon the
disappointment she had felt when Slughorn had unexpectedly returned to the Potions classroom the
following day. A coincidence? Perhaps . . . but she considered it unlikely. Snape had also been
absent from the Great Hall for the remainder of the week and she’d wanted to see him. She’d wanted
to see his face, to gauge if anything had changed for him . . . as it had for her.

She was transforming . . . slowly but surely . . . taking ownership of herself once again. It felt like
Hermione Granger was finally returning—Gryffindor, fighter, defender, advocate, guardian . . . but
not the old model . . . a newer version who knew herself far better, more intimately (much more
intimately). She had found surprising strength and confidence in that depth of understanding . . . of
being able to identify with herself, her body, her feelings, of finally trusting her intentions.

Reaching the top of the hill, she staggered to a standstill, bending over and clutching her knees to
catch her breath. Tonight was the Ball. She desperately hoped that Snape would be in attendance as
she happened to have been working on a plan . . . for him. After all, he had taken it upon himself on
multiple occasions to enact his own judgement of what he considered her deficits to be. Now it was
her turn to do the same. She would be giving him what her instincts told her he was in desperate
need of.

He wasn’t going to like it, in fact there was a chance it would drive him to punish her more severely
than ever before. But if he was going to insist upon running away and spending almost an entire
week hiding from her, she felt she had little choice.

She needed to force his hand. And the consequences? Well, she wasn’t quite prepared to consider
those . . . not yet.

Straightening, she propped her hands on her hips as she gazed up at the castle. A lone figure stood
atop the astronomy tower, black robes lifting on the gentle breeze. She watched as he slowly
retreated from the railing, before turning and disappearing.

That was the last time he would be running from her.

***

Hermione chewed her bottom lip as she pulled dress after dress from her cupboard. Since she couldn’t leave Hogwarts to buy a new one, she’d decided to transfigure one of her old ones for the evening. There was a certain look she was going for . . . slutty elegance . . . that shouldn’t be too hard to achieve. *And the colour?* It was out of green or black. Green would be too obvious. So black it was.

Tossing the rejected others onto the bed, she held up her little black dress in order to make it even more disconcertingly brief. Holding the tip of her wand to the neckline, she stretched and slung it down to where she knew it would reveal a good deal of cleavage (she’d perfected a breast-lifting charm especially for the occasion). Grimacing a little, she continued the modifications. There were bound to be some raised eyebrows, and even more frowns—McGonagall would look like she’d swallowed the Snitch.

Still it was all for a good—

*Knock. Knock.*

Huffing, Hermione dropped the semi-transfigured dress on top of the pile before striding over to the door and opening it.

“Hey, ‘Mione!”

Hermione’s mouth dropped open. Then she beamed.

“Harry!” she cried, flinging her arms around his neck.

He lifted her off the ground as he hugged her. He hadn’t grown that much but he felt bigger, stronger.

“Oi, steady on!” His voice was muffled by her hair.

She found herself reluctant to let him go but eventually she had to as she could feel him straining against her grip.

“Anyone would think you’d been on detention for weeks.” He grinned, straightening his glasses as her arms finally slid away.

Her face dropped. “Oh, so you know?”

“Of course I know. I must have received ten owls at least . . . but none from you.” His green eyes weren’t accusing, just concerned.

“Yeah, well . . .” She stood aside for him to enter. “That’s another part it . . . no correspondence with the outside world.”

“Bloody hell . . . he’s really got you by the short and curlies, hasn’t he?” Harry thrust his hands into his pockets as he looked around the room.

Hermione stared at him. *How could she explain that, thanks to Snape, she no longer even possessed short and curlies to be gotten by?*
“But this is nice, though.” Harry nodded at the spacious room. “You seem to be doing all right?”

If it had been a week earlier, Hermione would have instantly dissolved into a blubbering mess or broken into peals of hysterical laughter. But the truth was that, today, she was doing all right. Despite everything . . . or perhaps even because of it . . . she was okay, and could respond truthfully.

“Yes . . . I’m doing all right.”

He smiled. “I must admit I was pretty chuffed to hear that you were keeping up the tradition . . . giving Snape the run-around, keeping the greasy old git on his toes.” It was the usual put down but without the usual malice. His stance on Snape had softened considerably since the Shrieking Shack.

Hermione ran a hand self-consciously through her hair. If he only knew the truth . . . it was Snape that was keeping her on her toes, on her knees . . . hanging from the—

“Ginny says you’ve earned a lot of the points back already. What does he have you doing?”

“Oh, you know . . .” Hermione plopped down on her bed and curled her legs under herself. “Just . . . boring stuff . . .” She shook her head dismissively. “Nothing exciting . . . just the old favourites.”

Harry nodded. “Seen plenty of those.”

Hermione returned a half-smile.

‘I just wondered,” Harry suddenly continued, his eyes shuttering slightly in thought, “after everything that happened to him . . . that he might have—”

“Have you seen much of Ron?” Hermione interrupted. She didn’t want that conversation going any further. Harry was pretty astute—far more than Ron, anyway. It was approaching dangerous territory.

“Oh yeah, loads. I’ve been to most of his games . . . some of his training sessions.”

Hermione felt a pang of jealousy.

“He says to say ‘hi’.”

“Brilliant . . . has his entire vocabulary deteriorated to two-letter words?” she sniped sarcastically. “A few Bludgers to the head will do that.”

“Come on, ‘Mione . . . he would have been here if he wasn’t playing tomorrow.” Harry ambled over and sat on the bed beside her.

“A partner in tow, no doubt,” she muttered.

“A few actually,” Harry conceded.

This irritated her more than she could explain.

“I suppose a B-grade keeper is bound to attract his share of B-grade groupies.” She crossed her arms feeling ridiculously petulant, disappointed that ‘Old Hermione’ had chosen to rear her annoyingly judgmental head.

“It’s not his fault,” Harry responded seriously.

Hermione frowned in confusion.
“He’s always had this knack of attracting B-grade women.” He looked pointedly at Hermione.

“ Fucking hell!” She slapped him on the arm before breaking into a bout of wheezy laughter. It felt rusty but good, like she hadn’t laughed in months.

“I guess I deserved that,” she sighed, wiping the corners of her eyes. “I’ve just been feeling a bit . . .”

“ Bitchy?” he offered.

Hermione’s mouth dropped open.

“You’re supposed to be making me feel better.”

“ Jealous?”

“Hardly . . .” she muttered, wiping her nose on her wrist. “Well . . . maybe a bit.”

“You just have to get Snape to let you out. I’ll take you to a match. We can do dinner first.”

It all sounded so wonderful . . . anything sounded wonderful compared to being stuck in Hogwarts forever.

“Well . . . actually you might be able to help me with that.”

“Yeah . . . what do you need?”

Hermione swivelled around to face him before drawing a nervous breath.

“I’m going to pick you for the Snowball waltz this evening.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And?”

“You need to pretend . . . to like me.”

He snorted. “I do like you . . . most of the time.”

“No . . . I mean like me, like me.” Her eyes widened for emphasis. “You might need to warn Ginny.”

He looked at her with intrigue before reclining back against the wall.

“Well that’s going to take quite a bit of acting on my part.” His eyes sparkled mischievously as he scratched the fine stubble on his cheek. “What’s the incentive?”

“Apart from the opportunity to help one of your dearest friends?” she asked.

“Mmmm.” He shrugged. “I need something more . . . for Ginny.”

Hermione appraised him for a few moments.

“How does revenge sound?”

His eyes searched hers, the furrow of his brow squeezing the lightning bolt in consternation.

Then his face suddenly broke into a boyish grin. “Yeah . . . I’d be up for that.”
The lilting cadence of Irish music and the steady gabble of voices—punctuated by an occasional whoop or shriek of laughter—met Hermione’s ears as she descended the staircase to the Great Hall. She was late. But this time it was deliberately so.

Entering the hall, she saw that it was already filled with people, some occupying the round tables at the periphery but many already up and dancing, arms cheerfully linked, skipping, stomping and gambolling about. The room had been cleverly enchanted to resemble the Forbidden Forest, the walls replaced by clusters of shadowy trunks, twisted limbs swaying overhead—and coupled with the openness of the night sky illusion above, the effect was surprisingly realistic. The leaping flames from dozens of magical torches gave everything and everyone a distinctly amber hue, adding to the mood of mystical merriment and abandon.

As Hermione scanned the room, her heart suddenly catapulted into her throat. He was there. Arms braced defensively across his front, Snape sipped from a goblet as he listened to a conversation between Professors Slughorn and Flitwick—the latter standing on a chair, in order to be seen and heard no doubt.

Hermione nervously cinched her robe around her throat. She needed to find Harry, just in case he—

Suddenly the music stopped.

“Can I have your attention please, everyone?” Professor McGonagall’s inimitable brogue cut through the din, causing the entire hall to instantly fall quiet.

“I see that our Head Girl has finally arrived.”

Hermione felt the collective gaze of the room immediately turn to her.

“As you all know, according to time-honoured tradition, our Head Girl has the responsibility of initiating the first official dance for the evening. I would therefore invite you and your partner, Miss Granger, to take the floor please.”

Fucking hell.

This wasn’t quite how she’d imagined it playing out. Fingers creeping up to her throat once again, she stepped forward. The reinforcement of her anxious grip was entirely unnecessary, however, as
she had charmed her robe to completely conceal her body. The material practically hovered, making it impossible to tell what she was wearing underneath. As she proceeded, the crowd parted before her, allowing her to make her way into the empty heart of the room.

Scanning the crowd, she was relieved to locate Harry standing against the far wall with Ginny, Neville and Luna. As she made her way towards him, someone must have signalled for the Leprechaun band at the front to start playing again as the strains of a lively waltz suddenly burst forth. A small smile curled Harry’s lips as she approached. Ginny looked less impressed. He must have told her. Hermione realised then that it would have been better if she had asked Ginny herself...too late.

When she was almost to him, Harry stepped forward but she gave the briefest flick of her head, furrowing her brow in an apologetic ‘No’, before edging around him and proceeding to the corner where Snape had positioned himself, no doubt hoping to be invisible. Indeed, his tall, dark form was particularly well camouflaged against the shadowy columns of the trees.

Hermione wove her way through the crowd to get to him, his pale features hardening visibly with her approach. Then she stopped. And extended her hand.

There was an audible gasp from those behind her, even above the enthusiastic strains of the instruments.

Snape glared at her hand. And then at her. She kept her face carefully neutral despite the wild thrashing of her heart. Then he did just as she knew he would do—after all, he had very little choice. Extending his arm, sleeve still prohibitively tight, his long pale fingers grasped hers. She smiled. He didn’t.

Turning, she led him back through the crowd of shocked faces to the centre of the room, the band carefully timing their introduction to coincide with the point at which they faced one another. She placed her hand on his rigid shoulder and his own alighted lightly on her waist—far more restrained than it had ever been before. Grasping his extended hand, she looked determinedly into his bitter black eyes. Then they began.

He led without hesitation, stepping expertly, turning and guiding her in a deft loop that had her instantly reassessing her plans. He was good—far more adept than she had expected. But, fortunately, she was better. She’d danced for years—practically her entire life. However, she would need to be at least one step ahead of him if she was going to successfully execute her plans.

Fortunately he’d also chosen to wear a thick dark dress robe, so when she released his hand and turned into him—instead of away as he clearly intended—she was able to surreptitiously slip her hand down to grasp his crotch, stroking it gently before unfurling from him without missing a beat.

When her eyes returned to his, she saw that they had widened in shock, the whites now visible. His lips were no longer pressed together in disapproval—they had fallen open to suck in a deep lungful of air...clearly she had shaken him. But before he could mount a defence, she took a half step toward him again, swivelling her hips beneath her voluminous robe and rubbing gratuitously against his groin before stepping back.

Snape gritted his teeth before flinging her away. It was fortunate for Hermione that he kept hold of her hand, otherwise she would have gone careening off into the crowd. As it was, she managed to keep her footing despite her high heels and, just as importantly, hang onto her smile, a skill she’d learned early on in her dance training—the key to any convincing performance.

As they continued to glide across the floor, she could feel him attempting to prop her as far away
from his body as physically possible so, with a few stuttering steps, she managed to wrong-foot him. Then, lifting her arms, she spun around and crossed them over her chest so that her back was against his front, the top of her buttocks grinding against what she could swear was a hint of swelling bulge. He stepped smartly backwards, before twirling her back around and pushing her away, his eyes darting to the band, clearly desperate for a reprieve.

Despite his obvious urgency to be rid of her, he was actually doing quite well. In fact, he was starting to quite effectively thwart her attempts to fondle him. She managed to get in a few more brief strokes but he seemed to be able to anticipate her moves more effectively now, his deft reflexes cutting off her attack routes under the guise of some fancy grips and turns, even as they both continued to glide relatively smoothly across the floor.

Whilst it was undeniably frustrating, she couldn’t help but be impressed—he was certainly a fast learner. Still, she wasn’t finished with him yet. The dim, flickering light from the torches provided a useful amount of cover. So, as the band wound up, she decided to take one final shot.

Thrusting their joined hands aloft, she slipped her hand from his shoulder and grabbed him by the hip before starting to turn. He had no choice but to go with her and, as he rotated, she delved down, grasping him by what was now, without a doubt, a considerable and surprisingly robust erection.

His hand slipped off her waist, locked around her wrist and flung her away one last time. And on this occasion he didn’t hold on. With a muted shriek she twirled and stumbled across the floor into a set of strong but mercifully gentle arms. Looking up, she sighed with relief.

“Thank you, Hagrid.”

“Er . . . You alrigh’ Hermione?”

“I think so.” She nodded, looking back at Snape.

The dark wizard held his robe protectively across his chest, glaring at her between stray locks of raven hair as though ready to curse her off the face of the planet.

But then the music came to an abrupt end and it was time for them to select their next partners.

Delivering a small, grateful smile to Hagrid, Hermione straightened herself and undid the clasp on her robe before shrugging it off her bare shoulders and draping it casually over her arm as she traversed the floor. Acutely aware of many more mouths dropping open as the transfigured dress was revealed in all its glory, she managed to maintain a relatively relaxed gait on her way over to Harry.

This time he chose not to step forward, so she was forced to walk right up to him and take his hand, made all the more awkward by the fact that Ginny was hovering close by. Wincing a little internally as she tossed her robe aside, Hermione avoided looking at the redhead directly . . . that apology would have to wait.

As she led Harry into the middle of floor she noticed that Snape hadn’t moved, he was staring at the two of them. A group of terrified fourth year girls stood behind him. It was quite clear that none of them wanted to be next. Suddenly, one of them released a strangled yelp as she was bumped forward by the others. Snatching her hand without looking, Snape swept onto the floor.

The music started and Hermione turned to Harry who looked suitably impressed and possibly a little embarrassed by her figure-hugging dress—its plunging neckline certainly revealed enough breast and the strategic slits enough stocking-clad thigh for it to be considered inappropriate for a younger audience.
Still, she slung her forearm over his shoulder and he grasped her waist low enough to be considered her buttock. It was certainly not the type of intimacy she would want to force upon her best friend; nor did she want it for herself. But if he was kind enough to pretend for her, the least she could do was hold up her end of the bargain. She returned his smile and they set about, not so much dancing, as swaying and stepping. Harry wasn’t a great dancer but it didn’t matter—he mainly just clung to her and moved when she did, giving them the appearance of a slightly drunken couple sharing the last dance of the evening.

Hermione kept Snape in the periphery of her vision throughout, although it was hardly required—she could actually feel his seething gaze boring into her, into both of them. Despite her shivery apprehension, everything was taking place exactly as she had planned. As she’d anticipated, it required the forced closeness, and lack of escape routes, of a public liaison like this to discover what she couldn’t in private. Snape wasn’t impotent. Far from it.

Of course, there had been no guarantee that it would happen, and if it hadn’t she would never have followed through with the second part of her plan—petty revenge with Potter. But the result was that she was now in a state of what could only be described as trepidatious relief. She was genuinely grateful that he didn’t suffer from such an affliction—for his sake—but clearly he didn’t share the satisfaction of her findings, and was demonstrably incensed by what she had done . . . as she knew he would be.

Indeed, whilst she may have planned and hoped for certain outcomes from her actions, there was clearly one enormously unpredictable element in all of this—Snape himself. And it was his level of ire that would dictate much of what happened next. In fact, she had decided that no level of planning was going to mitigate against the fallout, and so had resigned herself to simply taking him . . . as he came.

Her face hovered so close to Harry’s that she could have easily kissed him. She would never do it of course—for so many reasons, but she was surprised by how repellent the thought was. Whereas the idea of kissing Snape again was enough to have her insides roiling with anticipation. *Would it happen? Would he let her? Or was that now off the table . . . forever?*

The duration of the song was necessarily shorter than the first, in order to enable further dancers to join in, and when it stopped Hermione squeezed Harry’s hand in gratitude, noticing with some embarrassment how foggy his glasses had become. She really hoped it wouldn’t cause problems with Ginny, as he had only done as she’d asked of him, and if Ginny should be angry with anyone, it was her.

But when she released his hand, she immediately made a lunge for Luna’s, having had quite enough tumultuous testosterone for a while, and deciding that yet another rumour was the least of her concerns.

Harry returned to the floor with Ginny, and Snape with a shocked Sprout in tow.

“I’m looking forward to hearing the story behind this,” Luna murmured in her ear as she placed her hand on Hermione’s shoulder. “If you manage to make it out of here alive, that is.”

Hermione lowered her head in acknowledgement, her eyes darting to Snape from under her eyelashes. “It’s complicated.”

“Relationships often are.”

Hermione looked at her sharply but Luna’s ethereal smile revealed nothing.
Relationship? It was hardly that. Not even close. It was more of an . . . understanding . . . or an arrangement . . . or something.

However, Luna’s words continued to play over and over in her mind as she moved through partner after partner. The floor rapidly filled with bodies and she eventually lost sight of Snape altogether. On a few occasions she was forced to relocate a wayward hand from someone who had clearly gotten the wrong idea about her . . . although she was quite prepared to take responsibility for the confusion. In fact, she was willing to own just about anything at that point.

When the floor was completely full, she looked up and caught sight of Snape standing on the far side of the room. He seemed to have divested himself of dance partners.

“I’m sorry but I have to go,” she murmured to the ruddy-cheeked boy enthusiastically clutching her.

His face fell with disappointment.

Hermione squeezed past further cavorting couples on her way to the door. But when she looked back she saw that Snape was already on the move.

Heart surging, she stumbled out of the doorway, frantically pulling off her heels.

She made the mistake of throwing a final desperate glance over her shoulder. All she saw were his eyes . . . and the murderous fury within them.

With a terrified gasp she turned. And ran.
Master Bait

Chapter Notes

A/N: For all you dark alcove lovers . . . this one’s for you. DSxx

Thanks to PhoenixRising87 for the chapter title.

At least he wasn’t running away from her anymore.

The sarcastic quip entered her mind, but disappeared just as quickly as she tripped over the top step and went down on one knee before quickly righting herself. She wanted to look back but she couldn’t. The image of his eyes, both forbiddingly black and devastatingly incendiary, had burned so deeply that they had already left a scar . . . she didn’t need to see them again.

Her jolting footfalls on the cold stone felt decidedly precarious with the slip of her stockings but she didn’t slow down. She hadn’t exactly expected him to be happy with her antics but there was something about his expression that seemed to transcend and nullify whatever tacit agreement they might have had.

She’d made the mistake of assuming that she knew him, that she understood him. But, in reality, there was nothing warmly familiar about him whatsoever. Each time they interacted, he took it to a new level, infused with further unpredictability, which meant that she could never get a solid handle on him. It was just his constant presence in her mind that had softened the edges, that had caused her to infuse more humanity into him than actually existed.

He was capable of doing literally anything to her. But was she capable of taking it?

She had begun to think that she was—that she could cope with anything. She even considered him responsible for it, for forcing her re-emergence. And yet it was, ironically, that confidence that had given her the courage to do what she had done to him.

But now? Now her heart was ready to explode out of her chest which, in turn, had almost exploded out of her ill-advised dress. She needed to get back to the safety of her room—to crawl under her blankets and attempt to wrap herself in a more comfortable delusion . . . one where the entire evening was reduced to nothing more than another errant, but mercifully safe, fantasy.

Awkwardly reaching under her dress, she pulled her wand from her stockings—the only place that would take it. Gripping the vinewood tightly, she ran with it like a baton. If she needed to use it, she would.

Trying to listen for pursuing footsteps above the roar of blood surging through her ears, the grating rasp of her breaths, the urgent thud of her feet, was impossible. She would just have to gather every ounce of her Gryffindor courage . . . and look back.

Whimpering with fear, she twisted her head as she ran, glancing down the corridor behind her. It was empty.

The relief was palpable, in fact it was audible, a strange hissing groan lurched, hot and raw, from her chest . . . almost a laugh. It was almost funny. In fact, it would have been funny . . . except that she
was suddenly hit by a train.

The impact stole her breath away, hurtling her deep into the recesses of a pitch black alcove.

She landed, face first against a wall of frigid bricks, sucking in mouthfuls of damp air, laced with the stale fetor of ancient mortar. A hand was on her throat, forcing her head back.

It was his hand, trying to suffocate her . . . or perhaps trying to help her breathe. She couldn’t tell. She had never been able to tell . . . whether his ultimate intention was to restore her . . . or to tear her apart.

“Wasn’t it enough the last time?” His voice was breathy with exertion, broken with something else . . . anger? . . . betrayal?

Hermione attempted to swallow, her larynx catching on the firm sheaf of his fingers.

“To be captured? Trapped? Brutalised?” Each word slapped against her cheek.

She moaned breathlessly. *Is that what he was going to do to her? Is that what he had planned?*

“Stupid witch,” he spat viciously. “Weren’t the scars enough?”

Suddenly she felt his thumb grinding over the twisted letters on the inside of her forearm. She’d Glamoured them, but even in the dark he knew where they were.

Then it started. The claustrophobic press of his body against her back, the wall sucking the heat from her bare skin like a Dementor, the pressure of his thumbnail scoring back and forth over her shame . . . her mind started to melt. He knew her triggers . . . how to instantly dismantle her defences . . . how to thoroughly deconstruct her . . . he knew her . . . too well.

His lips alighted against her temple, insinuating a slick stream of utterances directly into her ear.

“You need it . . . the helplessness . . . the degradation. You might paint your provocations with a bold veneer but it is no more than another duplicitous stunt, a supplication for punishment dressed up as more bluff Gryffindor courage. You beg me to force your submission. You incite me to make you suffer . . . so you don’t have to do it yourself. You seek to make me responsible for what you want for yourself . . . for what you want to do to yourself. It’s far easier to play the victim than the perpetrator . . . isn’t it?”

Hermione shook her head in mute denial.

“These scars didn’t happen a year ago, or even months.” He gripped her arm harder. “And they didn’t happen once. How many times have you carved over them, scored that dirty sentiment into yourself?”

She swallowed down a sob, unable to answer. She’d lost count.

The pain, the repeat of it, did something to her, woke something inside her. But it was so nebulous, so fleeting, swamped instantly by disgust that she had never been able to characterise it.

“I’ll give you one chance to admit to your intentions—to tell me what you want from me?”

She closed her eyes.

*How could she say it? How could she admit what she didn’t even know herself? His claims about her might have been delivered with the usual self-assurance but were they true? Was that really why*
she was compelled to return to him, to pursue him . . . to provoke him? He might see a lot, but did he really know her? Did he know her heart?


A low hiss of displeasure slithered down the back of her neck.

Then something cracked—his jaw perhaps.

“Maybe you could admit what your intentions are for me . . . why you have pursued me here,” she ventured boldly, her voice quiet but determined.

He suddenly whirled her around, slamming her back against the wall.

“Don’t try to insinuate that I’m some willing partaker of your pathetic manipulations,” he snarled. “This is entirely of your doing, the manifestation of your puerile, reckless ego. Your antics this evening have demonstrated just how self-indulgent you really are—your desperate need for attention, admiration . . . regardless of the outcome.”

“But I wasn’t . . . I’m not like that.” She heard the note of pleading in her voice. “I just wanted you to stop avoiding me. I only wanted yours . . . your attention.”

“Haven’t I given you enough?” His voice was tight with accusation. She could just make out the brittle sheen of his eyes.

Clearly he considered that she was manipulating him, using him. A spark of indignant fury suddenly flared inside her.

“Just what have you given me? Forced redemption? Maddeningly cryptic instruction? Cold, passionless exchanges?”

“Passionless?” he spat in her face. “What the fuck would you know about passion? When did you last harbour a mote of it? When were you anything more than a passive recipient?

He spoke the truth. She had lost much of her passion—but it was still there. Unfortunately the most memorable examples of late were when she masturbated. But prior to that . . . it was the book group. Somehow she didn’t consider that worth mentioning.

“Is this your attempt to incite passion?” he scoffed.

He suddenly tore open the low neckline of her dress, causing her breasts to burst free, the lifting charm still doggedly lifting. He roughly dragged his hand across both mounds, pulling at one nipple before discarding it in what felt like disgust.

She lowered her head. The dress had been a mistake . . . another mistake.

“No, I just . . . I . . . don’t know,” she admitted lamely, her anger ebbing away.

“And here we come to the root of the problem.” She could hear the derision in his voice. “You know nothing of yourself. And yet you presume to know me. You haven’t the remotest idea. Not the faintest clue. You suppose that this is as bad as it gets?” He snatched up her arm again, pushing her scarred forearm against her breasts.

“I want to know you,” she whimpered.

“No you don’t!” he growled, forcing her arm between her breasts, against her breastbone, the scar
lying over her shambling heart. *What was he trying to tell her?*

“You don’t,” he grunted, with a final emphatic shove. It was infused with danger, a warning to back off.

He simultaneously stepped back from her. Although he stood perfectly still in the darkness, she could still hear him breathing. There was a decisiveness to the distance. It seemed that he was preparing to leave her. Again.

She couldn’t bear the thought of it.

“Aren’t you going to give me what I deserve, Headmaster?” she asked, allowing a note of gentle cajoling to suffuse her words. “My punishment for attempting to humiliate you? I clearly need to be taught a lesson . . . about respect.”

“Why don’t you run back to Potter?” There was a distinct sneer to his tone. “I expect he has something he wishes to give you.”

She stepped forward tentatively, unsure of how far away he was.

“But I don’t want him.” Her words hung in the air between them. “I want you.”

Then, reaching forward, she found his crotch, surprised to discover his weighty erection still present.

A breath shuddered from him.

Then he snapped.

She was bulldozed into the wall, her body slamming against it with a fleshy slap. Her dress lasted a second, torn completely in two despite its screeching protests; her knickers stood even less chance, shredded by his clawing fingers.

Without warning, she was lifted by a hand wedged between her bare buttocks, and pinned in place by the broad plane of his chest before she heard the sound of a zipper and immediately felt the firm, smooth head of his cock roving demandingly through her folds.

She could already tell that it was going to be a tight fit. And he wasn’t going to be holding back. She braced herself, digging her fingers into his shoulders.

Pressing his forearms against the insides of her thighs, he forced her legs apart before suddenly lunging forward with his full weight, sinking as far into her shocked pussy as it would allow.

Her head smacked against the wall, but she was barely aware of it.

His cock might have been substantial, far bigger than the few she’d sampled to date, but there was something else. As he pulled back and thrust into her again, she sensed a certain . . . roughness . . . to it . . . an unusual ridging down the shaft that should have been disconcerting but with the pussy-straining size of him, and the cervix-pounding depth of his incursions, it only served to stimulate her further, her husky, desperate moans rending the air.

Suddenly he shifted position. One arm slipped around behind her shoulders and the other braced her hips. He was effectively crushing her entire body into his, but mercifully also insulating her against the bitter chill and bone-jarring hardness of the wall. Enveloped within his arms, with his substantial height and strength behind every plunge, she felt herself being fucked more emphatically and more completely than she ever thought possible.
His hips drove upwards at the same time as he forced her down onto his cock, resulting in a rhythmic, fleshy pounding that was echoed by his own grunts of exertion, and her higher pitched keening. One of her hands still clung to his shoulder but the other had found its way to his neck, knotting into the hair at the nape, pulling it as he rammed into her with mounting force.

‘Passionless’ had certainly been a misnomer. His rasping moans through the damp lips ghosting against her cheek were infused with so much feeling—anguish, desire . . . fear, that she clung to him more tightly—a likely futile but genuine attempt to reassure him.

But she soon lost sense of him altogether as her pussy was pounded into another plane. Her labia and clitoris pulsated as one, beaten into submission by the hammering of his pubic bone; her tunnel was burning from the mounting friction, straining under the massive load, the tension, the need to come.

At that moment, she felt so much a part of him . . . every breath she took was his, every sensation, every movement, a reaction to his . . . she simply had to make him understand their connection.

“I can feel it. You want me as much as I want you,” she murmured breathlessly.

He responded by turning his head away from her.

“You marked me on purpose. You want me to be yours. But you’re afraid.”

His breathing turned more ragged but he continued to thrust.

She fisted his hair, dragging him to her so her lips were against the rigid line of his jaw.

“You’re holding back so much.” Her voice had begun to rise as he drove her closer to the edge. “No one makes me come like you. No one. Now I want you to give it to me, to show me what you’ve been holding onto.”

He growled, a final frenzy of pounding sending her head pitching back against the wall as she released a guttural wail, her body starting to buck about in the rigid cage of his limbs like a bug in a jar. As the contractions captured her, she revelled in the sensation of her seething muscles dragging and drawing from him, his firm member still boldly embedded inside her, still reaming against her shuddering walls.

And just when the seizing began to abate, when she was struck by the depressing sense that she was alone in this again, he cried out. It was a sob of such bitter despair, of such obvious pain that she embraced him, pulling him tightly to her as he came, his cock straining inside her, its jerky undulations driving his seed deep into her.

She was gasping with him, with the sense of release that they shared, that she felt both directly and vicariously. But it was short-lived. He immediately withdrew from her and allowed her to drop to the ground without a word. Then she watched as his shadowy form moved away. He didn’t so much walk as stagger, his silhouette receding with an obvious limp.

She suspected, right then, that the scars had remained with him too.
Hermione’s eyes sprang open, a gasping breath fluttering through her parted lips as she surfaced from the dream. The distant rumble—like thunder but not—continued. Battle. That’s what she heard. So strange after all this time that it should strike her so immediately, so viscerally, as though it had never ended.

Her fingers sought out the dull throb between her legs. It wasn’t painful, just another memory, a physical reminder of another battle of sorts.

_Had there been a victor?_ If so, it wasn’t clear to her . . . at least not anymore. She’d expected to feel more satisfied about the outcome. After all, it was what she had planned. It had all happened as she’d intended. But—

_Boom_.

The windows shuddered in their frames.

Hermione frowned. It wasn’t the usual quiet Sunday morning. _A hangover from the ball perhaps? The last hurrah of a few wayward guests? Harry?_

She hadn’t gone back . . . for obvious reasons. Her dress had been reduced to tattered shreds, as had her knickers and stockings, and although she had managed to recover her wand and restore the fabric sufficiently to see her back to her room—clutching her heeled shoes to her stomach—upon entering she had immediately discarded it all . . . every shred . . . sitting naked on the bed, feeling her mood sinking with the sensation of him slowly leaking out of her.

It had struck her as oddly profound at the time—the loss, but also the progressive reveal of that which had been hidden within . . . slipping out despite itself, despite himself—she was seeing him . . . more of him all the time . . . the riddle of his personality gradually drawn out, ousted . . . reluctantly exposed.

In fact, she was increasingly of the opinion that the double agent was still very much present—a man of two masters, both now operating internally . . . one cool, confident, and comfortably dominant, the other far more wary, distrustful, even fearful but paradoxically, she suspected, desperately craving acceptance . . . affection even. Admittedly, that was the part that had intrigued her the most—the way he had fucked her—as though he couldn’t drive himself deeply enough, squeeze her tightly enough into his body.

But then there had been the release. It had sounded anguished . . . painful.

_Is that why he’d avoided it? Did it hurt to have intercourse —to come? Had fucking her been satisfying for him in the end or would he be angry again . . . would he try to blame her?_
This one was louder.

Pushing back the bedclothes, she swung her legs out of bed and padded over to the window. The morning was clear and bright but the view beyond the panes—rising parapets and distant trees—gave no indication as to where the sound had come from.

Dressing quickly in jeans and a shirt, she snatched up her wand and cast a charm over the madness of her hair before stepping out of her room.

Excited chattering bubbled up from around the corner. Following the sound, she discovered a group of students crowded around a row of corridor windows, jostling for position.

“I told you he was still lethal,” a tall boy crowed, elbowing the stocky redhead beside him.

“Lethal?” the redhead snorted, his breath fogging the window. “Mental, more like. What’s he think he’s playing at?”

Hermione moved up behind them, peering over their shoulders at a sight that immediately stopped her in her tracks.

A black form stood alone on the grassy slope facing the forest. Two huge trees lay on the ground to his left. They had landed, one on top of the other, and were now blocking the path to the lake.

As she watched, the figure raised one hand and released a ball of fire, striking another towering tree at the base, causing it to shudder violently. Then a purple bolt discharged from the tip of his wand, striking the tree again and throwing up an explosion of woodchips. Alternating hands, he cast spell after spell, complex and deadly combinations—or at least they would have been if the target had been alive.

“What’s he trying to do? Top himself?”

It was a legitimate question. Even though the tree couldn’t fight back in the traditional sense, it could certainly do some damage, and the way that it was swaying, leaning dangerously toward him, suggested that he would be in trouble if he didn’t move very soon.

“Hey!” The redhead suddenly turned to her. “I bet you hope he does n’ all. Get you out of a lifetime of detention.”

Hermione ignored him.

“Here he goes!” The tall boy elbowed his friend again.

There was a collective shriek from the crowd as the tree lurched forward. Snape held his ground, looking up at the towering column with an air of defiance.

No!

The word lodged in Hermione’s throat.

It fell.

At the last moment Snape stepped sideways, his hair and coat blown back by the impact as the tree came crashing to the ground with another resonant boom.

“Pity,” the stocky boy guffawed, looking around at the others. “Might’ve been rid of the git.”
It was the sort of thing Ron would have said but it incensed her all the same.

“He happens to be your Headmaster.” Hermione spoke quietly but firmly. “It will do you good to remember that.”

“So?” The boy turned to face her, chin jutting out defiantly.

“As a student of Hogwarts you’re expected to show more respect. Ten points from your house.”

“You what?” His face creased angrily. “I’m in Gryffindor!”

She was well aware. He’d been a pain in the arse for years.

“That has no bearing on the matter.”

“No joke,” he sneered. “You’d be happy to lose the lot, wouldn’t you?” Then he leaned in close. “And you’re hardly one to talk about respect, love.”

She knew perfectly well that he was referring to the ball.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor,” she responded evenly, fixing him with a contemptuous glare.

“Shut it!” the boy’s friend hissed, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him away before he could do any more damage.

Gradually the others drifted off too, uncomfortably, wordlessly, until she was left alone, watching Snape hurling more explosive fury and believing with increasing certainly that he genuinely did harbour a death wish.

“Looks like the perfect stress relief.”

Hermione jerked around at the voice.

Luna smiled as she approached.


Hermione sighed. “Do you really think that’s what this is?”

Luna shrugged. “Either that or he’s looking to face a thorny demon or two.”

Hermione’s gaze returned to the window. “Perhaps.”

“Like the rest of us,” Luna continued with her characteristic lightness.

Hermione looked sideways at her. “Some do it more privately than others.”

“That’s true.” Luna nodded. “But maybe some don’t want to do it alone.”

Hermione stared at Snape.

*What was he really doing? Just blowing off some steam? Demonstrating that he hadn’t lost his potency? Issuing a warning . . . to her perhaps? Or was this actually an attempt, in his own fucked up way, to communicate? Was this, in fact, his cry for help?***
Hermione stole quietly through the dungeon corridors. Seeking Snape out after such a disturbing display probably wasn’t the best idea in the world but being seen doing so would likely be even worse for both of them, especially after their very public performance at the ball.

She had tried to study. And then to read. But Luna’s words had kept coming back to her . . . and the image of him so uncharacteristically exposed, fierce but vulnerable, was just too troubling for her to ignore.

She had spent the last half hour daydreaming, running her fingertips absently over and over the scars on her forearm, thinking about his actions the previous evening . . . the way he’d forced her to confront her shame, pushing it protectively into her chest. It had felt significant at the time but she had been left, as usual, with more questions than answers.

And then there was the other matter that she wished to discuss with him.

In the end her journey into the subterranean chill had been inevitable, despite the fact that she was shivering more with fear and anticipation than cold by the time she arrived.

Pausing outside his door, she nervously clenched and unclenched her fists, attempting to regulate her breathing. There was always the possibility that he wouldn’t be there. But somehow she knew that he would. She had little doubt that after his reign of destruction he would have retreated to this dark, dank sanctuary . . . to hide behind his battlements of books.

She knocked.

Silence.

She waited.

Silence.

Should she knock again?

Possibly.

Or she could simply . . .

The handle turned, unimpeded. It was unlocked. With a tentative push, she peered inside the room.

His back was to her and his long arms were propped, outstretched against the mantelpiece. Hanging between his sagging shoulders was his dark head, bowed in what looked like exhaustion.

“Do you respect me so little?” His words held more weary resignation than bitterness.

“I do apologise, Headmaster.” Hermione quickly stepped into the room, closing the door behind her. “I simply wished to ensure that you were . . . safe.”

He snorted, hair swaying slightly with the subtle shake of his head.

“And of course I should be humbled by your intrusion.”

“I . . . No . . . Not at all,” Hermione fumbled. “I hoped that you would take me . . . I mean permit me . . . my presence in your . . . in your chambers in the spirit of . . . friendship.”

He lifted his head then but didn’t turn.
“Friendship? Is this how you engage with your ‘friends’?” His fingers tightened on the mantelpiece.
“Is there anything about our interactions to date that would suggest that we are engaged in a friendship?”

Hermione was quite unprepared for the question. It took her a moment to gather her thoughts.

“I honestly don’t know what we’re engaged in. And I’m not sure I wish to venture a characterisation at this point. But I feel that your objective has been to help me. And you have. I feel better . . . stronger than I have since . . . well, for a considerable time.” She paused for him to respond but he remained silent. “I happen to wish to return the favour. I . . . I want to help you. And I think I can.”

“I don’t require your assistance . . . in any form . . . and certainly not to service of any of your, no doubt, charmingly altruistic motives,” he muttered snidely. “What I need most from you in this moment is a hasty withdrawal . . . Leave.”

Hermione didn’t move.

“I’ll leave if you grant me my freedom.” Her hands found one another, folding into a nervous knot. This was the other matter that she’d wanted to discuss with him.

“No.”

Despite her apprehension at making the request, she was taken aback by his flat-out refusal.

“You can’t keep me locked up here forever!” She suddenly lunged forward, grabbing him by the arm.

“Can’t I?” He turned on her with a snarl.

Gasping with shock, she instantly lifted her hand to him. “You’re hurt.”

“It’s nothing,” he snapped, swatting her away from the bloody gash on his forehead.

“Let me heal you.”

“Leave it!” he ordered, grabbing her by the wrist as she attempted to raise her wand.

“Why? Why won’t you let me help you?” Her voice rose. “Don’t you trust me? I’ve told no one about what you’ve done to me . . . what you’ve made me do. And I won’t. I just needed to know that there was more. That you weren’t just a dark hearted bastard. That you weren’t simply motivated by spite . . . by the desire for retribution. I wanted to know that I could . . . affect you . . . as you’ve affected me. That I don’t . . . disgust you.”

She was surprised by how much this final admission hurt. She hadn’t even articulated it fully to herself. And yet it was the truth.

He gazed at her intently and she felt the tears spill from her brimming eyes.

“Disgust?” His pale features showed genuine shock. “You consider that I would be disgusted by you?”

She nodded hesitantly, drawing a shaky breath.

Releasing her wrist, he brought his hand to his face, placing two fingertips upon the bridge of his nose, ring finger resting upon his lips, little finger against the curve of his chin. Hermione frowned. What was he—
Suddenly he drew his hand sideways, across his face, reversing what was an extremely convincing and apparently long-standing Glamour.

The scar was deep. And long. A clean line, slicing from the corner of his mouth, all the way to his earlobe.

She choked, remembering his words . . . Werent the scars enough?

But then he moved his hand to his throat, watching her as he drew his index finger slowly down his front. The buttons released one by one until his coat was hanging open. Then he started on the shirt beneath. By the time he reached the final button, she was breathing audibly, her breaths rasping out for what she knew was coming.

Grasping a fistful of coat and shirt in each hand, he pulled them apart.

This time she couldn't stop herself, a sorrowful moan seeping from between her lips.

If he had been an animal she would have cried. But he was a human being. And the level of suffering etched upon his skin, carved into it, was beyond anything she had ever seen. Tears weren't nearly enough.

As it was, she was struggling to breathe.

She wanted to run but she couldn't—not after he'd trusted her with his secret shame. She couldn't touch him either—not as she would want to . . . he wouldn't tolerate it. Instead she stood numbly, dumbly, feeling as impotent as she had pegged him to be.

Then she was struck by a sudden thought, possessed by an impulse, a desperate need for answers, despite the risk. Reaching forward with trembling fingers, she touched him, brushing his milky abdomen lightly as she attempted to undo the button on his trousers. His dark eyes flickered warily between her face and her hands but he didn't stop her.

Finally releasing the button, she grasped the zipper and quickly yanked it down before she lost her nerve completely. She bit her lip hard . . . for courage, then pushed his trousers over his hips before curling her fingers into the waistband of his black boxer shorts.

Venturing a look at his face and seeing his mounting apprehension, she swallowed hard. Then pulled the elastic forward.

The fabric immediately flicked back, her shocked fingers unable to hold on. But she'd seen enough. Enough to understand the unfamiliar sensation when he'd penetrated her. Enough to explain him . . . and why he was the way he was. Enough to want to cradle him against her chest until the pain had gone . . . but it was, of course, too late.

"Who did this to you?" she whispered.

His gaze shifted downward, roving slowly over the torrid landscape of his body.

"Whomever valued their lives."

"They were forced?"

"I was a defector . . . a turncoat . . . from the enemy. They were ordered to test my loyalty . . . to see how far they could take me before I would refuse to return."
“But you did return.” She looked agonizingly at him. “You had to go back . . . for us . . . for . . . Harry.”

He simply stared, the weight of it crushing her.

It was too much—the thought of what he had been through. She cried quietly, head bowed, pausing occasionally to sniff or wipe her eyes on the back of her hand.

He didn’t move, remaining silent throughout.

When she finally managed to compose herself enough to face him, his features had settled into a visage of desolation, a type of stale shock . . . the face of someone who would have wept except that they’d run out of tears. As though the last one had dried up years before . . . perhaps when he’d realised that no one was coming to help him. That he was on his own. Alone.

Reaching a hand upward, she touched the corner of his mouth . . . the scar there. His face spasmed, his lips drawing back as though in pain. It was clearly difficult, but she continued to trace the line, ghosting gently over its contours.

“What can I do for you?” she murmured. “What do you need? What relief can I bring you?”

The muscles of his jaw clenched under her fingertips.

“I can help you,” she crooned softly, continuing to caress him. “As you have helped me. I want to. Just tell me . . . Anything.”

Suddenly he snatched her hand away.

She looked up at him beseechingly, then dejectedly, realising that she would never be allowed to touch him . . . not where he needed it.

“Accio!”

Suddenly something came flying from across the room and landed with a stinging smack against her palm before he closed his own hand around hers. She stared in shock at what appeared to be a leather whip of some sort, long tails trailing down over their fists. As she peered closer, she noticed tiny glints of metal and realised that each strap was studded. This was designed to inflict pain. It would hurt.

Her heart was racing. Her throat was so parched that she couldn’t even swallow.

But if that’s what he needed. She would allow him to do it.

“I’ll take it,” she murmured, lifting her chin with as much bravery as she could muster.

He stared at her as he rolled his thumb gently over her knuckles.

“No you won’t,” he responded. “You’ll give it.”

Her stomach dropped.

Fuck.
A/N: So, so sorry for the extended break between chapters. However, I did appreciate the queries and demands ;). I have been working on an SS/HG smutfest submission which is finally done so I can dedicate my time to this story. Thank you to those of you who continue to motivate me with your thoughts and feedback. I haven’t forgotten you. I’m just running a bit behind with responses. Love to you all, DSx

P.S. Chapter alert – flogging.
Thanks to TimeLady92 for the Chapter Title xx

“Will it . . . Is it intended to be . . . sexual?” Hermione stammered.

“Yes.”

Her eyes dropped from his, back to the leather flogger now growing damp in her anxious grip.

Her question sounded naïve but she had been compelled to ask. Things had suddenly escalated between them, and she certainly didn’t intend to make assumptions about what he expected to gain from the experience. With a past like his, it could serve any number of needs. And perhaps it would. It might hit the spot, so to speak, in complicated ways, inarticulable ways, ways that she was only just beginning to understand—sexual gratification a mere thread in what she was increasingly recognising as the tangled knot of one’s desires.

But acknowledging the complexity of his intentions didn’t necessarily mean that she was comfortable with them. Just because he wanted to be flogged didn’t mean that it would be ‘good’ for him—or for her. After all, she only needed to look at him to see the damage, to know that this hadn’t come to him by choice.

*How much had his torrid past shaped him? And did it continue to feed him now? Sex . . . pain . . . torture . . . abuse . . . Should she even be fuelling it? Would she only be adding to the confusion?*

*Or was the confusion only hers? Did he understand himself and his motivations perfectly well? She looked at him again—the penetrating darkness of his eyes. He certainly seemed to understand hers.*

He had alluded to it earlier—the perpetrator and the victim, suggesting that she had taken the role of the latter, in an effort to avoid confronting the former. He’d accused her of being passive—a recipient rather than a participant. *Was this as much about her as about him? Was he trying to draw her out of herself again?*

She chewed her lip. It was a risk. He was taking a risk with her, trusting her with something deeply personal—this man who trusted no one.

And she had promised to help. She’d begged to do it. Anything. She’d even been willing to offer herself in his place—again the ready victim, but the reluctant other.

And so there was really no argument. She had to do it. There was no other choice.

Despite reaching a decision, the dry lump in her throat was still there. She swallowed in an
unsuccessful attempt to dislodge it.

“Do you wish to start now?”

He nodded. Short. Singular. No hesitation. The need must be high.

She stared at the bloody gash on his forehead. *Had the trees been another attempt to tap into it—to relieve that tension? Like trying to scratch an inaccessible itch . . . or lance some deeply buried boil, some elusive emotional abscess?*

Or was she simply overthinking it—again. *Could this genuinely be about sex alone? Getting off? And letting her help with the kink . . . because she’d asked to?*

It wasn’t a satisfying explanation. But it never was. He’d explained everything and nothing to her so far. There had been many words uttered during their encounters but his meaning was rarely direct, forcing her to draw her own conclusions—inferences that were inevitably circular or convoluted, weaving themselves into more complicated knots . . . as was happening now.

*Knots.*

“Will I need to restrain you?” she asked.

He paused, appraising her with sharp, measured saccades, before delivering another nod. “I believe that would be appropriate.”

*Appropriate? What about this was appropriate? What about anything they had done would be considered by an objective observer to be appropriate?*

“That you will need to teach me the rope incantation,” she stated, her eyes flicking briefly to the ceiling to gauge what might be required.

“Magical restraint?” He arched one dark eyebrow inquiringly.

“I believe that would be appropriate,” she responded with only a touch of sarcasm, before turning away from him so that he couldn’t see the apprehension on her face.

Let’s see how much he really did trust her.

***

Hermione’s blood was literally thundering in her ears. Whatever she had expected to feel, it wasn’t this.

They were in Snape’s bedroom—equally as bland as the remainder of his quarters—except that it now harboured the startlingly imposing figure of naked Snape. He stood in the middle of the room, wrists bound together by a rope from the ceiling such that his arms were held above his head, elbows bent. His legs were parted, his stance casual but solid, a rope around each ankle fixing him to the floor.

As Hermione stood before him, arms hanging loosely by her sides, wand trailing from one hand, the leather flogger from the other, she found herself captivated by him. The evidence of devastation was considerable but between the scars were swathes of satiny skin of such a fine, translucent quality that—with his lean muscularity—he gave the distractingly realistic impression of being carved from marble. He was like a chipped and hacked statue of David—desecrated . . . by jealous rivals perhaps, which brought with it an intense sadness for the beauty that had been defiled, but also an odd
yearning to protect him from further harm—not a particularly helpful mindset considering what she was about to do.

His hair was dark and fine. Apart from that falling to his shoulders there was little else until one reached his pubic area, standing in stark contrast to the rest, pitch on snow, drawing the eyes there . . . and there happened to be plenty to see.

She looked there now, roving over his impressive dimensions, understanding why she could still feel the aftermath pulsing away between her legs. The scarring was considerable—horizontal lines on the shaft. Rather neat compared to the rest. She only just managed to stop herself from imagining the pain, focussing instead upon the not-so-casual hang, the smooth curve jutting out, brushing the inside of his thigh, betraying the beginnings of arousal. He was turned on. *But which part appealed to him most? The whip? The binds? Or could it even be her?*

She supposed she would find out.

Her eyes travelled back up to his, glinting like polished onyx behind a loose lock of hair. He might be firmly bound, but he was far from helpless. She doubted he would be able to free himself, not with the nature of the incantation, but he still possessed a formidable weapon, one that he could spar and strike with so very easily . . . his voice.

And that’s how he started.

“How did it feel to punch Draco?”

It caught her off guard. *How did he know?*

Her mind instantly began to churn through the years, peeling them back . . . wondering at exactly what . . . he . . . knew.

“I asked you how it felt,” he repeated more insistently—as though he weren’t the vulnerable one, as though he could still demand such things of her.

Apparently he could.

She answered.

“It was satisfying . . . I felt . . . powerful.” She lifted her wand slightly. “He deserved it.”

The corner of his mouth lifted almost imperceptibly. It seemed to be the right answer—for him at least.

“‘Deserve’ is an interesting term, wouldn’t you agree?” He tilted his head slightly, drawing her in. “Both a reward and punishment . . . depending upon your perspective—your relative . . . position.”

She inhaled sharply before blinking away his hold on her. He seemed to do it so easily, often without her even being aware of the fine web that was being spun.

“You asked . . . I answered honestly.” She lifted her chin in mild rebuke. “Your interpretations and inferences are your own.”

One dark eyebrow flexed upward.

“Indeed. And yet here you are . . . about to give another what he ‘deserves’.”

She shook her head a little. “This is not about ‘deserving’. It is simply an offer to assist—to fulfil a
request. Your request. This is not about me.”

“Isn’t it?”

Her finger tapped on the flogger. Perhaps she had been right. He might be revealing a great deal. But maybe he would be asking her to reveal more.

“And what if you had had this opportunity a matter of weeks ago. What would I have ‘deserved’ then?”

She studied his face. The frown had lifted slightly—he wasn’t accusing her. Clearly he knew that she’d hated him but seemed quite comfortable with the fact, as though it was expected. Did he set out to be hated? Was that a more secure position to occupy? Did it fit better with his own self-image? Certainly he seemed more capable of accepting the hatred of others than the opposite—kindness, affection . . . love.

It was true. She might have welcomed the opportunity to punish him only a few weeks prior but now she knew him better. Or perhaps she didn’t. Perhaps she understood him but still knew as little of him as she had at the outset. Regardless, she was reluctant to engage in any further analysis of her own motivations. This was difficult enough as it was.

Taking a step toward him, she addressed him directly. “What do you wish me to do to you?”

“Whatever is required.”

More fucking cryptic intimations.

“By whom?” Her voice was tight.

“By the hand that controls . . . the body that responds . . . the perpetrator . . . the victim . . . the provider . . . the recipient. The whip is merely an interface after all . . . a point of contact.”

His eyes didn’t leave hers. She felt them sucking her in. She only just managed to tear herself away, stepping aside and around him, moving quickly until she was behind him. Safe.

But from behind he was equally as striking, impossibly sculpted, lean and muscular, but damaged. He was damaged—she needed to remember that. But the way he spoke, the power he had over her, seemed to naturally strip away both her understanding and compassion.

He was goading her. It was clear. But she would have preferred for him to be honest. Or at least more helpful. She wanted to feel like she was helping him in return. Not hurting him. And certainly not punishing him.

“Where should I start?”

“Wherever strikes you.”

‘Just fucking tell me,’ she muttered under her breath, jiggling the flogger in agitation.

“You’re afraid.” He turned his head slightly, directing his voice over one bare shoulder. “You’re afraid of yourself—africa to discover your true motivations. You are afraid of the damage you can do—of seeing it manifested on the flesh of another.”

Hermione shook her head in mute denial. She understood perfectly well the damage she could do. She’d already done it. To many. To people she loved.
“People get what they deserve . . . in the end. Isn’t that what you intimated?” he continued. “And if that is the case—if life is fair, then so is the torture, the scars—all of it. All of it is simply meant . . . to . . . be.”

Hermione’s breathing quickened. Her hand tightened around the handle of the flogger.

“I didn’t suggest that life was fair,” she responded evenly. “It isn’t. What happened to you . . . what happened to both of us wasn’t fair. I don’t assume that people deserve what they get. And I don’t believe that you deserve this. But I’m going to give it to you, as requested, because I agreed to help. And because you refuse to give me direction, I apologise in advance.”

Stepping to the side, she readied herself, eyeing the contours of his back. It was the largest and easiest target to begin with. Who knew if it was what he wanted.

Gritting her teeth, she brought her arm back before flinging it forward, lashing the tails across his skin with a loud slap.

He hissed, his muscles tensing, appearing sharply defined as though engraved into his skin. She followed with another solid smack and a third lower down in the small of his back which caused him to jerk and grunt. She continued lower, lashing his buttocks, whipping the tails around his hips and then the backs of his thighs. His muscles twitched and popped as each blow landed, his biceps straining against the binds but he said not a word. The next flurry was aimed at his buttocks, stinging blows that left thatches of scarlet over the pearly lustre of his skin.

Hermione was already breathing heavily, a combination of exertion and the sudden surge of adrenaline. Propping the flogger on her hip, she stepped back to take stock. Then she saw it—his erection—now jutting straight out, bobbing keenly. He was obviously getting something out of it.

Watching him closely, she moved sideways until she was standing before him. Even though his body was etched with tension, his face was surprisingly calm.

“Tell me,” she said, eyes roving over his face, taking in the fine sheen of perspiration. “What are you after? The pain? Or me?”

He gazed at her intently for a long moment—long enough for her to wish that she hadn’t asked . . . and that she hadn’t been stupid enough to venture back into view. “Both,” he stated finally. “You are the pain . . . the pain is you.”

Her eyes shuttered slightly at yet another obscure claim. Such a statement could be taken a number of ways. Certainly he’d made it clear that he’d found her insufferable right from the beginning. She had pained him. And it appeared that she was paining him still.

But she didn’t want to. She didn’t want that responsibility. His pain wasn’t hers to own—he’d asked for it after all. And it wasn’t as though she didn’t have enough of her own to deal with.

“And what if I’m not comfortable with that notion?”

Perhaps being aroused is more important than being comfortable?”

Aroused? Was he attempting to peg her as a willing participant . . . again? She realised then that she did feel rather flushed, her mouth was dry and the throb between her thighs had deepened. But what did he expect? It wasn’t the fact that she was hurting him, it was the fact that he stood before her naked, muscular, glistening, with a substantial erection. Of course she was aroused. But it was extremely unfair to conflate the two.
“It was you who wanted this.”

“And I still want it,” he responded darkly, fixing her with a scorching look that went straight to her pussy, making any attempt to deny her arousal impossible.

“Let us discuss pleasure instead,” he continued. “Describe it . . . tell me how it felt when I . . . did things to you.” His voice drizzled over her, coating her, filling her crevices like dark treacle. She couldn’t deny its effect upon her. Even when she hated what he was saying, she was captivated by his delivery, just the mellifluous syllables dripping from his lips.

“You brought me . . . relief.”

“When my hands were inside you, my tongue, my . . . cock . . . drawing out deluge after dripping deluge of your earnest essences, your hips writhing and pumping, the air filled with your wordless, grunting pleas for more . . . they were all in aid of relief?”

She swung the flogger lightly against her palm. Of course he’d gratified her—in the most extreme manner she could ever have imagined. But it wasn’t calm and comfortable, as she considered pleasure to be, it was intense, urgent, fierce and sometimes violent. It was sensation concentrated to the point of explosion. ‘Pleasure’ didn’t quite capture it.

“What point are you trying to make?”

“Pleasure . . . even arousal is not always what we expect it to be. Indeed, the very opposite—pain—can bring it into existence, casting it . . . like a shadow.”

She peered at him, trying to understand.

He sighed impatiently. “Do I need to spell it out? You are in no position to determine the nature of pleasure for another.”

“And yet you chose to do so for me.”

“I know what you need. You don’t,” he stated bluntly. “And I also happen to know what I need.”

She looked at him. All of him. Raking her eyes down his body, lingering on his protruding cock, before returning to rest upon his face.

“What exactly do you need, Headmaster?” She stepped up close, trailing the flogger lightly down his abdomen.

His face twitched a little in response to her touch. “I need you to finish what you started.”

His body was responding to her, his muscles hitching under her light caress. It didn’t need to be like this. Harsh. Brutal. She could take him another way. And he would respond.

“I promised to help you. I didn’t say how I would do it.”

Tossing the flogger onto a nearby chair, she moved behind him, opening the large wardrobe beside his bed.

“Must I remind you that you are in my private chambers? My invitation does not allow you carte blanche over my personal property.”

She ignored him, trailing her hand over the neat rows of clothing hanging inside.
“I demand that you desist . . . immediately.” The warning was unmistakable.

She continued to search. Behind his robes she discovered a belt hanging from a hook. It might be awkward but it would do in a pinch. Then she pulled the next door open and found another hook with a hanger, draped over which were two dress ties. Black. No surprises. She’d never seen him in a tie before but perhaps he only wore them for special occasions—for court perhaps? Or funerals? It struck her then that he always seemed to be dressed for a funeral, as though perpetually in mourning.

But not now. Now he wasn’t dressed at all. And she found that she preferred it. In fact, there was only one thing that she considered could improve his current attire. Sliding one of the ties from the hanger, she tested it for strength. It would do perfectly.

She could have easily cast a silencing incantation on him but she didn’t want him silent; she still wanted to hear him—the noises that he would make. But she didn’t want the words. She couldn’t deal with them anymore. And they would only get worse as things . . . progressed.

His face had darkened, thunderous shadows continuing to descend over his features as he noted the tie grasped in both of her fists.

He lifted his chin uneasily. “Think very carefully about what you are planning to do.”

“You consider that I don’t spend enough of my time thinking already, Headmaster?” she responded without even attempting to sound innocent. There was no point in trying to play games with him. Lifting the tie, she pressed it insistently against his lips until it was wedged into his mouth, trapping his tongue and covering over his scar. Then she tied it tightly behind his head.

He looked displeased. Intensely. But there was something else—a tiny spark glimmering in the recesses of those impossibly black globes—enough, at least, for her to continue.

Moving behind him, she leaned in close, releasing a long breath as she trailed both hands down the collage of destruction from his shoulders to his buttocks—new welts upon old. She rubbed his buttocks gently, the places that she had concentrated her efforts, trying to soothe the burn.

Closing her eyes, she rested her forehead lightly against him. Laying down further layers, scars upon scars, wasn’t the answer. She knew that. She knew that now—he had shown her.

Now she would have to show him.

If she was the pain, then she could also be the pleasure—the pleasure she wanted to be.
He felt tense against her forehead, his muscles bunched as though attempting to ward off her touch. But she continued to stroke him, massaging his back and buttocks as she reflected upon how much more comfortable he seemed with being whipped than caressed. Despite the realisation, she remained unfazed. He might desire to be free of both her touch and the binds, as indicated by the occasional jerk as he tugged against them, but he was still aroused—she’d checked, allowing her hand to stray around his hip to brush his firm length before returning to soothe the welts she’d created.

Whilst he’d clearly wanted them, she wondered how often he’d been damaged in the past and left to suffer alone. This wasn’t even on remotely the same level as what he’d endured previously, but she intended to use the opportunity to show him care—to make him understand that he deserved more than pain. It might not be the relief that he’d asked for but she hoped it would convey, despite her slightly underhanded actions, that she genuinely wished to help.

Finally releasing him, Hermione stepped back and withdrew her wand from her sleeve before moving around to stand before him. The gag clamped between his teeth seemed a little harsh but it was absolutely required, as confirmed by the largely incomprehensible but patently threatening commands that suddenly gushed forth when she raised her wand to him.

He didn’t trust her. She wasn’t surprised, but the question was why he had allowed himself to be placed in such a compromising position. Had he really thought that he could control her? That she would be malleable enough, even in a position of dominance, to do as he desired? Or was his ultimate goal in all this to challenge her? Was this yet another sacrifice? The possibility that he might be doing this for her was more disturbing than she could possibly fathom. And the idea that she may have undermined his efforts made it even more so. So she let it go—for her own sanity as much anything.

The furrow in his brow deepened as she placed the tip of the wand to his forehead. Murmuring a healing spell, she watched as the blood retracted back into the wound and the flesh knitted up, hoping it wouldn’t form yet another scar.

He fell silent. What had he thought she was going to do? Obliviate him? Studying the wary shift of his eyes, she had the strange sense that she might have been right. Was he afraid of forgetting the past? Is that what the scars were about? A constant reminder of what had happened? Of what he had done?

It seemed that his self-flagellation may know no bounds. Which is why she was now even more keen to follow through with the next part.

Turning, she placed her wand on the chair and picked up the flogger instead.
“Despite what you may think, I’m not afraid to use this.” She held it up to him. “I also understand that pleasure is an extremely personal experience and that, for some, this is a legitimate source.” She rolled the handle thoughtfully around in her fingers. “For that reason, I will now use it on myself.”

His eyes suddenly widened.

Tossing it back down, Hermione proceeded to advance a few paces towards him before lifting a hand to finger the zipper of her top, lifting her chin suggestively. He paused, staring at her for an excruciatingly intense moment before dipping his head in response. Good. She wanted him in on this. Drawing the zipper slowly downward, she allowed the sound of the separating teeth to infuse the space between them whilst ensuring that her eyes never left his. At the bottom of its descent, she tugged the two sides apart before slipping one arm and then the other free, shrugging it off her shoulders before letting it drop to the ground behind her.

Next, she hooked her fingers under the hem of her T-shirt and lifted, again taking her time to drag it up and over her head, slipping the soft material off her shoulders before casually discarding it also. Skin prickling into gooseflesh, she was instantly thankful for the fire that Snape had thrown into the grate earlier. Whilst the whipping had certainly warmed her up, she had begun to cool down—although she strongly suspected that it would only be temporary.

Reaching both hands back, she unhooked her bra, curling her shoulders forward to allow the straps to slither down her arms, the cups peeling from her breasts before dropping to the floor.

His eyes were already there. She knew that he liked to watch her. He had from the very start—from the time he’d commanded her to stand over him and masturbate.

How the tables had turned.

Starting at her waist, she slithered both hands up her abdomen, riding the undulations of her rib-cage, to her breasts where she grasped both nipples and squeezed them, allowing herself to respond as though he were stimulating her. He would know if she was acting . . . or holding back—either would undermine what she was trying to achieve. And so she released the type of moan that she reserved only for the privacy of her own room . . . or for him, her lips parting desirously as she continued to roll and tug each straining bud.

His jaw muscles twitched . . . as did his cock. Another good sign.

She continued to stimulate herself, enjoying the tell-tale flare of his nostrils and the subtle cinching of his brow, until the throbbing in her pussy reached such a point that it required instant and urgent attention. Kicking off her flats one at a time, she pulled down the zipper of her jeans before turning her back to him and hooking her thumbs into the waistband. Bending gratuitously, she pushed her jeans and knickers down together. As she peeled off both layers, she continued to bend, arching her buttocks wantonly until he had what she hoped was a satisfyingly graphic view swaying before him, cheeks lasciviously parted as she stepped one foot out of her puddle of clothing and then the other.

Gradually unfurling her naked body until she was upright, Hermione sauntered with a deliberate hip-swing over to the chair. Perhaps she was overdoing it a little but she did want to give him a visual worth remembering. Grabbing the chair by the arms, she dragged it forward until it was positioned directly in front of him. Then she picked up her wand and the flogger, casting Scourgify on the latter before tossing her wand aside.

Ready.

Turning abruptly, she lowered herself down until she was perched primly on the edge of the chair.
Demure . . . almost. However, she immediately undermined any sense of propriety by casually sliding her knees apart, exposing her almost-hairless pussy, before dragging the tails of the flogger lightly up and down her inner thigh. He stared back, the firelight dancing in the depths of his hooded gaze. While he was clearly still vexed and brooding, he was also interested . . . as evidenced by the bold prow of his cock which reared up as she dragged the flogger over her parted labia.

She felt surprisingly calm. This was so far removed from anything she had ever done before but she had the advantage of being driven by a deep sense of purpose. And any reservations she might have had about exposing her body had been ostensibly demolished by her past encounters with him. She doubted it was possible to be more exposed than she had been thus far. After all, he had seen more of her than even she had . . . and he was about to see more.

Giving her mons a final slithery stroke, Hermione slid her buttocks backwards in the chair until she was settled comfortably, before bringing her heels up to rest on the edge so that she could watch him through the vee of her legs.

Lifting the flogger, she suddenly performed a little manoeuvre that she’d perfected with her wand, flipping it neatly around her fingers so that she now held the tails in her fist, the handle protruding outward.

The black, bulbed end looked imposing but not impossible, especially considering what she’d taken from Snape only the night before, so she began by positioning the flogger between her legs, slipping the firm leather knob into her slit before gliding it up and down through what she could already hear was a significant pool of arousal.

When her gaze lifted to his, she found that she didn’t even have to try to be lascivious, her tongue naturally slipping out to moisten her lips, her shoulders retracting to expose her breasts, her eyelids sinking at the sight of the gag clamped between his teeth, jaw rigid, abdominal muscles taut with arousal as his cock strained skyward.

She sighed audibly, a breathy moan slipping out from between her lips. He really wasn’t doing himself any favours. If his intention was to be released, there was no way it would happen with his perspiration-gilt muscles rippling before her. It was simply more fodder to fuel her pumping wrist, which dialled up a notch, prodding the phallus into her opening, stretching it, before lifting to deftly whisk over her clitoris until she was aching to be filled.

Spreading her legs a little further, she brought the flared bulb back to her pussy and began gradually working it inside herself. Using her heels as leverage, she curled her hips forward, her head rocking back to rest against the chair as she thrust.

“Unnnhhhh,” she moaned as it sank deeper inside her.

There was a soft echo from across the room. Inclining her head, she saw his hands clenched into pale fists. Significant nose dipped down, his gaze burned her from under heavily knit brows. She wanted to believe that it was desire . . . not just revenge. And the glisten of his cock, the sparkling gem crowning his head suggested that she might just be right.

Slipping the fingers of her other hand down to rub at her clitoris as she plunged the phallus harder into her tunnel, she could almost imagine that he wasn’t her Headmaster, that their adversarial and transactional past was just that—the past . . . and that she wasn’t at risk of serious repercussions when she finally did set him free.

But she wasn’t prone to that level of delusion—her mind was too frustratingly honest. So she set her jaw, focusing on her desire to demonstrate to him that arousal could be achieved without the need for
pain, in fact without touch at all. It would hardly be a revelation to him, conceptually at least—he understood far more than she about such things. But she wanted him to know that she knew . . . and that she knew it of him.

Agitating her fingers more frantically over her swollen nub, she fucked herself with the flogger and watched his pelvis twitching, the breaths billowing in and out of his broad chest. But it was his eyes that finally did her in. Having his gaze upon her, knowing the depth of what he knew, the breadth of his experiences, she found supremely erotic—especially being able to affect him in the way that she was after his past efforts to remain as callously cold and detached as possible.

Her pussy cinched around the handle, its ribbed length stuttering along her insides until she could no longer hold on.

Her jaw fell open, ragged breaths surging from her as she finished herself with a frenzy of stimulation.

“Uhhh . . . Yessss!” she cried, as her chin curled into her chest, the sight of her pumping hands blurring as she came undone, her core erupting into a chaotic flurry of contractions. The jerky undulations of her pelvis and sudden stiffening of her legs caused one of her feet to slip off the chair, jamming the flogger even deeper inside her. The result was a fresh wave of convulsions that drove her head back against the chair, a high pitched wail tearing from her throat. The seizing and writhing gradually subsided until she was left with her spent pussy throbbing around the rigid phallus, both hands slithering absently up and down her thighs as she sighed in contentment.

“Yo on bran o torta?”

Hermione cracked open her eyes. Unfortunately she could make out exactly what he said that time. ‘Your own brand of torture?’

She lifted her head to look at him. His entire body was rigid with tension—clearly hyper-aroused. But while he couldn’t be more vulnerable, he was still intent upon trying to provoke her. She wouldn’t be drawn in. She was in the driving seat now. He was clearly insinuating that she was a hypocrite . . . and perhaps she was.

Regardless, she had made her point, and now she was ready to make another.

“Yes. One that I’m suddenly rather taken with.” She gradually worked the handle out of her pussy before standing. “And I see that you’re rather taken with it also.”

Tossing the flogger aside, she approached him, taking slow, sultry steps until she was standing directly before him. Extending her index finger, she touched his cock, drawing her fingertip up the seam on the underside of his shaft, collecting the trail of dewy precum along the way before bringing her finger to her lips. Locking eyes with him, she drew her glistening digit into her mouth, rolling her tongue around it, savouring his taste before swallowing gratuitously.

A small sound in the back of his throat told her she had him exactly where she wanted him.

Raising both hands, she placed her palms against his chest. He quivered faintly. No doubt, in his experience, not all touch was intended to soothe. This time it was . . . at least partly.

Crawling over his pectoral muscles, Hermione traced her fingertips along the scars there before dipping her head to place her lips against one. He stiffened, tensing under her mouth but she continued to gently cover the length with small, feather-light kisses before moving down to nuzzle and then engulf the firm bud of his nipple.
He growled. A single bass note rolling around his throat. Again, she ignored it in favour of giving him what she suspected he had had very little of in his life . . . tenderness, affection . . . even sympathy. She doubted anyone had expressed sorrow for him, even after the multitude of sacrifices he’d made to help protect the Wizarding world. It was far easier to assume, as she had, that his cantankerous manner was due to arrogance, or a particularly caustic personality.

Laving gently, she plied one nipple and then the other, his growls turning into soft moans that infused her with an even greater determination to show him what it felt like to receive genuine care . . . and possibly something more.

Kissing his clenching abdomen as she slid down his body, she licked along the warm grooves between his muscles before finding herself eye to eye with his cock. She’d only been this close to a penis once before, but the result had been reasonably successful. Despite the size differential, and Merlin-knew how much extra baggage came with this one, she was hopeful for another positive outcome. And whilst she might be woefully inexperienced, there was a fiery determination burning within her chest . . . a trait that had eluded her for some time but that she was relieved to be able to draw from once more.

He’d spoken to her about oral sex in the past—the potency of the mouth, the ability of the tongue to communicate desire beyond words. But the greatest power he’d attributed to the eyes. What had he called them? The windows to the soul?

She would give him her mouth, and her hands, but she would mostly give him her eyes—so he could see the truth of her actions. He was the Master of Mistrust after all.

Grasping his hips, she steadied herself as she knelt before him. But it was only when she looked up that she realised, despite her earlier bravado, how ambitious this all was. It was one of the most daunting sights she had ever encountered—and not just sexually.

His imposing facade loomed above her, rendered even more ominous by the play of firelight and shadow—eyes burning like embers, the black gag slicing through his mouth, curling his upper lip and exposing glints of teeth. Dark hair hung in damp, clingy swaths that twisted around his features, making him appear even more fiercely commanding. His lithe form, glistening as it flexed against the binds, was not only imbued with an intense physical and magical potency but the scars spoke of courage and survival . . . someone who could prevail against the odds.

But most intimidating of all was the iron-clad phallus that hovered like a sceptre just above her forehead. From this angle she could see the horizontal bars across the shaft. They weren’t as neat as she’d originally assumed, the ragged edges clearly the work of a tool that was either dull or serrated. It would have been unbearably painful.

And so that’s where she started.

Tentatively, she lifted a hand to his shaft, grasping it gently before running the pad of her thumb along one of the raised ridges. Glancing up to gauge his response, she saw a complex mix of emotions tugging at his features—magnified when she leaned in closer. Keeping her eyes trained on him, she nuzzled the base, inhaling his musky, masculine scent before brushing her lips against the silken softness there. She trailed upward, pausing to feel the infinitesimal vibrations of his veins against her lips before meeting a thin rib of scar tissue. Dipping the tip of her tongue out, she stroked it, gently undulating her head back and forth to coat the symbol of torture with her own symbol of care, of healing, as one animal might do to another. This was met by a slight flexion of his expressive eyebrow, just the inner margin—a tiny indicator of need . . . that he needed this, or perhaps even her.

Inspired to continue, she interspersed her laving strokes with occasional kisses, especially at the knots
of particularly severe scarring. Working carefully, she covered the entire battlefield of lines, her laboured breaths no doubt cooling his shaft but never managing to take the edge off his erection which remained solid in her two-handed caress.

Then, leaning back slightly, she dropped her jaw, giving herself room to finally take his head. She’d left it until last not only because it was one of the few parts apparently undamaged, but because she wanted to give it her full attention, and to give him her full attention as she did so.

Trailing her tongue around the substantial perimeter of his corona, she watched the stuttering rise and fall of his chest. And as she slid up to dip into his slit, tasting more of his salty essence she noticed that he stopped breathing altogether. Finally inclining her head, she was able to engulf his entire bulb, taking its smooth contours into her mouth with only a small amount of difficulty. The key was to remain calm and focused, and to breathe. It would be easy to choke on something of his size. And she wasn’t planning on doing that . . . not only because she didn’t fancy putting herself through it, but it would undermine the very message she was trying to convey.

So she remained focused on working his sensitive glans, sucking gently as she rocked her head from side to side before bringing her hands into action, gripping and stroking his shaft in time with her undulations. His mouth was no longer pulled into a grimace, his lips loose and hanging apart as his breathy groans rasped past the gag.

Her tongue caressed him as her fingers slid up and down the loose skin of his shaft, and the entire time she kept her eyes locked upon him, knowing that he would be able to see the truth . . . because she felt it everywhere. She couldn’t pinpoint exactly when it had happened—perhaps when he was desperately fucking her against the wall in the alcove. Maybe before. But she had a deep-seated desire for him now. Not the sort of loved-up boyfriend desire. More of a desire that transcended any sense of relationship. One that disregarded all propriety, one that was dangerously primal, not beholden to convention or correctness. An addiction that one feeds—that feels too right, too integral to one’s being for it to be wrong.

And she saw it in him—that he recognised her need. The glassy sheen in his own eyes was unmistakable, the sounds he was making so raw . . . she had made the connection.

He had given her forgiveness. She had given him acceptance.

And to reinforce her intention—so that it was absolutely unequivocal—she sped up her pumping fist as she took him in her mouth more deeply, sucking and stroking until she could feel him tensing, ready to come.

As the guttural groan began, like that of a dying man, she pulled back a little so he could watch himself entering her. Jerking her fist she felt the first warm shots splashing across her tongue, then more violent bursts, one missing her mouth altogether, painting her chin and cheek, the other hitting the back of her throat at speed. Still she continued to pump him, directing his surging tip onto her tongue, where the final deposits landed, pooling in the gulley of her open mouth until he was finally drained. She gathered the mouthful together, displaying it to him before swallowing, accepting him—his very essence . . . his most intimate part.

And then she saw it. A tear. A single glistening drop, trailing down one cheek. Was it the physical pain—like last time? Or was it something else? She couldn’t ask. She wouldn’t ask.

Instead she rose up, standing on her toes to reach him. Hooking her hand around his neck, she pulled him down until she could capture his lips which she kissed separately due to the gag—sucking the upper pad and then the lower into her mouth, running her tongue along them, licking the tip of his tongue, knowing he would taste what she had.
Then she stepped back, touching her own lips as she retreated from him. She suddenly felt overwhelmingly emotional. And she didn’t want to cry in front of him—not again.

Quietly, she dressed and retrieved her wand before moving around to the cupboard behind him.

Returning a moment later, she held up her book.

“‘I found this. I’m taking it with me.’”

He didn’t respond. He looked like he had a lot on his mind.

She decided not to wait around to find out what it was.

Pausing at the bedroom door, she reversed the rope incantation before heading quickly for the entrance to his chambers. She considered it unlikely that he would chase her down but she was never entirely sure of how he might behave.

Slipping out the doorway, she breathed a sigh of relief. Then, as she started up the corridor, she may have done just one . . . tiny, little . . . skip.
The lightness in Hermione’s step was a welcome relief from the leaden boots that she’d been dragging around for months. So much so that she felt herself practically floating, gliding along the dungeon corridors, sweeping around the corners—

“Miss Granger!”

Hermione recoiled in shock as she rounded into the prune-like pucker and withering glare of Professor McGonagall.

“What business do you have charging about the dungeons on a Sunday?”

“I . . . I’m sorry Professor,” Hermione fumbled. “I didn’t expect to meet anyone else down here. I’ve just been visiting . . . the Headmaster.”

The older woman’s frown deepened. “Visiting? Do you mean attending detention?”

“No . . . I . . . borrowed a book.” She nodded to the book tucked tightly under her arm.

Professor McGonagall’s sharp gaze slid from the book back to her face.

“And enjoyed a cup of tea?”

Now it was Hermione’s turn to frown. “I’m sorry?”

Professor McGonagall brushed a finger over her chin and inclined her head at Hermione to indicate.

“Oh.” Hermione wiped a hand across her chin and felt the liquid smear that she must have missed. “Yes . . . he . . . um . . . he makes an excellent . . . cup of tea.”

Professor McGonagall peered down her nose before responding drily, “No doubt.”

Dipping her face in an attempt to hide the rising flame in her cheeks, Hermione gave a small, awkward smile before stepping sideways, preparing to leave.

“I have actually been waiting for you to come to me . . . of your own volition.” Hermione glanced up and was surprised to see hurt in Professor McGonagall’s green eyes. “To explain to me why you chose to break curfew for a second time—after I fought so hard for you to be allowed additional privileges as head girl.”

Hermione’s gaze returned to the dungeon floor. She had avoided Professor McGonagall for this very reason. The older woman had always had the capacity to make her feel like the worst person on the planet.
“I really am so sorry,” Hermione responded truthfully. “I didn’t come to see you because I felt terrible about it. I had no explanation for my behaviour... It was selfish. I’ve been focusing upon trying to earn the points back.” Her eyes instantly flicked over her shoulder in the direction of Snape’s chambers. “I know that you argued for me—and I really appreciate it. I’m so sorry to have betrayed your trust.”

As she spoke, she found herself shifting the book around to her front until she was holding it protectively against her chest. She was so good at doing guilt... but it still hurt.

“The Headmaster was extremely unwilling to allow you to attend that book group. You do know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It was only the collective reasoning of the rest of the Hogwarts staff that made it possible,” Professor McGonagall’s features hardened in a manner that made Hermione wonder exactly why she was being informed of Hogwarts’ internal politics.

“I understand.”

Face softening, the professor reached out to Hermione, placing a wrinkled hand upon her arm. “I know that this year has been difficult. It has been for all of us. But please know that my door is always open to you... Always.”

Hermione nodded, a grateful smile touching her lips. “Thank you, Professor. I do appreciate it.”

Footsteps on the stairs caused Hermione to look up. Professor Sprout was descending. She smiled when she saw them. “Good morning to you both.”

“Professor Sprout,” Hermione nodded, wondering at the chances of seeing two professors in the dungeons on a Sunday. Then she noticed Professor McGonagall’s expectant expression as the Herbology teacher approached, and sensed that this was not a chance meeting.

*Were they here to see Snape?*

Hermione took a small step backwards. Now she was worried. *How had she left him?* She realised then that she really should have checked to make sure that he was all right before leaving. *What if he wasn’t?*

“It was good to see you, Hermione,” Professor McGonagall’s lips cinched into a small smile. “I hope to see you again soon.”

Hermione inclined her head. “Yes, Professor.”

Then the two older women disappeared around the corner in the direction of Snape’s chambers.

Hermione swallowed nervously, unsure of what to do, but then heard their footsteps halt not far away.

“Did you manage to speak to the others?” Professor Sprout whispered.

“Yes, they all agree that this latest incident with the trees should be sufficient,” Professor McGonagall’s response was similarly muted.

“So what do you intend to tell the school board?”
“That we now have enough evidence of unsafe practises and indiscriminate property damage to put forward a motion for dismissal.”

There was a brief silence.

“How do you think he’ll take it?” That was Sprout.

“That is really not my concern. The man is not fit for the role and should never have been offered it in the first place.”

More silence.

“You haven’t forgiven him . . . for Albus, have you?”

McGonagall huffed. “I thought I’d made it clear . . . that has absolutely no bearing on the matter at hand. This is about the future of the school—a school that is in an extremely fragile state and that requires a more considered approach than he is capable of.”

Their footsteps finally started to move away.

Hermione’s heart and mind were racing, frantically trying to process what she had just heard. Biting her lip, she gripped the book until her knuckles turned white.

Then she stepped around the corner.

“Professor McGonagall,” she called after the retreating forms. “There is something I need to tell you.”

***

The cleaving spell worked surprisingly well. Hermione had never used it on wood before but found that, with a concerted effort, she was even able to split one of the largest logs directly down the middle. Now she was gripping her wand tightly, using it to levitate a log about the length of a bus deeper into the forest. It was tricky trying to navigate around the already established trees but she considered that it would make an excellent addition to the inner loop of a far-enriched obstacle course that she’d been working on the entire day.

Using the fallen trees, she had managed to create a range of climbing stumps, vaults, balance beams, and even some slab seats and tables scattered throughout her running track. There was still one more tree to go but the light was starting to fade. She would find a spot for the current one and call it a day. Gradually turning the huge piece of wood as though attempting to dock a large ship, she finally managed to set it into a clearing between a stand of tall, slender trees. She wasn’t deep enough into the forest to consider it dangerous but it was sufficiently secluded for people—or only herself if no one else cared to make use of it—to obtain some much needed solace.

Sighing with a mixture of satisfaction and fatigue, she proceeded to swing her leg over the log and lay down, her stomach and cheek resting against the trunk. She inhaled slowly through her nose, staring out at the corridors of shadowy columns and jumble of foliage. It was so peaceful, the scent from the split timber so heady and delicious she could just about go to—

Thud.

A huge shadow landed upon her back, pinning her against the log.

Before she could scream, it growled into the hair behind her ear, “Why did you lie?”
Snape. Despite her predicament, she felt the icy shard of terror in her chest begin to melt. At least it was the devil she knew.

“I don’t—” she attempted, having difficulty drawing breath into her compressed lungs.

“Why?” he hissed, pressing down on her more heavily.

“I just . . . I wanted to—”

“Help?” He spat the word.

Her breath choked out. She didn’t respond.

“You can’t.”

“But—”

“You . . . can’t,” he snarled.

“But Professor McGonagall—” She attempted to lift her head but found his forearm instantly braced against it.

“You think I don’t know?”

Hermione allowed her cheek to drop back against the rough bark. So he was aware that the other staff wanted him gone.

“Perhaps you would prefer me to tell her the truth? If you are so desperate to be removed?”

He snorted, a cool gush down the back of her neck.

“The ‘truth’? And whose truth would that be?” The dark cynicism of his voice ground into her. “The one you’ve cobbled together from countless gross assumptions? The detritus amassed from your festering ruminations?”

She grimaced in discomfort, wondering what he was so bitter about. She had made a connection with him—she knew it. So what was the issue? *That she had gotten too close? Or was it the fact that she’d taken the blame for the trees?* She’d told Professor McGonagall that Snape had felled them on her request—to help her to extend the obstacle course for others to use.

“I am not your latest cause,” he ground out through gritted teeth.

“And I’m not yours!” she retorted breathlessly.

He surged up behind her ear again, growling fiercely, “And yet I did not seek to debase you with pity. I did not approach you with sympathy . . . a service only to the giver.”

*Pity? Sympathy? Is that what she’d shown him?* A tightness wormed its way into her throat. She’d thought she was helping. She’d even congratulated herself on it as she’d left. *But had her actions actually hurt him? By dismissing his request, betraying his trust, had she failed to show him what she’d intended . . . had she failed to communicate how much she cared—that she did truly accept him?* His tears suddenly meant so much more to her.

Her own vision blurred, the trees turning into a muddy swirl that mirrored the black sludge backing up in her mind. *What had she done?*
His breathing was heavy in her ear, damp with emotion.

She swallowed painfully, feeling her thoughts receding, sliding back, a slippery slope, one that she’d clambered up with so much difficulty.

“The trees,” she whispered. “I’d forgotten why I needed them . . . until now.”

He didn’t respond, now just a presence—like the weight on her shoulders personified.

“Even as a child you need to know, don’t you?” she murmured. “That you are loved?”

She saw it so clearly now, wondering why it had eluded her for so long.

“I used to climb. I’ve always been a good climber.” Her voice was light and wistful. “We’d finished the picnic and they were reading. Both of them. Her head was resting on his stomach, rising and falling gently with his breaths. And I’d gone into the forest, only a little way . . . and climbed.”

She paused, remembering how she had watched them, straddling the crook of a high branch . . . feeling like a spy—with the ability to see them as she never had before. As they were without her.

“They must have been lost in their books because they didn’t notice for a long time. I didn’t mind. I liked seeing them like that—together but far away, in their own worlds.” She smiled, a brief twitch that fell away. “And when they finally realised—that’s when I saw it. The moment they surfaced and I wasn’t there, I remember their faces. The loss . . . so naked . . . raw, as though I might be lost to them forever.”

Her chest convulsed. The pressure on her back subsided.

“They called for me. Moving jerkily as though trying to go in every direction at once. But I just stayed up there. And watched. I wanted to see it . . . how much they loved me . . . how much they would miss me if I was gone.”

It felt like the bark against her cheek was also inside her . . . inside her throat as she swallowed.

“But then it happened. They did lose me. I went. And yet they didn’t miss me at all . . . they couldn’t . . . there was nothing to miss.”

The harsh truth, now spoken aloud, was acutely painful but somehow less traumatic than she’d expected—like a lie full of prickles that, once acknowledged, she could finally cast aside. But it was the next part that cut deepest, peeling back too many layers at once.

“I wonder now at my compulsion . . . this need to be among the trees, to run. It has always felt desperate—as though searching for something that has slipped away . . . like I’m trying to claw it back. And now I think it might be those moments—the ones where I should have been with them instead of watching, instead of unfairly testing them . . . making them prove that they loved me, when I always knew.” Her voice had ground down to a whisper. “I think I come here to feel close to them.”

She shuddered as a cool breeze whipped across her face in the fading light, flitting over her stippled tears. The pressure of his body intensified.

“And I did what I did . . . not out of pity.” Her eyes squeezed closed at the painful admission. “But because I wanted to feel close . . . to you.”

He remained very still, enveloping her like a protective carapace. But then she felt his muscles tense
and her hand immediately darted back, digging into the crevice behind his knee, holding him. “Stay. . . please.” Each word was a hoarse sob.

His body remained locked around her but she felt something upon her cheek—his hand, thumb trailing along her jaw. Surprisingly warm.

“What do you need?” The resentment was gone, his words soft and gentle.

She just resisted the urge to let it all out—to expose her most intimate desires to him. There was something more immediate.

“I need to feel you—inside me. Like this.” Her desperate hand stuttered up the back of his thigh, grasping his trousers before pulling his hips into hers. “And I need you to tell me why.”

She was sick of pretending that she understood everything. She didn’t. And even though she hadn’t always managed to deduce the meaning of his words, she had a sense that his purpose was less about communicating absolute truths and more about extending her, testing her perspective, forcing her to question her assumptions. He understood people and their motivations like no one she had ever met, and now she was asking him to tell her about her own. It might have been cause for embarrassment if it had been anyone else—but he had always seemed intent upon helping her to understand and she knew that he was brutally honest enough to give it to her with unflinching clarity.

“It is human nature to wish to feel some things and not others.”

Just the cadence, the timbre, the resonance through his chest into hers was enough to start the liquefaction of her mind, like a drug.

“Trying to separate one emotion from another is futile, as is trying to pick apart the physical from the emotional.”

His thumb continued, riding the curve of her chin before stopping to rest against her parted lips.

“But you already understand the dance between the two, don’t you? The physical and the emotional?”

His hand suddenly left her face, moving down to grasp her arm that was clutching at the log. He ground her forearm, her scar, against the bark.

“You already understand the power of using one to obliterate the other.”

Her face crumpled in realisation—it was what she had deprived him of by ignoring his request.

“But you happen to have discovered another source—a more potent well of feeling. A place where you can feel most deeply.”

His hand left her arm and slid down between her legs, gliding over her pussy through her jeans.

“You are beginning to understand yourself at your core—wanting to connect with it. You want to entice others. You want to entice yourself.”

He rubbed more insistently and she began to moan.

“And you favour how your body responds to me. You relish letting go—giving me control of it.”

He muttered something indecipherable and a burst of cool air suddenly hit her down there, a stark, seam-splitting exposure of her nether regions that made her feel both tight and open.
And then he touched her properly.

“Yesss,” she moaned, digging her nails into the log. It was an acknowledgement of the truth—to herself as much as he—and encouragement, to give her more.

But her plea turned out to be unnecessary. Now that he had breached her denim skin, the raw sensations were absolutely all-consuming. It was the context as much as anything—the gentle susurration of the surrounding forest, the damp earthiness and lazy lengthening of its shadows. And then his fingers rubbing her furiously, plying her in deft circles, stirring her clitoris to fill and throb, more cock-like than she’d ever comprehended.

She writhed, grinding into his palm, her hip bones jabbing against the unrelenting wood, the coarse bark abrading her nipples, grazing her cheek. But she noticed little of it as his fingers slid down to enter her, filling her with two long digits that immediately set to work stimulating and stretching, curling and jiggling until her rasping breaths filled the air.

“You feel it. The power that resides here.” His mouth was hovering by her ear. “You understand that you can use it to take as well as give—you sense its inherent power. And that’s what you want. You want to feel powerful. That’s why you did what you did.”

Her breaths gave way to sobs.

“You are powerful,” he murmured. “More so than you realise.” She heard the sound of his zipper opening, even as he continued to pump her with his other hand. “But you don’t need to seize it from others. There are very many who will give it . . . willingly.”

He rapidly withdrew his fingers, instantly replacing them with his iron cock, its contours broader and harder than she would have considered humanly possible. But after his intensive preparation, he slipped inside her with relative ease and all she felt was an overwhelming sense of gratification—a fullness of body and mind that left her wondering how she could ever feel complete without it.

He began to stroke slowly. “You want forgiveness.”

Her heart clenched.

“And you think that forgiveness will come when I do.”

Her hand slithered up to cover her face.

“That I will fill you with it.”

He continued to thrust, his breaths becoming more laboured.

“But that is not the case.”

Her heart sank as her eyes squeezed closed.

“Because I have already given it to you . . . It is now up to you to accept it. To accept fully. Accept what you are. Accept what you want.”

His words, rammed home by his actions, broke down another of her walls.

“I want this,” she whimpered, lifting her buttocks to allow him to penetrate her as deeply as he could.

He pumped harder, groaning in her ear.
She turned her head to glimpse his shadowed face above her. “I want . . . you.”

He faltered, staring intently into her eyes, his breaths visible on the cooling air. Then his hand slid under her cheek, protecting it from the bark before he unleashed himself on her.

“Unnhhhhh,” she moaned, curling her face into his palm.

His hips thumped into her, his balls pounding her outside as his cock rammed her insides.

Pelvis bouncing against the log, her legs shook as she tried to brace herself against the onslaught. His hot breaths rasped into her hair, his free hand hooked into the waist band of her jeans, yanking her backwards as he slammed forward. She had the acute sense that he was attempting to fuck a number of things out of his system . . . and perhaps into hers.

Scrabbling to readjust her hold on the log, she lost awareness of all discomfort as a surge of pleasure flooded from between her legs, up through her chest. It was the pre-orgasmic euphoria that strained out against his fingers as a high pitched keening before he dragged her over the edge.

“Severus!” she cried, his name bursting unconsciously through her lips as the eruption shook her, seizing her limbs and wrenching at her insides. As her pussy gripped and squeezed at his length, she felt his thrusts suddenly stutter and jerk before he answered with a raw shout of his own—deep and visceral, just like the release that pulsed into her with each powerful convulsion of his cock until he collapsed with a dying groan on top of her.

He was heavy, but she felt indescribably safe and secure pressed beneath him. With her face sandwiched between the cup of his hand and the rasp of his shadowed cheek, his chest rising and falling against her back, she was enveloped within what felt like a warm, dark, breathing womb. She imagined herself remaining like that, hibernating there in the forest with him.

“You are welcome to leave the school grounds as required from now on,” he murmured against her cheek.

Perhaps she wouldn’t hibernate after all. Perhaps she would just take him with her.

Then he lifted himself off her. But as he did, she felt the briefest press of his lips against her temple. Out of everything he’d done to her and with her, this was by far the most meaningful.

He really had forgiven her.
Hermione groaned, flailing feebly in an attempt to escape from under a mountain of bedclothes. She felt like a tin man—one whose joints hadn't been oiled in a long time, although she'd received plenty of oil in other places. Her lips curled into a sleepy smile as she remembered, slithering one hand over her grazed cheek and gingerly fingering her throbbing hip with the other.

After the forest, she'd staggered back to her room and immediately fallen into bed, only just remembering to flick a quick contraceptive spell over her belly before succumbing to the full weight of the day’s physical and emotional strain. She couldn’t remember waking at all in the night and realised that, despite the backdrop of discomfort, it was the first time she had slept through since before the war.

Rolling onto her side with some difficulty she spotted the book, sitting patiently on her bedside table. She hadn’t even opened it, having set to work on the obstacle course immediately after speaking to Professor McGonagall. Now she stared at it—the nondescript cover, just the back of someone’s head, hair short and dark—it could have been a boy or girl, but she knew that it was the latter, a girl whom she had met only briefly but felt she knew well, one she had missed these past weeks, missed experiencing the world through her eyes and learning through her thoughts.

They had read the book in parts—only a set number of chapters at a time in order to ‘digest and process’ ready for analysis. Hermione had been surprised by her own restraint. Despite yearning to know more, she had never read ahead. Now, having missed at least two meetings and perhaps never attending again, she would read the rest.

Her hand slithered out to touch the smooth surface. She immediately thought back to where she discovered it. Not on any of the heavily laden shelves in his office, or the piles in his chambers. It had been sitting in his cupboard. Alone.

It gave her an odd feeling and she realised then that she needed a block of time to dedicate to finishing it. But that wasn’t something she could give right now. Right now there was something more pressing to attend to—her freedom.

Her morning classes mainly involved project work which she could do in the evening. And her afternoon was relatively free. It wasn’t in her nature to skip classes but the occasion felt too momentous not to celebrate. She would spend the entire day out. Even breakfast would be taken in her favourite café. Proper coffee. Eggs. A pastry for after.

Her exhalation was a fluttering purr of pleasure. Somehow . . . inexplicably . . . life felt good.
Hermione enjoyed the swinging weight of her satchel as it nudged against her hip with each eager stride back from the Apparition point. Shopping bounty. She wasn’t much of a shopper but she’d enjoyed it so much that day. There had been at least twenty book shops. Some new, some second hand. And even though she was well aware that they often harboured many of the same collections, she just loved the way they were arranged—some upstairs, some downstairs, some slick and minimalist, some sprawling bohemian jungles. And she’d taken the opportunity to stock up on a range of purchases—just in case she was faced with another unplanned lock down.

In one shop, she’d also discovered a beautiful set of coloured inks. They weren’t magical, but the hues were stunning. Ginny wrote to Harry most days and put a huge amount of effort into her quillwork. Hermione knew it would be the perfect gift for her, especially since they’d not had an opportunity to speak since the ball.

As she approached the castle, Hermione slipped her hand into the satchel and felt the parcel that she was most surprised to return with—new underwear, three matching sets. It wasn’t something she’d ever cared about in the past but she’d happened upon the lingerie shop between book stores and instantly felt the need to indulge. The odd realisation when she was trying them on was that more than half of what she’d ‘randomly’ selected was in Slytherin green. It didn’t require any particular introspective insight for her to understand what she was doing. The more difficult part to fathom was what she hoped to achieve from it.

He was her Headmaster. She was his student. They didn’t even have a definable relationship. And yet . . . she’d ended up paying a hell of a lot of money for underwear that she’d spent her entire mirror time visualising being torn apart by his fingers, shredded by his teeth, to the point that she’d left the shop feeling embarrassingly flushed and aroused.

There wasn’t even a good way to regularly see him—at least no valid excuse to do so. And it still wasn’t clear to her whether their interactions had moved beyond what would basically be considered transactional. Indeed, she’d somehow ‘earned’ her freedom as a result of their latest liaison. It wasn’t really a dynamic in which the excitement of ‘new underwear’ belonged and yet she had three sets . . . and she didn’t intend to waste them.

Climbing the steps, she fingered the small gift in her pocket. It was nothing really. Just a bookmark. A brass stem with the head of a snake. But out of all of her purchases, it was probably the most worrying. What did she intend it to mean? How would he perceive it? Would she even give it to him?

She wondered then how something so small could signify more than the enormity of what they’d shared to date. But that’s what sometimes happened . . . the little things . . . his palm against her cheek . . . his lips against her temple.

Hermione drew a steadying breath as she stood before the imposing front doors. And now back to this. School . . . but necessarily so much more. After losing her family, it had become everything. Yet with the magnitude of her loss, it had felt woefully inadequate, incapable of fulfilling her, of providing for her on any level.

But at some point that had changed. Even now, breathing in the damp of the ancient walls, the heady oak of the door, she felt there was something here for her. Something worthwhile. And whilst her renewed sense of purpose might rest upon questionable foundations, she knew that the absence of it was worse. She’d been there. And she couldn’t go back. Going back would end her.

Turning the handle, she was instantly struck by a wall of noisy chatter—the Great Hall in the throes of dinner. She smiled at the normality. Life was going on. Entering the clamour, she found herself a spot at the Gryffindor table, placed her bag by her seat and poured herself a bowl of pumpkin soup. Grabbing a bread roll from the basket before her, she broke off a piece and popped it into her mouth.
before looking about her, taking in the bustling conversations and bursts of laughter, wondering if it was how she, Ron and Harry had appeared not so long ago.

Then she noticed Ginny a few seats down, head turned away, talking to Neville. Good. She would wait until the table had cleared a bit before trying to join in. She might even use the opportunity to give Ginny her present.

Hermione’s eyes continued to roam before settling on the teacher’s table. Snape was there, sitting in the very middle seat, his eyes focused on the table as he chewed slowly. She would have considered him lost in thought except that he appeared to be the only one at the table not engaged in conversation, much like herself. And it was his hands that suggested otherwise. The heels of both rested on the table, fingers slightly raised, relaxed enough, but positioned too closely to his body, as though he was prepared at any moment to thrust up and stride away. As though only pure determination was keeping him there.

His eyes lifted then and met hers. She felt it. The connection. As though their bubbles of solitude were merging, uniting them in isolation, separate from the rest. She realised then what a feat it was for him to appear as he did each day—a symbol of strength and resilience, of survival, when clearly it tortured him to do so. He had been rejected by his colleagues. He was derided by the students—those with enough bravado to overcome their fear of him. But still he managed to remain as he had always been.

She had previously considered his stern vigilance to be unnecessary. As though he was the only one clinging to the past when everyone else simply wanted to move on, to finally relax. But she now realised that it was his harsh demeanour that gave the students permission to be exactly as they were right now. His hypervigilance meant that they could engage in the trivial without fear. Dozens had died within those walls, it had been awash with blood less than a year previous and yet he had made it safe for them. Regardless of the fact that the physical threat had gone, he had made it psychologically and emotionally safe for them to return. Everyone knew that he would protect them. They knew of his bravery. And there was no doubt about his power... in fact he’d reminded them of it only the day before.

The other teachers, including Professor McGonagall, had been present when the slaughter had occurred. They hadn’t been able to prevent it. Who knew if things might have been different if Snape had been there to assist, but it was his watch now. And he was the most careful man any of them knew. If he couldn’t protect them, no one could.

Even when his eyes finally dipped away, she continued to watch—taking in his precise, considered movements. They had been battle-ready because of him. He had challenged them the entire time, toughened them, made them shrewd, suspicious, careful. It occurred to her then that the very traits they had despised in him growing up, were likely the ones that had driven them to prevail. He knew people. He knew how to bring out what they needed.

Looking back down at her bowl, she noticed it swimming under her gaze and realised how deeply he affected her. Keeping her head lowered, she gulped down the rest of her soup before looking up to find the seat opposite Ginny vacant.

Blinking away any remaining sheen from her eyes, she stood and relocated to the vacant spot.

“Hey, Gin,” she said brightly.

Ginny glanced up but didn’t respond, her pale brow drawing into a frown as she continued to stir her soup, which didn’t appear to have been touched.
“How have you been?” Hermione reached out to absently twist the empty goblet in front of her.

“Why would you care?” Ginny’s response was unusually sharp.

“What do you mean?”

Ginny continued to stir before huffing and dropping the spoon with a clang.

“Did Harry come to see you before he left?”

Hermione took a moment to work out what she was talking about.

“Um . . . no . . . I don’t think so?”

“What do you mean you don’t think so?” Ginny’s brown eyes narrowed.

“I . . . I might have missed him.”

“Why? Where were you?”

Whipping Snape, naked, in his bedroom.

“I . . . was busy.”

She looked unconvinced.

Hermione suddenly wondered why she was being interrogated so closely.

“Why? Isn’t he allowed to see me?”

Ginny glared at her before leaning forward to deliver the rest in a low hiss.

“Listen. I understand that the two of you are close. And I’ve tried my best not to feel threatened by that. But when you rub it in my face . . . in front of the whole school, like you did at the ball—when you use him like you did and then just dump him back with me like some supplementary prize, it makes me wonder exactly what you think of him . . . and of me. I know I can’t compete with you—you’re better than me in every way. But if you do anything like that again, I will be asking Harry to make a choice.”

Hermione’s mouth was hovering open by the end of her speech. “Choice?”

“You or me.” Ginny’s mouth twitched with hurt and fury. “He can’t have us both.”

Hermione couldn’t believe her ears.

“And just so that we’re even . . .” Ginny continued, as she slowly got to her feet.

Then picking up her bowl of cold soup, she dumped the entire contents over Hermione’s head, tossing it, once empty, onto the table with a loud clatter before turning and storming out the door.

Hermione sat dumbfounded, thick orange runnels oozing down her face and dolloping onto her shoulders as more and more people joined in the laughter. There were even a few claps.

Rising on shaky legs, she made her way toward the door. She didn’t even bother casting a cleansing spell. The shame was already complete.

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The spray washed away her tears but more came. Sobbing against the tiles, Hermione wondered why, just when she felt she was getting on top of things, life had decided to tap her on the shoulder and remind her of yet another of her failings. Friendships needed work. She liked to think that they didn’t—that once you had someone, you had them for life. But that clearly wasn’t the case. She’d let her friends down. And without someone who cared about her, without someone she could disclose her darkest secrets to, what was the point? What was the point to any of it?

She slowly washed her hair and managed to rinse most of the soup out of her ears. By the time she’d finished she’d run out of tears, her face red and puffy as she stared at her reflection in the mirror. How had she got it so wrong?

Despondently, she opened the door that led back to her bedroom. She’d only taken a few steps when she saw it—her satchel—sitting on the floor beside her bed. Only then did she remember that she’d left it behind . . . and yet here it was.

Then she felt the sudden warmth behind her—heat radiating from the shadows . . . from some formidable presence. Face crumpling in realisation, she dropped the towel before turning and plunging into his arms.
Chapter Notes

A/N: And here’s a big, juicy chapter for you. Warnings: Bondage and other stuff. DSxx

Thank you very much to those kind folks who have read and left reviews for my smutfest oneshot ‘The Room of Reconciliation’ - I greatly appreciate it xx
If you’re interested, here is the link. There are some excellent fics there - http://archiveofourown.org/collections/sshgsmutfest2017/works/11923422

There was a strange comfort to falling apart. Doing so against the cosily warm but steadfastly secure contours of his chest, with one of his strong arms braced around her shoulders, the other gently cupping the back of her head, it felt like a safe detonation, a controlled explosion . . . protecting her from herself and what she might otherwise do.

And after all that had happened between them, she no longer feared his judgement. She could release without expecting repercussions. And he was allowing her to do just that, assisting her . . . as he had done every other time.

But on this occasion, when she finally tipped her sopping face up to gaze at him, his stern nose and soft lips swimming before her, she was relieved to note that he didn’t recoil. In fact, he allowed her hand to carefully snake up, fingers caressing the nape of his neck before curling into his locks and drawing him down to her, to gratify her waiting lips.

And his mouth was as supple and tender as it looked. Against her lips he was the flesh of a peach, a ripe bud that she needed to open, her tongue tipping tentatively out to taste his sweet juncture, slipping along the seam, searching for an opening. She moved lightly against him, coaxing with tiny nips of her lips, gentle prods of her tongue, and she could hear him fast coming to a decision, the susurration of air through his nose building until he let go. And when he finally opened up she was completely consumed.

She moaned, the muted whimper from her open mouth draining into his, trying to communicate her deepest need, and his answering growl hummed through her lips, completing the cycle of desire. He took her in increasingly fierce mouthfuls and she did her best to keep up, rolling with him, opening herself up to the demanding thrusts of his tongue, capturing every opportunity to suck at each deliciously succulent intrusion. Then she slipped inside him as they fused, merged and parted, riding one another’s undulations time and again until she was gasping, as though somehow able to inhale him further.

His hand was on her breast, heel moulding the soft flesh, fingers already masterfully plying her helplessly aroused nipple. Her moans had turned into high-pitched whines and she realised then that her hips were already thrusting, grinding her need into his thigh.

Then his knee slipped up between her legs and she squirmed, trying to gain some sort of purchase to relieve the desperate ache that flowed like liquid fire from her core. The pressure there increased until she could do little more than plead her case, bobbing her head a little as she serviced his tongue, hoping that her appeal would reach further, down to his cock, in the same way as he was masterfully commandeering her pussy with each flexion of his muscular thigh.
Finally breaking away with a cry of utter desperation, she looked into his eyes which were ablaze. A mirror of her own.

“Severus,” she murmured urgently, her fingers trickling over the plane of his jaw. “Please help me... help me to stop it. I need it to let me go.”

“It will let go... only when you allow it,” he replied, hand slipping up under her chin, grasping her firmly to steady her gaze which was wandering as her nether regions slowly, comprehensively melted.

“Can you show me how?” she whispered, her voice lost to a faint shudder, one induced by nothing more than the prickling intensity of him.

He continued to gaze at her, searchingly, reaching into one of her eyes and then the next.

“Of course.” It was the gentlest of assurances, but delivered with such conviction that it caused fresh tears to well.

Suddenly she was swept up in his arms. He carried her with ease to the bed, as though she were no heavier than a child, before placing her across the short span of it. And as he sank down, dark form enveloping her like a gathering storm, his hungry lips took her again and she found herself arching wildly into him, a strident moan surging forth as though they had already been apart too long.

Her fingers fumbled blindly for his buttons—so many. But despite her desperation to touch him, the opportunity to finally kiss him properly was sublime, and so she allowed herself to grope and fiddle until his coat eventually parted and she could start an equally unskilled battle with his shirt.

Meanwhile he was feasting, tasting her, leaving a trail of hot destruction across her jaw and neck until she was writhing uncontrollably and had to give up on his buttons altogether. Instead she relocated to his face, cradling it in her trembling palms.

The scar across his cheek wasn’t visible but she felt it, her thumb sitting in the warm valley as she held him, kissing him with a passion that she hardly knew—or at least had never before directed at another human being. Books perhaps. Ideas. Noble causes. But not like this—a knot of such intense need that it could only be expressed with her most visceral exposure—with everything on the inside wanting to come out, to smother him, claiming him as her own, or even pulling him in to be part of her.

And he seemed to share her need, or at least her intensity, as though they were both desperately attempting to redress something—lost time? Missed opportunities? Or perhaps it didn’t yet deserve to be considered with such optimism... maybe they were simply staving off ghosts, or capturing a moment before it was irretrievably lost.

Regardless, she had never felt so close to anyone in her life. Even Harry. And in a strange way... even her parents. This was different... so impossibly physical, on top of the stark emotionality, that she couldn’t equate it to anything she had ever known.

Finally he released her and rocked back onto his knees. Her lips pulsed as she looked imploringly up at him, as though her heart were sitting right there, exposed for him to see. But he didn’t make her wait long, slipping off his coat before Wandlessly flicking open the remaining buttons of his shirt and discarding both.

Hermione’s lips curled into a tentative smile as she reached for him, coveting the delicious heat of his torso, skimming her fingertips over the chipped porcelain of his skin. And then a seam-splitting spell
caused his trousers to practically melt off, before his boots were flicked away and he was finally naked, straddling her thighs, erect cock hovering tantalisingly over her, taunting her, until she had no choice but to touch it.

But he stopped her, easily snatching up her wrists in one large hand before pinning them above her head. And when he’d fixed them in place with another spell, he proceeded to rake his glittering eyes over her, the raw hunger in them causing a fresh shot of arousal to steep her pussy.

And so she should have been ready—or at least harbouring some degree of mental and physical preparation for what was to come. But she wasn’t. It was so different to anything that had come before . . . so much more extreme because it felt real, like the proper consummation of a relationship. But it also felt dangerous—like the antidote to her acute isolation, the fulfilment of her impossible need, was irretrievably binding her—and now there was no going back, no way to undo it. But if she were honest, she was probably too far gone even before all this—already helplessly ensnared, beyond the desire or even the capacity to untangle herself from the enduring enigma that was Severus Snape.

And so it started with her breast. And his mouth. She watched the action play out through the curtain of dark hair that trailed in a silky sash across her skin, like a peep show, tantalising snippets of lips and tongue toying with the stark profile of her nipple. And of course it went far beyond the visual—layer upon layer of sensation daubed like an artist painting in liquid heat across what were relatively insubstantial breasts, but what he made feel monumental, as though they were the most important objects in the world, a Portkey directly to the core of her being.

And, of course, he was right. He was inside her—each lick and suck, each twist and pinch, tugging at the very foundations of her womanhood, such that she was compelled to marvel both internally, and in raw, wordless exclamations at how exquisite the juncture was between the increasingly similar worlds of pleasure and pain.

Then he slithered down further, kneeling beside the bed, his torso now cradled between her thighs. And in the absence of being able to grasp him with her hands, she clamped her legs around his middle, thrusting her pussy against him to show exactly what he was doing to her.

He looked back then, his gaze meeting hers over the growing divide of flesh between them and she saw it—the faintest of smiles. Just a brief deflection, less of his mouth than the corners of his eyes. He’d sneered plenty of times at her, but never smiled. And the tension in her features faded as she responded with a smile of her own.

But then his lips dropped to her belly, eyes still locked upon hers, and the tension returned—an automatic cinching of her brow, the agony of watching just how sensuous he could be—aquiline nose grazing a sinuous path behind his lips, like a particularly unhurried bloodhound following the scent of her arousal to its source. And when he found it, he didn’t stop at nestling between her folds. Without hesitation, his tongue slipped out to sample her well of desire, tasting the pool of liquid lust that he’d drawn from her. And while she had been slightly mortified at the intensity of her aroma, as though her pussy had thoroughly atomised and dispersed it for maximum impact, he seemed mercifully unfazed, in fact he appeared to be rather taken with it, lapping her silken essence up in hungry mouthfuls, as though it were nectar from the Gods themselves.

Moaning in appreciation, she spread her legs wider. She would make more for him. So much more. She would feed him from her body forever, if she could watch him as he was right now, milky eyelids fallen closed, dark lashes fluttering gently as he consumed her with abandon.

He was . . . beautiful.
And he made her feel beautiful—wanted—when others had made her a pariah.

One of his large hands still spanned her breasts, fingers long and deft enough to work both nipples at once. Now the other slid up to her belly, little finger touching the heel of his other hand, while his thumb rested on her clitoris. It was as though he was deliberately connecting all of her most sensitive bundles, his hands emulating the internal network of sensations firing throughout her body like dozens of simultaneous pinballs. However, it also felt like possession. He was claiming all three at once, the triangle of her womanhood, her uterus in the centre of his palm.

_Did he really want her? Did he want her like that?_

It turned out that she had little time to consider as his thumb suddenly pressed down, pulling back the hood of her clitoris, exposing it fully before he proceeded to show her exactly why he was down there.

Again, Snape’s intention was to reveal something. And, as was inevitably the case for her, it was so profound that Hermione couldn’t help but learn.

His approach amounted to little more than licking—each journey from her pussy to her clitoris a slow, methodical incursion, his tongue firm and flat, covering a broad strip to the base of her clitoris, before the tip was directed gently upwards. The last part, despite the care taken, was what jolted her most deeply. Due to the presence of his thumb, her clitoris was now protracted so that the sensitive shaft and head were being directly stimulated.

Flexing against her magical binds, Hermione whimpered helplessly. She usually avoided stimulating herself in that way due to the extreme sensitivity but he was doing it now, the slick pressure of his tongue creating a confusing blend of biting intensity and lingering pleasure.

But the languid pace, and the fact that he kept altering his approach when it became too overwhelming—thrusting in deeper to her pussy or even venturing down to prod against the tight constriction of her sphincter, meant that rather than being distracted by the conflict, she continued to gradually build.

There was virtually no friction—or at least not the type of frantic thrusting, stroking and rubbing she associated with sex—just a firm caress, delivered with precision and infinite patience until she began to feel the familiar, but still frightening, canting of her vision, as though her mind was starting to melt. He was working with such focused intensity but leaving her so bereft between, that she planted her feet on the bed and began to desperately thrust her hips, trying to relieve the agony. But he moved his hand down from her breasts to trap one thigh against the mattress, using his elbow to thwart the other, preventing her from creating any more sensation than was his intention.

“Oh, Gods,” she moaned, head rocking from side to side in lieu of what she wanted for her pelvis.

It was torture.

“Severus . . . I can’t—”

But then the pressure of his fingers on her inner thigh increased and she distractedly lifted her head to see. He was watching her as he continued his measured deconstruction, his profoundly dark eyes reassuring her that his desire was not to torture her but to bring her pleasure. But it was clear from his failure to let up that it was her responsibility to let it happen, to let the sensations gather without needing to force them, without succumbing to the desperation that was attempting to drive her.

As she continued to watch his reverential and humbling display, she allowed herself to be taken,
consumed by each sensation without wishing for it to be anything more or less than it was . . . acceptance . . . acceptance . . . and it began to feel glorious, transcendental, like every molecule of her body was being recruited, slowly brought into alignment with the centre of her being.

Her mouth fell open but she could no longer speak. A few shuddering breaths and jerky dips of her jaw were all she could manage . . . to convey his profound effect upon her. But then he pulled away, and she stopped breathing altogether. Her insides screamed, pleading with him to come back. But he had done what he had set out to do. She was already there.

She came. With nothing inside her . . . nothing even touching her but his eyes. It was a freefall of herself within herself—as though spontaneously erupting from nothing—and yet so extreme, she must have appeared possessed. Shaking, gasping, hyperextending, eyes rolling back and head arching into the bed as though in the throes of death. And yet it was the opposite. She was in the throes of life . . . living again . . . because of him.

And when she finally came down, blinking back to a hazy consciousness, she found that she could move, and did so blissfully, soaking up the profound relief from having experienced such a monumental release, in the knowledge that her acceptance had enabled it. And she was simultaneously swept up in a powerful tide of warmth from finally being allowed to just ‘be’ . . . and despite still being on her own, she was left feeling far from alone.

He was beside her now, stroking her hair, looking deeply into her eyes, his lips swollen from his incredible service to her.

She kissed him . . . gently, concerned that he might be tender.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He dipped his nose fractionally in acknowledgement.

She smiled, curling into him with a contented sigh before reaching down to trail a finger along his erection.

“Now will you please just tie me up and fuck me?”

He snorted then.

“Must I point out—?”

“No.”

She was a hypocrite. She knew it. She didn’t need to be told. But she was learning—slowly but surely she was beginning to understand. There were some things that one just needed . . . and it didn’t require analysis or explanation. She’d come to realise that about herself . . . and about him too. It was the main reason she would never deny him in that way again.

“Do you have a preference?” His deliciously dark voice was yet another treat—melting in her mouth—as though she deserved anything more.

“Yes.”

One of his expressive eyebrows arched upwards in inquiry.

“My preference is for you to show me what my preference is.” Her fingers stopped their teasing trail and wrapped around his girth—at least as far as she could reach.
That smile again. Just his eyes.

“If you are certain?”

By way of response, she leaned up to kiss him again, tasting herself and feeling inexplicably aroused by the prospect of having more of him.

Pushing himself to a sitting position, he reached out a hand.

“Accio.”

Suddenly a length of red cord snapped into his palm.

*Had he brought it with him?*

“On your knees. At the end of the bed.”

His commands sent a fresh shiver down her spine. She had definitely missed this man—this authoritative Snape.

Despite the residual heaviness in her limbs, she crawled as quickly as she could down to the foot of the bed before positioning herself on her knees, back to him.

He came up behind her, close, the warm, silken head of his cock brushing against her buttocks as he pulled her arms back and tied her wrists together.

Her heart was already thudding in anticipation.

“Now lean forward.”

*What?*

“Spread your knees wider.”

Hesitantly, she did as instructed, shuffling her knees outwards until she had opened herself up, broadening her base.

“Now lean forward,” he repeated.

*And break my face?*

She felt him tighten his grip on the rope, tugging a little on her shoulders.

Her breathing rate doubled in seconds. It wasn’t a long way to fall but she would certainly do some damage.

*Trust. This was about trust . . . giving over control. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. He had told her not to trust him in the past, but she had. And he hadn’t let her down . . . yet.*

Then she did it. She leaned out over the edge of the bed, face first, with nothing to stop her from falling, apart from the rope around her wrists, held within his firm grasp.

“Fear heightens the senses.” His baritone immediately slipped inside her, penetrating her as she hovered over the abyss.

“You gauge each sensation for risk . . . threat or safety . . . but you can never actually know.”
Then his cock returned, firm head pressing into the entrance to her engorged pussy. He was absolutely right about her heightened senses, his cock felt like a massive iron rod stretching its way inside her, pushing her even further toward the brink.

She whimpered, curling her chin into her chest as she took him deeper.

“And any difference is entirely your own.” The pitch of his voice had risen somewhat, as though his vocal cords were being constricted as much as his cock. “Your body is bearing down—trying to minimise the intrusion, and yet it makes any entry all the more . . . gratifying.”

His muted hiss told her he was trying to hold back . . . likely for the sake of instruction.

She had no such control, crying out as he thrust back into her, thumping into her cervix and forcing her further forward.

“It is only by giving your body over to another that you can combat the fear, and hope to discover true freedom—the freedom that comes from trusting yourself.”

Her eyes were barely open, the visual of the hard floor shuddering below her with each powerful thrust, too much for her to cope with.

But as he set up a steady rhythm, pulling back on her wrists as he slapped into her, riding her, she began to feel just that—at one with him—he controlling, her responding, her hips naturally moving to accommodate his.

Despite this, each thumping return of his cock continued to draw a guttural groan from her. He still felt enormous, stretching her in every dimension, making it difficult for her to relax, even slightly.

And then something else was added to the sensorial whirlpool—his finger, cool and slick with some sort of lubrication, now skirting around the tight perimeter of her sphincter.

In her mind, she was already close to capacity, particularly considering the swelling caused by her previous protracted orgasm, and the fact that she was employing all of her core muscles in an attempt to hold herself in position. Anything more may send her completely over the edge . . . and perhaps that was the intention. But she would never plead for anything less, she wanted as much of him inside her as possible and knew that the memory of this—his delicious cock riding her into oblivion—was going to be prime fodder of her masturbatory fantasies for years, if not decades, to come.

So even as the tip of his finger slipped past her constriction, instantly kindling a fire in her rectum, she found herself encouraging him, bending forward to present herself further. And he didn’t disappoint, continuing to ream the impossibly tight sheath of her pussy with his cock as he simultaneously massaged the front wall of her rectum.

“Unnnhhhh,” she moaned, her eyes screwing closed and her head pitching forward, making her instantly feel like she was falling.

He jerked the rope back, pulling her up until she had managed to steady herself, before pushing a second finger into her back passage. Her eyes flared open then, and so did her mouth. But the sensation was so incredible that she instantly attempted to thrust backwards into him, using her wrists and shoulders as leverage. The result was a series of deeply resonant growls and a tangible flexing of his cock inside her, indicating his obvious approval.

Gradually building in intensity, he rode her now as though coming to the frantic conclusion of a race, her shoulders almost popping under the strain of his jolting intrusions. And as his long fingers began to jiggle and curl deep inside her, simultaneous with the record depth he seemed to be achieving with
his cock, she began to howl like a wild animal. Her core was setting like concrete, the tension of her rock-hard muscles clamping him inside both passages until she could no longer hold on.

She screamed.

Muscles detonating in ways she’d never thought possible, she let go with an intensity that belied the fact that she’d already experienced an earth-shattering orgasm only a matter of fifteen minutes earlier. Convulsing, she felt her thighs and bedding growing damp with waves of release that could no longer be contained within the pressure cooker of her pelvis. And the sensations didn’t stop there. As she pushed forward, straining into the abyss—she felt the freedom that he’d spoken of—the floating sensation of being held up, of being lifted above it all, of relinquishing herself and trusting that she would be accepted and respected—and that she could, in turn, accept and respect herself.

It was a realisation that drained the last of her reserves. She collapsed, shattered.

But he didn’t allow her to melt away.

Instead, she felt him lift her limp body, cock still inside her, until her back was against his chest. One strong arm supported her under the ribs, taking the weight from her trembling knees, his other arm wrapped around her shoulders, fingers tipping her face around to him so that he could capture her lips as he continued pumping into her.

She responded as though in a trance, lips moving with a dream-like listlessness, eyes cracking open in an unsuccessful attempt to focus on him.

“Hermione, look at me.” His words were tight and laboured.

She tried again. His features gradually swimming into focus.

“You don’t need anything . . . or anyone. There is nothing that can be given to you that doesn’t already exist within yourself.”

Anyone? Anyone else? Was he talking about her friends? Ginny?

The problem was that she did need someone. She needed one person very much—the one inside her right now. She needed the person who wanted to do what he was doing to her. The person who cared to make her strong when everyone else seemed to want her to crumble away.

There was something about him . . . something about all of it that struck her then . . . a realisation that suddenly seemed so obvious but one that had somehow skirted the fringes of her consciousness . . . until now.

Snape was a well-known Legilimens, and an extremely powerful one at that. But she hadn’t sensed any obvious intrusions into her own mind—unless he’d kept it for moments when she was most distracted, which was entirely possible. But he still seemed to understand so much about her . . . and she had felt . . . other things.

“Severus?” she murmured. “Are you a Motulomens? Can you feel people’s sensations . . . their emotions?”

His eyes darkened. He looked troubled.

But instead of responding, he reached between her legs and touched her in a way that left her in no doubt as to the answer.
And as she felt herself careening toward her third orgasm, his frantic breaths turning into harrowing moans against her cheek, she had the terrible sense that his pain might not derive from what had been done to him . . . but what he had done to others.

Reaching blindly for his hands, she held them as tightly as she could while he came. Whatever he had done, she would forgive him. She was positive that she could forgive him . . . anything.
A/N: Lovely to hear from you. These chapters are tricky but I’m getting them up as quickly as I can. I hope you enjoy them. Xx

His side was empty. Her hand kept checking, crawling over the cold sheets to see if she’d somehow missed him. He’d only been there a short time . . . or perhaps longer—she couldn’t really say. All she knew was that he was now gone—and she felt the absence so keenly that she didn’t know where to touch herself for comfort . . . her snog-raw lips, her bereft breasts and the aching hollow beneath, or between her legs where she refused to Scourgify the glaze of their combined essences from her inner thighs.

They had fit together as though perfectly cast—as naturally in naked repose as they had in the deliciously hot throes of sex. Her mane had been a hairy nest under his arm, her face nestled into the soft skin there, breathing in his warmth. Cocooned in his embrace, one large hand grasping her hip firmly enough to make her safe, sleep had approached like a train barrelling into a tunnel. But before she’d succumbed, her own hand had slithered down in the darkness, resting upon the downy curve of his pelvis like a codpiece . . . protecting, claiming . . . and finally . . . sleeping.

But her sleep had been far less blissful, disturbed by vivid dreams—oddly contrived, like some sort of eerie stage show. Black and white. Light and shadow. She was herself, but also a character . . . a detective . . . or perhaps a spy . . . probing the dark in long, laboured sequences. Someone was hiding—close to her—but always beyond her reach. She pursued them along empty corridors, jaggling around blind corners, following echoing footsteps down stairwells and stepping through ominously dark holes, some turning into suffocating tunnels that she could barely fit through. Needless to say she never caught him . . . for she sensed that much. It had been futile . . . she’d known it all along and yet she’d been compelled to—

Her eyes flew open. The cover shone dully, muted in the grey dawn that peeped under her curtains. It was as it had always been—perfectly, patently unassuming. Groaning quietly with the effort, she rolled over onto ‘his side’ before reaching for the book, dragging it up beside her. Despite the early hour, she knew that it was time. She would read it—all the rest. Right. Now.

***

Her fingers trembled. They fluttered faintly against the closed cover as she stared at the image—the back of a head. Her head. Somebody. Nobody. A girl with a story—one she knew . . . not from reading it—but from living it. This was too close.

Slowly opening the cover again, she blinked, too numb to be surprised. No name. In the place that she’d carefully scribed her own, there was nothing. It had been removed . . . or had never been. She traced her thumb back and forth over the absence, wispy thoughts gradually coalescing into an image, shadowy and indistinct but one she had come to know very well.

Retrieving her wand from the bedside table, she summoned her jacket from where she had dumped it, still stiff, crusted with soup. Digging into the pocket, she pulled out the small felt bag and slipped the drawstring. The brass was cool to her fingertips, the snake head raised with an air of lethal
elegance, bringing a creeping sense of foreboding. Carefully, she placed it inside the book.

She would return it . . . both of them . . . to him.

***

_How did it feel?_

Hermione’s journey, echoing down empty corridors, fingers trickling along the cold banisters of staircase after staircase, bore enough resemblance to her dream that she found her bottom lip already mauled, self-inflicted, by the time she entered the familiar walkway to his office.

_Could he always tell the difference? Could he definitively separate his own feelings from those of others? How did he protect himself? Did he do it often? How often had he done it to her?

The discovery that he was a Motulomens wasn’t as surprising as it should have been. It fit too well. It explained too much. But as she’d lain thinking about him, the book laying heavily beside her, she’d come to the realisation that such a trait wasn’t as un-Slytherin as it might initially seem. After all, how better to manipulate than by gaining access to the most intimate recesses of someone’s inner world, with the capacity to circumvent their delusions, feel their bodily betrayals, interpret them, not necessarily with the compassion of an empath, but with the cold detachment of a master player . . . with the power to push and pull, whittle and wheedle, until he had them exactly where he wanted them.

No doubt it had saved him. He had likely survived because he knew more than anyone. Indeed, his skills probably ensured that he knew Voldemort’s cold, black heart better than the vile wizard himself.

It was, therefore, not only the ultimate defence . . . but the ultimate weapon.

And he had it.

That . . . and sex.

Fingers skimming down the front of her shirt, Hermione’s felt her breasts, clad in skimpy satin under her school shirt, surging with each fearful breath.

Sex.

She wasn’t beyond using it . . . as he had with her. But her intention—and perhaps even his if she could possibly hope for as much—went beyond manipulation. She wished to demonstrate a deeper purpose. And hopefully he would see it . . . or perhaps even feel it from her.

Still, the compulsion to run sent twitches popping through her muscles. She continued to stare at the door but there was no possibility of leaving. She absolutely had to know.

And the reason she had to know was both simple and complicated—she was in love with him. It was far from a comfortable admission, particularly considering recent revelations. But it was the truth.

She could no longer be completely certain of what or whom she loved. All she knew was that the fear pounding through her heart and mind was that of rejection . . . far more so than from what she might discover about his true nature.

And so she would give herself to him as she never had before. And hope that he understood why.
She knocked.

And entered.

The contrast was startling. Her presence in the austere surroundings of the Headmaster’s domain was no longer met with an equally grim scowl or sneer . . . or—as she had become even more accustomed to—nothing at all. Now there was warmth. The hint of a smile. He was clearly pleased to see her.

“Miss Granger.” He returned the quill to its holder, his fingers almost certainly deliberately stroking the ebony underside as he withdrew.

“Headmaster.”

Despite her trepidation, the relief of seeing him, and her instant desire that seemed to coat everything about him with a seductive lustre, brought a smile to her own lips as she clasped her hands behind her back, retracting her shoulders so that the shadowy outline of Slytherin green could be seen through her shirt.

Such a flagrant display, however, turned out to be unnecessary. The spark glinting in his onyx eyes told her that he had already seen everything—all of her, instantly.

“Tell me what you need.”

There it was again. She could so easily slip back into that warm, tranquil pool of sultry sibilance, allowing the smooth timbre of his voice to gather protectively around her. She could allow his confidence and power to melt her again, rendering her little more than putty, some blissfully pliant creature that his hands and mouth and cock could mould into something new, something more—smoothing over the cracks until she seemed . . . whole.

Despite the extreme temptation, she wouldn’t . . . this time it was she who had something for him. She lifted her chin slightly. “I do not wish to disturb you.”

He eased back in his chair. She wondered if he was already hard.

“Remove your Glamours,” he instructed.

Unclasping her hands, she slipped her fingers into her shirt sleeve and withdrew her wand. Sweeping the tip over her body, she nullified them all . . . and there were many . . . revealing the deep bruises from being slammed against the wall of the alcove, multiple scratches and abrasions from her time against the log, and now the rope burns—raw bracelets of crimson around her wrists.

“I can provide you with a quality healing salve.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she interjected quickly.

He gazed at her for a long moment, examining her various wounds with a practised eye, before inclining his head in acknowledgement.

“Was there anything else?”

“Yes . . . there is something that I wish to give you.” Her eyes flickered downwards, taking in the curve of her breasts and lump in her skirt pocket before returning to him. “May I approach?”

He inclined his head again, eyes never leaving hers.
Hermione’s hands went to her throat. Approaching slowly, her fingers twisted each of her shirt buttons in turn, allowing the fabric to fall open, revealing inch upon inch of satin and lace. His hands slid forward to grasp the arms of his chair and she felt a surge of something—power . . . he had been right, she did enjoy feeling powerful.

Then she undid her skirt buttons at the hip and allowed it to slither down to puddle at her feet before stepping out and continuing in her low-cut and extremely brief knickers. His eyebrow strained upward as a fierce heat flared in his eyes. Despite everything, such moments reminded her that he was still very much a man.

Moving up to settle beside his chair, she placed her hand on top of his. This was so important. And she was scared—perhaps he could feel it. Her scattered thoughts were pulling her in every direction, so she had no choice but to let her body take over. It was already tuned in to every part of him anyway, flushed and responding to little more than his presence.

Lifting a leg over his, she straddled his lap before sinking down to feel his erection well and truly established. She wondered, not for the first time, whether he had responded just as enthusiastically in the past but had taken precautions to hide it from her. Regardless, it was there now, pressing firmly against her scantily clad mons as she combed her hands into his hair, pulling him forward for an open-mouthed kiss.

It was effortless—the way they continued on seamlessly from where they had left off the previous evening . . . exploring, teasing, tasting and when his hands slid in opposite directions, simultaneously cupping her buttock and breast, long fingers slipping under the fabric to curl into her flesh, she moaned, feeling the need to grind herself into him, him into her.

She rubbed herself damp against the rigid contours of his cock until his laboured breathing, scorching nips down the already-tender flesh of her neck, and the desperation in his iron grip made it clear that he needed more.

But would he be ready for what she was about to give?

Unable to look at him, she rolled her cheek over his jaw until her lips hovered by his ear. They opened and closed a few times before she managed any sound. “I want you to fuck me . . . in my . . .” She took a deep breath. “In my back passage . . . my arse.”

He grabbed her by the upper arms and held her away from him, frowning as he searched her face. “You aren’t ready for that.”

Ignoring the self-conscious burn in her cheeks, she forged on. “I am ready. I . . . prepared. I want this.”

He drew his own deep breaths through barely parted lips, studying her closely. Despite the intensity, she didn’t turn away.

Was he inside her now? If so, he would only feel how much she wanted it.

Finally his grip relaxed. “I can use a spell to relax—”

“No,” she interrupted.
He sighed but she saw something in his expression—the subtle flexion of his brow, the dip of his nose—respect?

Whatever it was, he seemed to accept her position, and the simmering tension that permeated the rest of his body left her in little doubt—he wanted it too.

“You will be sure to inform me if it becomes too much?”

She nodded her assurance, reinforcing it with a final soft kiss to his lips, before lifting herself off his lap. Turning away to avoid the scrutiny of his dark, probing gaze, she busied herself with removing the rest of her clothing, before using her wand to clear his desk. It was only then that she realised she wasn’t entirely sure what she was doing. When she looked over, she saw that he had removed his coat and rolled up his shirtsleeves. A small jar glinted in one of his hands.

As he approached, she retreated a half-step, resting her bare buttocks against the edge of the desk, fingers curling around it, holding on with a blend of apprehension and anticipation. With an elegant wave of his hand, he cast what turned out to be a cushioning charm, causing the desk surface to sink beneath her. Clearly he was reluctant to add anything further to the diverse array of blemishes that currently marred her body.

Positioning himself directly in front of her, he placed his hands on her thighs, gently forcing them apart until he was able to insinuate himself between them. Then he grasped her shoulders, guiding her backwards, supporting her until she was lying on the desk, looking up at him with every ounce of trust that she could muster . . . after all, that’s what this was about. Balling her fists, she pressed them under the small of her back, hoping that it would provide some degree of support and relief.

The furrow troubling his brow deepened. Clearly, he was still unsure. But Hermione lifted her legs, walking her heels up his white shirt, from his abdomen to his chest, before wriggling herself closer until her buttocks were nestled against his groin and she could feel the bold heat of his cock pressing into her cleft. She hoped it was enough to demonstrate that she had no intention of backing out. This was too important.

Setting the small jar on the desk beside her hip, he leaned forward, placing one hand on the ankle near his shoulder and the other over one of her breasts. His eyes were filled with something indefinable. The cautious part of her was tempted to call it fondness . . . but it clearly went deeper than that—the events of the previous evening alone were enough for her to know that he had feelings for her. But the way that he caressed her now, using those devastatingly instinctual hands to both reassure her and turn her on in the most deliciously sensual way, was enough to have the layers of distrust and bitter resentment she’d packed around her heart unfurling, she felt herself shuddering from the vulnerability of it, as more and more of her was exposed to the wonder of the darkest and brightest eyes she’d ever encountered.

The book. That thought suddenly ripped through her reverie, jerking her back to a harsh reality. Grasping desperately at his perfect hands, she whimpered helplessly, “Please.”

He understood . . . or at least knew what it was that she needed.

Finally releasing her, he picked up the jar, unscrewing the lid before dipping his finger inside and removing a generous coating of clear gel.

“Hold yourself open,” he instructed.

Sliding her hands down the backs of her thighs, she cupped her buttocks with her fingers before pulling them apart, feeling her back passage instantly tighten with the exposure. However, the arrival
of his finger brought a surprising level of relief, not only because of the familiarity—he had been inside her numerous times before—but the gel had been warmed to reduce the shock as his finger was gradually introduced.

He worked one digit into her, twisting it a little as he progressed, priming her walls for what was to come. And when he introduced a second finger, she saw that he was watching her carefully, adjusting his position and angle based upon her response. The result was that her sphincter relaxed a little as he continued to stroke slowly into her, allowing his other hand to join in, slipping two fingers inside her pussy at the same time as driving a third into her anus. At that point the moan that had been threading around her throat since he first entered, tore free and she was in vocal free-fall.

Both sets of fingers stroked the thin wall between her passages and soon it began to feel like there was only one—as though he was tugging at a single outlet, ready to uncork her, allowing everything to spill free . . . all that she had been holding inside for so long. But she couldn’t. She didn’t even want to come . . . she wasn’t there for that. She was there for him to claim her . . . to make her his.

“Severus,” she gasped, her legs already beginning to quake.

He halted.

She shook her head faintly, her lips parting as she tried to explain, but nothing intelligible emerged.

Withdrawing both hands, he placed them on either side of her and leaned forward, bringing her legs with him as his lips touched hers, kissing away her hopelessness. Finally, he rose and, with a brief flick across his groin, released his long-suffering and impressively-patient cock, his trousers peeling away to reveal the solid column of flesh that she was somehow planning to accommodate.

Scooping up another two fingers of gel, he coated the sloping helmet of his glans as though polishing a door knob before dragging his fist down the shaft. Despite the inevitable discomfort, she found herself looking forward to having him inside her—partly for herself . . . but mostly for him. His scars stood out, sharp ridges of white against the remaining soft flush and she wanted to accept them into her—welcome what had been dishonoured and defiled into her most intimate recesses.

Her hands automatically returned to her buttocks, pulling them apart to assist his entry. But despite all of the preparation, the stretch that she felt when he pressed into her was enough to elicit a sound that she hadn’t imagined herself capable of. It was low and so deeply primal, she wondered if it might be the sort of wail she would expect to produce in childbirth. As it was, her otherworldly groans continued as she felt him paying out his length, millimetre by millimetre into the clamping tightness of her sphincter.

“Use your fingers to relieve the tension.” His voice cut through the haze of her thoughts and she pressed her fingers down harder, kneading her buttocks in an effort to quell the spasms.

Eyes falling closed, her face contorted as she felt each scarred ridge being forced inside her, causing her sphincter to trip and constrict over and over in response. She also became aware of his increasingly laboured breathing as he patiently manoeuvred, slipping inside her in tiny increments, his head edging aside the virginal limits of her tunnel.

Legs stiffening, her heels pushed against his shoulders as she cried out, arching back into the pliant surface of the desk as the flared base of his shaft made the last increments even more unbearably intense. Growling as her sudden movement drove him in to the hilt, she felt him stop still, cock completely motionless but throbbing inside her like a nuclear warhead. Then she felt his thumb slip down between her lips, and begin gently stroking her clitoris.
She had stopped breathing. But now she resumed... just... it was as though his cock was even taking up the space of her lungs. Her sphincter was straining wildly against him, working its best to expel the massive intrusion but simply managing to hold him as rigidly inside her as possible. She was a morsel on a skewer. An insect pinned.

But he continued to deftly oscillate her clitoris, gradually mixing pleasure into her pain until she felt herself wanting to rock, to have him moving inside her. And he seemed to instinctively take the cue, keeping his thrusts short and deep to sustain the fire simmering in her passage but never becoming acute enough for her to require him to stop.

As he sped up the rhythmic strokes on her clitoris, she responded by curling her hips, encouraging him deeper before sensing a shift in him, his vocalisations turning coarse and guttural. Finally, she took the opportunity to open her eyes and was enthralled by what she saw. His own eyes were closed and his head tilted back in the throes of ecstasy. A sheen of perspiration gilt his features making him even more striking as his flushed cock sank into her arse over and over again. They’d only been fucking for a few minutes but she could already feel that he was close to coming. And so was she.

“Severus,” she gasped. “I want you to come on me... on my stomach.”

He nodded faintly, his face contorting with the effort of pumping into her.

And then the thrumming on her clitoris, the burning heat of her sphincter and the impossible shifting fullness inside her rectum exploded into a cascading storm of sensations that sent her pelvis into meltdown. Her shrieks might have sounded like pain, but they were cries of shock, torn free as her orgasm surged powerfully around his deeply embedded cock, rippling through parts of her body that had never before experienced such a release.

She was still shuddering around him when he suddenly pulled out and began furiously pumping his cock with his fist. A stroke or two later, his substantial balls clenched and his shaft reared in his grip, driving a powerful stream of ejaculate in a long, glistening trail across her abdomen. He groaned as he continued to jerk, further lashings of warm seed painting her breasts, trickling down her ribs and drizzling into her navel.

By the time his cock was fully drained, the last drips trailing down his knuckles, she was coated in enough of his creamy lust to make his claim to her clear. But to drive home her point, she took his hand and placed it against her skin, locking her fingers into his before slowly rubbing his essence into her, smearing it over her entire torso until she finished with his palm between her breasts, resting against her galloping heart.

Only then, after she’d given him her trust, her body... and her heart... could she ask.

“Severus...?”

His contented gaze shifted to her face, one cheek lifting into that almost-shy smile and she nearly lost her nerve. But she couldn’t.

“Severus... were you at the book group?”

His smile dropped away.

“Please tell me,” she persisted. “Were you there?”

He stared at her before his eyes slipped away from hers.
“Yes.”

She tightened her grip on him.

“Who are they, Severus? Who are you spying for?”

The hand on her chest curled into a fist but she didn’t let go.

“Tell me. I deserve to know.” Her voice rose.

And then she saw it. As plainly as two security shutters slamming closed, the shine in his beautiful eyes died. He had locked himself away.

“Is this how you intended to buy my compliance?” he snarled bitterly. “Was this supposed to open me up? By allowing me to open you?”

She shook her head sadly.

“Who are you spying for now, Severus?” she whispered.

He jerked his hand out of hers before stepping back.

“If you’re asking,” he said coldly, “. . . then you must already know.”
Discovering the truth turned out to be less surprising, and considerably less satisfying, than Hermione might have expected. After all, his back was now to her, his broad shoulders moving in swift jerks, as he attempted to tidy himself in the wake of what had turned out to be an intense confrontation in every sense.

Sitting up, Hermione winced as the tenderness of her backside made itself fully apparent. Skin still tacky from being smeared in his essence, she looked around despondently, wondering if she should, like him, be removing all evidence of the encounter or settling in to demand more answers.

He moved away, thrusting himself back into his coat like an accoutrement that he should never have cast aside before setting about securing the buttons, head bowed, hands moving with speed and determination. She didn’t move. All she could do was watch the rhythmic roll of his fingers until he finally reached the bottom and slipped them away, out of sight, into his pockets. Pausing for a brief moment, he lifted his head without looking at her. Hermione wondered if he was going to speak but instead he turned toward the pale light of the window, covering the distance with long strides before halting too close to the panes, his face rendered little more than a ghostly reflection.

At least he hadn’t left.

“How did the Ministry ask you to spy on your students?” Hermione spoke to his rigid back as she gradually worked her buttocks to the edge of the desk, using her hands to reduce the pressure on her sphincter.

“They didn’t,” he replied.

She frowned in confusion. Then who was he working for?

“They asked me to spy on you.” He suddenly turned to face her. His demeanour seemed to instantly change—he was her Headmaster again—formidable, unperturbable.

Her eyes widened in surpise. “Why?”

His own face remained emotionless. “You can’t . . . posit a reason?”

Hermione was taken aback. She had assumed that he had been appointed by the Ministry to watch everybody, staff and students alike, and that Professor McGonagall had found out and wanted him removed because of it.

“I don’t understand,” she responded, pushing herself off the desk to stand on the cold floor. “Does the Ministry consider me to be some sort of threat?”
“Yes.”

She almost laughed.

“For what reason? Skipping classes? Over-consumption of books?”

He clearly didn’t share her amusement, his deep frown remaining steadfastly in place as she bent down to retrieve her shirt and underwear.

“So, after Voldemort, the biggest threat to the Wizarding world is Hermione Granger, is it?” she continued sarcastically as she dragged her knickers up and slung her bra over one shoulder and then the next. “You’re telling me that a school girl who can’t even manage to tame her own hair in the mornings is deemed a threat worthy of perhaps the greatest spy to ever live?”

He lifted his nose to peer at her. “Why did you insist upon attending the book group?”

Hermione stared at him before flicking her shirt to straighten it. “Because I enjoy reading books . . . as do you.” She swept her gaze pointedly around the packed shelves. “And I wished to share the experience with others.”

“With Muggles.”

She shrugged. “What does that matter?”

“What did you talk about?”

As his careful tone and insinuating frown seeped into her, a sense of unease began to worm its way into her stomach.

“Maybe you should tell me? You were there, weren’t you?” she responded tersely. Then a bolt of realisation struck her. “You . . . You were Samuel, weren’t you? In the book group?”

He arched an eyebrow.

It was quite obvious now that she thought about it. His hair had been quite a bit shorter and his eyes a disconcertingly vivid green but he was the same height, same surly countenance, in fact she couldn’t ever remember hearing him speak, rather spending the evening in a dark corner watching everything very closely . . . including her.

Buttoning up her shirt she continued. “As you know, we talked about books—plots . . . characters . . . how we felt about them . . . the author’s intention.” She gave a dismissive shake of her head. “The usual things a book group would talk about.”

“And yet some found your comments most intriguing . . . your various insights . . . inferences . . . suggestions of something . . . more.”

She stopped buttoning and looked at him. “I didn’t . . .” His intense gaze made her falter. “They didn’t understand it all . . . I made sure.”

“But . . .” he drawled disbelievingly. “You spoke of losing people . . . friends, many at once, you referred to fighting—battles, you even mentioned magic, if only obliquely, diminishing its potential usefulness to ‘chores and killing’.”

“It was . . .” Hermione was having trouble recalling her exact words. *Had she said those things?* “It was only in the spirit of sharing our thoughts . . . our . . . imaginings . . . I didn’t ever suggest that
they were facts.”

“You became very emotional. You were comforted by one in particular. You shared more with him than with the rest.”

Hermione stared. So he knew. He knew she had developed feelings for someone and yet he had done what he had done to her—he had forced her to engage with him sexually despite knowing that there was someone else. Crossing the room, she snatched up the clothes she had discarded on her earlier quest to seduce him.

“Is that when you became jealous?” she snarled.

“No, that’s when I sought to intervene.”

She dragged up her skirt and buttoned it, her movements fuelled by hot surges of anger, before shoving her feet into her shoes.

“Why? Because I’m not allowed to have a life? I’m not allowed to interact with anyone who isn’t already fucked up?”

He remained impassive.

“Who do I have? Who does any of us have?” Her voice came out in a strangled cry as the emotion welled up, stoppering her throat. “Who wants to talk about what happened? No one! Everyone is trying to move on—as though the others would have wanted it. But they wouldn’t—they would have wanted to be alive, or at least fiercely remembered—felt with some intensity. Not this . . . nothingness . . . this pathetic attempt to make meaning out of their blood, their . . . ashes,” she choked. The tears were flowing freely now. “Why wouldn’t I seek understanding? Why wouldn’t I look for someone open enough, far enough away from this stifling mess, to listen?”

His brow creased momentarily. She saw something of her Severus before he quickly disappeared.

“A Muggle?” he muttered accusingly.

“Why does that matter?” she cried in exasperation.

“Because . . . the book group wasn’t the only place that you frequented.”

She wiped a hand across her damp face, looking warily at him.

“Voldemort was never the greatest threat to the Wizarding world.” Snape regarded her with a crushing intensity. “It was always the others—the non-magics, the Muggles. They might have been recruited to assist us against him but the preference was always to conceal, to attempt to hide even his destruction from them. Didn’t you ever wonder why?”

Hermione didn’t respond.

“Because it is the nature of humankind to destroy what they do not understand. Non-magics would tear us apart in an effort to learn our secrets, to harness our powers. One need only look to how witches were fated in the past to understand what would happen if our world were fully revealed. And whilst we possess a number of defences, by far the most important is Obliviation. It is really the last frontier between our two streams of existence.”

Hermione reached over and picked up her wand from the desk, gripping it tightly in her fist.
Snape noticed. But he continued.

“Which is why the Obliviation Reversal spell or, more precisely, the Muggle Obliviation Reversal spell has been outlawed since the earliest days. It does not exist and has never been allowed to exist. In fact, anyone known to be seeking to develop it has been delivered the harshest of sanctions . . . Azkaban . . . or worse.”

Hermione’s heart lurched as Snape took a step towards her.

“And yet, until very recently, a bright, young witch was looking to do just that. She had been scouring the Muggle libraries, the Muggle book shops, the Hogwarts restricted section, using her status and privileges as Head Girl, in an attempt to discover the elements required to construct the Muggle Obliviation Reversal spell.”

Hermione’s lips began to quiver. “You know why,” she responded hoarsely. “You know why I’m doing it . . . I want them back. I . . . need them.”

“You do not . . . need . . . anyone.”

His words from the previous evening shook her to the core. All of it. All of it had been for this.

Raking a trembling hand into her hair, she grasped the roots painfully, trying to process his words.

“I wouldn’t have taken it any further,” she pleaded. “I would have stopped at them. I just want them to see me again . . . to recognise me—their daughter. There would be no one else.”

“No other Muggles that you would want to reveal to?” He took another step. “No one else that you would want to ‘understand you’, that you would seek to show the ‘truth’?”

She shook her head despairingly.

“And what if they wanted it of you? What if they had a taste of what existed and knew that you could reveal every encounter they’d ever witnessed, restore all of the memories of our world that had been covered over?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Could you have resisted? A naïve girl claiming to be an adult? Traumatised, guilt-ridden and acutely unaware of herself?”

Her shaking grew more pronounced.

“Imagine a sexually-experienced Muggle male showing you what I have. With your propensity to project, to fixate, to attach. Imagine his power over you.” His voice was tight. “You have become disillusioned with this world. And you are seeking to relinquish its hold on you. You are a threat . . . you are, in fact, one of the greatest threats there has ever been. Once an Obliviation has been removed, it can never be reinstated, or another one cast. You can render Muggles immune to us . . . and I believe that eventually you would have, either deliberately or by inducement.”

“Would have?” She attempted a sneer but it turned into a grimace of pain. “Before you rendered me safe? Before you acted with impunity to fuck me into submission.”

“Submission?” His frown deepened. “You suppose that that was my purpose?”

Her jaw muscles clenched fitfully. “Your purpose was the same as mine . . . you wanted what I
wanted . . . to soothe the hurt. But I sought it honestly. I didn’t attempt to steal it under the guise of ‘therapy’ . . . or ‘neutralisation’ . . . or ‘doing the fucking Ministry’s dirty work’.

His face hardened.

“Didn’t they know how fucked up you really were?” she pressed on, lifting her chin with increasing conviction. “Didn’t they realise that you were too damaged to do the job properly? That you would fall for me just as I have fallen for you?”

His breathing suddenly faltered.

“You tried to keep your distance, didn’t you?” Hermione’s voice was steeped in bitterness. “You played the cold, callous bastard so well—you made me feel like the worst kind of person so I would come to you, desperate for redemption, to relieve the guilt.” The last word caught in her throat and she practically had to swallow it down before continuing. “But there were cracks. You were too easily hurt . . . by just a few words—the suggestion that no one would want you.” Something flickered across his features, the shadow of old pain. “You obviously crave acceptance and I wanted to give it to you.” She gestured helplessly with her wand. “I had. I had forgiven you everything. But now this—now I discover that all of it has been one continuous manipulation, orchestrated by a man whose ‘purpose’ is riddled with ulterior motives that even he cannot admit to.”

The rigid rods of his arms thrust deeper into his pockets, but still he didn’t speak.

Digging into her skirt pocket, Hermione pulled out the book and placed it on his desk. Touching her wand to the surface, she restored it to its original size before fingering the bronze snake head.

“This book was your choice, wasn’t it? A test . . . a story close enough to me, to my trauma, to draw me out—to share . . . And it worked . . . I failed.”

She could feel his dark eyes boring into her as she smoothed her palm over the cover, the truth manifesting in his silence.

“So what now?” She turned to him, feeling the pain of rejection welling within her.

“The Ministry will be informed.”

Her face contorted, straining with the flood of words that wanted to pour out. But there ended up being only four, “And what about us?”

She tried to be strong but her lips trembled as though she were, once again, in the grips of her worst fear . . . that of being alone.

His nostrils flared as his chest filled over and over. It was clear that he wanted to say something, or do something . . . to her . . . with her, but he did neither . . . turning away, returning to the window, back firming into a protective wall.

Numb with shock and fighting back tears, she stumbled toward the door. As she grasped the handle, she glanced back once last time, seeing his cold, bleak reflection and knowing that it was he whom she had pursued in her dream—the one always just out of reach, the one she had been compelled to follow despite her fear, the one she had desperately wanted . . . but never found.

The blur of stairs and passages barely registered as, head down, Hermione rushed back to her room. She was almost there when she heard the voice.

“Hermione!”
Turning, she saw a young girl running towards her.

“Hey, congratulations! I just saw it!” The girl beamed. “It was like a waterfall of rubies!”

Hermione shook her head in confusion. “Sorry . . . I don’t—”

“The house points. They’re all back!” the girl crowed. “No more detention!”

Hermione’s hand went to her mouth. Turning, she ran blindly through her bedroom door.

“I thought you’d be pleased!” the girl called after her.

Hermione threw herself onto the bed, burying her face in her pillow.

And screamed.
A/N: So the reason for this latest delay is that my 25 year relationship came to an end. I don’t wish to dwell up on it as I prefer to focus on what I can continue to enjoy. One thing is (hopefully) writing. If you are still enjoying this story, let me know and I’ll ensure that I do my best to create a worthwhile ending. RL isn’t always easy but I have had some wonderful support from friends in RL and fanficland and I love you all for it. DSxx

She was so fucking stupid. So naïve. The question all along should have been ‘Why?’ Why was he doing it?

Hermione thumped her face into her pillow, muted shrieks of agony and frustration bursting through the injured seam of her lips.

How could she be so dense? From her earliest understandings of Snape, she’d never known him to be prone to arbitrary behaviours—everything was measured, purposeful. And yet she’d stupidly assumed that his current actions were due to some sort of spontaneous benevolence. She’d been deluded enough to imagine that he was investing so much time and effort in her because she was eminently worthy . . . because he cared that much for her. It was utterly ridiculous now that she contemplated it, face grinding with resentment and mortification into the soggy depths of her pillow.

At the same time she could forgive herself just a little. After all, he was absolutely not the man she thought he was . . . not the man he’d presented himself to be—particularly last night in her bedroom, when he’d provided what could only be described as an ‘explosive’ level of comfort and reassurance. The lessons had been there of course—they had continued, the subtle and not-so-subtle reconfiguring of her, but she had seen more . . . she had felt him, his seething intensity, his vulnerable depths . . . and yet it had all been a deception.

How could a man invest so much in deceit? Why would he go to such extremes?

On the surface, he seemed to care very little for his own existence. And yet spying for the Ministry—compromising himself all over again—would suggest that he did have something important to gain. There was little doubt that his appointment to the Headmaster position had been part of the arrangement so it was no wonder, then, that Professor McGonagall and the other staff were untrusting of him. But for a man who so desperately craved acceptance, he had managed to successfully establish the conditions under which he was assured of never getting it. And perhaps that was the ultimate intention—self-flagellation, self-loathing, deprivation as a form of punishment.

But why subject himself in this way? Why hadn’t he just crawled under a rock after the war to suffer in private?

Or had he, like her, perpetrated actions that he found so unforgiveable that the contempt of others was the bitter validation that he now required? As a Slytherin, a Death Eater, debilitating morality wasn’t something she would expect him to struggle with. But as a Motulomens . . . as a man who had loved . . . and lost . . . maybe he could never be free of it.
But still he was prepared to betray her. She loved him. He would have felt it... with both his body and mind insinuated deeply inside her, her feelings for him would have been more than evident. And yet he was now ready to inform on her—to report on behaviours that amounted to little more than a desperate attempt to undo her past wrongs.

_How much did the Ministry already know of her actions? How often did he report back?_

She wondered then if she had only come under their scrutiny because of Snape. _Was he the reason she had been targeted in the first place?_

Her groan was deep, fuelled by pain. The fact that her suffering and resultant behaviours had attracted cold suspicion and condemnation rather than empathy, made her feel excruciatingly hollow. It was the way of the Ministry... but perhaps it was also the way of Severus Snape.

His treatment of her since the moment he’d caught her attempting to sneak back to her room had been extremely harsh. And yet it was hardly unexpected. His bitter accusations had been hurtful but they were in keeping with the brittle, cantankerous man she knew him to be. In fact, if he had behaved any differently towards her she would have been immediately suspicious.

As it was, he had played her perfectly. He’d known exactly how she would respond. And she had hardly disappointed.

The only problem was it seemed he hadn’t been ready for how he would respond.

And so she was left with this... this desperate dichotomy... this infuriating illogicality... this walking contradiction in black and white who had managed to mind-fuck and body-fuck her to what felt like new heights and depths—confusion and despair.

He’d returned the points. He’d set her free just when she’d come to crave the opposite. She had given herself willingly in the end, allowing herself to tangle up in his enigmatic threads, welcoming what had felt like an irretrievable incarceration within him, and him within her. But no more.

And thus each Gryffindor ruby, each sparkling symbol of rejection, now mocked her, a glittering river of reality winding through her frivolous depths, blood red where he’d cut her loose and tossed her away.

But worse was the fact that it was ultimately a fabrication, a false liberation. She wasn’t free. She would never be free to pursue that which had sustained her since the end of the war; the one source of hope that had made it worthwhile clinging on to her pathetic life—the possibility of one day restoring her parents’ memories.

He had taken that from her.

Face and body crumpling as the last dregs of hope drained from her, she drew a shuddering breath.

Of course she had known the risks. They had studied the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy for months in Muggle Studies. The dangers of Obliviation reversal had been drummed into them. However, she was also very much aware that there were plenty of Muggles who knew about the wizarding world and posed no threat at all—her parents for instance... even Harry’s awful relatives who had presented no serious risk beyond despising everything about the world of magic.

But the truth was that they were monitored. Every Muggle was carefully assessed for signs that their interest went beyond, for example, parental pride, or mindless fear and resentment. The Ministry’s Obliviators worked round the clock to ensure that the knowledge and understanding of even the most highly initiated remained relatively superficial. And this was the primary issue with Obliviation...
reversal. As Snape had pointed out, the spell would render Muggle targets immune, preventing any further manipulation.

It was dangerous. But Hermione had been genuine when she’d stated her purpose for it. She had always intended for the application to go no further than her parents. And whilst she had let slip more to the book group than she should have, she still considered herself safe.

At least she had been.

Maybe not anymore.

*Would she ever be safe again?*

Crushing loneliness suddenly overwhelmed her, swamping her so completely that she felt herself sinking, as though she were no longer solid but some sort of ethereal being, soaking like water through her bed into the cold stone floor beneath. She felt herself withdrawing from her body, shutting down until she was entirely numb, barely present.

He had snuffed out the last of her light, the last of her warmth, just like that. To save his own hide; to retain his position on the take of the Ministry. Right then she couldn’t imagine any worse betrayal.

All the time she had thought he was building her up, he was plotting her downfall.

And he’d succeeded.

She’d fallen.

Insubstantial . . . little more than dust . . . Hermione drifted away.

***

The day disappeared in blurry chunks. She smelled food. Heard footsteps. A hand on her shoulder. Then nothing.

Just dreams. Vivid . . . as though they had been planted. Sinister seeds scattered and now germinating in her mind. *Were these bleak, shadowy scenes just that—further manipulations? More machiavellian taints set to exploit her sleep state as well?*

It was whilst being mercilessly manhandled, unseen forces tearing at her clothes, clawing at her body, that she suddenly decided that they had taken enough from her. She had given enough. Too much as it turned out. And so she left.

But it wasn’t until the crisp night air cut through the flimsy weft of her consciousness that she realised she was no longer dreaming. In the complete absence of a light source, unlit wand gripped tightly in her fist, she had somehow ascended a multitude of staircases and arrived at her destination unharmed. A swathe of starry pinpricks in the fabric of an otherwise complete night sky drew her forward until her fingers curled around the frigid railing. The bite was not unwelcome. Looking down, she discovered that the plunging view, which had turned her stomach since Dumbledore’s demise, no longer stirred the same feelings. In fact, the deadly drop in that moment seemed comfortably final.

*Had the great wizard felt the same? Had he reached a similar point of acceptance before Snape had killed him?*

This wasn’t the first time Hermione had ventured to the top of the Astronomy Tower with this intent.
However, it was the first time without an anchor back to something that mattered. And so it was quite straightforward. The end was clear. The railing would be her last hurdle, her last obstacle in this unforgiving life.

Flexing her fingers around the metal, she tested it for strength. Its rigidity was reassuring. It would hold. It would take her weight as she took her final—

“Hermione.”

His voice wasn’t loud but it shook her deeply, like a clapper resonating within a bell.

Releasing her painfully tight grip, she slowly turned. He was standing on the opposite side of the room, arms by his sides, lips parted as he dragged in deep breaths. He’d clearly exerted himself to get there.

“Leave.” Her command might have been little more than a croak, but her meaning was more than clear.

He took a step towards her.

She raised her wand. The tip trembled before her eyes.

“Leave . . . now.”

He took another step.

The first bolt flew before she’d even realised she’d released it. His reflexes were like lightning, deflecting the electric blue dart with his own wand before it could pierce his chest. He took another step closer.

She cried out as she threw the next. Purposeful. Fast. But he met it again, allowing it to ricochet harmlessly away. And still he kept coming.

By then she’d stopped thinking. She simply wanted him gone. And she was happy to hurt him in the process. Each bolt required quicker actions as he approached, his wand playing them away with deft ease. Her cries had become howls of rage. It wasn’t fucking fair that she couldn’t even be allowed to do this for herself. That she didn’t even own her own existence sufficiently to end it.

*What the fuck did he want anyway?*

She hurled bolt after bolt, aiming directly for his chest, shooting for what would be his heart if he had one.

He was so close now. Surely one would make it through. Surely she could strike him where it hurt her most. She loved him. Even as she released time and again, she felt each bolt as a deep pain stabbing into her own breast. She was sobbing now. Wanting him and hurting him were one and the same. As was hurting herself.

And then a thought suddenly struck her—she knew exactly what she must do. Turning her wand back on herself, she pushed the tip into her chest as she retreated, the railing pressing into the small of her back.

Only then did he stop.

She glared defiantly at him, but his appearance was not that of a man who had been outmanoeuvred.
He simply looked bereft. She realised then that he wasn’t there to win.

“What do you want?” she whimpered, grasping the railing with her free hand to stop herself from collapsing under the strain.

“You don’t need to do this.” His pale hand extended towards her but she shook her head vigorously against it.

“Never assume to tell me what I do and don’t need anymore,” she spat. “Not when you are little more than a fucking mouthpiece for the Ministry.”

His lips drew back with the stinging accusation before he slowly withdrew.

“I’m sorry, Hermione.”

She continued to shake her head but felt it faltering as she took in the glisten of his dark eyes, the faint tremble of his lips.

“You don’t need to do this.”

“Why?” she suddenly screamed at him. “Why did you do it? Why did you do so much... to me?” The last words crumbled away into sobs.

He didn’t respond for a long time—no doubt poring through a selection of damning explanations. Finally he chose one. “Because it was preferable.”

_Preferable? What the fuck was that supposed to mean?

“To the alternative,” he continued, his hands curling into restless fists.

“Alternative?” Hermione’s face contorted. She didn’t need any more cryptic bullshit from him. And yet she had the sense that she actually understood his meaning this time. “What alternative? What were they going to do to me?”

He was still breathing heavily. She listened to each weary exhalation wondering which would hold the answer.

“Full Obliviation,” he muttered quietly. “Removal of your wand. You would never again know magic. Nor anyone within this world.”

Her entire body crumpled. Wand dropping from her hand, she clutched her chest as though his words had caused her to spontaneously rupture.

_He had saved her... from that._

His arms were suddenly around her, squeezing her so tightly that she could hardly breathe. But it was what she needed. It was always what she needed. The pain had to be crushed from her, forced from her like an infection from a festering wound. And that’s what he did.

But all of it just made her life seem more unbearable, more unliveable. After all, nothing had changed. She couldn’t have him. And she couldn’t have her parents.

_What else was there?

Nothing.

Except... perhaps... the book group._
A/N: I have been completely overwhelmed and humbled by your messages of love and support. They made me cry. I feel for those of you who have been kind enough to share similar stories with me. What an amazing bunch of people you are. It has really helped me this week and I’ve been writing as a result. I’m not particularly good at expressing how I feel so I will leave it to these two to speak for me. DSxx

Hermione ran. Ferns reared up, whipping her bare legs as she plunged off the path. She needed the forest—both the intimidating grandeur of its towering trees, as well as the oppressive tranquillity that they invoked. And then there was the dark unknown. Death dwelled here in many forms after all, and yet all of it would force calmness upon her, as it could hardly compete with the destructive chaos inside her—her mind—a wild dragon, thrashing about, refusing to be tamed.

She’d woken not long before, still dressed in her school uniform, with no sense of how she had come to be in her bedroom since collapsing in the tower. Magic was the most likely explanation, a sleeping spell or similar from Severus’ wand but of course she had no evidence for it. The alternative was that she had blacked out. It was possible. Anything was possible. At least anything bad was possible.

Nevertheless she’d woken with the need to run. And she considered that a significant improvement from the previous compulsion that had captured her only hours before . . . the all-encompassing need to no longer be. So despite the sharp prompts for food that twisted her stomach, she had quickly changed . . . and escaped.

Thick matting, needles and moss, cushioned her footfalls, so the see-sawing of air through parchment-dry lips was the soundtrack that she focused on, beginning the process of self-soothing, of hypnosis, as trees blurred past, but still stretched as an endless tunnel ahead.

She was a train. Chuffing along. No passengers, no destination. Just moving relentlessly forward. Because that’s what trains do. That’s what people do. Even the people who want to go back because everything good is behind them . . . even they keep moving forward . . . perhaps hoping to arrive back at the start.

Its futility is lost (if one doesn’t look too closely) in the rhythm of movement, of life. But that’s what self-preservation is all about. Sometimes it’s about buying the delusion long enough for something . . . or someone . . . to finally dismantle it—safely. To open your eyes to the existence of both real and good, even in the places you’d searched before . . . but weren’t ready to find it.

Hermione wondered if that possibility still existed for her. Whether, if she looked for it, or even if she didn’t, it might be waiting there, somewhere . . . even right around the—

Crash!

Hermione fell heavily, her entire body slamming into the ground as a spear of pain rammed through her skull. It felt like her head had split open. Reaching up, she expected to feel the slop of brains but was surprised to discover that everything was relatively intact.
The same couldn’t be said for the body beside her. Blood. Lots of it. Oozing down a face that she barely recognised.

Neither of them had made a sound. Perhaps it was the shock. But now they did.

“Fuck . . . uhhh . . . fuck.” Ginny stared at her hands, soaked in blood from her gushing nose.

Hermione simply groaned, cradling her head.

They lay there together, dazed, confused, hurting, until Hermione managed to push herself onto her knees and crawl the short distance to the base of a tree, leaning gingerly back so her head didn’t touch it. She didn’t need her head to touch anything . . . not when it was only just holding together.

One of Ginny’s congealed hands clamped around the messy lump of her nose, snuffling sobs escaping her as further spots of blood spattered her previously-white T-shirt.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Ginny?” Hermione finally rasped, holding her forehead carefully with both hands like an unexploded bomb.

“What does it look like? I’m running . . . like you,” came the muffled reply.

Hermione leaned forward as the pain crested, speaking to the gap between her bent knees. “You don’t run, Gin.”

“And now I know why,” Ginny groaned, crawling closer.

Laughter surged up but came out as a sob as Hermione’s head began pounding even more viciously.

With a lot of snuffling and grunting, Ginny managed to slowly turn, then gingerly lean back against the tree beside her. Hermione winced as she glanced sideways. The redhead was an absolute mess, and not particularly red—much of her hair was now dark with congealed blood.

“What’s your wandless magic like?” Hermione asked.

Ginny shook her head a tiny bit. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Your nose is broken.”

“I’ll see Poppy later. You probably should too.”

Hermione fell silent. There were many reasons why she wouldn’t be seeing Madam Pomfrey. She preferred to keep those secrets to herself.

“I probably . . . I think I probably deserved it anyway,” Ginny muttered.

Hermione tilted her head, attempting to read the younger girl’s expression.

“You know.” Ginny gestured lamely with her other blood-encrusted hand. “For being a bitch.”

Hermione paused, trying to work out what she was referring to. It was strange how something that had seemed so significant only days before had managed to be almost completely obliterated by another truckload of shit.

“Yeah . . . well.” Hermione finally agreed but couldn’t really say much when she’d been responsible for breaking someone’s nose—even if it had been accidental.
“I came to see you yesterday. I brought you something to eat but I couldn’t wake you. You were completely out of it.”

Hermione nodded a little. At least that explained her few of her vague memories from the day before.

“I came to apologise, ‘Mione. I felt really bad about what I did. I couldn’t sleep.”

Hermione sighed. She knew that too well . . . guilt-ridden ruminations . . . insomnia . . . the worst. Releasing her throbbing head, she reached across and grabbed Ginny’s hand, their locked fists dropping down to rest on the cushion of moss between them.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. She could manage no more.

“It’s not though,” Ginny croaked desperately. “It’s not okay. We’re not okay. None of us.”

Hermione’s eyes prickled as she stared at the ground. She tightened her grip on Ginny’s hand.

“This all feels wrong, don’t you think?” Ginny continued, her voice tight and not just from the clamp on her ruined nose. “Like we’re all pretending . . . like we’re expected to act as though we’re fine because we won. But not everyone won, ‘Mione . . . Fred didn’t, did he?”

Hermione shook her head, a swollen tear tumbling over her eyelashes and sliding down the side of her nose.

“I sometimes wonder if it’s only me—because I was spoiled. You know, the baby of the family, the only girl.” Ginny’s snuffling grew louder as she succumbed to her own tears. “But I just can’t seem to cope with having none of them here. I just keep expecting to see Ron or hear one of the twins. It’s not like we don’t stand out—we’re Weasleys! We have red hair! We’re noisy!” Quaking laughter bubbled up before giving way to further sobs.

“It’s not just you.” Hermione’s gaze turned inward, seeing the same as Ginny—the faces gone, not all dead but nonetheless, not there as they desperately needed them to be.

Ginny coughed then, the wet sound of blood in her throat. Hermione rubbed her thumb over Ginny’s knuckles, letting her know she was all right.

“And Harry . . .” Ginny’s face suddenly contorted in pain. “He’s just so . . . normal. He cares but . . . he’s had to cope with so much . . . he’s more used to dealing with it than I am. And I just . . .” She shook her head, clearly struggling to find the words. “I just think we got together when things were so strange. So . . . abnormal. The feelings we had for each other were wrapped up with everything else. And when it all changed after the war ended . . . I think we might have too. I really look forward to his visits but as soon as he gets here I remember that things aren’t the same. I think he finds me boring . . . and insecure. I don’t know how to get it back . . . how to go back to the way we were.”

“You can’t.”

Ginny peered at her through bloodshot eyes.

“You can only go forward. And hope that he comes with you.” Hermione looked at her intently.

“But if he doesn’t . . .”

Ginny’s eyes closed then as if she couldn’t bear to hear the words.

“Gin, you’ll be okay. No one can give you anything that isn’t already inside you.” They were
Severus’ words . . . maybe she did believe them after all. “And you’ll never be alone . . . because you’re surrounded by people who understand what it’s like to have lost friends, family—people they love. Give yourself permission to grieve—and to ask for help. Don’t rely upon magic. Magic doesn’t fix everything. In fact, it can often make things worse.”

Ginny nodded, apprehensive eyes probing Hermione’s, before lunging forward to embrace her.

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured in her ear. “I know you’ve been unhappy too. I could sense it. But you always seemed so distant. I didn’t feel I could talk to you, but I should have. I should have asked and listened, like you have . . . here.” She squeezed her tighter. “And I was jealous . . . I couldn’t help it. All I see in you is everything I want to be. I can’t even go for a run without breaking my nose.”

Hermione laughed then. And so did Ginny. It was raw, broken laughter. But it felt warm and good—exactly what they both needed.

Finally she sat back.

“Are you all right, ‘Mione?”

Hermione gazed at her, taking in the genuine concern in her friend’s brown eyes. Then she nodded, managing a small smile. “I think I will be.”

***

The steps to the basement were dimly lit but someone was definitely there—she could hear the voices—earnest discussion drifting up from behind the closed door. Would they be surprised to see her? She’d missed two sessions in a row. Would they have noticed? Or cared? Possibly not. It was only a book group after all.

As she slowly descended, her heart seemed to simultaneously ascend until it was thrashing about like a Boggart inside her throat. Who would she encounter on the other side?

Professor McGonagall had given her permission to continue attending; more willingly than Hermione had expected—no doubt swayed by the fact that the Gryffindor point deficit had finally been rectified, and perhaps fuelled, in part, by an opportunity to supersede Snape’s authority.

And what of Snape, himself? Hermione had seen little of him. Did he know that she would be attending? Would he be here? Or did he think he’d warned her off sufficiently with the Ministry’s threats?

Thrusting her hands into her pockets, she felt the soft lump filling the insides of one—a bag of clothes, shrunken . . . enough to last two weeks. Would it be long enough? The note she’d left said that she was going to stay with her grandmother. That part she hadn’t gained permission for but she hoped it would muddy the waters if anyone came looking for her. Certainly her grandmother wouldn’t be giving her plans away . . . or even confirming Hermione’s existence. The irony was that she had been rendered as ‘safe’ as her parents without requiring Hermione’s ‘help’ at all . . . the ravages of dementia having seen to that.

Hermione squeezed the bag for courage and drew in a long, slow breath. She was finally taking her own advice . . . and seeking help. It just wasn’t quite the sort of help she’d recommended to Ginny. The particular assistance she required was extremely risky—both for herself and the person she was preparing to implicate. It was really far too much for her to ask of anyone, particularly someone she barely knew, but she couldn’t do this alone. And she had the strong sense that he cared for her. He’d listened to her for hours . . . patiently . . . non-judgmentally. He’d held her hand and rubbed her
shoulder when she’d cried. She had felt close to him—not as close as she had to Severus, but she doubted she would ever feel that way about anyone again . . . the circumstances were just too extraordinary. And she couldn’t go there anymore anyway, mentally or physically.

If she could convince him to help her, to hide her, for the next two weeks . . . she was hopeful it would be long enough for her to work it out. Her other pocket held her note books, and the texts she’d stolen from the Hogwarts library—pages and pages of information and research. It was a lot of work to decipher a single incantation but it was necessarily complex as the knowledge was scant and scattered. Many attempts, it seemed, had been made to encrypt or magically alter the information over time. But she was getting close . . . she could feel it.

Hermione reached for the door handle. If he said no, she would find a hotel room to work from. It would be less secure and more demanding than hiding behind a barrier of sympathetic Muggles—or even just one—where she could feel safe and supported, but she had little choice . . . it was literally now or never.

Cracking the door open, she scanned the room quickly. He was there. And around ten others. Severus wasn’t. She breathed. Then stepped inside.

The warmth of their welcome, men and women alike hugging her, had tears instantly seeking to spring from her eyes. She might be resolved to her new course of action but she was still fragile. After all, she had almost not been there at all.

Her gaze finally settled upon him and he nodded in acknowledgement. He didn’t smile . . . although he rarely did. But he held her there, in that intense way that made her feel that he saw her. She breathed.

She pulled up a chair beside him. And sat. Listening. Breathing. Contributing little. After all, they’d moved on. A new book. A new story. Profound . . . frivolous . . . juvenile . . . insightful . . . their opinions and critiques rolled over her in a warm, fuzzy wave of familiarity. Her fingers brushed his forearm, and then his wrist, casually, before seeking out his hand. He didn’t withdraw. She closed her eyes.

The door opened.

“And Sam’s back too,” a voice piped up.

Hermione froze.

He was there—in the doorway—dark gaze sliding around the room until it settled upon her . . . and stopped. He didn’t speak, simply striding to the far side of the room, taking his usual seat in the shadows. Watching everyone . . . watching her.

What was he thinking . . . right then? Was he jealous? She was holding another man’s hand after all. Or didn’t he care? Had he ever cared? Was this simply another shitty job? Had she been just another shitty fuck? Why, then, had he saved her in the tower? Why hadn’t he let her go? It would have solved a lot of his problems after all.

Perhaps he would soon wish that he had.

Smaller conversations started breaking out around the room. It seemed that the appearance of ‘Samuel’ had somehow disturbed the dynamic, not only for herself.

Hermione took her chance.
“Can I talk to you?” She leaned forward, whispering into the brown curls around the ear beside her.

He tilted his head a fraction. Her lips momentarily brushed his warm skin and she licked them... automatically... as though she might be able to taste him.

*Had Snape been right all along? Was she destined to fall too easily? Had that wellspring of sensual need, that carnal appetite, been inside her all along, waiting to be tapped by someone like him?* There was no doubt that she felt it right now. Desire. Arousal. Her body had grown accustomed to the attention, to the intensity of Snape’s advances, and his sudden withdrawal had filled her with an acute yearning. She was consumed by what felt like a dangerous level of need, and one that she would need to suppress if she was going to focus on the seriousness of the task at hand.

He nodded. She could have kissed him. But she resisted.

Tugging gently on his hand, she stood and led him over to a couch in the far corner, as far away from ‘Samuel’ as possible. It would be impossible for them to be heard but she was so afraid that she pressed herself close, keeping the same muted tone as she spoke directly into his ear.

It was an urgent stream of words that she knew could easily be interpreted as the ramblings of a mad woman. But she couldn’t afford to stop. The entire story needed to come out—her magical status, her history, her predicament, her plea for help... and her promise to him... to reveal herself fully, to show him things that would blow his mind. She felt confident enough to do that... in so many ways.

He stiffened when those words came out. They’d never interacted on that level before. But it was powerful. She knew it. She now understood just how powerful that was.

And whilst she’d felt his tension, he hadn’t offered any response the entire time she was speaking. Similarly, she hadn’t dared look at him throughout, afraid of what she might see. But now she did, leaning back with trepidation before focusing on his features. He was not traditionally handsome. He wasn’t even her ‘type’ physically. But there was something about him, something that drew her so strongly that she suddenly felt like a charlatan... or even a slut. *How could she flip so easily? From one man to another and back? How could she claim to be in love and yet be perfectly ready to cast him aside?*

But she had little time to dwell, as his response suddenly caught her in the throat.

“I will help you.”

No questions. No disparaging remarks. Not even a hint of uncertainty.

And then she did kiss him. She had to. The relief was just too great. And his lips were so soft, almost impossibly so for a man, and his taste was... sweet... familiar. Her fingers trailed up his neck... over his jawline... across his cheek... and stopped...

The realisation hit her like that train—the one that never stops, even when it should. Leaping backwards, a muted shriek burst from her lips as she stumbled, knocking over a small table and the lamp on it. The light fell across his features but she saw nothing of what her hand had felt... a scar... a fine horizontal line scoring across his flesh.

And then his finger lifted almost imperceptibly and his eyes instantly changed, the clear blue draining to tunnels of black.

“Fucking... hell,” she choked. “It’s you.”
“What is it, Hermione?”

A hand was on her back. The body of a woman slipped up beside and then slightly in front of hers—protectively—positioned between herself and the man on the couch. This woman was brave. Hermione felt it. She might have been in Gryffindor, like her... if she weren’t a Muggle.

But it made no difference. He was up in an instant, wand drawn. A deft flourish and the entire group were rendered statues, faces frozen in expressions of puzzlement and concern. Despite her fear, Hermione was struck by the irony of it. They cared. They were worried about her. Even Samuel had come out of the shadows and appeared to be striding her way. But of course he would never reach her. None of them would. Only him—the one she should never have confided in—the one transforming with each nimble slice and flick into the man she knew.

Then he moved forward, confidently, directing his wand at one after the other, Obliviating each in turn until he returned to the woman whose hand still rested reassuringly on Hermione’s back. Unfortunately Hermione could do nothing for her in return.

He did her from behind, wand against her temple. But his eyes drilled into Hermione’s as he did so, as he sucked Hermione’s existence from the woman’s mind. It was a warning—a demonstration of power. He was in control. He would manufacture her level of erasure... and thus the depth to which he would allow her to be known.

Hermione was struck again by her lack of ownership over her own being. He’d been there to stop her from ending it. Now he was determining the nature of her existence even beyond herself, in the minds—and possibly also the hearts—of others. It was a level of control one person should never have over another, and yet she had done the same. But the difference was that she had done it for love.

*He did it for the Ministry—*it’s heartless, faceless men. And she despised him for it.*

Reaching behind her back for her wand, a shrill cry of frustration suddenly burst from her lips. He had beaten her to it. One large hand instantly latched around her wrist like an iron manacle, and the other now slipped behind her, withdrawing her wand from her back pocket—just as he had done that first night. Glaring up into the hard planes of his face, she realised that despite what they had shared, he was still as closed off, as cold and distant as he had been from the outset. He had the perfect mantle. He was the perfect spy. Too good, as it turned out, to give it up. And yet...
“Does the Ministry know that you’ve been fucking me?” she demanded boldly, craning her neck to
look him fully in the face.

Black eyes falling upon her, she felt the meticulous scrutiny of his glittering gaze edging over her
features, analysing every lift, every fold, before he appeared to reach a conclusion that drew him
even further into himself. Jerking roughly on her arm, he dragged her towards the door. She didn’t
resist. There was no point. But she certainly didn’t intend to go quietly.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,;” she snapped at his back as he led her through the door.

Pushing her against the wall of the stairwell, he held her in place as he cast a parting incantation
through the door to reverse the Stasis charm, finally engaging the lock before practically carrying her
up the stairs and forcing her through another door into the dimly lit café.

Guiding her swiftly around tables, he drove her toward the main door, the cool evening air bursting
over her face like a bubble as she stumbled through onto an almost-empty street.

People were in the distance, silhouettes, moving away. But there was no point calling for help—not
with his strong fingers now clamped around her upper arm, wand trained across his body, jabbing
into her hip. They were moving too quickly anyway, hurrying through the shadows before turning
abruptly into an alley that would take them to the Apparition point.

The bag in her pocket thudded heavily against her thigh with each harried step. She’d placed it there
with hopeful excitement fluttering through her only hours before. Now it mocked her desperate
naïveté—her foolish dreams of finding someone to protect her.

She’d picked the wrong man. The man, as it turned out, most capable of ensuring that she would fail.
And as he dragged her into the shadowy recess between two buildings, pulling her into his chest for
the Apparition, she looked into his eyes and knew that he had no intention of helping her.

A moment later, the static pop still ringing in her ears, she recognised the profile of Hogwarts and
immediately attempted to pull herself from his grasp.

“I’m not going back,” she growled, twisting her arm in a vain attempt at freedom.

He stared at her dispassionately, allowing her to struggle a few moments more before turning with a
huff and proceeding to drag her along the moonlit road.

“Let me go,” she demanded more forcefully, continuing to fight. But it was no use, he was far too
strong.

She stuttered along in short, resistant strides, the gravel scuffing under her shoes as they closed the
distance to the castle.

“Please, Severus?”

The softer request was her last resort, her last attempt to appeal to his better side . . . after all he did
have one—she’d seen it . . . at least she thought she had.

He didn’t even break stride.

*How could he? How could he pretend to feel nothing for her?* Despite everything, she still harboured
intense feelings for him. She had fallen for him . . . twice. And it hadn’t been some erroneous
concoction by her lonely, addled brain . . . on either occasion. Her feelings had arisen in response to
him . . . she had been reciprocating his desires. He’d wanted her. It was hardly something he could
“You wanted to fuck me all along, didn’t you?”

He did falter then. Only slightly. Just a truncated stride before he continued on, refusing to acknowledge her.

“You could have chosen to do anything with me,” she continued, her voice straining under the weight of accusation. “And yet you forced me to have sex with you. It wasn’t because I wouldn’t respond to other ‘punishments’. It was because you wanted me. I saw it in your eyes. You were a bastard about it, but it was there—even from the start.”

“You weren’t forced.”

She was relieved that he had finally spoken, even if his claim was galling and patently untrue.

“Well I hardly had a choice in the matter!” she cried incredulously. “You made it impossible for me to refuse. You knew my mind. You knew how I felt. And you were my Headmaster. The power dynamic was hardly fair.”

“And yet you returned. You sought me out. You . . . responded.” He spoke without looking at her, forging ahead in long strides.

It was true. She had done all three. In the end she’d craved him . . . more than anything she’d ever wanted. And she had responded to his instruction. She’d learned. And grown.

But that wasn’t the point. No matter how he would seek to depict himself, he was hardly some benevolent therapist. He was a powerful wizard using a variety of sordid, deceitful tactics to manipulate her while satiating his own desires. It hadn’t been necessary for him to fuck her . . . multiple times. Even if she’d wanted it, there was no way he would have acquiesced if his goal was purely ‘correctional’.

And the truth of the matter was that he was inherently unstable. She’d delved beneath that cool facade and witnessed enough to know that at he was, like her, deeply traumatised. Their exchanges, in the end, had been far from judiciously detached. They had been infused with passion. They’d shared intense, deep-set emotions. And that’s what made his betrayal so devastating.

But Hermione had mercifully managed to progress beyond the hollow sadness that had almost pulled her under. Her primary emotion was now anger. And she was finally ready to defend herself. Maybe she had him to thank for that. Maybe not. But the fact that there was still a glimmer of her old, refractory self simmering somewhere inside gave her hope. She was a survivor. And she happened to operate rather effectively in survival mode, her mind rapidly scanning options, honing in on each piece of evidence, holding it up to the light, looking for cracks.

*How much did the Ministry know of Snape’s sexual antics? Was it information that she could use to her advantage?*

If his ultimate intention was to inform the Ministry of her transgression that evening, Hermione wondered if there might be power in discrediting him by pitching a few accusations of her own.

The problem was that he may have, in fact, been acting with impunity the entire time. The Ministry may have granted him the freedom to achieve their ends ‘at any cost’ and so anything she told them about his methods could be totally disregarded. But then there was the mysterious, Samuel. *Was he another Ministry stooge? Spying on the spy?* It was possible. Which would suggest that they didn’t entirely trust him.
It would also explain why Snape had chosen to remove her from the book group for her intensive period of ‘correction’. He’d already had her, after all. He’d known that she had feelings for him and could have used that relationship to carry out the Ministry’s wishes. Instead, he had taken her behind closed doors, away from prying eyes, to enact his ‘punishment’. And had used the Headmaster/student power disparity to force it, rather than manipulating her while having to pretend to be a decent human being.

The more she thought about it, the more she considered it unlikely that the Ministry would have endorsed his approach. Or even been aware of how damaged he really was. She was quite confident that Professor McGonagall and perhaps some of the other staff knew that Snape was spying for the Ministry, or were at least suspicious of the basis for his appointment. If they discovered that the Hogwarts Headmaster was using sanctioned sexual coercion to manipulate students, there would of course be an outcry. The Ministry would not only lose their man, but their influence over the school entirely. She doubted that they could afford that. Or that they would risk being embroiled in yet another scandal.

‘No’, she decided. They weren’t aware.

Which was surprising.

As she was hardly his first.

Hermione’s stomach twisted. The thought had crossed her mind before . . . numerous times . . . but now it squeezed her insides more forcefully. Tightening. Like his hand around her wrist as he dragged her up the hill.

“Why, Severus? What did you do?” she persisted. “What did you perpetrate? Were you forced? Or did you do it by choice . . . as you did with me?” She gasped as she felt the bones in her wrist grinding inside his iron grip. “Does the Ministry know about it, Severus? Do they know what you
He turned then, wand drawn, teeth bared in a grimace of pain and anger. He held the shaking tip to her temple. She could feel his fury seething down its length.

And as she stood, looking into his eyes with defiance, but at the same time too afraid to breathe, she suddenly saw him—all of him. Like some sort of mosaic, layers of conflict superimposed on his pale, angular features, she saw the evil that lurked within, but also the good that he went to equal pains to hide—and everything in between. She saw the regret, the loathing, the fear reflected in him. A mirror of her own. But she also saw danger. He was capable of doing anything to her, and she knew that he was ready to do it right now. To remove her as a threat. To neutralise her once and for all.

But he didn’t.

Instead he jerked the wand away, eyes searing into her before he turned with a wordless flourish, and disappeared into the castle.

Hermione stood on the steps. Trembling. But intact.

Or as intact as she could be. Without her parents. Without the book group. And now without him. With none to bear witness to her past. And none to be with her into her future.

She wondered then if his Obliviation might have been a blessing. If she couldn’t have the life she desperately wanted, at least she wouldn’t have to live knowing how close she had come.
Puppetmaster

Chapter Summary

A/N: I can’t thank those of you enough who have continued to provide me with supportive and thought-provoking commentary despite my tardiness in responding. It drives me and fuels my muse. I love you for it. DSxx

I'm pretty sure this chapter title is thanks to SouthernBelle50+. However, if it isn't. I sincerely thank the person who provided it and apologise for getting it wrong (again). xx

It had looked burgundy in the bottle, but on her toenails, wriggling suggestively above her, it was definitely red. Hermione consulted the bottle again—shook it—as though that would make some difference. It didn’t and she smiled. It was so delightfully frivolous, so indulgently girly that she felt a little bit ridiculous—mainly for the fact that she had forgotten the joy of such simple pleasures.

That she could delight in the act of simply coating her toenails in colour, something she hadn’t done since she was a child, swinging on a seat, her mother painting with a steady hand in the afternoon sun, was a revelation.

Indeed, over the past week she had come to the realisation that her cogitations and ruminations, and the maelstrom of angst associated with them, had drawn her into an almost-lethal level of hopelessness. And now she was trying to come back. In Luna’s room, lying on the floor with a rug as soft as clouds beneath her, her bare feet waggling absently skyward, Hermione felt young again—and surprisingly comfortable with the thought.

The steady scratch of quill upon parchment and the lilting murmur of whispered incantations added further to her contentment.

“I think I like the orange best,” Ginny announced, tilting her head in admiration of her own quillwork.

Hermione angled her chin down for a better look at the letter unfurled on the rug beside her. Each paragraph had been written in a different colour—a test of the ink set that Hermione had finally passed on from her shopping trip.

“Me too,” Hermione agreed. The orange—more of a gilt ochre now that it had been turned into words on parchment—was stunning. In fact the whole thing was beautiful.

It had been the perfect gift. Ginny had been genuinely excited and grateful, and was now writing a long letter to Harry. Both thoughts made Hermione happy.

Then the ceiling changed. This time it was a tropical sunset. The colours were vivid—almost psychedelic, but it was Luna’s incantation and Hermione had little doubt that the world according to Luna might look a lot like this.

“Where are you, Luna?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Luna replied from the bed, the top of her blonde head the only part visible to Hermione from her position on the floor. “I think it might be the Caribbean. Although I’ve never
Hermione’s eyes roved over the ceiling, admiring how the intense colours melted surprisingly serenely into one another. “It’s beautiful.”

Luna sighed. “I think so too. But Neville doesn’t like it. He always wants it dark. No stars.” She was silent for a moment. “Sometimes the world can be too much, for some, don’t you think?”

Hermione watched as Luna directed her wand at the ceiling and, with a deft swizzle, transformed it back into bland, wooden slats.

“Perhaps,” Hermione replied thoughtfully. “Maybe he’s just not ready for it yet.”

“Perhaps,” Luna agreed with her usual ethereal lightness. Then she fluttered the wand tip and jabbed it skyward to conjure the opposite—a tumultuous expanse of clouds. Dark. Thunderous.

Hermione’s unease—that which had been simmering just beneath the surface this entire week—suddenly returned. It was the inescapable sense of foreboding. Even though she had managed to avoid any instant repercussions after the book group, she was acutely aware that her actions couldn’t be simply ignored.

It wasn’t in Snape’s nature to forgive and forget. But whilst she had seen very little of him, she couldn’t shake the feeling that something was imminent. Who was he speaking to? What were their plans for her?

Of course, without her wand she was no longer capable of following through with her own plans. And a further blow had been dealt when she’d placed a trembling hand into her pocket to discover it empty—her notebooks somehow also confiscated during their combative journey back to the castle.

After losing all of her resources, and being abandoned on the steps, Hermione’s immediate response had been to surround herself with people. She’d returned to her friends and found herself enveloped in their warmth once again. It was a huge relief. She didn’t know why it had been so difficult for her to go there previously. Perhaps she had needed to reach the empty depths of rock bottom to realise that she could either choose to allow herself to trust again or face the destructive loneliness that had all but consumed her.

Either way, she’d spent a considerable amount of the past week in other people’s rooms, particularly Ginny’s. And despite not having her wand, she’d managed to begin studying again.

It was the closest she’d come to feeling ‘normal’ for such a long time. And yet she wasn’t. The ominousness of the swirling clouds above her made that clear. Despite her anger, and the bold defiance that had swelled within her when she’d last faced Severus, she was scared. Something was going to happen.

And her worst fear was that she wouldn’t even know when it did.

***

Hermione walked barefoot back to her room. There was something about the red adorning her nails that she found reassuring . . . that she gazed solidly at with each step . . . that even the cold stone beneath her feet couldn’t diminish. Ruby red. This was her essence of Dorothy—small fragments of hope that may one day carry her home.

Sense told her to let it go . . . to give it up for her own sanity as much as anything. But hope wasn’t something that could easily be relinquished. Even if it was fanciful . . . and fantastical . . . and

She opened her door.

Or blood.

The thought struck her immediately despite the fact that none was present . . . at least not yet.

Her wand may have lay benignly enough on her desk but the fact that it was there at all set her instantly on edge. She glanced uneasily around the room, despite the fact that everything that could be evident should be evident from her vantage point. It wasn’t a large room. Slipping to the bathroom, she opened the door. Empty.

Returning, she approached the desk.

Her books were there too. All of her notebooks. Even the texts she had stolen from the restricted section of Hogwarts, and those from the Muggle library. But it was the one sitting by itself that set her into a fresh tailspin.

The back of a girl’s head, brass snake rearing up from between the pages.

It was her gift, returned.

He was severing all ties with her. The final rejection. Severed . . . from Severus.

And the rest of it?

The rest was simply the rope she would need to hang herself.

***

She was being watched.

She felt it—a tell-tale prickle that crawled into her scalp but turned up nothing each time she jerked around to confront it.

Even on the bus.

She’d tried to shake whomever it was by mixing up Apparition with traditional Muggle transport. But still she felt them.

Forcing her jiggling knee to still, she shifted her satchel onto her lap and stared out the window. She was simply returning the overdue library books. There was nothing remotely suspicious about that. Except that she was, of course, the greatest risk to the wizarding world since Voldemort. And this was a test.

Could she be trusted to visit a Muggle library again? Could she be trusted not to attempt to run and hide? Could she?

The answer really wasn’t hers to give. She felt strongly that her fate had already been determined. And so she’d decided that she’d rather meet it head on than wait for the sinister shadows to close in and eventually consume her.

She heard the tremble, even in the quiet ‘thank you’ that she murmured on her descent down the bus steps to the damp footpath. Normally the sight of the old grey building filled her with joy. Now she was overwhelmed by feelings of such dread that it took all of her willpower not to turn around and
hammer on the bus door that had just hissed closed behind her.

Slow, ponderous steps, took her through the sliding glass doors, across muted carpet, past muted conversations, over to a desk with a young man seated behind it.

“I’m sorry . . .” Hermione began, but found that she couldn’t continue.

The man smiled kindly. “Yes?”

“I’m . . .” Hermione shook her head and then delved into her satchel for the books. “I’ve been sick . . . These are late.”

He nodded and took them, opening one and scanning the code. “There is a late fee.”

“I understand.”

“But . . .” He deftly tapped the keyboard in front of him. “It seems that you have been waiting a considerable amount of time for three books that have just come in. I think we can waive the penalty in the interests of good customer service.”

Hermione smiled faintly. “Three books?”

“Yes.” He consulted the monitor. “A book on psychology, one on memory and one about hypno . . .” He frowned.

“Hypnothesia.” Hermione nodded, remembering the request she’d put in about a lifetime ago.

“That’s the one,” he said cheerfully as he stood and made his way over to a cabinet full of books. A moment later he returned and handed them to her.

She looked down at them and then back at him.

She opened her mouth but there was really nothing to stay. She could take them. Or leave them. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a middle aged woman looking pointedly at her watch.

“Thank you.” Hermione smiled. “I appreciate it.”

And then she moved away.

Fuck.

She couldn’t take them back to Hogwarts. Perhaps she could just read them there, at the library. No notes. She’d have to rely upon her memory—not as good as it used to be . . . but better than it was.

She quickly glanced around again. If people weren’t already suspicious of her, they certainly would be after what she imagined was a pretty good impression of a deer in headlights.

Regardless, she jogged up the stairs to the private reading section, making her way between two walls of books before reaching the empty carrels.

Then she stopped.

What the fuck?

A book. The back of a girl’s head. Placed neatly in the centre of the desk. Numbness gradually seeped into her limbs with each step closer until she collapsed on the chair, the books tumbling from
her arms.

Fingers trembling, she opened the front cover.

_Hermione Granger._ Scribed neatly. With an earnest confidence that now seemed laughable.

It was the copy she’d never found, the one he’d taken, and now the bait in the trap that she’d just walked into.

“Hermione?”

She froze.

It was too cruel. But it had happened before. When she was under intense stress, she would hear them . . . their voices. Only to crash back to reality and be forced to grieve all over again.

“Hermione darling, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. I thought I’d lost you for good!”


Hermione gazed up. Unbreathing. Unbeating.

“What is it?” Her mother’s smile dropped away, brow furrowing with concern. “Darling, are you all right? Was it something you read?”

Tiny twitches hitched through Hermione’s diaphragm, making her gasp quietly, as though life was attempting to escape her in discreet but indelible increments.

“Hermione?” Her mother placed both hands on her shoulders and knelt before her. “Tell me. Are you sick? Should I call someone?”

Hermione shook her head haphazardly, like a ball on a spring.

“Are you sure?” Her mother’s eyes scanned her face—careful, intelligent, loving eyes.

Hermione placed a shaking hand over her mother’s knuckles, grabbing them fiercely.

_Mu . . . mu . . . _ Her jaw ratcheted up and down like a mute marionette. She was an infant again, trying desperately to be understood.

Her mother nodded. She wanted to understand.

Hermione’s breath finally returned, shuddering in and out until at last it managed to slide past her vocal cords. “I . . . I missed you, Mum,” she whispered.

“Oh, my love.” Mrs Granger lunged forward, wrapping Hermione tightly in her arms. “I wasn’t gone that long, was I?”

Hermione nodded against her shoulder, small but emphatic affirmations, declarations of longing that went far beyond words as tears spilled out.

“I’m so sorry,” her mother crooned, rocking her gently. “I thought I had been there for you but clearly I haven’t. You put so much pressure on yourself. And you have exams coming up. I should have known. I should have done more.”
Hermione wanted to tell her that she wasn’t to blame. She wanted to explain it all to her, but she couldn’t. Instead she let her mother continue her gentle placations. She just wanted to feel the words resonating through her, flowing into her soul, to let the tears carve tracks through her pain, to stay wrapped up in love.

Love.

Love.

“Hermione, we should probably find your father soon. He’ll be wondering where we are.” Her mother’s words eventually filtered through the haze of bliss and wonder.

Hermione lifted her head. “Is he here?”

“Yes, he came with us, remember? I ended up leaving him in the dentistry section. You’d think he would’ve had enough of those books by now, wouldn’t you? He’s written three of them himself after all!”

Hermione wiped both hands across her face with a contented sigh, her tears giving way to a watery smile. “I guess there’s always more to learn.”

“That’s what he says,” her mother laughed. “As I’ve always said—you’re your father’s daughter.”

Hermione stood on shaky legs, feeling like a newborn foal. “We’d better find him then,” she said, reaching for her mother’s arm. Now that she had her back, she had no intention of letting her go.

“Yes,” her mother agreed, setting off through the corridor of books. “Although I doubt I’ll get the same sort of welcome from him. I think he’s glad for the peace.”

Hermione laughed and then stopped.

“Wait.”

She pulled away, returning to the desk.

“Oh yes, your books.”

But there was only one she wanted—the one with her name in it, the one she had been completely wrong about, the one that hadn’t been bait at all, but a gift. His gift. The most precious gift he could have given her.

The cover image blurred before her eyes as she considered the truth of what he had done. The fact that he’d sacrificed himself again, placing himself in extreme danger for the sake of another, for her, was difficult enough to deal with. But the very real possibility that he might already be suffering the consequences was intolerable.

The last thing in the world she wanted was to leave her parents again. But she had to. She would see them home—safe. And then she would find him. Wherever he was. Whatever state he was in. And after she’d apologised for the bitter accusations and assumptions she’d thrown at him, she would offer herself to him . . . for assistance, protection, or at least a chance to seek to repay his kindness.

After all, a man as brave as he deserved better. Or at the very least the chance at a life beyond compromise and servitude.

Her only hope now was that the Ministry didn’t already have their hands on him . . . and that he
would be brave enough to allow her back in.
A/N: As this fic draws to a close, I’d like to thank you all once again for your thoughts, ideas and support. This has not been an easy story to write and I know it hasn’t necessarily been particularly easy to read. But those who have persisted have given me such a rich tapestry of positivity and discussion to consider, I couldn’t be more grateful. Thank you, DSxx

They were happy.
Both of them.
Really happy. Obliviously happy.
It was wonderful.
But it wasn’t right.

Hermione hovered on the doorstep in the waning light of dusk, hand pressed against the frosted glass panelling, undecided about whether she should go back inside. She’d left her father whistling in the lounge room as he sorted through a pile of old journal articles. Her mother had been cleaning—humming away contentedly as she’d slithered the duster over surfaces that Hermione had missed on the few occasions she’d returned to clean—when she’d desperately hoped that the simple act of creating a welcoming home would be enough to bring them back.

Hermione was happy too. Of course she was. She finally had what she’d been pining for all along—her family reunited. But there was something... missing. The angst. The hurt. The difficult conversations. The complicated explanations. The disbelief. The gradual acceptance... and forgiveness.

It seemed there was nothing to accept. Nothing to forgive. Nothing to even question.

When her mother had opened the fridge to see it practically bare, all she’d said was, ‘Looks like I need to do a spot of shopping’.

Neither of her parents had brought up their time away. They spoke to her as though no time had passed at all. But of course it had. They had missed a lot. And there was evidence of it everywhere. The lawn had grown. Pot plants had died. The newspapers had piled up since Hermione’s last visit.

But their response to each anomaly was quite unremarkable, setting about tidying up as they chatted away about paying the late telephone bill and working out what they could cobble together for dinner from the tins in the pantry. Clearly they didn’t remember everything but, worse than that, they didn’t seem to care.

Hermione hadn’t asked in the end. She’d played along. After all, just being with them, talking to them, hugging them, occupying her childhood home with them, together, as a family, was a dream she had almost given up on.
But it still wasn’t right.

She felt ungrateful. And selfish. Especially considering the risks he had taken to bring them back, and the fact that he might be in imminent danger himself. But her overwhelming concern at that moment was finding out what he had done to them . . . and why.

She took a last wistful look at the shadows moving beyond the glass, then turned, and walked away.

***

It was dark by the time she reached Hogwarts. Throwing flames into the torches around her room, she dropped her satchel onto her chair and looked down at the lone book, his book, on her desk. The brass snake head flickered in the light, undulating as though alive. She noticed then that the stem was no longer situated just inside the front cover as she’d delivered it to him. It was now slotted between pages, about a third of the way through. Sliding her fingers into the gap, she opened it and recoiled faintly in confusion. Blank. She flipped the page over. Nothing.

Dropping the snake with a clatter, she picked up the book and began flicking through the pages. It wasn’t until she passed the middle that words appeared. Her eyes tracked over the familiar sentences. This is what she had read. *But what had happened to the rest?*

Delving into her satchel, she brought out her copy, the one she had retrieved earlier from the desk in the library. Flipping over the cover, she glanced at her name written inside, reassured that she hadn’t been wrong about that too. She scanned page after page. They were full of words. It seemed strange, then, that the other book was mostly blank. But then the tight script suddenly stopped. A bit over half way through, the words disappeared. The pages were blank.

Hermione frowned between the two open books. It was as though they were a match. His book seemed to begin where hers ended. She had read hers up to the point that it was confiscated. Then she’d finished his, mistakenly assuming it was hers when she’d found it in his cupboard. But she’d not noticed the missing words then. It must have happened afterwards, when she’d finished.

Slowly closing both books, Hermione rested a palm on each identical cover as she considered what it might mean. Maybe he hadn’t simply left them as calling cards. Or gifts—symbols of what he intended to return to her . . . of his plan to repatriate her parents. Perhaps he had wanted her to discover this . . . this discrepancy. *But why?*

Scooping up both books with one arm, she snatched up her wand and strode out the door. She couldn’t wait and wonder any longer. She needed to find him.

***

Motes of burnt oak, the woody and mildly herbaceous aroma of his cigarettes met her nostrils before she had even reached his door. It seemed like an age since she’d last smelled it—as an audacious, drunken girl, pretending to be more. She was different now. In fact, she could barely identify with that person of only a month or two before—in the desperate throes of transition without having the capacity to understand what was happening. But she understood now. She had grown. And he had helped her. Whatever else happened, she needed to remember that he had helped her.

She knocked.

The door opened almost immediately.

*Was he expecting her? Or had he been waiting for someone else?*
She entered.

Snape’s large, lean frame occupied the chair by the fire, a half-smoked cigarette nestling between the vee at his knuckles, the fingers of his other hand curling around a glass of amber fluid. His coat and boots lay discarded in an untidy heap on the floor; the top buttons of his shirt were undone. It was as though, upon returning, he had immediately divested himself of his trappings, as though he had desperately needed to free himself but could only do so in the modest and meagre surroundings of his dungeon refuge.

“Severus?”

He turned his head slowly, with considerable effort. When he faced her fully, her heart sank. His entire countenance was one of exhaustion, his face having practically collapsed into a heavy, blank mask. Whatever he had done, it had taken its toll.

Hermione approached. His eyes were the only parts of him that moved, tracking her progress until she stopped, directing her wand to the second armchair and moving it out from the wall. She positioned it opposite him, close enough for her to sit, with her knees touching his. He didn’t flinch. He didn’t move at all.

She wanted to touch him more. In fact she would have preferred to be sitting on him for this conversation, feeling his bodily responses against her, in lieu of the expressions that he seemed incapable of giving. But she forced herself to sit back in the chair, to give him space. After all, the last time she’d seen him she had thrown some rather nasty accusations at him. She wasn’t proud of it. And despite it all, he had done what he had said he would do . . . he had helped her. Now she needed to know why.

“I can never thank you enough,” she murmured, her hand creeping forward to rest upon his knee despite herself.

He stared at her, the weight of so much, all of the words unsaid, behind his eyes. She might have considered him drunk if not for the sharpness and clarity there. Eventually he gave a small, singular nod of acknowledgment before lifting the glass to his lips, taking a long gulp of what smelled like firewhisky.

“Can I ask why?” Hermione leaned towards him. “Why did you do it?”

He exhaled through his nose before turning his face to the fire.

“Because I realised that you wouldn’t stop.”

Hermione’s bottom lip slipped between her teeth as she contemplated him. He had done it because he knew she wouldn’t give up on the reversal . . . despite his efforts. It was her fault.

“You could have let me go,” she murmured earnestly. “After the book group, I could have gone into hiding. No one would have known until it was too late.”

He sat in silence, the firelight playing upon his stoic features.

“You should have let me do it,” she insisted, her hand tightening on his leg.

“I was responsible for you.”

Hermione’s breath caught. Had he taken some sort of vow?
“What do you mean?” She strained forward, encroaching further upon his chair. “I thought you were there to spy on me?”

He didn’t respond.

“Severus?”

He shook his head wearily. “It doesn’t matter.”

Hermione was at a loss. What had he done?

Then she remembered the books still tucked under her arm. Taking one in each hand, she set them gently on the tops of this thighs.

“What are these?”

He managed a slightly sardonic eyebrow lift. “Books?”

She ignored it.

“What magic are they imbued with? Why have the words disappeared?”

“They were never written.”

She froze. Despite the instant acceleration of her heart, she attempted to remain calm.

“Never written? But there are words there.” She flicked open some of the pages to indicate. “Who wrote those?”

“You.”

She almost choked.

“How could I have written this?” she asked incredulously, pulling back from him. “I didn’t. These aren’t my words.”

He simply looked at her, as though waiting for her to understand.

Her gaze dropped down to the books. She stared hard at them, trying to remember.

“The story was . . . familiar,” she admitted distractedly. “The girl’s trauma. Her guilt. Their relationship . . . the sex. That was how I worked out that you were there—at the book group.” She looked up but his expression hadn’t changed. This wasn’t news to him. “Then I figured you’d chosen the book deliberately, and had engaged with me as a trigger . . . to bring me out—to see how much I would tell the others.” She returned her fists to the books. “I thought it was a test . . . I thought that I had failed.”

“You chose the story. You chose every word,” he said calmly. “The book was an illusion. You created the words as you read. From your subconscious. This was the story you wanted.”

Hermione shook her head faintly as her gaze jagged over his face, dipping from his eyes to his mouth, trying to comprehend his words.

“But everyone in the group was reading the same book. We were all reading the same story.”

“Were you? Or did you all create your own stories—the stories you wanted? Did you appropriate the
words as you saw fit? Was it meaningful? Was it profound?”

Hermione was starting to slide again, disassociating. She blinked furiously, trying to rein herself back in.

“But she . . . her relationship, the sex, started before . . . before we . . .”

He nodded slowly.

Her face contorted. “What are you saying? That you were only doing what I wanted—that I asked for all this, without knowing it?”

“You spoke about the need for domination early. And the guilt—the possibility of releasing it with orgasm.”

Hermione felt herself flushing. If she’d known that the story was about herself, she would never have discussed that with him . . . despite the fact she hadn’t known it was him.

He lifted a shoulder in a half-shrug, dismissing her embarrassment. “We know how to heal ourselves. We know what we need. Not always consciously, but intuitively. However, we don’t always recognise our own wisdom, or accept it, damming it up with misinterpretations and false logic. And it can be complicated, especially when others are involved.”

Hermione raked her eyes over him. There was something about his tone, the sudden tension in his shoulders, the way his eyes flickered away from hers, that made the statement seem like an admission of sorts.

“Were you using me too, Severus? Did you use me . . . to heal yourself?”

His gaze returned to the fire. It seemed to be his safe place.

"I told myself it wasn’t the case. But trust, even in myself, my own feelings, is not something I can always lay claim to. As you indicated, I was far from ready to accept that role again. Too damaged, as it turned out, to do either job properly.”

He paused, staring intently into the flames, but she didn’t interrupt, sensing that there was more.

“I foolishly thought that I could gain your trust for the Ministry, but remain otherwise detached. The feelings I had weren’t new. I’d experienced them before, but I considered that they would abate if I maintained some distance from you in the interim. It became more and more difficult. Then there was the fact that Ministry had my balls in a vice. They had secured my position at Hogwarts against medical recommendations, and I owed them. Their man, Samuel, was watching me too closely. You were clearly unstable, and a serious risk. I couldn’t keep covering up the fact without them growing suspicious. So I took you away . . . before they could take matters into their own hands.”

Hermione felt a chill crawl up her spine. She knew exactly what that meant.

“I knew what you needed. The Ministry basically wanted the same—for you to be rendered safe. So I gave you the bastard that could help you . . . And I enjoyed it.”

He finally looked at her.

“I did what I wanted, but justified it as necessary . . . for progress. I took potions in an attempt to control my response.” He lifted an eyebrow as if remembering. “Indeed, being able to feel each interaction from both perspectives, simultaneously, was nothing short of . . . extraordinary.” He
shifted a little in his chair, exhaling audibly. “Until I was caught . . . off guard.”

*The ball.* That was when she had finally managed to arouse him. It had been the turning point—the beginning of him opening up to her.

“As that, I finally had to admit to myself that I wasn’t simply doing it to help you. Or the Ministry. I was doing it for myself—as I had been the entire time. I was grooming you to be what I needed. But you turned out to be more. Far more. And I didn’t realise until it was too late.”

*Too late?* Hermione didn’t like the finality with which he delivered those words. She gazed at him as he took another swallow of whisky, wishing she had known his mind from the start—wishing she had known that he was the quiet, gentle, considerate man she had already fallen for. And that he had similar feelings for her. She couldn’t help thinking that they wouldn’t be in such a mess if he’d been more up front with her. But, then again, her opinion of him as Headmaster had been so tarnished from the beginning, she wondered how he might have engaged her otherwise.

Her gaze trailed down to the books, still resting where she had placed them on his thighs.

“What about your book?” She picked up the one on her left, the one that was blank for the entire first half. “What happened to your story?”

Rather than answering, he took a long, slow drag on his cigarette, appraising her with a look so complex that she wondered exactly what he was going to say.

“You finished it.”

“What?”

He exhaled a thin cloud, his lips coming together to make a soft hissing sound like he was deflating before her.

“I’m tired,” he said finally, letting the rest escape in a puff of resignation.

Hermione stared at him, quite unable to believe that he would give that as some sort of explanation. *Tired? Is that why he had sacrificed himself? Is that why he was giving up?*

Angry tears welled in her eyes. “Don’t put that responsibility on me. It is not too late. Your story is not over.”

He sighed, blinking slowly. “I have nothing more to give. You do.”

She tried to interrupt but he raised a hand.

“The Ministry will come. I covered my tracks as completely as I could. The library would have muddied the waters but it’s impossible to cover the spell trace completely. I may have bought a small amount of time. But little more.”

Hermione could restrain herself no longer. Letting the books drop to the floor, she lunged onto his lap, burying her face in the warm nook under his chin.

“Why not just let them Obliviate me?” she whispered, blinking hot tears onto his neck.

His strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her into his chest. She melted into him so naturally, it was like coming home. Even more so than when she’d returned with her parents. The irony made her sob. All this time she had imagined herself to be Dorothy, pleading with the Wizard to help her
“return home, only to find that she was already there. With him.

“The body remembers,” he murmured plaintively. “Even if the mind doesn’t.”

Through the haze of her sadness, his words took a few moments to coalesce into meaning. Was he saying what she thought he was saying? Had she understood him correctly?

Lifting her head, she could tell immediately that she wasn’t mistaken. Her hand trembled slightly as she placed it on his cheek, her thumb gently caressing the scar she knew to be there.

“You were Obliviated?”

He didn’t look away this time, lifting his troubled gaze to hers.

“Yes . . . at St Mungos. It was deemed that I would be unable to recover without it. I was too traumatised by what had happened. They told me afterwards that it had been a choice between Obliviation or institutionalisation. In the end, all memory of what I had perpetrated was removed. But . . . I can still feel it. And much of it is . . . intolerable.” His voice had tightened to a painful rasp.

Hermione’s heart ached. She couldn’t imagine how much he must have suffered—enough to cut himself because of the pain, but unaware of the cause—just knowing that he was in some way responsible. Being a Motulomens, the intensity would be extreme. It made her feel sick.

“Have you considered reversing the Obliviation?” she asked tentatively. After all, the spell wasn’t banned for witches and wizards.

“Do you believe that knowing the details of my actions would make it any less painful?”

Fuck. It had been a stupid suggestion. She could barely stand the agony that swam in his eyes, the internal battle that had clearly plagued him mercilessly since.

She ducked back down, nestling into his neck, caressing him gently. It explained why he had reacted so badly when she’d put her wand to his temple. Both Obliviation and its reversal would be equally traumatic for him. Had that also shaped his actions around her parents’ return?

“Is that why you didn’t complete the Obliviation reversal on my parents?” she asked quietly. “Did you consider the past too painful for them too?”

He shook his head.

“I inserted a block. But it’s only temporary. It will all come back but you need to prepare them. You need to talk to them about what happened so that when everything returns, they are ready. Otherwise they will suffer the same trauma . . . the same guilt.”

Hermione’s love for him became too much then.

“You are a brilliant and beautiful man, Severus,” she whispered, kissing him gently on the corner of the mouth and then fully on the lips.

When he responded, it was clear that his feelings for her had not abated.

They kissed deeply, passionately, both acutely aware that their time together was coming to an end.

But this knowledge, together with their mounting need, only made Hermione feel all the more helpless. Finally she broke down.
“You don’t deserve this,” she murmured tearfully against his lips. “You did this for me, because of me, after all . . . Isn’t there another way?”

He pushed her gently back until his intense gaze met hers, the shimmer glazing his dark irises unmistakable. “I told you, ‘deserve’ can infer both a reward and a punishment.”

Her face crumpled. “I don’t understand.”

He sighed, using one long finger to fold a stray tendril of hair back from her face. “Sometimes it is just easier to hand over the punishment to someone else.”

Then she understood.

So much of his life had been dedicated to paying for the past, that he no longer knew how to stop.

By ‘someone else’, she suspected he was referring to the Ministry . . . and the possibility of Azkaban.

But he was also talking about her.

And about himself.

About them both.

Perpetrators.

And victims.
“I can give you what you need, Severus,” Hermione whispered, trickling the fingers of both hands up his neck to rest against the tight planes of his jaw. Her gaze dipped down into the dark pools of his eyes. “If you will let me?”

Despite fatigue infusing them with an almost-fathomless depth, Hermione saw a spark—a flicker of heat, dancing defiantly in his jet black irises. And the bleak fog that had descended over them both seemed to lift just a fraction. The simple fact that she might seek to bring him any sort of relief, and that he might trust her to do so was sufficient to inject, not necessarily hope, but a shot of welcome warmth, rallying against the sense of loss that had left her steeped in bitter cold.

Lifting a hand, he executed little more than a brief curl of his fingers before the leather flogger darted like a tailed baton from the shadows. Taking her by the wrist, he gently folded the handle into her palm.

He did trust her. She could see it in his eyes. He trusted that she now understood him; that she had grown and learned from his lessons which, as she had always suspected, were as much about him as they had been about her.

Unfolding herself from his lap, Hermione took Severus by the hand and eased him out of his chair, the stiffness in his long limbs making it clear that he had occupied his spot by the fire for some hours. He followed her in slow, barefooted strides into the bedroom until she stopped and turned, bringing their interlocked hands to her lips. She kissed his knuckles, placing her lips against each peak and hollow in turn before pausing to suck gently on his smallest knuckle, watching him from under her eyelashes.

Stepping up close, he grasped her chin. That elusive smile crinkled the corners of his eyes, before he leaned down to take her lips once again, consuming her gradually, as though savouring the succulent flesh of sweet, ripe fruits. Her knees trembled against the emotional exhaustion wrought by the day, but also the relief of being so close to him again.

His own taste was a blend of woody herbs, smoke, whisky and . . . Severus. It was deliciously intoxicating, so uniquely him, and even though she desperately wanted to be less desperate, to take her time, she had very little remaining—perhaps even none. And so she lifted her wand and, as they kissed, began to strip away his clothing, peeling off his shirt to expose the warm curves of his bare chest and the solid rounds of his shoulders before moving to his trousers, a murmured seam splitting spell causing them to ooze from his hips, down his thighs, until he stood naked, a veritable feast as she finally pulled away to allow her gaze to roam gratuituously over every inch. After all, she’d all but given up on ever seeing him like that again.

Drawn to the dark thatch at his groin, her palm skimmed over the downy softness there before seeking out the silken warmth that she had missed terribly. His cock was already jutting towards her
belly, she could practically feel it filling as she took it within her grasp.

“I missed you,” she murmured, lips against his chest, ghosting back and forth over one tight nipple.

Tunnelling his fingers into her hair, he pulled her even closer as he rubbed away the knots of tension in her scalp.

She sighed.

He knew exactly what she needed. Always.

And finally she could reciprocate.

“I think I’ll have you over there, holding onto the mantel.” She turned her face toward the fireplace where a small fire was flickering in its hearth.

He stepped back then, the corner of his mouth ticking up as he appraised her—an acknowledgement perhaps, of how far she had come.

Moving with greater ease, in fact a languid grace that communicated total relaxation about following her instruction, he moved to the fire, bent forward at the hips and grasped the mantel with both hands.

Hermione moved up behind him.

It was so very different this time.

For some reason she was no longer looking at him as an object separate from herself, projecting her sympathies onto him, putting her discomfort at the fore. This time she felt him. She felt what he wanted and she understood why. And so when she started, lashing the tails smartly across his buttocks, she found the solid smack and subsequent reddening surprisingly satisfying.

She followed up again—and again—navigating by instinct, following the ebb and flow of their combined energies. And she didn’t so much as watch him as absorb his responses, building the stimulation steadily until she was groaning with him, sharing his release.

The power and connection was so erotic, and Hermione found watching him so arousing—the way he surged and gyrated as he moaned, his substantial cock beating against his abdomen with each swift jerk of her arm—that eventually she could take it no more, dropping the flogger and throwing herself at him, gripping him from behind as she sank her teeth into his shoulder-blade.

A guttural groan burst from him as his head arched back. But it wasn’t a cry of pain. And when he twisted around, dislodging her, she could see why.

His teeth were bared, his temples slick with perspiration, but his eyes burned with naked lust. And the intensity with which he now grabbed her seemed to be fuelled by the same desperation that was driving her.

A shiver of exhilaration rolled down her spine. She wanted him to unleash all of what she could see roiling around inside him, into her. And as he pulled her close, burying his face in her hair, the coarse gravel in his voice as he growled, “You need to be fucked,” broke her and she whimpered, lips parting to nip sharply at his shoulder.

Grasping her jaw with strong fingers, he crushed his mouth into hers as he drove her backwards towards the bed. Her clothes fell off wordlessly, wandlessly, and she might have fallen at the last
moment except that his arm suddenly swept around her, ushering her in one smooth gesture onto the bedclothes. The softness beneath her was instantly countered by the hardness of the body that descended, full length, onto her, trapping her in breathless wonder. It seemed incredible that she’d never even sat on his bed before, particularly considering how much sex they’d already engaged in but lying on it for the first time, sandwiched under his delicious body, it felt like something she would give anything to get used to.

“It seems that you have come to appreciate the innate charms of the flogger,” he murmured, his face hovering mere inches above hers.

“Of the flogee . . . in fact,” she responded, her words rendered little more than a whisper with the weight on him on her chest.

He tilted his head to look deep into her and she wondered if he understood just how hard she had fallen.

“Indeed.” The word spilled gently enough from his lips but she felt his entire body thrumming with the barest restraint. He was clearly winding up to make good on his declaration that she needed fucking. And, as far as Hermione was concerned, it couldn’t come soon enough. She was beyond desperate—and that was because she knew he would fuck her in exactly the way she needed.

Lifting himself on one elbow, he snaked his other hand down between their bodies, sliding over her mons and trailing down her inner thigh before curling below her buttocks and pulling upwards, arching his body to lift her leg between them until he was able to slide her calf onto his shoulder. It was at times like these that she sensed just how much he understood her body, its natural capabilities and limits. Grasping her other thigh, he pushed it aside so that her openings were fully exposed and then he pressed his weight down upon her, forcing her leg even further back as he simultaneously alighted with tongue and lips onto her mouth and slid the fingers of one hand into both openings at once.

“Uuhhhh,” she moaned, fingers curling into his muscular shoulders as his own fingers thrust and curled inside her. There was something so visceral about being compressed and impaled at once; it felt incredibly intense, especially with his tongue fucking her open mouth at the same time. And despite his considerable presence and the way she was pinned beneath him, she managed to curl and arch her hips in time with his plunging fingers, forcing him deeper inside her.

“It’s a pleasure to feel you fighting for what you want,” he murmured against her lips.

It was such a subtle inference that she didn’t quite understand it at first. But as he continued to kiss her deeply, his fingers delving into her increasingly lubricious openings, the meaning of his words finally coalesced. She had always fought. Standing up for what was right was central to her being—a core part of her identity. At least it had been. But the war had somehow transformed her, stealing away that fierce commitment, until she barely recognised herself. She’d become so passive, self-pitying, a victim, unable to stand up for herself, let alone anyone else. Indeed, she’d not even been able to bring herself to fight for her own survival. Without his intervention in the tower she wouldn’t even be here, with him, looking back on her own recovery with tears in her eyes.

He had wanted her to be strong. He’d gone to great lengths to make her understand the power that still resided within her, despite how hopeless she felt. His unconventional teachings had been all about forcing her to know herself more intimately, to understand her inherent potency in an effort to establish her independence from the guilt and self-loathing that was gradually consuming her.

And she could admit now that it had worked. She’d gradually come to understand his lessons but, unfortunately for him, the strength he’d instilled had only ended up fortifying her resolve to pursue
her parents’ restoration, not to declare, as he might have wanted, her freedom from the dangers of attachment.

She wondered then if that was what he had attempted to secure in his own life. Did he see safety in isolation?

Her heart suddenly clenched. Was that why he had sacrificed himself? Was this an attempt to undermine his own attachment . . . to her?

After all, the way he was kissing her now, gradually sinking into her like a man content to drown; the way he reached into her body, as though desperate to feel her most intimate recesses, to etch them into his memory for when they were taken away, it was quite clear that he was neither free, nor safe—he was helplessly bound, as was she.

But could she risk confronting the true purpose of his actions?

No.

Not when they were so precariously balanced—only a tenuous thread holding them together. In these final moments, she wanted to be his, and for him to do with her as he wished. After all, his desires and her own were so closely aligned that everything he did simply opened her up to more of what she wanted. And when his fingers slipped out of her and were suddenly replaced by something new, slithering over her nether regions . . . tendrils . . . cool metal . . . her heart started racing.

She couldn’t deny that she’d imagined the sensation already—the shock, the biting sting as the studded flogger lashed her labia. But that didn’t appear to be his plan. At least not for now. The feathery tails were soon replaced by the sensation of the flared knob of the handle slipping up and down her cleft. A muttered spell against her cheek and then she felt the tracking stop and the pressure start to build at her anus. Inhaling sharply, she grasped the bedclothes in her fist as the freshly lubricated head pulsed insistently against her constriction. She found her muscles naturally starting to pulse with it, admitting its considerable size in tiny increments. Finally she felt the knob slip past her sphincter, delving deeper before he began thrusting and that’s when she lost all sense of coherence.

His cock had been so huge inside her that first time that it had all been about coping, at least initially. But this was entirely different, it was intense but not at all uncomfortable, and each time the handle twisted and thrust, stimulating her back passage, a string of exclamations and expletives slurred from her lips that she barely understood but couldn’t seem to stop.

She was vaguely aware of him lifting her other leg, then a new pressure at her pussy, the head of his cock nudged inside her compressed opening as the flogger continued to stroke—it had clearly been charmed to continue fucking her. Moments later, he grasped her upper arms and thrust his cock in to the hilt, causing her to arch up between her own thighs, now pressed against either side of her torso.

As her breaths faltered, a tight moan escaping her, he began to pump, alternating with the flogger that seemed to have grown considerably, or perhaps it was just the sensation of being filled to capacity.

“Severus . . . Severus . . . ,” she groaned, the word a rhythmic accompaniment to each solid intrusion.

“I’m here,” he whispered in her ear and she instantly released the bedclothes, digging her fingers into his back, holding on with everything she had.

The steady susurration of his breath against her neck, the flexion of his muscles under her hands, the straining weight of him folding her in half, and the sensation of her most intimate passages being plunged as comprehensively as possible consumed her . . . and suddenly she was floating again. She
sensed the synchronicity of it all, the way her own breaths and her own heart merged with the rhythm of the rest, and she no longer felt like she was being fucked by someone external to her, but that he was inside her, and she was fucking herself, drawing each element of him into her own pleasure.

It was so pure that when she finally gathered to come, it wasn’t the unholy wail that she might have expected but a breathy sigh of exaltation that flowed from her throughout her deliverance, as her entire body shuddered and quaked, erupting over and over into itself until she was left clenching and stuttering around the two shafts that had taken her there but hadn’t diminished in their intensity.

When she finally opened her eyes, she found that he was looking at her.

She saw the need ticking through his features as he continued to thrust home, harder and harder. But there was also a stark vulnerability there. It was as he’d indicated in the beginning—two cocks fighting for supremacy inside her, the two versions of himself, battling it out.

But he wasn’t a stag . . . not the one he’d touted to win. He was a doe.

*After James and Harry, had he come to expect that only the stags would ever prevail?*

Her heart and body were overflowing with him. She had accepted him. All of him. And if he wanted her, she was his, he had won . . . twice.

If only for this moment.

She gazed into his eyes, wondering if he could feel everything that was churning around inside her—sadness, fury, love.

It made her so angry that a man like he should think so little of himself. After everything he had sacrificed in the service of others. And that he wouldn’t have an opportunity, even now, to live the life of peace that he deserved.

But, as he had said, she was a fighter. And she happened to consider him very much worth fighting for.

“*I love you, Severus.*” She gripped him with determination. “*I love you however you may come.*”

His face collapsed then, as though he had only just been holding on, and then he came, his vocalisations more sobs than groans.

She didn’t stop holding him, even as the jerks of his cock and the pumping flogger died inside her. When he finally did move, it was to gently remove the embedded handle and to slide her legs back down, allowing her to draw her first full breath in a long time.

He lifted his face to look at her then, his eyes bloodshot, his brow creased in an open expression of pain.

“*Love?*” he repeated hoarsely. “*After everything that has happened? After all that you know of me?*”

She nodded slowly.

He shook his head despondently.

“*Why can’t you believe that of me?*” she asked earnestly. “*Or, more importantly, why can’t you believe it of yourself?*”
“I considered that it would resolve . . . when you improved.”

Hermione looked at him incredulously. “This is not some aberration, Severus. It’s not just some troubled attachment that I’ll grow out of. It’s happened twice. Don’t you see?” She searched both of his eyes, trying to find understanding. “This isn’t something that needs to right itself. You are worthy of love . . . and I have fallen in love with you.”

“But . . .” he floundered, his lips attempting to formulate some sort of rebuttal, “. . . it’s of no use.”

“Yes it is.”

He blinked at her, his brow creasing further in consternation. “What do you mean?”

She lifted a hand to his cheek, attempting to reassure him.

“You will tell the Ministry that I cast the Obliviation reversal.”

His head jerked back in shock. “I will not.”

“You will,” she stated firmly.

“And if you don’t tell them . . . I will.”
A/N: Well this is it, the final chapter. If you’ve made it this far, I sincerely hope you’ve enjoyed this story. It has been intense and tumultuous, which pretty well sums up my life during the time of writing. But it is also a love story which I hope comes through in the end. As always, I couldn’t have done it without the support of you, my loyal and generous readers. This past two years of writing has been extraordinary. I didn’t ever imagine that I could write anything that anyone would be interested in reading . . . so this entire journey is beyond anything I could ever have dreamed of. I have entered a new chapter in my life, as most of you know. And thanks to your support and encouragement I am considering taking my writing a step further with an original fic and hopefully publication. This means that I might not have as much time for SS/HG but they will always be my OTP and my HEA. I hope to keep in touch with all of you who I have loved hearing from throughout. Take care and my sincerest thanks, DSxx

Severus was as close to panic-stricken as Hermione had ever seen him. A wildness had captured his eyes, such that she could imagine the churning chaos closing in on him, as it had with her on so many occasions. No doubt he could see the world unravelling—all of his plans to protect her falling apart.

But there was nothing else for it.

She had to make him understand.

“You told me that I’d finished your story.”

His gaze jumped about distractedly, his dark brows drawing together as he tried to make sense of her words.

She slipped the hand that she’d placed against his cheek into his hair and grabbed on tightly, trying to get him to focus.

“Severus, you told me that I’d finished your story,” she repeated urgently, sensing that their time together was almost up. “Now I want to finish my own . . . with you.” He shook his head faintly but she ignored it, holding on tighter. “I want you to finish it.”

“I . . . can’t.”

“Yes,” she persisted, tugging his face towards her. “Yes, you can.”

She smiled then, her conviction growing as she heard the words, her own, spoken aloud.

“You must go to the Ministry and tell them that I cast the reversal.” His head was shaking ‘no’ again but she tugged him more forcefully, steadying his gaze upon her. “Tell them that I went into hiding—I failed to return after leaving a note. Tell them that I was untraceable for a week and a half until you caught up with me at my parents’ house . . . after the reversal had already occurred.”

His gaze narrowed. He was clearly unconvinced but she ploughed on.
“Tell them that you’re confident that I will take it no further . . . that my intention was only ever to perform the reversal on my parents and that I am now safe.”

“And why would they believe such a thing?” he snapped bitterly.

“They may not. But tell them that you will be responsible for me . . . If it happens again, you will accept the repercussions, personally.”

He snorted. “So after already losing you for a week and a half, they would be confident of such a claim?”

“Tell them you will be watching me more closely from now on. In fact, I will rarely be out of your sight.”

The frown returned, his eyes shuttering slightly as though on the verge of comprehension.

She released his hair then, rubbing him gently behind the ear before trailing her hand back down to his cheek, nestling her thumb-tip in the cleft of his scar.

“Tell them that you will be leaving Hogwarts . . . with me . . . as soon as a replacement is found for the Headmaster position. And that this is the final role that you will ever perform in their service. Or in the service of anyone.”

He blinked then . . . slowly . . . as the realisation gradually surfaced, boiling up from the depths of his eyes. After a few moments, he swallowed, and she noted the faint tremble of his parted lips.

“I don’t need your pity.” His words were a strangled whisper.

“You don’t have my pity,” she stated firmly, attempting to dispel his doubts. Still she gazed at him, keeping her heart and mind as open as possible in case he needed further reassurance. “You have my heart. And I can only hope,” she paused, suddenly anxious that she may have somehow misread him, “. . . that I have yours.”

He stared at her then and she felt herself shrinking further under his scrutiny. He still had the capacity to intimidate her with a look, to fell her with a word . . . but this time his piercing gaze had her questioning . . .

Had she somehow got it wrong? Was she about to find out that she’d made a huge mistake . . . that she didn’t really know him at all?

Reaching a hand towards her, he placed his palm against her cheek, and she felt his index finger resting lightly upon her temple.

She caught her breath.

Then again . . . there was always that option.

To remove everything once and for all . . . as though it had never been . . . except in the weft of her body . . . and the weave . . . of her dreams.

***

“This is alright, isn’t it?” Harry nodded appreciatively as his gaze swept around the garden, an open bottle of beer in one hand and the other fist shoved deep into his pocket.

Hermione knew that her grin was ridiculous, but she couldn’t seem to temper it, she was just happy
—beyond happy, in fact . . . she had been verging on delirious the entire day. Being able to invite her friends and family around for lunch . . . to her house . . . to their home, was so surreal that she had almost worried that she would slip back into that trance-like fog again—the one that had dominated much of her life only a matter of months before.

But he had been there to reassure her . . . soft kisses in her hair . . . hands on her shoulders, trickling down her arms as she’d stirred potatoes at the stove. Then her hands had sought him out, gliding over his chest as he’d set the beer, his own brew, on ice.

“We like it,” she responded shyly, squinting a little in the sunlight.

Harry grinned knowingly. “I’ll say. I’ve never seen you so happy . . . and Snape . . .”

Hermione lifted a hopeful eyebrow, finding that she was suddenly desperate . . . needing to know that her friends accepted the man she had chosen—the man that she loved so dearly, that she adored so fervently that she could spend hours simply watching him . . . tending the garden . . . reading, her head resting on his lap. Her heart would fill with his quiet, with his contemplation. And she would feel it all restoring him, leaf by leaf, page by page.

“He smiled at me when he answered the door,” Harry laughed. “I didn’t think he was capable of it.”

Hermione’s smile broadened as she imagined Harry’s shock at seeing the man whose features had lifted visibly, casting aside years of strain, who now wore tidy but casual Muggle clothes and who would even laugh . . . spontaneously. When that deep bass rolled out, it was still so unexpected and infectious and she would inevitably end up joining in.

“We’re both really happy.” She lifted one shoulder in a small shrug. “I sometimes have trouble believing it . . . after everything . . .”

Harry nodded and took a swig of beer before wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “Yeah.”

They grew quiet for a moment.

“How are you going?” Hermione asked, looking over to the swing seat where Ginny and Luna were in deep conversation, glasses of white wine cupped in their hands. “You and Ginny?”

Harry looked into his beer bottle, as though studying the answer in its depths.

“You know.” He tilted his head a little to the side. “I was angry for a long time . . . after finding out that she’d lied.”

“She was scared of losing you.”

“Well . . . she nearly did.” He looked at her, his green eyes hardening behind his glasses.

“We’ve all done things we’re not proud of.” Hermione reached out and touched his arm. “I know I have. And you’ve still managed to forgive me.”

“Have I?” He gazed at her for long enough for her to begin to worry. Then the corner of his mouth lifted. “Yeah, it’s just that I wasn’t there when you needed me . . . because of her lies.”

Hermione squeezed his arm reassuringly. “I had someone else.”

He nodded slowly. “You did.” Then he looked over her shoulder and she knew that he was studying Severus. “But you didn’t really say what he did that was so helpful.”
Hermione suddenly hooked her arm into Harry’s and turned her face away, hoping to cover the flush rising in her cheeks. “He just encouraged me . . . to be more.”

“Did he?” Harry sounded sceptical.

“Well . . . in a fashion,” she murmured, heading with him towards Ginny and Luna.

“There’s certainly more to him than meets the eye.” Harry glanced his way again.

“Oh yes,” she breathed, her own eyes flickering over to Severus, drinking him in as she always did. He was sitting in a plastic chair on the patio, gesticulating with his usual air of elegance as her mother trilled with laughter before slapping him lightly on the knee. Hermione smiled. Her mother adored him, and Hermione loved it.

“So this all seems pretty serious.” Harry nodded toward the back of the house as they approached. “Is it a long-term thing?”

“I hope so. My parents have helped with the deposit—they made a bit from selling their house in Australia. Severus has started brewing again for the apothecary. And I’ll be taking my N.E.W.Ts next month. Then hopefully I can move on and find a job that I enjoy.”

“At the Ministry?”

“No.”

“Why?”

She chewed the inside of her cheek thoughtfully. “I’m not sure that their values align with mine.”

Harry frowned at her. “Is this about the House-elves again?”

She laughed. “No, it’s just a matter of being wise enough . . . to learn from the past.”

His eyes roved over her face. “Sounds like another story?”

“For another time,” she responded quickly, smiling at Ginny who was beckoning them over.

“And remember, Harry.” She suddenly turned to him. “We’ve all been through a lot. And we have all coped differently. No one’s perfect. Not me. Not Ginny. Not even the boy who lived.”

Harry grinned. “I’m as good as.”

Laughing, Hermione pushed him away.

***

Severus filled Mrs Granger’s glass with white wine before dismissing the bottle back to the ice box.

She considered him over the rim of the glass as she took a sip, the mirth in the corners of her eyes fading a little. It seemed there was something more serious that she wished to discuss.

Finally she said it,

“I still don’t completely trust my memory. Do you find that?”

Severus paused, considering his own glass, tilting it so that the sun played off the rim. “It’s difficult .
“Do you think it’s real?” she continued. “Or am I simply imagining it... anxious perhaps?”

He released a slow breath. “There is a sensation... of knowing... that comes naturally with our thoughts. It gives us confidence to trust ourselves. When that has been compromised, it can be challenging for that trust to be restored.”

She watched him closely, her eyes—so much like Hermione’s—intently scanning his face.

“You see, I’m worried. My mother has Alzheimer’s disease. I sometimes wonder if it might be the beginnings of that. I even wonder if what happened may have caused... damage.”

The staccato delivery and the way she now avoided his gaze made it clear that she was attempting to keep her emotions in check. Severus put his glass down on the arm of his chair and leaned forward a little to address her.

“There is no physical damage. But your anxiety will make any perceived deficit worse. You need to create opportunities to validate yourself... to demonstrate that your capacity remains, but be gentle, don’t force it. It is also the case that our memories of any given situation will never be entirely accurate. And that is as it should be.”

She blinked a few times before nodding her acknowledgement. “Yes, you’re right, Severus.” She swallowed, her face pinching a little before continuing. “I suppose it is also an odd sense of guilt—to now understand how frightening it is to lose that trust... that sense of familiarity. And yet I put my mother through it every time I visit. She doesn’t remember me. She must wonder who this stranger is... constantly reinforcing what has been lost. I wonder if it would be better for me not to see her at all.”

Her voice had ground down to little more than a whisper.

Severus reached out, placing his hand on top of hers.

“Without memory there is no past. But there is a present... and future. When you live in the present... joy comes in moments, not memories. And you can still have rich moments... always.”

She broke down then, turning her hand to grasp his as she pressed the other to her mouth. She remained that way, shuddering silently until her breaths had slowed to sighs and the whites of her knuckles had faded. Finally she stood, turning her shimmering gaze to him.

“I’m just so grateful that you found one another,” she murmured, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. “You are exactly what she needs.”

Then she released him and headed toward the back door in short, quick strides.

He sat back.

*What she needs.*

It was still almost impossible to fathom.

He turned his head. Across the garden Hermione lifted two slender fingers in a small wave. And then she was approaching, framed in sunlight, her mass of curls aflame. And it happened to be how he always saw her. Perpetually gilt. Like a gift. One that he received every day. Over and over again.
What she needs?

He had been wrong. He understood that now. One could not live as an emotional isolate. Not without becoming a mere shell, rotten on the inside.

*But how did one live as the opposite—an emotional gourmand? Simultaneously empty, aching with need, and full, bursting with adoration?*

*How did one live with this?* This soft, sensuous woman now sinking into his lap . . . now kissing him, filling him with a whole new emotion, one that he knew only as ‘Hermione’—love magnified until it stole his breath away.

*How did one live with her?*

Quite wonderfully . . . as it turned out.

By accepting that, despite everything, sometimes life was good.

By letting gratitude be enough.

And by giving everything of himself to her, laying himself bare because he trusted her more than he had ever trusted anyone, including himself.

She had been gradually restoring his memories, a fraction at a time—helping to reunite the traces . . . to relieve the deep-set torment. And she had challenged him to accept and forgive by opening and giving of herself, by guiding him, easing him through each difficult revelation with the impassioned cajoling of her body and the penetrating insight of her mind.

Even now, as she sat completely encompassed by him, he felt her hand slip protectively around his shoulders.

And that was the crux of it all. That they could be both the strength and grace that one another needed.

Then, of course, there was the fact that just being near her made him extremely hard.

“Do you need to take a potion in the future . . . before such occasions?” He could hear the smile on her voice as she leaned into his ear. “To ensure that the little Slytherin doesn’t make a scene?”

“Little?”

“Well . . . compared to the rest of you.” She kissed his neck. “. . . My substantial Slytherin.”

“That’s not helping,” he warned her, shifting his hips a little to accommodate the straining bulge in his trousers.

“Yes it is,” she breathed, sliding her hand down to his crotch.

He inhaled sharply and caught her by the wrist. “Disobedience of that sort has serious repercussions, as you well know,” he rumbled under his breath. “What particular punishment were you hoping for tonight?”

She nipped him on the earlobe. “Well Headmaster . . . I thought I’d leave that up to your discretion.”

He growled, holding her closer.
Despite having enjoyed the day more than expected, he had a good mind to now Imperius the lot of them and march them out the door so he could tie her to the patio furniture and fuck her in every way imaginable.

She snorted in his ear. “I don’t think these chairs will be up to the job.”

He chuckled, turning to capture her lips again.

She knew him too well. Better than anyone had ever cared to know him.

Which is why she was perfect.

And why she was his—a fact that she seemed to be rather proud of, making sure that the ‘S’-shaped bruises on her backside were never allowed to fade.

THE END

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