They hoped that life could find some normalcy after seven years of fear and tension. What they forgot was the Wizarding World is never merely "normal." SS/HG, DM/OC, HP/GW. WIP. NON-CON, NC-17, Adults Only. Chapter 37+ co-written with SnowBlind12.

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Notes

Disclaimer: The wonderful world of Harry Potter Does not belong to me, but this plot does. I do not get paid for my stories.

AN: No need to leave a review OR read this story if you are going to complain about OR if the following things bother you - 1. Character Pairing: If you don't like a Snape/Hermione pairing, move on. 2. Age Difference of Character Pairing: For pity sake. My husband is 10 years older then me. We met when I was 17, started dating when I was 19, married when I was 24 and had children together at 25, 27, 29, and 32. My HUSBAND’S mom and dad were NINTEEN (that's 1-9: 19) years apart in age. There are women out there that are too mature for their own good. I needed a large age gap to find someone who was on my maturity level emotionally, physically, and mentally. The age gap just ISN'T that big of a deal. 3. Hermione Student/Snape teacher: Agreed, it's creepy. It's also a bit romantic and every school girl who has ever had a crush on her teacher fantasizes about it. Fits the realm of Fan FICTION very well. I relish this pairing simply because of my own life experiences. I
see Snape in my husband and I see Hermione in myself. It's personal. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT...MOVE ON.

I want you to all know that this Prologue is dark. This is rated M for a reason. There will be erotica (lemons), adult language, and adult content. There is one chapter in this story that explicitly depicts rape. This is an angst/drama, but much of the beginning of the story will be light and fun and fluffy. The bulk of this story belongs to Snape and Hermione. There is one original character in this story - her name is Elizabeth Williams (Lizzie). Her story is going to center around Draco Malfoy, Ron Weasley, and Hermione and she's my solid co-story. There will be light stuff with other couples. I hope you enjoy. I beg you to review. I'll take positive and constructive alike! x~*LissaDream

**Adult Tags:** Masturbation, sexual intercourse, sexual intercourse of a minor (17), kidnapping, rape, torture, beating, cutting, hints of anal intercourse, light BDSM, pregnancy. Extreme emotional situations following abduction and rape.

Read at your own risk. If you don't like - I don't need to hear from you. Flames are not necessary - just walk away.
She woke with a soft moan of anguish, her head pounding. Although she was having trouble remembering why, anxiety filled her body. She slowly attempted to unfurl her cramped extremities. Where am I?! Her breath started coming in fast, hiccupping gulps; the oxygen not getting to her fingers and toes which were agonizingly cold and tingling. She realized she was bound and twisted painfully. Eyes flying open wide, her disorientation continued as she attempted to peer into the darkness that flooded her corneas. She could see nothing. Using her shoulders and knees to press into a low kneeling position, she winced as the tough skin surrounding her patella was pinched painfully into the damp, concrete floor. “Hello?” she whispered. Her throat felt like sand paper and she swallowed hard.

She felt a trickle of liquid over her lips and her tongue flicked out and tasted the metallic tinge of blood. I'm bleeding? Her heart started to thrum in her ears as adrenaline surged through her veins. Oh, my head, she groaned as her chin fell to her heaving chest. The sound of heavy booted footsteps came from above and she startled hard, attempting to curl into herself. The rough ropes knotting her wrists behind her back and to her ankles allowed no such movements. She made a pitiful puff of pain as she pulled and her right shoulder stretched uncomfortably. It was then that she realized she was completely naked. A sob broke free and her body started to tremor violently. True and unrelenting fear coursed through her body.

A door creaked and a small shaft of blue light dimmed through her surrounding, lighting unfamiliar and terrifying objects. Those heavy boots started on the stairs and she recoiled with a small squeak, frantically searching for someplace to hide. She closed her eyes when she realized it was futile and sucked in a deep breath to hold, trying to calm her frantic mind.

“Isn’t she a hot piece of arse?” a deep, gravelly voice came from behind her. “Look at those perfect, heart-shaped globes.” She froze, back going ramrod straight while her shoulders hunched in attempts to cover her nakedness. Her breath whooshed out of her in a rush of panic and she squeezed her eyes tighter – willing this to be a bad dream.

“I do see why you felt she could meet our…needs, it will certainly make him sit up and pay attention,” a softer tenor responded, oddly familiar in its lilt. “Do you think this was the wisest move, though? It may make him play much more roughly than we intended.” Two? She swore she hadn’t heard two people enter. Her breathing hitched to a more rapid pace and sudden rough hands came under her arms pulling her up awkwardly against his chest, making her thighs fall open. Another terrified yelp broke through her restraint as tears pricked behind her eyelids.

“Doncha think this is a wise move?” the gruff voice lamented. “Look at that slit, it’s fucking gorgeous. And her tits! Fuck.”

Hermione’s lips pursed tightly closed and whimpered a sound of pain out her nose as a rough, long nailed hand slapped her nipple with a sharp crack. A rolling chortle of breath fingered out over her breasts. A soft, surprisingly gentle, hand curled at her throat and another at her thigh. The second man. She opened coffee with cream colored eyes and stared, mouth gaping in surprised horror, into the ice grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy. “Doncha ya wiggle like that, witch, or I’ll give you something to wiggle on.” One of the rough hands that supported her to his chest slid down her arse, pinching it roughly.
She whimpered frantically, attempting to pull away as the soft hand on her thigh rose higher. Her stomach clenched in revulsion, she sucked in a breath and daringly spit at him, hard. It hit Malfoy just below the left eye. She didn’t even have time to take a breath before the open-handed blow snapped her neck back. She cried out in terrified agony as the blow made her head reel all the worse, but her sound was squeezed off as the hand at her throat tightened restrictively. She thrashed against her binds, desperate for life-giving oxygen. Seconds ticked by, she felt her eyes bulge. She met Malfoy’s eyes with pleading tears.

“She can’t meet our needs if she’s dead,” the gruff, thick voice came from behind her and the pressure on her larynx disappeared. She choked sobbing breaths into her bruised trachea. I don’t understand, she wept internally, trying to force the tears that prickled her eyes to stay put.

“Well, well, well … Miss Granger,” came Malfoy’s silky voice as one hand returned to her thigh. His voice was laced with satisfied amusement. “What have we here?” Hermione turned her face away from his gaze, ashamed, as a crimson blushed its way up her torso, breasts, and across her high cheek bones. One of his perfectly manicured fingers delved into her soft, slippery fresh. The sob that broke from her chest was defeated as he flicked her clitoris and her body betrayed her with a shiver. “Perhaps you are happy to see me?”
Chapter One

Chapter Summary

I have this written through Chapter Thirty. I have it coded and edited through Chapter Seven. It is a WIP. I will post as frequently as I can until they are all up. I do have this posted in it's current entirety on FFN and AFF.

Chapter One – May 1997

“Will you two come with me?” Harry’s voice whispered from nowhere. Hermione and Ron immediately rose. “Dumbledore’s office,” he murmured. They followed him, unseeing, hand-in-hand, through the Great Hall and up the ruined stone stairwell. Climbing exhaustedly, they reached the Headmaster’s office with little interference.

They watched with pride as the past headmasters and mistresses from Hogwarts cheered and congratulated Harry through their portraits. Watched as Harry and Dumbledore had their odd, sentimental exchange. When the cheering died down and the people in the portraits started to file out to seek news of the dead and injured, Harry turned to them. “I want to tell you what happened.”

And he did. Hermione, gripping Ron’s fingers tightly in hers, listened with her heart in her throat as Harry told them about Severus Snape and Lily Potter. Tears trickled down her face and Ron’s arm circled around her shoulders, pulling her close as Harry recounted his insanely brave trek to his death in the Forbidden Forest. They both gasped with wonder that the Resurrection Stone was in the Snitch and exchanged thankful, sorrowful glances with each other as he described how his mother and father and their friends helped him find the courage to walk into the bosom of Death Eaters that surrounded Voldemort and the curse that would take his life.

They listened in fascination and wonder as Harry retold his after-death experience of conversing with Dumbledore and how he was allowed to choose to return to them. At this point, she couldn’t take it anymore. Hermione pulled away from Ron and wrapped Harry in a snug embrace, burying her face in his chest as she cried. Hermione’s display of undiluted love and friendship choked off Harry’s words as tears fell for the hundredth time that night. He reached for Ron to join them. After what felt like years, they all calmed. Grateful to have each other safe. Grateful for it to be over.

“So, Professor Snape was the hero,” Hermione mused with deepening sadness, as she untangled herself from her two best friends and wiped tired eyes on her sleeve.

“The bravest man I’ll ever know,” Harry agreed, letting a deep sigh puncture the momentary silence.

“We should go collect his body,” Ron suggested after another brief stillness.

“Yes,” Harry and Hermione said in unison. Hermione reached for Ron’s hand again and he took it, gently weaving his fingers through hers, a dumfounded smile on his face. She returned it with a watery one of her own, her heart aching.

Together they made their way out onto the grounds. Harry was stopped numerous times by
volunteers combing the rubble for bodies. They wanted to touch him, talk to him, and thank him. After only being able to journey a few yards in as many minutes, Hermione whispered in his ear, “Harry, we’ll go get Snape. You stay with these people, they need you.” For some reason, her anxiety was peeking again. She felt a pull to dignify the man that had likely saved them all with his fearless, cunning bravery.

It felt like a lifetime had passed before they made their way into the Shrieking Shack. Hermione had captured the attention of a Healer who had insisted on bringing a Mediwizard and a magicked stretcher with. Hermione was the first through the passage, her wand held high with its tip lit to see the way through the dreary tunnel. Pulling her weary body into a sitting position as she crawled out of the channel, she struggled to her feet. She rounded the bend, her eyes landing on Snape and froze, mouth agape. His coal black eyes sparkled feverishly, his wand raised as if poised to attack. It trembled slightly, but otherwise a show of strength and rage dominated his features. His other hand was clamped tightly over a bunched bit of rags at the wound in his neck. She cried out, wand tumbling out of her fingers, and lunged towards him, ignoring that his wand rose menacingly. Both her hands pressed to help cover the one he held at his neck. His eyes met hers, searching, as if trying to assess her realness; trying to see if she was there to help or destroy. She shushed him gently as the Healer and Mediwizard sprang to action. “I won’t let you die, I promise,” she whispered fiercely, earnest and kind caramel eyes meeting onyx. “I know what you did, I know who you are. I won’t let you die!” His large hand turned and grasped one of hers tightly in it as his eyes dulled, whether with pain or mistrust, she didn’t know. She stared back at him with clear, syrupy eyes. Apparently finding what he needed, he closed his own and his hand went limp in hers, head lolling.

“HELP HIM!” she wailed, frantically turning his face to hers, trying to wake him. Gentle hands pulled her away as she tried to spring forward to assist; not knowing what to do but needing to do something…anything.

August 1997

Hermione woke with an anguished cry, tears pouring down her cheeks as the bed covers tried to strangle her legs. “Hermione!” a soft, pleading lilt. “Mione, please wake up. You’re going to wake up Mum!” Hermione’s breathing slowed some, her sharp mind locking onto Ginny’s soft, sweet voice. Her friend and confidant. Her truest supporter. Inhaling a deep, cleansing breath through her freckled button nose she stilled.

Her eyes opened to find Ginny’s boring holes into her. “Did you dream about him again?” she whispered worriedly. Hermione nodded mutely. “Are you okay?” Ginny prodded.

Hermione nodded. “Yes,” she whimpered through a tight throat.

“Should we go see him today?” her friend’s gaze was intense, unwavering.

“Yes,” came the almost inaudible reply, tinged with relief and longing.

Ginny nodded. “Try and get more sleep first, okay? Mum said she wanted to visit some of the other wounded who haven’t gotten to go home, today, as well.”

Hermione’s imperceptible affirmation was given and Ginny rolled off the edge of the twin bed made up for her guest and crawled back into her own. “I’m glad you and Ron decided not to take a romance anywhere,” she murmured conversationally as she cocooned herself back into the covers. “I know it took him a few days to get over, but I heard him tell Harry last night it was probably for the best. He values you as a friend too much to lose you completely if something were to not turn out right down the road.”

“Have you gotten anywhere with Harry?” Hermione asked softly, changing the subject quickly as
she pulled the bed clothes straight and threw a couple of punches into her pillow to fluff it up. “Is he still talking nonsense about not being with you?”

Ginny snorted. “I think I ‘talked’ him back into it. I knew he didn’t mean it, I know he’s just still apprehensive about it truly being over.”

“I think we all are,” Hermione answered gravely. “How’d the ‘talking’ go.”

“Almost too far,” she chortled with a wicked grin. Then she sighed, “I was half naked and he was completely disheveled before he called it off this time.” Her smirk broadened. “I wished him a bad case of the blue balls, mentally, for leaving me so ready and wanting. He’s determined I be seventeen before we have sex. I told him he better have an awesome present for my birthday.” She snorted.

Hermione choked. “Sex? Pft. I’m not ready and I’m eighteen.” Her mind wandered to the stolen moments with Ron after the battle, both seeking comfort for their wounded hearts and bodies. She never would let it go past some heavy petting – with clothes on. But would she have made the person stop if it had been him? She shook her head, dispelling her thoughts.

“You’re not in love,” Ginny responded wisely.

Hermione mulled that over for a moment, then acquiesced with a nod of her head. “I’ll give that to you.”

She wasn’t a hundred percent sure if she would make someone stop or not. If it felt right, she was definitely old enough…right? Moments later, she heard Ginny’s soft, even breathing and she slipped out of bed, pulling the comforter with her. She crawled up onto the window seat into a tall kneel before tilting to one side to rest on her hip, one shoulder to the window frame. She pulled the warm folds of the worn blanket around her legs. It was very early, she guessed around 4:30. The sun was barely peeping over the horizon in royal blue streaks that blended into the indigo of the night. Stars still twinkled brightly above, it was a new moon, so the stars were the only light that could be seen.

She sighed, dropping her forehead into one hand. It had been a rough summer. A summer of recovery. Hogwarts students had been dismissed the day of the battle and had not returned. While she had read in the paper that magically the castle had restored itself through its deeply engrained enchantments, there was still many repairs left to complete throughout the grounds and Quidditch pitch which the giants and enormous arachnids had destroyed. Minerva McGonagall had been appointed Headmistress. Most of the teaching staff were returning to their posts, except Slughorn, who was permanently retiring. It had been decided that because the school had a tumultuous prior year, all students would be returning to repeat the year they should have completed formerly and there would be a double batch of first years. This meant that Harry, Ron, and Hermione were returning to Hogwarts to complete their seventh and final year and take their N.E.W.T.s. Ginny would return for two more years to complete her secondary school education. While some students felt bitter about this, between the Ministry of Magic and Hogwarts’ staff, it was deemed the best solution versus having partially educated witches and wizards perform poorly on their exams and left to desperately attempt to qualify for posts they were not ready for.

Hermione was grateful she would be able to spend one more year not having to take on full adult responsibilities. She felt blessed that she would get the chance to do up her final year right, with no fear. She was excited to learn what she should have learned while on the run last year, and graduate with the scores she would receive after a year with no distractions and the proper amount of hard work and studying.

Her mind wandered, and she wondered if Snape would return. A slow tickle of warmth in her stomach would not allow for her denial of want. She wanted him to return. She shook her head violently. No, ‘Mione. That’s enough. He’s your teacher. Of course she knew that. She didn’t know
what her problem had been this summer. But her longing to know the real him, the one he’d kept hidden from everyone for so long was very intense and threatened to derail her thoughts completely. She bit her tongue and forced herself to redirect her thoughts.

As soon as the dust had settled at Hogwarts, Mrs. Weasley had gathered all her chicks – herself and Harry included – and they had returned home to the Burrow. Many funerals were attended by all, and a sob broke softly through her lips as she remembered laying Fred, Lupin, and Tonks to rest in the ground. Tears trickled down hollow cheeks and she swiped at them angrily. She had cried enough. Once a new routine had been established by the Weasely family, Hermione had let Molly know she needed to find her parents and restore their memories.

It was good to have them home and know that she could return to them and her childhood when the need became dire, but staying there had been suffocating. She had owled Harry to see if she could move in with him at Grimmauld Place, to which Harry replied he was staying at the Burrow for the summer with the intent to permanently reside at Grimmauld Place after the school year ended. She had balked at the thought of returning to Ron. In the aftermath of the Battle, when she was no longer terrified for her life, it had all felt wrong. Even though they had invited her to join them, she had declined to come. This prompted both Harry and Ron to turn up on her stoop the next day.

Harry took one look at Hermione’s surprised and apprehensive face and immediately realized what was wrong. He awkwardly excused himself into the house to prattle at Mr. and Mrs. Granger while Hermione took Ron’s hand and strolled with him to a local park.

They sat on the swings together and Ron lamented over the weather, looking increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, his eyes met hers, and as the tears toppled over her lower lashes, he reached out and brushed one away.

“We’re not going to do this, are we?” he asked her tenderly. She bit her lip as another tear fell, then gently shook her head.

“I love you, Hermione,” he whispered. She nodded.

“I know,” she murmured, gripping the chains of the swing, making her knuckles go white. “I love you, too, Ron. It’s just that, I’m not in love with you.”

He sighed deeply and averted his gaze. “I’ve been wondering about that the last couple weeks, too. I know I love you, but I’ve been worried it was all the pressure and responsibility of the war that made me think I was in love with you.” His voice sounded wrong, but her eyes flew to meet his, a wave of hopeful relief rolling over her like tides over sand.

“We can go back?” she pleaded. He gave a firm nod of his head and gentle smile.

“I think so.” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “It’ll be okay. Come back to the Burrow with us?” Her heart shattered at his expression. He was trying to put on a brave front through his disappointment, she felt like a harpy. She was ashamed of herself. Her gaze dropped.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“Never,” he responded, the truth peeled out of him like phoenix song. “No matter how life changes, ‘Mione, you and I will always be family. We’ve shared too much.”

The gentle tears that had slid down her face fell in thicker waves as her breath caught in her throat and she reached out to him. He stood, pulling her with him and into his arms. Wrapping them tightly around her and burying his face in her fragrant, bushy hair.
She shook herself out of her reverie and was startled to realize the sun was fully over the horizon. Heaving another sigh and wiping yet one more tear off her cheek, she forced herself to stand and don a dressing gown. She would see if she could start breakfast for Mrs. Weasley before the house stirred to life. Keeping busy helped her the most.
Chapter Two

Severus Snape let a long, impatient sigh run languidly through his large nose. If that bloody Mediwitch asked if he wanted a fucking sponge bath one more time today, he would not be responsible for what happened. “No, Miss Dronna. I washed with the therapist this morning,” he drawled, maintaining a bored, but reasonably polite expression on his face. Ever since the truth of his part in the war had come to light, he had received an outpouring of attention from witches all over the country, much to his chagrin. Apparently, an Order of Merlin, First Class was enough to make the knickers drop all over Great Britain. He insisted that all mail be forwarded to his house. He would burn it when he got back to Spinner’s End. Crazy, hero-worshiping witches. Didn’t they know he just wanted a life back?

He had zero interest in being the hero. He just wanted to survive this bloody hospital stay and be allowed to live a … normal life. Normal. He snorted This made the Mediwitch startle and throw a hopeful glance in his direction as she pretended to straighten up the small wardrobe near the door. Will I even know what to do with normal? “Please…leave,” he breathed menacingly, employing a bit of the old brusque tact he used with his students. Her eyes widened slightly and she scurried out of the room. He bit off the desire to laugh at her as she scuttled and let himself fall back into the flat feather pillows of the uncomfortable bed as his eyes slid shut.

A moment later they snapped open as hesitant footsteps filled his ears. “I thought I told you to get the fuck out, witch!” he bellowed nastily.

There was a soft “Oh!” of surprise and his gaze landed on her. Instantly he was sitting up, an apology on his lips. His eyes brightened from dull coal to glimmering onyx. The girl was back. His heart ticked up a notch and it was a struggle to keep a welcoming smile off his face.

“Miss Granger!” He stopped her as she was turning to flee, a box of what appeared to be biscuits in her trembling fingers. “Please stay, I thought you were someone else.” He saw her stiffen and pause, her scrumptious backside facing him in skin tight Muggle jeans. Her shoulders heaved as if she were taking a deep, cleansing breath and she turned back more slowly. He rolled his head, cracking his neck. The first thing he was going to have to do when he got out of here was find a witch to shag.

“You should be more polite to the staff, Professor,” she murmured meekly with a small smile on her face. It was off-putting, her being so…polite with him. However, each time she had visited him since the Battle of Hogwarts it was the same. He had always used intimidation with his students, but this particular student had never seemed to care. She always had her insufferable hand in the air; always with the persona of the know-it-all. Finding this side of her was utterly…arousing…this of course being her intelligence and capability of carrying a conversation without the show-off, brown-nosing attitude. He shifted distractedly and plopped a pillow into his lap to hide his growing welcome to her with a flabbergasted grimace. Returning his attention to her, he gestured to a bedside chair, which turned magically to face the bed.

Reviews are always delightful. I'll get this up as quickly as I can. x LD
“Sit,” he instructed briskly. She obeyed with no hesitation, the soft, sweet smile still curving her delicate mouth. His erection grew. *Fuck.* “To what do I owe the pleasure of a second visit in as many days, Miss Granger?” His baritone rumbled down her spine. Was it his imagination, or had her thighs pressed tighter together? His glance rose back to her lovely face as she shook her head minutely, as if to dispel something from her thoughts.

“Mrs. Weasley is here visiting the handful of wounded who are still hospitalized. She baked biscuits.” She raised the tin, inviting him to take it. He did so, his fingertips lightly brushing over hers. His stomach flopped, did her breath just hitch? He didn’t understand why she kept visiting him. He was never particularity stimulating company. Most of the time they wound up sitting in silence, sometimes sharing a newspaper. She read aloud to him occasionally as well, which was actually very soothing. She had a smooth, husky voice.

Where the visits were companionable, they were also…. odd. “I thought you might enjoy them, chocolate chip?” she inquired, bringing his attention back to the tin of cookies. He popped it open and took one, offering the tin to her. She politely declined with a small wave of a petite hand, her fingers wiggling absentely. He shrugged, replacing the lid and took a bite. It took a bit of effort to keep himself from groaning in pleasure. The food at this place was abysmal. This damn biscuit was the best thing he’d had in weeks.

“They’re…mouthwatering,” he drawled, noticing her quick twitch and shift in posture. She crossed her ankles. *Alright, Sev,* he chided himself, finishing the biscuit in two more bites. He’d been testing limits with her, seeing how much he could get her to squirm. *Leave the poor girl be, you’ve gotten what you needed.* He found it amusing, her change of heart – so to speak. She almost acted as if he affected her physically, which was utter nonsense. He was nineteen years older than her, for crying out loud. A “greasy git” he’d heard his students mutter, and a sour one at that.

“Do you find yourself ready for your seventh year at Hogwarts, Miss Granger?” he asked, reaching for, and taking a sip from, his water glass.

She relaxed. “Oh, yes, Professor.” She smiled broadly, deepening a shallow dimple in her right cheek. How had he never noticed that before? His mouth went dry; he took another sip of water. “I’m feeling nostalgic for Hogwarts and am looking forward to taking my N.E.W.T.s after a, hopefully, uneventful year.” She chuckled softly and the sound forced an unmistakable smirk to tug the corner of his mouth. How was she gleaning this reaction from him? She had certainly gotten under his skin over the past six weeks.

It was Severus’ turn to shake his head to clear it. Her genuine smile and sparkle left him momentarily breathless, not to mention her avid desire for learning. A smart witch was more of a turn on then a pretty one, but she was both. *You bloody idiot, she’s your damn student! Get a grip.*

“Have you received your booklist yet?” he finally managed, doing his best to keep his voice sounding uninterested. He knew starting a topic on books with her could be dangerous, but he was disappointed with her answer. He had been prepared to sit back and listen to that soft, husky voice ramble about her new spell books.

“No, sir,” she replied simply. “I hear they’re still trying to fill a couple of posts…” She trailed off for a moment, hesitating.

“Do you have something….to…ask…me?” he drawled, leaning towards her while inflecting the words as if he were answering her raised hand in the classroom. She threw a hesitant glance at him, her eyes quickly darting away to the clenched fingers in her lap when she found him watching her. He was surprised with himself, this was one of his most vocal visits yet.
“Are you going to be returning to Hogwarts, sir?” She bit her lip, barely daring to breathe while she waited for his reply.

He studied her face for a moment before replying. Gods, her lips were sexy. Plump, soft, pink – no hint of gloss or lipstick which he reveled in. He preferred a natural look. “Yes,” he stated briefly, noticing his voice sounded higher than it should. He cleared his throat before continuing. “A Potions master once more, it seems.” Her eyes flew up to meet his again before dashing away.

“That’s…good,” she intoned lamely. *You sound like a silly little girl,* she chided herself. She huffed out a breath and shoved fingers through her wild chestnut hair. “Well, I best be going. Please enjoy the biscuits.” She rose quickly, accidently tipping the bedside table. “Ouch,” she muttered as the tin of biscuits went flying. Snape raised his hand and the tin soared right into it, the table righting itself with a soft *clunk.* She looked disconcerted and then impressed by his wandless magic, her hand thoughtlessly massaging her iliac crest where the table had hit.

“Miss Granger, are you alright?” he asked her, sliding to the edge of the bed while carelessly tossing the tin to the end. He watched her rub her hip where she had hit the table, wincing. He thoughtlessly grabbed her by the hand and pulled her to him, dragging down the hip of her jeans to investigate. He marveled in the softness of her skin and his cock jumped as he took in the spring green string of her knickers. As he brushed his fingers gently over the bruise that was already starting to form, he muttered an incantation. She froze, her breath hitching in quick, rapid successions as an apparent charm cooled her skin. His fingers flamed as if he had been burned. *Does she feel this, too?* His stare bore into her, willing her to look at him. When she did, it was as if a Bludger had struck.

Without taking even a moment to consider the consequences, his dick took over all sense of propriety. He yanked her down while she simultaneously threw herself into his lap and he claimed her soft pink lips in his unyielding, hard mouth. She grunted in surprise, which allowed him the entrance he desired into that petal soft orb. His tongue swirled in, claiming her in a deep, decadent kiss that turned his stomach in a painfully delicious knot. Her wet, pink muscle reacted to his as if starving, stroking wetly. He groaned and shifted to slide his fingers up into her hair, breaking contact to shift his probing lips into a different direction. Suddenly, as quickly as she was in his arms, she was across the room, chest heaving and hand to her startled mouth. She was looking at him with barely suppressed shock and … and what was that? Revulsion?

“I have to go,” she flung out. “I’m so sorry, Professor!” Her face reddened with…shame? Embarrassment? Disgust? *Why is she sorry?* His chest knotted in apprehension, what in Merlin’s hairy bollocks had possessed him to react in such an unprofessional manner? He’d frightened her worse than a boggart. Before he could even speak, she was gone in a whiff of vanilla and lavender fragrance, deep brown locks trailing behind her.

“Miss Granger!” he called after her.

“Shit.” He struggled to his feet, intent on following her and apologizing, claiming insanity and inability to work out tensions in a hospital room. He took just two steps before having to reach out and steady himself on the chair. He was in no condition to chase her through the corridors. Two weeks of utter unconsciousness followed by two weeks of bed rest had left him weak. It would be at least two more before he regained his full strength. He collapsed into the chair, furious with himself for overstepping the boundaries. For playing his hand without knowing hers and letting his guard down. He couldn’t do it again. A young, beautiful, and intelligent witch such as herself would not be interested in him. What was he thinking? His elbows hit his knees at the same time he let his hands fist into his hair. *You stupid, bloody bastard. The one nice thing going for you – what felt like real companionship for the first time since Lily – and you blew it by overstepping all the red tape.*
She was out on the street without knowing how she got there, her breasts heaving with ragged breath. *Oh, Gods!* She crossed her arms over her chest, realizing her nipples were rock hard. Why had she done that? Her brain was fuzzy. The electric shock of his touch so intimately close to her arousal had thrown her and she had pounced on him like a niffler to gold. Her hands fist ed in her hair as hot tears coursed down her cheeks. She couldn’t see him again. *Oh, Gods, class is going to be unbearable!* She ground the heels of her palms into her eye sockets in useless attempts to damn the waterworks.

Forcing herself to take deep, even breaths, she leaned against the brownstone exterior of the building and bent at the waist, arms still hugging her middle tightly. When she had finally calmed her racing mind and slowed her shallow breathing, she found herself feathering soft strokes across her lips with her fingertips. She leaned back into the stone. Her lips tingled as if they had been jinxed. His tongue had tasted of mint and chocolate chips, his hands had left a scorching trail of blazing fire over her hips, and the back of her scalp tingled where they had knotted into her hair. *Stop it! He was going to pull you away,* she chided herself. *Don’t delude yourself into thinking he wants you, you’re just a child to him. A student, for Merlin’s sake!* She huffed a sigh, unable to help her mind from replaying the whole scene again and again.
Chapter Three

Chapter Three – September 1997

Elizabeth Williams was nervous. More nervous than she had ever been in her entire life. A slender, petite, and pretty witch of seventeen, her sparkling green eyes roamed Kings Cross Station. She popped up onto her tip toes once or twice to stretch her five foot nothing frame to scan the crowds. Heaving a breath, she blew side bangs out of her face as her hands dropped from the red and paint chipped colored trolley. After a moment, she dug in her pocket looking for a hair tie. Finding it, she pulled her straight, honey blonde locks up into a high pony tail that cascaded thickly to the small of her back.

She was nervous because she found herself not only about to attend a new school, but in a new country as well. She wasn’t just attending any school, either, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was legendary. It was the school where He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named had met his end less than a half of year before. Even in the far reaches of the United States, they had felt the wrath of the most notorious dark wizard known throughout history. It was also the school where Harry Potter and his friends – that they were now calling “The Golden Trio” – would be attending their final year.

Elizabeth, or Lizzie as most people called her, was a Muggle-born witch from the United States. While born in Michigan, her father (a “classified” military personnel member) had been deployed to work all over the world at various times in her life. He currently held employment at the U.S. Embassy in London. This new position had transported their family more than halfway around the globe this time. She smoothed her sweater down over tanned arms, trying to rub a little warmth back into them. Her tan probably wouldn’t last much longer, especially now that summer was coming to a close. It had already faded considerably since the previous spring when they had left the tropical islands of Hawaii for London. It was definitely a climate shock.

However, Lizzie didn’t mind. She was used to moving, used to needing to make new friends. She was quite good at it, actually. As a result, she had wizarding connections in almost a dozen countries across the world. Her mother (an Occupational Therapist turned stay at home mom) was a kind woman with a heart triple the size of most. An avid lover all of things little children, she had presented the world with six of her own; Lizzie, being the oldest at seventeen, and siblings Thomas (twelve), Michael (ten), Geoffrey (nine), Benjamin (four), and baby Sarah (one). Lizzie, being the only witch in the family, made for some interesting family talks with all those little blabber mouths. She rolled her sparkly eyes thinking of their farewells this morning with a slight lump in her throat.

She exhaled again. Being the oldest of so many children was often taxing, and at this point in her life she had felt she had raised a couple of kids of her own. She enjoyed getting to go away to school every year, no matter how much she missed them while she was gone.

She anxiously continued to push her trolley through Kings Cross Station, looking for the likely spot of platform nine and three quarters to be. She figured it was most likely a magical barrier, being it was in the heart of Muggle-ton London. She was scanning the crowds, looking for out of place “Muggles,” to see if she could ask where it was.

It was then that she spotted a large group of what was clearly a wizarding family. A matronly looking mother with thick red hair waving to four older students, two red heads – male and female, a dark haired young man, and a wild-haired teenaged girl, along with three laden trolleys. She approached them cautiously, but relaxed when she saw a small owl hooting excitedly in a cage that precariously topped a stack of trunks while an ugly orange cat prodded at it through the bars. “Pig, shut it,” she heard the tall red-head mutter at the bird.
“Excuse me!” she called, picking up her pace to reach them. “Hello?” The owl berating boy turned to her, and she stopped in her tracks as emerald eyes met blue ones. She sucked in a breath of surprise. *Holy hell in a handbasket!* Her mind raced. *Why does he look familiar?*

“Hi,” Ron said slowly, a bit of pink tingling the tops of his ears. His eyes slid down her body. *Well that was a bit daring,* she thought with an inward chortle that helped dispel her own sprinting thoughts. The red-headed girl nudged the dark-haired boy in the ribs, who smirked down at her with a twinkle. He stepped around the dumfounded Ron just as Hermione and Mrs. Weasley realized they had fallen behind and came to a halt. Harry noticed a beautiful and unusual owl nestled in a spacious cage a top her things.

“Hey.” He reached out his hand. “Are you looking for platform nine and three quarters?” he questioned, nodding pointedly at the owl. “What kind of owl is that? She’s beautiful.”

The pretty girl smiled brilliantly at him, thinking he looked familiar, too. She clasped his outstretched hand warmly in both of her tiny ones, and Harry heard Ron mutter, quickly turned his snort into a cough.

“I am. She’s an Elf Owl, her name is Arwen,” she said, her voice strong and firm, looking him straight in the eye. “My name is Elizabeth Williams, Lizzie for short. I’m a transfer student, we just moved from Hawaii…err, the United States,” she amended. Most people had no idea where one state was over another.

“Hey, cool!” Harry returned her smile. “Join us, we’ll get you to the platform. No parents with you today?”

She fell into step with him and the red-headed girl who was firmly lacing her fingers through his territorially. *Taken.* She gave the girl a warm smile and winked at her, using universal girl language to let her potential friend know that she acknowledged the claim and respected it. The girl’s lovely face broke into a grin. They continued to weave their way through the Muggle crowd, ignoring puzzled and bewildered looks at their strange animal cargo, and catching up to the older woman and the brown-haired girl, whom Lizzie noted was also quite pretty with a perfect heart shaped face and warm, caramel colored eyes. Was everyone good-looking in London? Christ!

“No folks, today. My parents are Muggles and exceedingly busy people. My dad works for U.S. Embassy, my mom stays with my other siblings.” Harry’s eyebrows rose and Lizzie peeked around him at the girl. “You are?” she inquired, catching the redhead’s eyes.

“Oh, we’re being so rude!” Ginny snorted, shaking her hair. “I’m Ginny. That’s my brother, Ronald.” She pointed ahead of them to the boy whose striking Caribbean eyes had stopped her in her tracks. “That’s my mum, and our friend Hermione. And this is Harry…” She paused for a second, glancing up into her boyfriend’s bespectacled face. She trailed off, her smile faltering slightly. Let the tittering begin.

Lizzie faced registered her surprised recognition. To give herself credit she only missed one beat before stating, “No kidding? As in Harry-fucking-Potter?” She snickered. “Well, it’s an honor to meet you!” She left it simple, not diving into any uncomfortable questions, even though she had millions.

Harry and Ginny exchanged a surprised smirk, as Ron tossed a look of consternation over his shoulder. Lizzie observed Mrs. Weasley, Hermione – *must be Hermione Granger* – and their trollies disappear into a brick wall situated between platforms nine and ten.

“Yes, Harry Potter. Nice to meet you, too.” He laughed. “Best to take it at a run, if you’re nervous.”
She watched with amusement lighting her face as he and Ginny strolled confidently through the barricade and disappeared. Damn, she loved magic.

Ron turned to look at her again. “After you,” he gestured.

“A looker and a gentleman to boot!” She laughed as his jaw dropped in astonishment. “How ever did I get so lucky?” She flirted surreptitiously as she pushed her trolley and breezed past him, slipping through the barrier with confident ease. He came out behind her with a goofy grin on his face.

“Sit with us?” he asked her, leading her to where her luggage would be magicked onto the train.

“I’d love to!” She nodded emphatically, but hesitated when she noticed those caramel brown eyes shooting daggers at her from one of the entry doors. “Wait, is Hermione your girlfriend?” She turned an accusatory gaze on him and his eyes dropped to his feet.

“She’s not,” he sighed. “But for the sake of being upfront with you, there was almost something. For maybe a minute. She ended it after the war.” He shrugged and Lizzie took note. Broken heart, poor dude. She frowned. He sure seemed nice enough, and Lizzie had liked Ginny immediately. She’d love to fall in with this crowd, positive it would make for an interesting year. She figured they’d be awfully leery of her, though. Who could blame them after the year they had just had?

“I would like to sit with you guys, but only if it’s okay with everyone.” She flipped her long blonde ponytail hair over her shoulder, quickly using slender, deft fingers to braid it. She left the end untethered and pushed it back. “I’m an compulsive peace keeper,” she told him conspiratorially as they walked to join Hermione and climbed onto the train.

Hermione nodded tersely at her and Elizabeth smiled kindly in return. A flicker of surprise flashed in the girl’s eyes at Lizzie’s genuineness and her smile warmed a notch. This left Lizzie feeling a bit better about the situation. A gal being over-protective of a friend she totally got. She followed the taller girl to a compartment where they found Harry and Ginny and two other people.

“Neville! Luna!” Hermione squeaked, going to hug them both together. Another couple. Lizzie observed. Smiling and nodding at them when they tossed curious looks at her.

Ginny spoke up. “This is Elizabeth…” She glanced at Lizzie. “Williams, right? She said to call her Lizzie,” she continued when the pretty blonde nodded with another dazzling flash of her even, white teeth. “She’s from the States.”

“That’s brilliant!” Neville gave her a polite smile. “We’ve never had a transfer in our year before.” Then he paused. “Oh, that’s if…” He trailed off awkwardly. Luna leaned in a whispered in his ear and he smiled at her, squaring his shoulders. “You’re in seventh year?” His friendly grey gaze returned to her. Her heart constricted, too much pain in this boy’s life.

Lizzie waited for Ron and Hermione to make themselves comfortable before purposely taking a seat next to the brunette. She didn’t miss the quirked eyebrows the girl gave her, nor the disappointed look on Ron’s face. Lizzie was as she had presented herself, however. The peace keeper. She had learned early in her life of moving from city to city and country to country that it was best to be open and real. To not pretend to be something she wasn’t. Her mother’s warm, encompassing heart had taught her well. If she was going to move forward with this crowd or pursue the cute blue-eyed boy, she needed to build a relationship with them all. Especially the ex-girlfriend-still-good-friend.

“So, let me just make sure I’ve got this all right,” she pointed at Neville. “You are Neville – I’m guessing Longbottom.” He nodded and she grinned emphatically. “I read about you, you’re fucking
amazing!” He gave a bewildered nod and looked apologetically at Luna, nervous he was being flirted with. Luna just smirked serenely at him.

“See,” she intoned. “I told you I wasn’t the only one who thought you were amazing.”

Lizzie chuckled. “And you’re Luna…?”

“Lovegood,” the girl said in a pixie voice that left Lizzie feeling relaxed and comfortable, it was obvious this large-eyed blonde fairy had a gentle nature and warm spirit. She was going to love her, too, she could feel it.

Lizzie pointed at the red-haired girl. “Ginny Weasley.” Ginny cocked her head to the side in affirmation. “The famous Harry Potter there, which makes you Ron Weasley.” She turned to Hermione as she caught his flash of an attempted seductive smile, trying not to chortle. “You must be Hermione Granger.” She smirked at the girl politely, raising a hand. Hermione took it with a pleased expression.

“You either read the news frequently or you’re up on your gossip columns,” she smirked. “Either way, I appreciate someone who’s well read. Did I hear you say your parents are Muggles?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. Yours are, too, right?” Her earnest interest spurred Hermione into a discussion about being a witch in a Muggle household. Yes, she thought, a warm feeling flooding her stomach. I think I’m going to like it here.
“HUFFLEPUFF!” the Sorting Hat bellowed, perched atop Lizzie’s straight blonde hair. Ron groaned aloud. She gave the small group of Gryffindors a small, bittersweet wave as she went to join her new house table for the Welcome Feast. Hermione watched her intently, her smile deepening as she observed the beautiful new witch being swallowed by a gaggle of Hufflepuff sixth and seventh years. Hannah Abbott and Ernie McMillian were the first to welcome the American into their circle.

Hermione felt it was the perfect fit for Lizzie. The girl was nothing if not kind and permeated the persona of loyalty and friendship. She saw the girl fitting into their circle well after the hours long train ride to Hogwarts, regardless of the house she was sorted into. She had been attentive and sweet, genuinely wanting to get to know everyone in their compartment equally; answering questions about herself fully, but briefly, before firing questions out to her new acquaintances. Hermione had been disappointed when she was summoned to take care of Head Girl duties and missed over an hour of the chatter with her friends.

“I like her,” Ginny murmured in Hermione’s ear. “Although watching Ron struggle with a boner all year might be enough to make me vomit.” Hermione snorted and then nodded vigorously over the Sorting Hat shouting, “RAVENCLAW!” as it sorted Zeppner, Tobias – the last of the new first years.

“I like her, too,” Hermione replied, covertly sending a glance through her eyelashes up at the head table. Snape was sitting in his normal chair, his eyes fixed stonily ahead with that same old scowl on his face. Ginny searched her friend’s face before flicking a glance at the man, too.

“He certainly doesn’t look like he’s changed at all,” she reported to Hermione with a shrug. Ginny had been hilariously horrified when Hermione had described what had transpired during her last visit to see Snape at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. What disturbed her the most was her friend’s dreamy expression after she had insisted on complete details about how the kiss felt. Hermione had acted like she had never been kissed before – and perhaps she hadn’t ever experienced a kiss quite like that. It was still disconcerting that her pretty, sweet friend could be harboring a crush on their scary and intimidating Potions professor.

“Well,” Hermione breathed, as quietly as she could. “I think he has.”

The Welcome Feast continued as expected. Professor McGonagall told them all to “tuck in” earnestly before giving her start of the year speech. Hermione observed that some of the staff looked a bit apprehensive and she wondered what was going on. She watched Flitwick for a moment and then shook her head, putting it off to beginning of the term jitters. It wasn’t long before pudding disappeared and golden plates shone brightly in the candlelit and star-strewn glow of the enchanted ceiling. Hermione sighed her pleasure contentedly while smirking at Ron and Harry comparing distended bellies full of the delicious food. Food was something she had come to appreciate much more since their year on the run.

She did her best to stifle a yawn. She was eager to get to her new quarters and snuggle under the
heavy covers of the big four-poster bed that she knew awaited her. Unfortunately, she still had to get first years to their quarters and complete her rounds. She looked up expectantly as the Headmistress hesitantly stepped to the podium.

“Sonorous,” McGonagall muttered, touching her wand to the side of her neck. “Good evening, students of Hogwarts.”

There was a resounding chorus of: “Good evening, Professor!” in return.

“I have the pleasure of introducing four new posts this year. Professor Zippy will be taking over Muggle Studies.” A squat, round wizard with fly-away light brown hair combed over a bald spot raised from his seat and bowed deeply. “Next, Professors Mr. and Mrs. Pfeiffer will be taking over Defense Against the Dark Arts and Arithmancy, respectively.” She paused again as the smattering of applause rippled through the Great Hall. The married couple were young and looked excited to be there as they waved at the students.

The Headmistress’s lips thinned as if she was concerned about her next announcement. “Lastly, we must welcome back Professor Snape who –” But she wasn’t able to continue. Harry leaped to his feet and let out an obnoxious whistle of appreciation while many other students rose to stamp their feet. Raucous applause cascaded over the room so loudly it was sure to wake the dragons of Gringotts. Snape, who had been pointedly averting all gazes, looked up in obvious astonishment at the warmest welcome he had likely ever received.

Hermione was standing on the bench, cheering with the rest of them. The applause went on for minutes. McGonagall’s tense face relaxed into an approving smile as she joined in the handclapping. Snape’s eyes roamed the crowd and rested on Hermione’s for a moment that stood still. Her pulse quickened, but the sizzle of the moment ended when Hagrid clapped a hand on Snape’s shoulder, causing him to look up at the half giant. _Is that a smile, Professor?_ She thought as the grin on her face broadened. She was sure there was a smirk on his face. As the applause died down, Snape gave a curt nod of his head; his face had returned to its mask of stone, but Hermione was certain a new light was gleaming in his eyes.

McGonagall continued, after clearing her throat loudly to regain control. “For all new students, and a subtle reminder for some old students, the Forbidden Forest is as its name suggests – forbidden.” A chuckle rumbled through the crowd; Ron and Harry exchanged grins. “Bulletins and brochures for clubs and teams will be posted in your common rooms to peruse for the week. There will be an open house signup for these activities Saturday morning here in the Great Hall for you to ask questions and see what would be a good fit for you.” She nodded curtly. “Your Quidditch captains will post positions in the house common rooms and set try-outs for a time that works for them.”

“Yes, I will,” Harry hissed, smiling broadly.

“All students will receive their schedules when they attend breakfast tomorrow morning. If there is a pink notice on your schedule, you will need to contact me to set up a meeting to discuss questions and concerns I may have for you.” Professor McGonagall took a deep breath, a severe look crossing her pinched features. “Here is where my happy news and information comes to an end. I fear, my dears, that the Minister of Magic has contacted the staff at Hogwarts earlier today with some unsavory news.

“It seems that, even though the war has been won and good prevailed, evil is still determined to cloud our happiness.” She exhaled heavily and Hermione’s stomach flipped with a tinge of fear. “There have been reports of Muggle-born kidnappings. Three in the last week, to be precise.” Here her Scottish brogue faltered momentarily. “One being a seven-year-old girl who was reported missing after her parents were found mysteriously dead in their home by Muggle law-enforcement
A gasp flitted through the hall, and Hermione’s heart missed a beat as tears pricked her eyes. *What?!*

“Here at Hogwarts, you will all be experiencing a heightened state of security and safety. I want our Muggle-born students to realize that they will be watched exceptionally carefully until those perpetrating these heinous attacks have been apprehended.” She cleared her throat. Harry and Ron reached for Hermione’s hands simultaneously, while Ginny slid a protective arm around her waist and pulled her closer to her side, as if directly standing in the way of her being taken. A grateful lump rose in her throat even as she felt anxiety rise and course through her veins. She could not stop a look to the Hufflepuff table, where she met the petrified gaze of Lizzie Williams. It was a look that mirrored her own feelings.

“I implore all Muggle-born students to be on constant alert and beg you to not leave the grounds without at least one person by your side. We will keep you all informed as we see fit. If you have questions, please make an appointment with me or your head of house.

“With these final words, I ask all Prefects, along with Miss Granger and Mr. McMillian – who are this year’s Head Girl and Boy, to please help escort students to their dormitories. You are dismissed.”

Hermione sat frozen, eyes still locked with Lizzie’s, who finally broke the connection as Susan Bones tapped her on the shoulder and gestured for them to walk together to the Hufflepuff common room by the kitchens. Lizzie looked back to Hermione and waved. “Talk tomorrow?” she mouthed, Hermione nodded back, a soft smile curving her lips.

She exhaled, looking into the faces of her most beloved friends. They were watching her with barely suppressed horror and sympathy on their faces. “Okay, you lot,” she said sternly, her practiced Head Girl voice blossoming out of her chest as if on cue. “To your rooms.” She squeezed Harry’s hand and knocked her shoulder gently against Ginny’s while winking at Ron. “I have a job to do, we can talk in the morning.” She paused, watching them gather their things all the while throwing her surreptitious looks. “Hey,” she mumbled. They all gave her their full attention. “I love you guys.”

Three dear faces, three sets of different colored eyes, all warmed as they enveloped her in a group hug. Murmurs of “We love you too, ‘Mione!” filled her heart as she embarrassingly pushed them away and started calling for Gryffindor first years to follow her.

.oOo.

After sending the extra-large group of first years through the Fat Lady portrait hole (the password “Moldy Voldy” set off some titters), Hermione set out to complete her first set of rounds as Head Girl. She held her wand loosely in her hand.

She wandered the corridors she was assigned mindlessly, greeting the occasional portrait or school ghost. She felt world weary after the evening’s announcements. She had been looking forward to this year being uneventful and ordinary, boring even! Didn’t she deserve normal? Hadn’t she been through enough? Wasn’t it time for her to be able to live without fear? A surge of uncharacteristic anger bubbled up and out of her chest. She growled and threw a punch at the stone wall, cursing loudly when pain knifed its way hot and sharp through her wrist.

“Miss Granger?” A rich, deep baritone came through the silence. “Such language,” he scolded. She whirled, cupping her apparently broken right hand against her breast supported in her left, her wand had clattered to the floor. He bent to pick it up and was about to hand it to her with more rebukes, but
one look at her face and his reproachful attitude changed.

“What’s wrong?” he demanded, surprised with his alarmed concern. He closed the gap between them in quick strides and pulled her injured wrist gently into his large, warm hands. A shiver wracked her whole body and her breathing came in quick, shallow pants that had nothing to do with the pain. She tried to jerk away, embarrassed by her reaction, but he held her fast. “Your metacarpals and wrist are broken. What in Merlin’s name have you done?” he demanded accusingly, trailing a cool finger lightly over said wrist.

“Er…” Her voice came out breathless as another shiver shot up her arm (it felt like it went straight to her groin), she let out a soft moan as her heart rate skyrocketed.

“Miss Granger?” He intoned more softly, hopefully misreading her reaction as pain.

“I punched the wall,” she squeaked, face going red with mortification. *Idiot!* She chided herself.

“You…? I see.” He pursed his lips while searching her face. She refused to meet his eyes. “Let’s get you to Madam Pomfrey.” He directed briskly, taking her elbow and attempting to turn her in the direction of the infirmary.

“Oh, no!” She was successful in pulling her wrist away this time, digging in her heels. This caused an unintended cry of pain to slip past her lips and her breath sucked back in with shock. “Couldn’t you…I mean…would you fix it, Professor?” She let out a shaky breath as her body started to convulse. “Please? I’m quite tired, and my rounds are about done. I just want to return to my quarters.” He studied her for a moment and then nodded curtly.

“Very well,” he muttered, laying his palm out facing up and indicating for her to place her hand over his. She did so after a moment’s hesitation. “Brackium emendo,” he murmured, gently sliding his wand tip over the back of her hand and around her wrist. There was a piercing, tingling feeling and then warmth spread through her wrist and fingers. It was still tender but the searing pain of moments before dissipated.

She relaxed as the pain left her body and glanced up at him shyly. “Thank you, Professor,” she whispered kindly. A very faint smile touched his lip as his head jerked a tight nod. He handed her back her wand, which she took gratefully.

“You’re welcome, Miss Granger.” His voice was clipped. He turned and gestured for her to lead the way. “I will walk you to your chambers.” Her astonishment was clear on her face and he had to bite his cheek to hide a smirk.

“Alright,” she agreed, taking a hesitant step. He fell into place next to her and they walked quickly through the silent castle. “It appears the inside of the castle is fully repaired.” She observed.

“Yes,” Snape agreed. She heaved a sigh when he offered no more.

“How did the rest of your summer go, Professor?” She questioned interestedly after a few minutes of tense silence.

“I do not see how that is any of your concern, Miss Granger.” He stopped short, eyes glancing to what he knew to be her dormitory door. Her face flushed prettily. Snape had to stifle a growl of desire. *I have to get out of here.* Her eyes watched his face carefully.

“Professor, I –” He broke her off.

“I trust you will heed the Headmistress’s admonishments to not travel alone outside this castle,” he
muttered in a dark voice, wanting her word that she would be smart and safe.

“Of course I will!” A tinge of fury colored her retort. “Professor, I just wanted – ” But he broke her off again.

“Goodnight, Miss Granger.” It was as if he was deliberately derailing her apology. In reality, Snape knew if he didn’t get away from her, he would do something he’d regret.

She sighed, watching him clasp his hands together behind his back and stalk into the darkness of the corridor, his frock coat flapping familiarly behind him. “Goodnight, sir,” she whispered, still feeling the warmth of his touch on her hand.

.oOo.

Snape had to use an unpleasant amount of determination not to turn back around and haul that pretty flushed face to his. Memories of his tongue pillaging her mouth got him through many wanking sessions throughout the remainder of the summer, but being in her presence while remembering that kiss was torture. He was getting stiff just thinking about it. He was going to have to be on high alert when she was in his vicinity. Especially if they were alone. Forcing himself on her would solve nothing, just create more of a mess. He breathed a deep sigh of relief as he descended the dungeon steps towards his rooms, thankful he was far enough away from her now to control himself.
Chapter Five

“Goodnight, Miss Granger.” His voice trailed along her spine, sending shivers of delight to cup deliciously there, low in her belly.

“No. Don’t go,” she whispered, reaching out and taking his hand. She laced her fingers through his in attempts to keep him from going. Startled dark eyes met hers, blackening with undiluted desire.

“You don’t really want that, Miss Granger,” he murmured even as he invaded her personal space. He pushed her against her bedroom door. One hand pressed next to her head, the other at her waist, just at the sensitive undercarriage of her breast. She felt the hard flesh of his abdomen rub against her sensitive nipples through their clothing and her head fell back in bliss from his nearness. As his protuberant nose skimmed against her cheek, he growled in her ear. “You’re playing with fire...”

She tilted her face to brush her nose against his. “Too late, I’m already burning.” She groaned, sliding warm hands over his chest to twine up around his shoulders. She pushed the length of her slender, soft form more firmly into his solid body. Groaning, he pulled back just enough to look into her eyes.

“I want you,” he growled, fingers sliding to sink into her hips. Three simple words made her knees buckle with need and she gasped, gripping his shoulders for support.

“Yes,” she choked out. An animalistic noise rumbled out of his chest as his lips trailed down her jaw bone and across her chin to hover just over her decadent mouth. She gasped, pressing her belly into his growing erection.

“Please,” she whimpered, pleading, trying to raise her mouth to his, eyes clouded and heavy with lust. His mouth hovered and their combined breath made her feel heady. “Kiss me,” she breathed. The words broke all his lingering resolve and his mouth collided with hers in a swirl of tongue and gnashing teeth. She panted loudly as his fingers dug into her bum and he hoisted her against the door. Her legs automatically wrapped around his waist and she ground her pelvis into his sex, eliciting another crazed sound. A thrill ran through her, it felt bloody powerful to entice such sounds from this seemingly indifferent man. One of her hot hands cupped the side of his face, her nails digging around his ear into the soft, sensitive skin of his neck, the other seemed to be slapping at the door as if she was looking for something.

He chuckled against her mouth as he realized what she was trying to do. Wandlessly, he threw open the door, tilting his pelvis to support her while wrapping one well-toned arm around her petite curves. He took three long strides and all but threw her on her back onto the bed. She squealed with shocked surprise as the door slammed shut behind them. His eyes bore into hers as she pushed herself into a half-seated position on her elbows. A slow smirk spread across his face he deliberately slid one finger through the air, making the bolt of the lock clink into place. Her respirations picked up, making her flawless bosom strain against the buttons of her uniform top.

He strode to the bed, stepping between her knees. Her molten, burnt caramel eyes never left his as his fingertips encountered one stockinged knee. Her head tilted back and she mewled high in her throat, her pussy pulsing with anticipation. “Do you have any idea how fucking sexy you are, Miss Granger?” Even though his voice was low, his baritone thundered through her body, making her heart stutter.

“Put your hands on me, Professor!” she pleaded, reaching one willowy hand to him. His groan was
slow as he crawled onto the bed like a sleek black panther, settling his hips between her spread thighs and nestling his mouth to hers in another blazing kiss. She gasped and tangled her fingers in his butter soft locks. His tongue curled around her lower lip and he sucked, nipping, making her sigh with desire before trailing hot, wet bites down her jaw. Her hips bucked against his erection and he squeezed his eyes tight, gritting his resolve against his hunger.

Grabbing her jutting hips, he rolled them, pulling her on top of him. She pulled back, somewhat bewildered, as he reached a hand up to cup her face. They stared at each other, burning dark eyes into blazing brown. He looked as if he was trying to read her mind...and maybe he was. She swallowed. Slowly she turned her face into his hand, her soft pink tongue darting out to swirl across his thumb. He watched with fascination as she daringly sucked the pad into her petal perfect pout. Growling, he pulled her back down to him. He seized her mouth in his while raking his hands up her slender torso, pulling her shirt out of her skirt as they skimmed up her lithe body. She squeaked, and her frantic fingers rushed to help. He stilled them and she pulled away slightly to question him with her eyes.

“I want to undress you,” he rumbled and her hands moved to the buttons of his frock instead. He grunted his approval even as he was pushing the blouse off her slender shoulders, trailing his fingers over the bare skin of the swell of her breast. Her bra was an enchanting aquamarine color, silk, trimmed with lace. He gave a grunt of appreciation and cupped them in his hands, running his tongue along the swells while pinching a nipple through the material. “Ahh,” she breathed, her nipples standing to immediate attention. It felt as if they had a direct line to her pussy as it leaked in response. His hands felt like a torch. She was on fire. She never knew it could feel like this. It had never felt like this with Ron or Viktor.

He sat up unexpectedly and her fists balled into knots in his coat, afraid she was going to topple off. He unfastened the clasp of her bra in one swift motion, causing her breasts to tumble out. She released her hands from his coat so he could fling it away. A scorching mouth encircled one taut pink nub and sucked deeply. She felt mindless for a moment before her fingers returned to him – deftly trying to complete her unbuttoning task. They trembled as she muttered wordless praises, arching her chest into his face. “Bloody hell,” he growled, sliding his stubbled chin across her areola as she writhed. “Too many damned buttons!” Yanking his wand from his coat he unbuttoned everything in one soundless incantation. She rumbled her agreement and started thrusting his coat and shirt off his broad shoulders. He helped her get his arms free and then rolled her again to her back, teeth nipping at her collar bone.

“Ooh, please!” She whimpered as his fingers trailed up the outside of her thighs. He snorted at her wantonness as he hooked his fingers in her knickers and pulled them down her legs.

His fingertips traced a lizard line up her inner thighs. “Look at me, Miss Granger,” he breathed hotly. She propped herself up and met his smoldering eyes over the mounds of her breasts as he slipped a finger into her slick folds. “You’re drenched,” he intoned gruffly as she fell back with a mewl, eyes sliding closed again. He circled her clit with one deft digit, making her hips buck and her head roll from side to side.

The combination of her panting and thrusting had his cock leaking and screaming for release. He pulled away to stand, smirking at her bereft whimper of disappointment. When she realized what he was doing, she quickly rolled to her knees to assist. She cupped the front of his trousers, rubbing gently through the material while her other hand slid the leather belt from the buckle. She slowly, reverently, undid the button and sensitively slid the zipper down while meeting his searching gaze with a heavy-lidded desire. He helped her push his trousers and boxers off his hips and his shaft sprang free. Eyes widening comically, she deftly encircled the base of his more than adequate cock in her tiny fist and pulled gently, reveling in the visceral sound that exploded from his chest.
Daringly, she bent at the waist, bringing his proud knob to her lips. A tentative lick of her tongue flicked the drop of pre-cum off its tip. “Again,” he demanded, and she flattened her tongue to bounce his glans off, swirling gently around the head. She liked the taste of his skin; it was hard but yielding under her curious mouth. His smell was musky and spicy in her senses. Carefully, she sheathed her teeth with her lips and pushed the tip into her mouth, hallowing her cheeks to suck with care. His breathing changed and she pumped him firmly with the fist that encircled the base of his cock. She alternated sucking and driving her fist, picking up a slow, steady rhythm. His hips started to move, pushing his length a little further into her mouth. She dropped further to allow greater access, grateful for the assistance. She was pretty new at this, after all. His fingers sunk into her hair, grasping it up off her face into a loose ponytail so he could watch her expression, and slowly rode her face. Suddenly, emboldened by his aid, her confidence soared and she devoured him like a circus lollipop, swirling and sucking and nipping until he stilled her with a grunt.

“That’s enough,” he rumbled low. She released him and sat back, a worried look on her face. “That was bloody amazing, Miss Granger, but it’s your turn.” His voice was gravely and thick with desire as he kicked his slacks and boxers off his feet. “Lay back.” He guided her down to the mattress by gliding his fingers up her thighs. She was still wearing her stockings and skirt and he pushed the latter out of the way, exposing her glistening sex.

“What are you...?” She trailed off as his fingers spread her folds wide and gasped her gratefulness as his warm, wet tongue delved inside, circling her nub with tender pressure. “Yes,” she hissed, eyes rolling back and hips grinding. He held her hips down and increased the speed, sucking and nipping until she was thrashing. “Please,” she breathed.

“Please what, Miss Granger?” he inquired, one eyebrow raised as he stopped.

“Please make me come, Professor.” It was a demand.

“Good girl,” he responded as he pushed two long fingers into her core. She groaned as the pad of his thumb found her sweet nub and flicked. Stretching her tight inner walls, he searched for her g-spot, finding it with little trouble. He concentrated on the bumpy interior mass while watching her chest heave and her breath come in hitches that made his chest constrict; she was stunning. Deliberately, he removed his thumb from her clit and replaced it with his tongue. Flicking and sucking while her legs started a telling tremble. “Come for me, Miss Granger.” His voice vibrated into her folds, and she did.

.oOo.

“Unnhh!” Hermione cried, waking as waves of pleasure engulfed her body. She was drenched in a light sheen of sweat, her breath coming in hiccupping gulps of excitement. She lay in her bed, fingers clenched tightly into the mattress as her body rode a massive orgasm, whimpering with undiluted shock and chagrin. As she started to come down from her high, she felt her joints turning to jiggling jelly and she sucked in and then repelled a long, measured breath. What the fuck was that?!
Chapter Six

“My schedule has a pink slip on it.” Hermione sighed, showing Ron and Ginny. “Where’s Harry?” Her eyes roamed the crowd of students in the Great Hall.

“He was going to put up the Quidditch flier before coming down.” Ginny told her, rolling her eyes. “And of course the poor guy can’t go ten steps without someone wanting to talk to him. I hope it dies down soon, I mean, ah!” She shook her head exasperatedly, burgundy locks tumbling in pretty waves.

“I don’t think it’s so bad.” Ron shrugged, ears turning pink with pleasure. He was getting quite a bit of attention himself, though not nearly as much as Harry was.

“That’s because you’re a conceited git!” Ginny declared waspishly.

“Hey!” Ron’s face was starting to turn purple.

“G’morning!” A sweet, American accented voice rang. Elizabeth Williams was sidling up to them. “Tell me that I don’t have to live at the Hufflepuff table. I can sit with you guys, right?”

“Right,” Hermione said quickly, sliding over so Lizzie could sit between her and Ginny, across from Ron. “How was your first night?”

“Not gonna lie, a bit disappointing.” Lizzie sighed. “I thought for sure I’d get Gryffindor after having so much in common with you guys.” She shrugged. “Hannah and Susan seem really nice, though. So, hopefully I can hang with them sometimes, too.”

“Well, we’re all allowed to co-mingle.” Ginny told her.

“Good!” Lizzie nodded one. “I got a pink slip on my schedule, what about you guys?”

“Nope,” Ginny and Ron responded together, while Hermione nodded.

“Wonder what that’s all about?” Hermione sighed. “The start of the year and I’m ending up in the Head office already.” “What didga do, ’Mione?” Harry materialized out of nowhere, plopping down next to Ron and hurriedly scooping a massive pile of scrambled eggs on his plate. “I’m starved!” He growled, shoving a bite in his mouth while reaching for the tray of sausages.

Hermione watched him gorge himself with a small look of disgust on her face before shaking her head to clear it. “I got a pink slip on my schedule, Lizzie did too.” She added, tossing a look at the American. “Do you want to go now? I won’t be able to eat until I know what the deal is.” “Yeah,
that works for me.” Lizzie stood, pulling her bag onto her shoulders. “Lead the way, Head Girl.”

“We’ll see you later!” Ron almost knocked Harry over in his haste to rise to his feet and see the two girls off. Hermione snorted at his attempt at gallantry, but Lizzie seemed to find it charming.

“Bye, Ron!” She winked and followed the brown-eyed girl out of the hall. Lizzie hurried to catch up with Hermione, familiarly linking her arm through the older girl’s. Hermione looked startled for a moment, and Lizzie smiled kindly. “I’ve been told by a few people already that I’m way too touchy-feely for all you stiff English folk,” she chortled. “If it bothers you…?” She trailed off, making a move to pull her arm away. “No.” Hermione smiled back, she didn’t mind the simple and friendly gesture. It just surprised her how quickly she was warming up to this girl and thinking of her as a friend.

“This place is ginormous!” Lizzie’s wide eyes looked around as she let Hermione lead her up the stone stairwell. “I’m never going to find my classes.” She heaved a sigh, looking down at her schedule.

“Let me see.” She held her hand out and Lizzie handed it over. Hermione scanned the sheet quickly, while making sure they skipped the trick step. “We have almost all our classes together! Which I guess isn’t super surprising as we’re both N.E.W.T. level seventh years, but you’re taking almost all the same classes as I am!” She exclaimed excitedly. Glowing brown eyes met green. “You have Care of Magical Creatures while I have my only free period, but that’ll be easy to find, as it’s out on the grounds. I’ll point out Hagrid’s hut for you while we’re at lunch this afternoon.”

“That’s great!” Lizzie sighed happily. “I’m so happy we’ll have lots of classes together, I’m really enjoying getting to know you. It’s been a while since I’ve had a good girlfriend.” She gave Hermione a searching look with a small smile.

“Why’s that?” Hermione asked, suspiciously.

“Remember how I told you all on the train that my dad is U.S. Military?” she asked. Hermione nodded and directed them up yet another moving staircase, Lizzie was completely lost now. “I’ve moved no less than ten times in my life.” The blonde continued.

“Ten?” Hermione was flummoxed. “Wow, that’s a lot!”

“Yes, assignments, you know,” Lizzie whispered, removing her arm from Hermione’s to pull on her hair. Hermione was starting to recognize that Lizzie played with her hair when feeling insecure. “As good as I am at moving and making new friends, it doesn’t always make the transitions easy. Other girls often get jealous, no matter how kind and open I try to be. Most of my friends around the world are male or past teachers. I haven’t really had a close girlfriend since I was around twelve.”

“That’s a long time.” Hermione conceded, stopping. She searched the girls’ face for a moment. Hermione knew what she meant, though. She and Ginny hadn’t gotten super close until the redhead started dating Harry. It wasn’t always easy being friends with boys. “I can tell Ron likes you, and I have a sneaking suspicion you find him attractive as well.” She watched with amusement as Lizzie’s eyes widened slightly and she started to say something, but Hermione stopped her. “Yes, we have a past. I can see that you know that.” “Ron told right away,” Lizzie responded carefully. “So I decided it would be more prudent to be your friend first. Listen, I’m just not one to stir caldrons, and -” She stared.

“Hey!” Hermione put a hand up to stop her. “It’s okay.” She told the girl. “Yes, Ron and I have a history. It’s a really stressful history, filled with a lot of fear and a need to just survive. Of course we glommed on to each other to help make it through. Nothing serious ever happened between us,
though.” She finished. “We’re friends, first and foremost. Best friends – more like siblings. I love him like a brother. Like I love Harry.” She hoped her honesty was transparent. “I’m not in love with him, though.”

Lizzie watched her for a moment before a tentative smile turned up the corners of her mouth. “How did he feel about that break up line?” She was grateful the Gryffindor was being candid with her.

Hermione didn’t know whether to laugh or feel offended, but the look on Lizzie’s face said she wanted Hermione to laugh. “How did you guess I broke it off with him?” She was trying not to smile back, but crossed her arms around her stomach to try and hide the fact she was a bit put off at the girl’s ability to read her so well.

“Well, for one – he told me. Second, what you just said to me sounded quite rehearsed.” She shrugged. “I’m assuming it was really hard to say!” She reached a hand out to lay on Hermione’s arm when she saw the hurt and anger rising in the other girl’s eyes. “I don’t mean to upset you, that’s not what I meant by it. You do love him, I can see that. I can see how close all four of you are – Harry, Ron, Ginny, and you. I’ve been there with the ‘love but not in love’ mentality. I totally get it.” She paused, relieved as the brunette took a calming breath.

“I’ve read about you guys. I never thought I would actually get the chance to be a friend. You have experienced more than most do in a lifetime. I know your ties with Harry and Ron run deep. Everyone does; the way you three are together screams it! Not to mention it’s all anyone is talking about around here. It almost makes you unapproachable…almost.” She squeezed Hermione’s arm as the girl looked prepared to say something again. Lizzie’s honesty had a way of getting herself in trouble sometimes. She hurried to continue. “Hermione, you three have obviously shared something that will be carried with you your entire life. I refuse to come between that. I won’t be the person who makes Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley hate each other.”

Tears filled Hermione’s eyes. This girl was so incredibly insightful that she made Hermione feel almost transparent. “I hate myself for hurting him the way I did,” she choked out, and attempted to cover her face as a couple of third years were passing them in the hall, looking at them curiously. “Piss off!” Lizzie glared at the two girls, who looked comically affronted before quickly scattering. She pulled the quietly weeping Hermione into a more secluded alcove and cast a silencing charm.

“He did want to keep going.” Hermione continued once realizing they weren’t being snooped on anymore. “But I couldn’t. Something changed in me after the dust settled and it wasn’t him I wanted anymore.” A sob broke.

Lizzie was unsure what to do or say, so she gently pulled the girl into her arms and squeezed. Hermione froze, surprised with the intimate gesture. “If you want to tell me anything,” Lizzie said, pulling back to let Hermione see her candor, still grasping her elbows in her palms. “I’m happy to listen. I promise that anything you say to me will stay with me.”

Hermione’s suspicions rankled again, and she searched the American’s face. All she saw was earnest uprightness. After so many years of holding so much burden and having to keep so many secrets, she let go. “I… I’m really into someone else,” she breathed. “I didn’t want to keep it going with Ron and have it ruin the friendship we share.” A cry hitched in her throat. Lizzie conjured a bench and guided Hermione to sit.

Settling onto the cool stone, Hermione sighed. “I can’t tell you who, because he doesn’t even know. I don’t think I can tell him, either.” A blush crept up her face. “It would be a very inappropriate relationship,” she murmured. “He’s a lot older than me.”

Lizzie stayed quiet, just listening. “He’s a hero, what he did during the war most likely saved our
lives. Most definitely saved a lot of lives.” Her arms finally relaxed away from her middle and she reached out to clutch the blonde’s hand in her own. “If you like Ron, don’t let me stop you from having a go with him,” she said suddenly.

Lizzie was startled in the turn of conversation. “Only if you’re sure, Hermione.” She was hesitant. “It’s not like I would move too quick with him. I’d like to get to know him as a friend first.”

“I’m sure!” Hermione stood abruptly and watched Lizzie slowly get to her feet. The blonde disappeared the bench and removed the silencing charm. “Let’s get up to see Professor McGonagall or we’ll be late for our first class.” All trace of discomfort gone, Hermione looped her arm through Lizzie’s this time. Lizzie felt warmth spread through her chest at the sweet gesture as they continued to the Headmistress’s office.

“Tabby cat!” Hermione announced to the gargoyle. Lizzie watched with fascination as the stone figure jumped out of the way and a spiral escalator turned up the hallow column. Hermione let Lizzie go and jumped on the first step, beckoning her to follow. When they reached the top, Hermione clanged the knocker.

“Enter!” Came the Headmistress’s Scottish lilt.

“Good morning professor!” Hermione greeted as she entered the room; Lizzie, a step behind, looked up at all the portraits. “Elizabeth Williams and I wanted to come see you straight away to talk about our pink slips.”

“Yes, yes.” McGonagall gestured for them to sit down, they obeyed. “Well, as I’m sure you have guessed, it’s in regard to the Muggle-born disappearances. I’m speaking with the handful of students who fall into this category to let them know I will be having a staff member assigned to keep a bit of an extra eye on you. I will be expecting your assigned staff member to be in contact with you a time or two per week and monitor your schedules. Do you ladies have any questions?” Hermione and Lizzie exchanged nervous glances. “Do you really feel this is necessary?” Hermione inquired.

“I do, and so does Shacklebolt.” McGonagall’s lips were tight with concern. Hermione slumped back in her seat.

“Do they know what is happening with the victims?” She whispered. Lizzie felt the atmosphere change. Instead of the professor and the pupil, it felt as the exchange was happening between peers. Nonchalantly, Lizzie averted her gaze and tried to busy her mind with other things so they could have a bit more privacy. She wasn’t very successful.

“They do not,” McGonagall replied tersely, her eyes closing as if to give herself a moment to think. “Miss Grang – Hermione.” Her tone softened. “We are terribly concerned for your wellbeing. I, amongst other of the staff and Ministry officials, intend to keep you safe. No harm will come to you here.”

“Professor, I’m not worried about my safety at Hogwarts,” Hermione whispered. “It’s safer than home, even.”

McGonagall nodded. “I wish to have Professor Snape be your advisor until the culprits are apprehended.” She told the wild haired girl. “He alone, above all the staff, has the experience and skill with which to keep you best protected.”

Hermione swallowed hard, and Lizzie couldn’t help her curious glance at the girl’s reaction. Hm. “He’s a lot older than me.” Her brain buzzed the connection with the flush creeping up Hermione’s cheek bones. “I don’t think he’ll be pleased to hear that, Professor.” She argued feebly.
“I’m sure I can provide sufficient incentive for him to take on this task.” McGonagall sniffed dismissively. “I just wanted to make sure you would be okay with the arrangement. I know Professor Snape is a bit…rough around the edges.”

Hermione snorted. *That’s an understatement.* “No, Headmistress, I don’t mind Professor Snape helping out with this. Perhaps he’d be willing to give me some independent potion lessons while we meet? I’m planning on going to University next fall, and I really want an Outstanding in Potions so I can pursue a degree as a Healer.” She hoped her excitement about spending one on one time with Snape wasn’t obvious. She thought her voice was shaking and she clasped her hands together to keep her body from trembling. She didn’t notice the smirk Lizzie was giving her.

“Miss Granger, I’m sure that could be arranged.” McGonagall turned her attention to Lizzie. “Miss Williams, do you have any questions?”

“What about our families?” Lizzie responded quickly, her dazzling smile in place. “I appreciate the extra effort that is being taken for my safety. Is anything being done to protect our families?”

Hermione looked surprised at this question and turned her face back to the Headmistress.

“Miss Granger’s parents are being kept under surveillance, due to her fame.” McGonagall reported. “We thought it for the best. The Minister did take the time to inform them what has been transpiring and they agreed the safest place for you is at Hogwarts until this is over. Miss William’s, being your family is relatively new, the Ministry is just doing a daily check on the house.”

Lizzie nodded her understanding, but Hermione spoke. “I’ll be expected to stay here for the Holidays?” she was disappointed. She missed her parents and had been looking forward to spending Christmas with them.

“For now,” the professor replied. “I’m sure you’d also be welcome at the Burrow. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley would be adequate protection for you, as well. Any additional questions?”

Both girls shook their heads.

McGonagall gave a tight smile and a brief nod. “Very well, ladies. You are dismissed.”

“Okay, now,” Minerva McGonagall said, weariness seeping into her voice as she removed her spectacles to rub tired eyes. Around her the teachers of Hogwarts exchanged guarded expressions. Seeing Minerva so troubled was not something new to them, but something they had all hoped this year would lack. The sixteen solemn staff members exchanged worried glances before looking at their Headmistress expectantly, none of them really eating their lunches. A few quiet murmurs of concern rippled before she spoke again.

“I have been instructed by the Minister to assign a staff member to each Muggle-born student,” she declared. “They will be in charge of knowing their student’s schedules, extracurricular activities, and locations to the best of their ability at all times.” “It’s an admirable idea, Minerva,” Sprout replied.

“I also think that’s a great idea, Prof.” Hagrid agreed in his gruff voice. “I volunteer ter wa’ch after Hermione.”

“While I know you care for the girl, Hagrid.” Snape’s low, languid voice came from the shadows of the staff room. “I believe that someone with a little more *experience* and magical *talent* should mind
Hagrid growled and was about to argue when Minerva cut in. “I know how much you love Miss Granger, Rubeus. However, I must agree with Severus. I worry about her being a target in this madness. She’s the most famous Muggle-born of our time. We do not know why this is happening, only that it is. I wish I could watch after the girl myself, but I just fear I do not have the personal resource of time available to me while maintaining my Transfiguration schedule and Headmistress duties.” She huffed, abruptly dismissing them with a wave of her hand.

“Back to the topic at hand. I have a total of ten Muggle-borns on my roster this year. Of course, you all know Hermione Granger. Then there is Justin Finch-Fletchley, Dennis Creevey, Elizabeth Williams – the transfer student from the United States…” She continued on. Total there were three Gryffindors, five Hufflepuffs, and two Ravenclaws.

One by one, the students were taken on by individual staff members. McGonagall left Hermione as the last student to be paired, hoping Snape would step forward. She was disappointed.

“I can take on Miss Granger.” Professor Babbling volunteered grudgingly as her name hung out over the group; everyone was hesitant to be assigned to her for fear of failing. “She is a remarkable girl, I do so hope we can keep her safe.”

“Please, do not take offense to this, Bathsheda, but Severus…?” She trailed off, meeting his eye across the room. She noted his shoulders tense and jaw clench. “Severus, I am wishing you to be assigned to Miss Granger.”

You have no idea the problems this could cause, Minerva. Severus grumbled to himself. He had volunteered to take on the William’s girl and both Ravenclaw students; she had assigned each one to someone else and now he understood why. He didn’t want to get put with Granger. His tenuous hold over his…desire, he spat the word in his head, for her wouldn’t do well to be subjected to the enticing little nymph in a one on one environment. “And do you think it would please her to have an old nemesis breathing down her neck all year?” He countered, a vain attempt to sway her. Everyone knew how the girl and her friends had advocated for him at his summer trial. Minerva was even aware of the two plus months she had visited him regularly.

“Miss Granger and I have spoken briefly about this.” She detailed plainly. “I do not believe she sees you as a nemesis, Severus. Far from it. She is agreeable and I think you are the best match against anything or anyone that would attempt to harm the girl. She even implored me to ask you if she could potentially get extra potion lessons out of the deal. She’s ambitiously questing an Outstanding on her N.E.W.T.s as she is planning on attending University next fall in hopes of becoming a Healer.”

Snape bit back a groan. How the hell was he supposed to say no to that? “You have got to be kidding me,” he grumbled. “I take it you have already agreed to this arrangement, Headmistress?” He addressed her formally, outwardly displaying his displeasure.

“Yes.” McGonagall bit out firmly. “I have your assistance in this matter?” When Snape dipped his head grudgingly she gave a sharp nod of satisfaction. “Good.”

“I wish you all to set up meetings with your students at least once a week to check in with them.” She instructed. “I’m not asking you to follow this student twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. However, please make it clear that if they need to change their schedule they should confer with you.” Her shoulders slumped. “Let’s try and make this term a good one. There are several students who very much deserve an uneventful year.” She heard several murmurs of agreement ripple through the room. “Very well, enjoy your meals.” She exited the break room. No one was
“Double Potions after lunch on the first bloody day!” Ron moaned, plopping down at the lunch table with Ginny and Harry. “Could we have worse luck, mate?” Harry grinned at his friend.

“It shouldn’t be as bad as the other five years we had him as Potions master.” He tried to encourage his friend. “I mean, he’s got to be a little different, right?”

“I should hope so!” Ginny’s face darkened. “You and Hermione did save his bloody life!”

“Hermione did.” Ron corrected. “She was the one so anxious to get to him. Harry and I thought we were going to collect a body. Hermione insisted on taking a Healer with and was the first to reach him. You should have seen the way she reacted.”

Ginny avoided her brother’s eyes. “I’ve heard the story,” she drawled. “Look!” She nudged Harry, changing the subject. “Hermione and Lizzie.” Harry looked in the direction she was pointing. “They’re getting awfully chummy,” Ginny muttered, taking in the two girls walking arm and arm and giggling.

“What’s so funny?” Harry asked as Hermione settle down next to him and Lizzie sat across from her next to Ron.

“Nothing!” They said together, exchanging a look that had them both tittering again. Ginny harrumphed.

“We’ll tell you later, Gin.” Hermione assured her friend, raising an eyebrow. “It’s nothing the boys need to know.” Ginny let a wicked grin cross her face, glad she was being brought into the circle.

“The three of you have double Potions this afternoon?” Ginny asked.

“Four of us,” Lizzie said, flipping her long golden hair over her shoulder as she settled in next to Ginny and reached for a sandwich. Hermione sat across from her next to Ron. “I have Potions, too.”

“Brilliant,” Ron said around a mouthful of corned beef sandwich. “You can suffer with us.”

“You don’t like Potions?” Lizzie said. “I find it utterly fascinating.”

“It’s not so much the subject as it is the instructor.” Ginny filled in their new friend. “Snape is a hard ass.”

Hermione choked on her pumpkin juice letting out an explosive cough. “Oh, my goodness!” She wheezed. “I’m so sorry!” Lizzie was wiping spittle off her face with a bemused expression.

“Scourgify!” the blonde said calmly, watching the juice disappear from the table top.

“You all right?” Harry patted her on her back and Hermione waved him off, assuring him she was.

“Tough teacher?” Lizzie eyed Hermione with a continued hunch.

Hermione attempted to clear her throat, eyes streaming. “Tough, but good. He knows his subject.” It was Ron’s turned to choke. “What?”
“You know what, Ronald?” Hermione demanded seriously, finally regaining her composure. “I think we owe Snape the benefit of the doubt this year. After all, he did save our sorry arses last year!” Her eyes blazed with defiance and Ron shrank at her reproachful glare.

Lizzie watched the exchange with a bemused expression. Hermione was being awfully protective and defensive.

“Well, I never –” Ron started, but Harry interrupted.

“Hermione’s right, Ron.” He stated simply. “We do owe Snape a lot, let’s give him a fresh start. After all, he did agree to allow us to continue with our N.E.W.T.s even though we only got E’s on our O.W.L.s.” Ron looked properly abashed.

“Oh, okay!” He muttered.

“Open your books to chapter sixteen,” Snape snarled. Lizzie was thus far not disappointed with the performance she had been promised. She almost burst out laughing when Snape had barged into the dungeon classroom, frock coat and robes billowing behind him like the bat everyone described. She attempted to exchange a look with Hermione, but the girl had her chin in her palm. Her other hand holding open their Advanced Potion Making book to chapter sixteen. She quickly hastened to get hers to the same page, watching her new friend’s dreamy face out of the corner of her eye.

“It appears we have a new student joining us this year.” Snape looked the pretty, beach blonde Barbie doll up and down. “Miss Williams, I hope you can keep….up.” His insinuation of her inferior intelligence would have been insulting enough to make her stand up for herself – if she hadn’t been forewarned about him.

Instead, she thought it would be fun to take his obvious bait. She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure I can, sir. I looked over this book the weeks prior to term starting. Most of it I have already studied.” The silence that rang through the dungeon was stifling. A pretty, blond boy across the way looked absolutely stunned.

“Did you just roll your eyes at me, Miss Williams?” Snape’s voice was dangerous, and Hermione reached out to place her hand over Lizzie’s and shook her head imperceptibly.

“Yes, sir. I apologize for that, it was an automatic reaction,” she stated sweetly, smiling brightly. Her eyes sparkled with mischief. Snape blinked, momentarily put off his game. As his reputation usually proceeded him, he had never actually had a student tease him before. He bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. It was certainly shaping up to be an interesting year.

“Ten-points from Hufflepuff, Miss Williams, for your snarky cheek.” He succeeded in keeping his face like stone. “Detention on Friday. I will let Professor Sprout know to expect you.” Lizzie’s eyes widened with startled surprise.

Uh-huh, Snape mused to himself. My reputation did proceed me. She just likes a challenge. Oh, my. I can see why Hermione finds him…alluring. So authoritative, domineering. He’s kinda sexy. That profile is awfully chiseled, the nose is quite regal, even if a bit big…broad shoulders, tall. It works…if you’re into the older man, anyhow. “Yes sir. I truly am sorry sir,” she replied with honest frankness. This seemed to throw him off and a smirk tugged at his lip.

He studied her with feigned indifference for a moment. Was she checking him out? “Your apology is
duly noted, Miss Williams.” He nodded and began his lecture by tapping the blackboard with his wand. A list of ingredients and directions for a Calming Draft appeared in neat, slanting lines. Out of the corner of Lizzie’s eye, she saw Hermione chewing on her bottom lip. Her big brown eyes were full of surprise at Snape’s reaction. She looked at Lizzie, mouth agape, as did many other student around the room; Harry and Ron even turned in their seats to stare at her. “Miss Granger.” He refocused his attention back to their two-person table. Lizzie turned her laugh into a cough as she noticed all students in the room snap back to attention. “You are not to help Miss Williams with this potion today, we shall see if her abilities can back up her smart mouth,” he drawled lazily.

Hermione agreed. “Yes, sir.”

Lizzie did her best not to chortle at the complete look of submissive desire on Hermione’s face. She had her number.

The class passed quietly. Lizzie was at a bit of a disadvantage due to not having a partner to help ready supplies and not knowing where anything was in the store room, but she hummed quietly to herself while persevering through the potion. Hermione was looking utterly bored off her rocker. Because of this, Lizzie assumed that she did not realize how longingly she was staring at the oblivious man at the front of the classroom. “You’re practically swooning, Hermione,” she whispered, trying to catch her attention. “Hmm?” Hermione’s eyes were glazed over. Suddenly, she realized what Lizzie had said. She took in Lizzie’s smirking face, startled. “What did you say?” She demanded in a hoarse undertone.

“I know you heard me,” Lizzie muttered, trying not to grin manically at her. “Pretty sure I know who your older man is.” Hermione whimpered in fright and Lizzie’s smile vanished. “It’s okay,” she whispered, trying to reassure her new friend. “Nothing to worry about. Secret’s safe.”

“The buzzing I’m hearing from your table is only assuring me that I will be less than impressed with your potion, Miss William’s,” Snape snarled, not looking up from his scroll work. “Ten minutes.” He addressed the entire class.

Lizzie didn’t flinch. She only needed two and the potion was clearing just as described in the book. It would be perfect. Hermione had averted her attention to reading the chapter to be covered in their next Potions class.

“Bring your labeled vials to the front.” Snape instructed in a bored voice when time was up. When Lizzie handed her vial to him he noted the bubbly handwriting on the label and did his best not to roll his eyes. “Well, Miss Williams,” he drawled, arching an eyebrow. “Perhaps you’re not a lazy American idiot after all.”

Lizzie grinned and thanked him, going to collect her things. The attractive blond boy was waiting by her table, while Ron, Harry, and Hermione waited for her at the door.

“Miss Granger, I would like you to stay after class.” Snape’s voice rose above the clatter in the room. “We have some things to discuss.”

Lizzie was disappointed she would be unable to watch Snape and Hermione interact, but her overt politeness had her nodding and greeting the Slytherin boy instead. “Hello.” She smiled.

“Hi.” His tenor voice was as nice as the smile that didn’t quite reach his icy grey eyes. His shoulder length white-blond hair was impeccably groomed, just touching the tops of his shoulders. “I just wanted to take a moment to introduce myself to the girl who almost got Snape to smile.” He reached out his hand. “Draco Malfoy.”
She shook his hand, startled as a current surged through her fingers.

“Oi, Lizzie!” Ron called. “You coming?”

“I’ll catch up!” She called back, feeling guilty as a murderous look flooded his face and he glared at the back of Draco’s head. Malfoy did not turn to look at him.

“Will you walk with me?” Draco asked her politely. She hesitated for a moment, he made her slightly uncomfortable, then acquiesced.

“I suppose I could do that,” she agreed and followed him out of the classroom.

“Yes, Professor?” Hermione asked as she approached his desk. She did not miss the way Harry had to grab the back of Ron’s robes and steer him out after Lizzie told them she’d see them later. She needed to warn Lizzie about Malfoy.

“It appears we will be spending some quality time together this year.” He told her, not meeting her gaze. His tone sounded bored.

“That was my understanding as well,” she murmured quietly, trying to keep the giddy twinge at bay.

He looked up to study her face. His breath caught in his throat when she met his gaze, and then quickly averted her eyes. “All right then, my office Friday at seven o’clock,” he said simply, dismissing her with a wave of his ink stained fingers. Hermione hesitated. “Yes, Miss Granger?”

Snape pushed back in his chair this time, leaning back with interest while crossing his arms over his chest.

“I wanted to apologize for what happened this summer, Professor,” she whispered, unable to meet his dark gaze.

“What exactly do you think happened this summer, Miss Granger?” he retorted coldly. Her eyes flew to his with noticeable surprise.

“Sir?” She had expected some sort of reaction from him. Over ten weeks she had visited him in that wretched place. Granted, he’d been comatose for two and bed ridden for another two, but she had gone at least three times per week. At least. Usually it had been every other day. They had spent so many hours together. Had discussed many things – perhaps not personal things – but academic and school related, about the people who had been killed, about the people who were injured. They had sat in comfortable silences, even. Just being with him felt good, and she had figured it had been the same for him simply because he had never asked her to stop coming. She had thought they were at least…friends. This cold indifference he exuded was almost insulting after the time they’d spent together in his hospital room.

“I have no idea what you are referring to, Miss Granger,” his voice was gruff and impassive. “My summer was quite…boring. Nothing of significance or importance occurred. Certainly nothing worth an apology.” His face was a mask of ice and Hermione felt her heart sink. She had ruined the tenuous friendship they had built by assaulting him in his hospital bed. Tears pricked hot in her eyes.

“I’m sorry to hear that, sir,” she mumbled. Turning her face away.

Was she upset? He thought she would prefer he not bring up what happened this summer. “I will see
you Friday evening.” She exited the room without being dismissed. He watched her go, a gnawing panic clawed his stomach. He rose and was about to make after her before coming to his senses. He had to control his urges to be with her, comfort her, touch her. He had to curb his craving for her or there was no way he would make it through the academic year without crossing a very clear line.

He threw himself back down in his chair, brooding. He could not pursue a student. It was reckless to even think about it. He growled in frustration and swiped up his quill, returning to his scroll work, doing his best to dismiss her from his mind.
"What's your next class?" Draco asked politely, glaring at Weasley who kept tossing death stares over his shoulder at him. It was barely the start of the year and already it felt like Draco Malfoy against the entire Hogwarts student body, well except his own house. At least there he still had a couple friends. It was going to be a long bloody year.

"I have Ancient Runes next," she answered after digging her crumpled schedule out of her robes. "I love that class. You?"

"Same." Draco gave her a stiff smile, trying to keep his attention on her and not Weasley. "Let's go this way." He grabbed her elbow and steered her through a tapestry into a hidden passageway.

"Holy hell," she muttered, looking at the rows of armored suits lining the alcoves down the hall. "This place is terrifyingly fascinating." She turned in a circle and walked backwards for a moment, staring up at the beautiful candlelit chandeliers above her.

"It's all right," he drawled. "This will be my eighth year here and I still get lost on occasion. I'll give it big and disorganized." Draco was transfixed by the way her hair shimmered in the candlelight. "Anyone ever tell you your hair looks like spun gold?"

Lizzie felt her face flush. You have got to be kidding me. She met his eyes shyly and gave him a small smile. "No," she said quietly. "Thank you."

Draco smirked at her obvious pleasure from his comment but it quickly turned into a frown. She was the only one in the school who didn't know his past, it probably wouldn't last long, and then she wouldn't give two hoots of the owl post to talk to him. He scowled and looked away. Did he regret his past? Yes. Was he ever going to live it down? Not at this bloody school. He sighed. "Where did you go to school before coming here?"

"Oh, all over. My last school was Ilvermorny, though." She shrugged.

"Yeah? Does that school have Houses?" he inquired. "This way." He put his hand on her back pack to guide her to the left.

"Yes, four Houses as well." She shrugged. "I was there for two years as a Horned Serpent."

"You were a snake?" One eye brow arched high.

"Yes." She laughed. "But a very different one from your Slytherin snake. The Horned Serpent is more known for scholars whereas Hogwarts, A History tells me that Slytherin's are better known for their cunningness, ambition…and self-preservation." Her eyes glittered at him. A slow smile slid silently across his features. Snape was right, she did have a smart mouth, but a brain to back it up. He had a feeling he was going to like her. A Hufflepuff. He barely kept himself from snorting. He wouldn't have even given her a second look were it not for the fact she had impressed Snape. He guess it helped that she was bloody gorgeous, too. All tiny and wispy with the most stunning green eyes. Her hair really did look like spun gold – nothing like his silver blond hair – it was a mix of straw and glimmer and sunshine and bronzey-gold. As the light pass over it he thought he saw...
"Where else have you attended?"

"I spent my first and second years in Australia – they tongue tie you at that school, you're not allowed to say the name." Draco gave her a surprised look. "My third was spent at Mahoutokoro in Japan, forth in Brazil at Castelobruxo. Then in America the last two years, so when I was fifteen and sixteen. I had to finish my sixth year by mail because we moved here in April of last year. Talk about scary. My mom and dad refused to let me register with the ministry because of what was going on (we knew exactly what was going on because of one of my teachers at Ilvermorny having family here in Europe). We were glad to hear the end of the war happened in May. My dad was getting pretty close to requesting a transfer because they were afraid I was going to get found out. Being a Muggle-born in Great Brittan last year was something to fear ... what's wrong?"

Draco had stopped in his tracks, a look of horror crossed his face. *Bloody hell, she's Muggle-born? Go fucking figure.* It wouldn't matter to her he'd been forced to take the Dark Mark and scared witless enough to comply with the Dark Lord's demands. It wouldn't matter to her that he didn't want to be known as the pure blood who hated Muggle-borns anymore. That was his father's soap box. It wouldn't matter to her that he fought on the opposite side for the end of the battle. It wouldn't matter that his father repented and was currently sitting a sentence in Azkaban for the next year. Nor would it matter his family was mandated to pay a hefty reparation fine. All that would matter to her was that his past showed that he could never like her kind, and she would find out soon enough. *There goes my already slim chance of having one person in this school my own age to start fresh with.* He realized he'd been staring at her using his ice mask. She looked quite unsettled; she swallowed and took a step back from him.

"Did I say something wrong?" She was hesitant with her words.

"No." He grunted, trying to shake himself out of his sour turn of mood. "It's just, this was pointless." He shrugged arrogantly, hiding his disappointment with feigned boredom.

"What do you mean, 'pointless'?"

"What I mean is, you're a Muggle-born," he snapped, deciding to just rip the Spellotape off and get it over with. "You're going to run back to Granger and Potter and Weasley and they're going to tell you who I am. Then you'll either pretend I don't exist or treat me like I have dragon pox for the rest of the year. It's not going to matter that I'm trying to put my past behind me, because you're going to hear the stories and think that my kind could never have honorable intentions where your kind is involved." He was livid. He just wanted to get out of there. One thing he had always despised was wasting time.

"What do you mean my kind and your kind? Aren't we all magical?" He snorted at her naivety. "Who are you?" she inquired, curiosity made those damnable green eyes glitter like diamonds.

"You don't want to know." He waved her off and pushed past her. "I'll get you to class and then you don't have to talk to me anymore."

"I don't know if I've ever met someone as self-depreciating as you, Draco Malfoy," she stated simply, staying stock still and watching him with careful eyes.

He stopped short and spun on her. "Self-depreciating!?" he snarled. "Fine, you want to know who I am!?" He backed her into the wall, slamming both hands on each side of her head. He towered over her. She flinched slightly, but her gaze never broke from his. "I was a Death Eater," he growled. Her eyes widened imperceptibly and her heart stuttered in surprise. He put his face millimeters from her
ear and rumbled. "And you're a Muggle-born. You know as well as I do that when you find out about me and what I did during the war from your new little Gryffindor friends it won't matter what I say or what my side of the story is. So let's not waste our time." He pulled back to fix her with a flint and steel gaze and was surprised to see her eyes alight with…inquisitiveness, rather than fear.

She paused for a long second, watching him watch her. He looked, for want of a better word, scared. And tired. So very tired. Like he'd lived a million lifetimes.

Her chin rose defiantly and she squared her shoulders standing up straight, making him back away a step. "I think you presume to much, Draco." Her voice was steady, and…sympathetic? "I'm pretty good at making my own judgements about people. So if you don't mind, I'd like to do just that where you are concerned."

He was clearly startled. "What?" He grimaced at the emotion that one word betrayed and silently chastised himself for letting them show.

"I'm a pretty good judge of character," she professed. "And I'm pretty good at giving people the benefit of the doubt. Always the 'new girl,' you see. I always hope people give me the benefit of the doubt, it's only fair for me to return the favor." He would never let her see how those words made his blood hum with surprise and hope.

"You trying to take the Mickey?" He crossed his arms over his chest and his form stiffened to a menacing height. Lizzie let out a confused huff.

"Take the Mickey? ...what? Then it dawned on her. "You mean am I trying to pull one over on you?"

"What the bloody hell else would I mean?" He demanded, bewildered.

"Well, that's not an expression I'm familiar with." She informed him. "Typically, we American's say something along the lines of 'are you fucking with me?'" Draco's mouth dropped at her obscenity, then it turned into a slow sexy smile. Hot damn, he's pretty! It distracted her.

"No, I'm not taking the Mickey," she told him with a smirk. "What's the point in pretending? All though I am going to tell you this, you're not gaining any points by trying to scare or intimidate me. I'll put you down faster than a hot cauldron if you think I'll take shit from you."

He laughed, those gray eyes brightening like a spring day after rain. She turned her face away and continued walking in the direction he had been taking her.

Hermione dumped her bag on her bed and flopped down on her back. The week had been excruciatingly slow. So much of what they were doing in classes this week was review to get them all back up to speed after the turmoil of the previous year. Even though she, Harry, and Ron had missed the entirety of it, to her the review was an utter waste of time. She sighed and rolled to her stomach. It was just after six. She had about an hour and a half until she needed to meet Snape for their planning session. He had owled her that morning with his expectations. She was to bring her Advanced Potions book, parchment and quills, a copy of her weekly schedule, an outline of what she did in her free time, and a list of her extracurricular activities. Basically, he needs to know where I am at all bloody hours of the day – because that won't be distracting at all.

After class but before dinner, she sat down and outlined her entire week. He was going to think she had zero life. Outside of classes, Head Girl duties, and meals, all she did was study. She probably
spent as many hours in the library every week as Madam Pince. *Who cares. He's an intelligent man, I'm sure he spent a fair amount of time in the library when he was a student, too.* She harrumphed and rolled into a sitting position.

*Maybe I should shower.* If she got her evening routine out of the way before she went to see him, she could just come back and go to bed when she was done. She didn't know if he was going to start her extra classes with him tonight, but being that he wanted her to bring her book and supplies, she wouldn't put it past him. *Who knows how long she'd be in the dungeon. It's bloody freezing down there, too.* She sighed and toyed with her hair, contemplating her real feelings. *Face it, Hermione, you also want to look and smell nice.*

Groaning, she made her way into the private bathroom off her quarters. Super huge perk of being Head Girl. Her own bathroom! It was nice too, separate shower, huge, deep tub with multiple taps. Not as big as the swimming pool in the prefects bath, but bloody brilliant. She took her time in the shower, washing and conditioning her thick mane of hair. Using a wide tooth comb while the conditioner was in, she pulled all the tangles out of the locks. She decided to take the extra few minutes and shaved her legs and armpits. Once she was out and dry she lotioned her legs and arms and spritzed on a coordinating body spray, all Muggle products she loved the smell of.

She dressed in a pair of indigo blue cotton string bikini knickers and a coordinating microfiber bra that had silver crescents on it, a pair of Muggle jeans and long sleeved thermal shirt that hugged her curves and was made of a pretty lilac colored weave with three quarter length sleeves to wear under her robes. She pulled at the sleeves for a moment, realizing the O-O-D of the scar from Bellatrix on her right arm was showing.

She paused, second guessing her choice in tops, then chastised herself. What did it matter? Why did she feel nervous? For Merlin's sake, she wasn't the only person who had permanent scars on their body from the war. She had another on her neck where Bellatrix had pressed the silver knife that had killed Dobby to her throat in attempts to hold her friends at bay, another circling her right breast from the blow she had taken at the ministry. These, along with many smaller ones all over her body from this and that were minor compared to some people’s physical scars. Harry had many scars, Ron had a huge gouge out of one arm from being splinched. She knew from firsthand experience how many scars were on Snape's upper body. She would never tell him how many hours she spent with him while he was unconscious. The first ten days or so they wouldn't even put a sheet above his mid-section as he burned with a terrible fever from Nagini's venom while they worked on perfecting the antidote that had been started when Mr. Weasley had been bit back in her fifth year. She had only been allowed in the room because he had no next of kin – and she was part of the Golden Trio. No one would have dared to tell her no those first few weeks, and she had used it to her advantage when it came to Potions Master Severus Snape. She could still sometimes push the envelop when she felt entitled to; she didn't do it often, though.

She sighed again and worked some Sleekeazy's into her scalp. She had gotten use to using it, and now it was second nature. To really make it look amazing she had to do three applications, but she had found through some experimentation that one relaxed it enough to make it look like a normal person's head of hair and didn't add too much time to her routine. Using her wand, she dried her damp tendrils until it looked like a wild mass of copper and chocolate curls. *Good enough.* She nodded at herself in the mirror and checked her watch. It was time to go.

*Snape was edgy. Fucking edgy. How was this girl making him such a blood wreck? He paced back and forth in his classroom. He wasn't worried about everything he had put together, he was nervous*
about doing something inappropriate. The last time he'd spent more than five minutes alone in her company, he'd forced a kiss on the poor thing, and she thought it was her fault! She had apologized to him about it. He growled in frustration under his breath. He was thirty-seven years old, it was ridiculous. He could control himself.

But if he was being honest with himself, it had been years since a woman had caught his attention as much as Hermione Granger did. She had been positively engaging throughout their summer interactions. Her bedside chats, and even just the way she had sat with him - reading out loud from the newspaper or a Potions journal - had endeared her to him more than he cared to admit. Not that he'd bloody say so aloud. He hadn't understood why she kept coming back. He'd been growly, unkind, and temperamental. But she had returned – three, four, sometimes five days a week – always with a smile and kind words, for almost ten weeks straight. Until that disastrous kiss happened.

When he had been well enough to sit for long periods of time, but not ready leave the hospital permanently, he'd been forced to stand trial. Her testimony in his favor had been smart and sure. It had surprised him that Potter also testified in his favor. He had been required to give memories and had consented to the use of Veritaserum. Not only had he been cleared of all charges against him, his deeds had turned around and landed him a fucking first-class honor. She had acted so proud, and he'd be damned if that hadn't made him feel good.

While he had not been surprised she didn’t come back to visit him after that calamitous lip lock, he had found himself…missing her. He'd never missed anyone in his life. Well, apart from Lily, but he had loved Lily. This revelation had bothered him, and he had decided to pretend their connection from the summer meant nothing to him. He shook himself out of his reverie and glanced at his watch. She would be here any moment.

He had their first lesson planned, it had actually been refreshing to put an advanced lesson together for someone who would be able to handle it. They were going to brew Veritaserum. His stocks were low, so it killed two doxies with one squirt and would cover the next three to four sessions as it needed the full lunar phase to mature. He might throw another potion in on week three, something simpler that only needed a couple of hours. He was still mulling it over; maybe Essence of Dittany. The potential Healer in her might find that interesting

The knock at the door startled him out of his mindless planning. He checked the time. *Early, as always.* He smirked. Taking a deep breath, he rearranged his face into a bored expression. "Enter," he drawled, perching on the corner of his desk.

"Good evening, Professor." Hermione smiled kindly at him as she slid the door closed behind her.

"Good evening, Miss Granger." He gestured for her to put her stuff on the table directly in front of his desk. "Would you like to go through your schedule first, or should we start with our lesson?"

"Let's get the boring stuff out of the way," she replied, pulling her planner out of her book bag. "I made a copy of my class schedule for you, along with my study schedule, Head Girl duties, and patrols." She handed him the pages of parchment. She continued to not look at him as she dug in her bag, retrieving a quill and some blank parchment. "I'm not currently engaged in any extracurricular activities," she told him, finally looking up. He was riffling through the papers she had given him. "My lessons are intensive, I have no free periods. Most of my free time is spent doing school work."

He finished with her schedules and set them on his desk. Turning to her, he stood. "Everything looks in order," he told her. "If anything in your schedule changes, please let me know. We will meet every Friday evening at eight o'clock to go through your upcoming week and will have a two to three-hour potion lesson, per your request."
"Yes, sir," she replied. Well, there went what little social life she had. She usually used Friday evenings as her free time.

He made his way over behind the lab table he had prepared for them and turned to see her watching him. "Well?" He raised an eyebrow.

Her mouth popped open and she tripped slightly on the hem of her robe in her haste to follow his lead. "Oof," she muttered, her hip slamming into a table. "Bloody hell, he's going to think I did this on purpose. It was much too reminiscent of what happened before she threw herself at him this summer. She kept her gaze averted as she pulled at her robes. "I'm so sorry, sir. The robes are – they're new and a little long. I haven't had a chance to hem them." She chanced a look at him as she finally righted herself to move forward and ran right into a solid expanse of muscle, nose slamming into his chest.

Mortification swept through her; she knew her face must be the color of a pomegranate. "Oh Merlin," she whispered, pulling herself back even as he placed his hands on each side of her shoulders to steady her.

"Miss Granger," he snipped. "Do try to be careful? We're going to be working with some expensive ingredients this evening."

"Yes, sir." She met his eyes with her own and he smirked at her before releasing his grasp and turning back to the table. She followed more slowly.

Twenty minutes later, she was powdering snakeweed with the mortar and pestle while he was explaining the following stage of the brewing process. "We do have to increase the flame before adding the snakeweed," he clarified. "The intense heat coupled with the weed will later help the potion be tasteless."

"Okay," she concurred. "Flame to stage eight?"

"Just a little past eight," he amended as she pushed the mortar to the side.

"Just a moment." She stepped back and pulled her robes off, tossing them over the table behind where they were working before turning to the flame. He watched her face closely, a bead of sweat trickled down her temple and her forehead was creased with concentration. He knew she would take these courses seriously, but never anticipated her excitement and enthusiasm to exceed that which she usually demonstrated in his classes. She would make a wonderful Potions Mistress. She set the flame precisely and double checked the instructions. "Three pinches of snakeweed," she mumbled. He watched as she reached for the bowl and the sleeve of her snug top pulled. She started grinding the weed again, as the potion called for fine powdered snakeweed.

His mid went blank for a moment as he noticed the silver marks on her arm. Trying to look closer without her noticing, he made out a double O and a D. Does that say what I think it does? Cold fury swept through him in an instant. His teeth ground and he growled before he could stop himself. He grabbed her wrist, startling her so bad the mortar, pestle, and ground snakeweed hit the floor and shattered with a reverberating crash that echoed around the deserted classroom.

"What is going on?!” She blurted, trying to pull away. "Did I do something wrong?!” Her expression was positively gob smacked.

"No!" He snapped, barely calming when he pulled the sleeve up past her elbow. "What the hell is...this!” he exclaimed, and she realized he had seen her scar. Burning charcoal eyes furiously meeting disconcerted chocolate ones. "What is this?!” he repeated – demanded.
Tears welled in her eyes as shame washed through her body. "I-It's a scar," she whispered.

"I can see that, Miss Granger, I'm not dense," he snarled. "What happened?"

"It happened d-during the war." Tears spilled over her lower lashes as she tried to pull her arm away from him, he held it fast. She turned her face away, trying to hide her confusion and humiliation. Why was he so angry? "B-Bellatrix…" She trailed off as if that was enough of an excuse.

_Bloody hell, I scared her._ "I did not mean to make you cry, Miss Granger." His voice came out distorted through his set jaw. He gently traced the thin, raised lines of the word on the silky-smooth skin of her forearm. Her skin felt scorched as he outlined the scar, like he was carefully opening each letter he touched with a hot scalpel. The feeling of want conflicted with her embarrassed emotions.

"Did this happen when you were held captive at Malfoy Manor?" he inquired, control returning to his inflection. He finally dropped her arm and she quickly stepped away from him, trying to clear her head while she tugged her sleeve down in place. She wrapped one arm around her waist in a form of self-protection. She watched him intently as his fists clenched and unclenched. She again tried to understand his boiling fury.

_Calm down you bastard._ He forced his body to unfurl tense muscles. "Tell me what happened that night." The demand came after minutes of silence. His voice was gruff and dark.

"I-I…" She trailed off, then steeled herself. "We were captured by a gang of Snatchers. G-Greyback and Sc-Scabior." She paused as a strangled sound left her professor. She watched his profile carefully for a moment, surprised by his display of barely restrained emotion, before continuing. "Harry, Ron, and I. I put a stinging jinx on Harry so they wouldn't recognize him. It worked for a minute. They figured it out quick enough. They had caught Dean T-Thomas and Griphook – a g-goblin – t-too. They took us to the manor. W-we had the sword of Gryff-ffindor and B-Bellatrix was beyond outraged."

"I'll bet she was," he huffed. He had put that sword in their hands. He was responsible for that scar on her arm. He gripped the table in front of him, his knuckles going white. _Fuck, fuck, fuck._

Hermione licked her lips and took a deep breath, trying to gather her thoughts. This was the first time she had told this story aloud. Her throat was closing with anxiety. "They kept…" Her breath hitched and she fought down the rising panic and sick roiling in her stomach. "They kept me to torture, because I am a Mudblood."

_No._ His mind raced at the defeat in her voice. He spun to her and grabbed her shoulders, shaking her. Her brain rattled in her head as fresh tears cascaded down her lovely face. "Don't call yourself that!"

"Why not?!" She spat at him, her body flaming to life with his touch. Her Gryffindor courage sparked anew. "They chose to torture _me_ because I was expendable. She used the Cruciatius curse on _me_, because I was disposable. They wouldn't _need me_. If I died or went mindless, it wouldn't _matter_!" She threw the words in his face and he flinched. "She demanded between sessions to tell her how we had gotten into her vault; asking what else we had taken. I managed to finally form the lie that the sword was a fake. I apparently work well under duress." She gave a mirthless laugh and he felt his face drain of what little color he had. His fingers tightened painfully, but she didn't seem to notice, just continued to stare directly into his face, not seeing him anymore.

"At least then she stopped cursing me. She started cutting me instead, which hurt less." Her voice had gone flat, the glittering in her eyes died. He stared at her, unblinking, for a fraction of a second before crushing her to his chest just as the uncontrollable sobs broke free from her chest.
The tears were better than the deadened look in her eyes; the look that made him think she had never before spoken these words audibly before. He sank to the floor, pulling her with him. Not knowing what else to do for her, Snape cradled her to him. He had never comforted a witch this way before. Hell, he'd never comforted anyone any way before. He felt awkward, like a gangly prepubescent teenager. He tangled one hand into her hair and wrapped the other around her shoulders securely. He let her cry, guilt washing over him for insisting on the details.

"Shh." He hushed her after a few moments. He bent his head, burying his nose into her unruly, magnificent hair. Intending to only give comfort, he struggled to keep his need to take pleasure in the feel of her body against his at bay. God, she smells good. Lavender and vanilla. "Shh." He soothed again, unthinkingly he kissed her forehead. "It's okay, Miss Granger. It's okay."

"I'm so sorry." She sniffed, pulling back slightly to wipe her cheeks with her fingers. "I don't know why --"

"Stop. You apologize too much." He told her, dropping the hand from her hair and placing a finger over her lips. Her tear softened, perfect mouth. She froze and he tensed, their eyes locking. The air between them was suddenly electrified.

She had felt his body responding to hers. She had felt the kiss in her hair. She felt safe, and warm; she was at peace in his arms. What she did next used every ounce of courage she possessed. Gently puckering her lips, she kissed his finger, never taking her eyes from his. His lips parted in surprise heat curled in her belly as his hand cupped the side of her face. Searching her eyes carefully, he silently asked her permission. The hunger that flamed to life in the depths of her chocolate and amber orbs and the whimper that left her throat almost made him groan aloud. He slowly bent his head and touched his lips to hers. Her breathy sigh ignited feelings long dormant in his soul. Her tentative fingers slid up his chest and over his shoulders, coming to rest entwined at the nape of his neck, kneading hard muscle, making him shiver in appreciation. She moaned softly as he deepened the kiss with a gentle sweep of his tongue.

It started slow and gentle, but quickly escalated as all senses became heightened and he growled. She cried out softly as his tongue swept deep in her mouth and his hands cascaded down her back, coming to rest in a death grip on her bum. He pulled her onto his lap, and she reflexively straddled him while thrusting her fingers into his hair, trying to get closer to him. He ripped his mouth away from hers and trailed hot kissed across her jaw to one ear where he nibbled gently. She gasped as the sensation shot straight to her core, tilting her head to give him better access. The heat of his mouth was seeping into her core, soaking her knickers instantaneously.

"Oh, Gods," she breathed, feathering gentle kisses along his cheek bone. His rough, long fingered hands slid up her back, under her shirt and she hissed at the feeling, rocking her hips into his. She was not naïve enough to miss the growing bulge in his pants as he lapped and nipped at the column of her throat, sucking at her pulse point. "Ah!" She was panting. He tugged at her shirt and she leaned back, allowing him to rip the offensive fabric up over her head.

Her arms fell gracefully to her sides. The sight of her straddling his hips, eyes darkened and heavy lidded with lust, her wild hair cascading over her shoulders and curling around the swell of her breasts held in the softest bra he'd ever felt spurred him into frantic action. In a rapid of quick successions, he pushed her to stand and stood himself, casting a stasis charm on the potion they had been working on and warding the classroom door. Grabbing her hand, he pulled her through the classroom to the doors of his quarters.

She did not try and stop him, following with willing desperation. The door burst open before they even reached it and he spun her in a circle into his office. The door slammed closed and she heard
bolts spring into place as the chamber door to his bedroom magically opened. He pushed her into the wall with his hips, capturing her mouth with his again while shoving her arms above her head. He entwined her fingers with his, holding her captive against the cool stone. Her breathy gasp and involuntary roll of her groin against his elicited a delicious sound from him, making Hermione feel like a goddess. She swallowed Snape's groan and met his hot, wet, skilled muscle with her own, dueling him with equal fervor. She hitched her leg around his hip and her hips rolled again, searching for friction she so desperately needed.

He released her hands and one arm dropped to encircle her slender form, cupping her bum through those damnable Muggle jeans while the other hitched under her raised knee. Too much fabric. He spun them in a circle and backed her to the settee. He pulled away, but kept his hand on her butt as he searched her face for any sign she wanted to stop. It was flushed a beautiful pink, her lips swollen from their kisses. She looked back at him with excitement in her eyes, he was sure this time. She wanted this. He bloody well wanted it, too. Keeping one arm around her, he pulled his wand from his robe pocket and shot a fire into the brazier to keep his office and anti-chamber warm. The fire roared to life in his bedroom as well, casting a comforting glow in the open doorway.

Without stopping to consider the consequences, he doffed his robes and tossed them on the couch, then scooped her petite form up into his arms, his lips thundering down on hers again as he carried her to his bedroom.

Her heart was pounding; she thought it was going to dislodge itself from her chest. It certainly was making a valiant effort. One hand clutched Snape's neck while the other dug fingernails into his shoulder, bunching the fabric of his button-down shirt. Where was his frock coat? She felt the softness of the mattress dip as he settled her on the bed. He climbed on top of her, his hard body covering her pliable one. She relished the weight and sighed contentedly, returning each enthusiastic kiss with one of her own.

It felt like he was snogging the life out of her, and her entire body convulsed in one massive tremor of need and excitement and nerves. He was being the right combination of fierce, but, oh, so gentle. Hermione never could have dreamed that Snape could be gentle. She wondered idly if it was because of their exchange in the lab. His teeth nipped her ear lobe; his wet, hot tongue curled around the sensitive base behind, making a shiver cascade down her spine. His hips ground into hers and she wriggled as the heat of his cock pressed into her gusset. It felt like her pussy had sprung a leak. Her knickers were soaked, she would be surprised if the jeans weren't as well.

His kisses and licks and nips were driving her mental. Her nails raked into his hair, scoring his scalp and drawing a long hiss from his nose as he worried the sensitive swell of her breasts, wet muscle lapping while rough stubble from his jaw scrapped the sensitive valley between. His hands, which had been propping his weight, slithered up her rib cage and cupped one breast encased the slippery soft fabric, rubbing the pad of his thumb over a nipple which peaked and hardened like a knut. All the while his hips ground into hers.

She rocked hers back tentatively and was rewarded with another low growl. "Miss Granger," he rasped even as he tugged the fabric of her bra down exposing a nipple. His hot breath cascaded across it and she whimpered. "If you have any intention of stopping me, now is your chance." That hard mouth grazed around the edge of her areola and, if it were possible, the nipple tightened further. Her need centering in the tip of the soft mound of sensitive tissue.

"No, don't stop," she breathed arching her back, presenting herself for him. They groaned together as he pulled the sensitive nub into his hot chamber, swirling his tongue lazily making her gasp and twist beneath him.
That's all it took for his very tenuous grasp on control, on making sure what was happening was what she truly wanted, to dissipate utterly. In what felt like moments her bra was gone and his shirt was unbuttoned. He smothered her lips with his again and again, his tongue dancing with hers in the same ancient rhythm his cock throbbed to participate in below.

He rolled them, pushing her up to straddle him while he unbuttoned and dragged the zipper down on her jeans. She rolled off to shove them down her hips and kick them off her feet, cursing as she met the resistance of her trainers, toeing them off. When she turned back to him, he was stark naked and she froze. He was gorgeous. Maybe not in the traditional sense, but his broad shoulders were toned, his chest flat and spattered with dark hair while marred skin flowed over muscle to his hips, which narrowed appropriately. While he wasn’t defined muscle, he wasn’t soft or overweight in the least. Lean and hard were the words that came to mind. The scars around his neck and right shoulder from the snake and others that were unexplained only added to his allure. They made him sexy and dangerous and even more appealing to her. His dick stood out hard and violently dark in contrast with the pallor of his skin, dark pubic hair curling at its base. It was huge, certainly larger than average. Definitely bigger then she would have ever anticipated.

She had never gotten this far before; she had no idea what to do next. Panic rose in her throat. *I can't do this, I don't know what to do. Gods, his cock looks big. Are they all that big? That's supposed to fit inside me?* She knew the basics. She was an avid reader, after all. She knew what she wanted to do, but what if he didn't like it? What if he laughed at her inexperience? Should she tell him she was a virgin? She didn't want to stop, she was worried if she said something, he'd force her to stop. He must have sensed her nervousness.

"I'm no different than anyone else you've ever been with," he told her gently, reaching for her. He pulled her face back to his as he settled her into the pillows on her back. He sat back and stared at her for what felt like hours. Blush stained her cheeks a brilliant pink as he took in her breasts. Her areola were a dark, dusky pink with taught nipples that seemed to lengthen under his stare. Her stomach was flat, but soft, and her hips rounded out in a perfect hourglass form that men would kill for. The apex at her thighs held a dark, curly expanse of pubic hair that made his mouth water. One arm came down to cover herself as his scrutiny got the better of her.

"No you bloody well don't, love," he grumbled menacingly. "You're fucking stunning." He kissed her deeply while trailing calloused fingertips down her body, between her breasts to the juncture just above her sex. He smoothed his palm over her low belly and his fingers teased along the top of her pubic hair. She shuddered and arched into him, moaning into his mouth. His fingers sank lower teasing the folds of her sex apart and finding her clit. Her body thrummed with heat and need, she ripped her mouth away from his and hissed through her teeth as he suckled her jaw bone.

"You're soaked, Miss Granger," he muttered approvingly as his deft and nimble fingers circled and slid in her most intimate of places.

"Uhh." Her hips arched again and her head lolled back into the pillows. "Oh, Gods," she keened. The lovely sound grew louder as he sunk his middle finger into her velvety heat, his breath released in deep, visceral sound that thrilled her.

Snape was thoroughly enjoying the wanton, writhing young woman beneath him. He hardly dared to believe this was really happening. His prick felt like marble and his bollocks ached with want for her. He slid a second finger in with the first. Before going any further, he wanted to see how responsive she was, what he might have to do to bring her to climax. Her legs fell open wider, allowing him a breath-taking view. He trailed more wet kisses across her chest, lapping at the neglected nipple from before. The pad of his thumb found her clit, which was swollen and hard. He gritted his teeth against the ridiculous sounds his body wanted to make as he positioned himself to kneel between her knees.
She was watching him; he could feel her gaze. He lifted his eyes to watch her back, slowly giving her the friction her body was craving. Her arms were loose above her head, her hair spilled riotously across the pillows. His pillows. This beautiful creature was in his bed. Wanting him.

"Oh, please sir." Her hips arched again and her chin tilted up as her eyes rolled back in her head. He knew she must be close. He leaned into her soft thighs, trailing his mouth up the sensitive insides while keeping a steady, firm pace with his fingers. When he kissed her glittering slit her hips bucked and she let out a guttural groan of need. Whimpers of "Pleasepleaseplease!" falling from her lips in a tantalizing husky murmur that was making him mad. His tongue stroked her clit while his fingers sought out the sweet spot inside of her. Finding it, he used a sweeping motion with his fingers. He felt her walls twitch and he sucked her hard, making her spiral over the edge, throwing herself into the abyss of pleasure.

"Ah….unhh!" She screamed, sobbing with her release as she flew. She whimpered when his hand and mouth came away, feeling his loss in the very center of her being.

With one swift movement, he settled his knob at her hot molten entrance and slammed himself into her before she had time to come down from her orgasm completely. He froze at her surprised pant of pain, her hands slamming onto his shoulders to stop him. Horror pulled at him as he realized what had just happened. She was a virgin? His mind whirred with astonishment as he dropped himself onto his hands to look at her. Her fingernails were digging into his shoulders, leaving crescent shaped indentations.

The pain had shocked her. She thought she'd be able to mask it if it hurt; she had been very wrong. Every fiber of her being wanted him out.

Now.

She pushed at his shoulders, trying to control herself. Taking fast, deep breaths; tears streamed down her temples into her hair.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He demanded hoarsely, it was taking every ounce of his already out of control resolve to not move, to let her adjust. If he had known he would have…what? Stopped? Not bloody likely. Gone slower? He would have tried.

"I didn't think it mattered," she whispered, her voice shook with discomfort. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? Gods!" He pressed his forehead into her shoulder, feathering kisses over her collar bone while he waited for her body to relax. He was so glad he had brought her to orgasm before slamming into her. At least she had been well warmed up. "Of course it mattered, you silly witch. I would have approached this much differently. Do you want to stop?" Merlin, say no. He didn't know if he could stop.

She thought about that for a moment. Did she want to stop? It didn't really hurt any more, it was just an uncomfortable stretch now. She had read that it could pinch or be painful, but she'd also read if the woman had used tampons that they would break the hymen and she most likely wouldn't bleed. She naïvely thought that also meant it wouldn’t hurt. Plus, she had a vibrator she used frequently, which felt amazing. She hadn't taken into account that his cock was probably three times bigger than her vibe. She realized that those things together made her believe it really wouldn’t hurt. As her mind whirled, she tried to get her muscles to relax. It seemed to be working. She felt her pussy spasm and contract around him, adjusting to his size. She felt full to bursting, her breathing finally starting to slow and the low ache of want came back as he trailed blistering open mouth kisses across her neck and jaw, trying to calm her and bring back her desire.
"You're okay?" He murmured questioningly as he felt the tension seep out of her along with the tiny whimpers of pleasure from his ministrations on her neck and jaw. He kissed the corner of her mouth, whining in response, shifting beneath him. He gritted his teeth against the sensation and ground his face into her neck. "You have to say the words, love," he whispered into her ear. "You have to tell me you're okay, that you want to continue."

"Yes." Her voice was filled with desire, rough and thick. "Yes, I'm okay."

"What do you want, Miss Granger?"

She paused, not sure what he wanted her to say. So she said the first thing that came to her mind. "I want you to fuck me, sir. Please."

He growled, her words couldn’t have been any more perfect. As he slid forward, her gasp of surprise crested and his ball tightened in answer. He had to go slow, make this good for her. Snape needed to last, he wanted to bring her to orgasm again. Why in the wizarding world this young witch had chosen him to be her first would never be understood – he might have to have her explain it to him. He slipped one arm under her back and pulled her into his chest, finding her mouth once again as he pulled out and then nudged back in. "Wrap your legs around me, pet." She complied with no hesitation. Merlin’s balls, she was tight as a vice. The angle deepened and he settled more comfortably into her, sliding in and out slowly; nudging her cervix gently with each thrust until she was mindless beneath him.

"Harder, harder." She whimpered against his lips, finally dragging her mouth away from his to suck in greedy breaths. Hermione pressed her forehead to his shoulder. He kissed her temple. "I can pick the tempo up a bit, pet," he murmured and her breathy groan edged him forward. "Let's not be too rough, or you won't be able to move tomorrow." He sat up on his knees and cupped the sensitive skin behind her own, pushing them up to her shoulders. Changing the angle again so he could sink deeper while notching the speed up to a slow cantor. He watched her eyes roll up into the back of her head while a quivering gasp escaped her lips.

"Oh!" She sobbed, the pressure was rebuilding in her to the point of an inescapable wall of pleasure-pain that fell so good and so terrifying at the same time. She was convulsing with the sensations. Her brain miraculously blank, sensation taking over everything.

"That's right, pet." His baritone caressed her, making the tension in her body ease. "You like that, don't you?" His voice was thick and gravely. The desire in it dragging her closer to a precipice.

"Yes." She panted, starting to meet his thrusts with her own. The growl that rumbled out of him only pushed her closer to nirvana. She reached out to run her fingers through the coarse hair on his chest.

"I want you to come for me again, do you understand?"

"Yes, so... close." She'd do anything he wanted her to. She would jump off the astronomy tower so long as he didn't stop. “Please keep talking.” This request surprised a low chuckle out of him. His fingers found her clit again, rolling a gentle circle around it's girth. "You're a naughty, girl, aren't you, Miss Granger?" His voice dripped with comical desire. He was trying to make her blush. It was working. To her surprise, she loved it, his voice brought her all the closer to the edge she was dangling off.

"Yes, sir." She gasped as his hips slammed harder into her thighs, bollocks slapping her arse.

He clenched his teeth hard as his balls rose, trying to crawl into his body. He could see how close
she was, felt the trembling of her whole body. He increased the pressure of his thumb on her nub and continued to murmur unintelligible words at her. When her legs stiffened, he knew he had thrown her off the cliff again. "Oh, Gods!" She cried out, jerking her hips into his firmly. One, two more strokes and he came with her, his release felt like it was being pulled from his toes. The groan emanating from his chest was deep and animalistic and only prolonged her own pleasure. He collapsed on her, crushing her into the mattress, hips jolting of their own accord while his seed flooded her core. His face submerged in her glorious, fragrant tresses. Her arms snaked around his shoulders as they both gasped and shivered and slowly fell back to Earth.

She welcomed his weight, hard and flat and sinewy, she didn't even mind his sharp hip bones pressing into her soft flesh. It was perfect. Everything had been perfect. She sighed in contentment and pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder.

As Snape's breathing slowed and his shaft started to go soft inside her, his mind returned. With it, a dawning horror spread through his body. He had just fucked a student. Not just any student – Hermione-bloody-Granger.
Chapter Eight

Lizzie had two dates and a detention this weekend. Professor Sprout had not been available to have her sit detention Friday evening, so she would be completing that obligatory task Sunday afternoon. The sweet lady told her gently to try and not rile Professor Snape up with a wink and a knowing look that Lizzie almost laughed at.

Draco had asked her to go flying Friday evening (so her gratitude of having to postpone her detention was palpable), and Ron had invited her to take a walk on the grounds the next morning. She was excited, but nervous.

She had been up front with both boys. It was a first date, they were to be gentlemen. She was getting to know them. She had also told both of them that she had a date with the other. Neither boy had looked very pleased about that, but she’d be damned if she was going to sneak around. She’d have a date or two with each of them, and then make her decision as to who she wanted to try things with. Maybe they’d both be disappointing – but what if they were both lovely? She closed her eyes, this could get messy.

Hermione and Ginny had been less than impressed with her choice to accept a date with Malfoy. As Draco had predicted, they had both cornered Lizzie Wednesday evening dragging her to Hermione’s Head Girl suite.

“He’s bad news, Lizzie,” Ginny said. “He was a Death Eater! You know what that is, right?”

“Yes,” Lizzie said simply. “And he already told me he was a Death Eater.” She shrugged. “He also told me he’s trying to put it in the past.”

Hermione snorted derisively. “Words,” she sneered. “Malfoy is a lot of talk, not a lot of action. He always has been.”

“Look,” Lizzie replied. “It’s just a date. He can’t hide his true self without a lot effort. I don’t know him – but you guys don’t really know me, either. You’re giving me a chance anyway. I’m going to do the same for him.”

Hermione and Ginny exchanged a surprised look. Ginny had the grace to look a little abashed. “Okay.” She gave a half shrug. “He did stop fighting for You-Know-Who at the end…and, well, he is awfully handsome, isn’t he?” She exchanged a look with Hermione.

Lizzie giggled. “He’s pretty!” She snickered. Even Hermione had a small grin on her face.

“What about Ron though?” The brunette asked after a moment. “I thought you were interested in Ron?”
“I am,” Lizzie affirmed. “I’m not going to lead anyone on, nor am I going to tell any lies. Ron hasn’t asked me out, yet. If he does, I’ll go on a date with him, too. Get to know him better. One date with Draco doesn’t mean we’re exclusive.”

Ginny and Hermione exchange a look. No one called Malfoy Draco. It was always Malfoy. “You better put a bug up his arse, Gin,” Hermione said seriously. “If it takes him even half as long as it did for him to kiss me, she’ll be married with two kids before he even considers asking her out.”

Ginny laughed appreciatively. “I’ll tell him to do it right away, or he’ll lose his chance.”

Apparently, Ron had been horrified that she had accepted a date invitation from Malfoy as well. Disturbed enough to be put into action immediately. He had asked her out for Saturday morning the very next day (which Hermione said was a complete record for him as the girls had whispered and giggled while on the way to Transfiguration).

While Lizzie enjoyed spending time with Hermione and Ginny together, the younger girl didn’t share their class schedule, so Lizzie was rapidly becoming closer with Hermione. She really enjoyed Hermione. She was extremely intelligent, well read, and down to Earth. Lizzie appreciated the candor and easy friendship.

“Sprout is my keeper,” she told Hermione with a sigh. “She decided we’d use my detention Sunday afternoon to go through my schedule. I was thinking about signing up for choir and Charms Club. Plus, I’m trying out for the Hufflepuff Quidditch team. Do you participate in any clubs?”

“I don’t have time, I have to study,” Hermione answered placidly. Lizzie looked at her appraisingly. “You have to play sometimes, Hermione. Can you help me get ready for my date with Draco tonight?” she asked the Head Girl as they pulled their Charms books out of their bags Friday afternoon. The din of the classroom covered their conversation. The older girl pulled a face.

“I can’t, I’m so sorry,” she blew a stray curl out of her eyes. “I have my weekly appointment with Snape tonight. He sent me an owl this morning with everything he wants from me tonight. I have to outline my schedule after classes. Then it’s dinner, and I was going to shower before I left to meet him. Looks like we’re starting lessons right away. I wouldn’t be surprised if he kept me there until midnight.”

Lizzie smirked at her friend cheekily. “All that extra time with your older man, you must be elated,” she whispered with a wink, after making sure no one was looking at them.

“Shh!” Hermione’s eyes grew wide and her eyes flitted around the room looking for eavesdroppers as well. Seeing none, she visibly relaxed. “All guy-talk on my end needs to be done away from eavesdroppers!” she pleaded, but not unkindly. Lizzie snorted and gave a nod.

So Lizzie had roped Ginny into helping her get ready. Where she was still building a solid base to their relationship, Lizzie liked the redhead quite a bit, and it was obvious the girl was a big part of Hermione’s life. Just as Ron and Harry were. She needed to tread lightly. She didn’t want to jeopardize new, tenuous relationships over boys. Not worth it.

“I like the green top with the flowy sleeves, it brings out your eyes,” Ginny told Lizzie. “Plus, he’s a Slytherin, he’ll be pleased with the color choice as well.”

Lizzie smiled at her in the mirror. “Sounds like a plan,” she pulled the shirt on over her head and gave her hair one final pat. “This braid is fierce, Gin!” Ginny was magical at braiding — no pun intended. Lizzie couldn’t braid to save her soul.
They’re called plaits,” Ginny told her, laughing. “It was a good idea!” Per Lizzie’s directions, she had started at one temple and wove across her head in a crown to the other temple. Tied off with plastic little rubber things Ginny had never seen in her life; the blonde witch had then pulled the plait so it was loose across her crown and used her wand to set her stick straight hair in flowing waves. While Ginny could braid, Lizzie could style!

“Okay, how do I look?” Lizzie did a quick pirouette, arms outstretched.

“Beautiful,” Ginny answered honestly. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Malfoy isn’t going to know what hit him.” Lizzie’s sparkling smile answered the redhead.

“I better get going, or I’m going to be late. Walk me out?” They had gotten ready in Ginny’s dorm room.

“Absolutely,” Ginny agreed. Lizzie gathered her cloak and broom. “I’ll get the rest of my stuff from you tomorrow, is that okay? I don’t want to haul it with.” “No problem.” Ginny concurred, and they walked in companionable silence down the tower steps.

“There you are, Ginny! Hey, Lizzie!” Harry called at them, waving from where he and Ron were sitting playing a game of wizard chess. “Join us?”

“Uh.” Lizzie felt awkward. “I can’t, I’m meeting… someone,” she amended at the last second. Better then shouting across the Gryffindor common room she was going out with a Slytherin. She might have only been here for a week, but the rivalry between the two houses had not been lost on her.

She noticed Ron looked like he swallowed a steaming pile of poo. “I’ll see you in the morning, Ron?” she asked as she and Ginny stopped in front of them. “Where do you want to meet?”

At the mention of their date, Ron perked up. “Have breakfast with us? We’ll go afterwards. Meet you in the Great Hall around 8:30?”

“Perfect,” she smiled calmly. “I can’t wait. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Waving at the trio, she exited the common room through the portrait hole.

Draco was relieved to see her coming down the grand stairwell outside of the Great Hall. She was right on time, but he had half expected her not to show after having time to talk with her new friends. She looked beautiful, despite the fact she was wearing those damn blasted Muggle pants…he thought they were called jeans. He had to admit they hugged her curves well. Then she had on a chiffon-y looking peasant top that had sweeping sleeves. It was bottle green and stunning on her. Her hair was all wild and wavy – much different from the straight golden locks he’d been searching out wherever he went. He shook his head.

Cool it, Malfoy, he chastised himself. No need to come across too eager. Just be polite.

“Hi!” She smiled at him, hoping down the last step. He noticed she was carrying a broom and had a cloak draped over one arm.

“You have your own broom?” He was a bit puzzled, he was planning on taking her flying – on his broom. He hadn’t expected her to bring one with. He held his Nimbus 2001 lithely propped against his shoulder.

“Oh, yes!” She nodded enthusiastically. “It was my parents gift for me for my seventeenth birthday! I was so excited. I had to use school brooms to play Quidditch prior to now. I’m thrilled to have my own! I haven’t had a lot of time to fly on it, so I thought I’d bring it with to stretch her legs.” Her
enthusiasm was adorable, he hoped his disappointment didn’t show.

She noted his frown, so she continued after a breath. “I thought we could take a side by side for a bit and then you could take me up on your broom after?” It was like she read his thoughts. Damn, he must’ve been more transparent then he’d meant to be.

He played it cool and shrugged. “If that’s what you want.”

He gestured for her to start walking, resting his palm on her low back. It tingled with the contact. Cut it out, mate, he snarled at himself. “So, you play Quidditch?”

“Hm.” His touch had distracted her, but she regained her composure pretty quickly. “Oh, yes. I love Quidditch. I was raised on sports like crazy. My dad was a Marine, so very into physical activity. I was raised playing all kinds of things. Basketball and baseball are my favorite, next to Quidditch of course. I made the team for my House at Ilvermorny - Chaser.”

“You going to try out for the Hufflepuff team?” “Absolutely! Tryouts are actually tomorrow afternoon. I’m going to go out for Seeker and Chaser; I’d be happy with either. That’s the other reason I wanted to get on my broom, tonight. I was so pleased you suggested flying! Do you play?”

“Yeah, I’m the Slytherin Seeker,” he told her with a smirk. They lapsed into silence. “Tell me about the other sports you mention. I’ve never heard of baseball.” Anything to keep that voice going. It was intoxicating – soft and sweet with an underlying husky tone. He removed his palm from her back and took her hand instead. Her hands were cool and soft. She entwined her fingers with his and beamed at him. Then dove into an explanation about home plates and bases and bats – that were kind of like the ones the beaters used – that was utterly befuddling. Before he even knew it, they were at the pitch. They looked around curiously. The pitch was still not a hundred percent back to normal. It looked like a couple of the stands still needed to be fixed, the center hoop at the other end of the field was broken and sad looking. The grass was torn up and needed re-sodding.

“Professor McGonagall says the pitch will be back to normal before the first game,” he told her, watching wide green eyes take in the damage.

“How is it the castle was put back together so quickly?”

“Old magic.” He shrugged as if that explained it and left no room for questions. She decided to let it drop. She was sure the war was a touchy subject.

“It’s actually pretty nice out here tonight,” she murmured. “Still cooler than I’m used to, though.” She dropped her broom and pulled her cloak over her shoulders, securing it at her neck. “It’s so freaking cold and wet here most of the time.” She gave a fake shudder and chaffed her arms, teasing.

He smiled tentatively at her, it didn’t reach his eyes. “Where were you before this?”

“Hawaii! Almost always hot and sunny. So glorious.”

“Sounds nice.” Why couldn’t he pick up the conversation on his end? It was getting bloody irritating. It was like the little pixie had tongue tied him.

She could tell he was nervous, which was really sweet, and from what she had heard from Ginny and Hermione, very out of character. “Race you to the goal posts!” she called scooping up her broom and taking off with a swift kick to the ground. He watched, bemused as she soared up and away from him.

“I don’t think so, witch!” He called after her, jumping on his own broom, graceful as a leopard
leaping limbs. He caught up with her in no time and she was laughing, her hair being caught and twisted in the wind, riotous around her face. It made her look elemental – wild and fierce. She leaned forward on her broom, prompting it to shoot ahead of him and he did a roll in mid-air before pressing forward to keep up with her. She was a good flyer.

They zoomed around the pitch, heckling each other for a bit before he gestured her to set down on the field below. He couldn’t remember the last time he had enjoyed himself more. He noticed they weren’t totally alone. There were a few other couples milling about on their own dates, but no one else was flying. It didn’t bother him, everyone else could sod off if they bothered them.

“Care to join me? I’ll take you out over the grounds and lake.” He held a hand out for her. “A proper tour of the grounds.”

“I can leave my broom here?” she inquired, making sure it would be safe.

“Yeah, you don’t really have anything to worry about.” He waved off her concern. She dropped her broom with no hesitation and quickly pulled her unruly hair into a pony tail over her left shoulder, then she took his hand. Neither missed the spark of electricity between their fingers. Her lips parted in surprise, and Malfoy had the sudden desire to lean in a kiss her.

“In front of you, or behind you?” She hesitated, not sure where to settle herself.

“Front,” he said decisively, pushing his traitorous thoughts away. He’d get to hold her under the pretext of flying a broom. Perfect. She straddled the broom and wiggled her perfect cotton covered curves right into his groin. He bit back a groan. Merlin! Was she completely oblivious? He didn’t think she was doing it on purpose. He breathed in her scent – apples and sunshine and fresh air from soaring around the pitch. It was intoxicating. He wrapped one arm around her slender form – she felt so small! – grasped the broom handled with his other hand and kicked off the ground. She gave a little squeal of pleasure mixed with anxiety of not being in control of the broomstick, but quickly regained her composure and settled back against him. He propped his chin over her right shoulder, away from her hair, and kept up a steady stream of low dictation, explaining their surroundings. The sun was almost finished sinking behind the horizon in a cascade of fiery gold crimsons and sparkling amethysts dripping into cobalt and indigo blues. As a whole, the scenery was quite breathtaking.

After a good thirty minutes, as the sky turned completely indigo and stars started to twinkle into existence, he directed them back to the pitch to get her broom. He was disappointed the evening was coming to an end.

Lizzie felt exhilarated. She was having such a wonderful time with Draco. She sighed when he touched down and reluctantly slid off onto her own two feet before scooping up her broomstick. She turned to him grinning, but her smile faltered catching the sight of his face. He looked positively pensive. “You okay, Draco?”

He studied her face for a moment, she had looked happy, grinning at him like that. Did that mean she had a nice time? He certainly had. Guarded as ever, he wasn’t about to tell her that without hearing it from her first. A Malfoy never showed his hand. He forced his face to clear. “Yeah, sorry,” he responded automatically. “Just thinking.” He reached for her hand again and they walked slowly back towards the castle. “I had a really good time tonight.” She didn’t beat around the bush; this American girl was pleasingly straight forward. It was refreshing.

“I did, too,” he admitted reluctantly. He pulled her closer to his side and unlaced his fingers from hers, sliding his arm across her shoulders instead.

Lizzie liked how direct he was. He moved with purpose. She had enjoyed their conversation. He was bright and well spoken. Definitely not an idiot. Even though he had been guarded, and not very
self-revealing, he had been the perfect gentleman. She just wished they had time to talk about more personal things, get to know each other on a deeper level. She hadn’t asked him anything about his family.

“I’d like to see you again, another date,” he stated casually, not looking at her. They were at the front entrance and she pulled him to a stop, turning him to face her.

“I’d like that, too, Draco,” she agreed with a sparkle in her eyes. He gave her a cautious smile, no teeth, but his eyes glimmered. She’d take it. He pulled her back to him and they continued walking. She was surprised when he didn’t leave her at the steps of the dungeon, instead escorting her all the way back to the Hufflepuff barrels in the basement. Stopping about ten feet away, he pulled her to a halt.

She had warned him she expected gentlemanly behavior from him tonight. He could tell she was an innocent. That thrilled him more than he cared to admit. He felt he had held up that promise well, but very much wanted to give her a goodnight kiss. Prove to her he had enjoyed himself, figure out how she was feeling. He wasn’t sure if a kiss on the first date was gentlemanly or not. Any other girl he’d ever dated had expected it, but this one – she felt different.

They looked at each other awkwardly for a moment before she heard him grumble. “Ah, fuck it!” With that, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. She had been expecting it and welcomed the attention with enthusiasm. She kept the kiss chaste, but sweet, and pulled away after only a few seconds. Just as she felt him decide to take it to the next level. She smiled kindly at his confused look, trying to hide the fact that her lips were burning where they had met his. It wasn’t that she was a prude or a tease, but if she was going to be dating two guys for a time before making a decision to pursue one, she wasn’t going to build a reputation as easy or loose.

“This was a really lovely first date,” she told him, her tone giving a gentle reminder of their brief history. “I’m a bit of an old fashion girl, so please don’t mind my chasteness. Let me know when you’d like to get together again?”

He stared at her for a moment, dumbfounded. She had ended the kiss well before he had wanted to. Why? This girl was going to be the downfall of him, he could just tell. He was going to have to tread carefully. “Goodnight, Lizzie. I’ll see you in Potions on Tuesday.”

She looked surprised for a moment that he was putting her off so long, but after a moment a resigned smile lifted the corners of her pretty mouth. “See you Tuesday.” She turned and took the last few steps to the common room door, whispering the password and disappearing inside.

He watched the golden blonde locks vanish as the door clicked quietly back in place. She had a date with Weasley in the morning, which infuriated him. Did he fight for her, or did he back off and just not bother with the trouble? If he went through the hassle of courting her seriously for her to turn around and pick the weasel, he might not live down the humiliation. He’d have to think on it.

Snape rolled off and out of Hermione after a few minutes, raising a hand to cover his eyes, still mentally berating himself. She automatically curled up next to him, tucking her head on his shoulder like it was the most natural thing to do. He couldn’t help his involuntary response of wrapping his arm around her and using his fingers to pull her hair from her face and smooth it away. “Mmm,” she sighed dreamily into his chest.

He stared at the top of her head. To say he felt he had been hit with a Confundus Charm would be an understatement. The mix of emotions running through him – he, who was good at keeping all emotions at bay – was overwhelming. He was sated, he felt content, he felt fulfilled. Her snuggling
next to him like it was meant to be did something to his chest that was uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Because of this, he felt a bit...anxious? Then there was a deeper part of him that felt regret, shame, and disgust. He was her professor, he was supposed to teach her – not fuck her. He had been assigned to her as a mentor and he had betrayed that role in an unfathomable way. He had taken her virginity for Merlin’s sake! When he focused back on her she was tracing a lazy, nonsensical pattern through is chest hair. How was she staying so bloody calm? Did she really have no comprehension of what they had done? What lines they had crossed?

Hermione was not calm at all. She kept her head down and concentrated on keeping her breathing even. Inside her overfull mind, her thoughts were racing. She had stepped so far over the propriety line she felt a bit … dirty. And embarrassed. She was just waiting for him to start in on her. To tell her this could never happen again; that it was a mistake. She felt her eyes prick and blinked rapidly, refusing to allow herself to cry. She didn’t want him to say it was a mistake, it would crush her. Everything had been so perfect.

Really, though, what is so wrong about this? Outside of the fact that McGonagall would be appalled and they’d have to keep it a secret – until graduation, that is. She was of age! She was going to be nineteen in two weeks. She lived through more than most grown adults did before she had even graduated from secondary school. She was responsible and mature. Not to mention she had lived her third year three times over, so really she was more like twenty-one, close to twenty-two. She should be able to have a relationship or sleep with whomever she wanted.

And, oh, she wanted him. If she was completely honest with herself, she had wanted him from the moment she had discovered he was still alive. After respecting him as a teacher and intellect for six years. After fighting with others to show him respect for years. After finding out what he had done to keep Harry alive and all he had sacrificed to fight Voldemort. After finding out he could love so deeply that it transcended time and space – she had to face that notion had been the biggest allure – she wanted that kind of love. After sitting day after day by his hospital bed, watching him fight for his life. She had always admired him, even if he had been a bit of a … jerk was really the best word. All right, jerk it is … jerk sometimes. She probably would have been a total arsehole, too, if she had to live the double life he had; constantly fearing a death with no warning, never sure if those who surrounded him believed him completely. How many times had she, Ron, and Harry doubted him? Too many to count, especially after Dumbledore’s death.

“Miss Granger,” he started to say.

“Hermione,” she whispered, wanting the formality to go away after what they had just shared. He paused, turning her name over in mind. All right then. “Hermione. It seems we’ve … crossed a line.”

She flattened her palm on his chest, contemplating the hidden inflection behind his words before giving her tentative answer. “No, I don’t think so.”

His surprised snort made her smile. She pushed herself up and folded her hands on his chest, resting her chin on top. He stared at her, taking in her still flushed face and bright eyes. She looked just fucked, and it was utterly … delectable. His hand moved from her shoulder to sink into hair, twisting the thick curls around his fingers.

“Severus…” She hesitated, and he hoped he did not betray the thrill that ran through him as his name rolled off her lips. “May I call you Severus?”

He hesitated for a moment before replying. Yes, he wanted her to say his name. “When we are alone,” he answered.
She nodded, agreeing that was a safe answer. “Severus, I…” She trailed off, wanting to word things just right. Not wanting to come off as some love-sick school girl. “I’m interested in you,” she said finally, deciding that was the safest route. His hand stilled for a moment before continuing the rhythmic petting of her locks.

“Why?” He asked in his clipped, shielded tone.

She looked up at him, her turn to be surprised. “What do you mean...‘why?'” She mimicked his tone of voice and was rewarded with a very tiny, but very there, smirk.

“I mean why would a beautiful, young witch – who literally has the world at her feet – be interested in an old git like me?” His voice was rough, but serious. It made her unhappy that he thought she couldn’t be attracted to him. She thought she had proven that fact admirably. His fingers hit a lovely spot on the nape of her neck that made her give a small moan of appreciation and she dropped a light kiss on his sternum, the afterglow of their coitus session still very much keeping her mind foggy.

“You’re not old,” she murmured. “Thirty-seven is still quite young.” She placed more kisses along his chest.

He was startled she knew how old he was. “Don’t do that, pet, it’s very diverting,” he scolded her, but not without a touch of humor. She gave him a small smile. “I believe I asked you a question.”

“What? Oh, yes.” She licked her lips while she thought, and then finally answered. “Because you’re intelligent.”

He snorted again, but inside he was pleased. That was her most attractive feature to him as well. Of course, it was aided by the fact she was physically appealing as well. “You couldn’t possibly be attracted to me,” he chastened her.

“I think I just very much proved that statement a lie,” she murmured quietly, not taking her eyes off his face.

He swallowed hard and, Merlin be damned, looked away from her to collect himself. What was it about this witch that made it so easy to let his guard down? “Be serious,” he told her, grateful to find his normal snark lacing his voice. He met her eyes again. Bollocks, she had the most beautiful eyes. She slowly pushed herself into a sitting position on one hip, her feet curled up to her side and rested her forearm across his chest gently. Her hair hung over her shoulders and her nipples played peek-a-boo with him, it was extremely deterring.

“I am being serious,” she insisted. Feeling exposed, he sat up as well; propping pillows against his headboard. He settled back into them and gestured for her to move and sit next to him while they talked. She acquiesced graciously and curled into him, again like she belonged there. He closed his eyes, trying to suppress the hopeful feeling that blossomed in the pit of his stomach. Hope was dangerous, it always led to disappointment.

They were silent for a moment, and he summoned the sheets to pull over their naked legs. “Your very tall,” she whispered.

“Pardon?” He was confused by her statement.

“My attraction to you – you’re very tall. That makes me feel petite and feminine, even though I’m not, really. I mean – I know I’m female and all, but I’m pretty much the tallest witch in this school. I’m taller than a lot of the boys here, even. Especially the ones sixth year and down – which doesn’t leave a lot of options, you know.
“You’re strong, and I like that. When you held my hands over my head and when you picked me up to carry me … that was … hot.” She felt herself blush prettily. He looked down at her in amused astonishment, but she wasn’t looking at him. Instead she watched her fingers, which were twisting and untwisting in the sheets. “You have a strong jawline and a hard mouth that work with your…” She paused, continuing to attempt to choose her words prudently. “That work well with your other features.” She nodded to herself, pleased. She wasn’t going to come out and say that she liked his large, Roman nose. It worked for him. “You’re independent, self-sufficient, brave – one of the bravest wizards I know. You’re brilliant – wait I already said that. Oh, no matter, that bears repeating.” She was starting to ramble and Snape was getting uncomfortable with the mushy praise, no matter how much it secretly pleased him. She met his eyes and he wondered at the honest desire in them, trying to figure out how he had missed this look all summer long. “What you did for Harry during the wa –”

“And now I make her stop.” He told her firmly. He didn’t want to talk about Potter. It just made him think of Lily. He didn’t want to think of Lily when he had this intelligent minx in his bed. “You’ve made your point, Miss Granger.” “Hermione, please. And I think I made my point when I gave myself to you tonight.” Her brave declaration hung in the air, leaving no room for argument and she pulled back so she could face him more fully. He closed his eyes briefly, trying to collect himself. She really couldn’t be more spot-on about that.

“Be that as it may, this was very … unprofessional of me.” He started his speech slowly. “You’re a student, I’m a teacher. I’m the adult, I’m supposed to have better control. You’re barely of age – now wait a second!” He glared at her as she tried to interrupt him. Her jaw snapped shut and that pretty fucking blush stole across her cheeks again. He was just about to start talking again when her jaw unhinged and she bolted out of the bed, spinning around and slamming her hands down on her hips as her eyes flashed hotly. “I will not wait a second. I’m not the ignorant adolescent you’re making me out to be. I’m going to be nineteen in two weeks, I’ve been of age for almost two years! I –”

Being she was completely starkers, it was one of the most magnificent things he’d ever seen. He would have told her so, but he was furious with her for interrupting him - twice. “Bloody hell, do you really think two years past the legal age gives you any sort of idea what the world entails?” “No, I think surviving years of terror and a war does!” She spat, stamping a foot. Her breasts bounced and he growled, feeling himself start to get hard again. Bloody hell, she was gorgeous with the firelight silhouetting her and her eyes flashing. All that blasted hair made her look like some sort of ethereal goddess.

“Just because we survived a war, doesn’t give us free reign to do as we please. There are rules to follow!” He had stood off his side of the bed and stalked over to where she was, getting in her face. “I disagree!” She retorted, backing away from him, intent on finishing their argument, even though her core had flamed to liquid heat again. Hard bodied, naked, angry Snape was dangerous and sexy as hell. He apparently was being aroused as well, his manhood was coming back to life.

He snorted. “Miss Insufferable Know-It-All thinks that breaking the rules is okay?” One eye brow arched high, and the smirk on his face was just so damn Snape-like.

Well, he is Snape, you dolt!

Her chin came up. The name had stung, but she refused to let him see that. “I’m not an insufferable know-it-all!” She snapped. “And yes, I think breaking the rules is okay when the intentions are good.”

“And just what makes you think I have good intentions towards you?” he demanded, eye darkening wickedly as he slowly started stalking towards her. His intentions were clear – devour. She left a
trickle of arousal slip past her labia. It took everything in her not to squeak and bolt, if only to prolong the game.

“I just do, and I have good intentions, too!” Her shoulders slumped in what only could be described as sadness. Snape came to a halt, the frown that pulled down the corners of her full lips bothered him. He wanted to kiss it away. She continued in a much more rational voice, no longer yelling at him. The rush of their argument was invigorating, he was almost sad that she had calmed. “I know that when you touch me it feels like my skin is on fire. When you kiss me, my brain turns to mush. I know that I’m aware of you when you’re in the same room with me. I know that I looked forward talking to you and debating with you every visit all summer long. You challenge me and keep me sharp and it’s not nonsensical, boring prattle like it is with so many other people I interact with! I know I missed you when I stopped visiting, but I just didn’t know how to come back after what had happened.”

She had missed him? Had anyone every told him that they had missed him?

“You might be a snarky, mean bastard sometimes.” Here his face flooded with ire, how dare she! “But I’ve seen who you are underneath enough to know there’s a real person behind your ice façade.” She sucked in a deep breath and her voice cracked with the weight of all these embarrassing admissions. She was avoiding his gaze, afraid she’d see him closing himself off. He was so good at shutting people out. “I know that I saw too many people die last year and I’m not willing to ignore my feelings because of an imaginary line of propriety! Life is too short!”

That brought him up short, and he had been so ready to start firing back. Instead, he stared at her avoiding his gaze idiotically for the breath of a second before closing the gap between them in one long stride, grabbing her face to his roughly. His mouth crashed down onto hers in passionate senselessness while his mind whirled. Is this seriously happening? I must be dreaming. She was kissing him back with the same vigor and abandonment, her smaller hands slid up his arms and her fingers curled around his wrists, holding him to her. His dick stood at full attention, hard as a marble cauldron. He hesitated in taking this any further for fear of hurting her. She had just lost her virginity, for Salazar’s sake. Then she was pulling away from him, trailing her hands down his chest and over the hard planes of his stomach as she sank to her knees. She grasped her slender hand around the base of his cock and squeezed gently, eliciting a grunt of approval. Apparently, she was going to make the next move. He watched her through obsidian eyes.

So…okay, Hermione. You’ve got this, you’ve read what to do, watched a video or two on the net while sneaking around at mum and dad’s. Just...go. Her pink tongue flicked out of that perfect mouth and he thought he’d died and crossed the veil. Her hand was blissfully hot and soft her tongue felt like molten lava. His eyes slid shut of their own accord and he rumbled his approval low in his throat. She licked his length, tasting herself on him, starting around the base of her hand while pumping slowly and evenly with her palm, finally reaching the flared head. A drop of precum had collected at the top and she tentatively lapped it away, causing another grunt of appreciation. It was salty and had a musky tang. She fancied it. She swirled her tongue around the knob of his shaft more quickly prompting more rumbles and groans. She must be doing something right. One book said to sweep her tongue light and fast just under the head where it flared. She did and was rewarded with a growl and a hand gathering hair out of her face and tugging with gentle insistency. She took a deep breath and pushed him into her mouth, still pumping with her fist.

“Yesss!” He susurrated, guiding her with the helpful hand in her hair. She shielded her teeth and increased suction, reveling in the jerk of his hips and the rasping sounds coming from him. She continued to swirl her tongue around him and removed her hand to see how far she could get him in. When he hit the back of her throat, she gagged slightly and withdrew to huff a breath. Then went right back for more, angling her head differently and loosening her jaw more. “Fuck,” he grunted.
Now both hands were in her hair, looping themselves in and cradling her head with a tender insistence, his hips helping her find what he wanted. She picked up the pace taking him as quickly and as deeply (and had a long way to go if she wanted him all down her throat) as she could while maintaining a swirl of her tongue. When she gagged again, he pulled away from her. “That’s enough.” He helped her to stand and then he was snogging her again, his arms wrapping around her, crushing her breasts into chest, her nipples tightened against the scratchy hair there. Her hands kneaded his shoulders and neck while his skimmed down to cup her bum possessively.

“Get on the bed.” He directed, breaking their kiss and giving her a gentle push. “On your hands and knees.” Her eyes darkened with the directive and the hunger on her face made his cock twitch. She moved quickly to submit. He settled in behind her, his whispered baritone making her shiver. “We’re going to go slower this time, tell me if it hurts.”

“Yes, sir,” she murmured, shuddering as his hands skimmed down her back and over her bum. She felt one hand reach around and tickle her clit making her give a small puff of desire as her back arched. “Mmm!”

One hand gripped her hip as the other lined his hard-on at the entrance of paradise. He pushed into her slowly this time, feeling every twitch and pull of her cunt. She was hot and wet, it was utterly intoxicating. He felt, rather than heard, her slow, low keen of bliss and was in complete agreement. Her walls stretched more easily this time, craving him. He bottomed out with a low moan. “Gods, yes,” he breathed. He stayed there, just basking in her heat and tightness. He could feel her heartbeat in his dick.

It wasn’t until she gave a desperate little grunt and pushed back into him that he started to move. He slid in and out in short bursts, knowing he was hitting her cervix with every thrust. He watched as one of her delicate hands twisted into the bedcovers and chuckled under his breath.

“I heard that,” she whined, but it turned into a lustful peel of need. “Oh, my God. You feel…so…good.” Her last few words were accented in time with his assault. She pushed back against him, starting to pick up the rhythm. As he jutted into her she ground back, squeezing the muscles of her scorching channel around him.

“Fuck!” He growled. He wasn’t worried about outlasting her this time, having just come less than an hour ago, but she was trying to make him lose it. He leaned forward into her, snapping his hips harder. *So much for taking it slow.* She squeaked with surprise, and collapsed onto her elbows, but kept her bum high and continued to meet him thrust for thrust. He slid an arm around her and his fingers delved into her pubic hair, seeking the sensitive nub that would help push her over the edge. He circled it again and again, playing her like a harp whose strings were winding tighter and tighter. He whipped his hips even harder into her, his bollocks slapping off her dripping sex. Her whole body tensed and she slammed back on him hard, he gritted his teeth and a grunt of pleasure was pulled out of his chest.

“Oh, yes. Severus! Fuuuck!” She wailed, her orgasm hitting her hard, reverberating in her body like a pin ball machine. She buried her face into her arms which held her propped on the mattress, sobbing with the release. He gripped both hands over her hips, hard enough to leave bruises, and continued to crash into her growling with satisfaction as his balls tightened and expelled himself to flood her for the second time that night. When his hips stopped jerking, all he could do was mutter. “Fuck, Hermione.” He pulled her limp, quivering body into his. Keeping them connected, he rolled to the side and spooned her from behind, pressing himself tightly into her while their thundering hearts returned to normal. He swept her colossal tendrils of hair off her shoulder and tucked it under them so he could have access to her neck and shoulder and ear. He dragged wet, lazy kisses over them, biting and nipping; only stopping when she started grinding back into him. He chuckled softly.
“There’s very little chance of us going a third time, you greedy girl.”

She laughed aloud and pulled his arm tight over her, trying to get closer. “That was amazing,” she told him.

“Do stop, you’re going to give me a big head,” he deadpanned, which made her giggle harder. He was floored, he wasn’t known for humor. That sound was intoxicating, though, and he’d say anything to hear it more. She whimpered slightly as his prick slid out of her with a damp flop. “Bugger, I could have stayed like that all night,” she muttered. It was his turn for a chortle, a real one. She had just made him laugh! She turned in his arms, grinning tentatively up at him. He was beaming down at her, a real smile on his face. “That changes so much,” she said softly, placing a gentle hand on his cheek, smoothing the crinkled crow’s feet at the corner of one eye. His whole face changed when he smiled, he looked years younger and softer, not nearly as menacing.

He reached up and took her hand, dropping his gaze from hers he kissed her fingers to make it look natural. Really, he was just uncomfortable with the smile of satisfaction on her face. He batted down the hope that was clawing in his stomach again and kissed her nose as a way to distract her. Before he could stop, he found himself blurt out the first thing that popped into his head. “We have to come up with a plan if we’re going to continue seeing each other like this.” Did he really just say that? Shite! He gritted his teeth in alarm. Her eyes widened and she smiled brilliantly – it dazzled him so much that his grit loosened immediately. “You want to keep seeing me like this?” The pleasure she depicted was so blatantly obvious it humbled him.

He closed his eyes briefly to dispel her diverting smile and glowing eyes. “I need to think,” he muttered, pulling away from her. “Just, stay where you are,” he told her, climbing out of the bed. This was so unreal, he was sure she would disappear. “Touching you is distracting, I need to think.”

“I distract you?” Her question was dripping with innuendo and lust and a dash of that blasted hope he was so trying to fight. It was all he could do not to throw himself back at her and ravish her for the third time that night. He raised his hand to wipe the smile off his face.

“Yes, Hermione, you are a delicious distraction.” He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “Just give me a few minutes, I’m going to use the loo.”
Snape stood over the toilet, one hand resting on the shelf above while the other aimed. He was looking up at the stone ceiling, the floor was freezing under his long, slender feet. His mind was discombobulated. For a man who was used to being in control, it was unusual for him to be in the situation he was currently living. His nineteen-year-old student wanted to have a relationship with him. That's what he gathered from their talk. It didn't seem like she just wanted sex; she had mentioned his intellect and that she looked forward to their conversations. She told him she liked being in the same room with him. She was attracted to him – and she had to be – no one goes through that much trouble and potential embarrassment to tell someone they just want to fuck. All this coupled with the more than mind blowing coupling they had just experienced – twice – made for the start of a pretty promising relationship…right? He shook his cock of residual drops, flushed, and moved to wash his hands in the sink.

He let the water continue to run long after he finished drying his hands. They would obviously have to keep this between themselves, but with the required connection of his mentoring and their extra potion lessons, they could easily see each other secretly through the end of the school year. Or until she gets sick of me – because really that was more likely. It never even crossed his mind that he would end it before she did. That seemed unlikely. She was attractive (beautiful, really, in a wood sprite kind of way), intelligent, kind, compassionate, vexing, fascinating, sexy (in a natural, unexperienced sense), and the list continued. Not that he'd share these thoughts with her, he just didn't think she really fancied him the way she thought she did. It was most likely just a school girl infatuation she would outgrow. But did that mean he couldn't enjoy himself for however long it lasted? He snorted. Fuck no.

He sighed and turned the sink off. Upon entering his bedchamber, he found her dozing on the bed on her stomach. A pillow cushioned her head, obscuring half her face, but what he could see was a soft smile on her petal lips and long, dark lashes laying against creamy, freckled skin. She looked so…young. You idiot, she is young. A child, really.

In the aftermath of their romp, her hair had become the unruly bushy mess of curls he remembered of her early adolescents when she was all gangly and awkward, and it made him feel protective of her, which made him feel uncomfortable. He pushed the thought away while taking in the sleek curve of her shoulders and the trail of beauty marks across one crest of a blade. He could see a hint of her bosom beneath her rib cage. She wasn't a tiny girl, but she was slender and feminine and soft. He liked that she didn't feel fragile under his fingers the way some women could. The emerald green top sheet was wrapped over her bum and waist, obscuring the jut of her hip and the padding of her buttock, but one sleek limb was out, curled into the other hidden beneath the bedding. Her toes were painted a shimmering silver and for some reason he found that completely adorable.

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly and then reopened them, almost astounded to find her still there, her back raising and lowering with deep, even breaths. He took a seat by the fire to just watch her, trying to talk himself out of this situation. Trying to let his morals win out over his attraction and fascination with her. He would go to McGonagall, make up an excuse as to why he couldn't be her advisor. Tell the girl this was a mistake. That they couldn't continue like this. That he should have controlled the situation better. He wouldn't apologize, that would be demeaning and cruel. She had wanted it as much as he had. He continued to watch her, his eyes drifting over her slender back resting on each nub of vertebrae he could see dimpling her spine. She shifted slightly and rolled to
her side, muttering something softly under her breath. He froze, thinking she was awake, but she settled back in. Only now he had a much more tantalizing view. He could see the top of the dark curls at her pubic bone and one soft nipple of her breast. He felt himself stir and glanced down in his lap in astonishment. He shook his head in attempt to clear his mind. He knew in that moment he would not be ending this…whatever "this" was.

He rose and silently padded around the bed, slipping in behind her. He encircled one arm around her, pulling the girl back into him. Unbelievably to him, he was definitely growing hard again. He wasn't about to let it go to waste. Not with a warm, willing witch in his bed.

Lizzie watched Hermione carefully at the breakfast table the next morning between tidbits of conversation with Ron and Harry and Ginny (well mostly Ron, as Harry and Ginny seemed extra wrapped up in each other that morning). The girl seemed to have a permanent smile glued on her face and a very dreamy look in her eye. She seemed…different. Lizzie was sure something had happened with Snape last night. Her suspicions were confirmed when she caught the brunette gazing up at the staff table underneath lowered eyelashes.

Lizzie "accidently" dropped her spoon so she had a reason to look over her shoulder and caught Snape looking back at Hermione. She dropped the spoon for real a second time at the undiluted carnality of that gaze. Holy shit, something did happen! She sat up straight and stared daggers into her friend until Hermione realized she was looking at her. When she did, she sat up straight and had the grace to look abashed. "Can I pop by your room after Hufflepuff tryouts?" Lizzie questioned, the underlying intent obvious to Hermione, who swallowed imperceptibly.

"Yes, of course. I thought we could go over that History of Magic essay due next week together, anyway. I'd like to know what you learned about the Battle of the Rocky Mountain Giants in 1492 at Ilvermorny."

The finesse of which Hermione covered their get together only made Lizzie more suspicious, but Ron had stood and pulled a bag onto his shoulders. Then he offered a hand to her. "We should go!" He smiled kindly at her and Lizzie looked up with a grin of her own. She was looking forward to this date with Ron.

"Yes!" she replied, but did not miss the opportunity to give Hermione a pointed look. "I'll see you after try outs," she said firmly. Hermione only nodded, that dreamy, faraway expression crossing her face again.

Lizzie turned her full attention to Ron as they made their way out of the Grand Hall. They made pleasant exchanges about their evenings, carefully avoiding the subject of her date with Draco. They quickly got around to the topic of their relations and both enjoyed discussing their big families. As they walked out onto the sunlit grounds, they fired questions back and forth asking how it felt to be the oldest and (almost) youngest of such a large group. For Lizzie the responsibility was crushing, for Ron the expectations were overwhelming. After fifteen minutes or so of strolling hand in hand, exchanging familial war stories, and laughing hysterically at each other, Ron pulled up short.

To Lizzie it felt like they were in the middle of nowhere, of course she could see the castle, but there were no people around. The Black Lake sparkled far off to her left. "What are we doing here?"

"This." Ron said excitedly, pulling the bag off his back. He opened it with a flick of his wand and yards of string started to pour out of the bag. Another quick incantation and a large, nylon owl flew out of the bag and soared into the sky. Ron caught the string and, after pocketing his wand, he let it
trail through his fingers while digging into the bag and catching a spool.

"A kite!" Lizzie glowed at Ron with appreciation, and he gave her a goofy grin. "I love it!"

"I borrowed it from Seamus." He pulled his wand out again and flicked it at the bag from which a large blanket flew and fluttered itself perfectly on the ground along with a picnic basket that held fresh fruit, cheese, crackers, and a flask of pumpkin juice. "I thought we could fly the kite for a bit and then have a snack."

Lizzie almost didn't know what to say. She was overwhelmed at the gesture. She would have been happy just to wander around the grounds chattering. "I'd like that." She gave him an answering smile and he held the spool out to her. The owl above was twisting and dive bombing of its own accord. "What do I have to do?"

"Just don't let it go, nudge the string if you want him to go one way or another." He shrugged, looking very pleased with himself. "Otherwise he kinda just does his own thing, but it's fun to watch."

He was fun to watch, and after a half hour of tossing the spool back and forth and watching the bird soar around the sky, they decided to have a seat and rest for a bit. Ron magicked the kite back into the bag and they settled onto the blanket, sitting close together.

Ron poured her a glass of pumpkin juice. She took it with thanks and took a swig. He filled a cup of his own and spread out the light snack. They picked up their family conversation right where they left off. Ron told her about his older brothers. Bill was a Gringotts curse breaker, Charlie a dragon trainer in Romania. He slid over Percy with a statement of "works doing boring stuff at the ministry." When he got to George and Fred, he paused for a moment and she was startled to see mixed emotions in his eyes.

"My brother's own the joke shop in Diagon Alley – Weasely's Wizard Wheezes."

"Oh! I know that store! It's incredible!" Lizzie exclaimed.

"Yeah, it is." Ron nodded, a faraway look crossed his face. "My brother Fred died in the war – one of the twins," he said after a long pause. Lizzie gasped and covered his hand with her own, squeezing his fingers tight.

"I'm so sorry, Ron," she whispered, her eyes prickled with unshed tears for his pain.

The redhead swallowed hard and met her eye briefly before turning away, his cheeks going a bit pink. "It's just taking some getting used to." He was trying to shrug it off. Lizzie squeezed his hand again.

"It will never truly go away," she murmured. "I'm sorry your family had to go through that, I couldn't even begin to imagine. The closest death I've had in my family was my Meme when I was twelve. I don't think children grieve the same way adults do, so I don't feel it can compare."

"I loved my brother, and I miss him," Ron sighed. "I don't feel my grief compares to George's though, or my mum and dad's. I mean, losing a twin – losing a son…so much worse, right?"

"Not worse," Lizzie scooted closer to him, aligning her hip to snug against his own. He relaxed into her touch like it was a balm for his open wounds. "Just different. Tell me about Fred."

Ron was surprised that talking about his big brother helped ease some of the stiffness and pain in his chest. As the stories flowed, so did their laughter at Fred and George's countless antics and
shenanigans. Over an hour later, they found themselves on their backs, as close to each other as they could get without laying on top of one another, both laughing with tears pouring down their cheeks. Between stories and laughter, they had munched on the picnic food which was now mostly gone. Their conversation was easy and fun; the bantering light and teasing. She was enjoying herself immensely. She didn't see it coming, though, when he rolled onto his elbow at her side and stared at her while she talked about the baby sister she had always wanted and didn't get until she was almost sixteen. How her little sister felt more like a daughter to her. She realized that he was staring at her with a bit of an awed expression and was about to ask him to close his mouth because his expression was reminding her of a stunned garden gnome, when he leaned over and planted a kiss right on her mouth.

Lizzie's eyes flew open wide in shock. She wasn't used to anyone sneaking something like this up on her. His mouth was firm, but gentle. His eyes were closed. She let her eyes close and kissed him back tenderly. He brushed his mouth against hers a few more times softly before running his tongue gently over the seam of her mouth, asking for access. She kissed him back chastely and pulled away with a small grin at his look of disappointment. "I'm having a great time, Ron." She assured him, brushing a lock of ginger hair out of his eyes.

He returned her smile hesitantly. "Me, too," he murmured and leaned to brush his lips to hers once more. This time he kept the kiss chaste, which relieved Lizzie of the burden of having to control the situation and she was able to just enjoy his lips on hers. He pulled back after a few moments and grinned at her, she laughed and pushed him away teasingly. He rolled into a tall kneel and helped her sit up. "We should head back," he said softly. "I know you have to get changed for your tryout and it's almost lunch time."

Lizzie nodded in response. "I really did have a great time, Ron. You British wizards are awfully inventive with your dates being we're stuck on campus in the middle of nowhere." She mentally berated herself for the comment when his smile slipped a bit. Stupid! Poor guy doesn't need reminding I had another date last night! She reached out and brushed his shoulder. "I'd like to do this again. Real soon!"

This pulled his grin back into place and Lizzie relaxed. He was a good-looking guy. He didn't have Draco's beauty, but he was sweet and endearing. He had a face she could look at for years and not grow bored; it was expressive and full of humor. Oh, he had made her laugh – her sides ached with it. She helped him clean everything up and pack away their supplies in his magically expanded bag. They walked hand in hand back to the castle and parted at the bottom of the grand stairwell with one last, innocent kiss. Neither noticed the platinum blond head who eyes were boring holes into Ron's back.

Lizzie sat with her Hufflepuff friends at lunch that afternoon, needing to distance herself from Ron and Hermione so she could concentrate on the task at hand. She loved Quidditch more than any other sport on the planet and she'd be damned if she didn't get on the team in one way or another. The Hufflepuff Quidditch captain was a boy she hadn't had a chance to talk with much yet name Zacharias Smith, all though Genny told her he was a right old git. She sighed and pushed her plate away, her nerves were starting to get the best of her.

When lunch was done, she made her way out onto the pitch to find about two dozen students trying out for the team. She donned her leathers as Smith explained he would be starting tryouts with having them all demonstrate their flying skills. Confident in hers, Lizzie dove and twisted and zoomed through the air, utilizing the whole of the pitch to show off to her ability. After the flying tryout, almost half the hopefuls were cut. Many of them left grumbling while a few younger students sat on the far side of the pitch to watch the rest of the tryout.
It was at this point Lizzie realized she had fans. Harry, Ron, and Ginny waved at her from one of the stands, she smiled and waved back. As she was doing so, she caught sight of silver hair a few stands down. Draco was leaning against the bottom of the stand the Gryffindor's were in, arms crossed. Watching her with raised eyebrows. She felt her heart thrum and a blush creep into her cheeks. She grinned coyly at him and raised her hand to answer Smith's question of who would be trying out for Seeker, giving her attention back to her would be captain.

She and one other girl watched their captain expectantly, but Smith looked Lizzie up and down a little too eagerly. "You're a great build for Seeker!" He told her appreciatively. "Have you played on a team before?"

"Yes," she answered, pointedly telling him with her expression she was unimpressed with the lewd way he was checking her out. "I was a Chaser on the Horned Serpent team at Ilvermorny."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Not Seeker?"

"No, I started there when I was fifteen and they had an established Seeker," she answered him regretfully. "They didn't even try out the position. I would have been better. We lost the season because of that Seeker." She knew she was boasting, but didn't care. She wanted this spot. "I knew I'd be leaving mid-sixth-year, so they refused to allow me to play Seeker because they wanted to keep their current one in top form." A few fellows gave her sidelong glances while flicking their gazes between her and Smith and the other Seeker-hopeful, who was giving Lizzie the stink eye.

He nodded. Impressed with her boldness. "Our last Seeker graduated year before last and last year's Quidditch teams were a joke under the circumstances. All right then." He shrugged and pulled the snitch out of the box. "Let's see what you got." Before he even let it go, she was on her broom.

She watched the snitch flit around the field until it disappeared and then kicked high above the stands to start searching for it. She caught sight of a flick of gold after only about four minutes and dived it. It was a tricky snitch and twinkled out of sight until she saw it back by the stand where her friends and Draco were. She grinned at it menacingly and pummeled ahead. She flew straight to the bleachers before diving and snaring the snitch out of the air about three feet above Draco's head. She did not miss the heated look he gave her as she pulled out of the dive with the snitch held high in her right hand. The Gryffindor's and Hufflepuff's were cheering and grinning at her. The other student who had been interested in trying out for Seeker was telling Smith she'd prefer to try out for Chaser as Lizzie landed.

They wound up playing two short scrimmages while Smith watched from the ground calling out suggestions and plays he wanted to see. She caught the snitch six more time to tremulous cat calls and screaming from her friends. An hour later he was announcing the team. "Herbert Fleet – Keeper, Samantha Ricket – Beater, Maxine O'Flaherty – Beater, Sam Summers – Chaser, I'll be the last Chaser, and Lizzie Williams – you're our new Seeker." There was muttering from some of the Hufflepuff's who didn't make the cut, but mostly happy, celebratory sounds from those who did.

After the first practice was settled on, Lizzie fell in with her new teammates and started back towards the castle. She enjoyed their chattered excitement over her abilities for a few moments. Then, giving thanks and praising them as well, she purposely let herself fall behind. She wanted to be alone for a bit and reflect on the tryout. She remembered Ron telling her he and Harry had an Astronomy assignment due Monday and that they wanted to get it out of the way so they could relax on Sunday. She hadn't seen Draco near the
end of tryouts and figured he'd gotten bored and went back to the castle.

Which is why he was able to startle her when he fell into step beside her a couple of minutes later. "Merlin, Draco!" She stopped short, covering her now racing heart with one hand. "Announce yourself next time!"

He snorted and shook his head. "No, your reaction was much more fun."

She let out a short laugh and swatted at his shoulder. "Did you hear the announcement of the team?" she inquired, giving him an excited smile.

"I didn't, but I can't imagine anyone else got Seeker." He cocked his head at her, raising an eyebrow.

"You're right, no one did," she boasted, eyes sparkling with excitement. He nodded, unsurprised.

"I never thought we'd have to watch out for the Hufflepuff team," he grimaced. "But you're going to level the playing field a bit." The admission pleased her.

"You'd better watch yourself, Malfoy," she sneered with a laugh. "I'm gonna fly circles around you. You won't catch the snitch playing Hufflepuff this year," she promised, winking.

The fire in her eyes and the way her teasing voice laced around him made the blood rush in his ears and he invaded her personal space physically. He wrapped his fingers around her hips and pulled her into him. She gasped at the contact and looked up at him as the electricity of his touch sizzled through her body. His eyes glinted like hot steel as his lips crashed down on hers. She felt the broom slip out of her fingers as all her careful inhibitions evaporated. One of his hands came up to grasp her chin and hold her in place while the other arm slid around her tiny waist, dragging her even closer as his tongue delved past her lips, set on exploring her mouth. She gave a startled whimper and opened like a flower without even thinking twice. Her body pressed tightly to his of its own accord. She matched the slide of his hot, wet tongue with her own, her arms winding around his shoulders while her fingers tangled in the satiny hair at the nape of his neck. She didn't know if it was seconds, or minutes, but he was sucking her lower lip and then pulling away too soon.

"That is how I should have kissed you good night last night," he told her as he released her, relishing her dazed expression and heaving breasts. "I'm not even going to give you a chance to think about Weasley. I will be the only wizard on your mind."

With those words, she watched him back away, face brimming with smug, confident beauty. She stayed still until his back was turned to her, and slowly pressed trembling fingers to her lips.
Hermione Granger’s reprieve of mindless reviews evaporated within days after the first week of term. All of a sudden, she and her friends found themselves drowning in N.E.W.T. level work that was more intense then she remembered fifth year O.W.L.’s being.

She, Harry, Ron, and Lizzie hunkered down together most evenings and Saturday mornings in the library, fixedly completing their coursework for the classes they shared: Advanced Transfiguration, Advanced Potions, Advanced Charms, Defense Against the Dark Arts (which they were breezing through, undoubtedly) and Herbology.

The addition of Lizzie to their group was natural and easy. While Hermione, Harry, and Ron were connected in a way that most people might find uncomfortable, Lizzie did not seem to mind. She never questioned their private looks or the way they could talk to each other without saying anything. If any of it made her feel excluded, she never said and never acted like it. For the first time in her life, Hermione felt like she had a true best girlfriend. Not to belittle her friendship with Ginny, but for the most part Ginny had her own girlfriends at school. It had just always been easy for Hermione and Ginny to fall together when Harry was such a big part of both their lives; they got along well.

Hermione found the way Ron acted around Lizzie to be cute and endearing. He was kind to her, they didn’t fight like she and Ron always had (and still did, if she was being honest). They had a lot in common with Quidditch and family life, and viewed day to day existence with the same easy go-with-the-flow mentality. Hermione wondered, though, how deep their feelings ran. At least how deep Lizzie’s did. Most of the time they acted like a brother and sister who were close. They easily touched each other on the hand or the arm. Ron would plop his arm along the back of her chair and Lizzie would sit close enough that their hips were touching. They talked with and teased one another, but it seemed to Hermione something was missing. She couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

Her Arithmancy and Ancient Runes classes were beyond brutal, often having hundreds of pages a week to read between the two and multiple discussion topics to prepare for each class. She was grateful to have the brilliant Miss Williams in both of these classes – and as Lizzie was still involved with Draco Malfoy – he started to tentatively tag along with the girls to study a few weeks into term as he was also in these courses.

Hermione found herself pleasantly surprised with the personality changes in Malfoy. While he still had a sharp tongue, and she would never have affectionate feelings for him regarding friendship, his intelligence impressed her. It was something she had never witnessed in the past. One afternoon in his presence was remembered with chagrined pleasure. The three of them battled over their current Runes essay for over two hours. His opposite view to hers (while Lizzie played devil’s advocate and spurred them on) of the parallels of the Egyptian alchemy text they were translating and interpreting left her irritated and feeling a bit barmy – but in the end, she had to relent that he had made excellent points on his debate. The look on his face when she told him so was pricelessly comical. Lizzie’s secret smile of pleasure at the two of them getting along was not missed by the curly haired brunette.

The other thing that astonished Hermione about Malfoy was the fact he was good to her new friend. Even though she was of Muggle birth, the derogatory word he had so easily spat at her in their younger years were never uttered. The sincerity in his pursuit was obvious – to her anyway. He held open doors and pulled out chairs; they held intelligent conversations in her presence that occasionally
crackled with an animalistic energy that made her feel like an imposing third wheel. She never saw
them touch, though, and he never kissed her in Hermione’s presence.

Her abridgment of the situation was that while Lizzie was comfortable and relaxed with Ron, she
and Malfoy always seemed to be on the edge of their seats while a rumble of thunder and shock of
lightening sizzled under them both.

Hermione was unsure how to feel about this, and as the weeks started to blend together and the
Indian summer of September gave way to the blustering winds of October’s fall, she was starting to
get nervous for the girl. On the surface, Lizzie seemed to be unable to decide which of the boys she
needed to let down. Hermione wished with all her heart the girl would choose Ron, she couldn’t help
but feel Malfoy was the better match for her. Lizzie never did ask her opinion and she was reluctant
to give it uninvited.

Lizzie William’s thought Ron Weasley was a gem. She was growing more and more fond of him as
the weeks started to swirl by in a blur of essays, quizzes, and Quidditch and choir practices. He was
funny and sweet and never tried to overstep the boundaries she had put in place to protect her
reputation. He was attentive to her, but if she was being honest with herself, she realized she was
coming to regard him as a lovely friend borderline brother figure. The way he, Harry, and Hermione
acted as siblings seemed to envelop Lizzie as their relationships willingly and lovingly grew. When
Ginny was with them, she and Ron fell in with Hermione as Harry always absorbed himself in the
redhead’s presence.

They had a few stolen moments and innocent kisses. He made her feel valued and respected, but she
wondered if the fact that she and Ron were very rarely alone was the culprit of the non-existent
romantic feelings towards him, or if they didn’t seek out being alone because they both knew there
was really no point in trying to develop a romance. The thing that worried Lizzie the most is how
Hermione would react if she chose Draco over Ron. Her new friendship with the girl was more
important to Lizzie then she had anticipated.

Lizzie was more than a little impressed with Hermione and she started to think of her as the big sister
she had always wanted. The Gryffindor was an amazing confidant. She was supportive and
encouraging without being over bearing or suffocating. She was accommodating and, if her
acceptance of Draco was any indication, an all-around good-hearted person.

She was kind to Draco, which Lizzie hadn’t been hopeful for given their history. And yes, she knew
their history. Both sides of it. Turns out once you got Draco Malfoy talking about the Golden Trio,
he couldn’t seem to stop. He went through their interactions of their early years and Lizzie was quite
horrified the boy she was growing more and more fond of used to be such a prick. Enough so that
Lizzie was touched that Hermione gave him the time of day; she realized the brunette only did so out
of friendship to Lizzie. Draco seemed to know his past misdeeds, though, and while he made no
excuses for his previous behaviors, he was stiffly cordial with Hermione.

As his stories grew more intense, Lizzie began to feel bad for the very mislead Draco Malfoy. Even
if he didn’t come outright and say it, he had been raised to believe one thing, observed and felt
differently about it, but had been scared of disappointing his lineage. Eventually he was forced into a
belief system he wasn’t sure about under extreme duress. But he was questioning it and analyzing it.
Lizzie was fascinated with his desire to be his own person, and a better one.

And really – hadn’t they all been scared? Lizzie had only spent a few months in England while He-
Who-Must-Not-Be-Named was alive, and she had been terrified! Draco had lived with the lunatic.
She couldn’t wrap her head around it...he LIVED with You-Know-Who. He never would go into
detail, skating over what she guessed was the darkest moments of his life. In the end, he had just tried
to survive. He had done what he had to do. Fear was a terrible motivator.

Lizzie continued to keep her guard up around Draco, she wasn’t about to ignore all the warnings she received from Hermione and Ginny, and even a few words of caution from Harry Potter, himself. However, she couldn’t deny her physical attraction to him was electrifying. She seemed to be hyper-aware of him whenever he was in her vicinity. They didn’t seem to have much in common outside of their love of flying and Quidditch, but this did not stop them from hours of heated discussions and debates. He pushed her intellectually and challenged who she was as a person. They had sweet moments, too. Sitting hidden in outskirts of the trees at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, tucked into a stand on the Quidditch pitch, or sprawled out at a table in an unseen corner of the library; he would hold her hand, or tuck her against him. While they shared more kisses, she forced herself to keep a level head and kept them chaste even though she craved more like the one he had bestowed upon her after her tryout.

He didn’t push her on this; sometimes she wondered if he was just respecting her earlier request of being a gentleman while she dated both boys and sometimes she wondered if he had decided he didn’t want her that way. Then she would tell herself she was being ridiculous, because why would he continue to see her if he didn’t want to? He had to feel the magnetism between them, too, right? While she never sat with Draco for meals or classes, and they kept their relationship quiet and semi-private, she would feel him watching her and often found herself studying him when he wasn’t looking. He seemed to have two close friends – Theodore Nott and Blaise Zabini. Both were fellow Slytherin’s. He didn’t deign to introduce her, tell her he would at a later time and warning her that both boys were set in what he called “the old ways.” Lizzie felt that this probably meant they wouldn’t approve of her parentage.

Lizzie was drawn to Draco on a level that dwarfed her feelings with Ron, but she continued to worry that choosing Draco over Ron would mean losing Hermione as a friend. She wasn’t sure she was willing to compromise a friendship she was coming to covet significantly.

Ron Weasley was in love. Head over heels, ass over teakettle in love. Lizzie was the epitome of perfection. She was kind, hilarious, liked to eat, loved Quidditch as much as he did, and was drop dead gorgeous. The best part of her was how easily she fit in with his friends. He didn’t have to sacrifice any time with them to be with her.

He was feeling confident that she was going to choose him, but it still made him a bit perturbed that she was still spending time with Malfoy. He’d never understand what she could see in him. He avoided the subject completely with her. He had tried to get Hermione to help him, but she had refused to discuss it with him, saying she would not come between two friends. If he wanted Lizzie to make a choice, he was going to have to be the one to ask for it. Maybe tell her she needed to decide by the Halloween feast?

Draco Malfoy was frustrated and tired of waiting. Lizzie Williams was the most beguiling witch he’d ever met in his life. He had done what he promised himself he wouldn’t – he had waited for her. Something he was getting piles of slack for from Zabini and Nott. And he had to be honest with himself, if it had been any other witch in this blasted school he would have told her sayonara weeks ago. As it was, she had him spending time with fucking Hermione fucking Granger. Bugger all if he wasn’t enjoying himself, either.

If he was truthful, he liked Granger. She was a total swot, but when it came down to it, he knew he had no right to even sit in the same room as the girl. Not after watching his crazy aunt torture her and doing nothing to try and help her.
He couldn’t believe Lizzie hadn’t walked away from him the second he had the nerve to tell her that particular tid-bit of information, but he was grateful she hadn’t. The American witch was a balm on his raw psyche. The more he got to know her, the better he felt about the world in general. She listened without judging; she was the only person he knew that was like that. She paid attention to him, evaluated what he told her, asked what he had learned from his experiences or their talks and pulled out of him what he wished he had done differently. Then she told him to forgive himself. He was slowly coming to terms with the evil path that had been forced on him and she was helping him move forward.

The only thing about their relationship that could have been better was getting rid of Weasley. Why she was still seeing the dolt when he was positive she felt the same pull he did was beyond him and his patience was running out. Perhaps it was time to outright ask her to choose.
Minerva McGonagall couldn’t remember a time since she met Severus Snape where the man had been anything less than serious and dour. That being said, she was positive something was going on. They often were the first in the staff room in the early mornings, especially after the last year. While they never spoke about it, she was certain he suffered from the same nighttime awakenings she did, dawn was always a relief. Her hawk-like eyes watched him as he made a morning cup of tea. If she didn’t know any better, she would think he’d met a woman. She stifled an uncharacteristic chuckle at this observation, Snape with some women seemed ... well it seemed out of character. All though she was sure there had been at least a few in his life. At some point. Maybe.

“Good morning, Headmistress.” Snape nodded as he settled across the table from her, flicking the paper open with a delicate twitch of his writs.

“Good morning, Severus,” McGonagall answered. Snape did not miss the questioning infliction in her tone. He groaned inwardly.

“Yes, Minerva?” He asked her.

“Well, more of an observation, really.” McGonagall wasn’t one to beat around the proverbial bush. The brooding man before her just raised an arched ebony brow inquisitively. “Well, my boy, there’s really no preamble for my question, so I’ll just come out and say it. Are you seeing someone?”

If he had been surprised by her question, she couldn’t tell. His expression did not change from the bored curiosity with her highly personal question. “I am not,” he clipped. “Why in the world would you ask such a foolish thing?” Inside his mind was reeling. What had he done to prompt such an inquiry?

“You just seem…lighter as of late.” She cocked her head and Snape snapped the paper into place again, schooling his features into a mask of stone. “Dare I say you appear happy?”

Snape pushed aside the uncomfortable feeling in his chest. He bloody well was happy, but he didn’t need her commenting on it. “Minerva, I mean this in the most inoffensive way possible. Please mind your own business. If anything has changed in my personal life, I will bring it to your attention only if it will affect my work.”
McGonagall hid her smile with her coffee cup. His dismissal just made her all the more certain. “As you wish, Severus.”

Severus Snape knew she would be here any moment for their Friday appointment. She was frequently over a half an hour early on their meetings nights. After a few weeks of this, he had asked her why she kept coming so early when she knew he would have work to finish before they could get started. “I like to be in the same room as you,” she had answered sweetly, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. She was often saying things like this and it continued to make him squirm.

The last seven weeks had been some of the most pleasant of his life. Pessimist as he was, though, he was sure the other boot was going to drop any second. She’d get sick of him or realize he was an unattractive old man with little to offer her. He breathed a quiet sigh and glanced at his time piece: 6:20. He turned his attentions back to his marking.

After only two weeks, they increased her extra potion lessons to two nights per week, and started them an hour earlier than originally planned; both realizing one evening a week would never suffice. The routine they had effortlessly established became the paramount of his existence. They performed the perfunctory tasks of maintaining her schedule and having her extra lesson, but by nine-thirty they were done with the obligations and could move to more pungent tasks. And it wasn’t always sex – which had surprised him.

He found Hermione to be more intellectually enticing then he first realized, which he would have never thought possible. He had always known she was more than intelligent, but when he truly grasped her ability to dissect and comprehend the intricacies of potion making, he was elated. Because of this, he probably unintentionally added mountains of work to her already overflowing goblet, but she had yet to complain. He would shower her with journal articles to read and set problems to her that were difficult for even some of his peers. While she struggled occasionally, with a little of his guidance and a few well-placed questions, she would always find the correct answers, sometimes coming up with scenarios he, himself, hadn’t considered.

Sometimes they would work on the extra tasks he set for her. Sometimes they would stretch out on the davenport in his office in front of a blazing fire; he in the corner with her on her back, head propped against his thigh. She liked it when he read aloud to her, which he found amusing. When asked why, she told him his voice was sexy and soothing and helped keep her mind calm. Many times, however, they would end up in bed. A tangle of naked limbs and exploring hands and mouths. The more time he spent with her, the more he began to realize it was not enough.

He smirked to himself when he heard the door click and lock behind her. Finishing a nasty note on first year theory essay, he looked up. Expecting her to smile at him and make her way to her usual seat to wait him out, his heart jumped into his throat at the sight of her. She looked terrible. Her hair, which she had become much more adept at taming, would quite literally do Medusa proud. It was a nightmare which she was currently trying to shove into a messy bun at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were blood shot and dark circles had formed beneath them. He had just seen her in class yesterday morning, how could she deteriorate this quickly? When they finally made eye contact, she tried to give him a brave smile, but a single tear tumbled down her face. He was on his feet and across the room in moments.

“Hermione!” He exclaimed, pulling her overburdened book bag off her shoulders. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m being silly.” She tried to brush it off, but her breath started coming in short gasps and another tear slipped down her cheek.
“Tell me.” He insisted, guiding her to a chair. He sat her down, pulling another up for himself.

“I -” But she couldn’t seem to choke out anything more. She was clutching a hand at her chest while the other massaged her temple. Her body started to tremble, he realized in that moment she was having a panic attack.

“Hey.” He cupped her face, smoothing the tears away, trying to calm her down. Without any warning, she was frantically grasping the front of his frock coat, struggling to suck in broken gulps of air. Foregoing any pretense, he crushed her to him in a tight embrace and started rubbing firm, soothing circles between her shoulder blades. “Just get it out, you’re okay.” He kept his voice low and calm even while his own heart thudded at her distress. He continued to stroke her back, pressing kisses to her temple while promising she was safe. It felt like hours, but was more like minutes, when her breathing finally evened out enough that she could relax against him, methodically pulling slow, steady breaths in through her nose. When she was finally still, he grasped her shoulders and pushed her back to look at her.

“You’re all right?”

“Better now,” she answered, she looked drugged.

He frowned. “Does that happen often?”

“Not as much recently, I struggled with them a lot through the summer,” she answered dismissively. “They’ve been better since I’ve been here.”

“What caused this one?”

She averted his gaze, uncomfortable, and shrugged.

“Hermione…” he warned

Her eyes flashed to his and away again. “It’s really nothing. I’m just feeling a bit overwhelmed with school work and Head Girl duties.” She was trying to brush it off. He narrowed his eyes.

“Try again,” he snapped. Her shoulders slumped.

“I had a nightmare last night. Please, don’t make me talk about it.” Her eyes were haunted, and he swallowed a lump in his throat at her pain.

She lithely slipped out of her chair and straddled his lap, sinking into him without being pulled forward. She rested her cheek against his heart and curled her fingers into his chest. Not knowing what else to do, he just held her. He held her and listened as her breathing became deep and even. Held her as her heat radiated through him. Held her and knew he was lost. He had never felt so protective of anyone in his life. After a long while she stirred and pulled back from him.

“Thank you,” she said, placing a chaste kiss on his lips. The fire of the simple gesture crackled to his groin.

“What, may I ask, have I done to deserve thanks?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Just by being you.” It was another one of those uncomfortable truths, he brushed it off with a gentle half smirk.

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “Now, how about I get you a draft of Tranquility Drought and Dreamless Sleep and escort you back to your chambers. I think you need a night off and an early
bedtime. Up!” He made to help her out of his lap, but she turned large doe eyes on him – looking at him like he was mad.

“No,” she whispered. “I don’t need an early night, I just need you.”

He closed his eyes to hide his soul. Her words sliced through him like a wand through the air. He was still struggling to believe his luck – this perfect, angelic girl wanted him when she was upset. He felt a soft thumb on his cheek and opened his eyes to find her just about to rest her forehead against his. She kissed his nose tenderly and then angled her head to press her lips gently to his, her fingers grazing over his stubbled jaw. He allowed her to control the kiss and was surprised to find her leaving his mouth to flutter soft caresses over his chin and cheeks and back to his lips again, where she slid her inquisitive tongue over them, asking him to open for her. He did with no hesitation. A deep sigh of pleasure whooshed through her nose and feathered over his face while her voice hummed in her throat.

He became an active participant then, running his tongue across hers warmly, sucking her pink muscle to his as the passion between them grew. It felt different tonight, though. Not frenzied or hurried, but heavy and methodical. In a show of his impressive strength, he gripped her bum firmly in his hands and walked with her wrapped around him until they entered his bedroom. After warding the doors and starting the fire, they took their time undressing each other. Languidly exploring every surface of each other’s bodies with their hands as garments dropped to puddles on the floor; never breaking their heated melding of mouths.

He carefully urged her into the bed and sank them back into the welcoming pillows and blankets, sliding one knee between her thighs, coaxing her to open for him. She bloomed willingly and beautifully, continuing to engage him in long, deep, sensuous kisses. He slid into her slowly, parting her slick folds with utmost care.

“Ahh,” she breathed, her mouth pulling away from his briefly as the sensation of their connection overtook her. “Severus,” she whispered, before finding his hot orifice with hers again. He felt like he was being scorched by the sun, waves of heat radiated off her and surrounded him in a chrysalis of unfathomable emotion and buzzing wonder. He stayed deep within her hot box, grinding his hips into hers. Relishing the closeness of their bodies. Sweat trickle down his temple and dripped from the tip of his nose, and still he kept his efforts agonizingly slow and deliberate.

Hermione writhed beneath him, barmy with the passionate bond she was experiencing. Her breasts were pressed into his chest, the hair there teasing her nipples. Severus filled her again and again with deep, expansive pressure and feeling.

Their copulation lasted much longer then she was used to. He was taking his sweet, precious time. She had been building for what felt like hours and her body ached with the need to release its desire. When perspiration clung to every inch of her skin and she thought there was no way she could continue without losing her mind, he increased the pace just enough to throw her blindly off the tallest cliff she had ever climbed. “Oh, Serverus,” she breathed, her breath hitching as her orgasm rolled over her like heatwaves from a pyroclastic lava flow. They started in her core and erupted through her being, the tight rupture of the muscles of her inner walls coaxing him to climax with her. He whispered her name in turn and she felt as if she were glowing with her affection for him. His seed poured into her in droves and her body welcomed the life-giving infusion.

When the spasms of their culmination subsided, he rolled to his back, taking her with him to preserve their joining. Her body lay limp as rag doll over him, her cheek pressed against his thundering heart. His hands traced trails of warmth down her spine. She felt safe, and content, and cherished. They must have dozed like that for a while, for when she woke the fire in the grate was burning low. She
lifted her head from his rib cage with reluctance before dropping a few delicate kisses through his chest hair. This woke him with a small rumble of pleasure. She tilted her face to his and kissed him warmly before slowly rolling off him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” His sleep laden voice protested, as his hands automatically reached for her, trying to pull her back.

“I should get back to my room,” she whispered.

“Oh.” One eye peeked open to take in her upturned nose and freckles. Her wild hair illuminated with the back drop of the brazier while she stared at him sleepily. He wanted her to stay, his bed felt cold and empty when she left. He watched her with regret as she leaned over the side of the mattress to pick her clothing off the floor. He knew that if he just spoke the words aloud she would.

He didn’t though, fearful of being wrong and sounding like a besotted swot if she said no. Instead he pulled himself out of bed and dragged his trousers on so he could walk her to his door. She turned to him with eyes full of glowing heat. She whispered her goodnight as she stretched up on her toes to give him a final kiss. She turned to slip out the door, but he caught her hand, pulling her back.

“Come back tomorrow night, make an excuse.” He all but begged her, dropping yet another kiss on her swollen mouth. She pulled back in surprise and searched his face, a lovely smirk curving her pretty lips.

“I’ll figure it out, it may have to be later, though.” He muttered his agreement and continued to kiss her. She backed away a few moments later with a breathy laugh. “Tomorrow,” she whispered, brushing a lock of dark hair out of his eyes with ink-covered finger tips. He let her go reluctantly and watched her until she disappeared around the bend. Returning to his chambers, he sunk on the bed. He was in far too deep.
Lizzie didn’t know what to do. Both boys had asked her to make a decision, and she really couldn’t blame them. If roles had been reversed, she would have never waited around as long as these two extremely different boys had.

She had a pro-con list a mile long. Both of them peppered with positives and only a few negatives. She wanted to talk to Hermione about her struggle, but felt her friend would be very biased when it came to Ron and was positive she would point the blonde in that specific direction.

She sighed deeply and covered her face with both hands, elbows plopping down on the desk at the end of her four-poster bed. "Fuuck," she groaned after another minute, throwing down her quill.

"What's up, Lizzie?" Susan Bones startled her and she jumped, whirling to look at her as she entered the dormitory. The cute redhead stopped and looked at the pretty blonde for a moment. "Boys." She decided when the girl didn't respond, and summoned a chair to pull up next to Lizzie.

"Yeah," Lizzie groaned. "I have to choose, Susan. I've let this go on too long, but…” She trailed off, looking desperate.

"I don't know how you think it's much of a choice." Susan looked at Lizzie with wide green eyes. "I mean, Ron Weasley is…” She stopped herself, looking horrified.

Lizzie didn't notice, too caught up in her own personal torment. "Ron is wonderful," she agreed whole heartedly. "He's sweet, and cute, and so, so funny. I never stop laughing when I'm with him. And I love his friends."

Susan watched the girls' profile glumly. Go figure. The most beautiful witch at this school likes Ron. All you have to do is look at him to see he's nuts about her, too. I'll never get a chance. With ever the kind heart, Susan reached out and covered Lizzie's small, still tanned hand with her creamy freckled one. "He's lucky to have met you," she whispered, holding back her sadness. "You're so lovely. Ron has been so through so much." She patted the American's hand.

Lizzie turned her hand over and squeezed Susan's fingers. "You're the sweetest," she told the Hufflepuff girl. "Draco, though…” Her words petered out again, another mournful sigh leaving her pouty lips.

"Malføy is a rotten git and doesn't deserve your attentions," Susan said harshly, standing.

A wave a fury swept over Lizzie, and she almost retaliated harshly. She caught herself in time and reigned it in. "I know his past hasn't been the best - "

"Hasn't been the best!" Susan scoffed, flipping her flaming mane. "His lot have basically left me a family-less orphan. I have no sympathy for him."

Lizzie bit her tongue and Susan continued, pointing a finger at the blonde accusingly. "You'd be daft not to choose Ron Weasley. Draco will do nothing but break your heart in the end. No one changes that much."
That brought Lizzie up short. Forcing down her last bit of anger, she realized her friend was just trying to protect her. Maybe Susan was right, Draco was dangerous. He had admitted his past to her himself. She knew some of the terrible things he had done. Does a Nundu change its spots? No.

Holy hell. But...oh, God that kiss. Whenever she thought about that damn panty-wetting kiss, her insides melted like igneous rock at the center of the Earth.

"Thank you, Susan," she murmured after a moment. "I value your opinion very much."

Susan's defensive stance deflated quickly. "I'm sorry, Lizzie," she mumbled kindly. "I know this has been eating you up, I see it in your face. You're obviously seeing a side to Malfoy no one else does. I just wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw him – without a wand."

Lizzie snorted. She understood, and Susan wasn't the first one to say something like this to her. The girl had every reason in the world to mistrust and despise Draco. "You're probably right," she admitted reluctantly, turning back to her list. She felt Susan pat her shoulder before crossing the room to rustle something out of her trunk.

"See you at dinner?" she asked, just before she left the room. Lizzie nodded.

She didn't have much time left, she was meeting Draco tonight, and told Ron she would tell him the next morning what her choice was. She either needed to break it off with Draco tonight or Ron in the morning. Neither prospect excited her over much.

"Come off it, Malfoy." Theodore Nott sneered. "What are you doing with that trumped up little blonde Mudblood anyway?"

Draco gritted his teeth, he was tired of having this conversation with his friends. And, fuck, he hated that word. Impossible to get his asshole friends to stop using it, though. The fact that Lizzie still hadn't stopped seeing Weasley was very apparent to all his Slytherin classmates. It was getting to the point where it was almost pointless to defend the girl anymore, but damned if he was going to let Nott get away with being an arse.

"Fuck off, Nott," he growled, shoving his hands through his recently chopped hair. He had noticed that morning after he was done in the shower how much he was starting to resemble his father. It had bothered him immensely, so he'd made use of the Hogsmeade day and stopped at the salon. He was practically bald, now. Well, not that bad, it was buzzed up the sides and back and he'd left it longer on top. The witch who had cut it had done a decent job and talked him into a styling paste concoction he couldn't remember the name of so he could style it back. He thought it made him look older and nothing like his father.

"Draco," Zabini berated. "I mean, I know she's a seriously hot piece of ass. Everyone knows you're not fucking her, though. Weasley has made it clear she's only 'getting to know you' both before she decides who she wants to date seriously."

"She's making you look like a fool," Nott sniggered. "You're letting her make you look weak."

Something inside Draco snapped and he growled at his friends. "She's going to make her decision tonight," he boasted. "When I'm done with her, everyone will know she's mine."

"How are you planning on doing that?" Zabini demanded doubtfully.

"I'm going to give her a reason to not walk away," Draco said evasively.
"Draco!" Lizzie protested, giggling while she pulled her face away from him. She felt breathless and dizzy. His kisses, while remaining chaste and kind, were coming frequently tonight. She was overwhelmed and very close to breaking the promises she had made herself.

"C'mon, Lizzie," Draco muttered against her lips with a grin. He slid his hands down her back while he pressed her into the wall of the alcove he had warded off for privacy. "It's been weeks. I know you feel this, too. I know you do." His mouth pressed against hers again, tongue sliding out to caress the seam of her lips while he palmed her back just above the swell of her bum. Lizzie gasped, and Draco took the opportunity to pillage her mouth the way he'd been dying to since he left her standing breathless just off the pitch after her tryout.

They both groaned together as their tongues swirled around each other. Lizzie's heart fluttered into her throat, making it hard to breathe. His body backed her even more tightly into the stone wall, the torch above them making their shadows dance like moths caught in a lantern. He felt her give in to him as he explored her mouth with his probing muscle, sweeping the roof of her molten maw before pulling back and sucking on her bottom lip. She sighed and wrapped her arms around his back, dragging her nails up his spine. He growled at her unshielded response and hitched one of her knees up around his hip and ground his pelvis into her, delighting at her sigh of pleasure.

He trailed an inferno of sizzling open-mouthed kisses down her jaw and suckled on the sensitive nub of her neck just below her left ear, nipping her pulse. "Uh," she whimpered, tilting her hips into his. Her mind was scrambled, trying to figure out what she had been going to tell him. "Draco, you have to stop." It was said without any real conviction as she pressed kisses into his shoulder. I can't think!

He was suckling at her collar bone now, his groin grinding into hers provocatively. She was losing her mind. He either didn't hear her or chose not to respond due to her lack of persuasion. His head shot up again and he attacked her lips with new vigor. "Dra-mmph…" She panted, scoring her nails into his hair. He needed to stop ... but she didn't want him to … but he needed to. She ripped her mouth away from his, sucking in air as if she had been about to drown, trying to collect herself. He moved his ravenous attention to her earlobe, nipping the sensitive tissue with his teeth. Pull it together, Elizabeth!

"Stop, Draco," she said, forcefully, finding her mind even as she gripped his hair in her hands, pulling his face away her.

He growled his frustration and slammed his open hand down on the stone next to her head, making her flinch, before spinning away from her.

"Dammit!" His own hands flew into his newly shorted locks, tugging at them like he was mental. "I don't want to stop, Lizzie!" He turned back to her, his eyes blazing with heat and exasperation. "I've been nothing but patient! I've let you make me look like a fool in front of the whole school! Waiting while you choose between me and Weasley!" he spat.

Lizzie made a noise that sounded like he had slapped her, and he instantly regretted his words. "I'm sorry, Draco," she muttered.

"Don't be sorry, just end it with him! He's an idiot!" The gorgeous blond swarmed back into her personal space and grasped her face in both hands, pressing his mouth to hers again.

"Draco," she mumbled around his lips, pushing at his chest. Gah! He made her brain so fuzzy! He was starting to frighten her, too. All those voices in her head telling her he was dangerous. Telling her she couldn't take him at face value. Telling her he would only hurt her. Is this where his façade drops? Is he going force me to do something I don't want in this secluded, warded corner of the castle? He's not paying attention to me! "Please stop, Draco!" she gasped as his hands tugged the
hem of her shirt out of her skirt. Her hips bucked in response.

"Your mouth is telling me no, but your body is telling me yes," he muttered against her throat, suckling the hallow above her collar bone. She moaned – her heart was going to beat right out of her chest in a chilling combination of exhilaration and fear. Panic clawed up her throat as his fingers made contact with the bare skin of her mid-drift. Suddenly the dread and alarm was overwhelming.

"Draco!" She sobbed, trying to push him away, terror overriding her passion. "Stop!" He still continued, brazenly palming her breast, and her alarm heightened. Not knowing what else to do to get his attention, she bit him when his mouth attempted to claim hers again, and tasted blood

"Fuck!" he shouted, pulling away with a murderous look on his face while wiping his lip. He froze, though, when the anger and pain cleared the lust from his brain. Taking in her appearance, he was disturbed with himself. She was sexily disheveled, her blouse untucked and pushed up, her hair a wild mess, but that was where the appeal ended. She was boneless against the wall, hands out in front of her ready to fight him off if he came back at her. Tears cascaded down her face. The worst thing, though, was look of terror in her eyes.

"Lizzie," he whispered, taking control of himself again. He reached out to her and she winced, side stepping him and rounding so her back was not to him.

"Do-on't!" she cried, the word hitching in her tight throat. "Stop!"

"Lizzie, I'm sorry!" He pleaded, trying to let his remorse permeate the atmosphere. She continued to back away.

"Don't touch me, Malfoy!" She yelled as he grasped for her again. Suddenly her wand was in her hand and he was rooted to the spot. He didn't know if it was the wand, or the fact she called him Malfoy with so much regret and contempt in her voice that made his heart sink. He knew in that moment he had made a mistake he couldn't fix.

"I lost my head." He implored her. "It won't happen again. Please, Lizzie, I didn't mean to scare you!"

She shook her head, the moisture in her eyes leaking freely. "I should thank you." He hated the disdain in her voice. "You've made my choice all the clearer, now. I can't be with you."

"Lizzie," he whispered, horrified. How stupid could he be? What had he done?

"I can't trust you! Everyone said I couldn't." She was angry and hurt and so confused. Her heart throbbed at the devastation on his face.

"Of course everyone said you couldn't trust me." Even to himself he sounded defeated. He hated it. Hated how this girl had made him let his guard down. Hated he had confided so much in her over the last two months. Hated that he felt sick to his stomach. Hated he knew what was coming. Hated he felt like he was going to cry. So, he did the one thing he did best – he put his walls back up. He would walk away on his own terms.

She watched in appalled fascination as the stone mask of their early days slithered back into place and settled with familiar grace. His back straightened and his shoulders squared. His hands moved to clasp behind his back and he stepped away from her. He looked every bit the young aristocrat and nothing like the boy she had grown so fond of.

"My apologies, Miss Williams." His voice was cold, detached, and polite. All the feeling and emotion of moments before was gone, just like that. "I lost my head in the moment and I regret what
"Forgive…you…?" Lizzie found herself giving a surprised, jerky nod as her resolve slipped. The very core of her being screamed no. She had worked so hard to tear those walls down. She couldn't believe she had talked herself into choosing Ron. She cared about Ron, very much, but the passion wasn't there. The sizzle, the spark – that existed only with Draco. It had never existed with anyone else.

Should he have stopped when she asked him to? Yes. Yes, he should have. If she hadn't been so in her own head, though, would she have even asked him to stop? If she was being honest with herself, that answer was no.

She had made the mistake tonight – she had made the wrong choice before the night had even started and this was the outcome.

He watched as her face went from fearful, to surprise, to doubt. He brushed off the flicker of hope the doubt caused and continued to rebuild his walls. "I hope you find what you need with the Weasel." He spat the last word, grateful he could at least get in that dig.

Her flinch didn't make him feel as good as it should have.

"Draco, wait," she murmured, for the first time stepping towards him instead of away.

He would be the one to leave now.

"Good night, Miss Williams." He gave a curt bow of impeccable formality and spun on his heel, disappearing without another word.

Lizzie covered her mouth with her hand to smother the cry that strangled through her throat.

"Lizzie?" Hermione whispered, she glanced at Susan and Hannah with wide eyes. The Hufflepuff girls, not knowing what else to do for the poor distraught blonde, sought her out to come help their friend. The girl was sobbing into her pillow, curled into a tiny ball of nerves and regret. When Hermione laid a hand on her shoulder, the anguish only got worse. "Lizzie, sweetie." The Head Girl was almost panicked. She sat down on the bed and pulled at the girl, trying to get her to look at her.

"We'll give you some time," Hannah whispered, tears in her own blue eyes. Hannah was such a sensitive person, she often cried whenever anyone else did.

Hermione nodded her thanks and the other two girls left the room. "Lizzie, c'mon," she murmured, rubbing a soothing hand on her friend's back. "What happened?"

Hermione was pretty sure she knew what happened. The blonde had obviously ended it with someone tonight and it had gone bad. Her heart lurched, feeling bad for Ron. At the same time, she was confused because she had just run into Ron and Harry in the hall before Hannah and Susan had found her and he had seemed perfectly fine.

"Honey," Hermione whispered, desperately trying to figure out what to say. "Lizzie, it's okay."

"It's not," the girl whimpered. "It's not okay. I hurt him."

"Sweetie, I don't think he was that hurt," Hermione disagreed. "I saw him a few minutes ago and he seemed fine."
"You saw Draco?" Lizzie sat up quickly, searching Hermione's face.

"Oh." Now Hermione was very confused. She would have put money on Lizzie choosing Draco over Ron. "You ended it with Draco?"

A fresh wave of tears spilled from emerald eyes. "No!" she wailed, burying her face in her palms.

"Good Godric, girl!" Hermione pulled her into a tight embrace. "You're freaking me out, tell me what happened!"

Brokenly, Lizzie explained what transpired in the secluded corridor of the third floor. Hermione grew more and more confused, then angry, and then baffled. "I don't understand?"

"Neither do I!" Lizzie's voice was hoarse from her tears. "I had every intention on ending it with Draco tonight – "

"What?!" Hermione was appalled. "I thought you were going to choose Draco."

"You did?" Lizzie's eyes met brown ones, clearly shocked at the revelation.

"Well, yes," Hermione admitted reluctantly. "There's just so much more…heat…between you and Draco."

"I…" Lizzie was ashamed of herself. How could she have ever thought Hermione would be angry with her for choosing Draco? "I didn't want to disappoint you." More tears spilled over red-rimmed eyes. "I'm such a moron."

"Oh, Lizzie," Hermione was exasperated. "What kind of friend do you think I am?"

"You love Ron so much," she whispered. "I thought you would be upset with me. Our friendship is so new, and I – I adore you. I didn't want to break our trust."

Hermione pulled the girl back in for another hug. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't want to lead on Ron, so I guess I'm going be done with both of them." Lizzie breathed out heavily, blowing hair out of her face. "What a fool I've been."

Ron took her let down well. At first, he had looked utterly shocked and a bit angry. When she explained she was no longer going to see Draco, and hoped they could still hang out, he calmed immediately. Hermione's suggestion of playing up the need to focus on her studies this year instead of boys seemed to sit well with him. He invited her to sit with the Gryffindor's at lunch. She politely declined, reporting she had promised to sit with Hannah and Susan, but would see him later.

Draco wasn't at lunch. She overheard a few whispers from the Slytherin table as she made her way to her seat. Nott and Zabini were staring at her, daggers in their eyes. She flushed.

"Ignore them," Hannah hissed at her. "You did the right thing. Who needs boys anyway?"

Susan nodded vigorously. "I was blown away when I heard you'd told both boys no." While she was being sympathetic to her friend, Lizzie didn't miss the way her eyes sparkled with excitement. "How did Ron take it?"

Lizzie studied Susan for a moment before responding. "I think he took it well. He was a bit upset at first, but better when I told him I wasn't going to be seeing Draco, either."
"Poor Weasley," Hannah sniggered, she knew how bad Susan's crush was. "Always friend-zoned! First Granger, now you."

Lizzie had the grace to look abashed. "Didn't think of it like that. We're better off as friends, though, there's really no spark between us."

Susan looked horrified and Hannah laughed again. Lizzie looked questionably between the two girls. "Am I missing something?"

"Oh, only that Susan has had a crush on Weasley for the last three years!" Hannah guffawed at Susan's betrayed grimace. "Oh, come off it, Sue. Lizzie doesn't want Ron. Now that you know, just be honest!"

Lizzie's mouth had dropped open and she looked at Susan with wide-eyed speculation. "Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded.
"Wh-what did you say, Minister?" McGonagall shocked face stared at Kingsley Shacklebolt as her stiff form dropped into the chair behind the desk in her office.

"It was an ambush. Both of my aurors are dead as well." Shacklebolt looked grim and tense. "This is the fifth attack this week. I've lost three aurors and eight family members. We're putting all Muggle-born families under the Fidelius Charm. Did you send for them as I requested?"

"Yes, they should be here any moment. Why have these attacks not been in the paper?" McGonagall demanded, her lips as thin as parchment, grief filled her eyes.

"We're trying to minimize panic." The usually regal Minister of Magic looked careworn and defeated. "It has been a trying few months. We thought there was a good chance that there would be attacks last night – anniversary of Potter's deaths, end of the first Wizarding War and all, but we were not prepared for a mass attack on one residence."

There was a knock on the door and McGonagall stood, schooling her features. "Enter!" she said in a controlled voice.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione's anxious faces appeared on the other side of the door. They hadn't been called into the office all together since before Voldemort had been defeated.

"You wanted to see us, Headmistress?" Harry said cautiously, eyes flicking warily to Shacklebolt. "Hello, Minister."

"Yes." McGonagall's voice waivered and Shacklebolt gave a grim nod.

"I fear we have some terrible news," McGonagall started softly.

Hermione's blood ran cold at the sympathy in her beloved professor's voice. The three friends drew together cautiously, silently providing each other support

"I'm afraid there was an attack last night," Shacklebolt demurred gently. "There is no easy way to say this, so I'm going to come out and be blunt. Hermione, your parents were targeted, they are dead."

Hermione's knees buckled and Harry and Ron caught her elbows, pulling her into them, surrounding her on all sides. Ron looked devastated and Harry looked murderous. "What happened?!" he demanded, pulling Hermione into his arms as she started sobbing hysterically. "I thought you had aurors watching her parents?"

"We did, they are dead as well," Shacklebolt stated regretfully.

Hermione's sobs became silent as she ceased breathing, her grief choking her. Harry indicated for Ron to sit and pulled Hermione to the chair to sit with him. She was taking in nothing around her, her pain was all encompassing. After all she had done during the war to keep them safe, all the time she had lost with them. She hadn't even stayed with them for the summer! She was bursting into bits; her heart was shattering. Anguish crawling up her esophagus, choking her; crumbling her to pieces. Then she exploded. She had no words, just mournful noises ripping from her chest. She scrambled at
Ron’s chest, looking for purchase for flailing fingers. She gripped his robes and buried her forehead into his neck.

Ron started shaking with her, tears leaking from his eyes, holding her as tight as he could while Harry just touched her. Brushing her hair back from her face, whispering her name. Minerva slumped into her chair again, burying her face in hands. All of them aching with Hermione’s agony and sorrow.

"Hermione," Harry whispered. "Hermione, we're here."

"Nooo!" The scream left her and made Harry's blood run cold at the utter desolation in her voice. Suddenly, she was thrashing out. Harry caught a blow to face and his glasses went flying. He scrambled to grab her wrists as she fought against the mind-numbing torment that was trying to destroy her very essence. He resigned himself to preventing her from hurting herself. More howling sobs cascading from her lips. Tears and mucus washed down her face, mixing and dripping off her chin. Ron conjured a handkerchief and gently cleaned her. When he'd done the best he could, Harry crushed her to him and Ron scooted close behind her, running a hand up and down her back. She struggled for a moment more before collapsing in a fresh wave of misery.

"We're here, Hermione, we're still here," he whispered in her ear, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

Much later the spent and overcome girl lay in Ron's arms, silent. Her eyes still streaming unstoppable tears with a vacant, faraway look. Ron had pulled her into his lap while Harry sat at their feet, rubbing small circles into her lower back.

The boys exchanged a silent look and Ron nodded, pulling Hermione closer and Harry stood and stepped back to the older adults who were murmuring in low voices to each other.

"What happened?" he demanded in a low, dangerous voice. "I don't understand how this could have happened."

Kingsley responded quickly. "As I said, we're pretty sure they were targeted. My aurors were outnumbered and taken down quickly. We think there was at least a dozen of them. They to-," he broke himself off and sent a searching glance at Ron and Hermione. When he was sure they could not hear, he continued. "They tortured the Grangers and then used the Avada curse."

"Do you know why they were targeted?"

"They left a message," Shacklebolt's voice went even lower and Harry had to move forward to hear. "They are after her."

Harry's face lost what little color it had left. "Do you know what this is about yet?"

"We have found no trace of any previous missing Muggle-born witches or wizards," the Minister looked haunted. "We've lost fifteen since August. Eight of them children under the age of eleven who were slotted to attend Hogwarts. The rest young adults in their late teens, early twenties. Two witches in their early 30s. Most female, but two twenty-year-old males have disappeared. They are simply vanishing."

Harry felt like he was going to be sick. "She must be protected! She will not be taken."

"She's safe at Hogwarts," McGonagall insisted. "Professor Snape will continue to keep a close eye on her."
Harry knew about this arrangement and nodded. "I agree he's the most qualified in this school to keep her safe, but what about when she's not here?"

"I think it's best she stays here through the end of the school year, maybe even through the summer," Shacklebolt returned.

"She'd be safe at the Burrow for the holiday's," Harry protested.

"She'd be safer here, under Professor Snape's watch."

"You don't think she'll want to be around loved ones over the holidays?" Harry countered, his patience slipping. "Her parents are gone. I know what it's like to not have a family. Holiday's only became great again when I found the Weasley's. She's going to need us."

McGonagall's lips pressed into a tight line again. "We have a few weeks to figure things out."

"What about funeral arrangements?"

"It's best that it's done quickly and quietly," Shacklebolt insisted.

"She'll need to bury them to help her heal."

"I agree, Harry," McGonagall sighed.

"How will this be explained to the Muggles?" Harry's questions were surprising Shacklebolt.

"You're going to make one hell of an auror, Potter," he said gruffly. "It will be written off as carbon monoxide poisoning. The house will be repaired and staged as soon as the investigation is over and we will phone it into Muggle law enforcement."

A curt nod from the black-haired boy was all that was returned. "Ron and I will stay with her in her dorm tonight." It was a statement, he was not asking permission. McGonagall nodded.

"I expected nothing else," she agreed.

"You stay with her, I'm going to get Ginny and Lizzie," Harry told Ron after they settled the shell-shocked Hermione on to her bed. "She's going to need us all."

It took him very little time to find Ginny, who paled so much her freckles stood out like black spots on a Dalmatian. "I'll get Lizzie," was all she said, after giving him a fierce hug. "I'll meet you in Hermione's room."

Lizzie was horrified. All she could think was it could have been her family, all her little siblings gone in the blink of an eye. Ginny stood with the shaking girl for a while, hugging her while she sorted her feelings. The guilt of her gratefulness that it was not her family was a bit overwhelming.

After about ten minutes, she turned wide green eyes to light brown. "Snape?" she questioned as both girls quickly made their way out of the Hufflepuff dorm.

Ginny and Lizzie both knew every detail about Hermione's relationship with Snape. All they had to do was listen to their friend talk about him to know she was completely in love with him, even if she hadn't said the words aloud.

"I can't imagine there's anyone else she would want right now," Ginny said hesitantly.
"How are Ron and Harry going to react?" Lizzie whispered.

"I think they would do anything to help numb her pain," Ginny breathed, trying to stop the tears from collecting in her eyes. "Harry was a mess when he came to find me."

"What if they don't react well?" Lizzie asked.

"I'll hex them both," Ginny said fiercely. "I know she's going to want him."

Lizzie nodded her agreement. At the stairwell to the dungeons they paused. "You go on," the blonde said to Ginny. "I'll get him."

"He doesn't know we know," Ginny reminded her. "You're going to have to word it carefully so you don't freak him out."

"I'll be fine, I promise," Lizzie assured her. "Just get up there by her. I'll be there soon."

Ginny raced to the grand staircase while Lizzie descended into the bowels of Hogwarts. Too quickly she found herself shaking at the doors to the Potion's classroom. She raised her hand and knocked firmly.

"Enter." Came a cool, detached baritone. She took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Snape looked up, a small grin on his face, expecting to find Hermione. Instead he took in an ashen faced Lizzie Williams who was standing frozen in his doorway.

"Can I help you, Miss Williams?" His tone was bored, disinterested, the smile quickly hidden and his normal collected demeanor put back into place.

"Yes, sir," Lizzie said quietly. She crossed the room, and much to Snape's surprise, she placed her palms face down on his desk and looked him straight in the eyes.

"I know about you and Hermione," she said quickly, her nerves making her unnecessarily blunt. Snape's face drained.

"Are you threatening me, Miss Williams?" His voice was grave and Lizzie was appalled.

"No, sir!" she exclaimed, stepping back quickly, horrified. "I'm doing this wrong."

"What exactly are you trying to do?" he demanded menacingly, standing.

Lizzie swallowed hard and her eyes rose to meet his again. "She needs you," she whispered. "What do you mean 'she needs me'? Where is she?" His voice was dangerous, eyes narrowed in suspicion. Lizzie thought she saw a glimmer of panic.

"Her parents were murdered last night," Lizzie said in a rush. "She in her room with Ginny, and Ron, and …" She broke off as she watched the professor stride quickly to his classroom door and leave her without a backwards glance.

She rushed to catch up. "What happened?" Snape commanded as he stalked down the hall. Lizzie, who was so much smaller, practically running to keep up.

"I'm not sure, sir," she could barely catch her breath. "I don't have the details."

Silence prevailed as they blew through the castle, receiving startled looks from the occasional
students who were wandering the corridors on this cold Sunday in November.

At the door of Hermione's room, Snape paused and took a deep breath. He needed to see her, but he had to be honest with himself – he wasn't ready for Potter and Weasley to know about their furthered relationship. He would do it for her in a heartbeat, but what if she wasn't ready for them to know?

The Williams girl seemed to have read his thoughts. "I know she wants you sir," she whispered. "Ginny and I will help with the boys."

He gave a curt nod and steeled himself. A moment later he was pushing into her room, his eyes sweeping the scene.

Hermione was curled into Weasley, who was sitting in the middle of her bed Potter was on her other side and Ginny was at her feet, all three just watching and occasionally touching the silent, vacant looking girl. The noise of him and Miss Williams entering the room made them all look up in surprise.

"Why are you here?" Potter's voice was not rude or condescending, merely inquisitive. Snape didn't hear him, he just locked eyes with the bushy haired Gryffindor that was becoming the focal point of his life.

Seeing him brought a wave of relief to Hermione beyond what she could have expected. Tears immediately sprung to her eyes again and she gasped. He searched her eyes for a few seconds and she knew what he was asking. Do you need me? Is our secret safe with them? She nodded as the sob broke and pushed herself into a tall kneel, pulling away from Harry and Ron who looked stunned and bewildered.

"Severus," she whispered, reaching for him as Snape crossed the room in three long strides and pulled her roughly into his arms as a sob shattered the air. Harry and Ron looked stricken and relieved at the same time. It was the first word she had uttered in over an hour.

"I've got you," he murmured low into her ear, his heart seizing as another dreadful cry wrenched from her core. He didn't meet either boys' eyes, simply stared at Ginny, who did not look surprised to see him. Her eyes met his with a gratitude he did not expect. As Hermione clung to him, arms wrapped so tight around his shoulders it was almost suffocating, the rest of the Golden Trio slowly scooted off the bed and stood, warily circling the two.

"Did she just call him Severus?" Ron asked in strangled voice.

"What is going on?" Snape heard Harry say in a low voice, addressing the room at large. He tried to ignore their whisperings.

"They're gone," Hermione breathed brokenly into his shoulder between sobs.

"I know," Snape answered, pressing a kiss into her hair. "I'm so sorry, love."

"Love?" Ron choked, throwing a horrified glance at Lizzie and Ginny who were huddled near the door, trying to give Hermione some privacy.

"Did he just kiss her?" Harry demanded, his voice starting to sound dangerous.

"Harry, calm down," Ginny said softly, crossing the room to grab his arm. Lizzie also dragged Ron and they moved into the bathroom, the girls wanting to give the couple some privacy.

Harry couldn't seem to rip his eyes away from the two, his face turning an ugly shade of puce. He
growled when Snape dropped another kiss on her forehead, his hands sliding too close to her bum.

"Harry!" Ginny insisted, pushing him into the bathroom.

Harry rounded on the girls and a shell-shocked Ron, who was gaping at Snape and Hermione over the tops of everyone's heads. Ginny pulled the bathroom door closed firmly and turned, leaning back against it.

"You're not going to cause a scene." She waggled her finger at Harry in a very Mrs. Weasley-ish fashion.

"What the hell is going on, Ginny?!” Ron demanded.

"SHH!" Both girls hissed together, glaring at him. Lizzie crossed her arms. With her being so petite, her anger would have been funny if it weren't for the lethal look on her face.

"Muffliato," Ginny muttered, pointing her wand to the door.

"They're seeing each other," Lizzie stated as if it was a natural thing for their best friend in the world to be with Severus Snape.

Ron went green and Harry paled. "What do you mean they're seeing each other?" Harry voice was deadly.

"She's in love with him," Ginny whispered and Lizzie gave her a cautious look.

"She's…in love…with…Snape?" Ron gagged as if he was going to toss his cookies and Harry looked thunderous.

"He's taking advantage of her!" He insisted, trying to get around Ginny who planted her feet and raised her wand threateningly at him. His eyebrows shot up into his hair.

"Stop, Harry," Lizzie insisted. "He's not, he loves her, too."

At the same time, Ginny snorted. "When has anyone ever taken advantage of Hermione Granger?!"

"Have they told you this?" Ron's whispered could barely be heard.

"When did this happen?" Harry fell onto the edge of the tub, flabbergasted.

"No, I don't think they've realized it yet," Lizzie said softly, eyes wistfully gazing at the door. She caught herself and turned back to the group. "You should have seen the look on his face when I told him what had happened, though. He was in a dead panic. Practically ran all the way here."

"I think it started this summer, you both know how often she visited him at the hospital," Ginny continued. Harry gave one sharp nod and Ron looked crestfallen.

"Why didn't she tell us?" Harry's hurt voice came out soft.

"Honestly," Ginny snipped, rolling her eyes. "And how well are you taking it right now? In this desperate time of need for her? If we hadn't been here to corral the situation – what would you have done?"

Harry winced at the truthfulness of her words.

"He's a teacher, though." Ron was still visibly shaken, face still an un-godly shade of sick. "She's a
student. This is just morally wrong."

"She's nineteen-years-old, you guys," Lizzie huffed. "And more than mature enough to make her own decisions."

"Ron's not wrong," Harry stood, he understood Ron's discomfort all too well. It was Snape. No matter how wrong they had been about him during the war. "He's old enough to be her father."

"But he's not her father," Ginny said pointedly, eyes narrowing. "Pull it together, Harry. She's going to need him right now."

"She has us," Ron insisted, pallor turning from green to red as his anger started catching up with him.

"And she loves us," Lizzie stated simply. "But she's in love with him."

That drew Ron up short, the same words Hermione had used on the playground in June reversed. He deflated like a stuck balloon and Harry's shoulders slumped in defeat. They just wanted her to be happy.

Snape did his best to block the whispered conversation around him and focus all his attention and energy on the broken woman in his arms. She felt so frail like this, which was wrong, Hermione Granger was not a frail person.

"They're gone," Hermione breathed brokenly into his shoulder between sobs.

"I know," Snape answered, pressing a kiss into her hair. "I'm so sorry, love."

"It's my fault." She gagged on her worlds, more sobs blubbering into his shoulder.

"No, no." He dropped another kiss onto her forehead and smoothed his hands down her back, stopping just above her bum. He heard a growl, but ignored it. Miss Williams had said they would take care of the boys. He continued to focus his attention on Hermione. Petting her back with sure, sympathetic fingers. He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the bathroom door click close.

If Hermione heard the Weasley boy shout, she didn't indicate it. She just continued to lay limply in his arms, tears now silently shaking her body.

A soft buzzing sound came from the direction of the bathroom door and he was glad one of them had thought to cast a Muffliato. "Come." He whispered to her as the sobs trickled to sniffs. He helped her off the bed the rest of the way and led her to her couch. He sat and reached out for her. She looked at him with so much sadness mixed with gratefulness his chest constricted painfully. She moved into his arms quickly, curling into him. He ran his wand down her nose and her sinuses cleared. Then he conjured a handkerchief and gently wiped the tears from her face.

"Thank you," she murmured, her sigh stuttering with the aftershocks of her tears. He trailed gentle fingers down the side of her face and she leaned into them, relishing his touch. She turned her face to them and kissed his fingertips, sliding her own hand up and lacing her fingers with his, pressing it to her cheek. "Thank you for coming."

"Nothing could have kept me away," he assured her, brushing his thumb under an eye to catch a wayward tear. He leaned to her and caught a tear from her other eye with his lips. She relished in the affection and brushed her nose against his, sighing, it was just what she needed in the moment. She angled her head and caught his lips.
He kissed her back gently, knowing it was the comfort she was after. He broke it after a short time and tucked her curly head onto his shoulder. She closed her eyes and snuggled in. It was then he realized they had an audience.

Weasley stood behind the group, hands clenched with a murderous look on his resigned face. Potter looked a strange combination of bewildered, regretful, and relieved. However, it was the soft smiles on the girls' faces he needed to relax.

"Ron," Lizzie said softly, taking his hand gently in hers. "Let's go get some food from the kitchens," she suggested. "We all need to eat. It will be easier for Hermione if we stay in here and keep things private for her."

Ron grunted, looking like he wasn't about to go anywhere. Snape narrowed his eyes at the redhead as he slipped an arm protectively around Hermione's slender waist. The grunt of disapproval from the boy almost made him laugh, would have if the situation weren't so dire.

"Ron," Lizzie insisted. He turned glaring eyes on her. "C'mon." She was successful in pulling him out the door. "We'll be back in a few." She called over her shoulder.

The room returned the silence, Ginny and Harry sat close on the edge of the bed, watching him and Hermione covertly while chattering to each other softly. It wasn't long until Snape felt the last bit of tension leave Hermione's body, and he knew she was asleep.

"What happened?" He demanded, capturing Potter's attention. The boy exchanged a look with his girlfriend before answering.
Chapter Fourteen

Snape turned Hermione over to her friends, promising to return after the castle had turned in for the night. He purposely ran into McGonagall under the pretense of giving her a report on how Hermione was doing with her extra Potions lessons and their check ins. As he knew she would, McGonagall took the opportunity to fill Snape in about Hermione's parents and the increase in security surrounding the girl.

"Minerva, where I understand and appreciate your worry about her safety, I believe that while she is on campus no one can hurt her," Snape insisted.

"And yet, the final battle of the second Wizarding War was fought on these grounds, Severus," Minerva sighed and rubbed her temples with her finger tips. "Whoever these people are, they are targeting Miss Granger. She is wanted by them. Do you realize that these Muggle-born children and young adults are disappearing with no trace? Their families murdered in their wake?" She paused before continuing in a pinched voice. "There was a message carved into her parents' mirror, Severus."

Severus felt his blood go cold. "What do you mean, a message?"

"It said ‘We're coming for you, Mudblood.’"

It took every ounce of control Snape had not to fly into a frenzied rage. He would murder anyone who even thought about harming the girl! He gritted his teeth and said nothing.

"How would you feel if we set up quarters near yours for Miss Granger?"

Snape had to bite back a splutter even as his heart leapt. He fucking loved the idea. "What exactly do you mean, Minerva?" He played dumb.

"I dislike that she is alone at night, even with McMillian across the hall from her." McGonagall looked grim. "I don't like the idea of moving her back to Gryffindor dorms. We've learned from past experience how difficult it is to get into the commons." Her voice was sardonic.

"I think if we did a bit of magical reconstruction, we could expand your chambers and set up a private room off the opposite side of your bathroom for the girl to sleep in at night. She can continue to use her room for privacy, her things, studying, and her own bathroom, etc. I would just like her to retire to your quarters at night to sleep. It would be the only time during the day she would be vulnerable within the walls of this castle if someone were to impregnate our securities."

"I hardly think this is an appropriate solution, Minerva," Snape sneered. "I would certainly prefer my privacy. I'm sure Miss Granger would as well."

McGonagall's lips thinned. "Humor me, Severus."

"As long as you can guarantee her quarters would be separate enough from mine that we would not accidentally run into each other in some state of undress. I do believe that would make things exceedingly…awkward." For the first time in as long as Snape could remember, he struggled with a lie.
Minerva snorted. "I will figure something out with combing the use of your loo so that when one enters, the other door locks automatically. I want her door to be inside your office and not accessible from the hallway. You will ward it each night. I will take care of it tomorrow. As for tonight, Potter and Weasley have agreed to stay in her chamber."

Snape had to grit his teeth. Potter, fine. Weasley…he didn't trust the freckled nosed imbecile. "Would you like me to kip on the couch in her room tonight as well, Headmistress?" he asked sarcastically. In her state of worry, she was bound to find it a swell idea.

McGonagall's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Are you offering?" she said placidly.

"Bloody hell, Minerva," he growled. "You can't be serious. I think you're overreacting." Inside he celebrated.

The headmistress's eyebrows all but disappeared into her hairline. "Since you offered so kindly, Severus, I think I will have you kip on the couch. Given the circumstances..." She trailed off.

Snape didn't bother to hide his incredulous snort, it fit both his elation that she played into his hands and the fact he wanted her to think he was disgusted with the idea.

"He didn't stop after you told him to?" Ginny hissed.

"Well, no, not right away," Lizzie whispered back, both girls glanced over at Ron and Harry who were playing a game of wizarding chess on the opposite side of Hermione's bed.

"Why in the world do you feel guilty?" Ginny murmured furiously. "He assaulted you!"

"No," Lizzie disagreed, waving a hand.

Ginny gave an incredulous grunt. "Merlin's bloody bollocks he didn't," she muttered. "Anything after you said stop was done without your consent or willing participation. You should have turned him in to McGonagall."

"No." Lizzie shook her head, but a niggling of doubt flipped through her mind. Draco hadn't assaulted her…had he?

"Lizzie, c'mon," Ginny whispered. "You're so much smarter than this. Do not let him make you feel guilty. You asked him to stop and he didn't. You had to get physical to get him off you! You did nothing wrong."

Her confusion only increased. "He said he was sorry…?" She trailed off, leaving it a question. "I don't think he meant to scare me. I mean – I said stop, but I was kissing him back. I'm sure he was confused, too."

"Confused or not, you told him no and he should have respected that."

A small feeling of relief slipped through Lizzie's chest. It was almost as if she just had needed permission to be upset with him – that it was as much his fault as hers. Ginny was right, what Draco had done was wrong. She had told him to stop and he hadn't. Did she still think the whole damn situation was a misunderstanding? Yes. However, she really had no reason to feel guilty for her part in it. He should absolutely be sorry for scaring her the way he did, and for not stopping like a proper gentleman.

She wasn't going to give up on her entire part of the blame in this situation, though. She had made
the wrong decision. She had been foolish about the situation. She had been kissing him back even while she told him to stop. He had apologized, and she knew he had meant it. He told her he lost his head, he had asked her forgiveness. She would forgive him. Really, she already had, but they would need to talk about what happened. That was…if he would ever even talk to her again. They would both have trust issues after the encounter.

A loud knock sounded at the door and Hermione shot upright in bed, bleary eyes peering through the dim room. Just a roaring fire cut the darkness in the corner hearth. "Who is it?" she choked out, her voice was rough from her day of tears and grief.

"It's all right, Hermione." Ginny stood with a tender look. "I've got it."

She pulled the door open to find Snape on the other side, the redhead wordlessly stepped out of the way to let him in and couldn't help herself from staring at his bum while he walked past. *Well, as unattractive as I find him, he certainly has that going for him.* She thought with a small snort of approval. Harry caught her eye with an incredulous look and she felt her face flush. *For the love of all that is magical,* she chided herself. *My boyfriend just caught me checking out Snape's arse.*

"It's late, ladies, if you don't head back to your dorms soon, you'll be out past curfew," Snape told Lizzie and Ginny while surveying the room. Hermione was looking at him like there was no one else in the world and it was completely distracting. He had even kept his usual cool disdain out of his voice.

"Yes, professor." Lizzie responded immediately. She took a moment to hug Hermione and wave at the boys. Ginny had crossed the room to kiss Harry goodnight. She stopped by the bed again to squeeze Hermione's hand and give her a reassuring smile.

"We'll see you in the morning, sweetie," she told her friend. The door closed softly behind them a few moments later.

"Headmistress McGonagall has requested I sleep on your couch tonight, Miss Granger," he expressed, trying not let a sneer cross his face as both boys exchanged a horrified look behind Hermione's back. "Potter and Weasley were also given permission to stay. Are you okay with this arrangement?"

Hermione's face flushed slightly, it was a beautiful look on her. "Yes," she answered. She looked tired, purple smudges under her eyes told him he was correct. Even with red-rimmed eyes, tear tracks, and the uncontrollable mop that substituted for her hair, she was lovely.

"You should go wash up, love," he said softly, reaching a hand to gently brush a lock of hair out of her eyes. "You'll feel better if you take a hot shower."

She nuzzled her face into his hand, never breaking her eyes from him.

"Check-mate!" Came a low growl. Weasley was glaring at the place where Hermione's face was pressed into his hand. He quickly curled his fingers and pulled away from her. He had never been, and probably never would be, good at public displays of affection. It was torture being so close to her and having to distance himself so far. Especially when he knew she needed him.

Hermione's face turned to take in her friends. She had been so grateful for them today. She wouldn't have survived without their presence. She was glad McGonagall had them come with for her world-shattering news. They'd helped her through the initial shock of grief better than anyone else could have. However, she couldn't deny that right now, more than anything, she wanted them to go. She wanted to – needed to – be alone with Severus. She knew he could make her forget the horrors in
her life, even if only for a while.

She let out a slow, easy breath, watching Ron and Harry watch Severus with wary eyes. "I know you have questions." She appraised the pair and startled blue and green eyes turned to her. "Ask them."

Snape raised an eye brow, assessing the young woman who was sitting on one hip in the middle of her bed. Without turning to him, she reached for his hand. When he gave it to her, she tugged on him, indicating for him to sit with her. He gingerly perched on the edge of the bed, sliding to bring one knee up. He braced himself on his palm and relished the fact that she leaned into his shoulder without a second thought.

Both boys looked at her with gaping mouths. Harry was the first to come back to himself. "When?"

"Officially? Right after term started," she answered with no preamble. "Unofficially, I've been pursuing him since July."

Snape raised an eyebrow at the back of her bushy head and held back a guffaw at Weasely's look of disgust.

"You've been…pursuing…him…" Harry trailed off, flummoxed.

"Yes, you will not pin this on him," she stated firmly. "I am not being taken advantage of." Mmhm, thought so. She raised her eyebrows at him, he had the grace to tinge pink a bit.

"Bloody hell." Was all Ron could say.

After a few moments of silence, Harry continued.

"Why?"

Hermione hesitated. How the hell to make them understand?

"I'd love to hear the real answer to that one myself, Miss Granger," Snape murmured low in her ear. His breath tickled past the sensitive skin there and an involuntary shiver ran up her back. She looked at him with wide eyes, he cocked his head to the side in question. He knew he could just look, she never tried to keep him out. He was somewhat afraid of what he wanted the answer to be, however.

"Why not?" She finally retorted after a long pause.

"I can think of a hundred reasons," Ron fumed sulkily.

"Good thing your reasons don't matter," she said waspishly. That shut him up, Snape wanted to gloat, but kept himself in check. These were teenage boys, he was an adult.

"But…seriously, Hermione -," Harry started.

"I don't want to fight, Harry," she whispered. "I'm so tired."

Green eyes searched brown. "You're happy with him?"

Snape wanted to jeer and at the same time he was impressed the boy had the balls to ask that question while he was sitting right behind her.

"Very." The word left her mouth with no hesitation, no note of falsities. Snape felt a warmth spread through his body and, without even realizing it, a stupid grin crossed his face.
"Me, too," he whispered, nuzzling the back of her head with his nose. She made a small whimpering noise in the back of her throat and leaned back into him turning her face so his nose brushed her ear.

Harry wasn't blind, he'd seen the look Snape got on his face when she answered his question even if he couldn't hear the words the man whispered back into his best friend's ear. Had he ever seen this formidable professor smile in person before? When Hermione's face, so distraught with the day's happenings, broke into a silly smile he knew instantly that Ginny and Lizzie had been right. They had to be in love. Nobody looked like that just because they were happy.

"I can't stay here," Ron muttered, seeing the look of incredulity on Harry's face. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I can't support this."

"Ron!" Hermione pulled herself of the bed quickly and Snape had to restrain himself from tearing the boy apart at the surprised hurt in her voice.

"Don't 'Ron!' me," he snarled at her, and she looked stunned.

"Ron," Harry warned.

"I can't believe you're just going to sit there and accept this!" Ron groused, turning on his friend. "He's a teacher – she's a student. I don't care that she's nineteen – this is not okay! And it's fucking SNAPE!"

"Am I put off by this?" Harry exclaimed, not letting the sound that escaped Snape's throat divert him, even if it was horrifying. "Yes, I am. It's weird, and a bit – well – unexpected, obviously, but when's the last time you saw Hermione smile like that?"

Hermione had stopped at the foot of her bed, watching her two best friends yell at each other over her relationship with another man. Her heart warmed at Harry's words even as it sank at Ron's anger. Snape watched her with a guarded expression. This was probably that other boot. Her friends didn't approve. She wouldn't stay with him.

"Of course, I want Hermione to be happy," Ron growled at him. "But not like this. Outside of Draco Malfoy, there's no one else I would want to see her with less than Snape. I wanted her to be happy with me. If it couldn't be me, at least it should be someone worthy of her!"

The air whooshed out Hermione's lungs as tears sprung to her eyes for the millionth time that day. "Ron," she whispered, heart breaking at his words. He threw a dark look in her direction.

"I loved you," he accused. "You didn't even give us a chance."

The tears spilled over. "I couldn't, I knew it wasn't right. You guys are my family – the brothers I never had!"

"You broke it off because you had some sick infatuation with an old man," he spat at her.

"Ron, that's not fair!" Harry placed a hand on Ron's shoulder at the incredulous gasp that left Hermione. "We were all under a lot of pressure. You shouldn't blame - "

"Shut it, Harry," Ron shouted, ripping himself out of Harry's grasp. "You're insane for accepting this. I'm telling McGonagall."

"You won't." Snape's voice was deadly and froze the three teens in mid-argument. Somehow, he was standing, feet hip width apart, a snarl firmly in place on his angular face. None of them had noticed him get off the bed. In fact, all three had all but forgotten he was present.
"Mimblewimble," he muttered, pointing his wand at Ron's mug. Ron felt a whoosh of cold air and the unpleasant feeling of his tongue rolling back in his mouth before returning to normal. He gagged.

"If you didn't recognize that, it was the tongue-tying curse. I can appreciate your anger, Mr. Weasley. I even applaud it. You will not ruin my career or Hermione's academic pursuits because you are jealous. She chose to let you know our secret. She trusted you. Think long and hard about where you want your relationship to go with her before you say or do something you regret."

Ron looked thunderstruck. Without another word, he turned to Harry. "You coming?"

"I'm staying," Harry said firmly. "Hermione lost her parents today, Ron. I'm not going to walk out on her."

The redhead looked abashed for a second, then slowly met Hermione's eyes. "I can't stay." He looked ashamed. He knew the fresh tear marks on her face were his fault this time. "I'm sorry."

Hermione gave a jerky nod. "I understand, Ron." Even though she didn't want to, even though she just wanted to be angry with him. She did understand. "Thank you for being here with me today."

Ron made his way to the door, he hesitated for a moment, but then pulled it open and left without a backward glance.

"Harry, you should go with him," Hermione murmured after a moment of heavy silence.

"Wha-? No." Harry said firmly. "I will stay."

"I will be fine. Severus will stay with me," she whispered softly. Harry looked wildly to Snape and then back to his friend.

"I think that's what he's worried about, love." Snape had stepped up behind her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

She covered his hand with hers. "Harry, you know who he is. You can trust him, and even if you're still not fully sure, you can trust me."

Harry drew himself up and stared at the couple in front of him. Snape was looking at Hermione the way he had seen him look at his mother in the pensive. Like there was no other witch on the planet. Hermione had leaned back into him as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Like the warmth of his presence was the same as her favorite old jumper.

They didn't even look odd together like one might think, they complimented each other. Pale skin, dark hair, dark eyes. Dark chocolate and milk chocolate. Feminine tucked into a masculine form. Even their age difference did not strike him as strange – it just...worked. And the look on Hermione's face...he had never seen her look like that. Even when she had thought she was in love with Ron.

"I do trust you, I'm just worried about you," he insisted. "You're my sister, Hermione. This is weird. No offense professor."

Snape did not reply, but he saw laughter in the man's eyes even as his face stayed neutral...which startled him. Snape...laughing?

"I love you, Harry," she murmured, taking the few steps between them and wrapping her arms around him. He hugged her back automatically, face burying in her hair. "I know this is peculiar for you. I didn't want it to be. I was going to figure out a way to tell you two with a little more subtly,"
she stepped back and gripped both his hands in hers. "I need to be alone with him, though, and I think Ron needs you."

Harry watched her carefully for another thirty seconds, searching her eyes for any hints of subterfuge. "Okay." He finally agreed. He turned his attention to Snape. The man raised an eyebrow in question.

"This is going to sound horribly cliché," he started.

"Then don't say it!" Hermione broke him off in exasperation. "He'll be good to me. He is good to me."

Harry gave a curt nod and sighed. "If you're not at breakfast, I'm coming here to get you."

"Deal."

He hugged her one more time, gave Snape another pointed stare, and then left the room to follow Ron.

"That was fun." Snape deadpanned as he welcomed Hermione back into his arms. He dropped a gentle kiss to her forehead and relished how her eyes swept close as she leaned into it. She gave a gentle snicker as she lay her head on his chest.

"I want you to go take that shower, now," he told her after a moment. "It will help you relax."

"I want you to join me," she whispered, raising her lips to his in a tender kiss.

He pulled back, eyes narrowing down at her.

"Make me forget? For just a little while? Please?"

"Oh, Hermione," he murmured, dropping another kiss onto her upturned lips. It went from gentle to frenzied in mere seconds. "Shower," he muttered around her kisses, and had the wherewithal to throw a ward at the door as she pulled him into the bathroom.

She had already started the shower before he closed the door to the loo and was back at him, running her hands over his chest, pulling his shoulders down while she stood on her tip toes to kiss him. She wasted no time drawing his tongue into her mouth and he stifled a groan at her urgency.

"Slow down," he chided around her kisses. "We have all night."

"Mmm." She whinged in noncommitment, frenzied fingers frantically fumbling with his frock coat. "No, fast," she begged. "Hard."

*Bloody hell, I've created a monster!* He groaned, but was eager. He often held back, not wanting to scare the piss out of her. "Rough?" he questioned, simultaneous grasping her blouse and ripping it apart, buttons flying.

"Ahh!" She gasped at the sensation, arching into him. "Yes," she hissed. They continued to undress each other in a hurry, frantic kisses turned into lascivious snogging.

Their teeth clashed, each trying to penetrate the other to the deepest extent. When their mouths weren't molded together, he was running his teeth and tongue along the tendons of her neck. He bit, leaving a mark and she groaned.

*No more holding back in the future!* He pulled away and she snarled at his loss. He grabbed his
wand and they were both completely naked, the clothes in a pile on the opposite side of the room. She launched herself at him, and his wand clattered to the ground as he scooped her up by the bum, spreading and massaging her cheeks. She moaned as her legs lifted and wrapped around him, his pulsating cock pressed to her low belly. Continuing to kiss her as if it was how he acquired breath, he stepped into the steaming water. He wasted no time pressing her up against the cold tile wall. She arched away, squealing at the cold, but this only served his purpose. He reangled himself and slammed into her dripping pussy, hard.

Her cries of pleasure were muffled with the rushing water around them, he gave her no time to adjust. Just gripped her hips hard in his hand, set his feet firmly to the rough stone floor, pulled all the way out and rammed in again.

"Yes," she choked, white lights sparkling before her eyes as her vision went blurry.

Her pussy felt like molten lava, he was afraid he was going to lose it before she even remotely had the chance to build to climax. He toned it back just a bit and dropped a love bite to one of her upturned tits. She whimpered and squirmed.

"Bite me again," she begged. He complied, soothing it with a hot tongue after. He needed to concentrate on keeping a hold of her slippery body and not falling himself. He readjusted his feet, bit the inside of his cheek, and set a grueling pace.

Each loss of him brought him back harder and deeper. Hermione felt as if he were trying to split her in two, and it was exactly what she wanted. Her head knocked against the tile wall as his prick pummeled her pussy. When he slipped a hand between them and started playing her sweet spot like a perverse instrument, she was done.

"Sever-unnhhhh!" She screamed, not able to finish calling his name as all coherent thoughts fled. She gasped as the most intense orgasm she had ever experienced tore through her body. Snape looked at her in shock. Her orgasm had come out of nowhere. He'd been able to time her down to a science after the last two months. He increased his speed and intensity, digging his fingers into her hips as she bucked through her climax.

"Sweet Circe!" He groaned as the increase in tempo and her milking muscles ripped his orgasm straight out of his bollocks. "Fuck, yes!"

He crushed her to the wall as wave after wave of his seed poured into her depths and she held him to her, murmuring words of praise and thanks into his ear. It was in that moment he realized he was in love with her, and it terrified him.
Hermione had been gone for a week, and Snape was going ruddy mad. He knew she was well protected, flanked day and night with a half dozen Aurors, as she went through the motions of laying her parents to rest. He wanted to be with her, but it was impossible without arousing suspicion. He had been required to attend the funeral with her friends as their escort. It had been painful being so close to her, knowing how vulnerable she was, knowing she needed him, and not being able to act on their desires for closeness and comfort.

The strength of his feelings for the Gryffindor girl were overwhelming at best, downright terrifying at worst. When she looked at him with those sienna and oak colored eyes, everything in his being pulled him to her. He had only been able to get her alone for five minutes at the wake, and the tender kisses and long embrace had done little to settle his need to protect and comfort her. She had assured him of her understanding, that she knew they needed to play it safe. She missed him, she said. She wished he could stay with her. He’d played it as cool as he could without being cold. The hope he’d been fighting since the beginning of September was an ever-present weight on his mind.

While she had been gone, he and Minerva had constructed a room for her adjacent to his suite. The entrance was inside his office to the right, while his chambers were to the left. The bathroom was in the middle of the two bedrooms. True to her word, Minerva had found a charm that when one door was opened from the outside, the other locked and then unlocked when that door was opened from the inside. There would be no accidental walk-ins in the middle of the night. Not that the feature would be needed. Severus had every intention of Hermione sharing his bed for the remainder of the school year.

He had gone through the motions, agreeing with Minerva that the burgundy and gold wall tapestries, the ornate fireplace, and the golden sconces that flocked the four-poster double bed decked in Gryffindor colors would make Hermione feel at home, even if they made him nauseated. He recommended she put a desk against the far wall, even if it would deplete the limited space. He told the Headmistress he hardly expected someone as dedicated and studious as Miss Granger to cease studying after curfew, especially when N.E.W.T.s were upon her. She had agreed wholeheartedly and expressed her pleasure and surprise when Severus transfigured an old coffee table into a beautiful mahogany desk and an old stool into a comfortable chair to sit behind it.

It was late Monday night, November 9th, and he was impatiently waiting at the gate for Hermione’s Auror escort to return her to the school. The funeral had been Friday. She had to wait through the weekend to meet with her parents’ estate lawyer late this afternoon. He could only imagine how frazzled and overwhelmed she would be. She had no older adults in her life, both sets of her grandparents were dead and only one aunt who lived out of the country and was unable to make it back for the burial.

Finally, the lights of several lit wands were visible on the path that came from Hogsmeade. He sighed in relief.

“Dawlish.” Snape greeted coolly as the Auror stepped to the gate, there were three others, obscuring Hermione from view. Snape muttered an incantation at the gate and the chains curled away. He pushed the creaking iron opened and his curly haired enchantress made her appearance, giving him a
very tired smile. Moments later she was through the gate. He was disheartened at her appearance. She looked like she had lost at least a stone while she had been gone. Weight he felt she could not afford to lose, she had been slender enough beforehand. The purple smudges under her eyes only confirmed to him she was not sleeping. Or at least not sleeping well.

“Good evening, Professor,” she murmured, slipping past him.

“Miss Granger.” He returned with a nod, taking her face in as if it were water and he had been wandering the desert for forty days.

“All went well.” Dawlish told him through the bars snapping the Potions Professor out of his unguarded appraisal of the young girl. Snape quickly set himself to reengaged the wards on the gate. “We had no incidences.”

“Thank you.” Was all Snape replied. With a quartet of loud CRACKs! the four Aurors turned on their spots and disapparated.

The moment they were gone, she was in his arms, face rubbing against his chest, breathing him in. His arms came around her tightly, one around her shoulders the other cupping the back of her head, holding her to him. He dropped his cheek to the top of her head, breathing in her sent. Lavender and vanilla had never tempted him so much.

“I missed you,” she breathed, her body relaxing for the first time in days.

He said nothing, just held her tighter. She hadn’t expected him to return the sentiment. Severus Snape was not a sentimental person. “Come,” he said after a moment. “I will show you your new chambers.”

She looked at him quizzically. “What do you mean?” She pulled away, but slid her slender fingers into his palm before lacing them with his.

“Headmistress McGonagall is worried about you being alone in the Head Girl suite at night.” He tried to hide his devilish smile, thinking she might find it inappropriate, but was unsuccessful. His grin pulled a real smile to her face for the first time in days. It felt strange. “She insisted on setting up a chamber for you in the dungeon. Opposite mine.” He looked down at her, quirking one eyebrow high.

He could not stop his outright laugh when her face went so scarlet he could see it in the dying light of twilight. “Why, Miss Granger, you’re blushing.”

She brushed off his laugh and forced a stern look on her face. “How did Professor Snape react to this predicament? Being stuck with one of his least favorite students?”

“He was appropriately outraged, but relented to his boss’s overactive whims,” he sneered. “He also insisted there be measures put into place so you would never run into him in any state of undress, or vice versa.”

The laugh that bubbled out of her sparkled around the grounds sending a thrill through Snape. Oh, he had missed that sound the last handful of days. She pulled him to a stop and he turned to face her. “So, you’re telling me we’re going to be living together for the remainder of the school year.”

“Yes, but in much closer quarters then Minerva intended.” He leered at her, and she felt heat spread through her body. The undiluted lust in his pitch-black eyes made the rest of the world melt away. Oh, she had missed him. “I want you in my bed every night. That is, as long as you want to be there.”
He grabbed a hip and pulled her closer. Her breath sped up as his mouth touched hers in a gentle, chaste kiss that belied the heat in his eyes.

“Yes,” she answered against the hard lines of his mouth.

Malfyoy was struggling. Struggling with his courses now that he no longer looked forward to study sessions with Lizzie and Granger. Struggling with his reputation now that the whole school thought Lizzie had dumped him for that idiot Weasel.

It had hurt to see her wandering to the basement hand-in-hand with Weasley a couple of weeks ago and it had made him struggle with his mood because…well, because he missed her. As cheesy as sounded, she had become his closest friend in their time together. He didn’t talk to anyone the way he had talked with her. Had never talked to anyone the way he talked to her. Not even Parkinson in the two years they dated prior to the war.

He saw her everywhere, and she was always with that blasted Golden Trio and the little Weaslette who was sewn to Potter’s hip. His mind growled over the term that had been coined to describe Potter, Granger, and Weasley. How nice it must be to be them. He let out a long, defeated breath.

The last thing he was struggling with was what happened in that secluded corridor the night he walked away from her. The guilt and confusion he felt over what had happened tore at him every day. He wanted to talk to her about it more, to apologize again. To get her real forgiveness, not just the wide-eyed, terrified, and confused nod of acquiescence she had given him that night.

He had tried to figure out where he had gone wrong, but it wasn’t until he asked Zabini to borrow the pensive he had inherited from his grandfather and had taken the memory out to examine it from a different point of view did he realize how many times she had asked him to stop. He couldn’t blame her for biting him even a little bit.

His mind had been buzzing with her returned ardor. She had kissed him with as much abandon as he had felt. Not wanting to be told no, he’d refused to hear it and had somehow made his mind think her struggles against him were frantic touches of returned lust.

The pain of her bite had left him furious until he’d seen the look on her face. He never would have wanted to be the cause of that look, it sliced through him like a million blades. The agony of her distrust after all he had shared with her over the course of eight weeks was unbearable. He was furious with himself for the way he reacted. Instead of closing down the way he had, he wished he had manned up and talked to her. He wished he had fought for her. Reputation be damned. After two weeks of no contact with her, he realized she was worth fighting for.

He now appreciated she could probably never forgive him for what he had done. She wouldn’t be able to trust him. In the same breath, he wasn’t so sure he wanted to be back with her if she was going to listen to all the whispers around her. She had promised him during their first encounter she would form her own opinion, but she hadn’t. She had let other people’s words cloud her assessment of him.

He gave a deep sigh and turned back to his locker in the Quidditch locker room to finish putting on his leathers. Yet, he didn’t blame her for this after watching what he had done in the pensive.

Slytherin was playing Hufflepuff today and he was not looking forward to being one on one with Lizzie at all. After she had made Seeker and before their break up, he had been looking forward to the heat of their rivalry on the field, knowing she was a stellar match for him and it would be a phenomenal game. Now he wasn’t so sure he could even compete against her.
After only half listening to Flint, who had also returned for an eighth and final year at Hogwarts, give a pep talk about how the Hufflepuff’s new Seeker was really good and to go for her at all costs to keep her out of Malfoy’s way, he made his way to a set of bleachers behind the pitch to wait out the remaining time until the game started in about twenty minutes in relative peace.

He was shocked to feel someone tug his arm from under the material surrounding the stand, and even more dumbfounded when he came face to face with a flushed Lizzie Williams. He threw his guards up and snarled at her.

“What are you doing?”

“I wanted to talk to you.” Her voice was clipped.

He looked at her for a long moment before giving a brief nod. “So, talk.”

“Don’t you dare go easy on me out there today.” She poked a finger into his chest pads and he stepped back in bewilderment. “I’m here to play a fair game. You best give it your all.”

“Why do you think I’d go easy on you?” he growled, getting back into her face to intimidate her. He knew it wouldn’t work. She was too fierce, too stubborn, too…perfect. And regardless as to what she thought, she knew him too well.

“Guilt?” she questioned, raising a beautifully arched golden eyebrow, and giving him a … seductive look? That threw him.

“What do I have to be guilty about?” He invaded her personal space, wanting to make her as uncomfortable as she was making him. It apparently didn’t work because she moved closer to him, her breath hot on his ear.

“We both have things to be guilty about.” It tickled his neck and sent a surge of blood to his groin. He bit back a groan. Whatever this heat was between them was maddening. It left him completely barmy.

She pulled back and retreated a couple of steps – did it affect her as much? “But I will never forgive you if you don’t put forth your best game today. Promise me.”

He looked at her with his stone mask in place, but she could see the glazed look in his eyes.

“Promise me, Malfoy.” She purposely used his surname to bring him out of his reverie. It worked, his eyes cleared and he looked at her icily.

“You’ll never know what hit you,” he snarled.

The game was almost boring. The Chasers on the Slytherin team were much better than those on the Hufflepuff team, and the Slytherin Keeper definitely had more skill. After two hours, the score was Slytherin 270 to Hufflepuff 100.

Draco played hard and tough; he was an excellent seeker. Lizzie had expected nothing less of him. She was frustrated with her inability to find the elusive Golden Snitch today, though. Normally she had at least seen it a half dozen times even if it had disappeared again with the length of the game they were experiencing. Today, though, she hadn’t seen it even once. She wondered if the garish yellow robes of Hufflepuff were obscuring the damn thing.

She dodged a bludger and twisted out of the way as the Hufflepuff chasers exchanged the quaffle while barreling through the center of the pitch, a Slytherin Beater and two Chasers on their broom
tails. That’s when she realized Draco must have seen the snitch, because he dove. “Fuck!” she muttered under her breath and spun herself around to pummel after him. He had seen it and was within feet of the damn thing while she was still a couple of meters behind him.

“Having a good game, Malfoy?” She screamed above the cheers, it was enough to startle him for just a second, but that was all she needed. She angled her broom and dove beneath him and the snitch, quickly turning to pluck it out of the air, while he reared the broom back to avoid crashing into her. They were only a few feet from the ground, and she had known they were going to crash when she decided to make her move.

She prepared herself for the impact. It was hard, but not as hard as it should have been. She realized why when she felt strong, wiry arms around her, protecting her as they slammed into the ground. Instead of smashing into her, Draco had grabbed her off her broom and rolled them in mid-air so he’d take the force of the fall on his back with her cradled to his chest. She was shocked even as the air left them both with a loud “Oof!”

He looked at her in a mixture of amazement and fury while trying to reestablish his breathing. “You’re a nutter!” He heaved out at her once he could draw air into his lungs.

She gave him her dazzling grin, placing the hand that didn’t clutch the snitch on his chest and pushed herself up to straddle him. “Yup!” she exclaimed before shoving her fist in the air to show the crowd who had the snitch. The Hufflepuff section roared to life even while the Slytherin’s celebrated their win. The final score was Slytherin 270, Hufflepuff 250. All Draco could concentrate on was the way her body felt against his. The look he gave her was almost reverent, and she swallowed past the desire that grew in her belly.

She rolled off him as her teammates came pouring down to the field to embrace her and give good natured pats to her back and shoulders. Malfoy sat up slowly resting one arm on a raised knee and stared after her in bemusement as she was swallowed into a swarm of classmates. Then scowled to himself. Bloody Elizabeth Williams.

“What the hell was that?” Flint snarled in his ear a moment later, as he and another team member gripped him underneath the elbows and hauled him to his feet.

“She got there first,” Malfoy shrugged indifferently, pulling his arms away from his teammates.

“No, what the hell was that move at the end?” Malfoy realized he was being taunted. “Looked like you were going to shag her in the middle of the pitch.”

He felt his face go hot and red. “What would I want with her?” he demanded, keeping his voice laced with its normal poison.

“Don’t be an idiot, Malfoy.” Another teammate scowled at him. “The whole school knows you want that filthy little American Mudblood.”

It took every ounce of strength Draco had not to throw a punch. “What’s it to you?” he demanded.

“It matters to us if it’s going to get in the way of the ruthlessness we’re used to seeing from you on the pitch, Malfoy,” Flint said, raising his hand at the other members of the team to back off. “If you had just run her over like you should have, she might have been out the rest of the season.”

“Pomfrey would have been able to put her right, and I didn’t feel like spending the night in the hospital wing,” Draco retorted coldly.

“Right.” Flint obviously didn’t believe him and Draco glared at him.
“Sod off,” he countered and, without bothering to look at anyone else, stormed off the pitch.
“Miss Granger.” The cool, detached voice of the Head of Slytherin filtered through the room. “I think you need to focus on the task at hand.”

She wasn’t fooled with his cold demeanor, she knew that he was delving into her thoughts which were adamantly replaying their fucking session from the night before – purposely messing with his head as she replayed every nip, and suck, and stroke from her point of view with the utmost care. Which was probably why he was sitting behind his desk. It was also most likely why he had put his teaching robes back on over his frock coat. She successfully kept the smirk off her face. “Yes, sir.”

She straightened in her chair and redoubled her focus on the Dreamless Sleep they were brewing for Madame Pomphrey’s stores. Well, Lizzie was pretty much doing all the work, which she did feel a little guilty about. She didn’t miss the sour look Ron threw at her over his shoulder, she gave him a small, friendly smile. She was trying very hard to keep the peace with him.

“Where are we?” She murmured under her breath and Lizzie snorted at her.

“Step six.” She hissed back. “Are you going to return to your daydream or can I get you to powder some asphodel petals and grab some essence of nettle from the store room? We’re both out.”

“Yes, of course.” She threw some dried asphodel petals into her mortar and quickly ground them into powder. “Here’s this, I’ll be right back.”

She moved between the desks efficiently, knowing right where she was going. She never noticed Snape quietly move through the room to follow her with an evil glint in his eye. She almost shrieked when she turned around to find him blocking the door for the store room. She glanced behind him to see everyone focused on their work. He muttered an incantation she didn’t recognize and a silencing charm and lunged at her. “Professor!” She squealed softly as he devoured her lips. “Someone will see,” she protested.

“No one will see, anyone that looks will see us talking through the open door.” He argued as his lips trailed a fiery line along her jaw.

“You’ve lost your mind!” She laughed, trying to set the jar of nettle down. He took it from her quivering fingers and placed it down without incident all the while maintaining contact with the column of her ivory throat. She groaned and wrapped her arms around his middle, not sure if she wanted to pull him closer or push him away. She was feeling instantly light headed. He pulled her firmly to his chest and returned to her mouth, she sighed against his lips and melted into the hard planes of his chest. The kiss became more tender and less insistent. Memories from the previous night making her ardor glow. He caressed her back lightly through her robes and she smoothed her hands delicately over his chest, loving the way his skin trembled beneath her touch. “You’re making me mental,” she breathed, trying to press every inch of herself against him.

“You throwing images at me of everything we did last night while I’m trying to teach is making me mental.” He growled in her ear, nipping the sensitive lobe. “Besides, I love making you crazy.”

She whimpered in her throat and then sighed, tilting her head back in abandon as he lapped the
tingling hallow of her throat. “Ah,” she breathed, palming up his back and dipping her head back to
him as his lips nipped across a shoulder. “Oh, gods. Severus. I love you,” she whispered, running her
teeth along the underside of his jaw. She said it without thinking. Said it without meaning to. She had
been thinking it for days, weeks even, always making sure she kept it away from the forefront of her
mind when she knew he liked to slip in and look from time to time. She’d been so careful with the
sentiment that she could hardly believe it slipped out unintentionally. She knew he wasn’t ready to
hear it. She was mortified. More so when he stiffened perceptively.

Instead of responding with something…anything, he pulled abruptly away from her, leaving
Hermione breathless with embarrassment, her arms outstretched as if she were still holding him. A
cold feeling tingled down her spine. He didn’t look at her as he mumbled something about getting
back to class before they were missed as he exited the cupboard before her, the enchantment on the
doorway broken. All she could do was nod stiffly and find her way back to her desk, face blazing
and hands shaking.

“Where’s the nettle?” Lizzie griped when she settled back into her seat, trembling.

“Oh,” Hermione was dismayed. Her shock was such she’d left the damn jar of nettle in the stores.
“I’m sorry Lizzie,” she whispered, trying to keep tears at bay. She watched as the girl huffed and
stormed off to the cupboard. I will not cry, I did nothing wrong. I didn’t deserve that reaction even if
it was a surprise. I can’t believe I told him I love him. What was I thinking? It’s too soon, he’s going
to think I’m some silly little girl who throws declarations of love around like flower petals during a
bridal procession. Oh. My. God. Why the hell am I thinking about weddings? She dropped her face
into her palms, stifling a horrified sob that threatened to break free. She had been too vulnerable
lately, her emotions bubbling too near the surface.

“Hey!” Lizzie had just got back from the store room. “Hermione, what’s the matter?” She kept her
voice low, but both Ron and Harry turned in their seats to look at her, concern on both their faces.

“I-I’m, sorry,” she muttered, air starting to hitch in her chest, eyes widening in realization a panic
attack was fast approaching. “I, I have to go.” She raised her voice. “Professor?”

“Miss Granger?” Snape’s voice was low, cold. It only made her want to cry more.

Was it really so
terrible to be told that you are loved?

“May I please be excused?” Her voice trembled with every syllable and many of her classmates
turned to look at her with surprise. Malfoy even looked up with some semblance of concern on his
face.

There was a long pause where Hermione dared to look up, keeping her hands up to hide her face as
best she could. Snape was erasing the board manually, something he never did, his back to her.

“Is your potion complete?”

Lizzie quickly tossed in the nettle and nodded at Hermione, eyes wide with concern. “Yes, sir.” The
sob hitched in her throat, her stomach clenching as if it was going to eject her lunch that was just
barely digesting. She had to get out of there, now. Or she was going to explode. “Please, sir,” She
pleaded after about thirty solid seconds of silence, tears spilling hot.

What have I done, what have I done. Oh, my God. She sucked in a slow breath, trying to keep the
cloying alarm at bay. Why wasn’t he answering her? He’s probably more shocked then you are, give
him a moment. The longer he took, the more freaked she started to feel – so much so she knew she
was going to have a full-blown panic attack. She leapt from her seat, not bothering to grab her things,
and made a beeline straight for his office door to disappear into her chambers – without his
“Miss Granger, that will be a detention.” She paused in shock at the door, no longer able to breathe. The panic of the moment clawing at her insides, her all-encompassing grief from the last month only fueling the fire.

Hermione’s eyes flew to meet his and her heart shattered at the look on his face. It was guarded, eyes blazing with an emotion she didn’t understand…almost distrustful. Did he think she had lied to him? More white hot tears streaked her face. “I’ll take the detention, sir.” She gasped out with no feeling and pushed into his office and through the door to her bedchamber…the one she had only been in once. She locked, warded, and put a silencing charm on the door behind her and threw herself face down on her bed, allowing the dam to burst completely. Instead of sounds, a high-pitched keen broke through with barely any force behind it. She was suffocating. She couldn’t breathe. Tears tracked wetly down her cheeks and she rolled to her back, attempting to force her racing mind to slow, instructing herself to pull in a breath. It wouldn’t come, and blackness engulfed her.

Lizzie exchanged guarded glances with Harry and Ron through the remaining fifteen minutes of class. Their teacher looked…quite upset. Hermione had been so frantic to escape that she had taken a detention in order to flee. Why Snape hadn’t given her permission when she was obviously so distraught pegged her as a bit cruel. It was obvious something happened, but she hadn’t seen them anywhere near each other the entire double period.

“Sir?” Lizzie questioned, raising her hand.

“Miss Williams?” Snape returned, not looking at her. That was odd in and of itself.

“I’m concerned about Hermione, may I please check on her?”

“No.”

Lizzie did a double take, attempting to make eye contact with him. He deliberately avoided her gaze. Ron growled under his breath, his worry rising tenfold. Lizzie gave him a look to keep quiet, but Snape had already heard.

“Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Weasley,” he drawled. Then addressed the class. “If you are cleaned up, you are dismissed.”

Lizzie bolted to his office door. “Where do you think you’re going, Miss Williams?” Snape demanded.

“You said if our things were put away we could leave.” She spun and glared at him, keeping one hand on his office door. “I want to check on my friend, she was upset.”

“I will check on Miss Granger as soon as everyone has cleared out.” His tone left no room for argument. “Leave her things,” he said baldly when she started packing up Hermione’s bag.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Lizzie snarled. The class gasped as a collective whole and Draco actually straightened and looked like he was about to put himself between the little blonde and the deathly glare their professor was giving her.

“Fifty points from Hufflepuff, Miss Williams, and a week of detentions, I think.”

Lizzie was so angry, she was shaking visibly. Ron and Harry quickly flanked the girl and grabbed her things, dragging her from the room before any more damage could be done. Harry threw a
reproachful glare over his shoulder at the oblivious Potions Master. While all this was taking place, most of the room cleared out. Draco being the only one left in his room. He stared at his Godfather incomprehensively.

“Good day, Draco,” he snarled, indicating he wanted the boy to leave.

“Sir, are you really going to check on Granger? If not… I-I could?” Snape raised an incredulous eyebrow at him, and Draco hastily threw his bag on his shoulders. “Or… not,” he muttered and scooted quickly out the room.

Snape sat down heavily at his desk, the stress of the last fifteen minutes causing his hands to shake. What was she playing at?

Severus. I love you.

What the bloody fuck! Women didn’t fall in love with Severus Snape. Ever. He had thirty-seven years to test that theory – it hadn’t proved false until this moment. Suddenly, the weight of what had truly just conspired slammed into him and he groaned, dropping his head into his fists. Severus. I love you. He had pulled away. Severus. I love you. Left her the moment she expressed something that made him uncomfortable. He’d given her a bloody detention when her devastation to his reaction had overwhelmed her. Severus. I love you. She’d had her arms around him, had been nipping his jaw, making him crazy with want for her. She had been caught up in a moment and had been unguarded and vulnerable with him… Severus. I love you… and he had all but attacked her. Because he was bloody terrified of her. Him. The man who had single handedly duped the greatest dark wizard known to man. Him. The man who had played a double agent for over sixteen years. Him. The man who had beat death by the sweat on his teeth. Terrified of a nineteen-year-old girl with big brown eyes, soft, perfect lips, and the dulcet Earthiness of a wood nymph.

And instead of returning her affection – which he had longed to do for weeks now – he had shattered her heart in seconds with no words at all. What was worse – he wasn’t anywhere near ready to try and fix it.

Hermione came to and was extremely disoriented. It was pitch black in the room and her heart instantly leapt with fear. Feeling for her wand, which she was grateful to find in the pocket of her robes, she muttered, “Lumos.”

The tip of her wand glowed a bright white-blue and she aimed it around the room. Oh. She was in her chambers off Snape’s office. Then the afternoon came back to her and a fresh wave of horror washed over her. She bit her bottom lip and let the pain of it help ground her. When the panic she had felt ebbed up her throat was stifled, she sat up slowly.

“Incendio.” She shot a flame into the grate of the beautiful ornate fireplace, realizing it was the first time a fire had been lit in it. She directed her wand at the candelabras and they blazed to life, warming the small room. Setting down her wand, she scrubbed her face with the heels of her hands before checking her watch, it was well after dinner. She was bloody starving. Quietly, she crossed her room and cracked her door. Much to her relief, Snape was not at his desk, she opened it more widely to notice her book bag and things were sitting on the opposite side. She grabbed them and tossed them into her room. She then cautiously peeked out his already ajar office door, the classroom was empty. She quickly sprinted back into her room, grabbed her wand, doused all fire, and literally ran into the corridor.

Hermione was relieved to make it out of the dungeons without seeing him. She cut across the great hall to the kitchens to pilfer a snack and then headed up to her Head Girl chambers. She took a long hot shower, not able to help the tears she cried while the hot water washed away her tension and cleared her mind. What was she supposed to do now? Tell him she wouldn’t say it again until he was ready? Ask him to forget it happened? What if he pushed her away permanently? The thought made
her nauseous. He was the best thing in her life. She truly was in love with him.

She cleaned her teeth meticulously and dabbed some moisturizer on her face after wiping the steam from her mirror with the palm of her hand. She inspected herself critically. Her wide eyes looked tired, the purple rings underneath made her look older than her nineteen years. Her lips were turned down. Her freckles stood out more prominently as her skin was far too pale. Her cheeks bones seemed higher and more distinct. Her hair was dripping from the shower, the ringlets pulled to waves with the weight of the water. She removed the towel from herself to study her body. She had yet to regain the weight she had lost in the wake of her parent’s deaths. Her collar bones stood out pronounced. She could count four ribs on each side and her hip bones jutted sharply against the plane of her belly. If she was honest with herself, she was probably too thin, but she had to admit that she liked the way her collar bones stood out, she had always thought collar bones were sexy. She sighed.

She knew Severus desired her. The power of being able to turn him on left her heady sometimes. Why she was scrutinizing herself so much left her feeling a bit bewildered. She shook her head to clear her thoughts and used her wand to dry her hair.

Knowing he had left for rounds at seven, she decided it was probably best to get back to the dungeon. Perhaps she would light a fire in his room and study while she waited for him. They obviously needed to talk.

Quickly dressing in her night things and then donning her school robe, she gathered her clothes for the next day. Just as she was about to pull open her door, there was a knock. Her heart leapt into her throat in anticipation, but she was disappointed when she opened the door to find Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Lizzie behind it.

“Hermione!” Harry exclaimed, pushing past her.

“Are you okay?” Lizzie embraced her friend tightly while Ginny and Ron slipped into the room behind her.

“What happened this afternoon?” Ron demanded.

Hermione looked at her four closest friends with watery eyes, grateful for their concern, but knowing she was nowhere near ready to discuss what happened. Instead, she gave them a brief answer.

“Severus and I had a row,” she said carefully. “It’ll be okay, I was just really overwhelmed and needed to get out of there before I broke down completely in front of the entire class.”

Four sets of eyes bore into her disbelievingly. “You were super upset,” Lizzie said quietly. “Snape was angry. He took fifty points from Hufflepuff and gave me a week worth of detentions because I asked to check in on you.”

Hermione was flabbergasted. “I’ll talk to him, that wasn’t fair.”

“No, it was,” Ron let out a dry laugh. “Pretty sure she said something along that lines of what the hell is the matter with you when he refused to let her go.”

Hermione gaped at the blonde.

“Hermione,” Harry spoke quietly for the first time since he greeted her at the door. “He gave you a detention because you asked to be excused and when he didn’t answer you, you fled. Everyone in the class could tell you were upset. I’m sure most people thought you were having an emotional moment in light of everything you’ve been through the past month, but … well. Hermione, what
happened?”

Hermione searched her best friend’s eyes before sighing.

“I’m just not ready to talk about it. I’ll tell you after we’ve had a chance to work things out. I’m going to head back down there now. He’ll be back from rounds around eleven. I have some studying to do, anyhow. I pretty much slept the rest of the afternoon and evening away,” she neglected to tell them she had passed out while having a panic attack.

“You want me to walk with you?” Lizzie asked.

“No,” Hermione shook her head. “I just need to be alone for a while. To…process.”

Her friends, while reluctant, finally agreed, all giving her hugs before leaving the room and heading to their respective dorms. Hermione locked up room and started back towards the dungeons. She arrived without meeting anyone. He’d left a fire blazing in the hearth in his office. She turned to his room, determined to wait for him so they could talk, but stopped cold. A piece of parchment was pinned to his door, his thick, bold handwriting clear.

Miss Granger,

I will ward your door when I come back from rounds. Have a pleasant evening.

Professor Snape

“No,” she whispered, breath catching in her throat. She reached out and tried the handle. It was locked. She pulled out her want. “Alohomora.” It stayed locked. She took two steps back in shock, not wanting to believe. He was shutting her out.

No panic this time, just grief. She fell to her knees, hand still resting on the locked handle of his chamber door. This isn’t happening.
Snape bit back a groan as he entered his office. It was after midnight. He had purposely stayed out late on his rounds because he had the perverse need to find mischief makers and take house points. Unfortunately, he found mostly Slytherin couples looming about, snogging...or more. All though he did corner two from Gryffindor and another from Hufflepuff. If he was honest with himself, he stayed out late mostly hoping Hermione would get tired and give up on him. He should have known she was too stubborn.

He was fully aware that the juvenile note tacked to his door was just that – childish. She was too mature to fall for it and take his unspoken words literally. Which was why he found her propped in the corner of the settee, a huge tome from her United States History of Magic open on her lap and a blazing fire roaring in the hearth. She had one elbow on the arm of the couch with her chin resting in it and was fast asleep. He sighed, running slender fingers through his lank black hair. He was really in need of a shower, it had been a long day.

Deciding not to wake her until he was through, he took down the wards and unlocked his door, pulling the offensive note down and crumbling it. He closed the door behind him. Twenty minutes later he was back. Her position had shifted, she now had her arm down, the book had fallen to the floor, and her head tipped back. She was snoring very lightly, and he found himself studying her. She was too thin and her cheek bones and collar bones were more pronounced because of this fact. She hadn’t gone to supper, either. He knew because he had been watching for her. Her thinness was worrisome to him, and at the same time it gave her an older, more angular look.

While less pronounced in sleep, she had dark circles under eyes. He knew she was sleeping very little, but they kept each other good company because he, also, hardly slept. It’s just what happens after years of expecting to be murdered while you rest. Couple that with the nightmares of all the ghoulish atrocities of his past and the reoccurring dream he had of Voldemort killing Lily for the last seventeen years and...yeah. He hadn’t slept much in years. Finding her in his bed every time he woke for the last month made the nights all that much more bearable, though.

Another thing to add to your list to solidify your stupid, idiotic reaction today. You’re running out of reasons to not apologize.

In fact, his own nightmares had been few and far between during this last month. They had been taken over by Hermione’s. She dreamed almost every night. He blamed them on her recent horrors, all though, sometimes she dreamed about Bellatrix. Once she had been screaming something about being burned and a dragon – he imagined that was the Gringotts break-in; she had told him about it in fascinating detail in the first few weeks of their relationship. A few times she had dreamed Potter was dead – those had been hard on her – and made him unnecessarily jealous. He knew she loved the boy as a brother. Mostly, though, she had night terrors about her parents. He grimaced – he would mostly likely be the star in her nightmares tonight. He’d have to blame them on himself, unless he did something about it.

He was just about to chicken out – and was disgusted with himself for it – when her eyelashes fluttered. He stared at her, pulling up his mask and shielding his mind from her coming assault, but there was no offensive in her warm, dark eyes. They focused on him and immediately welled with tears. He was shut down, he couldn’t do this. Sweet Slytherin, he didn’t want to be responsible for that look on her face. He turned to leave the room, feeling too overwhelmed at the raw emotion in
her expression.

“Please, don’t go.” Her voice was scratchy with sleep and wound thick with feeling. He paused in his doorway, one hand resting on the jamb, saying nothing.

“I can’t take it back,” she breathed, focusing on his tense back. “I wouldn’t want to, even if I could…but I won’t say it again if you don’t want me to. Please don’t shut me out.”

He cringed inwardly. She was saying all the right things. All the things she thought he wanted to hear. But was that really the truth? Did he want her to not tell him that she was in love with him? Was she really in love with him? It was just too fantastical to him.

“Severus,” she whispered. “I know it was too soon. I hadn’t planned on telling you yet, I knew you weren’t ready – that we weren’t ready. Please don’t let this ruin us. I – I can’t lose you, too.” Her voice was trembling with emotion, her words practically screaming how much she wanted him, needed him…loved him.

At her last words, he felt her arms encircling his waist from behind. He twitched almost imperceptibly. He hadn’t even realized she had gotten out of her seat, he was so wrapped up in her words and his thoughts. She splayed her hands flat across his abdomen, resting her cheek on his back between his shoulder blades. Not even realizing he had been holding his breath, he let it out in a silent whoosh, but still didn’t move. She stood like that against him silently, holding him to her while his mind whirred around everything.

Tell her you’re in love with her, too, you imbecile. Apologize for your reaction this afternoon. Tell her she’ll never lose you as long as she wants you. And for bloody sake, tell her she will not sit that fucking detention. Could you have been any more of a dunderhead? What the hell are you waiting for? She’s bloody perfect and you know it. She’s too good for you, and you’re going to let the “L” word frighten you away? You know you’ve been in love with her for weeks. You haven’t even barely looked at another woman since Lily other than to obtain your pleasure – and here, right in front of you is someone more perfect for you than Lily had ever been. You know what Lily would say to you if you could talk to her now – she’d ask what you’re waiting for.

He felt her arms loosen and pull away and he panicked internally. What are you waiting for? The right time? It already passed you by. You could make this the right time. You don’t want to walk away from this, you’d break her heart, you fool. She’d never trust you again. I DARE YOU TO TELL HER.

Hermione mistook his silence and immobility for a rejection. It took every ounce of her control not to burst into tears. She was so tired of crying. She pulled away from him and curled into herself, wrapping her arms around her middle under her breasts and retreating a few steps. She was just about to leave for her room when he took a deep breath as if he intended to speak.

She waited, heart pounding painfully in her chest. She watched as his form straightened and his arm dropped to his side. An unbearable amount of time later, he turned to face her.

She searched his onyx eyes hungrily, trying to figure out where his thoughts were. She was holding her breath. Finally, he spoke.

“I am sorry for the way I reacted this afternoon.” His deep baritone was like balm to her frayed nerves, her breath heaved out of her almost painfully. She swiped at her eyes, embarrassed that there were tears leaking again.

“It’s okay.” Her voice was small, she was just so relieved he was talking to her.
“It’s not ‘okay.’” He closed his eyes and raised his right hand to his forehead, rubbing the tension from between his eyes. “I was a fool and I was cruel. For Merlin’s sake, I gave you a bloody detention.” She couldn’t stop the incredulous laugh that escaped her chest, and his hand dropped, eyes meeting hers again. “You didn’t deserve that, you were trying to cope with the situation.”

She took a quick step forward, reaching out for him. She hesitated after a split second, but he took her hand, pulling her into his chest. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders while she buried her nose in his sternum and encircled his torso with slender arms.

“What?” He whispered into the top of her head, curls tickling his face.

“You’re forgiven,” she breathed. “It’s okay – I understand.” He pulled back and cupped her face, wiping her tears with the pads of his thumbs. The tremulous smile she gave him was shattering. She was putting on a brave face, knowing there was still a hippogriff in the room.

“It’s not okay,” he murmured, dropping a light kiss on her upturned face. “I should have told you I love you, too,”

The expression on her face was almost – almost – worth the turmoil of the day. She had been taken utterly aback and he had to bite his lips to prevent a laugh at the shocked confusion that marred her beautiful features. Instead, he kissed her. She gave an incredulous squeal of surprise and pulled back, eyes so round he thought they’d pop out of her head.

“You bloody arsehole,” she cried, half laughing, half sobbing. Then she kissed him again. “All kiss that kiss bloody drama! kiss For you kiss to say kiss it back? kiss You’re worse than kiss a teenaged kiss girl!” On that note, he didn’t let her pull away again. Slipping his hands down to cup her bum, he pulled her hard against his erection and she groaned. “Fucking arsehole,” she muttered again without conviction as he trailed a line of fire across her jaw to drink in her earlobe.

“Such language.” He chuckled against her ear. The rumble of his voice so close to her ear soaked her knickers completely and instantly. She growled, frenzied.

“Off.” She demanded, pushing at his robes. They were both surprised when not only his robe, but his pajama top disappeared. He gave an incredulous laugh, then his eyes slit in hunger, lust filling his body.

“Off.” He agreed. He completed a silent, wandless spell and she was stark naked.

She growled, her desire matching his, and pushed him backwards into his room, manually slamming the door behind them with her foot. Her fingers plunged into his lounge pants and he almost tripped as they tangled at his ankles while she continued to push him back to the bed. All the while their lips and tongues and teeth never leaving the others. She pushed him back, and he fell willingly to the bed. Happy to give her control over the situation. She had only taken control a couple times before, but both had been extra spectacular. Her passion and ardor were unsurpassed. He helped by pushing himself up, lying crosswise on the bed while she crawled over the top of him, laying her deliciously naked body directly on top of his. Then the heat cooled just slightly as she slowed their kiss. Her teeth pulling at his upper lip while he suckled her lower one. Her hands slid into his damp locks and her fingers curled into them, tugging until he tilted his head up to give her open access to his throat.

“Say it again.” She pleaded, running her tongue on the underside of his jaw bone on her way to swirl her tongue in his ear. He groaned as the pink tip sank in and her heated breath filled the antihelix. She trailed to the lobe and nipped before sucking again. An involuntary shudder cascaded down his spine. “Severus, say it again.”
“I love you,” he rasped, grasping her chin and pulling her face to his. He brushed his mouth to hers. “I’m in love with you,” he said into her open mouth.

She smiled against his maw before suckling his bottom lip into her mouth. When she released it she answered him.

“I love you.” The warmth that flooded him was almost stifling. Everything felt so…real, so perfect, it was right. Loving her, having her love him back.

She slowly sat up, raking her nails lightly over his chest, flicking his nipples as she skimmed past them. She rubbed his sex across hers, lubricating him, before grasping his cock in her hot little hand and positioning herself above him. She mounted him slowly, her eyes rolling back in her head with the pleasure of it, lower lip caught in her pearly white teeth. He gritted his jaw, letting her set the pace. When he bottomed out, she moaned and slumped forward a bit, palms to his chest to support herself.

“You feel so bloody amazing,” she whispered. “I was so scared. So scared I had ruined it all.” She whimpered when his hips jerked without his consent.

“Never, I’m here for as long as you want me.”

“Good, because I want you forever,” she breathed, and then started to grind against him. Her words were not missed, but quickly shoved aside as he grasped her hips to help set the rhythm. Her cries of ecstasy and joy exultant as she threw her head back, messy curls caressing his thighs, and rode him with wild abandon. She was stunning. She was his.

Snape’s hips jammed up to meet hers. “Uunh,” she cried out, her body stiffening slightly. She was close. He released one hip and caught a nipple in his fingers tugged. “Oh, fuck.” He upped the pace, bucking into her again and again while she slammed down on him. Her fragrant scent of arousal filling his senses.

“Come for me, Hermione,” he demanded, tugging again, the other nipple this time.

“Fuuuuck,” she cried. “Severus!”

Her orgasm rocked through him as she lost her rhythm to it and instead of slamming down, she ground her hips as he gyrated little hops. She whimpered as sensations became too much. Jerking and twitching, her pussy milked him for all he was worth. His bollocks tightened and then he was there, pouring himself into her. “Hermione,” he breathed and his orgasm erupted out of him.

She collapsed on top of him, panting. Her unruly mane covering them like a blanket. His hands sank into her hair and he pulled her face to his to kiss her long and slow and sweet. She melted against him, her fingers caressing the stubble at his jaw.
Chapter Eighteen

“He’s nuts!” Lizzie laughed, sitting between Harry and Ron on an over-stuffed couch in the Gryffindor commons room.

“Hagrid is batty.” Hermione laughed, covering her mouth with her hand as Harry and Ron glared at her, protective of their over-sized friend.

“I mean this in a good way, guys!” Lizzie elbowed Harry in the ribs before swatting Ron on the shoulder. “I love the guy, but this…monster fetish…sheesh!”

Harry snorted. “Okay, you’ve got me there!”

“Hey guys!” Ginny clambered through the portrait hole as the quartet of friends were sniggering and telling Lizzie more Hagrid stories a few minutes later. “Whatcha up to?"

“Just reminiscing about all the crazy animal stunts Hagrid has pulled over the last eight years,” Harry told her, pulling her down in his lap and kissing her deeply.

“Oi!” Ron gagged. “C’mon, you two. That’s bloody disgusting.”

“Sorry, mate.” Harry smirked at him, looking away from Ginny for a fraction of a second. “I haven’t seen her all day.” He turned back to his girlfriend eagerly. She grinned and proceeded to give everyone in the common room a show. Ron pointedly turned his face away while Lizzie watched with sparkling eyes for a moment before catching Hermione grinning from her wing backed chair, a knowing look in her eyes.

“How must it feel to be so in love, you can’t even keep your hands off each other in the middle of the common room with an audience of fifteen plus?” She joked to Hermione who sniggered.

“Better than being in love and not being able to show any public displays of affection,” she returned, before blushing furiously at the realization of what she said.

Ginny came up for air with a squeak. “In love?” she squealed, practically throwing herself into the chair next to Hermione, leaving Harry looking utterly bewildered and a bit put out.

Lizzie’s eyebrows rose and she gave the two girls a look. “Have you told him, Hermione?” she asked, leaning forward enthusiastically, putting both elbows on her knees and placing her chin in her hands, grinning.

Black and red-headed boys exchanged slightly horrified looks.

Hermione hid her face in her hands. “Stop!” Her face was as red as Ginny’s hair. “Oh, my God. Please let the floor swallow me whole.”

A few outsiders were peeping in on their conversation and Lizzie sent a glare at a group of sixth year boys. “Bugger off!” she told them, which made Ron snort. The boys rolled their eyes and went back to their game of Exploding Snap.

“Picking up on our British slang there, eh, Lizzie?” She instantly knew Ron was trying to change the
subject. He was still very uncomfortable every time the topic of Snape came up.

“Didn’t answer Lizzie’s question, Hermione!” Ginny prodded, lowering her voice and poking Hermione on the shoulder. She was oblivious to Ron’s attempt out of the conversation. If possible, Hermione’s blush deepened.

“Yes,” she finally whispered.

“And?!” Ginny squawked.

“Well, it was sort of an ‘in the heat of the moment’ thing, and after the initial shock – and me thinking I had thoroughly botched the whole damn thing – he said it back.” She felt it was prudent to leave out the details of that day almost a fortnight ago. “He’s told me every day, since.”

“Ah!!!!” Lizzie almost fell off the couch. Harry covered a smile with his hand, while Ginny looked dumbfounded. Ron abruptly stood and strode though the portrait hole without a word or a backwards glance.

Hermione’s face drained of color while the other three gaped after him. He’d been doing so much better the last couple of weeks – but this was probably to be expected from Ron. He always wore his heart on his sleeve.

“How could I have been so callous?” The brunette scolded herself, dropping her face into her splayed palm.

“He has to get over it, Hermione,” Ginny insisted. “You’ve done nothing wrong. How would you have reacted if he was the one spouting he was in love?”

“I would have told him I was happy for him.” The curly haired girl replied quietly. “At least I hope I would have.”

“You would have,” Harry said firmly.

“I’d better go apologize.” Hermione pushed herself to stand.

“No.” Lizzie stood quickly, holding her hands up. “Let me talk to him for you.”

Hermione nodded. “It might be better if it comes from you. I gotta get back down to my room to put some school work together for later tonight, anyway. I’ll walk with you for a bit.”

Lizzie grabbed her heavy cloak and they said good-bye to Ginny and Harry and exited through the portrait hole.

“Room of requirement?” Ginny raised her eyebrows suggestively. Harry nodded, but a faraway look was sprawled over his face.

“What’s the matter, love.” Ginny sunk back onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and dropping a kiss on his forehead.

He dropped his voice so it was barely discernable over the din of the common room. “Snape. In love. With Hermione,” he looked up at her, his eyes soft. “I would have never guessed…but. Ginny, god, he deserves it.”

Ginny smiled warmly and touched her forehead to his, squeezing his shoulders tightly. “He does. So does she. None of us have had it very easy, you know?”
He nodded and kissed the bridge of her nose, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. When he opened them, Ginny was startled to see tears glistening. “No, none of us have. But I think he’s had it the worst.”

“Where do you think he went?” Lizzie asked

“Probably either the owlery or the pitch,” Hermione answered automatically. “He likes the birds, and has been known to go there when upset. But of course the pitch…” She trailed off. Lizzie nodded.

“I’ll check the pitch first.” She gave her friend a small smile. “Do not fret about this. I’ll get him to calm down. “

“Lizzie,” Hermione whispered, stopping. “I’m heartbroken for him. I don’t know if him and I will ever be okay again.”

“Oh, honey,” she replied, hugging the girl fast and fierce. She pulled away, holding Hermione’s shoulders. “It’s going to be all right. He just…he just needs to fall in love himself.” Hermione nodded, and the two girls continued their walk to the Head corridor on the third floor.

“How do you feel about Susan Bones?” Lizzie asked tentatively after a short bought of silence.

“She a doll,” Hermione answered automatically. “Just the sweetest thing. So sad, though. She has no family left. She had a court appointed guardian last year while she was still underage. Now that she’s of age, she inherited her family estate.”

“She’s mad about Ron.” Lizzie told her after a brief hesitation. “Hannah said she’s had a crush on him for the last couple years.”

That stopped Hermione in her tracks, brown eyes finding green in a mix of excitement and trepidation. “That’s…good.”

Lizzie cocked her head. “You don’t like that idea?”

“No.” Hermione shook her head quickly. “I just…why do I feel jealous?”

Lizzie looked at her, exasperated. “Well, I get it. I do, but you have to keep that tidbit to yourself. You’ve moved on, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, it’s probably just a little residual possessiveness is all.”

Hermione nodded, looking very thoughtful. “I think they’d be brilliant together,” she finally said.

“Me, too,” Lizzie’s eyes sparkled impishly. “Care to play matchmaker with me?”

Hermione’s eyes burned with mischievousness. “I think that’s a splendid idea, Elizabeth Williams.”

“Me, too, Hermione Granger.”

They made plans to meet up during their free period after lunch the next day and parted at the top of the grand staircase on the third floor.

Lizzie continued through the castle and out to the pitch. It was getting fairly close to curfew, so she knew she needed to move quickly. Hermione was right, Ron was on the pitch, sitting below the right
goal post on the closer end of the field.

“Ron,” she said softly. He jumped a bit and looked up at her, his eyes darkening with malice.

“I don’t want you here,” he muttered.

“I know,” she murmured, and knelt in the snow beside him. “But I think you need to hear something.”

“What?” He ground out, not looking at her, while he packed clumps of white powder in his hands angrily.

“Aren’t you freezing?” she asked him, distracted for a moment. The wind was whipping her cloak everywhere and she stuck her hands under her arms trying to bring them warmth.

“I’m all right, I cast a warming charm,” he muttered. He pointed his wand at her and muttered the incantation. She immediately felt a flow of hot air surround her and sighed.

“Oh, my goodness,” she breathed, feeling better almost instantly. “I have to remember that one.”

“Okay, listen.” She continued after a moment of silence, Ron still not looking at her while he packed another snowball together. He had a little pile of ten or so done. “I know you’re hurt about Hermione, but if you were so hung up on her, why would you date me?”

His eyes flew up to hers in surprise. “I – I…I guess I don’t know.”

“Don’t know, or aren’t willing to admit that you’re upset she’s found someone new and you haven’t?”

He grunted, dropping his eyes again. “I guess it’s probably the second.”

“Mmmhm,” she said. She touched his shoulder lightly and he looked at her cautiously. “What if I told you I knew someone who really liked you?”

He searched her eyes for a moment. Then, taking her by complete surprise, hauled her into his arms. He pressed his lips to hers in a move Lizzie would have never anticipated. She gave a little squawk of surprise and he used the opportunity to slide his tongue into her mouth. Just let him kiss you, and then tell him what you were going to tell him. While she didn’t participate, she ended the kiss as quickly as she could. She pulled away from him and smiled gently, cupping the side of his face with her hand.

“Ron, you don’t want me, either,” she told him softly. “We have no heat.”

His eyes searched hers and then his shoulders dropped. “I know, it’s just that – ”

But she was sidetracked by a shock of silver hair blinking quickly out of her line of view caught her attention. “Draco?” she whispered, horror cascading over her.

“Malfoy?” Ron craned his head around to look. They could just make his figure out as it stormed back to the castle, platinum hair reflecting the moonlight.

“Ron,” Lizzie said, hurriedly rising to her feet. “Ron, I’m sorry. But I have to go. I will find you in a bit. Please go back to the castle and stay warm. If I can’t make it back to Gryffindor before curfew, I’ll find you in the morning.”

“What..?” He trailed off, and then his gaze flipped to Malfoy’s retreating figure. “Oh.” He stated
flatly. “I get it. Okay, tomorrow, then. Probably.” He didn’t say it unkindly, but was still a bit hurt. He knew Lizzie was right, he didn’t want her. He thought he had, until the relief that flooded him when she broke it off. Yes, he played it up like he was hurt, but he had thought she was choosing Malfoy over him. She was really like having another little sister. He watched her sprint off the field; apparently, she had regrets about breaking things off with Malfoy, though. He tilted his head back against the goal post. Why was he so unlucky in the relationship department?

Lizzie felt guilty as she sprinted off the field, chasing after Malfoy when her friend was feeling down on himself. But if Draco had seen that kiss, she had to talk to him before he had time to simmer. When she got within hearing range, she called out to him.

“Draco!”

He spun, glaring at her, but kept walking backwards and way from her. “What?” he said coldly.

So…that’s a yes, he saw. She picked up her pace. “Please, wait!”

“I don’t think so.” He turned and continued to stalk away from her. He didn’t want to listen to her excuses. He was disappointed. They’d been walking to a couple classes together again and he’d even met with her and Granger on Saturday in the library this past weekend to study. While they hadn’t had that talk she eluded to at the Quidditch match, they seemed to be back in each other’s good graces. Until he caught her snogging Weasley on the pitch. *I’m not doing this again.*

“Draco,” she gasped, holding a stitch in her side as she tried to catch up. He was so much taller, and she had started out so far behind. “Please!”

Guiltily, he came to a stop. A few second later, she literally crashed into him, looking down at her booted feet instead of up where she was going. He caught her shoulders and kept them both from toppling into the snow. “Watch it,” he growled at her.

She sucked in huge, gulping breaths and held up a finger indicating she needed a moment before bending over and resting her hands on her knees to help her overcome her over exertion. He crossed his arms and took a couple of steps away from her.

“Do…you…know how…to turn off….a war…ming…charm?” she asked. Sweat trickled down her temples and neck. He snorted.

“Not out here, you don’t.” He relented, hardly even mad at her anymore. Now he was trying not to laugh at her. “You’ll freeze on the spot.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her the rest of the way into the castle. Once inside he countered her warming charm and she instantly breathed a sigh of relief, her body cooling immediately. “Oh, my goodness. Thank you!” She fanned herself with a hand.

“What was so important?” he said dryly.

“You saw Ron kissing me.” She stated, he raised his eyebrows.

“That’s none of my business,” he leered.

“But it is! Draco, you have to know – ” He broke her off.

“I have to know *what* exactly?” He growled at her. She took a step back, eyes widening, hand settling over her still racing heart.
Fuck. He scared her again. Why did he keep doing that?

“I’m sorry,” he grumbled. “Just, say what you’re going to say so I can go to bed.”

“You have to know that it’s you I want.”

His heart literally stopped. Then kicked up in high gear, but his brain didn’t compute with it. If she wanted him, why was she kissing Weasley.

“What the fuck, Lizzie? Are you serious?” he demanded. “You sure have a funny way of showing it.”

“No!” she exclaimed, then stopped, both sets of finger tips raising to rub her temples. “He kissed me, and not because he even likes me. He’s hurt that Hermione’s in love with –” She stopped abruptly, wide eyed and slapped a hand over her mouth.

Well. That peaked his interest. “In love with who?” he sneered. The Gryffindor princess was in love…what great gossip! He almost started laughing.

“I…can’t tell you that,” she whispered, looking absolutely terrified and horrified with herself at the same time.

His eyes softened, even as warning bells went off in his head. Big secret alert! “Don’t worry about it,” he said gruffly. “None of my business. You were kissing Ron because…?”

“Right. Actually, no. I wasn’t kissing Ron. He kissed me, I just didn’t stop him because he needed to realize there is exactly zero romantic spark between us and it seemed like the best way to get the point across.”

He snorted and turned to walk away from her. *What a load of bullshit.*

“Draco!”

“You are so full of shit, Lizzie.” He spun back to her, all defenses gone, a turmoil of emotions clouding his eyes.

“No!” She insisted, reaching out for him. He pushed her hands away. “He agreed with me after I stopped the kiss! Then I saw you…were you following me?”

“No!” But he shifted his eyes away from her and she knew he was lying.

“Don’t lie to me, Malfoy!” She stomped her foot and crossed her arms angrily. “Why were you following me?”

“Because I was worried, okay?!” He threw his hands up in exasperation. “Muggle-borns are being nabbed every few days and disappearing without a trace. I wanted to make sure you were okay!”

She froze, her heart fluttering in her chest. “Oh, Draco!” she whispered before she launched herself at him.

He caught her, surprised. She grabbed his face in her hands and dragged his mouth to hers urgently. “He was initiating the deeper kiss this time. He rumbled in his throat and pulled her tighter to him, wrapping his arms securely around her petite form as hers slid back into his hair. He pulled away after what seemed like hours.
“Let’s get out of here,” he murmured, nuzzling her throat while holding her tight to him. “We’ll go somewhere private and we can talk this out.”

“Yes,” she whispered back.

He slid a hand down her arm and laced his fingers through hers, pulling them away from the entrance hall. Neither saw the glum Ron standing in the entryway. “Figures,” he muttered, watching them walk away.

“I know,” Draco said, dragging his hands through his hair. It stood up in messy points and Lizzie had to stop herself from finger combing them away. “I do know what I did. I watched it in a pensive and it was awful. I didn’t mean it. I-I lost control.” He broke off at her look of incredulity and immediately defended himself. “I know it’s no excuse, but it’s all I have. Lizzie, I promise. It will never happen again.”

“It can’t, Draco,” she said softly. “We have to go at my pace.” She paused for a moment and then whispered, her face tinging a delicate pink. “I’m a virgin.”

He looked surprised for just a moment and then gave a curt nod, accepting her terms, accepting responsibility for her needs. “I think I knew that. It won’t, I promise. I’ll be gentle with you.”

She breathed a sigh. “I’m giving you my trust, Draco.”

“Yes.”

“Now it’s my turn to apologize,” she said after a pause.

“For what?”

“For not listening to myself and for worrying what other people said and what I thought other people wanted. I should have only been worried about you and me.”

He raised his eyebrows, contemplating her statement. Finally, he replied. “I appreciate your apology and I accept it. That trust goes both ways, Lizzie. If you’re worried about something or uncomfortable about something, you have to talk to me about it.”

“Yes,” she nodded. “Which leads me to a question.”

“Ask.” He sat back in the chair he had commandeered in the library and crossed a foot over his knee. They were back in a dark corner, only their wands glowing next to each other on the table they sat beside.

“If this gets serious – and I don’t mean ‘will you marry me’ serious – but serious enough to last beyond the end of the school year, how are your parents going to react to me?” She didn’t look at him and his stomach tightened. He really hadn’t thought that far ahead.

“If it gets that serious, Lizzie, we’ll cross that bridge when we get there,” he said gently. “That’s the best I can give you.”

“Alright, but I still want you to tell me what I could potentially expect,” she pleaded.

“They won’t approve.” He wasn’t about to sugar coat it. “I have a duty to marry a pure blood witch,” he sighed.

“My options are actually quite limited, and most unsavory in my eyes…” He trailed off. “I still
haven’t decided if I’m going to follow my duty or my own path. I guess it depends on how my dad is once he gets out of Azkaban. How reasonable my parents are together when it comes to discussing the future of the Malfoy name and estate. I will not be looked kindly on for breaking the bloodline. I’d be considered a blood traitor. I’m going to get grief from classmates just for dating you, but I don’t care. I’m not willing to not see where this goes.

All I do know is that I don’t want to be associated with a family who uses the term ‘Mudblood’ anymore. Blood…is blood. Magic is in the soul – no matter the parentage. It took a long time for me to realize that – to come to terms with it. But I have received more kindness, affection, and second chances from half and half’s, blood traitors, and Muggle-borns than I ever have from someone of pure blood status.”

She searched his face, reading the sincerity in every line. “Okay. I’m willing to take things as they come.”

He gave a long sigh in relief and held his hand out to her. She took it slowly and wrapped her fingers through his. “Official, then?” he asked her. “We’re official?”

“Yes,” she smiled brilliantly at him. “I’m ready to move forward a step.”

He leaned in and kissed her gently on the mouth. “In that case…” He smiled at her. “Can I take you to the ball on Saturday?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”
Chapter Nineteen

The celebration Yule ball was being held for all Hogwarts attendees, families, and alumni to celebrate the completion of repairs and end of the suppression felt under Voldemort’s regime on the Saturday before Christmas. It was a chance for everyone to come together as one and attempt to put the past where it belonged. It was a bittersweet day for Hermione for one reason only – she couldn’t attend on the arm of the only person she wanted to. Therefore, she was attending alone, and she knew it would be wildly speculated on – she would be the only member of the Golden Trio with no date.

Lizzie and Hermione had planted the seed in Ron’s head about Susan Bones – and he had decided to pursue it. He’d been happier and more at ease the last few days then she had seen him in a long time, which lightened her heart perceptibly.

She sighed as she looked at herself in the fogged mirror over her vanity in her private bath. Even though she was sad she would not be able to attend with Severus, he was still going to be there. She was hoping that they would at least be able to find a way to sneak in a dance. And…she was dressing for him, which at least made the preparation fun.

“Her-my-oh-knee!!” Ginny’s sing-song voice came as she heard her chamber door creek open.

“Bathroom!” Hermione called back, wrapping a towel firmly around her hair.

She pulled open the bedroom door to find both girls almost ready for the dance – just a few touches of makeup and accessories left to accomplish. Ginny was in a true purple high-low halter robe-gown that crisscrossed in the back and sported a belt that was covered in beads and crystals (which also covered the straps of the halter and cascaded over the tops of her breasts). The chiffon material was ruched over the bust with a pretty teardrop cut out right in the middle of her cleavage – subtle but sexy. Under the belt, the same flowy material spilled to her knees in delicate folds that dropped to just above her knee before circling back and touching the floor in a short train. She wore a pair of flat, crystal sandals that caught and reflected light at every angle. Her hair spilled over her shoulders, loose, in a riot of styled curls. She wore a pair of crystal teardrops in her ears and a diamond bracelet Harry had given her for her seventeenth birthday.

Lizzie looked absolutely stunning in a Muggle gown – she was sure Draco wouldn’t know what to think of it. It was an ice blue sleeveless and backless dress with a sweetheart neckline. The bodice was fitted to her slight curves and beaded with clear crystals. But this is where the ordinariness of it ended. The under layer was made of lace and sprawled out to just above the floor in a beautiful pattern of embroidered fabric studded with more tiny crystals. Over this was a chiffon layer that swirled with every movement. She had simple pearl earrings in her ears with no other jewelry. Her hair was pulled back in a halo braid with curls pinned up in the center of it. A few tendrils had escaped to frame her lovely face.

Hermione stared at her friends, opened mouth. “You look amazing!”

“Thanks!” The girls answered together before smiling at each other.

“Your turn!” Ginny insisted. “Go get your knickers on and come back!”
Hermione turned back to the bathroom and slipped on a pair of black lace boy shorts with a black silk strapless bra. She donned a pair of black lace stockings that reached her thighs and used a sticking charm to hold them in place. Pulling the towel out of her hair, she reentered her room, using it to scrunch more water out of her soaked tendrils. The girls were setting up an array of makeup and products on her dresser with their backs to her.

She crossed to the door to lock it, when it opened unexpectedly.

“Yeep!” She squealed, attempting to cover herself as much as possible with the small hair towel, as Harry opened the door to her room.

He met her startled eyes as both Ginny and Lizzie whirled around to see what the commotion was. “Harry! Close the door!” Hermione snapped, as her friend of over eight years stood gawping at her in her underthings.

“R-right!” He exclaimed, and the door slammed shut.

Lizzie and Ginny burst into a round of uncontrollable giggles as Hermione pulled her bathrobe out of her wardrobe. Once it was secure, she sent Ginny to the bathroom to hide (so Harry didn’t see her before the dance) and reopened the door.

He didn’t meet her eyes as he scurried past her into the room. “What do you need, Harry?” she asked him as he stood awkwardly, shifting from foot to foot, gaze glued to the floor.

“McGonagall asked me to double check with you that the decorations were completed to your satisfactory, Lizzie,” he said, still not looking at anyone. Lizzie had headed the decorating committee and Professor McGonagall had been too swamped with paperwork for the student’s trip home for the holidays to supervise.

“Yes.” Lizzie answered, trying to hold back a fresh wave of giggles. “Everything is good, Harry!” His eyes darted to hers, then over to Hermione’s who was standing with her arms crossed, one toe lightly tapping the floor. His cheeks and the tips of his ears were red.

“I’m saying this, because I know that sometimes girls need to hear things like this,” he said quickly. “And I know my loving girlfriend agrees!” He raised his voice to make sure Ginny could hear him through the door. “Snape is one lucky man, Hermione.”

Hermione’s eyes widened before a blush flushed across her face. “Enough!” she muttered. While she was secretly pleased, she was also quite mortified that her ‘brother’ had walked in on her in her skivvies. Her face was beat red. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes, one thing.” He cleared his throat. “Can I talk to you alone, ‘Mione?”

“Sure, step into the hall?”

He nodded and Lizzie went to retrieve Ginny while they stepped out into the corridor.

“What’s up?”

“This.” She barely heard him, but watched him fumbling in his pocket. He pulled out a velvet ring case and popped it open, revealing a stunning diamond and garnet ring set in platinum or white gold. “Muffliato,” he said hastily, pointing his wand at her door so Ginny and Lizzie couldn’t overhear.

Hermione’s throat closed and her eyes flew to her best friend’s face. “You’re going to propose?” She
“Harry!” She wrapped him in a tight hug. “When?”

“Tonight.” He cleared his throat. “The ring was my mum’s. Do you think she’ll like it?”

“She’ll love it!” Hermione assured him. “Oh, she’ll love it, Harry. How could she not?”

“I’m nervous.”

“Why? You love her, you know she loves you. Does anyone else know?”

“I asked Mr. and Mrs. Weasley for her hand.” He smiled at her, looking devastatingly handsome in his black dress robes that were quite similar to the green ones he had worn in fourth year.

“And they said yes?” “After making me promise the wedding wouldn’t be until after Ginny graduates. Ron knows, too.”

“Of course he does! Where are you going to do it?”

“In front of everyone.”

This made Hermione pause. “That doesn’t sound like you, Harry. No wonder you’re nervous.”

“It’s not me.” He shrugged. “But it is Ginny. I know she’d love for all her family and friends to be there. It’s a special occasion. We’ll be dressed up. It will be an amazing memory, so I’m willing to shove my discomfort in the background for her happiness.”

Hermione accepted this explanation with no hesitation. Of course, Harry would do anything to make Ginny’s dreams come true. “I’m so happy for you, Harry,” she whispered, touching his face gently with her fingertips. “You deserve a lifetime of peace and happiness.”

Harry gave her a crooked smile. “Keep it a secret?”

“I’d take it to the grave with me.”

Harry snorted before leaning over to give her a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Hermione.”

“Just let me know if you need me to help in any way.” Hermione grinned at her best friend as he tucked the box back in his pocket.

“You better go get ready! You don’t have much time left, only about an hour.”

“Crap! Okay. I’ll see you at the feast.”

By the time Hermione entered her chambers, Ginny and Lizzie were completely ready to go. Hermione had a Prefects meeting in the early afternoon to organize the holiday departure the next day, which was why the other two had decided to start without her.

“Do you step into your dress or does it go over your head?” Lizzie got straight to business.

“Step in.”

“Sit.”

Thirty minutes later, Hermione didn’t even recognize herself. Lizzie was truly magical with her wand when it came to hair. She hadn’t even used any Sleeky-Eazy’s. Hermione’s usually thick, tight, and frizzy curls were relaxed and loose, leaving her hair so long it almost reached her hips. There was no
trace of fizz or poof, it was sleek and shiny. Ginny had made up her face lightly, giving her a natural look with a touch of smoky eye.

“You’re wizards, both of you!” She breathed, looking at herself in the vanity mirror. “I don’t even look like me.”

The girls laughed.

“Witches, not wizards! Let’s get you in your dress.” Lizzie gestured for Hermione to stand.

Hermione agreed and her friends held her dress as she stepped into it before zipping it up the back for her.

“Oh, Hermione!” Ginny gasped. “He’s not going to know what hit him!”

Lizzie was grinning. Hermione’s dress was quite mature, as it was her mother’s from a couple years back when she and her father had gone to Paris for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. She had worn the gown to the opera. Hermione had to transfigure it a bit in order to make it fit, but not much. The dress was off the shoulder with sheer lace sleeves that came to a point at her wrist. The lace made up a sweetheart neck line and covered her bust completely and circled her back just above the bra line. Then, the material turned into a patterned silk that fit her hourglass figure like a glove to the hips. Here, the fabric flared to the floor straight in the front and gathered in the back to spill out in a small train. On one side, there was a slit that came to mid-thigh. She slipped into a pair of strappy, black stiletto heels that she charmed to be much more comfortable.

The color of the dress was a deep, blood red. “It’s not too much?”

“There’s one thing I think we should change,” Lizzie said slowly after a moment of gazing at her friend. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes!” Hermione answered with a smile.

A quick twirl of her wand, and the dress turned a deep, dark Slytherin green. One more flick and a touch of silver thread wound its way through all the lace, making the sleeves and bodice shimmer. All three girls gasped. “Oh, Lizzie!” Tears swam in her eyes, but she blinked them back quickly. “It’s perfect. There had been something off about it from the beginning that I just couldn’t put my finger on. This was it! It was the wrong color.”

“I take back that he’s not going to know what hit him,” Ginny said with an evil smirk. “He’s going to have a hard time keeping his hands off you.”

Hermione laughed. “I promised him I’d go see him before going to the Hall,” she said. “I left the earrings and bracelet I need down there on accident, anyway.”

“We’ll see you in the Hall.” Ginny winked at her friend and the two girls left to find their dates.

Five minutes later, she opened the door to his office, relieved to find him not in it. She wanted to put her jewelry on before showing off for him. She closed her door gently behind her and plucked the onyx tear drop earrings that had belonged to her mum out of the small jewelry box along with the matching bracelet. She had her black beaded clutch already prepared with lip gloss and tissues and slung it over her shoulder.

“Hermione?” She heard Severus call.

“I’ll be out in a moment!” she called back. Then turned to give herself one more once over in the
She didn’t think she could look any more perfect. She opened her door.

Severus stood waiting for her, in formal wizard robes of all black with a dark green, silk cravat at his throat. When he saw her, she watched his face go carefully blank, but this reaction did not disappoint her. She knew that he only adopted that look when emotion was overwhelming. She gave him a soft smile and crossed the room, watching him swallow hard.

“You look dashing!” she told him, placing a hand on his bicep. She barely had to prop herself up to kiss him with the addition of her four inch heels. He returned the chaste kiss automatically, then took her hand and stepped back, gesturing for her to turn.

She gave him a dazzling smile and did an assisted pirouette, making sure her leg slipped out of the slit so he could see the lace stockings and high shoes.

“Bloody. Hell.” He choked out, eyes widening as they trailed up her stilettoed and laced leg.

“You’re sure we have to attend this asinine thing tonight?” He pulled her to him, encircling her waist with his large hands and capturing her lips in a searing kiss. Hermione had to fight to keep her composure. She gave a breathy laugh and used both palms on his chest to push back.

“Don’t muse my makeup,” she chided sweetly. “And, yes. We must go. We are two people who will very much be in the spotlight tonight.”

“You are absolutely breathtaking, Hermione Granger,” he murmured against her throat.

Hermione could almost not believe her luck when she realized she had been seated next to Severus at the head table. She threw an elated grin over her shoulder and, even though he did not answer her smile, his eyes glimmered.

“Miss Granger.” He nodded his head politely and pulled her chair out for her. She felt like swooning - it was almost as if they were on a real date.

“Thank you, Professor!” She responded, smoothing her dress over her bum as she sat. He took up his place next to her and turned to speak to McGonagall to his right.

Harry was seated in the middle of the table with Ginny to his right and Kingsley to his left. Next to Kingsley was Ron and Susan. Hermione sat next to Ginny, Severus next to her. She realized the probable reason they had sat Severus and her together was because they were the only two Order of Merlin, First Class recipients who didn’t have dates. Neville and Luna were on the other side of Ron and Susan, then teachers surrounded them all to each side. Below the head dais was a slightly shorter raised platform which held ministry personal and Order of Merlin, Second and Third Class recipients. Round tables dotted the Hall throughout, holding families, students, and alumni.

There was a succession of speeches while they dined. Kingsley discussed the reason for the event, Minerva talked about the completion of the restoration of the school. A few people had been invited to memorialize the fallen; a few more talked about how magical communities were being put back to right. Finally, Harry was asked to speak.

He looked horrified, and Hermione realized he must not have been prepared to give a speech. She caught his eye and gave him a sympathetic, but encouraging smile. He took a deep breath and moved to the podium.

“I wasn’t aware that I would be talking tonight.” He started, and a ghost of a chuckle rippled across the Great Hall. “Being this is the first time I’ve stood up in front of a crowd since the end of the war, I wish I had something prepared, but I will do my best.
“First, I need to talk about a few people without whom victory would not have been possible: Albus Dumbledore – a mentor, friend, father figure, and brilliant wizard. His years of dedication to this cause made it possible for us to move forward with the information that was needed to put an end to Voldemort. He is missed dearly, and will be remembered forever.

“Hermione Granger – please stand Hermione.” She did awkwardly, her face instantly flooding with embarrassed color, she appreciated the attention just about as much as Harry did. “Without this witch, none of us would be here today. She’s a bloody swot, but she’s my bloody swot.” It was said with such affection that Hermione had to bite back a sob of laughter as the rest of the crowd chortled. “She kept me focused, cooled my temper, kept Ron and I fed to the best of her ability, and was always one step ahead of everyone else. We would have failed before we had even begun if it hadn’t been for her and her blasted beaded bag of wonder and incessant planning and preparing.”

Hermione was fiercely blinking back tears, trying to keep a humble smile on her face. She failed. A single tear spilled over and she moved to swipe it with her hand, but a small touch to her hip made her look down, Severus was holding a handkerchief out to her, eyes smiling at her encouragingly even as the rest of his face remained impassive. She took it gratefully, nodding at him. She turned her eyes back to her best friend who was grinning at her. “I love you, Hermione. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me – for us.” He gestured at the crowd of people who broke into polite applause. Hermione gratefully took her seat and buried her face into the swatch of cotton her lover had given her. Under the table, she felt a gentle hand smooth over her knee, she couldn’t have been more thankful for the comfort.

“Ron Weasley.” Harry gestured for Ron to stand and he did with a grin and a wave. “Ron has been my best friend since the day I stepped on the Hogwarts Express, almost nine years ago. His unwavering friendship, trust, and courage built me up on days I thought I’d never get through. While he could sometimes be a stubborn git-” more laughter “-in the end he always knew he was where he was supposed to be.” The subtle hint to Ron’s desertion and imminent return was not lost on the ginger, who gave a stoic smile of thanks to his friend before reclaiming his seat.

“There are so many people who deserve my gratitude – Kingsley Shacklebolt for his heavy involvement with the Order. The entire Weasley family for protection, love, and strength. Neville Longbottom for courage and determination in face of certain death. For all those who stood and fought with us in this very room – on these very grounds – and came out victorious.” Applause erupted and Harry stifled a grin. Hermione was utterly impressed with his composure and the sincerity of his words. She would have been a babbling mess without a prepared speech.

“We also need to mention the man who kept the students at this school as safe as he possibly could last year, Severus Snape.” Harry gestured to Snape, and Hermione turned adoring eyes on her beloved. She almost laughed when he looked utterly appalled at all attention being on him, he obviously had zero intention of standing.

“I know you don’t like to hear it, Professor. I know that your selflessness is something you prefer to keep hidden.” Here, Snape scowled at her friend and Hermione had to bite the inside of her lips to stop herself from laughing aloud. “Your sacrifices and secrets most likely won this war for our side. I just want to thank you for my life. For the lives of my friends and their families. For the lives of all in this room.”

Green eyes held black across the small raised dais. After a long moment of silence, and an internal struggled that was palpable to Hermione, Snape gave a slight, graceful nod of his head. That was enough for Harry, who lead the applause that started smattering across the room.

“For Merlin’s sake!” Snape growled under his breath. “Twice in one year is more than sufficient.”
Keeping her eyes forward, Hermione snorted. She laced her fingers through his hand on her thigh, thankful for the draping table covers, and squeezed. “You deserve this, love,” she murmured, knowing only he would be able to hear over the applause.

“I don’t want it.” He breathed back.

“I know.” She squeezed his hand again, willing him to relax. The applause was dying down as Harry had started to speak again.

“The last person I want to thank is Ginny.” His voice was laced with nerves and Hermione realized he was going to do it now – right this moment. Her hand tightened almost painfully in Severus’s and her heart leapt into her throat. Severus looked at her, questioningly, but she didn’t take her eyes off Harry, who was reaching a hand out for Ginny to join him next to the podium.

The beautiful redhead hesitantly stood and walked to meet him, taking his hand with hers. “Ginny, you are everything to me. You…you are the reason I was strong enough to fight this enemy. What we have is the reason it needed to be fought and won. For good, for love, for family.” He dropped to a knee and Hermione let out a strangled sob of happiness as she watched Ginny’s face flood with realization as to what Harry was doing. “Ginerva Weasley, I love you more than anything in this world. I want to be your family. Would you do me the honor of being my bride?” He smoothly popped open the black velvet case where the beautiful diamond and garnet ring twinkled in the star-strewn candle light of the enchanted ceiling.

The hand that was not captured by Harry’s flew to Ginny’s mouth as an audible sob of surprise escaped her. Her gaze never broke from his as she gave a frantic nod, seemingly unable to speak.

“Yes?” Harry whispered.

“As if she’d say anything else,” Hermione murmured, fingers still entwined with Severus’s, eyes brimming with tears of joy. She was unaware of the intent gaze of the man beside her, eyes searching her face with longing.

“Yes!” Ginny exalted, pulling the dark-haired Chosen One to his feet and flinging herself into his arms. The applause was deafening.

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A dance floor was cleared with a few fancy flicks of wands and a band sprang up in the far corner of the room, music instantly filling the room. Many people started milling around, many more swarmed the dance floor. Harry and Ginny were surrounded by throngs of people wishing to congratulate them. Hermione sat, sipping a glass of sweet, red wine. Content to be inconspicuously beside the man she was so in love with in this public setting. They had exchanged polite conversation that was a bit impersonal due to the people who surrounded them. Apparently, they gave off an air of inapproachability, because very few people attempted to engage them in conversation and no one had asked either of them to dance.

“You do realize the only reason you haven’t been asked to dance by the throngs of young men is because you are seated next to me, don’t you, Miss Granger?” He teased her lightly.

“I could care less about dancing with any of these boys, Professor,” she answered with a smirk. He gave a small snort of appreciation at her use of the word ‘boys.’ They were seated side-by-side, a respectable distance between them. Snape had one ankle propped up on the opposite knee and Hermione’s legs were crossed, black lace stocking visible through the slit of her gown. She felt his eyes roaming her legs and pointed her toe enticingly.
I cannot wait to fuck you with those stockings on,” he purred seductively, leaning just slightly closer to her, after taking a moment to make sure no one was close enough to hear them.

Hermione’s mouth went dry just as her knickers were flooded. She made a strangled noise in the back of her throat and he laughed aloud at her obvious desire to do just as he suggested. She’d even be okay with doing it right there in the middle of the ball.

“Severus!” Minerva McGonagall strode up to them. “And Miss Granger! I’m surprised at you.”

Hermione looked up, bewildered. “What on Earth have I done?” she asked.

“Well, Miss Wallflower and Mr. Anti-Social. I think it’s high time our guests see both of you war-heroes on the dance floor!”

Hermione wrinkled her nose and Snape grumbled incoherently. “There isn’t really anyone I want to dance with, Professor. Ron and Harry are being manipulated by their date and fiancé. I don’t want to be felt up by classmates who hold no interest for me or strangers,” Hermione all but whined.

McGonagall looked shocked by Hermione’s admission, then narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “This is certainly not like you, Miss Granger,” she huffed. “You’ve always known your duties and followed through with them well.”

Snape took the opportunity to get his lover on the dance floor by interrupting smoothly. “Miss Granger, perhaps you wouldn’t mind dancing with me? Appease Professor McGonagall and save me from hordes of unsavory female companionship, as well.” Hermione looked at him, surprised, as he held out a hand. Severus was glad he was able to surprise her, it made their interaction seemed that much more casual. McGonagall made a small, pleased noise of approval in the back of her throat, watching Hermione expectantly.

“W-why, yes, P-professor,” she stammered, taking his hand. The electricity between them was almost palpable, she hoped the Headmistress didn’t notice. “I’d be honored.”

“I take it I don’t fall into the category of being felt up by a fellow classmate or stranger?” He chuckled darkly once they were out of Minerva’s hearing range.

She flushed at his faux grave expression. “Don’t be silly.”

He led her to the dance floor just as the tempo slowed and a waltz started to play. “Do you know how to dance, Hermione?” he murmured low, bending down so his breath caressed her cheek.

“Do I know how to dance?” She looked up at him, appalled. “What kind of question is that! Don’t you remember the last Yule Ball? Of course I know how to dance! Do you?”

“Yes. Please let me lead.” His eyes smoldered like lit coal, a glint of amusement in them. She tutted her outrage at the insinuation she would try to take control, but it was all in jest. He knew her too well.

Severus pulled her hand to his shoulder and surrounded her slim figure to rest his large hand on the small of her back; he gripped his other hand with hers and pulled it to his chest. She felt a bit dizzy and breathless from his nearness, but they were off. After a few steps, she relaxed and smiled up at him – pure joy in her eyes. He was gliding her effortlessly around the dance floor. She felt like Cinderella, positively floating on air, her eyes locked with his.

He was fairly certain this was the most erotic thing he’d ever done – dancing with the woman he was in love with. The joy and heat in her eyes turned him on more than anything else she could have
done. She just looked so damned happy, which made him feel powerful and masculine. Unconsciously, he pulled her closer, which made her give a shuddering sigh.

The rest of the room all but melted away. It felt as if they were in their own little bubble and he was struggling to remember to keep their engagement appropriate for a student and a teacher. He didn’t protest when the hand on his shoulder slowly slid to the nape of his neck, playing with the leather cord he had used to tie his hair back. She didn’t complain or try and stop him when his hand slid down further, resting more on her bum than the more appropriate small of her back. Neither noticed that they had somehow melded so close together their hip bones were touching.

Which is why, when a very disturbed Minerva McGonagall discretely hissed into his ear, he all but dropped her like a hot cauldron. “I wish to speak with you both privately, in my office. Immediately! Finish your dance and do not draw any attention to yourselves. And for Heaven’s sake, put your hands back where they belong!”

Both quickly complied with her instructions as she slipped away from them as quickly as she had appeared. Hermione’s eyes were wide with shock and Severus’s face seemed to drain of what little color he had.

Hermione and Severus sat in two floral patterned, wing-backed chairs opposite of McGonagall’s desk. The woman in questions studied them with a serious, tight expression. She had opened her mouth to speak no less than a half of dozen times, however, no words had yet escaped. Hermione was twisting her skirt in her hands, looking anywhere but at the two people in her presence. Severus was leaning away from her in his chair, ankle up on the opposite knee and his thumb and forefinger stroking his chin, he held Minerva’s eyes in a cool disregard, as if he had no idea why he was there.

Finally, the Headmistress closed her eyes, a pained expression pinching her delicate features. “Please tell me I’m crazy,” she breathed.

“Minerva,” Severus said in a clipped tone. “You have never been crazy.”

“Please tell me I’m mistaken, Severus.” She begged them. “Hermione, please.”

Hermione’s eyes flew and were caught by her favorite Professor. Her lips started to tremble, she was positively terrified.

“Please, Professor McGonagall,” she whispered. “Everything is fine. No one is doing anything they don’t want to be doing.”

“Be straight with me.” The elderly witch demanded, eyes flashing to Snape. “What in Merlin’s name is going on between you two?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Severus answered crisply.

“I am not a fool, Professor Snape!”

“We’re in love!” Hermione blurted, then slapped her palm over her mouth, eyes widening in horror. Severus looked at her in an odd combination of exasperation, love, and fury and she flinched slightly. Minerva’s face drained of all color.

“You’re in love with whom, Miss Granger?”

“With him, with Severus.” She reached for his hand, raising her chin in stubborn determination. She was relieved when he took it and squeezed. It looked like he was still trying to figure out exactly
what to say. “We know that this is highly unorthodox and most unexpected. I realize we should not have started a relationship while I was still a student here, but it just sort of … happened.”

The room echoed with the silence.

“Severus!” Minerva looked at him in complete shock, her Scottish brogue thickening perceptibly. “Please tell me you are not sleeping with a student!”

Hermione flinched visibly as Severus straightened in his chair. “Hermione and I did not intentionally start this relationship. As she said, it just happened.” He made no attempt to deny her accusation.

“Oh, my sweet Circe.” Minerva looked as if she was going to be ill.

“I can fix this right now.” He continued and Hermione looked at him wildly. What is he scheming! Her mind raced. “I will have a formal letter of resignation on your desk by morning.”

“You will not!” Hermione pulled her hand away from his and leapt to her feet. She faced him angrily, pointing a finger in protest. “You will not give up your career for me!”

“That is where you are wrong, love,” he said steadily, his head tipping back slightly to maintain eye contact with her. “I would give up my life for you. A career is nothing. I can build a new career.”

Hermione’s anger deflated like a balloon stuck with a pin. “Severus,” she breathed, completely caught off guard with his emotional declaration. Tears welled in her eyes as she slipped her fingers into his hair and pressed her lips to his in a sweet, tender kiss. He responded in kind, one hand reaching out to grasp her hip.

“Ahem!”

Hermione’s eyes flew open wide when she remembered exactly where they were and she whirled. Behind her, Severus stood, settling one hand on each of her hips. They both looked at their friend. Minerva was also standing, but the severe look she had been giving them moment before was nowhere to be found, instead her face was full of awe.

“You…you’re truly involved?”

“Yes.” They answered together with no hesitation.

“It’s serious?”

“Yes.”

The older witch placed a thumb and forefinger on her brow and rubbed, as if trying to scrub her mind clean.

“Hermione, you will drop Potions.”

“W-what?” The young witch was flabbergasted.

“You will drop Potions and self-study for the remainder of the year for your N.E.W.T.s. I’m sure Severus will assist you if needed. Severus, you will submit a formal statement to the Board of Governors explaining your situation. If they ask for your resignation, I will accept it. I have my suspicions, however, that they will look on this relationship favorably being who the both of you are.”

“You’re not going fire me?” Severus sounded dazed.
“Or expel me?” Hermione was struggling with her shock.

“I am not.” Minerva looked at them critically. “How long?”

“Since this summer.” Severus was unwilling to discount all their time spent together though the summer; they both knew they had fallen in love during his recovery, even if neither spoke about it.

Hermione tilted her head back and gave him a small smile, he dropped a kiss to her forehead, eyes reverent with their love.

“Wonders never cease.” Minerva shook her head, unable to tear her eyes away from the couple.

“Congratulations, my boy.” Came a familiar, low voice from above their heads. Three pairs of eyes focused on the portrait of Dumbledore behind the desk. “If there is anyone in this world who deserves happiness, Severus, it is you.”
“Mm.” Lizzie breathed against his ear as Draco trailed his open mouth along her collar bone.

“This dress is exquisite.” He nipped the column of her throat relishing her groan of appreciation and the feel of her fingers digging into his hips. “Have I told you how amazing you look tonight?”

“Only about a dozen times.” She hummed, nudging his chin with her nose before angling her head to capture his lips in a hot kiss.

“Mm.” He pulled back just slightly. “Only a dozen more to go, then.”

She gave a light chuckle before taking his bottom lip with her teeth and tugging gently. “Fuck, Lizzie.” He covered her mouth with his again, pulling her questing tongue into his mouth so it swirled with his in an erotic tango. His hands slid up her torso, his thumbs brushing against the side swell of her breast. Her breath hitched in a needy whimper and she arched into him. Taking that as a sign she wanted more, he gently palmed her breast over the top of her dress. She pulled back a bit as a hiss forced its way between her teeth.

“This is okay?” Draco asked her gently, not wanting any miscommunication between them.

“More,” she begged softly, and he groaned, bringing his other hand up to paw her evenly. He flicked his thumbs over nipples that were growing hard. “Draacoo!” She whimpered, head falling back. He took the opportunity to run open mouthed kisses along her jaw, nipping gently.

They had snuck off to the library, which was rightly deserted. Deep in the stacks just outside the restricted section, they felt secluded enough to be open with each other and had spent the better part of the last hour talking. The kissing had come after, and it was exquisite.

He pushed her into a small, two-person table tucked in the shadows, encircling her waist to lift her onto the flat surface. She spread her legs so he could stand between them, but her full skirts didn’t allow for any intimate access. He nipped up her slender, creamy throat and sucked the sensitive cartilage of earlobe between his kiss-swollen lips, all the while dipping a hand down the front of her dress. When she froze against him, he knew he’d pushed too far and immediately took a step back. He rested his forehead against hers and placed both hands gently around her waist again.

“Too fast?”

“Yes,” she murmured. “I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” he replied firmly.

“Thank you, Draco.” She met his eyes with a soft smile and he stifled a groan, her lips were puffy from their kisses, her pupils dilated with lust. He squeezed his eyes shut and grit his teeth – forcing his mind to think of decidedly unsexy things. Fifteen seconds later, he was feeling much more in control.

“Okay.” He cleared his throat and flopped down into one of the chairs at the table. He needed to change the subject. “So, I have a question for you.”
“Hmm?” Lizzie slid off the table and settled into the chair opposite him, reaching one hand across the flat surface. He took her fingers, lacing them with his.

“Granger and Snape...yeah?”

She didn’t have to answer him. Her eyes popped open comically wide and he snorted. “Holy. Shit. I’m right, aren’t I?”

She said nothing, face freezing into a mask of impassibility.

“Okay, okay. You don’t have to answer me, but I saw them on the dance floor earlier. I also saw McGonagall hissing at them. It correlates well with your almost slipup the other night. Oh, and he was groping her bum.” He smirked at her, one eyebrow cocked.

Lizzie swallowed audibly and dropped her gaze from his face, thoughts running frantically through her mind. Finally, she answered. “It’s not my place to say anything. You’ll have to think what you think and that’s all I have to say on the subject.” It was said in such a way he knew he should drop the subject, but he was too drunk on the knowledge to desist.

“Fucking Merlin’s saggy butt cheeks!” He roared with laughter and Lizzie sat back, pulling her hand from his, shocked with his reaction. “That frigid swot and Snape!” He threw his head back as mirth engulfed him completely. “It’s almost too good! When I think of it, they’re bloody perfect for each other, aren’t they? She’s in love with him? Gods, I can’t imagine anyone in love with Snape. He’s just so...mean. Is he in love with her, too? No – I’m sure not. I don’t think that man loves anything or anyone, including himself.”

Lizzie was watching him, her face carefully blank; his unrestrained laughter had her heart fluttering even as his words made her angry. She bit her tongue to keep herself in check.

“You’re really not going to confirm this?” He watched her carefully, he could see the mix of anger and hilarity in her eyes. “You’re not denying, either.”

“It’s really none of our business, Draco. Do you know how much trouble they’d get in if it were true?” She was proud of paying the doubt card. She didn’t say they were or weren’t together, but chastened him all the same. “I also think it’s unkind of you to call Hermione frigid – she’s the sweetest, warmest person I know at this school. She cares about everyone...and didn’t you tell me Snape is your Godfather? You think so little of him? You don’t think he loves you?”

Draco’s roaring flame of amusement died to embers at her words. Damn blonde beauty was right – he was being unnecessarily cruel to people that were good to him just for his own sadistic pleasure. “You’re right, Lizzie. I apologize. That wasn’t kind of me.” He sighed, this girl was too good for him. “I know Snape loves me, he’s been nothing but wonderful to me my entire life. Granger has been most accepting of me this year, as well.”

Lizzie nodded, satisfied. “It’s best you keep your observations to yourself, yeah?”

“What observations?” He gave her a coy grin. She nodded in return.

Severus handed Hermione a crystal tumbler with a finger of firewhiskey in it. She took it gratefully, eyes staring blankly into the fire roaring in his hearth. He slumped down in the leather wingback chair opposite of her with his own glass, legs stretched out in front of him with his ankles crossed, one shoulder pressed into the wing of the chair. After a moment of quiet contemplation, he threw the burning liquid back. It seared down his esophagus before hitting his stomach with a delicious spread of warmth. He closed his eyes and pressed the cool glass to his forehead.
“I’ll leave the school,” Hermione said after a few more minutes of silence. “I can take N.E.W.T.s this Spring without remaining at Hogwarts. I’m good enough of a student, I don’t need to attend classes.”

Anger engulfed him. “Like hell you will!” He growled at her. She shrank back into the expanse of the chair, startled with his vehement reaction.

“Severus, be serious!” She scolded. “This is your career we’re discussing!”

“I told you, I don’t care about my career.” He shrugged. “I wasn’t bluffing. I’m a Potions Master, I can get employment anywhere.”

“Hogwarts is your home!”

Silence. He reached for the bottle of firewhiskey and poured himself another shot. He slammed it back as quickly as the first and was startled when she held her empty glass out for a refill. He eyed her warily for a moment before leaning forward and dropping another dollop in her glass. She downed it just as quickly, and he watched her with subtle bemusement. She hadn’t even pulled a face.

“You’re familiar with the taste of firewhiskey, Miss Granger?” he drawled, humor lacing his voice.

“Don’t change the subject, Professor.” She rolled her eyes at him, he didn’t miss the emphasis on ‘Professor.’

“I’m not,” he said evasively.

“You are.” Her voice was soft, kind. She stood and set her glass on the coffee table before rounding it and taking his glass away from him. He watched her through narrowed and guarded eyes. She hiked her skirts and straddled his lap, one knee on the outside of each of his thighs. Her hands slid over his shoulders and she rested her forehead to his temple, pressing a kiss to the crest his cheek bone. He sighed deeply through his generous nose and slipped his large hands around her silk-clad torso, eyes sliding shut at her tender ministrations.

“Hermione,” he said at last. “If I have to leave Hogwarts, it would not be the end of the world for me. There’s been a lot of pain and heartache inside these walls for me. I have other options – especially with my war-hero status.” He spit the last words out in deep sarcasm. “You’re in the home stretch of your education. Not only is the completion of your N.E.W.T.s important to you, they were important to your folks – and – they’re important to me. You will not leave this school on my account.” His last sentence was said in such a tone that brooked no argument even as his hands skimmed seductively up the arch in her spine.

Her breath hitched. “Okay,” she murmured, fluttering her eyelashes against his cheek in soft butterfly kisses. She pressed herself against his chest as her fingers slid up his neck into his hair, tugging the leather cord from his masculine plait and pulling the tendrils loose. “I’ll finish the year; you’ll find a new job, but only if the Board of Directors insists you resign.”

“Mm.” He agreed, sinking his teeth gently into the soft tissue at the apex of her neck and collar bone while dragging the zipper of her dress down maddeningly slowly. Her hum of approval at the sensitive skin below his ear roared through is senses like mountain torrents.

“I’m going to miss you over break,” she whispered into his ear while his hands crept beneath the susurrying silk of her dress to cup her beautiful bum. He froze, his heart clenching. She wasn’t staying in the castle?

He gripped her waist and pulled her back. “What do you mean?”
She looked at him, lust and confusion making her eyes unfocused. “Huh?” She leaned forward, attempting to cover his mouth with her own.

“Wait, Hermione, stop.” He pushed at her hips, forcing her to stand. If he kept her close, he’d never get an answer.

“Stop?”

He almost laughed at her offended tone, but he was too upset. “You’re leaving?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “I told you I was going to the Weasely’s for Christmas.”

“You most certainly did not!” He argued, a mix of fear, anger, and sadness rising alarmedly into his chest. He didn’t want her out of this castle. “You’re not going!”

She stepped back and crossed her arms around her middle, this forced her breasts up to swell over the top of the dress, which distracted him momentarily. “What do you mean I’m ‘not going?’” she demanded.

“Stay with me.” He softened his tone quickly, he didn’t want to fight with her. He wanted to peel her out of that provocative dress slowly and deliciously and made love to her until her toes curled and she begged him to stop.

His change in mood registered immediately and need pooled in her womb. “The Weasely’s are expecting me;” she whispered. “I can’t back out now. How about I come back on the twenty-seventh. I’ll only be gone for two days. I’ll apparate back to Hogsmeade, you can meet me. We’re planning on going to Diagon Alley for Boxing Day.”

He growled, fear now the dominant emotion. “I will agree to this only if I meet you in Diagon Alley the day after tomorrow. I don’t want you out in that crowd without me.”

She sensed his fear and her heart melted. “I would love you to meet us in Diagon Alley. I’ll owl you the time and place.” She reached up to snake one arm around his neck and pulled his lips down to hers. “There’s not one other person in this world I’d rather be with on Boxing Day. I am just sad we don’t get to spend Christmas together,” she said against his lips. He sealed their mouths together, effectively ending their conversation as he finished pulling the zipper down over her bum. She pulled away and helped him pull the tight lace sleeves off her arms and slip the dress down her perfect hourglass figure. He groaned aloud as he revealed the black silk strapless bra and lacey boy shorts. The knickers clung to her rounded hips and flat belly in all the right ways. The stockings ended mid-thigh, and the effect on his prick was instantaneous when she stepped out of her skirts and he realized she was still wearing her high, strappy shoes; it went from half-mast to full salute in less than a second.

“You’re going to be the death of me, witch,” he said affectionately. Her fingers reached to deftly remove his cravat. He took over, pulling it out of the way as she quickly unbuttoned his dress shirt (his outer robes had been removed when they had entered his rooms). They both hummed their appreciation when her cool hands slid up over his heated chest to his toned deltoids, pushing the garment off his shoulders. His wrists were caught in the cuffs and she giggled as she helped him undo the cufflinks. He used a bit of wandless magic to send them to his dresser. A low rumble escaped his throat as she used his momentary distraction to capture his belt, tugging urgently with one hand while the other smoothed over his bulging placket. “Hermione,” he grunted. “Fuck.”

She purred her agreement while pulling the belt through the loops on his pants, letting it fall to the floor with little care. She moved quickly back to his fly, undoing it with unwavering confidence.
“Minx!” he huffed as she shoved both his slacks and undergarments over his delicious bum before he pulled her with him, back into the chair.

She gave a small “Oompf!” of surprise before rocking her lace-clad slit against his cock for a couple beats as he neatly unhooked her bra. She whispered her approval as one set of fingers nipped and rolled a delicate peek. “Ah!”

Hermione pulled away from him, sliding down his torso and onto the floor. She removed his dress boots and socks and pulled his pants off the rest of the way before her focus honed in on his raging hard-on. She looked up at him with eyes so dark they looked like ground coffee beans in the flickering flames of the fire. He would never tire of that look – maddening desire and love – even if she gave it to him for the next two-hundred years. One slender-fingered hand encircled the base of his glans as she walked forward on her knees to settle between his legs. Her breasts and tamed mass of curls brushed his upper thighs as her clever tongue darted out to capture the drop of precum at the tip of his flared head. He grunted and slipped one hand into her hair even as her tongue danced down his length to his bollocks. She nuzzled her nose in the wrinkled skin, breathing in the scent of his all-male musk and sex before lathing one bollock generously with hot saliva. He gritted his teeth as a sharp exhale escaped through his beak.

“Fuck!” he muttered appreciatively. “Gods, love, don’t stop.” He guided her hand back to his straining cock and wrapped his much larger hand over hers, showing her what he wanted. She buzzed her acquiescence against his scrotum, turning her attentions to the opposite teste, and followed his lead. After a moment, she pulled back and used her own saliva to wet her hand before moving it back to pump his shaft more effectively before returning her attentions to his balls. His head fell back in shocked appreciation at this new approach of hers. She’s been fucking reading, I’ll put money on it. After a few more minutes, she swirled her tongue back up over his member before sucking the tip between taut lips. His hips bucked wildly and he tugged her hair with both hands, she let go of his cock with a wet pop and smirked up at him, obviously very proud of herself.

“Looking awfully pleased with yourself, young lady.” He ground out with a leer. He didn’t let his grasp of her hair go as he pulled her to her feet while standing himself. She gasped with surprise at his forcefulness as he roughly slammed his mouth to hers, eliciting a glorious sound from her throat.

“I’m not holding back, tonight. I want to push our experiences,” he muttered against her lips. “If you don’t like something, tell me to stop. I will stop immediately, I promise you. Do you understand?”

“Yes!” She gasped out before diving back in, mouth open and as needy as a newborn hatchling. He drove his tongue into her mouth, tasting her teeth and cheeks. He grabbed one side of her knickers and ripped them with little effort. She groaned, but he had the other side ripped and the scrap of fabric off her before he could finish her lament of approval.

Her knees buckled out from underneath her, but he caught her in a bruising grip by the hips and backed her into the bed. “On your hands and knees, arse in the air.” Her heated gaze never left his as she pushed herself onto the bed. It only flicked away as she rolled, then her face reappeared over her shoulder, eyes smoldering with need. Her hair was everywhere, cascading over her shoulders, trailing over her back, skimming her breasts. He growled at the provocative picture she made, as his palm cracked down on one firm buttock; her eyes widened imperceptibly.

“Ah!” she whimpered, surprised, but she arched her back. “Again!” She panted. He smacked the other cheek before kneading both with his hands. She arched again. He gave four more sharp cracks on her backside to her surprised growls of delight. “Severus!” she exclaimed, head falling into her arms. “Gods, yes!”

He scooped his hands around her knees and flipped her to her back, shoving her legs up and apart.
She bowed off the bed and cried out, hooking her hands around the back of her knees to hold her
them in place. She made the most stunning picture of debauchery: young and beautiful, riots of
chestnut curls, neck arched, eyes closed, mouth open in a silent hallelujah of sensation, stockinged
legs ending in sexy heels, breasts barred – he was mindless with his desire for her and she squirmed
with her need. He wasted no time, slipping two long fingers into her sopping channel and curling his
fingers against her g-spot.

“Unngh!” She croaked, voice low and throaty. “Please!” She exhaled audibly.

“What do you want?” He taunted her, a sneer of lust clouding his features.

“More! Suck on my clit!”

He obliged with great pleasure, her juices coating his lips and chin instantly while his fingers
continued their sadistic torture. He felt her legs start to tremble, her hips rocking into his
ministrations. “Come for me, Hermione,” he demanded, his baritone rumbling through her core like
thunder. She gave a high-pitched keen that suddenly dropped an octave and tore out of her belly. Her
orgasm ripped through her like an avalanche, dragging her along in its wake. His finger movements
slowed as he lapped up her release like a starving man at a banquet.

The aftershocks of her climax caused her to tremble and shake, but did not prevent her from lacing
her fingers into his hair and pulling him up. He trailed his mouth over her stomach and through the
valley of her breasts, pausing to worship the mountain peaks on each side before covering her lips
with his in a desperate, deep, and debilitating kiss. She had thought she was mindless before, but it
was no comparison to how she felt with the weight of his body and feel of his lips on hers; she could
taste herself on his tongue. His warm muscle laved against hers, instantaneously reigniting the need
in her belly. “I want you inside me, love,” she purred, dragging her teeth over his stubbled jaw.

He caught one leg by the knee and pulled it over his shoulder while sliding his pulsing cock into her
cunt without hesitation. She mewled in delight and tilted her hips to meet his thrust, loving the angle
he had her in. A few strokes and he readjusted, pulling both legs up as he pushed himself to his
knees to give himself more leverage even as the position allowed him to slide deeper into her pulsing
core.

He set a vicious pace, and she met him thrust for thrust. Her gasps of delight drowned out by his
growls of pleasure. “Faster!” she begged.

He whipped his hips, back straining, splitting her over and over again, jolting her entire body with
each brutal thrust. She sobbed with her pleasure, meeting each stroke with a tilt of her hips and a
gasp of his name. The coil inside of her winding so tight she thought she couldn’t bear it a moment
longer, then it burst like a fireball and scorched through her veins like fiendfyre.

His name fell from her lips in an almost silent prayer of thanks even as her pulsing muscles ripped his
seed from his bollocks to coat her inner walls. “Hermione!” He choked, her name falling reverently
from his lips as he found her kiss-swollen mouth with his own. She wound her arms around his
shoulders and held him tightly to her while he spent himself in her warmth, wordlessly letting him
know just how much she wanted him, accepted him, and loved him.

Later, they lay spent in each other’s arms, silently watching the other, eyes speaking without words.
She trailed feather light fingers across the planes of his face as he swirled circles with his thumb on
her hip. A light, silken sheet pulled to their waists kept the chill from permeating their bubble, their
legs tangled together for nearness. “I love you,” he murmured, dropping a gentle kiss to the bridge of
her nose. She snuggled closer to him, eyes fluttering shut in pleasure from the tender touch as her lips
curled in a satisfied smile of contentment.
“I love you,” she whispered back. “Happy Christmas, Severus.” She nuzzled his jaw with her nose before pressing a chaste kiss to the throbbing pulse in his throat. She let her hand fall to his chest and burrowed in more closely, her head resting in the nook between his collar bone and shoulder.

“Happy Christmas, love.” It was the happiest one he’d ever had, and they hadn’t even exchanged gifts.
Chapter Twenty-One

“I’ll cover for me?” Ginny whispered, giggling into Hermione’s ear.

“Oh course, I will! Jump his freaking bones!” Hermione’s eyes danced with amusement. “Just meet me back here in about an hour and a half.” Ginny’s smile was dazzling as she hugged her friend.

“Snape will be here, soon?” The redhead gave her a momentary look of concern, glancing around the shop.

“Professor Snape is here.” Hermione’s eyes sparkled with happiness, nodding to the dark man in the entry way of the bookstore. Ginny flipped around and nodded a hello to the intimidating teacher.

“Thank you again!” She exclaimed and took off out of Flourish and Blotts before rounding the corner to the apparition point.

Severus raised an eyebrow at the Weasley girl as she bolted past him before turning to Hermione. “Do I want to know what that was all about?”

Hermione chuckled as her eyes continued to dance with merriment. “She’s got serious plans to get some shag time with Harr—”

Severus broke her off with a disgruntled growl, face dissolving from its usual impassiveness into a mask of horror, eyebrows shooting into his hairline. “I did not want to know that!” He sputtered.

The curly brunette burst into gales of giggles as he scowled at her. “The look…oh, Gods…the look on your face was so perfect.” She clutched her sides as her full-bodied humor shimmered through the room. A few people turned to look at her, her happiness drawing smiles and sparking a smattering of contagious snorts around them. It also garnished some inquisitive stares as the two were recognized.

Severus’s face softened and his eyes warmed with her mirth, his discomfort at the turn in conversation was worth this reaction.

He cleared his throat and thrust his chin forward, indicating they find a more secluded spot in the back of the stacks. She wiped a trickled of moisture from her eyes from her shortles before following him into the shadows. She, too, realized they had been noticed.

Once they were out of the line of curious stares and whispers, he pushed her into a bookcase and kissed her lips passionately. “I missed you,” he declared, nuzzling her neck with his nose before
pressing a chaste kiss to her temple. He stepped back almost as quickly as he had jumped her, knowing it wouldn’t do for them to be caught by the other patrons.

Her eyes had darkened perceptibly, but she remained in control of her faculties, just barely. “I missed you, too, Severus.”

“I have an appointment I need to keep, I was hoping you wouldn’t mind coming with me?” His voice was controlled, his expression guarded. *Hm. What is he up to?* She watched him carefully for a moment.

“Yes, I’m fine with that. Where else am I supposed to go? It’s not like you’ll leave me alone.” She quirked an eyebrow at him, a half-smile tugging one corner of her mouth.

“Indeed,” he agreed with a roguish grin. Her heart literally came to a complete stop at the expression. That smile hardly ever crossed his face, but when it did…oh Gods, when it did…it instantly left her a mess. Her breath shortened into little gasps and her eyes dilated, only a thin ring of the warm chocolate visible around the blown-wide pupil. Her reaction just made the grin all the more pronounced.

“Bloody hell,” she whispered. “Stop looking at me like that or we’ll have to go find a bathroom stall.” Her voice came out breathless and husky and the grin instantly morphed into a leer of desire. He made to reach for her, but she quickly stepped back and shook her head fiercely. He turned his neck over his shoulder, where her gaze was directed. Two women, a lovely blonde and a pretty witch with raven hair, who looked to be in their late twenties or early thirties, were whispering to each other and glancing at him. He grit his teeth. Damn did he hate being out in public these days. He didn’t understand these types of women. They were impeccably dressed and quite attractive. However, everything about them screamed of desperation.

“Are you Severus Snape?” The dark-haired witch called out.

“No.” His reply was blunt and he turned his attention back to Hermione, who looked at him with wide eyes.

“You *are*!” It was the blonde who spoke this time, her voice tinkled like wind chimes. Severus hated wind chimes. He much preferred the soft, husky tones of the surprised brunette by his side. Both women actually strutted up to him, much to his mix of horror and grotesque amusement.

“Ladies,” he said politely, inclining his head. “I apologize, but I cannot talk now. I am late for an appointment.”

Both faces dropped. “That’s okay,” the blue-eyed, blonde replied after a beat. “We just wanted to give you this.” She handed him a slip of parchment and he took it, glancing down at it curiously. *For Merlin’s sake!* He rolled his eyes and tried not to sound cutting when he replied.

“I cannot accept this.” He pressed the parchment containing floo call information back at her, firmly pressing it into the witch’s hands when she made to refuse. “I am extremely happily involved with someone and will not be disrespectful of her.”

Hermione’s gasp of surprise behind him almost made laughter bubble out of his throat, but the look on the faces of the women in front of him went sour. “Isn’t she a student? Hermione Granger, right?” The raven-haired witch accused hotly. “A little young for you, no?”

Severus forced a mask of steel over his features and pulled hard on the reins of his anger. “I never said this was the woman I was with,” he replied shortly. “It is absolutely none of your business,
witch. Now, please excuse us.”

He stepped back and guided Hermione by the small of her back to pass the women in question before brushing past them himself. Both women looked disgruntled, but did not pursue him any further.

Once outside Flourish and Blotts, he took the lead, keeping Hermione in his peripheral vision. He slowed his pace when he noticed her expression turn from surprise to concern, brow furrowed. He could almost hear the gears grinding away in that bushy-headed brain of hers. Glancing around, he pulled them into a narrow, concealed alley next to the Quidditch Supply Shop. “Out with it.”

She didn’t even pretend to not know what he was talking about. “Does that happen a lot?”

“What? Women giving me their contact information?”

She nodded, eyes on their feet. Her shoulders were slightly rounded forward and one arm crossed over her stomach, knuckles white as she grasped the opposite side of her torso.

She was feeling insecure. He had to nip that in the bum immediately. “Hermione, look at me.” She glanced up and met his eyes briefly before dropping them again. “Hermione.” His voice was firm, but not unkind. He gently took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted her face up to meet his eyes. “There is no one else I want. Not now, not ever. You are it for me.” His words were laced with sincerity; she realized how silly she was being. For Merlin’s sake, he had told Minerva McGonagall he was in love with her!

She heaved out a sigh – a mixed breath of a sob or laugh broke out of her lungs and she nodded. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as he pulled her into a warm embrace. “I don’t know what came over me. They were just so beautiful and, well, so much closer to your age. And…and I just…” She trailed off. His arms squeezed her a little more tightly.

“I know what you ‘just.’ You’re wrong.” She nodded against his robes and squeezed him back. “Good. Now, we must be going. You dressed how I asked?”

He pulled her back into the flow of people – it was insanely busy in Diagon Alley on this clear but cold Boxing Day. “I did, semi-formal. All though you have me very confused as to why.”

“You’ll see.” His tone was evasive.

“Hmm.” She agreed.

Ten minutes later they stood outside a small jewelry shop which looked very much closed to her. “Severus, they’re closed. What are we doing here, anyhow?”

“I need to pick up a watch that has been repaired for me.” His voice sounded odd and she glanced up, curiously. “They’re closed to casual shoppers today; appointments only.” He knocked firmly on the glass-fronted door. It opened on its own, thrusting a gust of warm air at them. He took her by the hand and pulled her into the store.

“Ah, Severus.” An elderly man smiled from the counter. “And this must be Miss Granger?”

“It is. Good afternoon.” Hermione glanced at him. Again, confusion flooded her body.

“What’s going on?” She whispered, tucking herself next to him. He gently reached up and plucked her hat off her riotous curls before pulling her scarf from around her neck.
“May I have your coat?” They took of their outer layers and hung them on an ornate cloak rack by the door under the watchful, twinkling eyes of the shop-keeper. Then, Severus lead her to the counter. “My watch is ready?”

“Yes.” The man, whose name tag read David, smiled at him. “I will get it from the back.”

When he left, Severus turned to Hermione and pulled her left hand into both of his, bringing it up to press a tender kiss to her knuckles. Then he started a speech that left her heart galloping like a flock of hippogriffs in her chest. “I just want you to understand that I have waited many years to find you. I had given up hope, and I am in no rush, but I need you to know how serious I am.” He swallowed hard as he watched her eyes widen and her full lips part in realization. He smirked, he knew she would catch on quickly.

“I have never in my life had the chance to fully feel the way you make me feel. I am not a sentimental or emotional man. I’m not the easiest man in the world to get along with – I know this. I know we will fight, because we are both stubborn and have volatile tempers. I know there will be bad days, but there isn’t anyone else that I would rather have those bad days with. I want to take care of you, and I want to let you take care of me. I feel like a completed puzzle when you are around – we just fit together.

“I want to go to bed every night with you by my side. I want to wake up in the mornings with your head on my shoulder. When you’re ready, I want to give you children. I will not rush you, and you do not have to answer right now if you are unsure – I will not be upset. We haven’t talked about this at all.” Here he dropped to a knee, continuing to firmly hold her hand in his, his heart racing as he watched her eyes fill with amazed tears. “Marry me?”

Her breaths came in staccatoed gasps of shock, her whole body trembling. A tear slipped down her cheek as she reached to brush the fingers of her right hand over his forehead, sweeping a lock of slippery, ink-colored hair from his eyes. Their gazes didn’t break, but for the first time ever he couldn’t read her at all. He had already told himself he would not use legilimency. He did not want to know what she was thinking at this very moment. Not when he had sprung this on her so suddenly, with no precursor conversation, in their brief (although intense) history together.

“We can be engaged for however long you’d like. There is no rush to the alter. I just want to –” He hurried to make a case, fearing she was going to say no when the silence had stretched longer than he was comfortable.

“Shh.” She touched his mouth with her thumb, brushing his lower lip. “My answer is yes.”

He didn’t even realize he’d been holding his breath until it forced its way out of his lungs, his whole body relaxed as she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his with tender affection. He slipped his hands into her hair, cupping her head lovingly as he pulled himself to stand, never breaking their kiss. She wrapped his arms around his waist and clung to him ferociously. When he pulled away, he was embarrassed to find tears dampening his eyes and tried to turn his head to discreetly wipe them away.

“Severus.” She hummed with expressive devotion, she – herself – brushed the moisture from under one eye. “I love you.” He kissed her again, pressing her against his body with one hand between her shoulder blades and the other at the small of her back. After, he just held her to him, cheek resting on top of her head, the arm that had touched her upper back was now circled firmly around her shoulders, the other around her waist.

“I love you, too, Hermione.” He said after another moment. Then he cleared the emotion from his throat with a soft cough. “Now, for your ring.” He pulled back and gestured to the case where David
was now standing, his eyes full of warmth at their obvious happiness. “Choose what you like, cost is not a factor.” He chuckled at her astonishment and, after lacing her fingers with his, he pulled her to the counter.

An hour later, after a bit of an argument, she had chosen a beautiful diamond setting. A half carat, brilliant stone set in the top of a swirl of white gold, flanked on each side with more diamonds - alternating brilliant and baguette cut. The matching wedding band was just a thin piece of matching gold that would be soldered to the engagement ring just before they wed. Her protest of cost (neither Severus or David would tell her what the actual price was) fell on deaf ears. The moment she had put this ring on her finger he had seen her eyes light up like a Muggle Christmas tree – he knew before she did that it was the one.

He asked her to get her winter things on and wait at the door while he paid for her ring (and his watch, because he had not lied about that), before he also dressed to return into the winter weather. He offered his arm with a warm smile, love reflecting in his eyes. She took it and waved to David over her shoulder, they both expressed their thanks.

“You were surprised?” He murmured a few minutes later as they took seats in the small café where Ginny was to meet them. He ordered two hot chocolates and some biscuits.

“Surprised doesn’t begin to cover it.” Her eyes glowed with happiness, he felt humbled he had put it there. She glanced down at her ring finger where the diamonds twinkled back in low lights. “I’m so happy, Severus,” she whispered, reaching to take his hand.

“Me, too, love. Me, too.” He covered their joint hands with his other and squeezed before regretfully pulling away. They still needed to be cautious in public until hearing from the Board of Directors. “I know it was very sudden, you’re quite sure –”

“I could never be more positive.” She broke him off, a steady, sure smile on her face. He nodded, his smile soft.

Suddenly, the room grew eerily quiet just before ear-piercing screams filled the air. Both Hermione and Severus were on their feet at once, wands raised, eyes alert, feet shoulder-width apart and their knees bent. They had automatically gone back to back to protect each other, instinct not over shadowing their love for each other. Seven or eight dark cloaked and silver-masked figures stood in various positions around the café. Patrons were bolting for the doors, some dove under tables, others stood in the same posture as them – wands out, ready for battle.

“Hermione,” Severus breathed, not moving his lips. “Do not wait for me. If you can get out of here, run like hell hounds are chasing you. Disapparate back to Hogwarts. I will find you, I swear.”

“I will not leave you,” she stated stubbornly.

“Hermione, please.” His voice was laced with panic and fear. It brought her up short as he reached back with his non-wand hand and squeezed her hip. “Promise me!”

“I promise,” she said grudgingly. She wasn’t about to argue with him. “I love you.” It was said with an edge of desperation – and it was heard.

“Awww…the Mudblood is in love with her professor!” The cackling voice was distorted through the mask.

“I guess those rumors flying around at the elite Christmas parties were true.” Said another figure, voice equally unnatural.
Severus’s heart flew to his throat. *Rumors? Who else knew?*

“You thought we were hunting her before, Professor?” The first voice was speaking again – it was so twisted and odd that one could not even distinguish if it was male or female. “When we killed mummy and daddy Granger and left our nice little note? You were very wrong… Once we found out she had taken up with the biggest blood traitor of all…tsk tsk. You signed her death certificate, Snape.”

Snape grit his teeth as Hermione pushed herself more tightly into him, her heart was pounding so hard she could barely hear with her pulse beating her ear drums. She observed other patrons had understood they were not being targeted – just the famous couple by the window. *Good, everyone get to safety. Someone bring help…please.* Very few remained in the room…three, maybe four. They were staying, wands raised – poised to fight, to help. She was grateful.

Neither one of them dignified the cruel banter with a reply. Without saying a word, both started a silent attack. One Death Eater was slammed into wall with Hermione’s forceful *Expelliarmus,* another crumbled to the ground with Severus’s *Stupefy.* Then all hell broke loose.

Careful to maintain her shield as she sent hexes and curses one after another at the remaining five or so dark figures, she fought with every ounce of fury she had. How dare they. How dare this special day be ruined because of these sick, twisted people who couldn’t let ridiculous prejudices go. How dare life be so unbelievably unfair. She was so tired…exhausted. She didn’t want to fight anymore. She shot a stupefy but the Death Eater she aimed it at dropped in time and was missed. The rebounding spell hit a wizard on their side. She swore spectacularly. Then her heart froze as the warm mass that was Severus at her back collapsed.

“Shevus!” she screamed. She whirled in a circle, keeping her wand outstretched as she straddled his body to protect him. She realized he had been four on one – odds set hard against him. Fear gripped her whole body, making her tremble with exertion.

“Stop!” She was sobbing. “Please, stop!”

Laughter erupted from all sides and the panic choked her. She heard a whispered “*Avada Kedavra*” and braced herself to know no more, but it did not hit her. It hit the only other patron still attempting to fight. “No!” She was horrified as she watched the young woman collapse, a surprised sort of determination still on her face even though her eyes were lifeless.

“I-I will go with you! I won’t fight anymore.” She was pleading with them and she didn’t care. She could feel the rise and fall of Severus’s breaths at her ankles. He had to live or she would die inside.

“Throw your wand to me, Mudblood.” She didn’t know who said it, it came from behind her. She threw her wand over her shoulder with no hesitation. “Please don’t kill him.” She sunk into a crouch over his body, trying to shield him, knowing it was useless. If they wanted him dead, he would be dead. She couldn’t save him.

“Oh, sweetheart.” The voice came from her right and was exceedingly cruel. “You have no leverage. There’s no use in begging. Certainly you see that?”

“Of course I do,” she whispered. “I have to try.”

“You’re in luck, Mudblood.” It was the very first voice again, she figured he or she must be their leader. “Our orders were to make sure he lives…you, on the other hand…eh.” She saw black clad shoulders shrug belligerently.
Throughout the conversation, Hermione slowly slipped her new engagement ring off her finger and slid it into the breast pocket of his frock coat. She was grateful she was not seen. She knew what was in store for her would be unbearable, she refused to give them the leverage of her engagement. At the conclusion of the conversation, she carded her hand through Severus’s hair, a litany of prayers pouring through her mind as she tried to keep her eyes focused on the five Death Eaters who surrounded her in a loose circle about three meters away. She silently told him how much she loved him, that she would figure out a way to come back to him; she begged him to be strong.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

She raised both hands quickly, making sure they saw they were empty. “Just saying goodbye,” she stated quietly.

“Stand!” Hermione complied immediately. “Take three steps away from him.” She followed the orders.

Hermione was grabbed roughly from behind and her terror escaped her throat without her permission. Her elbows were forced together behind her back and she whimpered as pain shot through her pectorals. Another hand slammed into the side of her face and the room spun alarmingly, blood filling her mouth even as she felt her lip split.

“I’ll tell you a secret, Mudblood.” That first voice was in her ear and nausea bloomed through her belly, creeping its way into her heart. “When we’re through with you, you’re going to wish we had killed you. Before we’re done with you, you will be begging to die. Instead…instead we’re going to break you to pieces. Then…” There was a dramatic pause. “Then we’re going to return you so destroyed that it will break him.”

She ignored their words, forced back her fear, and looked the person straight in the face. She raised her chin defiantly even as the blood dribbled down her jaw. A menacing chuckled filled her ears. *I hope Ginny is running late.* It was the last thing she thought before debilitating pain crashed through the back of her skull and she knew no more.

She woke with a soft moan of anguish, her head pounding. Although she was having trouble remembering why, anxiety filled her body. She slowly attempted to unfurl her cramped extremities.

*Where am I?!!* Her breath started coming in fast, hiccupping gulps; the oxygen not getting to her fingers and toes which were agonizingly cold and tingling. She realized she was bound and twisted painfully. Eyes flying open wide, her disorientation continued as she attempted to peer into the darkness that flooded her corneas. She could see nothing. Using her shoulders and knees to press into a low kneeling position, she winced as the tough skin surrounding her patella was pinched painfully into the damp, concrete floor. “Hello?” she whispered. Her throat felt like sand paper and she swallowed hard trying to clear it.

She felt a trickle of liquid over her lips and her tongue flicked out and tasted the metallic tinge of blood. *I’m bleeding?* Her heart started to thrum in her ears as adrenaline surged through her veins. *Oh, my head.* She groaned as her chin fell to her heaving chest. The sound of heavy booted footsteps came from above and she startled hard, attempting to curl into herself. The rough ropes knotting her elbows and wrists behind her back and to her ankles allowed no such movements. There was another layer around her elbows, she distractedly realized this pushed her breasts out as if on a serving platter. She made a pitiful puff of pain as she pulled and her right shoulder stretched uncomfortably.
It was then that she realized she was completely naked. A sob broke free and her body started to tremor violently. True and unrelenting fear coursed through her body.

A door creaked and a small shaft of blue light dimmed through her surrounding, lighting unfamiliar and terrifying objects. Those heavy boots started on the stairs and she recoiled with a small squeak, frantically searching for someplace to hide. She closed her eyes when she realized it was futile and sucked in a deep breath to hold, trying to calm her frantic mind.

“Isn’t she a hot piece of arse?” A deep, gravelly voice came from behind her. “Look at those perfect, heart-shaped globes.” She froze, back going ramrod straight while her shoulders hunched in attempts to cover her nakedness. Her breath whooshed out of her in a rush of panic and she squeezed her eyes tighter – willing this to be a bad dream. But it wasn’t – the attacked at the café was coming back to her. Severus. Everything came flooding back with crystal clear clarity.

“Hmm. For filth, she certainly has a viscerally appealing body.” It was a softer tenor that responded, oddly familiar in its lilt. “Poor Severus, to lose such a pet would be devastating.” Both men chuckled together. Two? She swore she hadn’t heard two people enter. Her breathing hitched to a more rapid pace and sudden, rough hands came under her arms pulling her up awkwardly against his chest, making her thighs fall open, exposing her most intimate of places. Another terrified yelp broke through her restraint as tears pricked behind her eyelids. The ropes dug in painfully in this graceless position.

“She’s going to make the boys go mad. How long do you think it will take to break her?” the gruffer voice questioned dumbly. “I hope I get my turn. Look at that slit, it’s fucking gorgeous. And her tits! Mmm.”

Hermione’s lips pursed tightly closed and whimpered a sound of pain out her nose as a rough, long nailed hand slapped her nipple with a sharp crack. A rolling chortle of breath fingered out over her breasts. A soft, surprisingly gentle, hand curled at her throat and another at her thigh. The second man. She opened coffee flecked with amber colored eyes and stared, mouth gaping in surprised horror, into the ice grey eyes of Lucius Malfoy. When did he get out of Azkaban? “Doncha ya wiggle like that, witch, or I’ll give you something to wiggle on.” One of the rough hands that supported her to his chest slid down her arse, pinching it roughly. She whimpered frantically, attempting to pull away as the soft hand on her thigh rose higher. Her stomach clenched in revulsion, she sucked in a breath, returning her gaze to Malfoy.

“When did he get out of Azkaban?” the white-blond-haired man’s face twisted into a severely cruel leer. “You will receive no help from me.”

Tears filled her eyes even as anger filled her heart. She pulled in another breath, letting her mouth fill with as much saliva as she could manage before daring to spit at him – hard. It hit Malfoy just below the left eye. She didn’t even have time to take a breath before the open-handed blow snapped her neck back. She cried out in terroried agony as the blow made her head reel all the worse – the room tilted alarmingly, but her sound was squeezed off as the hand at her throat tightened restrictively. She thrashed against her binds, desperate for life-giving oxygen. Seconds ticked by, she felt her eyes bulge. She met Malfoy’s eyes with pleading tears. “Boss wants her alive.” The gruff, thick voice came from behind her and the pressure on her larynx disappeared. She choked sobbing breaths into her bruised esophagus. I don’t understand, she wept internally, trying to force the tears that prickled
her eyes to stay put. “Well, well, well … Miss Granger.” Malfoy’s silky voice sounded as one hand returned to her thigh. His voice was laced with satisfied amusement. “What have we here?”

Hermione turned her face away from his gaze, ashamed, as a crimson blushed its way up her torso, breasts, and across her high cheek bones. One of his perfectly manicured fingers delved into the soft, slippery flesh of her sex. The sob that broke from her chest was defeated as he flicked her clitoris and her body betrayed her with a shiver. “Perhaps you are happy to see me?”

Her lips tightened into a thin, hard line and she pushed her mind outside of her body, trying to be clinical. She wasn’t a fool – her body was not betraying her, it was responding to the stimuli. It didn’t matter that she didn’t want it, that it wasn’t welcome. She couldn’t fight her physical response, but she had to control her emotional one.

“Stop.” She said coldly as two long fingers slipped into her vagina.

“Oh…I do not think I will, my dear. Humiliation for…humiliation? You will not spit at another person while you are with us, do you understand?”

Her stomach rolled with sick. She tried to detach herself from the sensation. She hated he was being gentle. Her humiliation would be an orgasm she didn’t want. This is not happening. Her thoughts were racing even as he enticed heat to swirl through her core. His other hand gripped her face. “I said do you understand?” Her eyes popped open at the menace in his tone. She glared at him as her breath hitched in her throat.

“Yes.” She spat the word at him and pushed a groan down. She would not give him the satisfaction. She gagged as she felt the erection of the man behind her press into her bum. The coil of heat in her belly was almost unbearable, she fought it relentlessly. “St-stop!” Her voice cracked and she squeezed her eyes shut, shame filling her as her climax spread through her body. It was not the same, of course, the pleasure. Instead of making her feel warm and sated and loved, it made her recoil into herself – sickened and humiliated. Just what he had wanted. She was failing and it had barely even started. She bit the inside of her cheek until it bled. It helped calm her a bit.

Harry held Ginny while the girl sobbed hysterically. He, himself, was fighting tremulous emotion. She was gone. Hermione had been taken. There had been so much destruction. Four dead bodies – all patrons of the café – and Snape. Snape was still unconscious. There were no witnesses left from the battle, save him. None of the attackers had been left behind. One witness from before the fighting started said there had been seven of them.

They sat in a private waiting room at St. Mungo’s with most of the Weasley family, all wore the same devastated look. Kingsley Shacklebolt and a few Aurors were also present.

They all looked up when Snape’s voice could be heard raging from down the hall. “Get me the fuck out of these restraints!” he bellowed. Harry, Ron, and Ginny were out of the waiting room in a shot, only to be stopped by two large security wizards just meters away from his room. More people piled behind them. “Where is Hermione?” His voice was a combination of dangerous and hopefully pleading.

“Sir.” A calm, but firm voice came. “You were hit with three high level Stunning Spells. You cannot get up.”

“Where is my fiancée?!” The growl was frightening, but brought the trio up short with astonishment.

“Fiancée?!” Ron whispered in agonized disgust as horrified and shocked gasps chorused behind
“Not. Now. Ronald.” Ginny ground out through gritted teeth, all the while exchanging a sorrowful look with her own fiancé. He curled his hand into hers and lost his battle with his tears.

Fifteen minutes later, Shacklebolt entered Snape’s hospital room with the aurors at his side, allowing Harry to be present. He watched with a heavy heart as the stone-masked Snape gave a monotone account of what happened in Diagon Alley until he had blacked out. Fear gripped Harry harder than any he had ever known. No one has been found. They’ve all just disappeared without a trace. A trail of bodies in their wake. Snape looks utterly lifeless. His eyes have no light in them. He’s already given her up for dead. He took a shuddering breath, never taking his eyes off his professor’s face. When the Minister and aurors left, he stayed. Staring at the man who had loved his mother. Staring at the man who was in love with his would-be sister.

Finally, he spoke. “She’s not going to die.”

Cold, black eyes met his, his skepticism was tangible in the air. “She’s not,” Harry repeated determinedly. “Hermione is a survivor, she’ll figure out a way. She’s strong.”

It was silent for many minutes before the stoic, powerful wizard in front of him opened his mouth and said two sentences that broke Harry’s heart. “So was your mother.” His deep, usually silky baritone was devoid of all emotion. “Everyone I love dies.”
Chapter Twenty-Two

Ten Days Later - January 1999

Hermione pumped the cock in front of her with seemingly delighted fervor, alternating between using her hand and her mouth while the masked wizard above her groaned in enjoyment. Without looking closely at the witch, one would think she was having the time of her life. Upon further inspection, they would see the blank expression in her eyes and the jerkiness of her movements. The Imperius Curse was working at its finest. In the very back of Hermione's mind the words fight this tumbled over and over again. Finally, she won and her eyes slid back into focus. She sat back on her haunches and closed her mouth with a determined click of her teeth.

"She fought it again." The voice behind her was annoyed.

"I could care less, she's more fun when she's fighting us off, anyway."

"Last time I took her, she didn't fight." The first man sounded bored. "She's getting clever. We must be more so. Crucio!" She had expected this, but the screams came anyway. When the curse was lifted, she was laying on her side on the cold floor, curled into the fetal position, panting. She squeezed her eyes shut, but the tears just cascaded from underneath them.

"Perhaps it's not cleverness. Perhaps we've broken our dirty toy. Should we teach her a lesson? What do you think, sweetheart? Do you need us to teach you a lesson?" The second voice was laced with cruel mirth and she couldn't suppress the shudder that spasmed down her spine.

She was hauled roughly to her feet. There was a muttered charm and her hands shot above her towards the ceiling. She groaned loudly as the forced movement stretched her damaged shoulder. The ribs that she was sure were cracked pulled and the pain was stifling. Her arms continued to rise until she was just barely on the tips of her toes. Her body immediately began to shake with the exertion of pain.

"What do you want, sweetheart? The tawse? The cane?" She didn't answer, just pressed her lips together tightly. Her bum and thighs were so broken, it wouldn't matter what they used. Both hurt too much, just different flavors of pain. She hated that she knew what they felt like.

"I like the tawse. Covers more ground and the slap is satisfying. You like it, too, don't you sweetheart?"

She shuddered even as her arms started to go numb. She pushed herself out of her mind, seeking out her private refuge. She detached herself from her own body to endure their torture.
"CRACK!"

Two straps of thick, hot pain bloomed across one hip and pulled her from her seeking. It was getting harder and harder to distance herself from her tormentors. Her head fell forward with a groan of agony.

"CRACK!"

The other hip. Tears slipped unbidden down her face to drip off the point of her chin, she slumped against her restraints and another wail of agony rippled through her as the pull on her shoulders and battered torso screamed at her. She sought for her solace more urgently.

"CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!"

One after another fell: across her battered bum, across her broken and bleeding thighs, flamed a new path across her low back. Nausea bloomed through her body as the agony became overwhelming, all encompassing, intolerable. She knew what people meant when they said "living nightmare" now. She was living in her own personal hell. There was a long pause and then hands were on her. This was worse. She would take the torture and the pain gladly over their touches.

Most of the men that had invaded her body and senses over the last ten days had been rough, mean, disgustingly nasty. They took their pleasure without worrying about hers. She was grateful for their callousness. Nothing damaged her more than gentle touches that enticed memories of Severus. Nothing broke her down further than men she didn't want coaxing climax after climax from her own body. These two were the best at it – or the worst – depending on perspective. The worst for her, it couldn’t get any more awful. She called them Thing One and Thing Two in her mind. She hadn't seen a single face outside of Malfoy that very first day. She knew if she survived this, those silver masks and distorted voices would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life.

She grunted as a palm grazed across a nipple, effectively erecting it, making it ache. No, no, no! The sobs began. Her control was lessening every day. They were doing exactly what was promised – breaking her. She was clinging to a ledge with only her finger tips.

"Stop." Her voice was no longer in her command. Another set of hands slid to the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs, teasing it to a hard ball of need. She felt her womb quicken in traitorous betrayal. As the length of an erection press against her bum, the sobs came harder. She didn't know how much more violation she could take. A blindfold encircled her face and her cries broke in increased apprehension. This just meant they were going to use their mouths. It was even worse than gentle hands.

She wasn't wrong. After the biting lick of the double strapped tawse, their caresses were almost more unbearable. A hot mouth encircled one taught nipple as a heavy cock invaded her from behind. She groaned from the discomfort, her channel was exceeding sore and felt raw. One hand of the man behind her continued to tease her clit and she felt herself barreling towards an orgasm she didn't want. "Stop!" Her voice was scratchy and rough. "Don't come inside me," she begged. The men laughed. She knew there was no point in begging. There was no point in expressing anything, but in her heart, she knew when she was no longer talking, no longer fighting, she would be truly broken.

"We'll come anywhere we fucking please. You're our dirty little sweetheart, aren't you? You like us to come in your sopping pussy."

Another sob broke from her chest as she was forced to orgasm. The grunts and groans of pleasure from behind her signaled her rapist had also spilled his pleasure. Gods, no. No, no, no! The man in front of her released her bonds. As she had no feeling in her extremities, she flopped limply into his
"Such a good little sweetheart, don't you think?"

"The best. Shame we'll have to return her soon."

"I think we've broken her in well."

"One more ride, my friend?"

"Don't mind if I do. How about you, sweetheart? One more ride for old times’ sake?"

He forced her onto her hands and knees and took her from behind. She couldn’t support herself on her arms, so she lay her upper body on the cold floor. Every thrust of him into her made the pain radiate throughout her body, charring her from the inside out. She forced her body into rigid indifference. He compelled two climaxes from her before ejaculating his disgusting self into her core. She had made no noises that time, she had even held in the gasps of pain. She did not struggle, merely remained completely impassive, as if she could care less what was happening to her. When he was through, he removed her blindfold and released her. She forced herself to her feet, and after a few false starts due to the crippling agony that was her own body, she crossed the small, cold cell to the cot she had been permitted. She rolled onto it and faced the wall, turning her back to them while wrapping her arms around herself tightly.

"I think there's only one thing left to do." She barely heard him.

"Just reopen that scar line by line, then Malfoy can complete her memory modification."

A small part of her mind twitched alarmingly. What scar…oh, NO! She whipped around, eyes wide with renewed horror. She forced herself into the far corner of the bed, curling her legs to her chest and wrapping her arms around her knees. It was the only position in which she was fully obstructed from their ogling.

"Ah. Still with us then, sweetheart?"

She didn't look at either man.

"Grab her!"

She would have run if only there was somewhere to run.

She was forced to the cot on her back, her left forearm pulled roughly away from her body. She was sure she felt her wrist snap and white-hot pain shot through her fingers. She managed to keep the strangled sob at bay. A third man entered the room and helped hold her down as a silver knife, exactly like the one which had done this horrible act the first time, was produced. Then the agony started again as her Mudblood scar was opened fresh, more deeply than the first time. The blood poured down her arm, soaking the thin, paper-like sheet beneath her. Her screams were not human. By the time the "L" had been reached, she passed out. They weren't kind enough to continue without her, waiting for her to be conscious before starting again.

When it was done, they left her alone. She didn't move from her back. Tears ran freely down her temples into her ratted, unwashed hair. Her breath came in hiccupsing gasps as she focused on the intense pain in her arm, focused on the steady drip of blood as it pooled, warm and sticky, around her extremity. It meant she was alive. For now.

Her legs were cocked at an odd angle. Her right arm rested lightly across her stomach. Her left,
which burned with searing flames, lay out in the position they had held her down for the cutting. Her head was turned back to the wall, eyes staring – unseeing – as the rain continued to fall from her eyes.

"Well, my little Lioness." The silky tones of Lucius Malfoy curled through the room. She didn't even flinch. "Are you ready to go home?"

A surreal feeling of panic and peace slipped through her being, but she didn't move. "Stand, sweetheart. Now."

She didn't know if she could.

"I said now, filth!"

She tentatively rolled, sliding her feet to the floor. She had to use both hands to push herself off, which triggered a cascade of stings, pinches, and pulls all over her body. It felt as if she was being attacked by an entire beehive. Blood dripped along her wrist, running in rivulets across her palm and down finger tips where it beaded and dropped to make soft plopping noises on the floor beneath her. Once on her feet, the room pitched horrifically. She sucked in a deep breath and tried to push through the sickening haze.

"Look at me, Mudblood."

Her eyes met his. He raised his wand before speaking gently. "I've been working on a new memory charm. This one erases names and faces, but does not take your memories. You will be able to remember everything that has happened to you." Her shocked dismay must have shown on her face, because he chuckled. "You just won't be able to remember I was involved." With those words, he twirled and jabbed his wand, pointing it at her forehead, she flinched as if he intended to strike her. "Obliviate et facies nomina!" After a moment, she realized she was alone in the room. She looked around in confusion, wondering why she was standing in the middle of it.

The door creaked and a masked and cloaked figure entered. "Stupefy!" She crumpled to the ground, mercifully unaware for the first time in ten days.

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Six Days Prior

"Severus, this is utterly ridiculous," Minerva snapped. "You cannot hole yourself up in here for the rest of your life. Kingsley has requested your help. I have arranged Horace to take over your classes until she is found and you feel able to return. Go to the ministry. Find her!"

"She's dead, Minerva. There's nothing to find."

"Severus. She is not dead." The headmistress pursed her lips in frustration. "You must have faith in her strength. That girl loves you. She is counting on you!"

Startled dark eyes met bespectacled ones. "She's counting on me?"

"Of course she is!"

For the first time in four days, a fire lit in Snape's belly. What was he doing? Wallowing in self-pity? Was he really doing this to himself while the witch he loved was most likely being tortured, hoping to be rescued?
He met Minerva's gaze again and the elderly witched nodded with a grim look of satisfaction on her face as she saw a fierce anger burn into being in the young man's eyes. "Go!"

Six days later, he was hopelessly beyond frustrated. It seemed no one knew anything. At the end of a very long day, he sat with two Weasley's, a Potter, and Miss Williams in his office, relaying news – or the lack there of – from his day at the ministry.

Lizzie Williams seemed oddly distracted, eyes full of fear and a faraway look. Miss Weasley had a hard look of determination on her face. Potter and Mr. Weasley looked as terrible as he felt. The aching devastation he carried in his gut was just shy of being debilitating. They all startled jerkily when the head of Kingsley Shacklebolt erupted in his fire grate.

"Miss Granger has been found." His rich, accented baritone was cool, clinical.

Snape felt his blood rush hot as both girls broke into sobs behind him. "Is she alive?" He barely whispered the sentence.

"Just barely." Came the reluctant reply. "She was taken to St. Mungo's post haste. Meet us there." He disappeared.

"You must return to your dormitories."

"Like hell, we will!" Potter and Williams snapped at the same time. Snape growled in frustration, reaching up to pull on his hair. "I cannot take you with this time. I must go alone." His gaze bore into Potter, begging him to understand.

After a moment, the boy nodded. "You will make arrangements for us to come in the morning?"

The man's shoulders slumped in relief. He had not been up for a fight. "I will, I swear." With those words, he scooped up a handful of floo powder and called out "St. Mungo's Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries" and was gone.
“You’re Miss Granger’s fiancé?” The healer raised a surprised eyebrow, instantly recognizing the spy and hero from the war. That was almost twice her patient’s age. And if she wasn’t mistaken, her teacher?

“I am. Can I see her?” Snape was maintaining his control just barely. He glanced at the petite, dirty blonde-haired Healer up and down as if to assess her worth.

“I’m Healer Nox. Feel free to call me Laura, if you prefer.” She reached out her hand. Snape looked at it a moment and then met her unremarkable brown eyes. Hermione’s are much prettier. The Healer dropped her hand when it became obvious he wasn’t going to shake it and cleared her throat. “Please follow me.”

Snape and Kingsley followed the middle-aged healer to a secluded waiting room where she beckoned them to sit. “Miss Granger is… Well, I’m sorry to say she has been through a most horrific ordeal.”

The knuckles of his hands whitened as he clutched the arms of the uncomfortable plastic chair. “What…exactly…do you mean?” His voice was low and menacing.

She glanced at the Minister and back to Snape. “Are you sure you want him present?” she asked cautiously.

“Yes,” Snape replied. “He is a good friend to both me and my fiancée.” He waved his hand, dismissing her concerns. If this statement surprised Kingsley, he did not let on.

“I am going to list Miss Granger’s injuries. I want you to realize that she is stable. We are treating everything as quickly as we can. None of her injuries were life threatening or permanently disfiguring with the exception of one on her forearm.”

“I could care less what she looks like,” Snape brushed these comments away. “Tell me.”

The Healer dropped her gaze for a moment, collecting herself. She followed the news, the reports. She was well aware this man was exceptionally brave and well-guarded. Still, saying these things aloud. Hearing what somebody – likely many somebodies – had done to the woman he planned to marry... Her stomach turned.

She took a steadying breath and started. “Miss Granger was repeatedly sexually assaulted over the period of the last ten days.” She kept her tone calm, cool, and slightly detached. She ignored his grunt of surprise. “She was diagnosed with internal vaginal bruising and lacerations and two second-degree labial tears. She was sodomized and had a third-degree rectal tear.” She watched Snape’s face drain of all color and he buried his face in one hand. The Minister blinked, a look of horror crossing his face. She remained persistent, wishing to complete her unsavory task so their torment could end.

“Her attackers carved the word ‘Mudblood’ into her left forearm. It was quite deep, but she fortunately did not sustain any damage to her tendons. It will scar, but she reported she had already had this scar – that they had reopened the old wound.

“She is experiencing malnutrition and dehydration and reports weight loss. Her right shoulder
tendons and muscles were horribly strained – a very bad sprain, I would call it. Because of this, she is experiencing slight nerve damage in her shoulder plexus and will have limited use of this extremity until it’s fully healed which will take a few days. She had three fractured ribs on her left side, two on her right along with heavy bruising. Both wrists were fractured; digits four and five on her right hand were broken. Her left cheekbone was fractured and she had a hairline fracture at the base of her skull.

“She was riddled with abrasions and lacerations over almost every inch of her body – it’s obvious she was beaten. She reports use of BDSM instruments: canes, paddles, riding crops, tawse, and the like. Most of the abuse from these ministrations was concentrated across her buttocks and the backs of her thighs. It is obvious she was suspended by her wrists for long periods of time.” Through her report, Snape’s face hardened more and more. A fire lit in his eyes that made her a little breathless with fear. Here, however, he made a strangled sound and stood, striding to the small window that overlooked the street. She paused momentarily, letting him come to terms with what she had told him thus far. His hands were clasped behind his back tightly, knuckles white with the exertion. His shoulders were squared and his back ramrod straight. She could see the tension trembling through him, his anguish rolled off him in waves.

She took a deep breath and continued. “She reported being put under the Cruciatius and Imperius Curses. A memory charm was detected, but we have been unsuccessful in breaking it.” She took a deep breath, grateful she was able to control herself. She had never in her life seen such a horrible case of sexual torture.

After a few minutes, Laura felt compelled to speak more. “Mr. Snape?” He reluctantly turned and met her eyes. The pain she saw there made her heart stutter. “She has asked for nothing but you since she arrived. Demanding to know that you are alive and unharmed. She remembers everything. Her immediate concern was not for herself, but for the fact she had to leave you behind in the middle of that café, unconscious – not knowing your fate. She was absolutely terrified for your well-being. She reported the same story you gave almost word for word, but was able to tell us what happened after you were stunned.

“By all rights, Miss Granger would have every excuse to be a shell of a human being. I have never in my life seen such devotion and determination in this type of victim. She blew me away with the clinical calm she has over what she has been through. She insisted on giving me a full account of what happened in the café to relay to the aurors. She is the definition of a soldier - an elite soldier.”

Snape felt a lump rise in his throat. Even through his pain and fury, pride bubbled in his chest. Yes, she was a fighter. Her strength was unparalleled. Just as Harry had declared; just as Minerva had insisted.

He cleared his throat and gave a short, grateful nod. “How are her injuries being treated?”

“Most of them have been healed quickly and with relative ease. All fractures were sealed and she has been given a dose of Skelegrow. I do recommend she wears a wrist brace on her left for a few days, that one was a little more severe. All lacerations and abrasions were healed immediately with magic and treated with an external potion cream; most look weeks old. Her more intimate injuries were healed in the same way. The more severe contusions should be gone within the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours, the lesser bruises within the next four to eight hours.

“The carving on her arm will continue to need treatment through the end of the week and will fade to a pink scar. Right now, it has been closed, but is still quite angry looking. It was being bandaged when I was summoned to meet you.

“She has been given potions to prevent infection, potions to treat possible sexually transmitted
diseases, a potion to prevent sepsis due to the rectal tear, a hydration potion, a vitamix potion, pain potion, and a blood replenishing potion – her arm was cut today and she lost quite a bit. We can teach her a glamour if she wishes to conceal the scar.

“We were unfortunately unable to obtain any physical evidence, it had all been charmed away.

“Her emotional state…” She trailed off, wanting to word this just right. “To be honest, her emotional state is unbelievably stable in light of what she has experience. I would recommend counseling for it to be monitored for at least the next six months.”

Snape closed his eyes in relief. Of course that brilliant brain of hers held on. Why did I ever doubt her?

He opened his eyes again and pinned the Healer with a significant stare. He had only one word. “Pregnancy?”

Laura blanched just a bit and his heart sank. “It would be too soon to detect a pregnancy if it has already been established. Miss Granger reports she had been using a daily ovum blocking charm for your intimacies. However, with no wand she was, of course, unable to use it. I have explained her options to her, she has not made a decision.”

“And those options are?”

“A termination potion if she’s pregnant and does not wish to carry the child.”

Snape couldn’t help the jerk of his head. She would never terminate a pregnancy, it was in her nature to protect the weak. He knew her too well. “Surely there’s something she could take now to prevent a pregnancy.”

“We have a potion she could take to prevent implantation as long as it has not yet occurred. It would not affect an already established pregnancy. She’s more informed on her monthly cycle than any other teenager I have ever met. She reports being on day fifteen of her cycle and that her normal ovulation pattern is day eighteen. I am afraid that pregnancy is a very real risk.”

She watched this larger than life man slump forward, back side resting against the windowsill. Both of his large, slender fingered hands covered his face in seeming exhaustion. The Minister had not spoken a word or made a movement during their entire conversation. After a few beats of time, Snape looked up at her. “Can I see her?”

“She’s awaiting you anxiously.”

“She’s waiting you anxiously.”

“Severus, I will return in the morning to get her statement. I cannot imagine speaking with her tonight.” Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice sounded very controlled, but his look of abhorrence was not able to be hidden. “Please make sure she rests. I fear our questions will be very difficult tomorrow; she is the only witness in these crimes. If there was any way I could spare you both, you know I would. We need her testimony, Severus.”

Snape gave a wordless nod of his head. He understood. He knew she would as well.

Healer Nox stood. “This way, Mr. Snape.”

Panic crawled through him as he followed the woman down the hall. For the first time in his life, he felt unsure of what to say, how to react. They paused outside a closed door and he watched the Healer’s shoulders lift and drop in a deep sigh. “Mr. Snape?” She whispered. “Can I give you a few words of advice?” She turned to look at him.

Irritation crawled up Snape’s back, but in the back of his mind something niggled at him, urging him
to listen to the witch. He gave a brief nod.

“Let her set the tone, don’t try and force anything on her. Treat her the same way you always would. Don’t act like she’s fragile or broken. She just needs you right now, not the version who is devastated by something out of your control. She needs the version of you she loves.”

Snape’s lips parted in surprise, but he was grateful for her words of advice.

Laura turned back and knocked gently on the door. “Come in!” Hermione’s voice sounded scratchy with lingering pain.

Another quick whisper over her shoulder. “I forgot to tell you her vocal chords are raw, they will heal quickly enough.” Then she opened the door. “Miss Granger, there is someone here to see you.”

Hermione’s eyes immediately found Severus’s. A strangled sound broke from her throat and she pushed herself to sit all the way up in bed, reaching for him – both arms outstretched like a child begging to be picked up into their parent’s arms. “Severus!” Relief, love, anguish, and longing were just some of the emotions that crossed her face. After the briefest of pauses to take her in – She’s really alive! – he crossed the room in large steps, pulling her to him, up onto her knees; he tried to remind himself to be gentle, but he was so relieved.

Her face pressed into the side his neck as her fingers dug into his head, one at his temple, the other around the base of his skull. “Oh, Gods. I thought you were dead.” She sobbed into his neck, pressing soft kisses there. “They wouldn’t tell me what happened to you!”

He didn’t trust his voice, just pulled her more firmly against him. His hands touched her – her hair, her shoulders, her spine. He needed to make sure she was truly there. They moved to cup her cheeks and he pulled her away from him gently. Her face looked much the same, save a light shadow of a bruise along her jaw. She was freshly showered, curly hair still damp. She smelled heavenly.

She moved to kiss him, but he held her in place firmly, needing to drink in her lovely features. Her eyes were bursting with knowing, her face lovely, her hair wild. Her grateful, sweet expression clouded with doubt when he held her back from kissing him a second time, pain slicing the light in her eyes. “Can you still love me? After what they did?” The whisper was broken. He jerked, her question taking him off guard and shocking his heart. A growl left his chest even as tears sprung to his eyes.

“What a question, you stupid girl!” Then his mouth was on hers. She sighed into him, melting into his embrace. He pulled back and started covering her face with love. “I was in agony without you, Hermione. Agony. I thought I had lost you forever.” He brushed kisses along her jaw, across her cheekbones. Another to the bridge of her nose, the sensitive spot between her eyebrows. More to her eyelids – kissing away tears – another to her temple. He worshiped her face with gentle, loving caresses of his lips, his fingers stroking the contours of her delicate features. Her hands gripped his wrists and she leaned into his ministrations, needing the affection. Finally, he rested his forehead against her and sighed. Obsidian eyes staring into the perfect shade of brown.

Two hours and a shouting match with a couple Mediwitches later, both Severus and Hermione were snuggled together in the enlarged hospital bed. Hermione was refusing the sleeping potion and Severus was just so thrilled to be holding her again that he was letting her get her way.

The bed was tilted in a semi-seated position, Hermione was curled into his side. Her left hand was lacing and unlacing the fingers of his right, their other arms tucked under each other. She rested her head on the apex of his shoulder and chest and he leaned a cheek against the top of her head. They had not talked over-much, and had only exchanged a half dozen kisses or so. Touch seemed to be
what she needed more than anything. He would give her what she needed.

“I hear that busy brain of yours, pet,” he murmured. “Please tell me what’s on your mind.”

“I will shortly. I’m still working on it,” she replied. He felt her small smile even though he could not see her face.

There was another five-minute lapse of silence where the hand not being played with hers trailed light touches up and down her spine. He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. Finally, she sucked in a deep breath and he knew she was preparing to talk.

She pulled back and motioned for him to get comfortable, indicating she wanted them to be able to see each other’s face. He turned to his side, sliding one hand gently over her hip, caressing soothing circles onto it with the pad of his thumb.

“I have to ask you to do something for me. Something that will be really hard.”

He searched her face for a long minute before he replied. “If it’s within my power, it shall be so.”

She nodded, releasing a long, shaky breath. She met his eyes with a fierce determination. “I need you to give me doubt.”

He looked confused and her eyes dropped. A moment later a tear dropped off her chin. He tilted her chin up, wiping the tear; concern lined his face. “Hermione?” He needed her to elaborate.

“I…well. I’m sure you’ve thought this already, but…” she took another breath. “I could be pregnant.” Her voice was so small, so low, her eyes so full of mixed emotions it put a pin in the bubble of his anger.

“You could be,” he acknowledged.

She gave a stiff nod and sniffled. Another tear tracked down her cheek. “I might not be, though. I typically ovulate on my eighteenth day. Sometimes on my seventeenth. But…Severus.” Her voice was agonized. “If I am I…I couldn’t…” She swallowed hard. “I just couldn’t…” She couldn’t even say the word. She wouldn’t be able to terminate the pregnancy, it was just not in her nature. She knew that he knew what she was trying to say. She repeated her opening line, and he finally understood what she was asking of him. “I need you to give me doubt, Severus.”

“Your could be,” he acknowledged.

His eyes closed to hide his pain and anger from her. Pain for her torment, anger for her tormentors. He disguised the gesture by leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead in tender affection. She wanted him to give her doubt as to the parentage of her potential child. To claim the child as his own and never contest its paternity. He answered cautiously, but with assurance. “Tomorrow, love. Let’s give you one more day to heal.”

Her eyes searched his for a moment before she nodded. She pressed a chaste kiss to his lips in silent thanks and curled into him again. They continued with their silence, content to just bask in being with each other. A short while later she spoke again.

“You will be with me during my interview tomorrow?”

“If you want me there.”

“I do.” She sighed, sliding her palm over his chest lightly. “You will hear everything, though. Are you sure…?”
“I am.”

“Tell me what happened here?”

“I can’t, not yet. I am ashamed of myself.”

She pulled back, her face flooding with surprised concern. “What do you mean?”

“I am ashamed with how I behaved. I shut down. The pain of your loss was too great.”

“Oh, love,” she whispered, tracing his brow gently with the backs of her fingertips. “You are allowed to be sad. You are allowed to try and protect your heart. You are allowed to fear. Has no one ever told you this?”

Her words of forgiveness could not have been more perfect. He captured her gentle fingers in his hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Thank you.”

“Do you have my ring?” she murmured, pressing a sweet kiss to his jaw. “I want it back.”

The first real smile to cross his face in days pulled one from his sweet witch. “I do.” He untangled himself from her, sliding out of the bed. “I kept it on me the entire time. I’m intrigued to find out how you got it into my breast pocket.”

“I got them talking,” she answered, watching him dig in the pocket of his frock coat. He returned to the bed and took her left hand, sliding the ring to its home. It would stay there until the day she died.

__________________________________________________________

“Are you ready, Miss Granger?”

“I am.”

She watched as the Auror – Banks was his surname – set his wand to record before taking a deep breath and starting. “I was unconscious when we arrived. When I woke, I was in a four-walled room with a two-way mirror next to the door. The walls were white, the floor tiled. There was a cot, a sink, and a toilet. Much like a Muggle prison cell. I was given no clothing. The cot had a pillow and a small blanket. You have an account of my injuries?” The auror nodded.

“There were fourteen men. Three were what I would consider elderly – sixty plus. Grey hair. All between five foot nine and six feet tall. One had a tattoo of a wand on his left bicep. Seven men were between thirty-five and forty-five years old. Two were under five-foot-seven. Three were between five-foot-seven and six-feet. Two of these men had tattoos. The first had black hair and a skull and cross bone on his left pectoral. The second had dirty blonde hair and an iron cross with the words “Illegitimi non carborundum” in a crest surrounding the bottom between his shoulder blades. Two were six-foot to six-three. One of these men had a large birth mark across his left inner thigh, he had red hair.” She continued her descriptions. Severus marveled at her calm and detailed recollection.

“You never saw a face?”

“Not a single face. All voices were distorted, the same as in the café.”

“Did all the men have a dark mark?”

“No. Six did not.”

“They all sexually assaulted you?”
Here she paused, swallowing back bile. She took a sip of the water that had been placed in front of her, sucked in a deep breath, and answered. “They did.”

Severus swore. She flinched. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, gently touching the side of her face.

“It’s okay.” She reached up and snatched his hand, squeezing it gently.

“Are you positive about the number? About your recount?”

“I am.”

“How did you escape?”

“I didn’t. They let me go.”

Both men gaped at her.

“Why?” The auror was looked at her with an expression of awe.

“When I got them talking at the café, one of them told me what their plan was. I played into it.”

“How?” Severus seemed cautiously proud. She glanced at him and gave him a sad smile.

“They told me that they were going to break me. He said to me: ‘When we’re through with you, you’re going to wish we had killed you. Before we’re done with you, you will be begging to die. Instead, we’re going to break you to pieces. Then we’re going to return you so destroyed that it will break him.’ Him, of course, being you. So, I let them think they broke me.”

“How?” he asked again, his voice was strangled.

“For the first few days I fought like hell. I attempted to steal wands. I rarely stopped making noise. I raged. I screamed. I threatened. I hit, and scratched, and bit, and spit. I didn’t sleep. I told them they’d never break me. After my ‘period of courage.’” She used her fingers to make air quotes. “I let myself act like I was breaking down. If I was alone, I stayed silent. My fighting became weak, more halfhearted. I didn’t talk as much. I stopped screaming while they assaulted me and cried more. I slept. By day eight, I stopped resisting. Of course, I didn’t participate by any means – I just didn’t do anything. I barely said anything. I stopped eating the food they brought me. I stopped trying to clean myself up. Day nine I asked to die; I begged to die. Day ten I barely said anything. The only reaction they got out of me on day ten was when they told me they were going to cut my arm open again. My reaction was shock more than anything. I wish I had controlled that better.

“Of course I couldn’t control the pain, so controlling my reactions to it was exceedingly difficult. I figured this helped me. It was genuine. I chose ten days because it was believable. I have a reputation for being exceedingly stubborn, but I could have held out another ten if it had been needed. I’m grateful it wasn’t. They think they did their worst; they think they did what they promised. They did not. They played right into my hands. Where I could not prevent the things they did to me, they did not control me. I controlled them.”

Banks flicked his glance to Severus, eyebrows having disappeared into his hairline. “She’s terrifying.”

He wasn’t joking, but this statement caused one of those real, rare, devilish grins to cross the face of the man she loved. His reply was one infamous word. “Indeed.” Hermione actually had to bite back a true laugh. She cleared her throat instead. She didn’t want Banks to think she was cold hearted or insane.
“Don’t get me wrong, please.” Her eyes pleaded with the man as he turned his attention back to her. “You need to know that I have been deeply affected by this. It was quite literally the nightmare of my life. I will never be the same person again.” She felt Severus’s hand slip onto her thigh and squeeze gently beneath the table, his smile had disappeared. “However, I am clinical enough to realize the opportunity I had. So many Muggle-borns have already died because of these men. So many of my kind murdered. Children. Oh Gods -” Sobs threatened to overtake her and she had to pause for a moment. She brought her elbows to the table and dropped her crumbling face into her hands. Severus’s hand tightened on her leg again with encouragement.

When she was in control of her emotions, she raised her face and started again. “I knew that I had to make the best of my situation and gather the information I could. I had been given a guarantee that I would come out of this ordeal alive. I didn’t have to fear for my life, therefore, I could be strong. I could bring back as much knowledge as possible to help bring these fuckers down.” Her eyes flashed and she paused for a long moment. Then, she turned her head and looked straight into her fiancé’s eyes, her face filled with deep pride. “I won their game.”
He had taken her back to Spinner’s End when she was released from the hospital after lunch. He was embarrassed of the state of the place, not having been back there since summer. Everything was covered in a fine layer of dust. She just smiled at him, eyes twinkling as he made his half-hearted apologies. She asked to borrow his wand and a few quick cleaning spells later, she had the place cleaned up and presentable. He watched her move around in this space where he grew up and marveled at the rightness of it. She had entered the sitting room and gasped in delight at the floor to ceiling book shelves that dominated the room, piled with stacks upon stacks of thick tomes.

“Come,” he said, after letting her trail her fingers over their spines for a solid ten minutes. “Your friends will be here, soon. They are most anxious to see you. Let’s run to the corner mart and buy some biscuits, then we’ll come back and set some tea.” She took his offered hand and they left in companionable silence. He didn’t comment as she looked longingly over her shoulder at the books.

He had gone back to Minerva and filled her in when Hermione had slept the night before. He had gotten her to take the Dreamless Sleep in the wee hours of the morning. Minerva had been a wreck. He informed her of his intention to take at least the next three weeks off and keep her with him. As term had only been back in session since the fourth (and it was now the sixth) he had requested her friends to arrive through the floo at four o’clock (when classes let out for the day) to visit with her before returning to the school in time for the evening meal. He suggested they bring her school books so she could work from his home while she recovered. The headmistress had agreed on this course of action.

Approximately a half hour later, the fireplace in the sitting room glowed bright green and Harry Potter popped into his sitting room. Severus had to push back his discomfort of having his personal space invaded by his students, but he was attempting to get use to the fact that these young adults were going to be a part of his life. Probably for the rest of it.

He had transfigured the two wing back chairs that accompanied the lone davenport into couches so there was enough space for all of them to sit and visit. Hermione had made a lovely smelling Earl Grey tea and arranged chocolate chip and sugar biscuits on a plain white serving plate and had them and his ebony colored tea set ready on the coffee table.

Harry stepped out of the fireplace and right into Hermione’s arms. Wrapping her in a fierce hug with a shout of exclamation. She buried her face in his shoulder and squeezed him back. Severus had to bite down the taste of jealousy. He had nothing to be jealous about – this boy was her adopted family. Ginny followed Harry, carting Hermione’s trunk with her clothing and school work. Ron and Lizzie came after. He was surprised when Draco Malfoy also came through the floo, but understood when he took Lizzie’s hand and pulled her to him protectively.

“Draco.” He nodded at his Godson with an approving smile. Miss Williams was a good match for the lad.

“Godfather.” Draco returned the greeting.
Hermione was engulfed in a four-way hug between Potter and the two Weasley children. A mix of tears and laughter sounding from their tête-à-tête. Lizzie stood back with a wistful smile on her face. Severus recognized the look of one who was part of the group, but still a bit of an outsider. His witch realized her other friend was there and immediately took the girls’ discomfort away.

“Lizzie!” She pulled out of the arms of the other three to wrap the little blonde in a warm hug. Lizzie returned the gesture with fierce warmth.

“You’re okay?” Lizzie whispered.

“I’m okay.” Hermione answered, then amended, “I’ll be okay.” Then she did something that surprised everyone in the room. “Draco! Thank you for coming!” she said before enveloping him in a hug right around his middle. Draco looked absolutely horrified for a moment, gaze darting around the room wildly as if to say, “I didn’t do it!” Potter and Weasley looked surprised, Severus raised an eyebrow at him, Ginny gave him a smirk, but Lizzie was smiling. He tentatively gave her a squeeze back before taking her shoulders and pulling her away gently.

“Glad to see you back with us, Granger. Lizzie was upset.”

Hermione gave him a satisfied smirk and Severus had to use a hand to wipe the smile off his face. She had done that to purposely make the poor kid uncomfortable.

“Sit, sit.” Hermione gestured to the couches. Ginny, Ron, and Harry plopped on one, Lizzie and Draco the other. Severus sat back in the corner of the third, crossing his left foot over his right knee and sprawling one arm long the back. Hermione was being a perfect hostess, pouring tea and passing plates. When everyone was served, she surprised him by sitting right next to him. Hip to hip. He watched Draco’s eyes widen slightly as she leaned into his side and offered him a bite of a cookie. He smiled down at her gently and declined.

“So…” Draco started when the awkward silence dragged on too long, catching Snape’s eyes. “My dad is going to lose his ever-loving mind when he hears about you two.”

Ron snorted. “My mum was besides herself…with happiness,” he grumbled. “She’s already planning your wedding, Hermione. As much as Ginny and Harry’s.”

“Oh, no!” Hermione sat bolt upright. “Does everyone know?”
Snape watched her carefully, gaging her reaction. When five heads nodded at her she blanched slightly. “What a mess. I so wanted to be the one to tell your mum and dad, Ginny and Ron. They’re like second parents to me.”

Severus watched Ron glance away, a telltale flush riding up the younger man’s neck. Harry broke in quickly, realizing the same thing. “Well, she thinks you and Professor Snape will want to get married quickly. Being that Ginny and I are waiting until the summer after next, she’s anxious to get started.”

Severus was doing his best not to panic. He did not want to rush Hermione into things. He promised her a long engagement, whatever she wanted.


His heart stopped and he looked at her with undisguised surprise. “Are you sure, pet? I told you there’s no rush.”

“There’s also no reason to wait, right?” She smiled at him and his heart restarted.

“As they say, it is the bride’s day,” he answered softly, raising a hand to brush a stray curl of her temple. “Whatever you want, you shall have.”

Both of the girls on the other couches sighed appreciatively and he looked up, disgruntled. He had forgotten for a moment that they had an audience.

“July, then, I think. Do you think your mum will really help me, Gin?”

The redheaded girl grinned wickedly. “Yes, I’m sure. So will I! It’ll be good practice.”

“Something small,” Hermione told her. “Just family and close friends. I don’t want a big hoopla.”

“A hand fasting?” Ginny suggested. The three young men were starting to look as decidedly uncomfortable as Severus felt. Talking about weddings – his wedding – with all these student present was very off-putting.
“Oh, hand fastings are so beautiful!” Lizzie squealed. “So Earthy and rich in romantic tradition.”

“I think that would be perfect!” Hermione agreed. “Severus,” she turned to him and he raised an eyebrow warily. “You don’t mind being married barefoot, do you?”

That brought him up short. “What?”

“It’s for connection to the Earth,” she explained. “Everyone who attends a hand fasting must be barefoot during the ceremony. I know you’re very tight laced when it comes to your wardrobe, but you would do this for me, yes?” She fluttered her lashes a little and he felt his cheeks grow a bit warm.

Bloody hell. Her flirting and casual behavior was making him ache for her. He wished they were alone. He sat up straight and pretended that they were. “I meant it, love. Whatever you want.” He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “Will you excuse me?”

She smirked at him, knowing just how uncomfortable he was, and nodded. “Of course.”

“He okay?” Harry asked, watching Snape’s shadow disappear into the kitchen.

“Harry,” Hermione said softly. “He’s an exceptionally private person. You have absolutely no idea what this conversation just did to him. He handled it very well.”

“I can’t believe you’re marrying him.”

The words came and her heart sank. “Ron,” she said softly. “He makes me happy.”

It was silent for along moment and then he sighed. “I know. I just…well. Well, it’s Snape. It’s just weird, you know?”

She surprised everyone in the room by busting out laughing. Deep, and long, and straight from her belly. Her friends all looked at her with bemused expressions and soon they were all giggling.
“What in the bloody hell is so funny?” Snape called from the kitchen, sounding slightly paranoid. This just caused their laughter to deepen. Even Draco was chuckling.

“Nothing!” Hermione finally called back before lowering her voice to talk to her friends. “If any one of you had told me a year ago that I would be engaged to Severus Snape I would have hexed you to hell in back. Now I couldn’t possibly live without him.”

Ginny and Lizzie chorused an “Aww!” while Draco looked surprised, Ron a bit green and Harry nodded with a smile.

“I’m happy for you, Hermione.”

“Did he get you a ring?” Ginny asked, eyes suddenly flying to her friend’s left hand. “He did! Let me see!”

Lizzie and Ginny both piled on the couch on either side of Hermione and the three boys started to cautiously chatter at one another. Before long, Snape was letting them know it was time to go. Hermione hugged them all (Draco offered a hand to her, not even remotely comfortable enough to endure another Granger squeeze) and she shook it with a laugh. Draco flooed away first, followed by Lizzie and Ginny. When it was just Ron, Harry, Hermione, and Severus, there was a long pause.

“*You’re really okay, Hermione?”* Harry whispered, his eyes were shiny with unshed tears. Hermione gave him a sad smile and a slight nod.

“I’m not going to lie to you guys. I’m feeling pretty fucked up.” Severus’s hands grasped her shoulders in comfort, his heat at her back was calming. “I’m going to be okay, though. I have you three. It’s all I need.”

Ron grit his teeth against his fury at what had happened to his friend. “We’ll find them, ‘Mione. We’ll kill them all.” Harry nodded; Severus’s arms curled around her collar bones in a backwards hug, drawing her into him.

“No.” The word was definite, final. “They will get what is coming, but it will not be at the price of any of your souls. Do you understand me?” Harry and Ron nodded. Severus made a noise of noncommittal.
“I love you guys.” She disentangled herself from her fiancé and pulled them into a hug before pushing them to the fire. “I’ll see you guys soon. I’ll owl.” They each kissed her on the cheek and disappeared into the brazier.

She sighed with weariness and turned into his waiting arms. He pulled her close and propped his chin against her head. “Are you hungry?” he asked. “Not really.”

“Tired?” It was still early, but both knew they had something to do before sleeping tonight.

“I am,” she answered. “I need a shower.” She pulled away from him and crouched to her trunk, popping it open. “Oh, thank Merlin.” He watched her lovingly caress her wand and was instantly curious about it.

“What’s it made out of?” he asked and she smiled up at him.

“Vine, dragon heartstring. Ten and three-quarter inches. Here.” She handed it out to him and he took it, immediately feeling warmth flood his fingers. His lips parted in surprise. He gave it a twirl and shot gold sparks out of it. It felt as good as his own wand.

“It knows I love you,” she said simply. He smirked at her. “What about yours?”

“Blackthorn, thunderbird tail feather. Fourteen inches.” He slid it out from his sleeve and handed to her. She had already held it earlier today and had been hesitant of its power. It did not recognize her as its owner, but had seemed to recognize her as someone to trust. It had allowed the basic cleaning charms to be performed to her satisfaction.

“I was very surprised that it responded to you.” He told her after a moment of studying her own wand. They traded them back and she continued to paw through her things, pulling out a pair of lounge pants, a long-sleeved tee, a zip up jumper, and some comfortable undergarments. “A few people have attempted to use it in the past with no luck. It must recognize who you are to me.”

Hermione’s face flushed with pleasure. “It’s obviously a quite powerful wand, it vibrated through my whole body when you gave it to me the first time. I think if I had taken it from you without your permission it would not have worked for me at all. Blackthorn is quite difficult to control, from what I’ve read of wand-lore. Ron stole a wand made of blackthorn from the snatchers he was captured by when he first left us. Harry used it after his holly and phoenix feather wand was broken at Christmas
last year. It was very temperamental; it did not work well for him.”

She stopped when she realized her was looking at her with deep affection. “What?” she said shyly.

“You’re brilliant. I never thought I would find a witch that I could talk to like I do you.”

The blush that bloomed through her cheeks was breathtaking. “Come, let’s shower together.” He reached a hand to her and, after securing her garments in one arm, she took it. Her face set itself with a mix of nervousness and determination. He only loved her more for it.

He cast an impervious charm on her bandaged left arm and she removed the wrist brace. He had to clench his jaw at the fading bruises and light lines that were scattered over her lovely body as he gently undressed her and then himself. He beckoned for her to get into the shower while he finished disrobing. He knew the next hour would be paramount in helping her heal and he was determined to take it agonizingly slow.

They washed each other with soap and flannels and hands; slowly and tenderly exchanging chaste kisses and soothing words. When they were cleaned, he leaned back against the cool tile wall and pulled her so her back was to his front, letting the heat of the water rush over their bodies, and just held her for a long time, waiting for her to be ready to move to the next step.

She turned the water off and pulled the curtain open a little while later, handing him a large, fluffy towel before starting to dry herself off. As he watched her, his hunger grew. He tampered down his need for her. He was determined to make everything about her tonight. He had to. When they were dry, he led her to his room. The queen-sized bed was covered in dark navy bedding with white sheets. He indicated she should put her things on the dresser and left her to crawl into the bed. He lay on his back, one arm cocked beneath his head, the other reaching out for her as she turned to face him. She took a deep, calming breath and crossed the room to him.

He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her temple. “You are going to have complete control, love,” he said quietly. “Tell me what you want, I will do it. I will not frighten you.” She nodded, her eyes softening in thanks.

“I want you to cover me with your body and kiss me for a while.” It was something that would not trigger any bad memories. The one thing that was a blessing the last ten days was no one had attempted to kiss her mouth in any way. This was strictly Severus’s domain. He rolled to her slowly, gently pressing his legs against her and covering her with his warmth. He held most of his weight on one forearm while using his other hand to caress her face. He dropped light, chaste kisses across her lips, drawing them out slowly and sweetly, carefully giving her time to adjust to each movement and
sensation. Her arms came up to wrap around his shoulders and she lightly scratched his skin over his scapulas. He sighed in appreciation. Gods, he had missed her – missed this.

She opened to him, a small whimper in the back of her throat and Severus gently sucked her lower lip into his mouth, swirling his tongue against the plump surface. She gave a small gasp of joy before arching into him, seeking his tongue with hers. The muscles slid languidly over each other, the kiss was slow and hot, warming them deliciously. He pulled back after a significant amount of time and she immediately gave the next directive. “Put your hands and mouth on me,” she murmured.

He trailed open mouth kisses to her jaw, down her neck and across her collar bone as one hand carved a gentle trail up her hip, over her rib cage to where her lovely breast was. He palmed her nipple and squeezed gently. She squirmed again, breathless. He paid equal attention to her breasts, mouthing them with reverence, pulling her nipples into the tropical heat of his maw. Making her want it. He had grown painfully hard with his need for her, but would not be asking for anything in return.

“Please, come inside me,” she whispered when she couldn’t stand the wait anymore.

“What position, love?”

Her eyes rolled back in her head as he grazed his stubbled chin over the flat expanse of her stomach on his way to her center. He lapped at a hip bone and spread his palm over her womanhood, gently parting her with nimble fingers.

“Missionary,” she answered. “Slow. Kiss me again.”

He gently urged her thighs apart and slid himself into position between them. He hitched one leg onto each of his hips and coated himself in her excitement before pushing himself to the entrance of her body. She was watching him with heavy lidded eyes, her breaths were slow and calm. She nodded once and he gently, excruciatingly slowly, pushed into her inch by blissful inch until they were joined completely.

“Mmm.” Her voice rumbled in her throat and ended with a small gasp as he bottomed out side her heat. “Oh. I missed you.” Her voice trembled with tears and he covered her mouth to help stem the flow before pulling back and brushing his nose against hers.

“I’ve missed you, too, love.” He pushed forward with tender ease and she gave a small gasp of
pleasure. “Can I bring you, sweetheart?”

“No!” Her eyes flew wide, pleading, tears spilling over her lower lashes and he froze in panic as her body started trembling violently.

“What, Hermione? Tell me.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart. Please. Never again.” He closed his eyes tightly and gritted his teeth even as he nodded.

“Never again, I’m sorry.” He was. So sorry.

“Kiss me,” she whispered through her tears as he pushed into her again, continuing the slow, torturous pace. He covered her mouth with his and proceeded to love her tenderly. The trembling subsided slowly and small, sweet sex noises erupted from her throat from time to time.

“You can go faster,” she said after a short while. Her arms were holding him to her, her hips meeting his gentle thrusts. It was exquisite. He had never felt so connected to her. He sped up a bit and her head tipped back with pleasure, exposing her neck. He nipped the tendon gently and brushed his nose at her pulse point.

“Faster!” She demanded again, he complied. He was so close, he wanted to take her over the edge with him.

“You feel so amazing, love.” His voice rumbled in her ear, bringing her closer to her climax. She gave a little sob. “Tell me you’re okay.” He begged. “I’m so good, love. So good.” She promised him. “I’m going to come.”

“Yes. Come for me, Hermione.” He agreed. “Let me bring you.” He angled himself differently and felt her arch her back, allowing his pelvic bone to graze her clitoris. She gasped, her legs tightening around his lower back, hands digging into his shoulders. “There!” It was an exclamation. “Don’t stop! There! Oh, thank you!” She sobbed with her release, pressing her forehead to his. His tears mixed with hers as he spilled himself inside her. When they calmed, he rolled them, keeping himself buried within her, but bringing her on top of him so she wasn’t crushed beneath him. She lay, spent, her head tucked into his neck. She planted soft kisses to his collar bone, and he stroked her hair.
“I love you, pet,” he murmured.

She nodded against him. “I love you, too. It was perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, love.” He held her head to his chest so she wouldn’t see the tears falling freely from his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

*The wood and core of Snape’s wand is not known. I researched for over an hour before making this decision. I hope it does not upset anyone. Blackthorn Properties: Blackthorn wands, which is a very unusual wand wood, has the reputation - in Garrick Ollivander’s opinion well-merited - of being best suited to a warrior. These wands appear to need to pass through danger or hardship with their owners to become truly bonded. Given this condition, the blackthorn wand will become as loyal and faithful a servant as one could wish. Thunderbird Tail Feather core: Powerful, but difficult to master. Can sense danger and cast curses on their own. Length: 14” is the length of Severus Snape’s prop wand in the movies that you can buy from numerous vendors.
Severus’s thirty-ninth birthday came and went with little pomp and circumstance. Not that he minded – he’d never been very big on birthdays. He had, however, been very surprised and pleased that Hermione had even remembered, let alone the fact that she did her best to make the day special. She woke him with a simple breakfast in bed, which they had shared in comfortable companionship. Then they took a lazy shower together, soft caresses and care the main goal of the endeavor. They spent the rest of the morning in his study, snuggled on the davenport, going through the latest potions journal. She begged off lunch, insisting she needed to rest and he had watched her go with concerned eyes, though he couldn’t disagree with her need for sleep.

After a light lunch and a couple of hours putting around in his basement lab, he had gone to join her. He hadn’t intended to sleep, but after only a few moments, he succumbed to the pull of oblivion only to wake to the smell of some sort of confectionary deliciousness wafting through his house. His house. He hadn’t even known the oven still worked.

He found her in the kitchen, drizzling glaze on a lemon poppy seed cake. She met his stunned expression with a shy smile. “One of the house elves at Hogwarts told me it’s your favorite,” she whispered, eyes shining. He just shook his head with a crooked smirk.

“You’re spoiling me,” he told her.

“You deserve to be spoiled.”

They ordered Chinese take away, which he picked up, and had another quiet evening. They settled back into the study after eating. Severus sat in one of the large wing-backed chairs by the fire reading; Hermione at his desk, school work sprawled. He watched her covertly from across the room as the hours ticked by. Two hours into her work, she kept nodding off even though it was only about nine o’clock.

“To bed, pet.” He insisted the third time her head bobbed.

“Mm,” she protested. “I haven’t given you your present.” He was floored.

“You didn’t have to get me anything, Hermione.”

“Nonsense. I’ve had it since before Christmas – because you wouldn’t let me give you a Christmas present.” She disappeared upstairs for a moment and came back with a wrapped box that would appeal to any Slytherin and a nervous expression.

Inside was a beautifully carved Cherrywood box that was hinged and locked. After she handed him a brass key, he opened it to find an antique set of Potion knives ranging from sharpened stone and obsidian to silver, steel, and gold. The handles were carved ebony with intricate patterns. He was deeply moved and fought a tightness in his chest for several minutes before her question pulled him into a response. “Do you like them?” Her tone was anxious.

“They’re too much.” He shook his head in wonder. They were positively exquisite. He couldn’t imagine what they had cost.
“Don’t worry about that,” she murmured. “Do you like them?”

“I love them. I don’t think I have ever received such a thoughtful gift.” Truth was, he hadn’t received a real gift since he was a young child, and those had been few and far between.

Her pleasure in his response was palpable. “I saw them and just knew I had to get them for you. There’s a detailed history of them buried under the padding. They’re just fascinating. They belonged to a –”

He broke her off with a firm kiss on her still moving lips. “They’re perfect,” he insisted, knowing her mouth was running because she had been nervous he wouldn’t like them. “Let’s go to bed, love.”

He didn’t miss the audible swallow she gave or the way her eyes darted away from him. Her face drained of all color and he realized what she thought he meant. “Hermione.” He set the box of knives on the coffee table and tilted her face back to look her in the eye. “Hermione, no,” he said softly. “I do not expect anything from you. Please don’t be worried, swee…pet.” He just barely caught himself and she flinched slightly. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, sidetracked. He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I will not pressure you, I will not ask for anything from you. When you are ready, just let me know. Until then, I don’t want you to worry. I’m a grown man. I love you. I will be patient.”

Her eyes flooded with a mix of relief and regret and she nodded her understanding. “Thank you.”

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**January 22nd, 1999**

Somehow, she had known it would come to this, but that hadn’t stop the overwhelming feeling of deep panic and failure that swirled through her body. She held the little stick she had been able to sneak the last time she and Severus had picked groceries up at the convenient store together in disbelief.

Her period did not come on day twenty-nine as it should have. When it didn’t show up on day thirty, she tested with her wand the first time. After the tip had turned gold three days in a row, she knew she needed a muggle test before she would truly believe it. The pink plus sign taunted her.

She was pregnant. The little white plastic stick she had just peed on let her be sure. Her entire body started to shake in denial as nausea clawed up her throat. She chucked the test in the waste paper basket and just made it to the toilet in time. Her stomach expelled the little bit of water and bile it held (because, of course, Hermione being Hermione, she followed the directions to a tee and used her first urination of the day).

If she was honest with herself, she had known it would end this way. She had just prayed she was wrong. She retched again, gagging and sputtering. Large, cool hands were suddenly in her hair pulling it back from her face as another dry heave wracked her body. She spat and coughed multiple times before wiping her mouth on the sleeve of her robe. When she was sure they wouldn’t continue, she sat back against him. He conjured a glass of water wandlessly and she took a few moments to rinse her mouth and spit the water into the toilet before draining the glass in a few deep gulps. He smoothed sweat from her brow before bunching her hair to one side as she slumped back again.

She sat in stunned silence for a few heartbeats. For the first time since the previous summer, she wished he wasn’t with her. She felt humiliated, dirty, tainted. To see the look in his eyes on this morning would be horrible. She had begged him to help her with this possibility and she just knew he would feel obligated to follow through. She was terrified this would destroy them.
His fingers continued to smooth her hair, the other hand ran lightly over her shoulder. She knew he was just waiting for her to say it. She took a deep breath.

“I’m pregnant.” Her tone was dead and clipped, it sounded defeated. When had she become so weak?

Both hands stilled for a tick of time before continuing their ministrations. “I’ve always wanted to be a father.” There was no hesitancy in his response.

Her eyes filled with tears as his arms wrapped around her from behind, settling her back more deeply into his arms. “I don’t know if I can do this,” she whispered. “What if it’s obvious that it’s not yours?”

“I will love the child anyway, because it will be yours.” He made it sound so simple.

And maybe it was that simple, but the declaration of unconditional love for a child that might not even be his pulled sobs out of her in waves. She tried to pull away from him as they tore through her body, but he tightened his hold on her and let her cry. She didn’t know how long they sat there on the cold bathroom tile, his arms supporting her – it felt like a lifetime. She cried for herself and the horrors she had endured. She cried for Severus and the pain that life kept inflicting on him at every turn. She cried for the unborn child in her womb and the circumstances surrounding its existence. She cried because two things in her recent life that should have been so incredibly joyous had been stripped of that happiness. She cried for the unfairness of it.

While she cried, she waited for him to change his mind, to tell her he couldn’t stay. To tell her she was disgusting and damaged and impure. To tell her he could never love a child that may have been fathered by a rapist. But he just continued to hold her more tightly and rock her gently as he rested his chin on the top of her head, murmuring soothing, undecipherable words of comfort.

When she lay spent in his arms, he finally spoke. “The conception of this child does not matter to me.” He told her in his deep, resonating voice that was balm to her wounds. “What matters to me is that you and I are together. That we love each other and we will love this child. We will raise the child to be kind, and intelligent, and good. We will never let the child know what their true origin might be.”

He tilted her chin up and waited until her eyes hesitantly met his. They shimmered with pain and residual tears and horrors he’d never understand completely and it brought his fury to the surface. He held it in as tightly as he could. “I am this child’s father, Hermione. I am. No one will ever tell us anything different.” She gave a small gasp as his hands slid around her middle, cupping the nonexistent swell of her tummy in his palms and contracting his fingers there lightly, possessively. “This baby is mine. You…you are mine. No one will ever take that away from me – ever again. Do you understand? I love you, and we will be fine. I promise.” His face was severe, determined. It demanded her surrender to him even as it compelled her love for him to strengthen. Only the very best of men could say what he had just said to her, and she knew this. Their eyes held for a very long time before she gave a short, jerky nod. He pulled her to him by the nape of her neck and kissed her fiercely.

The tears came again, but this time with relief and peace.

Severus coaxed her back into bed in relative silence and control. He was able to keep the anger out of his eyes, the vehemence off of his face, but he was sick with it. As soon as she was settled and starting to doze again, he slipped out of their bed and through the house. The rage was making every muscle in his body quiver like a bowl of Jell-O sitting on top of washing machine set to the spin.
cycle. He was able to descend two flights of stairs, sealing and silencing the basement door behind him. He was in control enough to cast a silencing spell on the ceiling and vents of the small, dank room before his anguish and heartache overtook him.

The roar that came out of him would have made a class of first years wet their pants as a collective. It reverberated back to him, bouncing off surfaces and the damp stone of the walls. Then he started smashing things. Vials of completed potions were shattered, cauldrons smashed and dented, ingredients toppled, notes flying. He turned over his work desk, shattering an old photograph of his mother and himself from when he was very young. He seriously considered starting the room on fire. The rage and fear was consuming him, being burned alive would probably not be any different, right? The howls that left him grew in intensity until his vocal chords felt raw and shredded.

He crossed the room and threw a punch into the cement blocks of the wall. It felt so good that he let it slam into the stone over and over again until his knuckles were broken and the skin surrounding them mashed to a bloody pulp. He didn’t feel pain; instead, the sensation helped ground his whirling thoughts and calm his roiling stomach.

His words had been very pretty and just what she needed – he knew this. His obsessive desire to protect her in any way he could had somehow dragged out a sensitive, intuitive side of himself that was able to say all the right things at all the right times. And it wasn’t as if he had lied to her; far from it. He was more deeply in love with her than he cared to admit. Her strength through these horrors had only endeared her to him more. He would love the child because it would be a part of her even if it wasn’t a part of him – but it could be his. He held onto that thought like a life line. It could be mine.

So rooted were his feelings for her, he had the need to avenge her honor like a dark vigilante hell bent on revenge for all the wrong doings of the world. So excruciatingly painful was his guilt of not protecting her the way she had needed him to the first time that he could barely breathe due to the weight of it pressing on his chest.

He knew he was being foolish, she did not blame him. What happened was not his fault. However, he couldn’t seem to help but blame himself. How had he survived almost twenty years as a spy and double agent only to fail the woman he loved within months of the beginning their relationship?

As much as she insisted she was okay, as much as she put on a brave face and continued to participate in the day to day with admiral courage, he knew she was cracked. Not as broken as the men who taken her had wanted her to be, but broken nonetheless. The fire in her eyes was a bit duller, the passion of her mind had quieted, the bounce in her step and her endless energy was no longer overflowing. He knew it would come back as she healed, (and he was determined she would heal, he wouldn’t let her drown) but it broke his heart to watch her barely existing as she was.

The news of the pregnancy was not unexpected, but devastating in its own right. On top of all the other horrors her young life had held, it would now include an unwanted teenage pregnancy and motherhood before her time. Things that would change her path in life drastically. He vowed to do whatever she needed of him to make it easier.

He came back to himself and surveyed the damage of the room. It was well and truly destroyed, but his mind and emotions were back in his own control. He looked at his mutilated hand with indifferent scrutiny before pulling his wand out of his pocket and muttering the incantations to set it right before turning his attention to fixing his lab.
It was a late Sunday afternoon when they returned to Hogwarts. Severus kept his arm around Hermione’s shoulders protectively as they walked through the huge double-doored entrance. Her friends were waiting, watching for them expectantly. As soon as they were spotted, whispers of others broke out around them. Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Lizzie surrounded the couple from all sides, sending glares to anyone who stared. It didn’t stop the comments from reaching her ears.

“…what she could possibly see in him…”

“It’s gross, he’s twenty years older than her…”

“They were together when she was kidnapped…”

“…heard they’re engaged?”

“…tortured, raped…”

Hermione kept her chin up and eyes forward, but sank a little closer to Severus, who pulled her tightly to his side. He ignored everyone. The group closed in more tightly and they hurried her from the hall.

Her friends left them outside the Potions classroom, promising they would see her at breakfast the next day. Once they were settled, their things put away, and the rooms glowing merrily with fires that did little to warm her, he sat opposite her in the wing backed chairs at the hearth.

“I want to floo to Minerva’s office and discuss the letter I received from the Board. We need to tell her about your condition.” Hermione gave a curt nod, staring blankly into the jumping, crackling flames. “I would like Madam Pomfrey to check you out, Hermione. We really shouldn’t go to the Hospital unless we don’t have a choice.”

She glanced at him, then back to the fire. “That’s fine.” Her voice was soft.

He cleared his throat and sat forward in his chair, resting is forearms on his knees and dropping his head into his hands to card his fingers through his hair. “Let’s not tell anyone else you’re pregnant until you’re past the three-month mark. Longer, if you want. Your robes will hide your condition well into your fifth month. Pregnancies can be fickle before a woman hits twelve weeks.”

“Whatever you say.” She shrugged and continued to stare into the fire.

“Hermione?” Her demeanor had changed since she had confirmed her pregnancy. The last two weeks of January had been filled with lots of emotion – mostly saddened disbelief. She avoided all pregnancy talk and shut him down quickly if he attempted to broach the subject. Thus far, she wasn’t having any outward signs of pregnancy other than a bit more fatigue. He prayed she was one of the lucky witches who didn’t deal with sickness. It was still too early to be certain how her first trimester would go, however. Her body was just starting to figure out it had a visitor.

“Yes?” She tilted her face towards him again and he attempted to give her a small smile.
“You’re okay?”

She shrugged again. “I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Do you want me to set up an appointment with the psychologist your healer recommended?”

“No.”

He sighed, but relented. Standing, he pinched some floo powder and tossed it in the grate.

“Headmistress’s Office!” he said loudly, sticking his head into the fire place.

“Severus!” Minerva’s voice could be heard.

“Can we come through, Minerva? Hermione and I have some things we need to discuss with you.”

“Of course!”

He reached for Hermione’s hand, but she avoided taking it. He frowned, watching her toss floo into
the brazier and step in calling out her destination. He followed quickly.

“Sit, sit.” The Headmistress indicated the chairs facing her desk and they obliged. Hermione crossed
her legs and tilted her head, looking anywhere but at the two of them. Minerva exchanged a
concerned glance with him, raising an eyebrow in question, he shook his head minutely.

“I received a letter from the Board of Directors,” Severus started. “They are putting me on probation
and will reassess at the end of the year. In the meantime, I am not allowed have Hermione in my
formal classroom, I am not allowed to grade any work she does for her self-study, and I am not
allowed to supervise any of her N.E.W.T. sessions. I wrote Horace Slughorn, and he has agreed to
stop bi-weekly to grade her work. I believe the end went something along the lines of, ‘While this is
highly unorthodox, yours and Miss Granger’s war status is highly valued. You have always been an
exceptional teacher with good moral standards. As you and Miss Granger are engaged to be married,
we anticipate your questionable interactions with your female students will not happen again in the
future.’”

Hermione let out a dry laugh, and he glanced at her, raising an eyebrow. “They’re right, you’re it for
me.” Her face clouded and she looked away. His stomach clenched, he would give anything to
know what she was thinking, but didn’t dare use Legilimens. She’d gotten very angry with him the
last time and didn’t speak to him for two days. It grew quite quiet.

“We have some news,” He started after a long, uncomfortable pause.

“Oh, I do hope it’s something happy, Merlin knows you both need it.” Minerva said. Severus closed
his eyes in attempts to keep his voice even. The woman had no idea, he would not snap at her.

“It should be, but it’s not.” He heard Hermione mutter dejectedly. He reached out to her and took her
hand, squeezing it gently, she did not return the affection. The Scottish woman looked between
them, worry once again etching her features.

“What’s that?”

Hermione finally looked at her Head of House. “I’m pregnant,” she stated bluntly, eyebrows raised
and chin thrust out in challenge.

Minerva sat back in her chair, a look of horror crossing her face, hand coming up to cover her mouth
in shock. Severus wanted to strangle the woman for her crassness. Did no one have a poker face?
“Severus…?” The older woman implored.

“We wanted you to be aware for obvious reasons. We do not want anyone to know until after she reaches the twelve-week mark,” he explained. “She may become ill. She’s already struggling with fatigue.”

“How far along is she?” Hermione didn’t miss the fact they were talking about her like she wasn’t there. She stopped herself from snorting. She really wasn’t there, though. Not mentally. Not emotionally.

There was a long pause. “Six weeks.”

“Oh, my.”

“Yes, yes.” Hermione snarled sarcastically, pulling her hand away from Severus’s and standing. “We all know what this means. There’s no reason to say it aloud. Merlin knows I can’t stop thinking about it.”

She turned away, crossing her arms around herself before stomping angrily to a far window. They watched her press her face against the sill, looking out at the frozen grounds. Severus cast a Muffliato so he and Minerva could talk freely. He would let her pout, she deserved it.

“She’s going to keep the child?” The Headmistress asked, alarmed.

“Yes.” He crossed his leg over one knee.

“Oh, my.”

“Indeed.”

“You will raise the child with her?”

“Obviously.”

“Severus, enough of the one word answers. How are you doing? This cannot be easy for you!” She was scolding him, he glared at her.

“How the fuck do you think I’m doing, Minerva?” he snarled. “My fiancé of six weeks was kidnapped, tortured, and raped. She shows up at the hospital with a range of appalling injuries and stories, but somehow kept her mind intact and her strength at full force. All this only to find out she’s potentially going to birth the child of a rapist at nineteen years old. Her heart is too big to terminate. I knew from the moment they told me she was raped that this was a possibility – and so did she. She begged me to be intimate with her the day after she was raped and tortured so she could have doubt of the child’s paternity.” His voice cracked and he felt disgusted with himself.

Minerva’s eyes widened in horrified shock. “And you did, because you love her. You told her you would raise the child with her, because she’s everything to you.” Minerva understood, even if she didn’t particularly agree with the situation. “I don’t understand why she didn’t wait and terminate if she fell pregnant, however.” Severus snorted with derision. “She told me, that if she were to actually be pregnant that, ‘it’s not the child’s fault. I will not end an innocent life.’” He made air quotes, a mix of frustration and immense pride in his voice. “She won’t end an innocent life, but it’s destroying her! Her emotional and mental state has disintegrated the last two weeks. I … I don’t know what to do for her.” He glanced at the girl in question who was still staring out the window, face unreadable, and sighed heavily. “Merlin, help me. I don’t know what to do. I’m as heartbroken as she.” He dropped his face into his hands.
“You’ll be there for her, and she will get better.” She paused, watching him scrub his face with his hands. “You’re going to have her see Poppy for prenatal care?” Minerva changed the subject, sensing Severus would not be able to talk about it further. She was right, he was grateful for the topic change.

“Yes.” He answered. “She is not even going to tell her friends of her condition.”

The headmistress raised her eyebrows in surprise, but did not comment on the decision. “I will go with you to Poppy. Come.”

He removed the Muffliato and called for Hermione to join them.

“Oh, Gods, Draco,” Lizzie whimpered, clutching his hair in her fingers as he laved attention up the side of her neck to just below the sensitive juncture of her earlobe. He tightened his fingers on her hips and pushed his growing erection into her stomach.

They had officially been together going on a month and a half. The fallout with their friends had not been nearly as bad as they had initially thought. Hermione had said “Finally!” and Ginny and Harry had smiled and told her they were happy for her. Ron, being a couple weeks into his new relationship with Susan Bones when she finally told him had given her a slightly sad look, but shrugged and told her he’d kill him if he hurt her. She took that as a good sign.

Draco’s friends had laughed their asses off at him, told him they had known all along the two would end up together and asked when they would get to actually meet her and start getting to know her. He had smiled sheepishly at her when telling her their reaction, assuring her they were, in fact, being genuine. Because of the nightmare with Hermione, Lizzie and Draco had been spending their free time with her friends. Now that the brunette was back at school and somewhat settled, they finally had the opportunity to make plans with his friends. They were planning on having lunch at the Three Broomsticks with them that weekend as it was the next Hogsmeade visit. She was excited.

Her thoughts were pushed out of her mind as his hand slid up under her shirt, across her ribcage to cup her breast, she groaned loudly against his lips. Thank Heavens they had warded and silenced their hiding spot, which was an abandoned classroom on the fifth level.

“Take it off,” she said against his lips. He froze a moment before pulling back to stare at her wide-eyed.

“Yeah?” he asked cautiously, eyes burning.

“Yes,” she replied, and punctuated her affirmation by pulling her jumper up and off, leaving her in a silky white balconette bra and her skirt, knee socks, and shoes. Gods, but she was tiny. Her muscles were toned from Quidditch, her stomach shadowing a four pack, her arms lean and long and graceful. He groaned and pulled her back in, hands running up her bare back. Goosebumps exploded over her entire body even as fire trailed in wake of his touch. He left her mouth to trail soft kisses down her neck as she tugged at his jumper. He pulled back again and whipped the offensive garment out of the way. They stared at each other, eyes blazing. He watched her drop her eyes to take him in. His alabaster skin glowed, a few beauty marks marring its creamy perfection deliciously. He was lean and long, muscles sinewy from Quidditch and workouts. Stunning. He was about to move back in, when she pulled her wand out of her skirt. Pointing it at their jumpers she muttered a Transfiguration incantation and he watched as they turned into a large nest of blankets which she directed into the furthest, darkest corner of the room. She hopped off the desk and took his hand, walking backwards with a coy smile and lust darkened eyes.
He swallowed loudly and followed without asking any questions. He watched her settle herself down into the squishy mass of quilts on her bum and leaned back on her elbows. “Bloody hell,” he groaned at the provocative picture of his very fit girlfriend in a partial uniform, gorgeous bra, and golden blonde tresses spilling everywhere. He dropped to his knees and crawled onto the blankets, impressed with how thick and comfortable they were on the stone floor. He caught her mouth, nipping her bottom lip before gently sucking it into his mouth. Using his body, he guided her onto her back, covering her body partially with his. They kissed deeply for a few minutes, breathing growing more ragged, touches more urgent. He cupped her breast over her bra and she gasped, thrusting herself up, into his hand more fully.

“I want you to put your hands on me.” She murmured around another searing kiss. She gently pushed him up until they were both sitting and he watched her, unable to speak with the emotion clouding his thoughts. She reached behind herself and unclasped her bra. He growled as the flimsy fabric slipped down her arms and she set it to the side. Her breast were small, but pert and lovely, rosy peaks topping creamy, porcelain mounds.

She reached and took his hand, guiding it to her breast. Her eyes closed as he brushed one nipple, watching it harden and lengthen under his ministrations. “Can I kiss them?” he asked gently, pulling himself closer to her and dropping a soft kiss to her collar bone. He sucked and nipped there and then moved down her shoulder. Her head tilted back, a soft mewl escaping her throat. He sunk one hand into her hair, tangling his fingers there to tilt her chin back farther to give his lips better access to her throat; his other gently played with one breast, causing her breath to hitch and more delicious sounds erupted from her voice box.

“Yes,” she hissed. Inside, he was pumping his fists up into the air in celebration. He guided her legs apart and settled himself between them, pressing his trouser clad hips into her skirt and knicker covered sex. Watching her to make sure he wasn’t pushing too far, he gently rolled his hips into hers. Her eyes clouded and she gasped at the sensation of their cores meeting and whimpered when his tongue sought one nipple gently.

“Oh my god.” She arched her back and rolled her hips instinctively and relished the visceral sound he made.

He pulled back and blew cool breath over the nipple he had just teased, watching it harden further in the dim light. Her hips rolled again and he met her thrust with one of his own, grinding into her. Her hands snaked around him to clutch at his shoulders and upper back as he turned his attention to her other nipple.

She was grinding back and he knew when she found that sweet spot because she hissed another, “Yes!” He moved his attention back to her neck and she peppered one of his shoulders with nips and kisses, soothing with her tongue in their wake.

“Gods, Lizzie,” he muttered against her neck. “You’re so beautiful.”

“This feels so amazing, Draco,” she breathed before she caught his mouth with hers, plunging her tongue to mate with his. Their movements grew more desperate, her pants mixing with his short, staccatoed grunts.

The heat of her core burned through their clothing and his mouth never left hers. He alternated stroking her face and hair or her breasts. “I think…Dracoo,” she groaned. Her body was shaking. “Come for me, Lizzie. Fall apart, I got you.”

“Unghh!” It was soft shriek of surprised pleasure and pulled Draco over the edge. He snarled loudly into her neck as he lost himself in his boxer-briefs. He collapsed on top of her, holding some weight
off on his forearms. He caught her lips again, kissing her gently while they came down from their high.

When they were both breathing normally, he rolled off her. He slid his wand out of his pocket and cast a silent, discreet *Scourgify* to his nether region. After a moment, she rolled to snuggle up next to him. He brought his arm around her dropped a kiss to the top of her head. His chest was tight and full, he was struggling with an unfamiliar emotion as she drew whimsical patterns over his smooth chest with her index finger.

“That was wonderful,” she murmured after a long minute. He squeezed her gently as she tilted her head up to look him in the face. Startled to see the intense emotions in his expression. She pushed herself up to look at him better and he tilted an eyebrow up, trying to be cocky.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered. “Was that…was that okay?” She suddenly felt so unsure. He was not a virgin, she knew that. Maybe that had been ridiculously boring for him. She felt tears prick her eyes – it had meant everything to her. She had never done anything like it before. She reached for her bra as he deciphered her mood change.

“Hey,” he sat up quickly and pulled her into an embrace, smoothing his palms down her spine. “Lizzie, that was so hot. Amazing. I’m sorry, I’m just feeling a little…odd.” He could not wrap his brain around the emotions he was experiencing; he was in awe of her, protective of her, overwhelmed by her presence. He wanted her again, all the way. Wanted to bury himself inside her to be as close as possible. He pulled back and dropped a kiss to the bridge of her nose. “You’re gorgeous. Sexy as hell,” he assured her. “I feel so dazed. I’ve never felt like this before.”

She stared at him in surprise, his voice was thick, the emotion evident in his eyes. Then she realized what was happening. It had been barreling towards this from the beginning of the school year. Her heart started thudding. She’d been waiting for the right moment. She cupped his face with one hand and he turned to press kisses to her fingers before nuzzling his face into her palm. “I love you, Draco,” she whispered, kissing him lightly on the lips.

His astonishment was evident, but it was mixed with a longing. Then his eyes cleared and she knew he figured out what he was feeling. “I…” he broke off, still grasping at the realization. His breath hitched. “You knew what I was feeling, and I couldn’t put words to it.” He shook his head, a full, stunning smile breaking his face, joy lit his eyes. “I love you, too, Lizzie.” He pulled her to him tightly and pressed kisses to her face before sealing his mouth against hers.

He watched her, leaning against the doorjamb of the loo. She hadn’t moved since they had gotten back from seeing Poppy. Hadn’t touched her dinner. His concern was growing. Madam Pomfrey had done a complete physical on the her and declared her and the child growing in her womb healthy, but in need of a few pounds. No kidding. Between the death of her parents and her abduction, she had lost more than twenty. She had been thin to begin with. He sighed and crossed the room.

“Come to bed.” She jumped as he settled a hand on her shoulder, her face tilted up to look at him.

“Okay,” she agreed sullenly. He watched her disappear into the bathroom, his gut twisting. He put himself to bed and pointed his wand to lower the fire and put out the candles. She reappeared a few minutes later in a long-sleeved tee and flannel pajama pants. He cocked his head in surprise. She usually slept in a tank and shorts. He had always just slept in his boxers, but a few days prior she had requested he wear shorts or pajama pants to bed. He obliged without question.

She walked up to him on his side of the bed and leaned to give him a chaste kiss. She smoothed her
fingers over his brow. “I’m going to sleep in my room tonight,” she said softly. He sat up abruptly.

“What?” he demanded, surprise colored his deep voice.

“I…I just,” she broke off and took a deep breath. “I just can’t…” she stopped.

“Hermione, don’t do this.” He grit his teeth, reigning in anger and hurt, and reached for her hand. She let him take it, wrapping her other arm around herself. “Come on, love. We’ve shared a bed for months. It will be okay. I won’t touch you, if that’s what you’d prefer. We can put a pillow between us.”

She wouldn’t look at him and he realized she was trembling. “I guess that would be okay.”

“What’s going on, love?” He tried to pull her to him, but she resisted his efforts. He gave a more forceful tug and she relented, letting him pull her into his lap. “I feel like you’re trying to push me away.”

Her eyes met his and he was frustrated to see more tears. He wanted to take her pain away. “I don’t know what’s wrong. I just feel so … overwhelmed. I’m nervous about tomorrow.”

“You’re safe here. It’s not going to be easy, I’m sure the Hogwarts Rumor Mill is working triple time, but we’ll get through this. Together, okay?”

Her face smoothed for the first time all day and a very small smile broke through. “Okay,” she murmured.

“There’s my good girl.” He gave her a tentative smirk and she let a sigh, snuggling her head into his neck. He cupped her head and dropped a kiss into her wild curls.

“Come, now. Over you go.” He helped her off his lap and watched her round the bed, crawling onto her side. He was about to roll over and bring her to him when she slid a pillow into the middle of the bed, avoiding his gaze. For the first time since they had started sharing a bed, she turned her back to him and buried herself under the blankets.

He was frozen with his arm outstretched, but decided to give her the space she felt she needed. He shifted and lay down on his back, resting one arm over his stomach, the other tucked behind his head.

“Goodnight, Severus.” Her voice was soft, and he could hear a hint of apology in it. Yes, he’d give her space if that’s what she needed.

“Goodnight, my love.”
Chapter Twenty-Seven

The stares were awful, and they came at all hours of the day. She couldn’t walk down any hall, up any flight of stairs, or sneak through any passageway without people actually turning so their eyes could follow where she was going. The whispers were just as bad. She would approach a group of students to ask a question or give a directive and all conversation would cease. No one would look at her face – Circe forbid anyone look her in the eye.

She wasn’t sure what part of their knowledge was worse. The fact that she was engaged to the formidable Potions professor (not because she was ashamed or embarrassed, simply because it was private, and both she and Severus relished their privacy) or the part where she had been abducted and raped by every Death Eater who had escaped ministry persecution and then some. By mid-June, she was sure it would be the fact she would be almost seven months pregnant and didn’t know who the father was.

Breakfast had been an unmitigated disaster. She literally could have heard a pin drop when she walked through the doors of the Great Hall. Severus had left her at the top of the dungeon steps and made his way to the staff entrance at the back of the Hall. She agreed that was for the best. It was perhaps kinder to staff and students for them not to be seen together at all hours of the day.

She wasn’t sure what she was doing with him at the moment. Half of her wanted him next to her every second of the day, the other half didn’t even want to be able to look at him. She was an awful mix of desperate for him and disgusted with him. It felt like her mind wasn’t her own.

Harry, Ginny, Ron, Susan, Seamus, Dean, Luna, Neville, Lavender, Paravati, and Lizzie had swooped down on her the moment she entered and started chattering quickly about everything and nothing. This did not stop anyone from noticing she had entered. The sudden ceasing of meal time din reached her ears anyway. It didn’t stop her from seeing the wide eyes, some people even standing to get a better look at her. Severus was already at the head table, watching her protectively over the newspaper he was reading. Ginny slung her arm around her waist and Lizzie took her hand on the other side and they simultaneously guided and pulled her to the end of the Gryffindor table. Her friends surrounded her on all sides. Malfoy, Nott, and Zabini gave her encouraging nods from across the room. The noise did not resume when they were seated, her friends piling food on her plate that she would never eat. It wasn’t until Professor McGonagall stood and told everyone to get back at it or they would be late to their first classes did the normal chatter pick up. She swore her name was being hissed from every corner of the room.

Her face was blazing and she was struggling to keep tears at bay. Her friends were being lovely, pretending everything was normal, but she wanted nothing to do with them. They were making plans for a game of fanged frisbee in the snow between end of classes and start of dinner and were trying to encourage her to come. She made an excuse about being tired and having so much work to catch up on. “Next time,” she promised. They let it go.

The days blended together. She answered questions only if she was called out. Twice in as many days she had actually told a professor, “I’m sorry, I don’t know.” This happened to wild whispers from her peers and overly concerned glances from her professors.
At night she studied, trying to catch up, striving for the perfection she knew she was capable of, but she was so bloody exhausted she could barely keep her eyes open by the time dinner hit. She was struggling with staying on task with her revising schedule for N.E.W.T.s and by Thursday evening Severus had woken her at her desk and put her to bed three of four nights.

Friday morning dawned earlier than usual for her, she woke feeling out of sorts. Thinking she had to pee – she always had to pee these days, having to stop between almost every class – she jumped out of bed only to have a wave of vertigo sweep over her so hard she almost hit the floor. Cursing she stumbled to the bathroom, waking Severus.

“What’s the matter?” His voice was thick with sleep.

“Sorry, hafta pee,” she muttered, softly clicking the door behind herself. Then her stomach rolled and she was on her knees throwing up outstandingly into the toilet. She vomited so hard, petechiae* (pe – tee – kee – I) bloomed across her cheeks. She had barely anything left in her stomach from supper the night before and tasted mostly bile. Her body started to tremor violently as she heaved dryly. She didn’t even notice when the door creaked open or that Severus had entered until he was pulling her hair back with one hand, rubbing her back gently with the other. She continued to dry heave about a dozen more times, tears and snot streaming down her face with the effort. She sputtered and spit and groaned as wave after wave of nausea hit, but she had nothing left. When her stomach finally calmed, she collapsed, her muscles trembling with the exertion.

Grim faced and aching for her, Severus pulled her into his arms, trying to warm her cool limbs and soothe away her shaking. He handed her a wad of tissues which she used to clean her face and she pulled in slow, controlled breaths. He was glad he had brought his wand with and conjured her a glass of water. She rinsed and spit into the toilet before taking a few tentative sips, then, much to their dismay, she was back on her knees, losing the little water she had taken in and dry heaving again.

He stood and started the tub, making the water hot before tapping the floor with his wand. The cold tile bloomed deliciously warm under her knees as she braced herself at the toilet, continuing to sputter. He helped her stand once her body calmed again and she had cleared her face a second time. He grasped her around the elbows, supporting her when her knees buckled, before stripping her out of her pajamas. She was too weak to protest, but he said nothing when she attempted to cover her nakedness with her arms. His dismay at her decimated frame was barely kept at bay. He could count ribs and her hip bones jutted out painfully. When he helped her into the tub, he could see each knot of her back bone, he had to choke back tears. She bloody had to start eating more, but now with morning sickness starting, he feared her nutritional health would only continue to deteriorate.

She sank into the tub with a deep, guttural moan of pleasure, turning to her side to hide against the edge and resting her face on the lip. “Thank you,” she whispered, then gagged horrifically. He grabbed a garbage can for her to spit into as a sob broke through the gagging. “What’s happening?” Her voice was desperate.

“Oh, love.” He sighed and sat down next to the bath, resting his back against the white porcelain. “I think you can welcome the joys of morning sickness.”

“The pregnancy –” She gagged again before swallowing audibly and taking a deep breath. She tried to open her mouth to talk and all that she could manage was another gag. “Oh my God,” she moaned miserably after a few more large, calming breaths. He smoothed a damp curl from her cheek and wiped a tear from under her eye.

“I’m sorry, love. I’ll talk to Poppy and find an anti-nausea potion that’s safe for pregnancy.”

“Crackers,” she whispered in a pleading voice. “Saltines. And juice. Orange juice, please.
pumpkin.” She was taking shallow breaths, punctuated by hard swallows trying to control the roil of her stomach.

“On it.” His answer was blunt and he stood, exiting the bathroom. “Pepper!” he called for a house elf he liked in particular. Hermione heard him give her specific orders and actually felt a small smile tug one corner of her mouth before another roll of her stomach had her dry heaving into the garbage can, saliva flooding her mouth, which she spit.

The crackers did help, but the orange juice tasted awful to her palate even though her mind still craved it. Severus dumped the cup down the drain, rinsed it, and filled it with cold water from the tap. “Will you chill it, please?” she whispered when he made to hand it to her. He tapped it with his wand and held it to her lips, letting her sip carefully. “Oh, thank you,” she breathed, grateful for the coolness to wash away the aftertaste of dry, salty crackers and bile.

“Sit up, love,” he urged her, kneeling at the side of the tub. He transfigured a flannel into a small, plastic water pitcher and set about washing her hair. Her little throat noises of pleasure were doing things to him he was trying hard not to contemplate and he focused on the task at hand.

When he finished, she thanked him again. At this point, the gratitude was making him quite uncomfortable. “I’ll get your robe,” he told her, leaving her to dry off in privacy. When he came back she had her hair wrapped in a towel with another secured toga style around her body. She didn’t meet his eyes as he handed her the garment.

“I’ll let you have the bathroom,” she told him, not unkindly.

“You’re feeling better?” He knew he sounded worried. The flash in her eyes made him uncomfortable. Why didn’t she want his concern?

“I am. Hopefully that’s it for today.”

But as the days passed, the hope proved to be fruitless. The morning sickness, or all freaking day sickness, as it were, only continued to get worse. She was pretty sure she vomited more in the last seven days than she had in her collective lifespan. All in all, she felt like death warmed over, looked like it, too.

It was the make-out session of his life. Not that Ron hadn’t ever had any great make-out sessions, but none of them had felt quite like this. Lavender…well. He shuddered mentally as Susan’s fingers dug into his shoulders, her body adjusting under his. He stifled a groan as her thigh ghosted over his hard on. Lavender was something he tried not to think about. He’ll never know what he was thinking while he had been with her. He shouldn’t think ill of the dead, though. Hermione had been a great kisser, but never into it enough for his taste. It had been like she was fulfilling a job description. Lizzie…well, even though he had wanted Lizzie to be more, he imagined kissing Lizzie was what kissing Ginny would be like. He grimaced.

“What’s wrong?” Susan breathed, planting a few chaste kisses at the corner of his mouth before returning to seal her lips soundly over his, tracing the seam of his maw with her pert, little tongue.

“Just thought of something stupid,” he muttered, pulling away after another intense, tongue-filled smooch. He nudged her chin with his nose so he could nip at her neck. She gave a satisfied little hmm in the back of her throat that increased the excitement, her nails ran down his back over his jumper.

They were in Hermione’s Head Girl room (a place he, Harry, and Lizzie took turns using for their
make out sessions and romps with Hermione being absent and or hardly ever utilizing the room herself.

Which is why, when the girl in question bolted into her room fifteen minutes later, making a beeline for the bathroom without noticing her friends on the bed, he and Susan almost toppled to the floor. They quickly started to right their clothing before they realized what was happening.

“I think she’s throwing up!” Susan whispered, horrified. Sure enough, the unmistakable sounds of sick echoed around the room, the door to the loo wide open.

“Oi! Hermione!” Ron exclaimed, dashing in to check on his friend. He watched in dismay as the poor girl was sick two more times before spitting, wiping her face with toilet tissue, flushing, and flopping onto her hip in exhaustion. She looked up at him, dazedly realizing he and Susan were staring at her in a mix of confusion and concern.

“Do you need to go to the hospital wing?” Susan asked, eyes wide.

“Blimey, I’ve never seen anyone throw up that hard in my life.” Ron was awed. “I have four brothers who got bloody trashed over the hols, too.”

This made Hermione give a little squeak of hysterical laughter that had boyfriend and girlfriend exchanging worried looks.

“Hey!” Ginny’s voice came from the doorway. “’Mione in here? I thought I saw her running through the hall.”

“I got her here!” Ron called out. “She’s sick.”

“Should I get Professor Snape?”

He watched Hermione shake her head violently before she gagged and drove herself back up on her knees to dry heave over the loo. “She says no, but I think that’s a good idea.”

Susan was wetting a flannel and kindly pressed it to Hermione’s forehead after the heaving stopped. She watched the girl take steady, calming breaths, swallowing loudly between each. She didn’t miss the protective hand the curly-haired brunette had curled to her lower abdomen. Ron left the loo to give the girls some privacy when Susan told him she would help Hermione until Snape arrived.

“Hermione?” The lovely redhead asked softly. “Are you pregnant?”

Wide, startled, and terrified brown and amber eyes met blue. “Oh, honey.” Susan plopped down next to the girl she had known of for eight years, but was just starting to really get to know. She threw an arm around her shoulders and pulled her in. “When are you due?”

Hermione stiffened and pulled away from the girl, effectively ending the attempted connection. “September. Listen. Please don’t tell anyone.”

“Does anyone know?”

“Yes. Severus, Madam Pomfrey, and Professor McGonagall.”

“You haven’t told Ron or Harry?”

“NO!” Susan jumped at her vehemence. “I’m… I’m not ready. It’s too early yet.” Susan nodded hesitantly.
“I won’t tell anyone. I swear.”

“Hermione!” It was Harry. He skidded to a stop at the bathroom door and watched as Hermione pulled herself to her feet and brushed her teeth. “You all right? Ginny said you’re sick.”

“I’m fine,” she assured him quietly. She wasn’t looking anyone in the eye. “I’m going to head back to the dungeons, guys. I’m tired. Maybe I have a little stomach bug.”

“I’ll escort you.” Severus’s deep, thundering baritone came from the doorway and she looked up. Her friends were watching the interaction closely and she attempted to smile at him, but it looked more like a grimace of pain.

“’Mione,” Ginny said, sounding artificially bright. “We’re going to Hogsmeade this weekend. Lizzie has a date with Draco and his friends, but you should come with us, Luna, and Neville. We’ll go to Honeydukes and pick up some of that caramel nougat you like so much.”

Hermione’s stomach twisted violently at the thought and she covered her mouth with her hand, trying to stave off another gagging episode. She looked wildly at Severus, imploring him to get her out of there quickly. He wasn’t any help at the moment. He was watching her interact with her friends.

“Thanks Ginny, but I’m going to stay in this weekend. I’m so behind in Runes and Arithmancy. I haven’t been feeling well.”

“Oh, come off it, Hermione,” Ron teased, trying to lighten the mood as he slung an arm over her shoulder. “You being behind still means you’re at least a week ahead.” His comment was met by chuckles, which abruptly cut off when she lifted her chin and glared at him, ducking out from under his arm. Harry reached for her, but she side stepped him to avoid the familiar touch.

“I’m actually behind,” she snapped. “Truly behind. Life hasn’t exactly been easy for me at the moment, Ronald!” Her words were sharp and Ron and Harry flinched, being forcibly reminded of the Hermione wearing Slytherin’s locket on a day with no food. She caught their jerky movements and instantly felt bad. Severus raised an eyebrow at her. Anger was good. Anger was better than no emotions. He was disappointed when it fizzled as quickly as it had come. “I’m sorry.” Her voice dropped into a monotone and her eyes fell to the floor, her arms wrapping around herself as she avoided a hug from Ginny. “I can’t come – I really don’t want to. I’m…I’m just not there yet.”

The boys nodded at her, and Ginny looked hurt. She crossed the room and brushed past Severus. He let her go a few paces ahead, turning back the small group of her closest friends. “Please keep trying.” He all but begged them. The quartet stared after their teacher in silent shock. They were pretty sure they’d never heard the man say please. However, the desperation in his voice said so much more.

“I made an appointment for you with Dr. Jenkins.” He lifted one eyebrow when her head whipped around so she could glare daggers at him. “That’s the most reaction I’ve gotten out of you in days,” he told her stoically, brushing off her ire flippantly.

“I’m not going.”

“You are. Monday. Six o’clock. I will escort you myself and stay in the waiting room during your session. You will continue with him until you have returned to some semblance of yourself.”

“Whatever.” Hermione turned back to her Arithmancy texts and notes, no infliction or tone in her voice. Severus felt his shoulders drop.
“Have you tried the lozenges Poppy sent for you?” He attempted again to engage her in conversation.

“They smell terrible.” She muttered. He closed his eyes briefly, praying for strength. He would not be angry with her, he would not. She was being so God-damned exasperating, but he could not upset her worse. She was just too fragile.

“I’m still researching anti-nausea potions. There are two that should be okay, I’m just looking up correlations with pregnancies.”

“Okay.” The answer was brief, uncaring.

“I’ll leave you at it, then.” He turned to leave her room, where she did all her studying. She had put herself to bed the night before – in her own bed. She had never even come in to say goodnight to him, he had just found her passed out under the covers around midnight when he had come to bring her to bed. He paused in the doorway. “You’re sleeping in here again?”

“I don’t know.” She didn’t look up, but he saw her shoulders tense.

“Come say goodnight at least?” he requested, softening his voice. He didn’t keep out the longing, her attempts to break away from him were starting to scare him. He missed her; he missed her mind, her laughter, and the way she felt in his arms.

“Sure.” The answer was laced with noncommittal.

He sighed and walked back to her, settling his hands on her shoulders gently. She jerked at his touch and he pulled away as if she had burned him. They didn’t say anything. He stared at the back of her head, not seeing her stare blankly at the wall, tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “Goodnight, Severus,” she finally said in a tight voice.

He left without a word, the door closing with a soft click behind him. She was angry with herself. She wasn’t sure what was making her do it. If she kept pushing like this, he would break. She wasn’t a stupid girl. He wouldn’t put up with her being like this much longer. She had to figure out how to pull herself together, or he would leave. Was that what she wanted?

She just felt so…at war with herself. The logical part of her mind knew she was depressed, that she needed help to get through this. She was fighting a losing battle; she couldn’t continue to fight her demons alone. She was pushing away everyone she loved and didn’t know how to stop.

She wanted her mother, more than anything. Jean Granger had a way of being able to wrap her arms protectively around her daughter and make everything okay again, no matter how bad it had gotten. She would never have that again. Her hand dropped to her still-flat stomach. There was a little hard ball, now, if she lay on her belly. Outside of the fatigued and overwhelming nausea and vomiting, there were no real signs she was carrying a life inside of her. She wished she had someone she could talk to about pregnancy. The longing for her mother pinged again and she gave up studying as a bad job.

She stripped to her knickers and crawled into the lonely, cold four-poster bed. She knew it was hurting Severus that she couldn’t be by him, but she just couldn’t stand it. She felt filthy, soiled, tainted. Used by disgusting men and hung out dry, left for dead on the stoop of hospital. Muddy – dirty. A dirty Mudblood. A sob forced its way out of her chest. She didn’t want him to touch her, to soil himself. He was too good for her.

She didn’t know he was standing on the other side of the door, listening to her sob with tears pooled
Lizzie wasn’t sure if she had ever laughed so hard in her entire life. Theodore Nott was a bloody riot and a half and was only egged on by Blaise and Draco. The three had been exchanging childhood horror stories all evening. Some were downright appalling, and she wasn’t always sure if she should be laughing or crying – such as the time Theo’s father told him his dog ran away after having killed it himself for chewing up a pair of his favorite slippers. The way he told the stories, though, made her feel like he just wanted everyone to laugh. Almost as if it would take away the tension that was his life growing up as the son of a Death Eater.

Draco’s angry parent stories were nowhere near as bad as Theo’s (as apparently his parents did love each other and their son), and Blaise had grown up without a father. All three were only children and were fascinated with her explanation of having to go to bed early because of sharing a room with a younger sibling or fighting over who got the biggest piece of meat because there was only one for each person at every meal. She had a hard time coming to terms with what must’ve been a lonely upbringing.

“But we weren’t alone,” Theo insisted after taking a swig off his third tankard of butterbeer. They had finished lunch an hour before. “We had each other. We were tutored together,” he explained when Lizzie raised a questioning eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Draco said. “Blaise and Theo would floo to the Manor every day during the week to study. Blimey, we got up to such shenanigans. That poor tutor. What was her name?” All three boys were laughing and Lizzie couldn’t help but grin as they reminisced.

“I don’t remember,” Blaise said. “Do you remember when we were six, though? And Theo hadn’t had any accidental magic yet?”

Draco guffawed and choked a bit on a sip of butterbeer while Theo gave a look of mock indignation. “Now…guys. I don’t think Lizzie needs to hear this one…”

“Oh, Lizzie most certainly does,” Lizzie quipped, her grin turning to chuckles as the other two boys laughed harder.

“We convinced him to climb up on top of the Garden shed off the East orchard. We had snuck away from that blasted tutor…what the hell was her name, you guys?” Draco could barely breathe between the words and the laughter, they were starting to get stares from other tables at The Three Broomsticks and Madam Rosmerta shot them a warning look, although even she was smiling.

Both the other boys shrugged still chortling merrily.

“Anyway, anyway,” Blaise continued. “We convinced him to climb up the garden shed and then insisted he could fly. We stood underneath him telling him to jump.”

“I was bloody scared out of my mind!” Theo recalled as tears started streaming down his cheeks. “But, they were my mates, yeah? So I freaking jumped!”

“Just as the tutor – guys…gonna drive me barmy, what is her bloody name?! – comes running up waving her arms like a crazy person screaming ‘Don’t do it, Theo! You’re gonna die!’ but Theo had already jumped.”

“I freaking heard her, too. So, here I’m already jumping and now I’m one hundred percent sure I’m going to die. I screamed all the way down.” All three boys were hysterical and Lizzie was laughing just because of their reactions to each other.
“What happened?” She insisted when no one continued. “Obviously you didn’t die!” More laughter before Theo was able to choke out an answer.

“I bounced!”

“Like one of those Muggle rubber balls…boing, boing, boing,” Draco used his finger in the air to demonstrate the leap frog pattern his young friend had taken once hitting the ground from the top of the garden shed and they all dissolved into a riot of giggles again. Lizzie was swiping tears from her eyes at their antics.

It took many more minutes for them all to calm and if any of them said “boing, boing, boing” they were off again in a riot. Finally, after a smiling, but frustrated Madam Rosmerta told them to stuff it or get out, they calmed enough to wipe their eyes and clear their throats.

“I gotta use the loo,” Draco said once they were sipping their beers and giving each other smirks behind their mugs. “I’ll be right back.” He leaned in and kissed Lizzie on the forehead then shot a warning look at his friends. “Be. Nice. Do not scare her away or I’ll kill you.” He said pointedly.

The other two boys shared an innocent glance as if to say “Who? Us?” Before nodding.

The moment Draco was gone, they pounced on her. “Dear sweet Circe, what have you done to him?” Blaise asked, grinning. “He’s never been this happy, ever. It’s refreshing to see.”

“I think he’s in lo-o-o-ve with you, Miss America,” Theo teased, stretching the ‘o’ in love out to three syllables.

Lizzie felt her face go bright red, but her eyes sparkled. All those brothers meant she was quite used to being teased relentlessly. “I sure hope so. I feel the same way.”

Both boys started making smoochy noises at each other. “Draco’s in lo-ove, Draco’s in lo-ove.” They chanted before she waved at them to stop, grinning.

“Well, Miss America, welcome to the club, then.” Theo raised his drink and motioned for the other two at the table to do the same.

“What club?” Lizzie laughed, raising her glass. She was confused.

“The People Who Love Draco Club, of course,” Blaise said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Now that you’re a member, you’re probably stuck for life. He’s hard to get over, that one. No matter how upset he makes you.”

Lizzie silently agreed from her personal experience back in October. “I can see that,” she conceded. “I take it if you’re initiating me to this club, you approve?”

“You bet your beautiful eyes we do,” Blaise winked at her flirtatiously and she felt color rise in her cheeks again.

“And as one of us,” Theo continued. “Know that you can always come to us if you need help. Us Slytherins stick by our own, and you, Miss America, are now an honorary Slytherin…being you’re dating the Prince and all.”

They clinked their glasses with smiles and laughter and more banter. She would toast to that. She couldn’t be more grateful that Draco had these friends in his corner, they seemed like really great guys.
*With this chapter I officially broke 100,000 words and 200 typed Word Document pages! I’ve never written anything this long before! O.O

*Petechia – plural petechiae – small red or purple spots on the skin caused by a minor bleed from broken capillary blood vessels. (This happened to me with my third pregnancy – it is a very real thing.)

*If anyone reading this thinks I'm going overboard with the pregnancy symptoms I'm going to say - welcome to my world of real life horror shows for pregnancy. I was violently ill with all four of my pregnancies. My daughter's was by far the worst, and I was hospitalized overnight twice for fluids. I lost 35 pounds with her my first trimester, I couldn't keep ANYTHING down for WEEKS. I'm not over-exaggerating.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Eight
March 1999
10-11 Weeks Gestation

The first week of her psychiatry appointment had been silent. As had the second. She was sitting in her third. It was fifteen minutes from the end and she still hadn’t said a word.

“How’s your morning sickness?” The petite, dark-blonde haired man asked, tapping a pen lightly against a notebook. A notebook that was filled with little notes that Hermione figured were probably doodles, being she had barely said five words total since she started these sessions.

Dr. Jenkins was a Muggle with a witch for a daughter. He was part of a Ministry program that was recruiting Muggles “in the know” to help in areas of expertise the wizarding world was sorely lacking – such as psychology and help for people with mental health issues.

“How far along are you, now? Ten weeks?”

Hermione stared pointedly at the clock above the doctor’s head. Ten minutes and she could get the flying fuck out of there. Although she was slightly impressed that the man had at least read the questionnaire that Severus had mostly filled out for her. He was right - ten weeks. Today. March first. Thirty weeks to go. Then a lifetime of servitude to a child she didn’t want. Guilt washed through her at those thoughts and she found her hand clutching her stomach apologetically. I didn’t mean it. She thought frantically. I will love you, so much. I swear it.

Dr. Jenkins watched the broken, young girl pat her abdomen lightly, a frown marring her gaunt, but pretty features. “You do know it’s not too late, Hermione. You could still terminate the pregnancy.”

The girl’s head lifted rebelliously and there was a spark of defiant determination in her eyes he had not yet seen in the last two sessions. A good sign. “No one would blame you.”

Hermione’s dark eyes glittered with anger.

“You want the child?” The man was not surprised, he had been told by the fiancé (the very intimidating fiancé) that there was a chance the child could be his. Dr. Jenkins was positive Hermione’s love for him was genuine, even with the reports of her pushing away from the poor professor. He had politely suggested therapy for Snape as well, to which the dark-haired man had growled something unintelligible and menacing and the doctor had desisted.

He was surprised when an affirmative nod came from the girl, before she dropped her eyes back to her flat stomach. A start. Finally. One question answered.

“How is your relationship with your fiancé? Are you still struggling with intimacies?”

Dark eyes met his again, they were soft this time. She wanted to talk about the baby. She regarded him for a moment before looking away yet again. “Let’s talk about something else. How is your revising going? My notes say you feel behind, but that you’re an excellent student. You have made up all your missed work from your month away and are on time with your assignments again?”

More silence. “How is your relationship with your fiancé? Are you still struggling with intimacies?”
Hermione would have laughed aloud if she hadn’t felt like bursting into tears. Intimacies. What intimacies? She hadn’t touched him, not even a brush of the hand, for three weeks. The last time he had put his hands on her, she had flinched away from him, not wanting him to touch her disgusting body. He had not even held her hair back as she vomited. Granted she was vomiting daily. All day. Every day. Madam Pomfrey said that should clear up in the next few weeks. Gods, she hoped so. She brushed those thoughts away to get back on track. She knew it was her fault he wasn’t touching her. She knew she had pushed him so hard he had given in and gave her the space she had been demanding through her silent actions.

“Times up!” She declared, hopping up and fleeing the office the moment the second hand turned the clock over to seven. She burst through the door straight to the fireplace where she scooped a handful of floo powder and tossed it in the grate, calling out, “Severus Snape’s Office, Hogwarts!”

Severus had stood when she burst into the waiting room at almost a dead sprint, staring after her dark curls with longing. He turned his haunted eyes on the psychiatrist hopefully. The man was also staring after Hermione, then he looked to the professor.

“She gave me a little bit today. More than last week.” He tried to reassure her fiancé. “She loves the child she’s carrying.”

A small look of relief flooded Severus’s face. “Did she say that?”

“She didn’t have to. I told her it was not too late to terminate, I thought she was going to murder me with her eyes.” He paused for a moment, taking in the very small smirk and flicker of light that crossed Snape’s face. “I asked her if she wanted the child, she nodded. She protects it, covering her womb with her hand. Have you noticed this?”

Snape gave a curt nod. “I have.”

“Is she still avoiding your touch?”

“Yes, but I have to admit I haven’t been trying.”

“How long?” Dr. Jenkins inquired. Snape crossed his arms over his chest, tilting his head slightly as he pretended to think about it, trying to downplay just how desperately he missed and craved the physical connection they had shared. “A couple days before her first session. I put my hands on her shoulders and she ripped away from me like I had shocked her.”

The doctor noted his specificity and decided to let him play his game. “Does she let her friends touch her?”

“I can ask them, but I don’t believe so. Madame Pomfrey does at her weekly check – that’s the school Mediwitch. Muggles called them nurses.” He watched the doctor nod thoughtfully.

“I want you to start trying again,” he told Snape. “Little things. Brush her fingers if you eat together, touch her face when you tell her good night. Try and hug her.”

“And if she continues to refuse?”

“Keep trying. She needs the human connection. Don’t be overbearing.” He had to stifle a laugh when the man glowered at him. He feared it would be difficult for the dark-haired war hero not to be overbearing. “I believe she feels unworthy of touch. It’s common in victims of sexual assault. I have another young woman right now who describes feeling dirty, unlovable, unclean, disgusting and a multitude of other self-depreciating adjectives.” He watched the severe planes of Severus Snape’s face carefully, but saw no flicker or trace of what the man was feeling. He had to admit it, Snape was
very good at hiding his emotions. “I will see you both next week?” He finally asked after the silence stretched longer than was comfortable.

Snape nodded and strode to the fire to follow his fiancé.

“I wrote my mother and told her about you,” Draco said softly, playing with Lizzie’s fingers. They were camped out in the abandoned Head Girl room after Ginny had whispered in Lizzie’s ear at lunch that it would be free that night, knowing of the blonde girls plans. They were propped on the bed. Draco’s back against the headboard, Lizzie sitting between his legs, back against his chest. He dropped a soft kiss behind one ear.

“Yeah? What did she say?” Lizzie said dreamily. She had been surprised when he had asked her if they could just cuddle and talk for a while. The word ‘cuddle’ from Draco’s mouth felt like a bit of an oxymoron, but she wasn’t one to refuse. She loved to cuddle. She had a picnic basket that the kitchen house elves had helped her with sitting on the coffee table by the roaring fire. He didn’t know, but she was planning for them to stay the night.

“She would like to meet you,” he told her. She stiffened.

“Is that a good idea? What about your father?”

“My mother will handle my father. She always does.” Draco’s tone was tight and he laced his fingers with hers, squeezing tight. She squeezed back. “She invited you to stay with us for the Easter holidays.”

Lizzie tilted her head up to gauge his seriousness. “Do you want me to?”

He looked bewildered. “Why wouldn’t I? Any extra minutes with you just makes my days all the better.”

“Aw,” she teased him, planting a sloppy kiss on his jaw. “That’s the sweetest thing ever!”

Draco grimaced at being called sweet, rolling his eyes. “You seem to drag it out of me, witch,” he muttered gruffly before dropping a chaste kiss on her lips. She snuggled into his embrace more deeply. “Will you come?”

“I’ll write my folks and make sure it’s okay. If they say yes, I will be happy to spend Easter with you.”

He loved that answer, squeezing her again and making her breath whoosh out of her lungs. “Draco!” she laughed before he kissed her again, more deeply this time.

“Hungry?” he asked her breathlessly after an unspecified amount of time. Somehow, she had ended up on top of him. Their kissing was getting out of hand and the evening was young. She was getting more adventurous in their physical pursuits, but Draco’s control was getting put to harder and harder tests. Double-entendre intended.

“Not for food,” she whispered, nipping at his chest while rolling her hips. He growled and slapped a hand up to his forehead.

“Lizzie…” he said. “Let’s eat. I need help taking my mind off this or I’m going to push too far.” He had made a point of being overly honest with her about his wants and desires. He wasn’t trying to push her or make her uncomfortable, but he needed her to know that he was actively restraining himself and doing his best not to scare her.
She paused in her ministrations and sat up, smiling at his grunt of want as her knicker-covered quim dug into his trouser-clad erection. “I don’t want you to take your mind off it,” she said cautiously. She nervously started to play with the ends of her hair over one shoulder. “I’m ready.”

Draco’s mouth went dry even as his dick gave an excite leap from its confined place in his pants and under her bum. He sat up with her still on his lap, wrapping his arms around her waist. His grey eyes sparkled like dew in the morning sun. “You’re sure?”

“I am. I checked with Hermione, she won’t be coming here tonight. We have the room to ourselves.” She paused, watching him with serious, cautious eyes, worried she was being presumptuous. “You’ll stay with me?”

“Yes, absolutely,” he declared adamantly, claiming her mouth gently. “Contraception? Should I do the charm?” “No, I got potion from Madam Pomfrey a few days ago. I’m good until next month.” He grinned at her, realizing she had been planning this for a while. He pulled her back in and they kissed for a long time, eventually ending up with Draco’s hips nestled in the cradle of her thighs and Lizzie on her back, head cushioned by fluffy pillows. She had tried to remove his shirt a few times, but he had stopped her. Insisting they were going to go very, very slow.

He only started undressing her when she was writhing with need beneath him, her hips rolling and legs shifting with pent up frustration. He sat back and peeled his jumper off before rolling her top up and off as well. He turned his attention to her neck, softly toying with her nipples under the lacey expanse of a navy-blue bra with one hand. He teased them to a painful point, enjoying her gasps and grunts of pleasure as her hips continued to roll. “Draco, please.”

His brain zinged triumphantly with her needy pleas and whimpers. He was so ungodly hard it was borderline painful, but he wasn’t second in his class for nothing. After she had told him she was a virgin, he went on the hunt. Reading every book and magazine article on how to make the first time for a girl special – and not painful. That’s what he was most concerned about. He wanted it to be pleasurable for her. All his sources eventually came back to the same three things. One, make sure the witch was relaxed and enjoying herself. Check. Two, make sure the witch was … for lack of a better word … primed. Ample foreplay and an orgasm or two before penetration. He was well on his way through the first part and already had plans to get her off twice before taking any pleasure for himself. Three, stay calm, start slow, build in intensity. He could do this.

Slowly her bra came off, he lavished attention on her soft, perky tits. Stroking her stomach and rib cage, dipping his fingers into the waistband of her skirt to pet the top of her downy, soft pubic hair. She was starting to grind her teeth with frustration when Draco took pity on her. He divested himself of his trousers and socks, then unzipped her skirt, sliding it down her legs. He left her knickers in place for the moment, needing that final barrier to help himself stay in control. He was an eighteen-year-old, hot blooded male after all. He skimmed his fingers up her legs and the insides of her thighs. Her whole body was trembling with desire. For him. She was so bloody gorgeous and he told her so. She gave an embarrassed chuckle as he sealed his mouth to hers again, kissing her deep and slow while one hand slipped beneath the elastic of her knickers into her silky heat.

She was drenched and he groaned against her lips as her hips bucked, wildly seeking the friction she desperately need. He bypassed her hotwire button and slipped two fingers into her dripping sheath. They slid in with ease due to her over preparedness. She ripped her mouth away from him, dropping her forehead to his shoulder and pressing damp, chaste kisses to his throat between gasps of pleasure. He slid his fingers back out and encircled the bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs. She was so ready and wanton that she exploded before he made two full circles, crying out his name against his shoulder. He made a guttural sound in his throat before moving to the next part of his plan. He was a bit nervous about this maneuver as he had never had the desire to do it before this stunning,
intelligent, sweet girl entered his life.

He rid himself of his boxer-briefs before rolling her panties down her legs and tossing them on the floor. They stared at each other, drinking in the other. Neither overly shy, but also not overly confident. She sat up and reached for his face with one hand, he nuzzled her fingers before gently pushing her back into her nest of pillows and sliding between her thighs. Adjusting her legs over each shoulder as she looked at him with heavy lidded curiosity.

“You don’t have to do that, Draco!” she exclaimed in a voice thick with desire when she realized his intentions, but he just chuckled softly, his breath ghosting across her sex.

“I want to. This part is a first for me. We’ll both have firsts tonight. Relax, love,” he insisted. Her eyes softened and she let her head fall back as he gently kissed her damp mound. She smelled amazing, her arousal was musky and sweet, reminding him of an over-ripe honey dew melon. Tentatively he flicked his tongue out and growled. Holy fuck. He had never tasted anything like her. Tangy and sweet with a hint of salt. Pure Lizzie – and he was absolutely head over heels in love with this girl.

No longer worried about the taste, he nuzzled in harder, seeking her clit. He flicked his tongue across it light and fast and the spiral inside of her went from just barely coiled to clenched tight. She whimped a mix of utter distress and enjoyment, her fingers came down to grasp his short locks. “Draco!” Lizzie’s whine was delicious. “Oh, Gods!” Her hips bucked. Her touch made him growl and he latched on to her nub of pleasure like he would to her nipple and pushed her over the edge with a loud shout of ecstasy, having to hold her hips in place firmly with his hands in order to ride the waves with her. “Unghhhhh! Ah!” She cried out. “Oh, shit.” Her body jerked hard as he chuckled at her vulgarities.

Her aftershocks and grunts and the jerk of her hips were mesmerizing as he continued to tease her nub and lick up her release. He felt extraordinarily powerful and masculine. He had never known a woman could taste so unbelievably scrumptious. Very, very slowly, he crawled up onto his knees and slid his steel wrapped in velvet, dark red cock over her sex, coating himself in her juices. Her eyes flew wide at this new, extremely intimate caress and their gazes locked. “You’re still sure?” he murmured.

“I don’t think I could ever be more positive.” Her voice was husky and sated. “You feel so amazing.” She tentatively rolled her hips and they groaned together. He knew after all the foreplay he might not last long. They had all night, though. She had seen to that. If she didn’t orgasm this time, she would again. He positioned himself at her entrance, and as he slowly pushed into her, he kissed her. Sharing the taste of herself as they became one.

Her breath hitched as he filled her, slow, gentle, and sweet. She had been braced for pain or discomfort, but he had gotten her so ready, made her so relaxed, that there was none. Just a stretch and fill that was so sublime she felt delirious with it. They both let out a shaky breath when he was buried in her. “Oh, fuck, Lizzie.” His forehead was resting on hers and she had her arms around his shoulders, nails digging into his upper back.

“I know,” she whispered, breath hitching in her throat. It was an emotional experience for both of them. He covered her mouth, kissing her gently, brushing her lips over and over with his while clinging to every ounce of his control to give her a time to adjust. When she gave a tentative thrust of her hips, he couldn’t stop the rumble that left him.

Then he was moving. He reached down to hike one leg around his hip, granting him deeper access. She gasped and made little sex noises in her throat, driving him bloody barmy. “Can I go faster?” he begged, trying to keep a steady, but gentle rhythm. She nodded mutely, fixing her mouth to the
hallow above his collar bone to suckle and he let go a bit.

“Ah!” She cried out, throwing her head back with the change of pace. “Oh, Gods. Draco. Oh. Oh. OH!” He felt himself bottom out against her cervix, but her sounds were all in the affirmativer, so he didn’t slow, didn’t stop. He was barreling towards his orgasm, but grit his teeth, trying to hold out for her to have one more. It took much focus to slide one hand underneath her, pressing her back to arch a little more so his pelvic bone would hit her clit. Her grunt the first time it caught and her immediate understanding thrilled him; she opened her legs wider, dug her heels in, and arched so he’d hit it every time. Her noises became more desperate and she started to tremble.

“Lizzie…” He could barely think, let alone talk. He fought the tightening in his bollocks with everything he had. He was going to explode like a popped pastry can. He grit his teeth and forced his thoughts elsewhere for a moment. Once again in control for a few more beats he started talking.

“You feel so good, sweetheart. So fucking good.” She grunted an incoherent agreement, he chuckled lightly and gasped in a breath. “I want you to come again. For me. Please, Lizzie? So bloody amazing. Let’s try and come together. I’m so close, are you close, baby?”

Another nonsensical groan of affirmation. He rolled the short thrusts into a grind and her eyes rolled back in her head, eyelashes fluttering, her mouth dropped open in a silent crow of delight and he felt her muscles explode around him as a long, low moan erupted from her. He pushed her completely over the edge by slamming into her, lengthening and deepening his drives and he was behind her in a few short thrusts, crying out her name and pounding out his release before collapsing into her arms, rolling them slightly to his hip so he wouldn’t crush her into the mattress. They were both shaking and covered in a thin sheen of perspiration. He kissed her hard and fast, then pressing more to her cheeks and the dip between her eyes before returning to her mouth for a slow, deep, Earth shattering exchange. He poured everything he was feeling into that kiss, all the emotions that were surging through the synapses of his body and she returned it with equal fervor. When they had to stop to breath he rested his forehead in her disarray of golden locks. “I love you,” he whispered with conviction, lips grazing her ear. “You are amazing. That was…it was bloody fantastic. Absolutely wonderful.”

Her blush was sweet, her eyes down cast. She looked up to meet his gaze and her blush deepened. “It was perfect,” she murmured, kissing him lightly. “I love you, too.”
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Notes

I have only three pre-written chapters left and then you'll have to wait as I fumble through writing the rest of the story. I will post one per day until Monday when you'll get Chapter 31. I'm working on Chapter 32, but struggling.

Make sure you follow for updates. I am also on AFF and FFN if you prefer one of those forums or AOO. LissaDream on all of them. xLissa

Chapter Twenty-Nine
Mid-Late March
12-13 Weeks Gestation

“Neville, hitch my leg up, yes. Ooo, yes. Just like that.” Luna’s sweet, lackadaisical voice could be heard ringing clear down the second-floor hidden passageway. It was just shy of curfew. Bloody hell. They really couldn’t have found a better spot? Snape grimaced. The last pairing in this castle he wanted to catch going at it were Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood. He stopped outside the passageway and cleared his throat.

A frightened squawk came from Longbottom and he had to stifle a bubble of hysterical laughter. Best way to kill that kid’s hard-on was to have his most feared professor catch him trying to round second base. “Please step from behind the tapestry…immediately.” He drawled in a lazy, deep rumble.

“Luna! Luna, no!” Longbottom could be heard. “He doesn’t mean…put your - !”

“Oh, hullo, Professor Snape.” Lovegood had done as asked, presented herself immediately. Without putting her clothing back on. Frozen in surprise, it took Snape a moment to look away from the tiny, bare breasted girl. Grimacing, he did a one-eighty and put his back to the pixie.

“Miss Lovegood, I would very much prefer it if you would put…your…shirt…back…on.” He said through gritted teeth, he could feel heat and color creeping up his neck. Sweet mother of all things magical. The girl was completely uninhibited. Always had been. He resigned himself to being more elaborate in his instructions in the future if he ever had the unfortunate happenstance of catching her again.

“Luna! I tried to tell you!” There was a small squeak from the girl as Longbottom grasped her arm and pulled.

“I’m sorry, Professor Snape.” He heard a rustle of the curtain. “Luna just…well. She’s just Luna.”

“Indeed, Mr. Longbottom.”

“I do apologize if my nudity made you uncomfortable, Professor Snape.”

“We shall not speak of it again, Miss Lovegood.” Came the dry answer. Neville was grinning at Luna, trying to not bust out laughing.
A few moments later, he had two students standing in front of him, fully clothed this time. “Ten points from Gryffindor, fifteen from Ravenclaw.”

Lovegood cocked her head at him questioningly. “Why do I lose an extra five, Professor?”

Snape held back a snort. This had been nothing if not entertaining. “For indecent…exposure…Miss Lovegood. If you two don’t take yourselves back to your…separate…common rooms immediately, it will be another five…each…for missed curfew. Do…I make myself…clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Longbottom answered promptly, taking the little blonde chit’s hand and pulling her along. Neither noticed the smirk he gave the two as they disappeared. That was the most amusing thing he had come across in weeks.

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” Ginny snapped at her friend, frustrated beyond belief. She glanced at Snape who was sitting behind his desk while Ginny tapped loudly again on Hermione’s bedroom door. “Hermione, can you hear me?” Three more loud knocks. “You have got to stop holing yourself up in here. Have you even seen the outside these last two months? There are no bloody windows down here.”

She was met with more silence. She saw Snape drop his head into one hand, the other penning something in blood red ink across some poor, unfortunate souls’ essay. She absently wondered what year he was marking, seventh years had an essay due the day before. She refocused on the task at hand. Three more pounds. “I’m not leaving. I will sit out here all freaking night if I have to, you ungrateful swot.” She saw Snape’s head snap up in surprise and she threw a wink at him. She thought a small smile tugged the corner of his mouth before he turned back to his work. It was saying a lot about his patience that he had allowed her to carry on thus for almost the last thirty minutes.

There was a tentative knock at the door and both Ginny and Snape looked up to see Lizzie and Susan peering into the room cautiously. Snape gestured them in halfheartedly as if saying, “Be my guest.”


Susan didn’t knock, just started talking. The three other people in the room were barely able to breathe when they heard her words. “Hermione? It’s Susan. Can I come in?” She knew she wouldn’t get a reply, so she continued, not even stopping for a breath. “Hermione. I know what you’re going through.” They heard a snort from inside, but it didn’t throw the redhead off. “I was raped during the war, he took my virginity. Let me in, we can talk. Maybe we can help each other feel better.”

Snape stood abruptly, eyes flashing with surprise, hands shaking at his sides as Lizzie and Ginny both tucked up behind Susan protectively. The three exchanged, shocked looks at this unexpected display of candor. “I know it really helped me to talk about it. I saw a Muggle psychologist for a while. He helped me process my feelings. Are you seeing a psychologist?” Susan continued to talk to Hermione through the door like no one else was listening.

“It happened here, at Hogwarts. On the battle ground. It was Nott Senior, I pulled off his mask while I tried to fight him off me. He disarmed me. Broke my wand. I was out by Hagrid’s hut, just at the
edge of the forest. I was fighting with Cho and Marietta. They ran off to get help. I blamed them for a long time."

More silence, tears were starting to stream down Lizzie’s face and Ginny looked about ready to fly into a rage. “He dragged me into the forest, tied me to a tree. Ripped my robes. Bit me. I still have teeth marks on my shoulder and left breast.” Snape sat down heavily in his chair, eyes sliding shut, nostrils flaring with rage, but he let her continue. Hope flooded him. Maybe the realization she was not alone in her experiences would help.

Susan’s voice was calm, unemotional without being detached; just matter of fact and clinical. “I begged him not to and he used the Cruciat on me. I’ve never felt anything like that and I hope I never do again.” She paused and they all looked up as they heard something crash from inside the room. “Are you okay, honey?” Susan was concerned. “Can I come in? We can talk. You can tell me anything, I won’t judge you.”

No other sounds came. She took a deep breath, her voice was starting to tremble, her face flushed pink. “His breath stank and it was obvious he hadn’t showered in days. He kissed me, bit my lip. Slapped me across the face when I started to cry. My nose bled.” Her voice was shaking more now. Ginny laced her fingers through one of her hands, Lizzie the other. The pretty girl squeezed both and gave them a small smile of thanks. “He used some sort of charm to tie my knees to my wrists. Sliced my shirt and bra off. mauled me.

“When he put himself inside me, I threw up from the pain. He hit me again before vanishing it, but then covered my nose and mouth, not letting me breathe. I thought I was going to die. I felt like I was being ripped to shreds down there. Turned out I had been. It took three magical repairs to put things right.” A strangled sound of fury left her Potions professor and she felt a flame of heat rip up her face. “I’m sorry, Miss Bones. I am merely angry that I cannot raise him from the dead so I can kill him for you.” Came the calm, baritone voice. This made Susan relax again.

“He got me pregnant,” Susan said, her voice was clear, but unbearably soft. “I wasn’t as strong as you, though. I terminated the pregnancy. He or she would be just a few weeks old right now, so I’ve been thinking about it a lot. I second guess myself sometimes, but what’s done is done. I can’t change it.”

Snape was floored. Did the girl know Hermione was pregnant? Ginny and Lizzie exchanged bewildered looks and their eyes met Snape’s. Both girls paled at his expression. “She’s pregnant?” Ginny whispered. “Oh, Gods. She’s been so tired…and all the throwing up! How did I miss this? I’m an awful friend.” She turned back to the door and started pounding again. “Hermione! Please let us in. Please!” She was crying openly, angry blotches appearing under her freckles.

The four people in the room froze as they hear a lock unlatch. The door cracked open and Hermione’s tear streaked, gaunt face appeared. “Only Susan,” she whispered. Ginny looked ready to protest and Lizzie let out a strangled sob, but Snape…Snap…Snape was elated, grateful. He wanted to give Susan Bones the moon.

“Only Susan,” he agreed firmly, telling the other two girls with his eyes to leave. Hermione did not meet his gaze, but opened the door wider to let in the blue-eyed redhead. When she disappeared inside, the door was closed, the lock sliding home.

“Ladies,” Snape said warningly to Ginny and Lizzie before they left. “You will keep the pregnancy between those in this room until Hermione is ready to share with Potter and Mr. Weasley. She must be the one to tell them.”

The girls nodded. Lizzie opened her mouth to ask a question before thinking better of it and simply
walking away. Ginny stared at him a long time, meeting his eyes unflinchingly. She must have found what she needed, because she gave him a small smile and a nod before following the Hufflepuff.

Snape watched her the next few days, carefully continuing to integrate his instructions from Dr. Jenkins from two weeks prior. A brush of his fingers when he handed her a bottle of ink. A gentle touch on her face when he checked on her before he went to sleep. He followed her into the bathroom a few times to hold her hair back when the pregnancy sickness overtook her. Each time she jumped or shied away from his touch, but he didn’t miss the longing in her eyes. The need for human contact.

After Susan Bones had disappeared into her room for more than three hours the Tuesday after her last psychiatry meeting, she had seemed different. A bit lighter, more needy of company. He was getting her to exchange pleasantries almost daily. It got even better as Susan would visit with her after classes ended each day for an hour or more. After the Hufflepuff left, Hemione would leave her door wide open while she worked. He was surprised to find it unlocked while she slept. She wasn’t avoiding being in his presence. He had been able to encourage her to eat a bit more than normal in the evenings, as he had been ordering their dinner into his chambers every night for the last month. Evening meals seemed to be the only ones she was keeping down, so the fact she was putting more away heartened him.

He had finally broken down and contacted a Healer specializing in prenatal care at St. Mungo’s and had gotten an approval on an anti-nausea potion. He was planning on presenting it to her tonight along with two others the Healer had helped him with. He was prepared – even wished – for a fight. It would be something other than painful politeness. “I brewed you a mood stabilizer.” A pale green vial was plunked down in front of her. “I spoke with a Healer specializing in prenatal care and without going in depth, told her you have been depressed. She recommended this concoction. I ran it past Dr. Jenkins, he agreed it was an excellent idea. I also have an approved anti-nausea potion and a vitamin potion you will be taking every day until you’re at a healthy weight.” He added the next two vials to the first.

A frown pulled heavy at the corners of her plump lips as she stared at the potions. “I don’t want them.”

Hands came down heavy on her shoulders and she jumped and squawked in protest, leaping off her chair and away from him. She glared at him through narrowed eyes. “You’re being ridiculous,” he growled at her, looming over her authoritatively. He would have regretted the tearful look she gave him if she hadn’t cried almost every day for the last two months. He would have felt bad for treating her unkindly if he thought there was anything else he could do at this point. Yes, she had made some progress over the last few days, but not enough. He was simply unwilling to continue on like this. She had to choose to get better. She had to choose him as he was choosing her.

“You will take these. You must.” He snatched the mood stabilizer up and plucked the cork from it, thrusting it into her face. “So help me God, Hermione Jean Granger, if you do not take this willingly I will force it down your throat.”

She took a purposeful step away from him and the reaction he had been seeking with those specific words set a thrill through him. “I choose what I put in my body! No one else does. I choose what I do and do not do. I do!” She stamped her foot and watched an eyebrow disappear into his hairline.

“You choose everything, Hermione. Always. I will never take your choices away from you, but I will be damned if I stand by and continue to let you make all the wrong ones. You won’t help your nausea with the lozenges Poppy procured for you. You won’t schedule yourself a short nap before dinner so you can work a little later at night as I suggested a month ago. You are literally wasting
away to skin and bones, and you’re going to decline an anti-nausea potion? Who are you? Not the logical young woman I’ve come to know and love!

“You refused to terminate the pregnancy, and I respected that decision. I knew the woman who made that decision. You are not taking care of yourself – which means you are endangering the child you insisted on keeping. The child I know you love even if you can’t say it aloud. You won’t even talk at your psychiatry appointments – don’t look at me like that – of course I know you’re not talking to him. You signed a paper giving him permission to tell me everything.” Her outraged gasp only goaded him. “It is not my fault if you didn’t read what you were signing, pet. It doesn’t matter, though, even if you hadn’t signed it you practically scream it at me every time I remind you of your appointment. Just because I’m not poking in your mind doesn’t mean I don’t sometimes hear.” Her glare turned into a glower of disapproval, her arms were crossed tightly over her chest and she was all but snarling at him in contempt. He recorked the vial and set it down.

“You’ve stopped spending time with your friends. You do nothing but attend class and sit in your room.” His breath shuddered through him. “Hermione...” He had to grit his teeth and clear his throat in attempt to keep the worst of his emotion and pain from her, but let some slip through. “You’re pushing me away and I don’t know what to do to bring you back to me. I’m terrified I’m going to lose you.” He wasn’t meeting her gaze. “Hermione, I will fight through hell for you, but I need you to give me something. Anything. I miss you.” The words were foreign to him, but they ripped through the air with a forceful need and he grasped her shoulders. She knew how rare it was for him to say something like that and her eyes widened in surprise, pain slicing through them – but the pain sparked something deep in her core.

Bloody hell, she was sick of crying. But here she was again, on the verge of tears. Her self-depreciation, depression, and overall feelings of unworthiness made her say what she did next. Made her throw out her own darkest fear; smashing his face in it in a daring challenge. “Then leave,” she whispered. He closed his eyes tightly, his heart sinking. Where was his witch? Why could he not help pull her out of this? Why was she shutting him down? Why was she shutting him down? “You’re going to eventually, anyway.” She attempted to jerk away from him, but he wouldn’t let her, his fingers dug painfully into her shoulders and she gasped as the tears splashed hotly over her cheeks.

His eyes finally settled on hers and the heat in them was stifling. “Have I given the impression I’m going anywhere?”

A small flicker of guilt crossed her face. No. He hadn’t. Not once. He had done nothing but try and make things good for her since she was let go. He had done everything she asked, had even done things she hadn’t asked for. She was trying to find the girl who had hunted and destroyed horcruxes. The one who had fought in the Battle of Hogwarts. She was trying to find the young woman who seduced a twenty year her senior professor (and a bloody terrifying one to boot), the one who had fallen in love with him and had been so happy mere weeks ago. She was trying desperately to find the girl who had played a horror filled game with her abductors and won. She was desperate for the girl who had asked her fiancé to sleep with her to give her doubt about who her potential child’s father could be. She tried to find the brazen woman who had the strength to make love the very day after she had been brutally raped. She just couldn’t. She didn’t know where that person had gone.

The one that was left was turning into a shell. She had lost over a stone. Her clothing hung off of her. Her face was gaunt. She had no appetite. No ambition. She was barely making it through classes. Looking at this man she loved, seeing his pain and concern tore at her. And even though she still felt broken, that heat in her core sparked an ember to life in the pit of her stomach. She searched his eyes, his question still hanging in the air. He caught his breath and watched a glow return to those beautiful brown orbs for the first time in weeks. “No,” she murmured. “No, you haven’t given me the impression that you’re going anywhere.”
“I’m not.” He insisted. “I don’t want to. I’m here with you.” He searched her face for a long time, lingering over the sharp angle of her cheekbones, the bruises under her eyes. “I love you. Always. I’m not going anywhere.”

A shuddering breath shattered the silence as she tried to accept his statement. Finally, she nodded and held out her hand. “I’ll take the potions.”

She saw and felt the tension seep out of his body, she hadn’t realized how stressed he was. She watched him as he let go of her to recollect the vial, removing the cork once again. She realized he had lost weight as well, weight he couldn’t afford to lose. He had just begun to look healthy again after the war, and it was all fading again. It was her fault. She straightened her back and squared her shoulders as he handed her the potion. She threw it back and grimaced at the bitter aftertaste. “How often must I take it?”

“Weekly.” The relief in his eyes was palpable and the guilty feeling grew. He handed her the next and the next which she downed in quick succession. The anti-nausea medication was instant. A deep calm swept through her abdomen and her stomach muscles relaxed for the first time in well over a month.

“It shouldn’t take long for them to help you feel better.” He was watching her face, watching the relief flood her features. He knew the anti-nausea potion was instantaneous. She could take one dose every day. It lasted twelve hours. The vitamin potion was specifically geared for prenatal needs. He already noticed the color seeping into her cheeks as her body absorbed nutrients it hadn’t been getting in much too long.

“I will take it without question. You’re right, I need to step up. I’m sorry I’ve been wallowing.” It sounded a bit forced, and he winced.

“Hermione…” He considered her carefully and slowly opened his arms to her. She hadn’t allowed him to hold her in so long. She hadn’t kissed him in much longer. He missed being tender with her, missed being intimate so much. He missed her affection towards him. He may have only had it for a short time, but once he had become accustomed to it, he had never wanted to be without it again.

She looked up at him and gave a curt nod, walking in to his arms, wrapping her own around his waist. He curled one arm around her head, sinking his fingers into her hair, and the other around her shoulders and dropped his face into her hair breathing in the scent of lavender and vanilla he had come to love so much. Oh, Gods. He felt his muscles start to tremble with relief, anguish seeping from him in waves. He swallowed hard, barely letting himself believe this was really happening. He felt like sobbing.

“You have more excuses than I care to admit to wallow, but you have not been the Hermione Granger I know.” He told her gently when he felt he could talk safely. He squeezed her tightly. “Accept the help that is being given to you. Allow yourself to heal. Stop punishing yourself. You are blameless in this. You did nothing wrong. So many people are scared for you. They’re all waiting on the sidelines to help in any way they can.”

He felt her nod against his chest and she squeezed him more tightly. “I’ve missed you,” she breathed after a moment. She was sure the mood stabilizer was working. She felt more emotionally open than she had in far too long. “So much. I feel so unworthy of you…so…dirty.”

His words caught in his throat as his mind whirred, trying to figure out how to address her fears. Fucking doctor hadn’t told him how to respond to this type of declaration. “Don’t let yourself feel that way.” He said finally, tilting her head up. He dropped a tentative, chaste kiss on her lips and felt her melt into him. The joy of it was extremely overwhelming. It seemed she was just as starved for
his touch as he was for hers by the way she was pushing herself deeper into him. “You will always be the purest thing I hold in my arms. I love you, pet. So much.” Instead of answering him, she looped her arms around his neck and pulled herself onto her tip toes to kiss him again. He groaned when he felt the insistent tapping of her tongue on his lips and he met her tongue with his own enthusiastically.

She clutched at the nape of his neck, digging her nails in deliciously. He tapped down on his racing libido, the hallow ache in his gut that had been craving her touch and love for far too long. The feeling of waking after a terrible dream was seeping in and if he didn’t control the situation he would do something he would regret. He gently cupped her face with both hands and slowly ended the kiss. “Stay by me tonight. Let me hold you. Just hold you.” She searched his eyes and nodded slowly.

“Yes,” she agreed, her eyes welled again. “I’m so sorry for all I’ve done. You deserve so much better than me.”

“No!” He pulled her to his chest again, careful not to overwhelm her. “No. You have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing.” He felt her nod against him again. He took her shoulders and pushed her away, guiding her to the settee in his office. He used his wand to stroke the fire that was burning low, building the flame and heat until the room felt better. He sat and pulled her down into his lap.

“Tell me you understand that what has happened to you is not your fault.”

She looked away. “I know it’s not my fault, but I just - ”

“No. Tell me that it’s not your fault.”

She set her jaw determinedly. “It’s not my fault. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“That’s right.” He continued. “Say – ‘I am loved.’”

“I am loved.”

“Tell me who loves you.”

“You do.” She was getting choked up again. Saying these things aloud was almost making her believe it.

“Yes. I do. Who else?”

“Harry.”

“He’s your brother. He loves you very much. Who else?”

“Ron and Ginny.”

“All the Weasley’s. Molly has been writing me daily. Who else?”

“Lizzie.”

“She’s been a nightmare and a right thorn in my side trying to help you. I’d say she loves you more than even you know. Who else?”

“My parents.”

“Yes. Even though they’re gone, their love is inside you. Anyone else?”
“No?”

“Yes. Minerva. Poppy. All your professors. You’ve been a favorite for years.”

This pulled a smirk out of her even as tears slid gently down her face.

“Who else loves you, Hermione?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you love yourself?”

A very long pause, then a quiet answer. “Not as much as I used to.”

Severus nodded. He suspected as much. “We’ll work on that. There’s one more person.”

“Oh?”

“Do you know?”

“I don’t.”

“The child you’re carrying.”

She gasped in surprise, a hand coming to flutter over the very slight swell of her lower abdomen. She turned watery, hopeful eyes on him. “Do you think so?” The longing was heartbreaking. “Do you think they could love me?”

“How could they not? You’re Hermione Granger.”
“Welcome, Prime Minister.” Minerva indicated for Kingsley to have a seat. “Brandy?”

“Thank you, Headmistress, I would love some.” He inclined his head politely as he took a seat. “I found myself with an unprecedented free hour this afternoon and very much wanted to come check in on the lovely Miss Granger.”

Minerva’s lips twitched into a frown. She knew Kingsley was truly concerned as he had a very large soft spot for the Golden Trio. She was also aware that said trio looked up to Kingsley with great respect. She supposed it wouldn’t hurt anything to give the man an honest update as long as he promised to keep his silence.

“You are aware that Miss Granger is involved with Severus?” She handled him a crystal tumbler with dark amber liquid.

Kingsley let a sly smile cross his face and nodded, taking a sip from the tumbler. “Yes, since the girl was abducted. I also sit on the board for this school, so I am very well aware. His letter to the board was extraordinarily uncharacteristic of him. I believe the words such as ‘second chances at a good life’ and ‘will step down from my post gladly if that is your decision’ were thrown out there. He is smitten, no?”

“Smitten doesn’t begin to cover it. Those two are bloody well meant for each other. All’s one has to do is see them together to know it.” She let out a happy little chuckle as she sipped on her own glass. “Who would have ever thought it?”

There was a pregnant pause, then she continued. “Pleasant news aside, she’s been struggling. Reports are she is attending classes and completing her work to her normal caliber. However, she spends most evenings locked in her room. Severus said she is not spending time with her friends and that she has distanced herself from him. He been taking her to see a Muggle psychiatrist Monday evenings.”

Kingsley looked surprised. “What changed? She had seemed so stable. Shaken, yes. And of course you expect some emotional trauma after what she endured, but so drastic?”

“The poor thing has found herself with child. Severus feels this has caused a mental snap.”

The Minister froze in shock, hands clenching into fists. “She’s pregnant?”

“I’m afraid so.” Her Scottish brogue was more pronounced with this statement.

“How far along?”

“Oh, I do suppose she’s right around the twelve-week mark at this point.”

“The child could be her one of her attackers.” Kingsley stood in a flourish of robes.
“Well, yes.” Minerva’s voice was hesitant and guarded. His excitement was very appalling to her.

“We most procure a DNA charm result immediately. Do you realize what this could mean for our investigation? If we can get just one of these bastards under our thumbs, we could put an end to this madness!”


“She will understand, she is strong.”

“Minister… Kingsley. I implore you,” Minerva whispered, standing. “You cannot ask this of her. She and Severus were…well. Please excuse my divulgence of too much information, sir, but they were intimate immediately following her release from the hospital.”

Kingsley froze in surprise at such private information, not understanding where the Headmistress was going with this. “So?”

“They only were so because Miss Granger expressed the desire to have doubt of the child’s paternity so as to help her and Severus raise the babe as their own. They are getting married.”

Kingsley slowly sat back down, considering her words very carefully. Finally, he spoke. “Who is giving her prenatal care? I suspect Madam Pomfrey?”

“You suspect correctly.”

“Then we have Madam perform the test to see if the child is Severus’s. If it is, we tell them and take a weight off of their shoulders. If it is not, they never have to know, but we then have a magical signature to go off of.”

Minerva’s lips tightened in a straight line. “When is it you wish to do this?”

“Immediately.”

““You wished to see me, Madam Pomfrey?” Hermione asked quietly. Poppy Pomfrey looked up from her desk with a tender smile, it broadened when she saw the tall, dark Potions Master standing protectively behind the girl.

“Yes, my dear. I would like to move your check to today.” She said in a no-nonsense tone. “I’m afraid I will have to be out of the building tomorrow.”

Severus rose a lone, suspicious brow. Her tone sounded evasive to him, but he decided to say nothing. One day early on her check wouldn’t hurt anything.

A few moments later, Hermione was laid comfortably on a cot at the far end of the hospital wing. Madam Pomfrey was tsk-tsking disapprovingly as she took the girl’s vitals and cast a diagnostic.

“You have lost more weight, my dear. You must not. You are going severely hurt yourself and the child.”

“I know, Madam,” Hermione answered softly. “Severus has found an anti-nausea medication that is quite wonderful. I was able to eat an almost normal supper last night and was actually quite starved for breakfast this morning. I will need to take it slow, as my stomach has shrunk. Things should start going in the right direction, now.”

Poppy watched a tender smile be exchanged with the formidable Severus Snape and felt a tingle of
relief spread through her. Something had finally changed for the better. “You seem much better today, Miss Granger.”

“I feel much better today, Madam Pomfrey.” The reply was said with such heartfelt relief that Poppy felt tears prickle her eyes.

“What else has changed?”

“I made a connection with someone else who has had a similar experience,” the curly-haired brunette answered softly. Severus reached and took her hand with his, his thumb brushing her knuckles softly. “And Severus has also brewed a mood stabilizer and nutrient potion that was recommended by an Obstetrician Healer.”

“Oh, my dear,” Poppy smiled and patted the girl’s leg affectionately. “It does sound like you are on the road to recovery. You must still see your psychologist.”

“I will.”

“I have a few tests I’d like to run today. And if you’d like to, I should be able to find and amplify the child’s heartbeat.”

Severus’s eyes widened in alarm while excitement flooded Hermione’s features. “Really?” she exclaimed. “I would like that very much!”

“First some diagnostics to make sure the child is growing well with no complications.” And a quick paternity test. I do hope Severus doesn’t realize what I’m doing. But the large man was distracted and didn’t pay attention to her fancy wandwork or her muttered incantations until it was too late.

“Poppy!” he exclaimed harshly, and the elder witches face flushed in regret and embarrassment. That was, until the resulting glow made them both pause in shock.

“Do it again.” His whisper was hoarse, his voice constricted.

“What’s the matter?” Hermione was alarmed. She sat up, her arms cradling her middle protectively. “Is everything okay?”

“One moment, love.” Severus reassured, sitting next to her on the bed and sliding an arm around her shoulders.

Poppy repeated the test which took a few moments. The light glowed again and the emotion that overtook Severus’s face almost made the elder witch burst into tears. “It’s mine?” It was an almost hysterical question said so incredibly softly, she read his lips more than she heard his words.

“What’s happening?” Hermione sounded terrified, watching the light wink out of existence. When no one spoke, her voice got a little shriller. “Please! What is going on?”

When Poppy realized Severus couldn’t speak, she happily took the liberty. “The child is perfectly healthy. I am also very happy to inform you that Severus is most definitely its father.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped and tears overflowed her eyes instantly, she turned her face to Severus who was staring at her in disbelief. “Do you promise?” Her face turned back to Poppy as a strangled sob left her. Happiness, relief, shock, and unadulterated joy filled the girl’s features, returning her to the semblance of the strong young women she had always been. “The child is Severus’s? Do you promise?” When Poppy nodded, weeping at her joy, she threw herself into Severus’s arms, peppering his face with kisses murmuring, “It’s ours, the child is ours!” over and over again in quiet
Severus was unable to speak, he just pulled her in tight after a beat and buried his face in her wild, bushy curls, taking slow, shuddering breaths as he fought the need to weep openly.

Poppy gave them a few moments, only returning to them when she heard their soft whispered exchange quiet. They were sitting on the bed together, Hermione in his lap, pressed into his chest, her arms around his waist, his arms around her back. They made a lovely sight for her sore, old eyes.

“Would you like to hear the heartbeat?” she asked the couple warmly.

“Oh, yes!” Hermione exclaimed. “Please.”

“Please sit up on your bum, you can lay back against Severus,” Poppy requested. “I’ll need you to lift your shirt. The girl did as was asked. “I will touch the tip of my wand to your abdomen.”

Hermione nodded, eyes wide with anticipation, one hand gripped in Severus’s. “Prenatal cordis pulsatio.”

A low, thrumming whoosh-whoosh, whoosh-whoosh, whoosh-whoosh filled the air and another happy, tearful smile split the young girl’s face. She glanced up at her fiancé, eyes shining. “That’s incredible,” she whispered. Severus dropped a silent kiss to the top of her head. They listened to the strong, beautiful sign of life for a couple minutes.

“There’s one more test I can perform today, if you would like me to?”

Hermione’s eyes met hers. “What is it?”

“Would you like to know the child’s gender?”

“Oh!” She paused and her teeth came out to worry her bottom lip. “Severus?” She looked up at him, giving him as much say as she had.

“I will leave that up to you, my love,” he whispered, leaning down to kiss her brow before raising their joint hands to brush her cheek.

“Um…” More lip worrying before for she answered. “You know what…”

“I got your note, ’Mione,” Harry called, tapping on the door to the Head Girl suite. “I let everyone else know. Ginny’s with me. Can we come in?”

“Yes!” Came the reply. Ginny and Harry exchanged a surprised look. Their friend’s voice sounded almost normal. Even a little excited. Rolling her eyes as Harry’s hesitancy, Ginny grabbed the knob and pushed the heavy door open. She was surprised to see Hermione and Snape snuggled into the loveseat by the fire. The room had been rearranged, and there was a cluster of overstuffed chairs and a couch by the fire as well, waiting for the gathering of people. Headmistress McGonagall was next to arrive, to Harry and Ginny’s surprise. Ron and Susan, and Lizzie and Draco came next. Snape used a bit of wandless magic to lock the door behind them while everyone exchanged greetings and got comfortable. There was a tea service with cakes and biscuits laid out on the coffee table and Hermione waved her hand at it indicating for everyone to help themselves.

Once everyone was settled with their cups and plates, Severus started talking. “It’s been a rough couple of months.” It was something of an understatement, but the people around the room nodded encouragingly. “But things are turning around.”
Hermione smiled at him softly and sat up to the edge of the loveseat. “I want to thank you all for being so supportive. I know I’ve been very difficult to be around…” She couldn’t help the grin that crossed her face when her friends started protesting and telling her that she had every reason, and that they loved her. She tried to speak again, but they became insistent.

“Oi, you morons,” Draco’s exasperated drawl came from where he was cozied up in a large chair with Lizzie squeezed in next to him. “Let the bushy-haired swot talk.”

His words were met with icy glares from her friends and Hermione felt a bubble of laughter climb her throat and erupt. Eight pairs of eyes looked at her in surprise and the laughter grew and it felt wonderful. She felt wonderful. More wonderful than she had felt in much too long. She had slept – truly slept – in her wizard’s arms last night, she had a full belly of breakfast, she had been told her biggest fear no longer existed. Life was truly, magically turning in the right direction. Now she had to just tell her friends the good news.

She was finally able to get her giggles under control and warmth flooded through her when Severus slid a warm hand over her thigh, his face bright with their joy.

“You look different, today Hermione,” Lizzie whispered. “You’re feeling better?”

“Everything has changed,” Hermione said softly. “I want to thank you all for sticking by me. For trying to be here for me when I just kept pushing you away. You’re all true friends – yes, even you Draco. Don’t think I missed the chocolate cauldrons and caramel nougat you left for me or the attempts to get me to see Lizzie. Thank you for trying to help.”

Draco looked decidedly uncomfortable, especially when Ron and Harry gave him appraising looks.

“I was dealing with some news that made me struggle greatly. Today, though. Today I found out the best thing.”

Susan immediately started grinning, she sat up eyes sparkling. “It’s Professor Snape’s?” she asked in her soft, melodic tones.

Hermione’s face crumpled into a mix of extreme joy and overwhelming emotion. Minerva, Ginny, and Lizzie gasped and Hermione grinned with sparkly, watery eyes.

The boys were confused. “Care to enlighten us?” Came Draco’s lazy request.

“I found out a little over two months ago I am pregnant.”

Ron and Harry were horrified, Draco’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “I…I didn’t handle it well. Which I suppose is quite obvious in hindsight. But today we found out the child is Severus’s. It’s taken a lot of the pain away.”

Lizzie, Ginny, and Susan stood and Hermione leapt to her feet to meet the girls in a squealing mass of hugs in the middle of the circle. Minerva watched as Snape leaned back into the couch, one ankle coming up to cross over the opposite knee, one arm stretched out on the back of the couch. His face was guarded, watching the male portion of the Golden Trio. Her gaze moved to the young men in question, Harry was a mix of shock and bemusement as he watched the girls, Ron was a mix of horrified and … was that sadness? Maybe a little…resignation? Then it flickered, and a small grin started to cross his face.

“I’m gonna be an uncle?” he said to the room in a strong, loud voice, standing. The grin grew larger. Her gaze flickered back to Snape who seemed to have a mix of surprise, relief, and disgust on his face.
Everyone stopped and looked at him, Hermione’s eyes found his and she let out a choked sob of relief before throwing herself at him. He caught her and gave a little twirl, before Harry joined the hug from the other side, encasing her in their affection. They pulled back and kissed her cheeks before hugging her again. The three murmured quietly together while everyone else chattered amongst themselves.

Snape started when Draco sat next to him on the love seat and held out his hand. “Congratulations,” the young blond man said politely. “I know you always wanted children.”

“She hasn’t told anyone the best part yet,” Severus said, taking Draco’s hand in his.

“Oh!” Hermione squeaked when she heard him. “I forgot!”

“What?” Almost everyone answered.

“It’s a girl!”

Chapter End Notes

AN: Snarky author is grinning and saying "You're WELCOME!"
Okay everyone! This is it for daily updates. From this point on, I have to update as I go along. I am part way through writing chapter 32, though, so hopefully by the end of the week at the latest. Thank you for all who’s checked this out, followed it through now. Special thanks to those who kudo. Even more gratefulness to those who comment! Lots and lots of love! xLissaDream

Chapter Thirty-One

My Dearest Hermione,

Hello, darling! I have been thinking about you constantly for weeks and weeks. Severus has been maintaining good communication with Arthur and me and we were ever so pleased to hear you are doing better.

I have also heard the absolutely lovely news that you are expecting a little darling early this coming Fall. I wanted to extend an offer of communication with you – if you have any questions or concerns regarding your pregnancy, please write. I do have quite a bit of experience even if it’s been seventeen years since the last one. Bill and Fleur are expecting a daughter in May, as well. I’m sure she would welcome correspondence from you as you go through pregnancy together. You know I’ve been itching for grandchildren for years, now, and I do so hope you’ll think of me as an honorary Grandmother for your little princess. It will be wonderful for these two babes to grow together as cousins. Even though they’ll not related by blood, you are like a daughter and sister to all of us. Family is family, regardless of genetics.

Now to broach a delicate subject. I know you and Severus have discussed marriage this summer, but I thought that perhaps the impending arrival of your wee one might inspire you both to wed at a sooner time. Perhaps over the Easter holidays? Just say the word, darling, and I will pop over to Hogsmeade this weekend and we can talk about what you would like. I will put everything together and we’ll have you and Severus married before you can say boo.

I look forward to your return owl. Love, Molly (and Arthur)

Hermione read the letter twice, trying to stem the tears pooling in her eyes from making an escape, she knew she had a watery smile on her face. She sat at the breakfast table with her friends, eating a full breakfast as she had every morning for the last week. Her brain worked quickly. This weekend (the twentieth and twenty-first of March) was the last weekend before break. If she kept their ceremony on the traditional Saturday they could wed the twenty-seventh, the third, or the tenth. Being she’d be traveling after classes on the twenty-sixth, the twenty-seventh was unappealing – and really, really soon. Only about ten days away. The third was the day before Easter…also not ideal for people who wanted to spend time with their families. That left April tenth. April tenth as her wedding date and anniversary for the rest of her life. She felt a slow, soft smile slip across her face. It felt right. April tenth. She glanced up and met Severus’s eyes across the Great Hall, he was watching her with his head cocked and an eyebrow raised. She mouthed “Talk later,” across the great room and he gave a nod before turning back to the Daily Prophet.
“Bloody hell,” Severus heaved a sigh as he closed his office door behind him.

“Hey, love!” Hermione’s voice came from her room where she was working at her desk. “Don’t forget, six o’clock with Dr. Jenkin’s.”

“How could I forget,” he muttered to himself as he flopped uncharacteristically into his leather desk chair. She’d been most anxious to get to her next session. Dr. Jenkins said she had literally spouted an ocean full at her last session. This session he was insistent Severus join them – he was not bloody well looking forward to it at all.

“Hey, you alright?” He looked up to find Hermione in the doorway to her room, shoulder propped against the jamb, arms folded across her chest.

“It’s been…a…trying day,” he said slowly, summoning his bottle of firewhiskey and a tumbler wandlessly. “I’m exhausted.”

“Mm,” she responded sympathetically. “Wanna talk about it?” She crossed the room slowly until she was standing behind him. Tentatively, she dropped her hands onto his shoulder and dug her thumbs in. His muscles were like rocks.

“But particularly.” He let out a long, low moan of pleasure as her clever fingers worked his over-tense neck and shoulders, his head falling to his chest to allow for better access. The moan did something to Hermione that been absent for weeks – made her want him. She bit her lip and swallowed, her fingers freezing for a moment before she deliberately dug back into his deltoids. Another low grunt left his throat and she gave a little hum in the back of her own. I’m not ready yet, I know I’m not. Dr. Jenkins and I discussed this in length last week.

Yes, but he said that it was okay you weren’t ready then – that you would know when you were ready and to trust your instincts.

But what if my instincts are wrong and I panic halfway through? He has to be dying, he’s been so patient with me. Starting and making him stop would be horribly cruel.

“I hear that brain of yours, Hermione.” A soft chuckle came followed by another low groan as she found and worked on a deep knot.

What if I just pleasure him? It would be a…start? She pulled a hair tie off her wrist and used her fingers to gather his hair up and off his neck.

“What in Merlin’s name do you think you’re doing?” he growled incredulously. “I will not walk about sporting a man-bun.”

She sputtered a laugh before answering him softly. “I’m just getting it out of the way for a minute, don’t fret. I won’t make you leave this office with your hair up. I promise.” Fastening the tie, she moved her hands back to his shoulders and continued to massage deeply. She loved how he was turning into a pliable block of clay under her hands, the tension seeping out of him. Hesitantly, she leaned forward and ghosted a kiss over the back on his neck, letting her tongue trailed out to dampen the skin. She felt his surprise even as she relished his taste – musk and man…her man. Her hands slid around his shoulders to cross over his chest as she dropped her head and let her teeth graze the sensitive skin behind his ear, catching the lobe and pulling gently as warm breath blew from her nose and made him shiver.

He stayed quite still as she paid loving homage down the strong tendons on his neck to suckle at the pulse point, she saw his fists tighten in his lap, knuckles going white under the pointed cuffs of his
frock coat. She smoothed her hands down his chest as she nuzzled her nose against his jaw, pressing more kisses to the sensitive underside, his stubble was rough against her sensitive lips. She started to circle him, one hand staying on his chest as the other trailed over the back of his shoulders, another shock of pleasure shot threw him and he trembled. She met his eyes. They were guarded, but his pupils were blown wide with desire; it made her breath catch. She slipped her hands up his neck to thread into the hair that was pulled taut at the nape of his neck and slowly met his lips with hers in a chaste, sweet kiss. One of Severus’s hands shot up and laced around her delicate wrist as he opened his mouth to her and breathed in her taste and scent, giving her control of the kiss with a groan of heated desire.

“Hermione…” He breathed as she slipped onto his lap. She could feel he was already rock hard through their layers of clothing.

“Shh.” She hushed, giving him another deep kiss. “I want to take care of you.”

He grunted, his continued shock evident.

“Will you let me?”

He pulled back and studied her face carefully for a moment, then let out a nod. “Take it at your own pace,” he murmured. She slipped off his lap and kneeled at his feet. The sight almost made him come in his pants. It had been so incredibly long, he knew he would be down and out for the count minutes after she started. She raised shaking fingers to his belt and he watched her through heavy lidded eyes as she slid the leather through the buckle before undoing the buttoned fly. At her prodding, he raised his hips so she could slide his pants and knickers down his back side.

His cock sprang free ferociously. Red and angry looking, pliant velvet over a rod of oak. She looked at it for a long minute and he started to feel nervous she was going to panic, but then she met his eyes and he was floored to see the lust in them. She leaned forward slowly and raised a finger to swirl the pearlescent drop of precum around the frenulum. He gritted his teeth, his hands grasping the armrests of his chair so hard he thought he might splinter the wood. Then she raised her eyes to his again and touched the finger covered in his seed to her lips, her tongue darted out to taste and her eyes closed in apparent pleasure.

The breath left him in a whoosh as she growled, sitting up on her knees she wasted no time taking him deeply into her mouth. He hit the back of her throat unexpectedly and his head fell back in pure bliss, his hips thrusting of their own accord. She did not gag, only tried to take him more deeply, her tongue swirling insistently. She was a solid three-quarters of the way down his length, he wasn’t sure she’d ever put that much down her throat before and he could not help the visceral snarl that erupted out of him. He wanted to lace his fingers into her wild curls and fuck her mouth. It took every ounce of will power not to, and his fear of busting the armrests on the chair returned. She pulled him out of her throat and grasped the base of his dick. Shocking him, she spit forcefully and pumped his length, a mewl of delight leaving her body.

“Fuck, love!” His head rolled on the back of the chair fitfully as her tongue danced and swirled around the mushroom shaped tip of his prick while her petite hand pumped and squeezed insistently. His bollocks rose high and tight as she reclaimed him with her mouth and applied delicious suction while continuing to pepper her tongue in light, creative circles and swirls.

“I’m going to come, Hermione.” He warned her through gritted teeth. Her hand fell away and she pushed him deeper into her tropical maw, the suction of her lips strengthening, her insistent tongue still pulsing against his meat. His hips jerked at the first spurt of hot, creamy liquid made its escape. She hummed her approval maddingly, swallowing around his manhood. She continued to suck and swallow as his body convulsed with pleasure. She consistently plied his erection with lascivious
He pulled her roughly into his lap, taking her mouth hotly with his. He ignored the bitter taste of his own release as he shoved his hands up under her shirt, gliding his fingers across the silky-smooth expanse of lower back. “What can I do for you?” he begged her, catching her bottom lip with his teeth before sucking it into his mouth. He grazed her tongue with his teeth as she moaned, the sound reverberating through his brain.

“I don’t know,” she whispered when he left her mouth to blaze a trail of scorching fire across her jaw and down her neck. She arched into him, whimpering, presenting her beautiful breasts. He cupped one over the fabric of her top and bra and felt a nipple stiffing beneath the insistent swipe of his thumb. She gasped and her hips rocked before her body started trembling violently. He noticed immediately and froze, tilting his head up to look at her, heated desire mixed with fear filled her eyes. Her hands were clenched on his shoulders and her breaths were coming in quick succession. “I – I don’t think I’m quite ready for anything yet, Severus,” she whispered thickly. “I’m so sorry.”

Sadness filled him, not for him, but for her. She had given him so much pleasure, he just wanted to return the favor – the affection. “That’s okay, love,” he murmured, pulling her to him in a tight embrace. He ran one hand over her forehead to smooth away unruly tendrils of curls before pressing a kiss there and tucking her head into his neck. “You were brilliant at helping me relax,” he chuckled, trying to ease the tension. It seemed to help as he felt her shoulders shake with a silent laugh and she pressed a sweet buss to his neck.

“The neck massage or the prick massage?” She snorted a laugh against him. After the initial shock of the vulgar words coming from that sweet mouth he ground out a bark of laughter. “Both.”

She pulled back, her eyes shining with pride. “I know it wasn’t exactly what you may have had in mind, but I’m so happy to be getting back on track. I miss you so much,” she whispered. His expression became serious and he reached to brush a gentle touch over her cheek.

“It was perfect. I will take what you’re willing to give. I will give whatever you’re ready for,” he told her firmly. “Just keep talking to me.” She nodded and they sat quietly for a moment before he continued. “Looked like you got a letter this morning, care to share?”

“Oh!” Her eyes lit up and she slid off his lap. “Yes, just give me a sec, I need to use the loo!”

He watched her disappear into her room and heard the bathroom door click shut, so he took the free moment to put his slacks back right. “Pepper?” he called to his house elf. She popped into existence with a loud crack!

“What is Pepper doing for sir…and miss?” She tacked on as Hermione reentered the room.

“If we could get some supper brought in a bit early, Pepper?” Severus asked kindly. “We have an appointment tonight.”

“Yes, sir. Pepper is happy to oblige.” “Pepper?” Hermione asked tentatively. Severus was surprise, she rarely would ask the house elves for anything, still vehemently against their positions in magical society. “I was wondering…oh. Um, by any chance would you be able to, uh, make me some tuna macaroni and cheese?” She glanced at Severus awkwardly, and he raised his eyebrows at her. “My mum used to make it with cream of chicken soup…” She trailed off, her cheeks pinking. “Pepper, I’m sorry. Don’t worry –”

The elf broke her off. “I is happy to be getting Miss what she wants, I is! Miss has lost too much
weight with her baby sick! Miss is having cravings for the wee one, yes? All Miss ever has to do is call for Pepper. Pepper will serve young Miss happily! Pepper loves babies, Miss!” Another loud crack! and the elf disappeared without waiting for a response.

Hermione looked flabbergasted and Severus had to hold back a snort of laughter. “How did she know I’m pregnant?”

Severus looked at her, bemused. “Are you daft, witch? You’ve been vomiting and requesting saltines for the last six weeks. She’s been scolding me hotly for just as long for letting you lose too much weight. You’ll never be rid of her, now. She’ll want to wait on you hand and foot. Tuna mac… really? That sounds positively disgusting.”

She wrinkled her nose, but chortled. “I liked it as a kid, but haven’t had it in years. It’s been all I can think about since lunch – I feel like I’m going nuts!”

There was another crack! that came from Severus’s private quarters and they knew the elf was setting up their meal. He stood and reached a hand out for her and she laced her fingers through his. The elf Disapparated before they entered the room and Hermione’s mouth watered at the plate of cheesy, creamy, pasta goodness that was at her place. Severus was relieved that he had been served a roast with potatoes and vegetables. There was a small loaf of crusty French bread on the table. She let go of his hand and quickly plopped into her seat, immediately picking up her fork and taking a rather large bite. The moan that left her was primal and made Severus exhausted cock twitch approvingly even as he laughed at her.

She gave him a playful glower, but continued to dig in with gusto. He poured himself a glass of wine and tapped his wand to her goblet to chill her pumpkin juice before settling across from her to start his own meal.

“Your letter?” he asked after a few bites of beef.

She swallowed thickly and took a sip of juice before answering him. “It was from Molly!” she exclaimed with a smile. “Do you wish to read it?”

“Just tell me about it.” He shrugged and took a bite of steamed carrots and hummed in approval. He was starving – he forgot what a great appetite inducer sex could be.

She paused for a moment, a soft, secretive smile crossing her face which brought Severus up short. He raised an eyebrow in question, chewing another bite of the roast. “She’s wondering if we would like to get married over the Easter holidays, being we’re in the family way.”

His quick inhalation of breath caused a coughing fit as he aspirated a small piece of the meat. He reached for his goblet quickly, sputtering all the while.

“Are you okay?” Hermione asked anxiously, rising to her feet. He waved her off and she sat, hesitantly. He motioned to her to continue with her meal as he calmed himself and sipped carefully on his wine. Well, apparently she was ready to marry in less than three weeks…but was he? He shook his head trying to clear his thoughts while giving little coughs to dispel the lingering ache of breathing food into his lungs.

When he asked her to marry him, he had been positive she would want to wait until she had completed a mastery apprenticeship. She had talked about going on to University. He figured they’d have time. Yes, things had changed drastically. Yes, she was pregnant – with his child. They were going to be parents. Why was he even thinking about this? Of course they should get married as soon as possible.
“When?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

“You don’t want to?” she whispered, suddenly looking very unsure of herself. He cursed flamboyantly in his head.

“Of course I do, Hermione.” He reached across the table and splayed out his hand, asking for hers without words. She set down her fork and slipped her hand into his, smoothing her fingers across his wrist. “I was just surprised, is all.”

She studied him for a moment before giving a slow nod before pulling her hand away so she could continue eating. “I was thinking the tenth. Molly offered to put things together, but that will give me some time to be able to be a part of the preparations. We would keep it small, there isn’t much time. My parents had a small account put aside towards my wedding. It’s not much, but should cover the costs,” she still wasn’t looking at him and he noticed she was playing with her food.

“Hermione.” She looked at him then, swallowing at the warning note in his voice. “I promise you, I wish to marry. I would have never asked you if I was not serious about my intentions. I am not that kind of man.”

He saw her eyes well with tears and mentally continued to curse himself for his callousness. “I know that, but so much has changed. You didn’t sign up for a broken woman and a child before you’d even been with her a year. I would not fault you if you had changed your mind. I know…I know I’m not the same person I was when you proposed. I don’t know if I’ll ever get that person back.” She lifted her chin, and even as it trembled, he saw her determination. “We don’t have to marry this Spring, we can wait as long as you want. It’s okay if you’ve changed your mind, I would understand.”

He growled and she flinched, her gaze dropped hastily. He stood and stalked over to her, pulling her to her feet and grasping her shoulders. “Nothing will make me change my mind! I told you when I proposed to you – willingly, without coercion, without even having an inkling of an idea that you might say yes – that I have waited my whole life for you. Do I wish the circumstances were different? I do. I know you do, too. And, no, you’re not the same person – but neither am I. I thought I lost you, Hermione. Another woman I loved – dead, because of me. You will come out on top of this, I know you will.

These reasons do not mean I’m going to change my mind. You’re carrying my child! I intend to make you my wife. You are going to cause me to lose my patience with you if you continue to insist that I’m with you out of some warped sense of responsibility. You are not an obligation, you are the woman I’m in love with.” He grasped her chin and forced her eyes to his. “Do you love me, Hermione?” Her eyes widened in surprise at the question and she nodded frantically. “Do you wish to marry me?”

“Yes.” It was a whisper.

“I feel the same, please stop doubting yourself.” She heaved a great sigh and leaned into him.

“I’m sorry I keep doing this,” she murmured as her arms slid around his waist. He kept his at his sides. His prickly personality and frustration with her self-depreciation kept him from returning her embrace. Moments ago they were at peace with each other. This should have been a happy conversation. “I’m working on it. I know it will get better.”

He let out a long breath, mentally counting to ten. He had to remember she had been through something terrible. He had to remember she was pregnant and very, very hormonal. He had to remember that no matter how mature she was, how responsible she was, how determined she was;
had to remember that no matter what she had seen and done in her life, she was still quite young. He finally slipped his arms around her, returning the embrace.

“You will, we’ll get there together.”
Chapter Thirty-Two

"Come again?" Hermione's eyes were large, she couldn't believe that Dr. Jenkins actually wanted her to answer that question with Severus in the room.

"Do you blame Professor Snape for being abducted?"

"That's…ridiculous." She sputtered indignantly. "He fought with me – for me. Why would I blame him?"

Dr. Jenkins turned his attention to Snape. "Do you blame yourself for Hermione's abduction?"

Hermione's eyes flicked to her fiancé's dear face. No. He couldn't blame himself. Could he? But the doctor's question was met with dead silence and narrowed, glittering malevolently, obsidian eyes.

She reached for his hand, but he flinched away from her; his dark eyes flickering to hers. The guilt there left her breathless. "No." She sat up straight and turned her whole body towards him. "How could you possibly believe that?"

More silence. Hermione felt tears war with rage in her center. "Severus," she whispered. "You fought with me. We were outnumbered. You were hit with four stunners! This is not your fault."

His gaze turned away from her and fixed pointedly at the clock above Dr. Jenkins' left shoulder. He sighed deeply when he realized he had another thirty minutes of this utter rubbish.

"Don't." Her voice was flat. "Don't shut down. You've just dragged me out of my desolation. Don't disappear into your own. Talk to us – to me!"

"I will talk to you, when we are home." That brought her up short.

"That doesn't help us here," she insisted. "You've been telling me I have to talk to Dr. Jenkins for weeks. Now I am. He's requested you join me so you can help me work through things. I need you to do this with me."
He glared at her, slowly crossing his arms over his chest and returning his gaze to the mantel clock.

"Severus." He did not like the tone she was taking with him. She had no right to talk to him like that. All patronizing and disappointed.

"I told you I didn't want to do this." He glared accusingly at the doctor who held his gaze without flinching, much to Severus' astonishment.

After a short pause, Jenkins dipped his head. "You did. I disagreed. I think that for you and Hermione to have a successful future, both together and as parents, you need to discuss what happened. I would also like to delve into your pasts – with your large parts in the war and your childhoods."

Severus bristled and stood abruptly. "I will be in the waiting room." He informed them dismissively before taking his leave without a backwards glance. The door clicked softly behind them and Dr. Jenkins met Hermione's tearful gaze with a raised eyebrow.

"You have to realize that his part in the war was exceedingly difficult. If it was not for Severus Snape, there is a real possibility the light would have fallen. He…well. I don't even know where to begin."

"The beginning is always a good place to start…"

So, she spent the following half hour giving Dr. Jenkins a loose briefing on everything she knew Severus Snape had a part of during the first and second Wizarding Wars. Her information was second hand, of course (as he never spoke about the wars with her directly). She barely got everything out before their time was up and Dr. Jenkins stood.

"You've given me much to think about, Hermione. I will see you next week."

She gave him a weak nod and let herself out. Severus was waiting at the fireplace, back ramrod straight, shoulders thrown back – intimidating. He was hiding his discomfort behind a wall of intimidation…with her.

"Don't." She pleaded, stopping a few meters away from him.

His brow furrowed in confusion. "Don't what?" He doesn't even realize he's doing it, it has been second nature to him for so long.

"Don't be Professor Snape with me." His mask of indifference turned wooden in surprise and, with relief, she watched his shoulders fall.

She closed the distance between them then and took his hand, pulling it to her face and pressing a kiss into his palm. "I know how difficult these sessions are. There are horrors in both our lives that are…difficult to discuss. Let's do this for each other – for our daughter. We deserve to give our family the best chance possible. Promise you'll try."

He studied her impassively for a long time. So long, Dr. Jenkins exited his office into the waiting room, keys rattling as he locked up for the night. Severus muttered a quick Notice Me Not charm as the man's head snapped up, looking around wildly. Of course, they were not seen. A few moments later, they were plunged into darkness as Jenkins disappeared out the firm's door.

"I promise to think about trying."

She didn't feel she could ask for more than that.
"Have fun today," Severus encouraged her tenderly, watching her pull on her woolen hat and mittens. Hermione gave him a soft smile before crossing the room to where he was seated behind his desk to press a chaste kiss to his hard mouth.

"I will," she promised, bending her head to kiss him a second time. His hands slid around her hips and he hesitantly deepened the kiss, nibbling the inside of her bottom lip before coaxing her tongue out to play for too brief a moment. When he pulled back, he was wickedly pleased to find her eyes still closed and a dreamy expression on her face. When she blinked her eyes open only a second later, his knowing, heated look made the blood rush to her face. "Stop." She poked his shoulder gently with a half quirk of her pretty pink pout.

"Stop…what…exactly…Miss Granger?" He raised one dark brow, the heated look smoldering as a smirk bloomed across his features. He deliberately let his baritone rumble deep, his speech pattern falling into the one he used to intimidate his classroom students. Her breath came to a complete stop and a laugh rumbled from his chest. He reached up and snatched her chin between his thumb and forefinger with a gruff gentleness, pulling her maw back to his before dominating her with a searing kiss. She moaned against his mouth and let him guide her until she was straddling his lap, her mitten-clad hands gripping his shoulders. "Stop that?" He fought to control his breathlessness as he broke their lip lock, her forehead fell to press into his neck.

"Yesss." She hissed the word, feeling like a pile of gelatin on a summer day – melted and gooey.
"Yes, if you keep that up, I'll never meet my friends in ti – "

The rap on the door made her jump and she glanced quickly at his desk clock. "Oh, I'm late!" she exclaimed, glaring as a deep chuckle escaped him. "This is your fault!" she accused. "You can come in! I'm ready. Was just saying good-bye!"

As soon as she had said "You can come in!" the door popped open to reveal Ginny and Lizzie and Susan standing in it. Ginny made a face as she watched Hermione climb off Severus' lap and Lizzie snickered indulgently.

"Have a good day, Professor Snape!" Susan said kindly and he gave the three girls a dismissive wave while watching Hermione's flushed cheeks deepen to a cherry red.

"Be safe, Hermione," he told her sternly. "Please." She reached and gave one shoulder a squeeze.

"I promise."

"He's always so sweet?" Ginny asked once they were on the path between the school and the small wizarding town.

"What?" Hermione felt distracted. She was nervous! She was actually going to be sitting down to tell her ex-boyfriend's mother what she wanted for her wedding to her school teacher. Could life get more odd?

"He's quite sweet with you," Ginny repeated without blinking an eye. "Is he always so?"

"Oh," Hermione gave a secretive smile when she noticed Lizzie and Susan watching her as closely as Ginny. "Yes and no. I mean, he's been extra gentle in his nature as of late, but I know he's becoming frustrated with me. You know his personality, he's very rough around the edges." She paused as her friends nodded. "He's patient with me, though. More patient then he is in class. Before
Christmas, I would have told you he can be a total arse and that we butt heads and argue a lot – which we did; and I know we'll continue to do so when things get more back to normal. But...I do love him. He is so good to me – treats me well."

"That's all? He treats you well?" Susan cocked her head. "I've seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one else is paying attention, Hermione. He adores you. He looks at you like a starving man at a bakery window."

If her cheeks weren't already ruddy with the wet cold of Great Britain's March, she knew she would have blushed.

"There's a serious heat between you," she continued, her eyes twinkling devilishly.

"Hot for teacher!" Lizzie busted out laughing, her giggles echoing off their surroundings. Hermione snorted when the other two looked confused.

"Muggle rock song," she said with a grin and a shrug. "And yes. I'll give it to you. The air quite crackles with electricity when we're alone."

"Even when you're not alone, did you know Draco saw him squeeze your bum at the Yule Ball?"

Hermione's mouth popped open in a surprised O. "I didn't, woops!" Her reply was sheepish, her eyes lowered. Heat fused through her body at the remembrance of what had happened after the Yule Ball.

"Is the sex good?" Ginny's lack of propriety made Hermione halt in her tracks. "I'm sorry!" she rushed on at the stricken look on her friend's face. "Hermione, I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

"It's...it's okay." She realized her friend was mostly likely apologizing about the careless sex quip in light of her currently tragedies – and could she blame her? Didn't teenagers talk about sex? "That's not what I was upset about," she cleared her throat, taking in the three girls. "I'm not upset at all, you just startled me with that question. I know it's normal for girlfriends to talk about their sex lives, but I just...can't. He would be horrified. Suffice it to say I am quite satisfied." Or would be if I could get back on the proverbial saddle.

Ginny gave a quick nod, Lizzie hid a smile behind her hand.

They walked in silence for a bit before Lizzie spoke up. "Well, I don't think Draco would mind if I bragged to my girlfriends."

"Ron and I aren't there yet," Susan said with a flip of her ginger braid. "I'd like to take it slow, he's been very understanding."

"As he should be," Hermione said softly. "He was never pushy, and he really cares about you, Sue."
"This is my brother we're talking about." Ginny's face was a mask of morbid curiosity and revulsion.

"What about you and Harry?" Lizzie smirked knowingly, throwing her arm over Ginny's shoulder and pulling in. It was a bit of an awkward movement with Ginny being quite a bit taller than her, both girls giggled as they stumbled. Hermione felt a stab of jealousy at how close the two girls had become over the last few months. Susan hesitantly linked her arm with Hermione's and gave the brunette a tentative smile. Warmth flooded Hermione's chest and she returned the smile, squeezing Susan's arm in thanks.

"We are making good progress," Ginny grinned with a laugh. "It's kinda fun figuring this all out together. I ordered a couple books and we've been playing around."

Hermione started to snicker in earnest while Lizzie looked intrigued. "Care to share those books?" she said with a lilting laugh. "I could definitely use some tricks up my sleeve. Draco is a bit more experienced then I am, it'd be fun to surprise him."

Torrents of giggles ensued from all four girls as they crested the hill and made their way onto Hogsmeade's streets. "We're gonna be late, we should move a bit faster," Ginny stated once her chortles were under control.

Two hours later all was tentatively decided. Hermione would be staying at the Burrow with everyone for the two weeks of break, something to which Severus had tentatively agreed as long as she promised not to venture out alone. The ceremony would be small and intimate. Draco would be Severus' best man and the only people he had requested to invite were the Malfoy's. As much as Hermione loathed Lucius Malfoy, she didn't feel she could deny him this only request. Ginny was going to be Hermione's maid of honor, Harry and Ron were going to give her away — as they were the only family she had left. It would be an outdoor hand-fasting at sunset followed with a picnic dinner and cake and there would be music and dancing. Molly promised to set up a ceremonial site and would have a tent with heating charms for the meal and celebration after.

"Are you sure about the lemon cake, Hermione? That's a bit of an odd choice for a wedding."

Hermione gave Molly a gentle smile, thinking about the cake she had made her fiancé for his birthday. He'd eaten the whole thing within just a few days, Hermione only having a piece that first night. "I'm positive. It's Severus' favorite, and he already has handed this whole thing over to me. I want him to have a few things that make it feel special and about him."

Molly grinned broadly and covered Hermione's hand with her own, giving it a soft squeeze. "You're a thoughtful child."

"Now, mum?" Ginny's tone had changed and Hermione glanced at her friend with a quizzical look.

"Okay, Ginny, now," Molly chortled.

"Now we get to go have some fun!" Ginny stood quickly and pulled Hermione to her feet.

"Fun?" The curly haired brunette was bewildered, but allowed herself to be pushed into her outer-things and pulled out of the bar and down the street, the rest of the party trailing behind them with secretive smirks.

"Ready?" Ginny said, bouncing on the balls of her feet while Susan and Lizzie giggled and Molly
grinned tolerantly.

"For wha - ?"

"Dress shopping, of course!" The auburn-haired witch took her friend's shoulders and turned her to face a shop with a beautiful mannequin in the window wearing a pretty, poufy, white, gauzy dress. Hermione's heart almost stopped.

"Everthine's." The name of the shop came out soft and wistful. "I never even though about a dress." She turned to her friends and surrogate mother with wide eyes. "I'm picking out a wedding dress!" It was an elated whisper said with such emotion Molly's eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, dear," she told the young woman with tenderness.

Fifteen minutes later, she was in her first gown. A form fitting silk that clearly showed off the slight swell of her belly. It was vetoed immediately. Next, a princess gown that made Hermione feel like she was drowning in taffeta and ribbons. Molly beamed and encouraged her to put it in the maybe pile, but Hermione was dead set against it and told the attendant to make it disappear.

Fifteen dresses and an hour and a half later, she stood staring at herself in the mirror with all three friends and Molly, none of them had been able to say a word when she had stepped out in this particular dress. The bodice was a bit risky – a nude tulle stitched with rich ivory lace leaving gaps in the fabric to show skin along her rib cage and upper belly. It had a plunging sweetheart neckline and she knew she'd have to perfect the lifting charm her attendant had used to put the girls in just the right spot. The lace trailed past the empire waistline in points down each hip where the material turned to chiffon and flowed to the floor. The right leg had a slit that went up almost entirely to her navel, but modestly was preserved with a lace underlay that peeked through the part. Where the front of the dress was elegantly sexy, the back was downright provocative. The covering over her breasts swept up in cap sleeves that topped each shoulder before spilling down the back sides of her rib cage, leaving her back bare in a low dipped V. More lace trailed over the top of her bum before also turning into chiffon that waterfalled down her legs to a very short train. It was earthy and beautiful and reminded her just slightly of her Yule ball gown that had received such a heated reaction from her wizard. The barely-there evidence of her pregnancy was sheathed in the chiffon and not even remotely noticeable.

"It's not…too sexy?" Hermione asked tentatively, terrified to be told the dress wasn't appropriate.

"Heaven's, no," Lizzie exclaimed, the first to be able to pull her jaw from the floor and answer her bedazzled friend.

"I can see by the look in your eyes this is it, Hermione. The professor will adore it, you look stunning," Susan said with heartfelt sincerity.

"Molly?" Hermione whispered, looking at the woman in question in the mirror. They locked eyes and Hermione was startled to see tears, even more so when her own eyes started to prickle.

"You look like perfection itself, my dear." Molly's smile was watery, and she raised a fist to her mouth to cover her gentle cough of emotion. She had hoped for so long this young woman would be her daughter someday, her emotions were bittersweet. She would keep her in her family no matter what it took.

Once gleaning her mother's approval, Ginny spoke up. "It's not too sexy, 'Mione. It's exactly sexy enough. He's not going to know what hit him."
"I told you during our last session I would not discuss this."

"But you also said you'd discuss it with me privately and you've skirted the issue all damn week, Severus. We need to talk about this! I will not have it hanging over our heads. We are getting married in just over two weeks!"

"Don't be preposterous. This changes nothing. We will marry and we will be perfectly fine!"

"Preposterous!" Hermione's voice was incredulous. "You think I'm being silly!? Nuh-uh. You're the one who thinks my abduction was your fault! How many times have you insisted over and over again that it wasn't my fault? That I was blameless. I believed you – I still believe you, but I will not stand here and let you blame yourself. It was no more your fault than mine. We were surrounded, outnumbered, out-wanded. I thought – " She broke off and sucked in a huge gasp of air, her tummy rolling with nerves and a turmoil of emotions. "I thought they killed you. When you fell at my back. You hit the ground with a thud that was…my heart stopped." She clutched her hand to her chest, fighting back tears, breaths coming in hiccupping heaves of hurt. "I stopped fighting. They asked me to give up my wand, and I did so willingly. I would go through it all again if it meant saving your life, but that does not mean it was my fault. You taught me that. You made me see that. What do I have to do to make you see that the people to blame are the men who took me? The ones who hurt me are the ones we must fight against. We must fight against them, not each other. We cannot let them win!"

She stared at his unmoving profile. His jaw was set with deep tension.

"I will not air my grievances in front of some Muggle quack pot!" He exploded out after a few moments. "I am not talking to him about our personal lives, Hermione! I will not stand for this drivel!" For the second time in as many session, she watched him jerkily stand to his feet and stride out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Her face colored with embarrassment and she flipped a look at Dr. Jenkins after watching him go with open-mouthed horror. "I'm so sorry. So sorry. I think…I think it's best to cut this one short, yeah?"

The doctor, instead of looking insulted or infuriated simply looked bemused, it made her pause. "I believe that Severus is embarrassed about discussing his past with me. His lack of knowledge of the - Muggle you call it, right? – the Muggle world is probably a bit frightening to him. I am Muggle through and through and therefore am not someone to trust. My science is not exact, and while I know he's an intellectual, I would surmise he is not well versed in the art of psychology."

"That's rubbish," she snapped. "His father was a Muggle. I know it's just his personality. He doesn't trust many, he's a very private person."

"How many years has he been out of connection with the Muggle world, Hermione?"

This gave her pause. "At least…well, at least twenty."

"And many things have changed in the last twenty years, have they not?" he prodded continually.

"I suppose they have, yes."

"I think he is uncomfortable with the situation he finds himself in and I think he blames himself for many, many things. I think it starts back with his friendship to Lily Potter née Evans and the poor
choices he made as a young adult and snowballs through the first and second of your wars. He has seen and had to do many terrible things. He gave up happiness and the chance at a life over and over again until it escalated out of control. I do not think he expected to survive the war, my dear." He paused to let his words sink in.

"When it was all over, both his Masters – yes, his Masters, Hermione. Voldemort and Dumbledore were his Masters. He took their direction for years. What they did not control of his life he controlled behind a mask of unfeeling and loathing for self-protection. When it was over, his Masters were dead and you were there. For some reason, he left the mask off and let you in – only you, it seems. He grew more and more comfortable in this role, only putting his disguise on when he felt threatened, am I right?"

Hermione stared at him, dumbfounded. How had she not seen this? "If he would talk to us, I would bet his relationship with his parents was not good. I suspect an abusive home, abuse from his father – if not from both of his parents." Hermione covered her mouth when a saddened gasp was not able to be stifled. "I suspect his friendship with Lily was the first thing that felt pure and good in this world for him. When she fell in love with his enemy, he felt betrayed and fled to his friends who led him to Voldemort. I am just speculating, Hermione, because you do not know these things for sure, and he has not opened up to me. These are my suspicions, though. There is deep seated guilt and self-loathing in that man. He blames himself for many things that were simply out of his control, such as your abduction. Just promise me you will continue to prod him to come. We will continue to work diligently to unravel you both and help you both heal.

"In most cases such as this, I would feel remised not to warn my client that you are marrying someone you do not know and should think long and hard before moving forward." When Hermione's face drained of all color, he cleared his throat. "In most cases, that is. For you and your professor…something tells me no matter where our sessions lead us, the two of you are quite suited and will always find a way to work through your difference and quarrels. You've been through so much already and neither has been willing to walk away. It seems to me that your love for each other is larger than life."

She finished her session with Dr. Jenkins even though she wanted to rush after Severus. She was glad she did, because the rage that had ignited in her belly when he stormed out the second time after promising to try the last time had time to die down. She understood the pain and fear of not wanting to share. Had she not gone through it for weeks and weeks before she was finally able to open up? She flooed through and, when straightening to her full height in their quarters, found him sitting silent and still as stone in the dark leather wingback chairs. A crystal tumbler of amber liquid in one hand. He didn't meet her eyes as she brushed the soot of her traveling cloak before removing it to hang on the rack. She felt his eyes on her, even if he wasn't moving.

She turned to look at him, and this time he met her eyes. The pain in his almost took her breath away. "Severus," she murmured, taking a step and reaching one hand out to him. He broke their look and flicked his eyes to the fire, watching it consume the logs in the hearth. She crossed to him and, even though he gave a slight protest, climbed into his lap, settling her bum comfortably in the crease between his knees. He took the tumbler of alcohol and set it on the table, all the while holding his guarded gaze. Then she slowly wrapped one arm around his shoulders, using her free arm she guided his head to her breast and held him to her, pressing a kiss to his oily hair.

Severus was confused and bit alarmed at being treated like a small child needing to be held in his mother's arms, but his mental turmoil was such he didn't resist. After a moment, he succumbed to her warmth and buried his face in the valley between her breast as his arms encircled her waist tightly.
She said nothing to him, just held his head, gently stroking his hair and occasionally pressing more kisses to the top of his head.

The words started to bloom out of him before he could stop them. "I do not blame myself as much as I am angry with myself. Why I thought that I alone could protect you in the madness of Diagon Alley the day after Christmas, I will never know. We should have never been out. I am livid with myself for not seeing that ahead of time and insisting you stay with me at the castle. I would have taken your resentment willingly, if I could have saved you from what you had to endure.

"I feel guilt at what they took from you and sadness for what you have lost. They smothered your fire, Hermione, and your fire is what brought me back to life. Watching you these weeks has shattered me, and I had only just begun to rebuild, myself. I had only just started to let myself hope for things I never thought I would achieve. A wife, a family, a home…love. These concepts were things I had told myself I would never, ever have even though I wanted them desperately." She said nothing, just held him a little more tightly.

"When I…when I woke in my hospital bed back in June to find you sleeping in the chair next to me, my world tilted on its axis. I couldn't understand what you were doing there, which is why I raged at you – you remember?" She gave a noncommittal grunt in her throat.

"How could you forget?" He smirked into her cleavage and tightened his arms, smoothing his palms down her back. "The nurse that witnessed my rage gave me a right scolding after you fled. She told me that you had sat by my bedside almost every day for a month. She told me you read to me from the paper and that you sang to me, but mostly that you had just sat with me, holding my hand and talking. Tell me what had been happening since the war.

"I couldn't understand why you would do something like that and I admit I was ashamed of the way I had gone off on you. I was positive I would not see you again until we had returned to Hogwarts, but you came back the next day. I think I fell in love with you then, you know? You walked through the door in your skin-tight jeans and that white peasant top. Your hair was wild and bushy, your stance defensive and guarded, but your face." Here he pulled back and cupped her face in her hands. Her eyes were shining with unshed tears of surprise at his detailed recollection. "Gods, Hermione, your face. Brilliant determination mixed with an emotion I couldn't place. I can place it now – you loved me then, too, didn't you?"

She let out a shuddering breath as a tear slipped down her cheek and nodded. "I'd been infatuated with you for years," she whispered. "I knew you were not what you seemed. I just knew everyone was wrong. It became harder to defend you, though. Especially…well, especially after Dumbledore. I regret that I stopped defending you. I stopped trying to make other people believe you were good." He flinched slightly and she trailed her fingers up his arms and entwined them with his. "It felt wrong, in my heart of hearts I knew it wasn't what it had seemed, but all the proof…well. You know where all the proof pointed." He nodded.

"When I…when Harry told us about your memories. Oh, Severus." A small sob escaped her and she pressed her forehead to his, releasing one of his hands to cup her palm around his face, she pressed a kiss to his lips. "I was devastated. For you, I was devastated for you. You had given up your whole life to protect Harry because you loved his mother. I – I couldn't imagine a love like that. My first instinct was to find you. I was determined to see you get a proper burial – one with the dignity and respect you had deserved. To find you alive…oh my God. I never expected – never dreamed – you could have survived. When I saw you there, my heart stopped. When it restarted I knew then. I had always respected you, I had always admired you. I had never taken your nasty comments and put downs to heart, they just seemed a coping mechanism to me. While some of them were hurtful and demeaning, I worked very hard to not take them personally, to watch you and continue to respect
who you were. But when I saw you alive, knowing your whole story, that is when I realized I could love you. I never in a million years dreamed you would let me in, let alone love me back."

"You didn't give me a choice!" He almost laughed. "You wouldn't stay away. When I realized what was happening, I fought it."

"I know you did!" She did laugh. "I told myself you were just not use to being on the receiving end of compassion and was determined to make you accept mine."

"You succeeded, up until that disastrous kiss."

"That kiss was wonderful," she whispered. "We were both too stubborn to see what it really had been. We both thought we had forced ourselves on the other. I had no intention of making a move until I had graduated, you know. I didn't want to come off as some silly little school girl with a crush on her teacher."

"What made you change your mind?"

"You did, when you kissed me again. I wasn't going to tell you no, I could have never told you no. The months that followed were…Severus. They were the best of my life, even with the death of my parents, having you was everything. Everything." He pulled her in closer and pressed his lips to hers gently.

She sighed when they parted and nestled her face into his neck before she continued to speak.

"When you fell at my back and I thought you were dead for those agonizing seconds, I was determined to make them kill me. When I felt you breathing at my feet, I was determined to survive as long as they let you survive. And we did, we lived. We are living. Now…now we need to heal.

"We have to let Dr. Jenkins guide us, love. I know you're unfamiliar with this science, but it's helping me. It helped Susan. It will only make us stronger. I need you to be there with me. Pretend he's not there, talk to me, don't talk to him. We have to do this to survive. I need you to survive. To be healthy, to be whole. Will you? For me? Can you? For us?"

She felt the tension and fight drain out of him. "Yes," he breathed finally. "I can. I will."

She pulled back and locked eyes with him. "Do you promise me?"

"I promise you."

He kissed her, fiercely and she felt a molten need for him after their confessions. She wanted to be close to him, wanted him to touch her. Their melding of mouths grew heated and she felt him swell beneath her bum quickly. She buried her fingers in his hair and held on for dear life as her desperation for him swept her up like a riptide. She gasped audibly when his lips left her to seek her neck, massaging the corded tendons and muscles with his tongue. She groaned and felt her body start to tremble with anticipation. There was no fear, for the first time in months, there was no fear.

"Severus," she said desperately. "Gods!" she cried out when he bit her where her neck met her shoulder. "Severus, I want you to put your hands on me," she begged, squirming in his lap fitfully.

"Yes," he agreed fervently. He stood with seemingly no effort and crossed the room to the large four-poster. Reverently he lay her back on the comforter and stretched out on top of her. She welcomed him, opening her arms and legs, sighing as his hips settled into the cradle of her thighs. His weight was deliciously heavy and hot. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his mouth back to hers, desire surging through her. Her hips rolled and he groaned, deepening the kiss, splaying his hands up her rib cage and cupping a breast through her clothing. She arched into him
greedily, she was frantic for his touch, all her worries and anxiety seemed to have melted away. Somehow, between the kissing and the lazy touches, they found themselves undressed and, as his fingers dipped into her sopping silt, a shuddering sigh slipped past trembling lips.

His visceral groan as he gently pushed two fingers inside her was almost enough to make her come undone. She felt a deep aching fill her chest as the emotions of being touched by him again and not being afraid crashed over her. Her hips thrust into his hand as she tilted her neck back to seek his eyes. Heated coal burned into warm chocolate and he moved forward slowly to take and seal his mouth to hers again.

"Can I put my mouth on you, love?" He begged quietly when they parted. His thumb was swirling the bundle of nerves under her hood and her little sex noises were driving him mad.

"Only if I can put my mouth on you, too," she answered softly. His grunt of surprise made her lips curl up into a smirk which turned into a little whimper of disappointment when his hand pulled away from her. He rolled onto his back, his erection standing vertically from his body, thick and hot and proud. Her mouth watered at the sight.

They had never done this before and he gave her that breath stealing, devilish smile before calmly saying, "You'll have to sit on my face to make this work."

A nervous giggle left her, but she allowed him to guide her into place. The slight swell of her abdomen pressed into his chest, but it wasn't too uncomfortable, and was immediately forgotten at the contact of his mouth pressed to her clit. "Fuck!" she hissed and his responding chuckle vibrated her folds and only served to make her shudder.

He worked her for a moment, going slowly, letting her get use to the new position and sensations. When a tentative hand reached for and encircled his weeping prick, he let out a grunt that made her gasp. Then she let herself go, engulfing him in her hot orifice, sucking hard and pulling him deep as one hand pumped the base of his cock. His hips jerked and he gave a rumble of need.

He dipped his tongue into her and she keened around him, the vibrations pulling his bollocks up tight and he fought his release, trying to time it with her own. She surprised him by grinding her hips down onto him and he stifled a laugh as his nose grazed her clit. The laugh turned into another hum of pleasure when the sensation made her lips lock down harder and her suction increase. Her tongue was deliciously out of control and his hips bucked lazily, loving everything she was doing. When her legs started to tremble and her lower body froze in delectable anticipation he stopped holding back. Then she was quivering and humming with her release, the suction of her mouth around his cock was almost painful as less than a second later he poured himself into her mouth. He felt her swallowing around his cock, and her jerk and moan of pleasure as he locked on to her clit to drag out her pleasure made him flex his hips again. Her mouth came off him with a wet pop, but her hand was still wrapped firmly around his dick as she trembled and jerked. Her face was press to his hip, nose nuzzling his groin and she audibly gasped and shuddered and tried to catch her breath as he lapped up her creamy, mouthwatering release.

Moments later, she was curled into him, their naked limbs entangled, their arms wrapped passionately together, kissing almost desperately. "You're okay?" He almost begged her, his veins were singing, blood rushed in his ears, his heart pounding with abandoned joy. She was tearful, but assured him they were happy tears.

"I am, I swear. That was wonderful, I've missed you so much." It was said between a dozen soft, chaste kisses and gentle fingertip caresses. "I love you," she whispered against his jaw. "So much, thank you. Thank you."
He just kissed her in reply.

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Friday March 26th

"Severus, everyone is staring," she whispered self-consciously. "You're going to ruin your reputation."

"I don't bloody well care at the moment, do I?" he said gruffly into her ear. They were at the Hogsmeade train station where Hermione was going to boarding the Hogwarts Express with her friends momentarily and he had suddenly gotten quite touchy feely with her, one hand on her low back, the other holding her hand as he moved to stand closer to her. Granted, this was going to be the longest they'd been apart since her abduction, but students were not even attempting to hide the fact that they were ogling the duo with interest.

"You're the feared Potions master, however will they continue to be afraid of you if they see you feeling up your child bride?" she teased him with a grin on her face and glint in her eyes.

His eyes narrowed a bit before he leaned his lips to her ear and his silky baritone rumbled into her psyche. "Should we give them something to talk about?" She could have orgasmed on the spot from his voice alone, but then his lips were on hers. She squeaked with surprise, her eyes almost popping out of her head. If they hadn't already been the center of attention, the laugh that poured out of him when she pushed him away in shock solidified the fact that every single eye was on them.

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water for a few seconds before she shook her head with a hasty smile. "You have no idea what I'm going to have to field on the damn train now, you git," she hissed, still teasing him. He gave her a crooked smile and touched his fingers lightly to her cheek bone. She actually heard a gaggle of sixth year Hufflepuffs sigh. She felt a blush bloom through her face and ducked her head, letting a curtain of frizz shield her face from the onlookers.

"I will see you Monday at your therapy session," he said quietly. "Enjoy your time with your friends and ceremony preparations."

"I will miss you, so much." The look of adoration on her face made his chest constrict.

"And I, you, pet. Please. Be safe." It was as close to begging as he would ever get.

"I will go nowhere without asking you to meet me and at least two other people. I swear."

"You best."

"I do. Kiss me good-bye." The train whistle blew just after the words left her mouth. He dropped a chaste, sweet kiss to her lips and brushed her cheek again before taking a step back from her and dropping the hand he had laced through hers.

"I will not watch the train leave," he said softly. "That is entirely too sappy."

She snorted a laugh even though her eyes were damp with moisture at their imminent parting. "I agree." She said primly, tilting her chin up as her eyes glittered with humor.

He ached to pull her into his arms and kiss her like he would never see her again, but their interaction in front of the other students and staff were already making him quite uncomfortable. Instead, he gave her a shallow bow, took her hand placed a gentle kiss to her knuckles, stepped back, and Disapparated.
She stood where she was for a moment before Ginny and Lizzie appeared and linked their arms through hers. "You'll see him in a few days," Lizzie insisted as she guided her friend away. Hermione couldn't help looking back over her shoulder at the spot where he disappeared. She was already on the verge of panicking without him. They had spent at least a portion of every day together for the last three months.

"I know," she whispered, her throat tight. "I'm okay."

Ginny let out a low chortle. "You look like you're going to burst into tears," she countered.

"I'm trying not to."

"Aw, honey." Lizzie wrapped her arm around her shoulders.

"I'll be okay. It's just weird being without him."

"I promise, mum and I are going to keep you so busy, you won't have time to think," Ginny promised.

Chapter End Notes

Wedding Dress
https://ae01.alicdn.com/kf/HTB1hJUFMVXXXXXBaXXXq6xXFXXXB/Lace-Haute-Couture-Sexy-Sheath-Wedding-Dress-Bodice.jpg

Yule Ball Gown
https://ae01.alicdn.com/kf/HTB1jbMROFXXXXctaXXXq6xXFXXX2/Custom-Made-Navy-Blue-Green-Mermaid-Lace-Evening.jpg
“It’ll be fine,” Hermione insisted, hugging her friend tightly. “I’ll see you next Friday for dinner. I’m nervous, too.”

Draco rolled his eyes as Lizzie and Hermione squeezed each other tightly for a moment before gently tugging on a lock of her hair.

“Everything is going to be fine, Liz,” he promised. “My mum is going to love you.”

Lizzie pulled back from her friend and gently touched the girls’ face. “’Mione, I’m so happy you’re back with us. I’ve missed you so much.”

Hermione took a moment to collect her emotions before giving her friend a watery smile. “I missed you, too, but I’m back on track. Things will be fine. You’re such a wonderful friend, I’m so lucky to have you.” She leaned in and gave Lizzie a peck on the cheek before squeezing her hands and dropping them.

Draco raised an eyebrow with a teasing twinkle in his eye. “Any chance the next snog could be on the lips? That’s quite a fantasy of mine…”

Both girls smacked him playfully on the shoulder before dissolving into giggles. “What?” he said, feigning innocence behind a smirk. “No harm in a fantasy, right?”

“Lizzie kissing me is a fantasy?” Hermione copied his move and raised an eyebrow as a few people pushed past them getting in que to leave the train.

“Granger, c’mon.” He rolled his eyes. “There isn’t a bloke at school who doesn’t think you’re hot. And of course, my Lizzie is drop dead gorgeous.”

Hermione snorted, then conspiratorially eyed up Lizzie, giving her a slight wink as Draco was distracted when a firstie bumped into him. She let her voice go all low and husky and reached out a hand to brush a lock of golden hair out of her friends’ eyes. “Lizzie is gorgeous, I have to agree with you there, Draco.” She let her fingers trace Lizzie’s cheek bone, both of them gazing at each other
before glancing at Draco and bursting into giggles. Poor Draco looked like he was ready to cream his trousers.

“Maybe some time when we’re drunk, Malfoy,” Hermione grinned.

“Damn,” he hissed. “You totally had me going for a sec.” He gave both girls a wolfish grin before hooking his arm through his girlfriend’s and giving Hermione a two-fingered salute. “Don’t let my Father intimidate you next Friday, Granger. He’s an arse. See you in a week.”

“Later, Malfoy. Bye, Lizzie.” She watched them get swept up in the crowd.

“That was nice advice, Draco,” Lizzie murmured. “Do you have anything for me?”

“Yeah,” he said, his nerves showing for the first time as he spotted his mother in the throngs of people waiting to pick up their kids. “It doesn’t matter what my father thinks of you.” He glanced at her, and she saw the serious concern in his eyes. “I love you, and I’m not letting him get between us.”

Lizzie felt her heart stutter in her chest before it took off at a breakneck speed while her tummy did a belly flop. “I love you, too,” she whispered. “Thank you for telling me.” He brought them up short for a moment and grasped the back of her neck to press a kiss to her forehead.

“Here’s my mum,” he whispered, brushing his nose against hers before pulling away. There was a spindly house elf next to the beautiful, regal-looking woman who immediately (and without a word) took a hold of both their trunks and Disapparated with a resounding crack! Lizzie tried not to gawp after the thing.

“Draco, this must be Elizabeth” Narcissa Malfoy stuck out a perfectly manicured hand, two rings glittering brilliantly in the late afternoon sun.

“Hello, Mum,” Draco said with a tender smile. “Yes, this is she.”

“Please,” Lizzie said with her signature blinding smile. “Call me Lizzie, Mrs. Malfoy.” She slipped her tiny hand into the other woman’s and shook it firmly. “I’m so happy to meet you.” She ducked her head, feeling a bit awkward and shy in the shadow of this stunning woman.

“Lizzie it is. Please, feel free to call me Narcissa. Draco has told me so much about you. You are just as beautiful as he described.” Narcissa tilted her head to the side with a gentle smile as Lizzie felt her face flush red with pleasure. “He’s warned you my husband will most likely talk out of his arse tonight, yes?”

Draco snorted, letting a real grin settle on his face as he stuck his hands in his pant pockets. “Nice way to put it, Mum.” He leaned and kissed Narcissa on the cheek she presented for him.

“Let’s go get the unpleasantries over with, shall we?” Narcissa turned and walked to the line in front of the large brazier used for floo travel from the station.

Lizzie glanced at Draco, who quickly and firmly took her hand in his and squeezed.

“Here is your room, Lizzie.” Narcissa presented the girl. “The house elves will have already settled your things. Please feel free to dress for dinner, which will be on the table in thirty minutes.” She left with a motherly pat on the cheek for Draco, who opened the guest room door for Lizzie and gestured her inside.
“My room’s across the hall,” he told her with a sly grin. “My folks aren’t the hoity-toity, no sex until marriage type. I was given the talk about magical birth control for men when I was twelve and taught to use it before I have sex every time until I get married. Separate rooms are just a show on my mother’s behalf.”

Lizzie snorted as she entered the room and then gasped. It was huge, with vaulted ceilings and elaborate design. Silk damask wallpaper in cream and gold covered the walls to the white wainscoting and chair rail, glazed white crown molding with corner sconces braced what could only be a silver paneled ceiling where a huge crystal candle chandelier swayed in the middle and four smaller near each corner of the room. There was a massive, white and ivory canopy bed in the center of the room to the far wall with gauzy white drapery for privacy. The furniture was antiqued cream inlaid with gold trim and white marble tops. The floor was a deep, dark grey hardwood that offset the room beautifully. At the opposite end of the room was an enormous white marble fireplace with gold veins. On each side were grey, built in bookcases crammed with books and crystal figurines.

“Oh my God, Draco,” Lizzie whispered, turning in a circle, her arms splayed out, eyes cast up to the shimmering light fixtures.

Draco smirked. He might have changed, but he was still smug about his family’s heritage and riches. “I’m glad you like it, wait ‘til you see the lav.”

She glanced at him with sparkling eyes before darting to the far door that could only be the bathroom. “Holy shit!” she cried out and he started to laugh. “This tub is like a five-person jacuzzi!” She popped back out, eyes smoldering with a devilish grin on her face. “Tell me we can try that out tonight.”

With a low growl, Draco stalked toward her across the room, she didn’t even pretend to be alarmed as she met him part way and allowed him to sweep her into his arms, his mouth descending on hers hungrily. “Not now, Draco,” she managed between kisses. “I – oomf!” She braced both hands on his chest and pushed back with a tinkling giggle. “I have to dress for dinner!” She froze suddenly and his ardor vanished at the blatant look of terror in her eyes.

“What’s the matter?” He was concerned.

“I’m scared, Draco,” she whispered, her eyes dropping as she started to tremble slightly. “I want your parents to like me.”

Draco sighed and pulled her in tight. “My mum already does, I promise. My father…Liz, my father just got out of prison. He’s still under house arrest. He’s nothing to fear. I believe he’s learned his lesson. The mud we have to drag this family out of is deep. He’s a pompous arse, but he’ll accept this or he’ll lose me.”

Lizzie’s eyes grew wide. “Don’t be rash, he’s your father.”

“I’m not being rash, Lizzie.” He shook his head, his eyes earnest. “He might be my father, but you’re my future.”

Lizzie’s face froze in shock and then crumpled with emotion. She leaned forward and kissed him gently. “I feel the same way, Draco. That you’re my future.”

He let out a breath he didn’t even know he had been holding after she answered his bold declaration, and after giving her one more tight squeeze, he stepped back and let her go. “Freshen up, I’ll meet you in the hallway in fifteen minutes.”
Lucius Malfoy was amused with his Draco’s rebellion, but he honestly couldn’t blame him for his dalliance when the wispy little beauty arrived at the table on his son’s arm. She was stunning. All petite with fine bones and delicate facial features. The utter epitome of the fairer sex, much like his Narcissa. It wasn’t until she started speaking that he really found his son’s appeal to the little Mudblood wench, however. She was bright, quick witted, more than acceptable manners (especially being she was a Yank), and had a marvelous sense of humor. It was really too bad her parentage tainted her so. He wondered if his son had bedded her yet. He imagined bedding the wench himself. It was a delectable thought that passed through his mind as he undressed her with his eyes. He smirked when his son noticed and watched the lad’s face darken perceptibly.

“Tell us about your parents, Elizabeth.” Narcissa was saying when he broke eye contact with Draco and tuned back into the conversation.

“My mom stays home with my siblings.” The blonde chit answered with a dimpled smile. Lucius felt his cock stir and bit back a chuckle as his mind continued to race with images of debauching the girl. She’d be a damn sight more fun to corrupt than the Granger girl had been, so much more beautiful and petite. He forced himself to listen, giving her a politely bored look. “I have four brothers and a baby sister.” Lucius felt his eyebrows raise and a sneer cross his face. Great. A blonde, Mudblooded Weasley, as it were. It took an unacceptable amount of force not to roll his eyes.

Narcissa, charming as ever, continued to look delighted. “Where do you fall in that impressive lineup?”

“I’m the oldest,” Lizzie replied politely.

“Is your sister magical?” Lucius reached for his goblet of elfin wine as he asked his question. “Often times, magic will run through all female children born to Muggle parents.”

Draco looked inordinately pleased with his question and he gave a slight nod and twinkle of his eye to make the boy think he was trying.

Lizzie looked slightly surprised at this and he grimaced internally. Did she not have the decency to explore her tainted history?

“Thus far, Sarah hasn’t shown any sort of magical capability.” She paused. “However, she only just turned two, recently. My magic didn’t manifest until I was almost five.”

“What did you make happen?” Narcissa’s eyes twinkled with merriment and Lucius was taken aback by his wife’s sincerity of interest. Surely she did not approve of this obvious gold-digging bint.

“I prevented my infant brother from getting hurt.” It was said very quietly, almost fearfully. “We were at a park, and my mother became distracted by another child who was lost. It was my fault, really. I thought I could push the stroller to her, but was too little. I lost control and there was this little hill that sloped to a pond. I didn’t cry or scream or anything, but when my mother called out frantically and started to run, she scared me and I levitated the stroller back to the path. It was seen by at least a dozen Muggles and the Magical State Government had to be dispatched to perform Obliviates. My parents were allowed to keep their knowledge to help protect me from further accidents, such as it were. It was a very off-putting experience. I remember telling them I didn’t want to be a witch.”

It was quiet for a few moments before he decided to continue to play the gallant host. “I can only imagine it was a traumatic experience for such a young child.”

That dimpled smile split her face again and his placket grew even more tight. He clenched his teeth...
and gave a slight shrug as if to brush off her unspoken thanks. She turned to Draco, her eyes glowing
and he had to bite back a laugh. The twit thought she was gaining his approval, Draco’s tight smile
told him the lad new better. Well, he did have a hand in raising the boy.

“And your father, what does he do?” Narcissa prompted as a change of course magically appeared in
front of them.

Lizzie was momentarily distracted by their main course, beautifully displayed carvings of roast duck
over a bed of steamed green and black beans drizzled with a citrus pan sauce, sided with roasted and
seasoned baby red potatoes. It was Draco’s favorite, definitely not one of his. He was never a fan of
duck. He lifted his eyes back to the girl and observed as she watched Narcissa from under lowered
lashes, double checking what utensils to use and how to start disassembling the meal into bite sized
pieces. He was begrudgingly impressed with her fortitude and determination.

After Narcissa had placed a bite of duck in her pretty mouth, Lizzie picked up her utensils and started
to prepare her own first bit with dignified grace while answering the question posed to her. “My
father is a classified military personnel member. Even our family is not really allowed to know what
he does. He’s currently employed at the U.S. Embassy in London.”

“Do you live directly in the heart of London, then?” Lucius asked politely. He knew her family was
in a safe house. The moment he heard Draco was bringing her home for break, he decided to do
some digging. Mostly for his own curiosity, partly because he’d love to tell his higher up where they
could find a new family to destroy. A dark chuckle curled through his mind.

“No, actually. My mom fell in love with a beautiful townhouse in the suburb of Sutton, right near
Horton County Park.” The stupid blonde girl answered with a smile. “It’s quite a lovely area.”

“I’m sure it is.” Lucius murmured demurely, but he knew his son saw the glittering malevolence in
his eyes and watched him swallow, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

Once pudding was cleared Lizzie politely declared herself full to bursting and complimented her
formal hosts with a sincere smile and word of thanks. Draco’s hand, which had sat on her knee for a
large chunk of the evening, squeezed her it tightly in approval.

Startling both Lizzie and his parents, Draco turned to his witch. “Love,” he said softly, biting back a
chuckle when Lucius’s head snapped up at the term of endearment. “Can you head back to your
room on your own? I would like to speak with my parents privately for a few minutes. I’ll come find
you after. We can maybe take a stroll through the garden?”

“Of course,” she answered. She hesitated a moment and Draco knew what she was unsure of. He
took her hand and gestured her to rise to her feet. His parents and himself followed suit, then he
leaned in a gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek. He saw his father’s eyes narrow in his peripheral
vision and clenched his teeth while trying to maintain the convincing smile on his face.

“Shall we retire to the drawing room?” Lucius directed and Narcissa lead the way. Draco fell into
step beside his father and behind his mother after seeing Lizzie to the door and pointing her in the
correct direction of the guest room.

“Tibby?” Narcissa called. The house elf cracked into existence and bowed low.

“What can I’s be getting for Madame?”

“Tea, please.” She answered simply before settling herself on a davenport. Lucius sat next to her,
Draco across from them in one of two Bank of England chairs. An ornate sterling-silver tea service
appeared on top of the mahogany and granite coffee table with a soft pop and Narcissa, ever the lady of the Manor, set to serving.

“I would like to know what you think of Elizabeth.” Draco knew he exuded a confidence he barely felt, but his father had taught him that quite well.

“She’s delightful, darling,” Narcissa said, handing her son a cup and saucer. “Beautiful, intelligent, extremely well-mannered for a Yank…” She trailed off as her husband snorted and turned a questioning look at him.

“I just agree with your sentiment, my love,” he told her. “The ‘well-mannered for a Yank’ was actually word for word with a thought that had crossed my mind. And beautiful, yes. Very much so. Stunning is more like it.”

A tentative, slow smile crossed Draco’s face. “You like her?”

“I do,” Narcissa nodded, but raised a questioning eyebrow at him.

“She’s lovely for a dalliance while at school, Draco,” Lucius answered, his tone dismissive.

Draco’s face dropped and Narcissa hissed at Lucius who turned a stone-cold face between the two. “Honestly, Draco. You know I have been negotiating betrothal terms with the Greengrass’s for almost two years now. They feel you and Astoria would be a good match and agree that, when she graduates in two years, you can be wed immediately.”

Narcissa stopped breathing and turned wide eyes on her son. His face had lost all color except for two spots of pink high on his cheekbones. “I thought we were past this. I thought the war had usurped the need for arranged marriages.”

“You are a pureblood heir, in need of a pureblood bride to carry on the Malfoy name.”

“Lucius, we’ve discussed this…” Narcissa was cut off by a dark look from her husband and she pursed her lips into a thin, white line.

“We have, yes, but I have made the final decision. Dally with your Mudblood all you want, Draco. Do not expect us to accept her into this family as a daughter-in-law.”

Draco hissed at the slur before silence settled into the room. It was so wrought with tension you could feel the vibrations like you could see ripples on a pond. “You will allow me to marry whom I choose.” Draco finally said in a flat, dead voice. “And I choose Elizabeth.”

His mother blanched and his father stood with fierce anger emanating from his whole body.

Draco stayed calm as the power of the three magical beings swirled in the air as emotions rose. “I’m not saying I wish to propose to her now, we are both young. I am not saying that I am one hundred percent certain, our relationship is in its infancy. We might only be teenagers, but we’re not so immature that we don’t know how we feel about each other. We have been dating since September and spend almost all our free time and study time together. We are deeply connected, I feel as if she’s my other half. I’m in love with her.”

Narcissa made a surprised sound in the back of her throat and grasped her husband’s arm, attempting to pull him back into his seat. He refused her guidance and stalked across the room to a large, ornately framed window, his mind reeling. He would put an end to this nonsense once and for all.

“You will marry Astoria Greengrass two years from this next June.” His voice was final, brooked no
room for argument, but yet his son rose to his feet angrily and defied away.

“I will not.”

Lucius whirled angrily as his wife rose to her feet and calmly pointed her wand at her husband with blazing eyes, her hair crackling with her power. “Sit. Down. Lucius.” She stated with barely contained fury. “Now.”

Both Malfoy men looked at the petite, pristine woman with open mouthed shock.

“I disagree with your choice of Astoria Greengrass for Draco, and I’ve been telling you this for months upon months.” She started calmly, pouring herself another cup of tea before wordlessly offering to pour more for her men. Both declined as Lucius sunk back onto the davenport in the opposite corner from his now calm wife. Her wand had been tucked away and she acted as if nothing unusual had happened. Draco’s face brightened and he avoided his father’s gaze purposefully. If he looked at the man, he’d gloat and he didn’t want to push his luck. “I think she is a vapid girl with no backbone and Draco would be bored to tears with her. Daphne would be a much better choice…”

Here Draco made a vehement sound of protest. Daphne Greengrass was a horror show. She was manipulative and cunning and carried all her boyfriends’ bollocks around in her purse until she cut them loose and ate them for dinner. Currently she was leading Stephen Selwyn around and it was a disgusting sight to behold. “…but I digress as his reaction is evidence enough for me that the rumors of the girl are true. She’s a trollop who sleeps around and emasculates every man she touches. I don’t want that for our son either.” She used her spoon to swirl the milk into her tea before tapping it gently on the rim, setting it lightly on the sauces, and taking a delicate sip. She paused a moment, took a second sip and set it back down with a gentle clink before continuing. Her men were still staring at her in silent awe.

“Draco is not saying that he knows right this moment that he wishes to marry Miss Williams, just that he feels very strongly for her and could see it leading down the aisle. Did I take your meaning correctly, darling?” She curled a perfectly manicured eyebrow at her son. He gave an abrupt nod, but said nothing.

“I propose a compromise,” Narcissa said after taking another controlled sip of her tea. She watched out of the corner of her eye as Lucius started grinding his teeth. Merlin help her, she was starting to despise the man. Ever since Lucius had been released, she couldn’t help but feel him as a burden to her. He was as manipulative and full of secrets as always. She had a sickening feeling he was caught up in something that would only continue to bring their family dishonor.

The end of the war had brought them so close together. They hadn’t wanted the Dark Lord to prevail. They just wanted to survive in tact as a family unit. To be able to love each other wholly without fear for each other. She had thought they were all irrevocably changed, and her son most definitely was. Where she wasn’t thrilled with the idea of Draco tying himself to a Muggle-born girl, she couldn’t help but be proud of him. He had also written of a tentative friendship with the Granger girl, which was wonderful being she was marrying Severus (a whole other can of craziness to contemplate) and a cordial relationship with the Potter and Weasley boys in his year. He was immersed in his studies, getting the best marks in his entire academic career, and seemed truly happy for the first time in many, many years. If this girl was helping him with all this, she was determined to welcome her with open arms. Thus far, Lizzie had made it easy. She was lovely, charming, intelligent, and the way her son looked at the girl made Narcissa’s stomach flop. The fact that Miss Williams returned that look made her heart sing with happiness for Draco. Everyone deserved that kind of love and devotion.
Her husband had gone into Azkaban as a broken, changed man; he came out much like his old self. Why? She would never be able to understand. She thought Azkaban would have just reinforced his change of heart. This had been disappointing for Narcissa, who had striven alongside Draco to change their thoughts and put out a reformed front to society. They had participated in restoring Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. They had attended charity fundraisers and had donated generously. They had helped open an orphanage and were matching the funding for it from the Ministry. Narcissa volunteered many hours there weekly. In other words, they were actively trying to show the wizarding world that the Malfoy’s knew what they had done in the past was wrong and wanted to change, to be better.

“What is your compromise, ‘Cissa?” Lucius asked silkily. She shuddered at his tone of voice, a combination of sucking up to her laced with a threat of punishment if he didn’t like what she said. She knew he wouldn’t like what she said. She squared her shoulders and stated her case anyway.

“Draco has five years to find a suitable match. Bloodlines will not be counted in our qualifications, Lucius. In fact, marrying a half-blood or Muggle-born witch will only play in our favor. I would prefer our son be able to marry for love, if it is what he chooses.” Lucius narrowed his eyes dangerously, a sneer slashed his handsome face. She turned to Draco and paused to take another sip of her tea. “That is our side of things, the things we must take into account. As for your side.

“We must have a chance to know her for at least six months before you propose. She must be worthy of the Malfoy name; she will take a huge place in upper society and must be able to handle the pressures. Therefore, she must be intelligent, trustworthy, well-mannered or able to be trained as such, witty, and pleasant on the eyes – not that you would choose someone who wasn’t.” She realized her qualifications sounded vapid and shallow. Such was society life. “She must be willing to put being a society wife above a career.”

Draco blanched at that last requirement. Lizzie was highly intelligent and planned on taking an apprenticeship if she could get one. She had talked about Arithmancy or Charms; she had even discussed wanting to be a Healer with him.

“You know that is important in a Malfoy wife, Draco. Do not be surprised. Lizzie would have a solid ten years to pursue further education and start a career, but that career would eventually have to be put on the sidelines to take up her place as the Malfoy matriarch. I would happily share the duties with her for as long as I can so she could continue to work part time, if she so chose.”

“Narcissa, you are making it sound like you’re ready to welcome the chit into the family with open arms!” Lucius’s face was turning an ugly shade of puce. It had always been an unattractive color on him. She rolled her eyes.

“Don’t call her a chit, Father. Her name is Elizabeth!” Draco demanded through gritted teeth. “She’s wonderful, and if you give her a chance, you’ll see this.”

Lucius stood dismissively. “I will continue contracting a betrothal with the Greengrass’s. She has six months to prove herself to your mother and myself. If it is not a unanimous front, she goes and you do as you’re told.”

“I said five years, Lucius. They are children, Miss Williams is not even eighteen years old, yet!” Narcissa snapped, losing her temper slightly.

“I am saying six months. Why let them date that long if we do not approve? It doesn’t pay to let things drag out.”

“I will not let you both dictate my life. We don’t live in the Middle Ages anymore.” Draco’s voice
was eerily calm and both parents looked at him in astonishment. The maturity and cool he was presenting was a very new development, he knew that as well as everyone else. “It’s the twenty-first century. I will not be a part of a marriage contract. I will choose my own wife. One I see fit. One I think will do the Malfoy name proud. If you cannot abide by that – have another child yourselves and disinherit me. Or don’t have another child and I believe the Weasley’s will inherit…yes? They are our closest living relatives, as it were? How lovely.” His eyes twinkled with derision as his father visibly shuddered at the thought.

He stood and walked over to the French doors that lead to the hall. He ripped one door open and froze. Without turning back to them he said in a low, threatening voice. “Father, you will do nothing to hurt Lizzie. Nothing. If you do, you will be out your heir. I am not bluffing.” He exited the room with barely any noise, closing the door with a soft click on two dumbfounded faces. Lizzie was waiting.
"Where are we going to start today, Dr. Jenkins?" Hermione asked pleasantly as she took at seat hip-to-hip with Severus on the overstuffed couch opposite of the doctor's large, dark brown leather chair. She admired the brass nail heads in the curling arms before meeting the man's eyes.

"No preamble?" Dr. Jenkins said with a smile. "How about telling me how your week went. You both seems more comfortable today."

Hermione smiled and laced her fingers though her fiancé's. "We are more comfortable. We had a long talk after our last session. It helped immensely."

The doctor looked at Severus with appraising eyes. "Very good, then. Severus, are you planning on participating this session, or are you just sitting in? I have no wish for you to leave again, we will go more slowly from here on out."

Severus made eye contact with Hermione and held her gaze while he answered. "I will participate to the best of my ability and I do promise I will not leave again. I do not promise I will answer every question." Her eyes glowed with happiness and pride – he had taken her advice to talk to her instead of Jenkins so he would be more relaxed.

"I find that a fair statement." He sat back more deeply in his chair and flipped open a tablet, poising a ballpoint pen above the line paper. "I wish to discuss your engagement tonight."

Both his patients looked at him with barely veiled surprise. "Whatever for?" Hermione asked, confused.

"I wish to know the reasoning for moving your relationship forward as quickly as you did. My understanding of the wizarding world is that you age normally until about age fifty and then it's like time stands still for your body for the next forty or so years before you start aging again. The lifespan is between 130-150 years, correct?" When Hermione nodded he continued. "So why rush?"

"That's a valid question, I just don't see how it pertains to our therapy sessions," she replied, confusion evident.

"Humor me," he replied. "Severus, Hermione tells me you proposed on a bit of whim – why is that?"
The Potions professor's face became contemplative. He wasn't ashamed or worried about this topic of conversation, in fact he was almost relieved by it. Loving Hermione and wanting to bind her to him was hardly something to be embarrassed about, and a story he'd willingly tell. However, like Hermione, he was quite mystified about the topic of choice. Shrugging, he smirked at his fiancée, who looked back at him with one raised, beautifully arched eyebrow and a smirk of her own. They hadn't discussed the brash nature of his proposal, he could tell she was curious.

"It was Potter who brought it on, actually." Her other eyebrow rose as her eyes widened in surprised, twinkling with mirth. Fuck, this was a lot easier when he was pretending to talk to her. She was right. Why that surprised him, he wasn't sure. He would probably need to get used to her being right a lot in the future. Female intuition or something along those lines.

"Harry told you to propose?" she squeaked after a moment of silence.

"No, no. You misunderstand. Potter proposing to the Weasley girl – that's what brought the idea to the forefront of my mind. I hadn't really contemplated it seriously, but…" He paused, unjoining their hands and raising his fingers to brush his upper lip in thought, trying to figure out just how to word things. "Your reaction. The way your eyes shone, the tremble of your lips. I could see your heart swelling for your friends after what he said. How she was the reason he fought so hard and had the strength to endure, how he wanted to be her family."

Hermione's eyes shone with tears at his lovely words as he continued. "I realized in that moment, listening to him while watching you, that he was spot on. I thought I had fought the war for a love I had lost – one that I never really had; he made me see I fought the war for the love I was to find. You." He had to clench his teeth to stave back the emotion when she started to blubber. Gryffindors! he thought with loving sarcasm. Always the heart on the sleeve. He cleared his throat. "Once I realized that, I didn't want to wait. Granted, I thought it would be a few years before we bonded ourselves, but I was more concerned for you to have the time you needed than for me to have more time. I'm ready, but I am almost twenty years older than you."

Dr. Jenkins was looking at this man with new eyes. He hadn't really felt this kind of emotion and sentiment was possible from Severus Snape. Apparently, he had been dead wrong. "Hermione, tell Severus what went through your head."

"Oh, goodness." She laughed through her tears, snatching a tissue from the coffee table and wiping her eyes. "You know, you're just a big old softy, you git!" She muttered playfully, crushing the tissue in one hand. His eyes crinkled with mirth even though a smile did not tilt his lips. "Well, I was quite floored. Honestly, my whole mind went completely blank, and if you know me – which you do – you realize what a feat that is!" He actually chuckled at that statement as she giggled a bit maniacally. "After the blankness receded (this was when you started getting a little nervous and rambling about being engaged for however long and not rushing to the alter) all that flew through my mind was yes. Yes, yes, YES! I wanted it all, I could picture everything you said. Every word was what I wanted, and you were the only person I could see myself with when I achieved those things."

It was Severus's turn to be surprised, all though he had much better control on his emotions. He didn't speak, just reached out and brushed her cheek gently.

"Wonderful," Jenkins said calmly. "Tell me about what happened after."

"We picked out a ring," Severus answered. "Then left for the café."

Silence.

"Continue."
"We were waiting for Ginny," Hermione whispered. "Everything went quiet before the screaming started."

"We reacted instinctively – back to back, wands out." Severus supplied.

"Hooded, masked men – Death Eaters – surrounded us. You asked me to run." It was a whisper.

"You told me no, that you wouldn't leave me."

"I didn't want to."

"There we are," Jenkins said softly. "Right there."

They stared at each other, faces solemn. "I didn't have a choice," she said softly, reaching for him. He took her hand and laced his fingers through hers, his other hand coming to cover their joint ones.

"I know you didn't."

"I came back. I fought my way back. I'm still fighting my way back, but I'm right here."

"You did, you are. I am grateful."

"I'll never leave you by choice."

"I know that now."

"Forgive me."

"Bloody hell, woman," he choked. "There's nothing to forgive."

"It wasn't your fault," she insisted.

"It wasn't my fault." Obsidian eyes slid shut in acceptance of that statement.

"It wasn't your fault," Jenkins agreed quietly.

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**Malfoy Manor**

She was trembling. Severus had his fingers entwined with hers as they stood at the gates to Malfoy Manor, waiting for someone to fetch them through the wards. This was a terrible idea. The girl had been tortured violently just inside these walls. He took a deep breath and untangled their hands only to firmly slide his arm around her shoulders and pull her tightly to his side.

He turned his face back to the Manor to see Draco and Miss Williams walking towards them, both smiling invitingly. He forced a nod before tilting his fiancée's chin up to meet his eyes. "You're alright?"

Hermione's lips trembled as she attempted to give him a brave smile. "Narcissa has promised that the drawing room is warded so no one can enter. You will not accidentally end up there by any chance."

"Okay," she whispered, eyes bright with trust. He dropped a kiss to her forehead.

"Thank you for doing this," he told her honestly. "It means a lot to me for you all to get along. They're really the only friends I have left."
"Of course," she said sweetly, and tilted her head up for a kiss. He obliged just as Draco and Miss Williams opened the gates.

"Hello sir, Hermione," Miss Williams greeted with a dimpled smile. Hermione studied her friend carefully before allowing herself to be captured in a hug. It had been a week since Lizzie joined the Malfoy household for break. The girl looked haggard and overwhelmed.

"Are you okay?" Hermione whispered in her ear. Lizzie shook her head and glanced at Draco who was shaking Severus's hand and exchanging salutations.

"We'll talk later," Lizzie answered evasively. They hooked arms and followed behind their men as they made their way up to the impressive Manor house.

Hermione couldn't help but be awed by the architecture of the entry hall. The arched doorways and gilded molding was stunning. There was a massive gold and silver candlelit chandelier that towered over them in the middle of the space. Two sweeping staircases led up to each wing of the house and intimidatingly tall French doors beckoned to the floor level directly in front of them. Two more doors on each side of the room led to what Hermione assumed were probably smaller entertaining rooms. Perhaps a parlor and music room, if she knew anything about Baroque design. The walls were lined with dark blue silk wallpaper dotted with tiny silver shapes that were indiscernible from a distance. The walls met darkly stained, eight-inch-tall baseboard of rich mahogany before butting up against beautiful stone floors. She was fairly sure the stone was slate. Everything was very Baroque-esque in style and time period.

"Draco, your home is beautiful," Hermione murmured sincerely, eyes wandering the stunning space.

"Wait until you see the rest of it," Lizzie muttered under her breath with a small laugh. "This place is like a museum."

Draco let out a bark of a laugh before thanking Hermione and holding his arm for Lizzie and gesturing to on the side rooms. "My mother would like to begin with drinks and starters in the music room. Would you join us?"

"Lead the way," Severus directed, holding his arm out for Hermione as well.

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy rose to their feet when the foursome entered the room and Hermione started to tremble again. Everything felt...wrong. She forced herself to breath.

"Oh, Severus!" Narcissa exclaimed, crossing the room to take one of his hands in both of hers. "We are so happy to have you tonight."

"Thank you, Narcissa. It's a pleasure, of course."

"Miss Granger." The beautiful blonde woman turned to the obviously terrified girl. "I do hope we can make you comfortable, my dear. I know the circumstances the last time you were here was less than desirable."

Hermione held back a very unlady like snort, but Narcissa's warm hands and kind face helped her feel more at ease. That was, until she heard Lucius greeting Severus. She felt something in her brain click, and though she couldn't put her finger on it, she immediately felt even more ill at ease. Fortunately, her fight or flight kicked in and she was able to steel her nerves.

"Ah, Miss Granger, perhaps you are happy to see us?" Lucius said in a silky drawl, taking in her kind smile. "I do hope we can make you feel at home." Shivers ran up her spine that had nothing to do with pleasure. He took one of her hands and pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles. She had to
force herself not to pull her hand away and wipe it on her skirts with a growl of disgust. This man still rubbed her every wrong way.

"Of course, Mr. Malfoy. It's a pleasure. Thank you for inviting us into your beautiful Manor." She forced herself to answer politely.

"Please sit. What can I get you all to drink?" Narcissa set to being a gracious host. Glass of wine in hand (in which her husband-to-be leaned over, touched lightly, and wandlessly turned into a deep red grape juice, much to her delight), Hermione felt just comfortable enough to let her eyes wander through the music room. The sitting area, where appetizers and beverages were arranged in perfect detail, circled around a stunning red granite fireplace, above which hung an intimidating portrait of what Hermione assumed to be Draco's grandfather. The portrait had said not a word, but the way he glared between the two young women, it was obvious he was unimpressed.

After a while of half listening to the conversation, Narcissa interrupted her longing gaze at the stunning, slick black grand piano that took up a large portion of the space. "Do you play, Hermione?" she asked the curly haired brunette kindly.

"I do," she answered enthusiastically. "I don't get much chance to practice during the school year, but I took lessons all through primary school and still meet with my tutor in the summer, obviously not the last two summers, however. I'm quite rusty, unfortunately."

"Oh, do play something for us," Lucius's eyes glinted with something she couldn't define and it forced her posture to snap ramrod straight in defense.

"Oh, I shouldn't," she murmured demurely. "I wouldn't wish to humiliate myself or Severus."

"Nonsense." Narcissa stood and reached to Hermione, indicating she'd like to take her wine glass. She looked to Severus for guidance and he gave her a half smile and nodded his encouragement.

"If you do humiliate yourself, Narcissa or I will attempt to play. Then there will be humiliation exchanged for humiliation." Lucius gave a chuckle that made Hermione look at him oddly. "His voice…"

"You never mentioned you played before, Hermione," Severus said softly, interrupting her errant thought. "I'd love to hear you."

She took a deep breath and looked to Lizzie, the girl gave her a signature grin, her blue eyes sparkling like sapphires.

"Alright then," Hermione stood, pulling confidence up from her toes. "Something classical? Baroque? Modern?"

"One can never go wrong with a little Mozart…Beethoven…Debussy?" Lucius drawled in a bored voice.

"Debussy, it is." She gave a small curtsey before crossing the room to sit at the piano. Her fingers were trembling, but only slightly. This is something she loved very much and the instrument was exquisite. She lowered herself to the gleaming bench, smoothing the skirt of her robes under her bum. She tapped her feet on each peddle to gauge their distance before effortlessly sliding open the lid. "Claire de Lune would please everyone?" She asked with a polite smile as she slid her fingers over the gleaming keys.

Lucius raised his eyebrows and turned a hesitantly impressed face to Narcissa who nodded warmly at the girl. "Lovely choice."
And so, she played. The pianissimo introduction to the song was started with hesitancy, but as her muscle memory took hold, the next set of chords flowed confidently from her finger tips and she found herself engrossed in the third movement of the Suite Bergamasque which she adored with passion. Soon, she was completely lost, fingers flying through trills and runs before the song dipped back into a ritard and decrescendo. Not until the last arpeggiated chord sounded at the end of over five minutes did she come back to herself. She was flushed with pleasure, her breath short with passion, her body thrumming with its release of censor and talent. Her head snapped up as enthusiastic applause came from the small grouping of people around her. She hadn't even noticed that they had moved, but moved they had. All of them now surrounding the sleek instrument. She met and held Severus's eyes, which glowed with pride and even a bit of lust.

"'Rusty,' she said." Narcissa teased to the room at large. "Can you imagine what she would sound like with practice and forethought?"

"Quite impressive." Lucius drawled and Hermione's eyes flew to his. She cringed internally as she felt his eyes sweep her body, lingering on her breasts and stomach before returning to her eyes. She quickly broke his gaze, looking to Severus, but he was engrossed in a murmured conversation with Draco. She suppressed a shiver of revulsion. What was it about this man? Outside of the obvious, of course – the fight in the ministry, watching her be tortured by his sadistic sister-in-law, giving Ginny the horcrux-infested diary, sneering at her every time he saw her.

"The instrument is impressive," she said lovingly, strumming out a few more chords before sighing. "I don't know if I've ever played on an instrument of this quality."

"Is there anything you can't do, Granger?" Draco joked in a lazy voice.

"Yes," Hermione laughed, breaking the tension in the room. "Sing. I'll leave the singing to Lizzie."

"But not today," Lizzie chortled as all eyes moved to her with consideration.

"I'll play for you," Hermione grinned, she didn't feel like being the only one singled out.

"I haven't warmed up, and it's much more important for a vocalist to warm herself before performing."

"Ha!" Hermione chuckled, closing the lid of the piano gently. "I'll give it to you today, simply because I'm guessing dinner will be served shortly?" She sent a questioning look at Narcissa who nodded with a small smile.

"Miss Granger is correct, we'll have to put Elizabeth on the spot another day." She handed Hermione her glass of "wine" as she stood and moved away from the instrument.

Narcissa took Severus's arm and they proceeded to lead the way to the dining room, followed closely behind by Draco and Lizzie. Hermione nervously glanced at Lucius as he rounded the piano and offered her his arm.

"Thank you for the lovely entertainment, my little lioness." Lucius demurred, a devilish grin on his face that would mark him as handsome, if it weren't for the evil glint in his ice grey eyes. Hermione's entire body froze, something about his voice – the phrase he'd used – startled her deeply. On instinct, a hand fluttered down to protect the small swell of her belly, unnoticeable in the robes she wore. Oh, but Lucius watched the movement and pale eyebrows rose. He lifted his eyes to hers and studied her intently for a moment before a sneer curled his face. "Are you in the family way, Miss Granger?"

She gave a small squeak and pushed past him, her skin crawling as if she were covered in honey
"Now, now." The loathsome man caught her hand and tucked it into the crook of his arm. "It would not do for us to enter the dining room separately, it would make me look very ungentlemanly."

Hermione did not dare deign him with a response, instead she clenched her teeth. Her whole being knew that something was very wrong. She allowed him to escort her into the elegant room and lead her to her seat, thankfully next to Severus. The moment she was seated by him, her body started to tremble more violently then even her nerves had made it when they first arrived. He looked at her in alarm and slid a hand over her thigh, grasping her knee and leaning in.

"What's wrong?" He hissed quietly into her ear while giving Lucius a rueful smile from across the table as he took his seat.

"I don't know," she whispered honestly, trying desperately to prevent the tears that were trying to well in her eyes. "I think I'm going to have a panic attack."

"Breathe." He encouraged in a low murmur, wrapping his fingers around hers, sliding his thumb across her knuckles soothingly. As quietly as possible, she pulled a deep breath into her lungs through her nose, blowing it out gently through slightly parted lips. She did this a few more times while Severus engaged in quiet conversation with the table, still rubbing her knuckles. By the time the soup hit the table, she was in control of herself again, albeit still feeling terribly uncomfortable. She gave him a tremulous smile as she reclaimed her hand to dip into the steaming bowl of broth. It was delicious.

While Hermione tracked the conversation as they moved through each course, she participated minimally. Focusing instead on the exquisite food that made her pregnancy palate palpate with joy. After the lovely soup, there was a beautifully presented shrimp cocktail. Hermione almost groaned in delight as the cocktail sauce was heavily flavored with lemon and dill. It was served with a hard roll she couldn't identify and the sweetest butter she had ever tasted. Following the fish course, the entree and removes were served together as a small platting of half of a Cornish hen paired with glazed carrots and a bowtie pasta in some creamy sauce she was unfamiliar with, but tasted of garlic and thick cream and seasonings that tickled her taste buds tantalizingly. A delightfully crisp, non-alcoholic punch followed for the palate cleanser. The Roast course included quad on wilted cress, which was not as much to her taste, but she was getting full, anyhow. An asparagus salad with champagne-saffron vinaigrette started to fill in the limited cracks in her over full tummy. However, when the chocolate painted eclairs with French vanilla ice cream appeared before her, she somehow found room for it, as well.

Severus watched her with amusement as she fastidiously put away almost every bite of every dish placed in front of her with polite enthusiasm and little throat ticks of pleasure. She had never been a big eater since he had known her more intimately, and after months of barely eating anything at all, he was relieved her pregnancy had taken over her palate and drove her to put weight back on her too-thin frame. He guessed in the last few weeks she had gained about five or six pounds, but being she had lost well over thirty-five since her parents and her abduction, she had a long way to go.

"Shall we retire to the parlor for tea and coffee and dessert?" Narcissa asked politely to the room at large.

"That wasn't dessert?" Hermione asked before she could stop herself. Lucius's eyebrows rose and a condescending smirk covered his features. Severus gave him a hard look as the poor girl flushed pink, realizing her mistake. "I'm sorry, I'm not use to such elaborate meals." Her voice was small.

"I am ever so pleased that you enjoyed the food, Hermione," Narcissa replied kindly. "You definitely
look like you need to put on a bit of weight. It was a pleasure to see you eat so well." She gave her husband a reproachful glare, daring him to say anything to the contrary.

Her blush deepened and Severus slid his fingers over her leg again to help quell her embarrassment.

"Of course, she should eat with gusto," Lucius said, tone sly with a slight edge to his voice. "She is expecting after all, isn't she, Severus? Dare I say she's almost…four months along?"

The silence was almost painful, Narcissa's hand fluttered lightly to her chest with surprise as Hermione's already crimson face deepened to maroon.

"How astute of you, Lucius," Severus said with barely disguised contempt. "Yes, Hermione and I are expecting. We are very excited, even if it was a little premature for our relationship."

"How delightful!" Narcissa quipped.

"Yes, how delightful," Lucius agreed with a bland smile. "Is it also delightful that you could potentially be the father of another man's child?" My child perhaps? The thought disgusted him as much as it intrigued him.

Severus growled a warning as his betrothed's face went from cherry red to translucent, her eyes sliding shut as shame carved her features. Anger filled him and his posture became defensive just as Draco exclaimed. "Father, honestly!"

Narcissa shook with slightly checked rage. "Lucius, what a horrific comment. Hermione has been through a terrible ordeal; it is none of our business nor is it even remotely polite for you to make such observations or comments."

Lucius cringed outward at his wife's reproach. He had to hold back his disgust of the man he called son and the man he called friend before calmly answering. "I apologize for my outburst; it was very rude of me." He gave a gracious nod at Hermione, who was being blocked protectively from his view by his enraged friend.

"As it were," Severus stated crisply as he protectively placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder, she reached up to touch her fingers to his. "The child is mine, confirmed with a prenatal paternity charm. We are expecting a daughter in September."

Lucius grit his teeth in disbelief before extending another apology and heartfelt congratulations he didn't really feel. How in the world had they failed so horrendously breaking these two? The curly-haired chit had seemed so utterly destroyed beyond recognition when they released her. Now it was all babies and weddings and hand holding and secret touches and smiles. Severus was a traitor to his kind, he deserved a lifetime of hell for his actions.

He unfortunately had to let the rest of the evening pass with no other incidences or his wife would castrate him. Bollocks all anyhow.

Severus was grateful his friend had the decency to keep his mouth shut the rest of the bloody evening. Hermione was looking ready to drop from exhaustion and sheer force of will to remain calm as he led them away from the Manor. Just outside the gate, he Apparated them to Spinner's End.

She had done him very proud in that difficult setting. He had been floored by her piano playing and she had handled the ten-course meal beautifully, carefully following cues from him and Narcissa as to how to go about each plate that appeared before her. He was still concerned about how Lucius
interacted with her, something had seemed very off. Even for his non-Muggle-born-loving friend.

She sank into one of the arm chairs in front of the fireplace when they arrived in his home. Using her wand, she moved some logs into the hearth and threw an *Incendio* at them. The fire roared to life and seemed to bring a peace to her frame as she relaxed back into the chair.

"Hermione?" he asked quietly, settling at her feet and leaning against her knees. "What did Lucius do to you in the music room when you were alone with him for those few moments?"

"He really didn't *do* anything," she said softly, gently digging the fingers of one hand into his sleek hair, he leaned into her touch like a cat. "It was the way he held himself, the things he said."

"What did he say?"

"That's just it." She pulled into herself, she could feel her mental reprieved crashing in around her. "I don't know. Except for that awful comment after dinner, he was perfectly polite. Something just… felt so wrong." Another shield slammed into place and she panicked, trying to push it out of the way. She was horrified that she could feel herself shutting down. A sob broke and Severus turned to her, terrified.

"Hermione?" He moved up to his knees, moving between her legs to cup her face in his hands. "Love, what's wrong?"

"I don't know," she whispered, another choked sob breaking through. "I feel like I've taken five steps back… I just… I can't." She pulled her face out of his hands and covered it with both of hers as he pushed himself to stand. Her breaths were coming in hiccupping gasps and she cringed as he pulled her up out of the chair and into his arms. She pulled away quickly, needing the space. He couldn't touch her now, not when she felt so broken again.

"Hermione…" His eyes reflected his fear and she held his gaze.

"I think I need you to take me back to the Burrow."

"You're not going to stay…?"

"Please, Severus. I'm so sorry." She averted her eyes, pretending the stone of the fireplace was fascinating.

"Hermione," he knew he sounded desperate. "What *happened*?" He gasped her shoulders and pulled her to face him. Her eyes were blank and he almost screamed with frustration. "Don't you dare do this again. Stop it right now!"

Her eyes widened and she shook her head, her breathing still coming in ragged. "I c-can't seem to stop it."

"Hermione…" It came out almost as a groan as he forced her into a hard embrace, rubbing his hands up spine. "Don't leave me again," he begged. Those words seemed to trigger something in her and her breathing immediately became easier even as her tears became more fierce. She sagged into his hold, grasping his robes in her fists.

"No," she hiccups. "No, I won't. Of course, I won't."

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**Monday April 5th**
"There's been a set-back," Severus said quietly, entering Dr. Jenkins' office.

Jenkins stood in surprise of Severus's voice being the first he heard for this session. He was leading Hermione in by her hand. The girl looked haunted, purple darkened her puffy eyes, her hair was as limp as he'd ever seen it and she looked bedraggled.

"How much of a set back?"

"Nightmares, nervousness, depression." He started, leading her to the davenport and guiding her into a corner. He crossed the room to the tea pot and busied himself by making her a cup of tea. She accepted it gratefully before turning her eyes to the doctor.

"I'm aware of my situation," she said calmly. "I'm trying to pull myself out."

"What triggered it?" Jenkins settled himself into his chair as Severus sat next to her on the couch and pulled her into his arms. She went willingly. "No loss of intimacy?" He observed.

"We hadn't regained full intimacy," Severus answered, his voice sad. "She's been agreeable to being held, cared for, and touched. We've done nothing else for around a week."

"What triggered this?" The doctor asked again.

"Dinner with an old friend's family. He's standing up as my best man." Hermione shuddered at his words.

"Who?"

"Lucius Malfoy," Severus started. "He was... well, he was part of the Death Eater movement, but his family turned at the end. He served some time, and has been home on house arrest. He has a 24-hour pardon to attend the ceremony."

"I was tortured in their home during the war," Hermione said quietly. "I think I am reacting to being back there. I don't think this is about my abduction."

"Tell me what happened."

She explained the looks she felt, relayed their conversations. "He really did nothing wrong, he was polite except for when he brashly brought up that the child may not be Severus's, which he apologized for immediately."

"Tell me what you felt."

"Panicked. Trapped. Suffocated."

"The breathing techniques you taught her helped while we were in their home, but when we returned to my home, she had a full-blown panic attack," Severus supplied.

"I see." He was silent for some time, no other questions coming forth. Finally, he spoke again. "What have your nightmares been about."

The brunette shook her curly head, declining to answer.

"Hermione, we must talk about them."

A distressed noise left her throat and her hand clenched her robes over her heart.
"Has she told you about her nightmares?" The question was directed at Severus.

"No."

"Hermione, tell me about your nightmares."

She closed her eyes, a tear escaping. "I don't want to worry you."

"That's my job," Jenkins said kindly. "You worry me and together we figure out how to fix it."

She let out a long sigh on a woosh. "I was back there, only now there are faces. A face."

"Lucius's."

"Yes." A hitch of breath held back a moan of fear. "I'm being silly, right? He was on house arrest at the time. He couldn't have been there."

Silence. Severus's face had gone translucent in its stillness, blank to hide his emotions.

"We cannot rule out what your subconscious is trying to tell you," Jenkins said quietly. Severus's head snapped up and he looked at the man intently.

"You think there is a possibility." It was a statement of fact and the doctor didn't deny it.

"Our subconscious is very good at filling in the blanks, sir."

"There's no proof," Hermione's small hand covered his clenched fist. "Love, there's no proof."

"So, let's get proof."

A light sparked in Hermione's eyes as her fiancé's face became fierce with determination. A plan. A plot. A way to bring vengeance. It was exactly what she needed. Her mind cleared of its terrified haze. Her brow set with purpose.

"What do you propose?"

Twenty minutes later both Hermione and Jenkins were nodding in agreement, faces grim with resolve. "I think this will work," Severus said calmly. "Let's catch us a Malfoy."

Chapter End Notes

Debussy Clair de Lune: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LlvUepMa31o&list=PL416C3B4F5EBC7D86
Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Notes

AN: So here's our beautiful day. I'm going to let you know that this chapter has a cliffie. I'm sorry about that, but I wanted to focus on their ceremony for one chapter, it's important. Next chapter...action and lemons. Promise. ;o)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five
Saturday April 10th

He was getting married today. Never once in the last thirty-nine years of his life did he think this day would come. By the time he was twenty-two, the only woman he had ever loved was dead and he resigned himself to a life of sullen solitude. When he had finally completed the vows he had made to his dead love, when he had seen her son through the worst of the war, helped him stay alive so he could win, he had felt peace. Peace as his life’s blood drained from him. Peace as he slipped into nothingness. Something had kept him on this plane, though. He had woken woozy and frantically clinging to life. Being a smart man, and not particularly trusting, he had carried a bezoar, anti-venom, pain potion, and a blood replenishing potion on his person at all times for the previous half year, plus.

He had chewed the bezoar and downed the potions, but his magical core had been too weak to heal the punctures in his neck; one which had almost completely severed his carotid artery. So he had pressed a dirty, wadded up ball of yuck to his neck and resigned himself to probably bleeding out a second time. Until those caramel eyes had met his.

She didn’t know he remembered, but he did. He remembered the shock and alarm in her eyes. He remembered her frantic pleas for the medical staff to help him. What he remembered most, though was her promise. “I won’t let you die, I promise. I know what you did, I know who you are. I won’t let you die.” The words reverberated in his skull as he knotted his cravat. She was the first person in thirty-eight years who had kept a promise to him. He would spend the rest of his life keeping the promises he would make her today.

She felt fluttery. Her whole body hummed with her excitement. She was marrying today. Marrying a good man, a brave man. She was marrying for love, for family. It was more than she could have ever dreamed.

How she, Hermione Granger, had become the object of Severus Snape’s affection, she would never know. Where he really hadn’t changed in the last almost year, he had shown her a side that he had kept hidden from the world for too terribly long. The side of protector, friend, confidant…lover. He loved her, and she loved him. So, when asked if she was nervous, she told them no. When asked if she wanted to change her mind, she told them no. When asked if she was happy, the resounding yes had made them all smile.

Her daily ablutions consisted of the normal and the abnormal. She had been bathed and scrubbed pink, lotioned and powdered, plucked and prodded, and made up. She was pleased with her makeup, the girls had kept it natural and light, enhancing her already lovely features. An Impervious Charm
was placed on her face because everyone said she would cry. She hoped she wouldn’t, how embarrassing to cry while you told the world you loved someone.

Ginny and Lizzie had gone in together on some very sexy knickers in ice blue (her something blue and something new) and had tucked the matching bra in her small, beaded bag she had transfigured to match her gown – for later, they had told her. She was wearing a pair of drop diamond earrings of her mother’s for something old, and Molly had borrowed her a crystal and pearl necklace that she had worn on her wedding day. She had a pair of satin slippers to wear for the reception, as the bridal party and all guests were to present themselves barefoot for the ceremony and tie their magic to the Earth and to each other.

Her hair was stunning and had taken Ginny and Lizzie almost three hours to complete. Lizzie saying over and over again that she had too much hair for her own good. A thick, loose braid crowned her head and was pinned heavily with baby’s breath. They had left tendrils loose to frame her face. The braid had been pinned with a sticking charm to one side of her head, then the rest of her mass of curls had been straightened to waves, and tucked into a loose, thick plait that fell heavy down her back, just grazing the top of her bum. In it was pinned more baby’s breath. This, coupled with her gown, left her looking like some sort of Earth goddess.

Molly had walked in and instantly burst into tears. Ron and Harry had trouble speaking until Harry finally told her she looked stunning and Ron pulled her into a warm embrace and told her softly how beautiful she looked. Lizzie and Ginny had gushed. She felt perfect. Now, she just had to wait for sunset.

There were too many flowers. White and dainty. They covered the arbor and the chairs; petals were sprinkled down the aisle and there were bunches in vases on each side and each end of the aisle as well as on each side of the arch. The thirty-odd guests felt like too much, but he didn’t see anyone he didn’t know. Most of these people were very close with his wife-to-be. Hagrid, Minerva, many Weasleys, Andromeda Tonks and the little wolf brat of Lupin’s. Most of the staff from Hogwarts. The remaining Order members. He wanted to laugh at the Malfoy’s, who looked out of place and decidedly uncomfortable. Lucius was talking with Narcissa who was sitting in a place of honor on one side of the aisle as Severus’ only family, while Draco attempted to make awkward conversation with Charlie Weasley and his date. Just a few more minutes and he and his best man could move to the wedding arbor. An officiate from the ministry was present in long, silver flowing robes. His name was Lewis, and he seemed like an okay bloke, had a lovely speaking voice. The ceremony would be nice.

He had told Hermione he wished to write his own vows – he was pretty sure she had been shocked on that account. He hoped they weren’t too sappy, but he had lots of promises to make today to this woman who had changed his life, who was giving him a family, and who was going to make a home with him. A real home. He wanted to promise her a good life, he would do everything in his power to make it so.

Lizzie Williams exited the house about five minutes later, just as the dazzling, golden sun touched the horizon. “It’s time!” she called, and she made her way to sit next to Draco as Severus and Lucius made their way to stand to the right of the officiate. A few moments later, there was a swell of piano music and Molly and Arthur Weasley (who were standing in for Hermione’s parents) made their way down the aisle. A breath after they were seated, Ginerva Weasley appeared clutching a small bundle of white roses, wearing an aquamarine colored dress. Thank goodness it wasn’t some horrible, gaudy color. The dress was made of a light, floaty material and had a sweetheart neckline that ruched across and enhanced her bosom and slender waist (not that he was looking) and cascaded freely to the ground. It swirled around her feet and she danced lightly down the center of
the chairs, smiling broadly at him, her hair swept up in an elaborate coiffure. Her eyes sparked and
he couldn’t help returning her smile with a small one of his own.

Then his eyes flew back to the door as Potter and Weasley made their way through, both stopped
and turned and offered a hand to the wood sprite who exited. Emotion choked him, and he batted it
down by throwing up his Occlumency shields until he could control himself better. She looked
stunning. Flowers and crystals and curls. Painted toes, French tipped nails, and glossy lips. She
wasn’t carrying a bouquet, as both hands were occupied by her friends’. The skirt of her sexy,
elegant dress swirled around her slender legs as she moved with confidence towards him. Her hair
was wildly contained with tendrils framing her face, her eyes were wide and glittered with
excitement and happiness and looked at him as if he was the last man on the planet. Before he knew
it, she was in front of him, kissing her friends on the cheek and squeezing their hands before reaching
to him. To take his hands in hers, to take him into her heart. Forever. He cleared his throat and her
eyes smiled at him knowingly.

Then it started with a swirl of magic that ruffled the girls’ gowns and lifted the men’s robes. “Ladies
and gentleman.” The beautiful tenor voice of the officiate started. “We are gathered here today to
celebrate the union of two faithful souls…” A wand was raised and a breeze blew in from the East.
The tendrils of Hermione’s hair swirled around her features as their hands clung together.

“We bless this union with the gifts of the East. Communication of the heart, mind, and body, fresh
beginnings with the rising of each sun. The knowledge of the growth found in the sharing of
silences…”

The wind changed directions and dust motes could be seen where the sun streaked through the trees.

“We bless this union with the gifts of the South. Warmth of hearth and home, the heat of the heart’s
passion, the light created by both to illuminate the darkest of times.”

The breeze was now in Severus’s face, blowing the loose tendrils of his ink colored hair back from
his cheeks and jaw, most of it being captured in a black leather thong at the nape of his neck.

“Blessed be this union with the gifts of the West. The deep commitments of the lake, the swift
excitement of the river, the refreshing cleansing of the rain, the all-encompassing passion of the
sea.”

One last time the wind changed direction and the officiate continued in his melodic voice.

“Blessed be this union with the gifts of the North. Firm foundation on which to build fertility of the
fields to enrich your lives, a stable home to which you may always return.”

The officiate completed some pretty wand-work which Hermione watched with rapt attention for a
moment before a warmth coursed beneath their feet and spread up their legs until their entire beings
were encompassed with it. Even though the wind was now still, both his and Hermione’s hair and
clothing moved with the crackle of magic – their magic binding together.

“The bride and groom may now share their vows.”

Hermione started, and to her chagrin, she would indeed cry. They were tears of joy, of love, and of
happiness. “Severus, I choose you. I choose you and no other. I choose you to be no other than
yourself, as I love what I know of you just as you are. I choose you because I trust who you are and
who you will become. I will respect you and honor you, always, in all ways. I take you to be my
husband, and I give you myself as your wife. To have and to hold, in grief and in happiness, in
sickness and in health. I promise to love and cherish you from this day until my last breath; in this
world and in the next.” A single tear rolled down her cheek and he raised his hand to cup her face and wipe it away with his thumb and gave her a gentle smile.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead before starting his own. “Hermione, I came here today to give myself to you and to receive you into me. I promise to give you the best of myself and to never ask for more than you can give. I promise to respect you as your own person and to realize that your interests, desires, and needs are no less important than my own. I promise to share with you my time and my attention and to bring joy, strength, and imagination to our relationship. I promise to keep myself open to you, to let you see through the window of my world into my innermost fears and feelings, secrets, and dreams. I promise to grow along with you, to be willing to face changes in order to keep our relationship alive and exciting. I promise to love you in good times and in bad, with all I have to give and all I feel inside in the only way I know how.” More tears were sliding down her cheeks, and his other hand left hers to cup both sides of her face in his long fingers. He caught another tear before continuing so only she could hear him.

“You and our daughter will be my life. I will protect and keep you until the end of time. I thank you for giving myself back to me, and I will spend the rest of my life showing you how grateful I am to have you.” She nodded, and a choke of emotion escaped her throat, causing many in the crowd to sniffle and make happy sighs even though the hadn’t heard his last few sentences. She pursed her lips in attempts to control her emotions and reached a hand up to wrap around one wrist before leaning up to kiss him gently on the lips.

“You’re supposed to wait until the end to kiss.” A wobbly voice came from the crowd. A rumble of tearful chuckles helped break the intensity of the beautiful moment as the officiate stepped forward again.

“Hermione, you have a ring for Severus?” She nodded and turned to Ginny who handed her a simple, yellow-gold band.

“It was my father’s,” she whispered. “I hoped you would wear it.”

“Of course, I would be honored.” He raised his left hand and she slipped the ring on his finger with a watery smile.

“I will now ask Hermione and Severus to join their left hands. Ginerva and Lucius, please take their right hands with yours.” A simple, silver and gold ribbon was conjured with more pretty wand-work and draped across their joined hands. “As this knot is tied, so are your lives now bound. Severus Tobias and Hermione Jean, woven into this cord, into its very fibers, are all the hopes of your friends and family, and of yourselves, for your new life together.” The ribbon magically wound around their hands again. “With the entwining of this knot do I tie all the desires, dreams, love, and happiness wished here in this place to your lives for as long as love shall last.” The cord twisted and knotted again. “By this cord you are thus bound to your vow. May this knot remain tied for as long as love shall last. May this cord draw your hands together in love, never to be used in anger. May the vows you have spoken never grow bitter in your mouths.”

A final time and the ribbon glowed hot and bright. “Two entwined in love, bound by commitment and fear, sadness and joy, by hardship and victory; anger and reconciliation, all of which brings strength to this union. Hold tight to one another through both good times and bad, and watch as your strength grows. Remember that it is not this physical cord, but what it represents, that keeps you together. You are now bonded for life.” The heat and light intensified as the officiate finished the hand fasting vows. When the last consonant sounded, the ribbon seemed to melt into their hands and wrists as the light burst forth and encompassed the whole of the gathering. Hermione looked around in wonder before her eyes met his. He smiled fully at her, crooked teeth and all.
“I present to you Mister and Madam Severus Snape.” The officiate seemed surprised at the intensity of the glowing light, as well. “You may now kiss your bride.”

Severus chuckled and pulled her to him with one hand on each hip, dropping his mouth lightly to hers. She reached up to wind her slender arms around his neck and returned the kiss sweetly. A few brief seconds later, they parted with silly smiles and bright eyes. Fingers entwined, they turned to face their witnesses who applauded and whistled and shot bubbles out of their wands as the couple receded back down the aisle.

“You go nowhere alone with him. Promise me, wife,” Severus whispered into her ear about forty-five minutes later. She shivered, loving the new term of endearment. The meal was over, and had been light and delicious. Champagne and wine and beer was floating around on magically refilling trays along with snacks for those who stayed to dance, which was almost everyone. A magical deejay played Muggle and Wizarding music back to back and many people were dancing and enjoying themselves. Currently, Severus held his beautiful bride in his left arm with hers draped over his shoulders, their right hands were entwined and held against his chest as they moved gracefully around the floor. He was having a hard time remembering that they still had to figure out if Lucius had been there when Hermione had been captured, so caught up was he in his young bride’s beauty and his desire to make the party more private. He pressed his left hand to the small of her back indicating he wanted her closer. She settled against him and he was surprised to feel the small round firmness of her womb pressing against his groin.

“I can feel your baby bump,” he said softly.

“I’m starting to show,” she said quietly. “We probably won’t be able to keep it a secret for too much longer once we return to school. I am sixteen weeks on Monday, and with all the weight I’ve lost, it’s going to become quite prominent within the next six to eight weeks or so.”

“You’ve gained some weight this last month,” he returned, still keeping their conversation intimate as he led her around the floor.

“Don’t remind me, I’m up seventeen pounds!”

He almost laughed at the horror in her voice. “You can stand to gain the weight, Hermione. You lost, what, almost thirty-five pounds since your parents passed?”

She looked ashamed for a moment and he dipped his mouth to hers, kissing her sweetly. “Thirty,” she admitted.

“So you could easily stand to gain another twenty five and only be up ten or twelve pounds from your original weight. Poppy told you she wanted to see you back up to your original weight plus.”

She gave a low growl and narrowed her eyes at him. “If my appetite continues the way it has been the last four weeks, there will be no issue with that, not that I like it. Can we stop talking about me getting fat?”

He tossed his head back and laughed merrily, causing numerous people around them to smile at them and tinkle their glasses for another kiss. He obliged only too willingly, this time with a more inappropriate snog that left her feeling decidedly breathless as it drew wolf whistles and cat calls from their friends. She was blushing prettily when he pulled away.

“Pink is a stunning color on you,” he murmured against her forehead. “Have I told you how utterly perfect you look today?”
She smiled into his neck before placing a kiss on his jaw. “Only about a dozen times,” she whispered.

“Here he comes,” Severus’s arms tightened around her briefly and he felt her tremble slightly before watching her steel her nerves. “Be ready.” He heard her cancel the glamor over the scar on her arm.

“Ah, Severus, my friend. Do you mind if I take your bride for a twirl around the dance floor?” The haughty tones of Lucius made Hermione’s tummy flip, but she looked up at him with a demure smile as Severus answered.

“Of course, Lucius.” He twirled Hermione out from his body before bowing over their joined hands and passing her to the elder Malfoy.

The man elegantly pulled her into a formal hold, and she didn’t miss how he looked at her scar curiously before turning his attention to her. “You look lovely today, Miss Granger.”

“It’s Madam Snape, actually, sir,” Hermione answered with a quirk of an eyebrow. “Just today, actually,” she smiled and he gave a low chuckle. “Thank you for the compliment, though, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Oh, I think we’ve moved on past formalities, don’t you, Hermione?” The way he said her name made her feel queasy. She pushed past it.

“If you say so, Lucius.”

They moved around the dance floor silently for a few moments, she saw him looking at her scar again.

“Does this bother you, Lucius?” She indicated the puckered pink lines.

“No, not at all. Scars are meant to be born with pride,” he started. “I’m just surprised how clean it looks after being opened twice.”

There. She had him. Instead of making her feel triumphant, she felt panic rising and knew she needed to get away from him as quickly as possible. She tried to pull away, but he held her fast. “Are you okay, sweetheart?”

“Loo,” she said quickly, the horrendous endearment made her head swim after just receiving confirmation that he was one of her attackers. “I’m sorry, being pregnant makes it urgent on occasion.”

“Loo,” she said quickly, the horrendous endearment made her head swim after just receiving confirmation that he was one of her attackers. “I’m sorry, being pregnant makes it urgent on occasion.”

“By all means.” He let her go with a small smile that didn’t reach his eyes. He didn’t even realize he had made a mistake. She whirled away from him and had to check herself so she didn’t bolt from the tent. She was almost to the house when Severus caught up with her.

“Hermione!” He exclaimed.

She turned to him and all but launched herself into his arms, fear overtaking any pleasure of catching one of her captors. “He called me sweetheart.” Her breath hitched in her throat and she coughed gently to try and dispel it. “He commented that my scar looked good for being opened twice.”

Severus had gone very still. Dangerously still. Lucius was not one for terms of endearment. Especially with people he barely knew. Definitely not with people he didn’t like – and he did not like Hermione. If he had called Hermione sweetheart, he knew what it meant to her. There was no way he could know, unless he had been a part of it. That, coupled with the fact that very few people had
known her scar had been reopened during her capture, and he knew this was it. His heart sank even as ice started to flow through his veins. He closed his eyes, trying not to gag on his own tongue. *There’s no way he could know unless he’d been a part of it.* Resignation settled over his being. He knew what he would have to do.

Hermione noticed his change of mood, but she said nothing as she continued to cling to him, trying to force her body to relax. “He was one of them,” she said quietly after a long time.

“He had to have been. There’s no other reason for it, it wasn’t a mistake. Lucius Malfoy doesn’t make those kinds of mistakes.”

“You’re going to kill him, aren’t you.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes.” The word spun out on a menacing hiss.

Closing her eyes to block the screaming in her heart about how wrong it was, Hermione whispered. “Good.” She wanted him dead.

Chapter End Notes

Wedding Dress
https://ae01.alicdn.com/kf/HTB1hJUFMVXXXXXBaXXXq6xXFXXXB/Lace-Haute-Couture-Sexy-Sheath-font-b-Wedding-b-font-Dress-font-b-Bodice-b-font.jpg

Yule Ball Gown

Hair Front
https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/38/17/87/381787317480bc0ab46c72015f09764d--natural-wedding-makeup-wedding-makeup-looks.jpg

Hair Back
https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/1d/f9/b4/1df9b4438c5f4f69e97ca5910fccc789--wedding-hair-pins-wedding-hairs.jpg

Bridesmaid gown (only floor length)
https://i.pinimg.com/originals/fc/04/98/fc049816cf77045337d415b528cc1965.jpg

-Italicized - Blessings from the Four Directions - Unknown

-Hermione's vows were based off an Unknown author's work entitled "I Choose You." I embellished and altered some wording. Italicized are word for word.

-Italicized vows by Severus written by Dorothy R. Colgan

-Italicized - Scottish Hand-fasting Ceremony - Unknown
“Wait, where are you going?” Hermione demanded as she watched her husband spin on his heel in a billow of black robes, catching a glimpse of a very fierce and terrifying scowl on his face.

“Today?!” She exclaimed, realization choking her. She was almost running to keep up with him.

“Right now? Oof!” She stumbled over a dip in the lawn, but caught herself and hurried after him.

“Severus, it’s our wedding day!”

He didn’t seem to hear her and she was becoming almost frantic. “You can’t do this in front of everyone, they’ll take you away from me!”

Still no reply and too quickly they were back in the party tent, all eyes on them due to Hermione’s loud protests. Many mouths were gaping in shock at the rage Severus was emanating, others covered their mouths with their hands, trying to hide their surprise. Everyone’s eyes were wide, barely daring to breathe.

“Lucius Malfoy!” Severus thundered. There was a tinkling of glass as someone dropped a champagne flute and gasps flitted around the space.

“Severus, no!” Hermione pleaded, grasping his elbow. He did not shove her, but he did disentangle her fingers and firmly set her away from him. Not making eye contact and not answering her, he was too far gone in his wrath.

“I invoke the challenge of the Nabu Dehul for the wrongs done to me and mine!” Magic cracked through the air; the marquee and table cloths billowed with its force. Several surprised shouts came from around the room. A small shriek reached Hermione’s ears, it was obviously Narcissa’s protest of surprise. She was distracted from looking at the woman by the raw power of the challenge that was cascading through the tent, it was fascinating. Hermione had read about past Nabu Dehuls – Wizard Duels – while doing research for an essay Professor Binns had assigned in sixth year. The last one had been fought in 1873, over 125 years ago. It was an ancient right, she knew. One still respected by the ministry – at least if Severus won, he wouldn’t be carted off to Azkaban. If he won. If he didn’t, he’d be dead and she would be a widow the same day she wed.

Severus’ voice ripped through the crowd again, laying the specifics of Malfoy’s crimes at his feet. “Lucius Malfoy, I accuse you of the rape and torture of my wife – what say you, man?!”

More shocked exclamations met her ears, but her eyes were fixed on her wizard; the power radiating off him was riveting.

Lucius Malfoy, who had looked up at Snape’s explosive entrance, seemed calm. Every witch and
wizard gathered was staring at him with bated breath, awaiting his answer. The magic of the duel
was as old as time. It forced the challenged to accept a fight to the death if the accusations were true.
While it had been a long time since it had last been invoked, it’s power and prestige did not let the
wizarding world forget what it truly was – an infamous form of revenge.

Slowly, the chiseled, blond-haired man raised his fingers to his cloak and undid its tie. He calmly
removed it and handed it to his wife before undoing his cufflinks and rolling his sleeves. Only then
did he answer. “I say I accept, Severus Snape.”

Narcissa moaned in horror, tears cascading down her face. Draco left Lizzie’s side quickly to
comfort his mother. Lizzie watched him with alarm and dismay.

An outrage exploded around them. Ginny and Luna had to put themselves in front of Harry, Bill
rushing to help hold him back as Charlie and George grabbed Ron in order to stop him from rushing
the elder Malfoy.

Hermione felt sick as she watched her new husband shed his dress robes, his cravat was being torn
from his neck with angry, jerky movements before it was tossed over his shoulder. He ripped the
buttons open at his neck to allow for better movement as his wand slid down from its spot up his
sleeve to be held defensively in his right hand.

Molly and Minerva were dashing around banishing tables and linens and chairs. The deejay shrunk
his system and Disapparated with a reverberating crack! She heard Kingsley Shacklebolt send out
his Patronus, requesting Auror back up.

The leer emanating from the senior Malfoy was cruel and unabashed. “How did you figure it out,
friend?” The last word was full of sarcastic humor. Hermione saw Draco’s face drain of color at his
father’s admission, Narcissa buried her face in his shoulder as he held her to him. From fear,
embarrassment, shame, grief? Only she knew.

“Very few people knew her scar had been reopened during her capture,” Snape snapped, raising his
wand and taking a fighting stance. “Among a few other tells.”

Lucius mirrored him from approximately nine meters away, holding out his left hand, palm up,
before curling his fingers in a few quick successions. The gesture screamed “bring it on.” Hermione
whimpered with fear.

“You know the rules, Malfoy.” Snape’s words were snarled, his deep voice laced with anger and
malice.

“Yes, Snape. I know you’ll be dead shortly, leaving your pregnant new wife behind. A widow the
same day she wed. How tragic.”

Ron let out a growl from across the room and Arthur had to grab his arm to re-aim his wand as a hex
flew from the tip. “If anyone helps, they die!” He cried above the hum of magic swirling around
them. “Only the challenger and challenged can participate! Lower your wands!”

No words were exchanged from the duo, but suddenly it started. A swarm of daggers were flying at
Snape and a few people screamed as he threw up a Protego and changed the daggers into daisies that
floated harmlessly to the ground before swirling his wand and making it hail fire. The crowd backed
up as Malfoy deflected the spell and aimed a slicing hex at Snape. There was a grunt of pain and
Hermione gasped, her fingers flying to cover her mouth, as a red streak appeared on her husband’s
cheek.
There was a pause of shock that anyone had gotten a spell through so early in the game. Hermione watched as he reinforced his shield and aimed a *Reducto*. It rebounded off Malfoy’s shield and shattered a table to the man’s left.

It was countered quickly with a *Sectumsempra* which Snape barely deflected right after it shattered his shield. “How is he getting spells through Snape’s *Protego*? He has one of the strongest shields I know of.” The words were distant in her ears because her heart was thudding too loudly, but they pulled at her. Something was wrong. She clutched her chest over the pounding muscle that was trying to crash through her ribcage. Desperate to keep herself together when she just wanted to fall apart. This couldn’t be happening! Not now. Not today!

Malfoy deflected two more spells in quick succession before getting another slicing hex on Snape’s arm. The Potion Master’s face contorted with rage and anguish and it hit her.

He was emotional.

This wasn’t the cool, calm, and collected Snape they all knew. He wasn’t hiding himself like he always had. His guard was down, he was allowing himself to feel today, this important day, in order to connect more deeply with her.

But he was too emotional, too angry, too hurt, too scared. *…the strongest shields I know of.* “Put up your Occlumency shields, Severus!” she screamed. “Damnit, don’t you dare do this to me!” He didn’t react, didn’t look at her, she felt like she was yelling at a brick wall. “Shield your mind!” As she bellowed the words, she doubled with dread because another slicing hex hit his forehead just above an eye.

Then, Lizzie was there, finally able to fight her way across the room to envelop Hermione in an embrace and pull her back from the sidelines. Ginny, Harry, and Ron were not far behind. The boys had calmed enough to realize they could do nothing but watch and take care of the overwhelmed and tearfully hysterical Hermione.

While she felt her friends’ presence, her eyes did not leave the man she loved. She knew the moment he registered and complied with her frantic plea because the game changed instantly. The mental shield allowed him to cut out the distracting emotions and reinforce his *Protego* tenfold. The next rapid progression of spells from Malfoy bounced off it, shattering glass, bowling over a table, and firing a hole through the side of the tent.

An evil sneer crossed Snape’s face and silently he shoved his hands forward and the Earth sprang up to bury Malfoy, who deflected and turned it into shards of glass to push back at Snape. Snape turned the glass into rain that pelted down heavily on his shield and sprayed their audience. Before the all the rain had settled, he sent a *Confringo*, which shattered Malfoy’s shield and immediately followed it with a slicing hex. Blood bloomed across Malfoy’s chest as a shallow cut ripped through his shirt and skin. A look of shock on the handsome man’s face was quickly covered by a sneer. Sweat was dripping down his face from his exertion.

“All that you have, Snape?” Malfoy goaded, reinforcing his shield before sending two more quick curses at Severus. They ricocheted off Snape’s *Protego*.

“You know I’ve tasted her?” There was a disgusted intake of breath from the crowd. Draco’s face looked green at his father’s words. Lucius grunted as he chased away another hex, his hair coming loose from the plait that hung down his back. He spun and fired again. “I hung her from the ceiling by her wrists and whipped her until she bled before I fucked her from behind.” Snape’s face darkened, moisture beaded on his forehead, but his concentration was not lost. Not even when
Hermione let out a low groan of shocked humiliation at Malfoy’s disgusting anecdote. More protests flew from the lips of onlookers. Hermione was special to everyone there, no one wanted to hear the filth coming from his mouth.

Harry enclosed his arms around both her and Lizzie, Ginny and Ron crowding them closer in attempts to protect their friend.

“I know the sounds she makes when she climaxes, Snape!” He followed his words with flashes of sickly green light. Severus had to duck and roll to avoid the *Avada*, half of his inky hair falling out of the leather thong that bound it back from his face before he leapt back to his feet in a low crouch. Shock registered on his face for a split second before he dispelled it.

Malfoy used the momentary glimpse of emotion to his advantage. “Oh, you didn’t know she received pleasure from her captors? She has a very responsive body, your wife. I have two friends that were very, very skilled at making her come over and over again.” More hexes deflected. Snape still didn’t respond, his Occlumency shields protecting him from this new horror of information.

Hermione sobbed, her face hiding in Harry’s neck for a moment. “Don’t listen, Hermione,” Lizzie whispered, rubbing her friend’s back as the others circled them more tightly. “It’s okay.”

“You can’t blame her, though. Any good Healer will tell you it’s a natural response, even when the stimuli is *unwanted*.” More repulsive words to goad her husband.

“Let’s get her out of here!” Ron suggested hoarsely, sickened by the descriptions and taunts leaving the elder Malfoy’s vile mouth.

“I will not leave!” Hermione hissed through clenched teeth.

“I watched as my true friends claimed her virgin arse.” The man snarled, sweat now pouring down his face.

“Oh, gods,” Ginny moaned, tears streaking down her face in absolute alarm and repugnance. Overwhelming sadness for her friend took hold and she was sobbing along with Hermione in the next instant. Ron and Harry and others in the room were passionately shouting insults and protests back at Lucius, trying to drown out his words.

“Shut your fucking mouth, Malfoy!” George and Charlie could be heard over the other screams. And he did, when Snape hit him with a *Silencio* followed by a *Sectumsempra* that splayed open a thigh and sent Malfoy to his knees with a silent grunt and a hiss of pain. “Lucius!” Narcissa screamed, her hands flying to cover her mouth as she jumped from her son’s side. Her eyes wide with fear and wet with tears, one arm outstretched as if she could protect him. Her son pulled her back into his shoulder, willing her to not watch. His father deserved whatever Snape wanted to dish out, but how was he to tell his mother that?

“Mother, shh.” The pale boy hissed, his eyes round as the fight between his father and godfather continued.

Mere moments and a well-placed stinging jinx later, Severus was standing over Malfoy, one dragon-hide boot crunched down over the elder wizard’s wand hand. Lucius’ fingers did not loosen, he refused to let the wand drop.

“Do you yield, Malfoy?” The deep baritone came out around panting from his exertion. They were the first words he had spoken since he invoked the challenge. Snape pulled in deep gasps of breath,
trying to slow his heart. Sweat had soaked his hair and his once white dress shirt clung to every inch of his torso. Perspiration trickled down his temples and off the tip of his nose, blood streaked his face along the left side from the cut above his left eyebrow and along his left cheek bone. More blood was on his chest, streaking his shirt, from shallow cuts that had been landed through a heavy shield. “If you yield, I’ll make your death quick. Painless.”

“No!” For the first time since the fight started, Snape reacted to her voice by looking at her. His head snapped up as his young, beautiful, and terrified bride pushed her way through her friends. “Don’t, Severus. Stop. I know I said I wanted you to, but I don’t. I changed my mind. This isn’t worth the damage to your soul. Let the Ministry have him, let the Aurors take him.”

“He doesn’t deserve to live, Hermione.” Snape’s voice was quiet and seemingly calm, but there was a tremor that showed the venom and hatred he felt. “He deserves to die for what he did to you.”

“No,” Hermione whispered, slowly crossing the space between them. She stopped a couple meters away and reached a hand out to him, her fingers were trembling. “He deserves to rot. We need him to bring an end to the abductions and murders. I am not the only one who he has hurt. We need him to bring justice.

“Revoke the challenge, Severus. You are the only one who can. Don’t let him drag you down with him.” The voice belonged to the Minister.

“I have already murdered, Hermione. You know this. What is one more?” Severus acted as if he hadn’t heard Kingsley.

“You haven’t murdered like this. All your other murders were to protect – yourself and many, many others. Your soul was shielded by your double life. Dumbledore was a mercy killing – planned – an assisted suicide. No one in this room would argue that. This murder would be done for revenge, it will damage you. He was your friend.” Her argument was insistent; her voice clear as it carried around the marquee. The others murmured their agreement, encouraging Snape to end the duel.

Sensing his weakening resolve, Narcissa spoke, her voice quivering with emotion. “Please, Severus,” she murmured, even though Draco tried to stop her words with a low hiss of conversation no one could make out. “I know he’s done wrong, but…please.”

Severus’ eyes slid closed with consternation as he contemplated. Kingsley and the Aurors he had summoned seemed to materialize out of nowhere, moving in to take Lucius prisoner. Snape decided, opening his eyes and removing his foot from Malfoy’s hand. He watched dispassionately as the man angrily shoved himself to his knees, face red with defiance. His wand was left on the ground before him. The Aurors waited, no one could interfere physically until Snape released the bond of the challenge.

“Severus Snape releases the Nabu Duhel challenge beholden to Lucius Malfoy,” he breathed and a shower of silver sparks burst from the tip of his wand. The powerful magic that had swirled the room ceased as if a large retaining wall had caught the breeze and pushed it in a different direction. There was a split second of silent stillness and then it was as if someone hit a slow-motion button. As the Aurors moved to put an Incarcerous bind on the man, Lucius pitched himself forward, grabbed his wand, rolled, and Disapparated with a resounding crack of deafening sound.

The stunned silence that followed was broken by a sob from Narcissa and a roar of rage from Snape as the whole crowed burst into a flurry of action and sound. Before Severus could do anything rash, Hermione sprinted the short length that was still between them and launched herself into his arms, pulling his face around to hers with her hands on each cheek. “Let him go!” She insisted, pulling his lips down to hers in a searing kiss which he did not return, so deep was his fury.
“Stop,” she whispered against his mouth while pandemonium raged around them. “Look at me,” she pleaded. “Be here with me, now.” He finally met her eyes, black coffee to swirled caramel, and took her in. Her hair was coming undone and there were tear streaks on her face, the Impervious charm wearing off long ago. Her beautiful gown was now stained with his blood and covered dirt. There were strips of scorch marks from the fierceness of the magical entity that had surrounded them all.

Realization dawned; what he had done sank in. He had terrified her. She had cried because of him. Today – on her wedding day. “I’m sorry,” he growled, feeling his shoulders drop. “Oh, Hermione, I’m sorry.” He raised a hand to her face and gently brushed a smudge of dirt off her cheek.

“Don’t be sorry. Be here. With me. Now.”

“Yes.” One arm slipped around her waist and he pulled her closer. There was a beat where heat seemed to blossom through them.

“You were magnificent,” she rasped.

An eyebrow quirked as he realized her voice was laced with a tremble of desire, her eyes heavy lidded and focused on his lips. She glanced up at him through her eyelashes.

“I want you to take me to bed, Severus.” Her voice was husky. “Take me home, make me your wife.”

His eyes darkened perceptibly, the pupils dilating, and he pulled her completely flush against his body, dipping his head to kiss her. Unfortunately, that was as far as they got. They were interrupted with a barrage of questions and Madam Pomfrey, who came to tend his injuries. With no way to stop the inundation of their friends, they were pulled apart. Severus was dragged to where Draco and Narcissa were being held for questioning. Hermione was engulfed by the Weasley’s and Harry in attempts to calm her, make her sit, and press water into her hands. She looked longingly over her shoulder at her husband and sighed.

Two hours later, Hermione was feeling giddy with fatigue. She giggled as she heard Molly arguing with the matron of Millamant’s Magical Marquees, who was berating her for the damage to the tent and insisting they would never again do business at the Burrow. “That’s two of two weddings that destroyed my property!” The angry woman was hollering.

“For Heaven’s sake!” Molly threw her hands up in the air. “I said we would pay for the damages, just like we did the last time!”

She was distracted by Lizzie whispering tearfully with Ginny. “I don’t know if he knew.” The pretty blonde’s voice hitched on a sob. “Oh, Gods, Ginny. What if he did? What if him being with me was all a ruse?”

“Lizzie, no. I don’t believe that for a moment.” Ginny attempted to sooth. “He loves you, it’s so obvious. Not even Draco is that good of an actor.”

The only answer was more quiet sobs. Her eyes roamed the small crowd again to settle on Severus who was speaking with Kingsley and Arthur. Harry and Ron were just on the outskirts of the conversation, listening to every word with rapt attention. Suddenly, she heard Severus’ voice cut across the noise. “No more, tonight, Shacklebolt. I got married today, I want to take my pregnant wife home.”

Kingsley looked surprised for a moment, shooting a glance at Hermione and catching her eye. She gave him a small smile and a nod. She couldn’t hear his reply, but knew it was in the affirmative
when her husband’s shoulders relaxed.

She whispered her goodbyes to Ginny and Lizzie, kissing their cheeks before telling Lizzie to not fret until she heard more from Draco and that she agreed with Ginny that he probably had not known. Molly intercepted her for a fierce hug on her way to say her farewells to Harry and Ron. Both of her dear friends hugged her tightly and kissed her. Harry brushed a lock of hair from her face and told her again how beautiful she looked. Ron agreed with pink cheeks and a bashful smile. It seemed they were both a little drunk, being much more touchy and sentimental than they’d normally allow themselves.

She waved her good-byes to more Weasley brothers before nodding at Arthur and Kingsley as Severus wrapped his arms around her, turning on the spot. A tight tunnel ride later, and they were at the gates of Hogwarts – home. It would be her home until they figured out what she was going to do for further education or a job. Then they would make the decision to settle in Spinners End and floo to their respective work places, or sell the house in Spinners End and purchase something together, closer to their respective work places. However, all that mattered tonight was Hogwarts and their quarters and being together again.

She knew without a doubt that tonight was it, she was ready. She married him because she loved him, he fought for her because he loved her and wanted to protect her honor. Tonight, she would show him she was whole again – and she would be whole again as soon as they became one.

They quietly made their way through the wards of the gate and reset them before walking hand and hand up to the castle. No words needed to be exchanged, the silence was loaded with promises and heat.

When the doors to their chambers were locked and warded, Snape turned and met her eyes with a searching look. She smiled softly and toed off her slippers, watching as he removed his boots. Then she grasped one hand in hers and reached up on her tip toes to press a gentle kiss to his lips before spinning away and backing into the bathroom, leading him forward with their still clasped hands.

He started the shower wandlessly, the sound of the water fall was soothing. Silently, she undid his buttons as he plucked bruised flowers from her hair and released the sticking charms. She felt the weight of it sag around her shoulders and down her back before she smoothed her palms over his chest to push the shirt off his arms. It collapsed in a pool of muddied white at his heels.

Gently, he guided her to turn and pulled the zipper of her gown down, over her bum. With a soft groan of appreciation, he uncovered a triangle of ice blue lace at the cleft of her cheeks. The fingertips of both his hands trailed up her spine, only to separate at the base of her neck to slowly move over her shoulders. He turned them again, so he could watch her in the mirror that hung above the bathroom sink. Slowly, he slid his palms across her bare nape to the cap sleeves, his fingers slipping underneath to push the heavy, lacey, beaded fabric from its perch. Having nothing left to hold it up, the dress cascaded down her body, revealing her to him in the reflective glass completely.

A low growl escaped him and he put his mouth to her ear. “I will make you mine again tonight, wife,” he rumbled. A delicious shiver ran up her spine as she made eye contact with him in the mirror and nodded. She was riveted with the image of them. She was completely nude outside the triangle of blue lace at the apex of her thighs. She could see hints of her dark pubic hair behind the fabric and knew they were already soaked with her arousal. He looked dark and dangerous, his eyes glinting like lit coal. His hair was pulled loose from its tie and wild from his fight. It hung over his shoulders. She hadn’t realized how long it had gotten, it almost grazed his nipples.

She watched as his hands slid back down her arms, caressing her sides before snaking around her and cupping the small swell of her abdomen where their daughter lay in her womb. Her skin tingled,
over-sensitive and on high alert. She observed with hooded eyes as his long, slender fingers – so white against her creamy skin – made their way up her tummy to caress the undersides of her breasts before lifting their weight in his palms. His thumbs and forefingers encircled both taut, dusky pink nipples to pluck and roll them, pulling that cord attached to her sex and making her squirm with a puff of pleasure. Her head lolled back to rest in the hallow of his shoulder, the one that had been made just for her. She could feel his erection pressing against one bare cheek of her arse through the layers of clothing she still wore. Her hands came up to cup under his and he growled his approval as she helped him stimulate herself.

When his fingers were done teasing her breasts, she turned in his arms to press kisses against his chest. Her tongue flicked out to caress a nipple, making him inhale sharply as her hands wandered down to open the placket of his trousers, rubbing him through the fabric while she struggled with the buttons.

Finally, she had him free and tugged the slippery fabric over his hips, watching his manhood spring free like a tightly wound spiral letting loose. She sank to her knees into the pool of their discarded clothing to follow his pants to the ground and help him step out of them. His cock brushed her cheek, leaving a smear of precum behind. She felt her own excitement drip past her lips, soaking her pubic hair and knickers.

Before he could think to stop her, or help her back to her feet, one of her small hands was wrapped around his heat, pumping her towards him as her mouth engulfed his tip. He let out a startled grunt of pleasure as her tongue attacked his hardening length with enthusiasm. Her other hand came up to cup his bollocks, swirling them in her hand gently, like a pair of Chinese stress balls.

She hummed her pleasure at the pure masculine taste of him, dragging him deep into her throat and pulling back with firm suction and a twist of her wrist that caused him to sink his hands into her hair and jerk his hips with a low curse. He allowed her to continue her ministrations for a few minutes before gently insisting she regain her feet. He hiked her up onto the counter, where she hissed as the cold, stone top made contact with her bare bum. He chuckled as he grasped the strings that held the two triangles of fabric together and tugged them down her smooth legs and off her feet before forcing his way between her legs to capture her mouth with his.

His tongue dove deep, tasting her with a desperation that had been absent from them for too long. Her arms came up to encircle his shoulders while his hands closed around her back, splaying his palms flat before pulling her flush against him, her bare breasts being teased by his chest hair. His prick and coarse, black pubic hair was pressed against her belly and she moaned deep in her chest, opening her mouth wider for his explorations even as she wrapped her legs firmly around his slender hips. He could feel her wetness pressed to his thigh as she ground against him, desperate for relief from the delicious tension that was coiling in her tummy.

His hands came down to cup her bum and he pulled her off the counter and into his arms, walking them straight into the shower and under the hot spray of water. They groaned together as the sensuality of the heat and pressure of the rainfall showerhead cascaded around them, their lips still locked in a heated snog. He pulled away from her reluctantly, letting her slide down him until her feet were firmly on the ground. There was a heady smirk on his face at her glazed look. He reached behind her for the shampoo and squirted a heavy handful of it onto his palm before rubbing his hands together. He indicated for her to turn around and she obliged, moaning in contentment as he massaged the soap into her tresses. After her hair was rinsed and conditioned, she leaned her bum into the cradle of his thighs, enjoying the feel of his cock on the small of her back, before letting her head fall forward as he worked her over with a soft flannel, sliding it over her body, washing away the dried sweat and grime of the long, emotional day. Once she was rinsed, she returned the favor, paying special attention to his heated length, pulling more visceral sounds from his chest as she
rinsed him and then followed the rinsing by engulfing him with her mouth again, not able to get enough of the taste of her husband.

Too soon, he stopped her again with a rough jerk to her feet. She gasped her surprised protest even as he pressed her into the corner of the tiled shower stall. This time, it was he who sank to his knees. Using his hands to brace her bum, he guided her legs over his shoulders. The water from the shower head cascaded down his back, the spray of it coating them both in warmth and steam. He helped her prop herself against the wall before diving face first into her pussy, eliciting a guttural yip of delight from her as he pulled her labia into his mouth, his tongue searching out her sweet spot. She tangled her hands in his hair, shouting her ecstasy in non-sensical phrases and praise. Her climax crashed around her hard, making her hips jerk erratically. If he hadn’t had a death grip on her slick backside, she would have slid right down the wall.

Instead, he held her steady and anchored her until she came down from her high. He helped her regain her footing before pushing himself to stand with the assistance of the shower walls. He turned the water off and pulled her out of the stall, using a wandless spell to dry them, making her hair poof wildly and bringing them both to laughter. It stilled almost instantly as her laughter made his slightly wilting cock spring back to full mast and her eyes dropped to it, lust erasing mirth. He swept her up bridal style in his arms and carried her into the bedroom where a fire danced wildly in the hearth and lit candles were scattered around the room. Soft piano music was floating in from somewhere. She looked around in surprise before turning sparkling eyes on him.

“How?” Was all she said.

“Help from Pepper,” he explained with a shrug. She smiled softly at his sweetness while he continued the short walk to their bed. He set her gently on top of the comforter before his gaze became predatory and he stalked her – his prey. He climbed lithely onto the bed as she scooted herself back into the pillows. He once again reminded her of a sleek, black panther – and she was his meal. Her eyes drifted closed as his lips made contact with one ankle, his hands sliding up a silky leg as his mouth trailed in its wake. When he reached the juncture of her thighs, he retreated and started again with the other leg. Once again, he skipped the spot screaming for his attention and lavished the swell of her belly with his hard mouth and hot tongue, his hair occluding his face and caressing her abdomen, his fingers sinking into her hips.

She writhed beneath him, reaching down to tug on his hair, trying to pull him up to her. He refused to move quickly, paying extra attention to every nook and cranny over her body, giving more love to the undersides of her breasts and her collar bones and neck. Her nipples ached with want of his touch, and he continued to deny her, driving her barmy with a desperate need.

Her hands clasped and pulled at him, his hair, his shoulders, reaching down to cup his bum as she thrust her hips up to rub herself against his sex. He growled a warning at her, before lacing both hands with hers and holding them above her head. He dropped a buss to her lips. “I will have my way with you, witch, stop trying to rush me.” It was a promise and a threat and was quivered with pent up lust and a desire to please.

“Please, Severus, I need you inside me. Please!” She groaned as he relented a little bit, encircling a nipple with the tip of his tongue before sucking it into his hot mouth, making her cry out and arch her back. “Oh, gods!” She whimpered pitifully.

Severus was so hard it was painful, the prolonged teasing was driving him as mad as it was her, but he continued on the path of righteousness. He had plans. Divine intervention would not help either of them tonight. He would take hell with the sins of her flesh and die a happy man.

He finally let his fingers leave hers and slide into her heat, thrusting two fingers up inside of her,
making her cry out expletives that turned him on even more. He watched her face with rapt attention as his digits set a grueling pace that she matched with jerky thrusts, begging him for more, for harder. He added a third finger and watched her eyes roll back and her neck arch. He dipped his mouth to her throat and sucked, leaving a love bite, and then another where her neck met her shoulder, before adding his thumb to her clit to increase the intensity of the assault on her cunt. It took very little to bring her to another screaming, sobbing climax, and she clung to him as he pushed her off yet another cliff into the deep abyss of sexual sensations. He rolled her onto her side and crooked one leg up to her chest. Her vision was blurry with her most recent orgasm and all she sensed was a position that she had never been in before.

“Look at me, wife. Look at me when you become mine, again.” Her rolling eyes finally sought him out, her jaw slack with satiation. He gave her a wicked smile and pressed himself into her, never removing his eyes from her glazed gaze. She parted for him willingly, her tightness almost his undoing. She couldn’t help that her eyes slid closed with the sheer intensity of the moment, of receiving him into her after so long. A swirl of magic flitted through the room, guttering the candles low before they rose again at the consummation of their binding. Then, they were moving. The position left the thrusts shallow, but intense. She wound one arm up and around his neck, dragging him down to kiss him full on the mouth, nipping his lips with her teeth before pushing his head down, down to her presented nipple. He took her wordless plea to heart and sucked it fully into his mouth, making her hand clench at the nape of his neck and mewling “yes” to explode from her. He reangled slightly and knew he found a perfect spot when she gasped and groaned, thrusting back harder against him. He toppled her off another cliff within minutes. She shouted her joy with his name on her lips. She was so incredibly responsive tonight, months of little to no intimacy making it easy to drag her off each precipice.

He lifted himself up onto his knees, pulling out of her, which made her growl in protest, her eyes flying wide as she rolled to her back and pushed herself up on her elbows.

“What - ?” But he broke her off with another hungry kiss, silencing her question as he scooped each of her knees in his elbows and pistoned back into her, hard and fast. It made her squawk against his lips as he bottomed out fiercely before she reached and clasped him to her breast, scratching her nails up the rippling muscles of his back. He angled himself on his knees and drove into her again and again, driving crazed, sexy whimpers and gasps from her.

“You’ll come again,” he demanded and she hissed.

“I don’t know if I can,” she gasped, her nails digging in harder as she met him thrust for thrust. He let her knees go and they slid down his torso to wrap around him, her feet cupping his buttocks, allowing him to slide a little deeper. His balls were screaming with their need, but he held himself off, determine to drag one more climax out of her. He reached down and shoved her legs off from around him, rolling them and pushing her up to straddle him. She fell limp on top of him for a moment breathing heavily before pushing herself up with her palms flat on his chest. He placed the soles of his feet flat on the mattress and grabbed her hips as he drove up into her. Hermione’s head fell back with a low cry of delight, her insane tendrils of hair everywhere. He growled as she picked up a rhythm, slamming down as he thrust up. He watched a bead of sweat trail between her perky, bouncing tits. Feeling firm in his conviction she wouldn’t lose their rhythm, he reached out and plucked one of the budded tips. She cried out, her nails digging into his chest at his nipples, making him curse. He snaked his other hand between her folds, pinching her nub before rolling it in his fingers. This did make her lose rhythm and he settled her into a grind as he swirled her nub.

“Come for me, Hermione,” he demanded. She made an inarticulate noise of consent, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, a look of utmost concentration on her face. Her eyelashes fanned out across her cheeks; she looked absolutely gorgeous. “Let go,” he growled, his deep voice
reverberating like thunder through her nerve endings.

He was going to fill her up so full, his seed would be leaking out of her for days. He wanted her there with him. He circled her clit a little faster and her gasp and the tightening of her thighs let him know he had her. Without losing a beat, he rolled them again, lifting her bum and increasing the pace and force. She came with an inarticulate cry. “Unngggg!”

Her release was borderline hysterical and mindless and curled *his* toes as he hissed “Yessss!” and catapulted himself off the nearest ledge with her. “FUCK!” He poured himself into her, driving through their combined orgasm. Her inner muscles sucking at him with a strength that was otherworldly as he jerked into her again and again before collapsing on top of her, rolling slightly so as not to smother her. He grasped the back of her head and sealed his lips to hers, driving through their combined orgasm. Her inner muscles sucking at him with a strength that was otherworldly as he jerked into her again and again before collapsing on top of her, rolling slightly so as not to smother her. He grasped the back of her head and sealed his lips to hers, pulling her tongue into his mouth hotly, possessively, before slowly gentling the kiss. Sweeping his tongue against hers, nipping her lips, then sucking her bottom lip as they both breathed heavily through their noses, their hearts gradually calming. He was watching her face as she slowly opened her eyes and smiled at the unfocused, sated look in them. She returned his smile with a shy one of her own, tilting her head again to give him a sweet, chaste kiss.

“That was incredible.” Her voice was thick and raspy, laced with contentment.

“It was,” he agreed, pulling her into his arms as he settled onto his back. He cast a *Scourgify* over them, chuckling as she squealed her surprise before wandlessly dousing the candles that were strewn across the room. He silenced the music and reached out to summon the blankets that had been dilapidated during their romp and a pillow that had found its way to the floor. Finally settled and comfortable, he began to gently stroke her bare shoulder, smoothing hair away from her face as she rubbed a thumb across his jaw, her breathing evening out.

“I love you,” she whispered, yawning.

“I love you,” he answered, conviction ringing in the tone of his voice. “More than anything.”

She was already snoring softly against him. He buried his nose in the top of her head, breathing in lavender and vanilla and sweat before drifting himself.

Chapter End Notes

Please don't kill me because Lucius escaped...I need him for the next few chapters. Hang in there, he'll get his due.
While the married couple fell into a fully sated sleep, things were vastly different for Draco and Narcissa Malfoy at the Ministry of Magic.

“For the last time, Minister,” Narcissa said in a voice that was growing very weary. “We had no idea Lucius was involved with the Muggle-born terrorist group. I swear.”

“Mrs. Malfoy,” Kingsley Shacklebolt said gently. “We have already told you that we believe you were unaware of Lucius’ activities, we just need to know if he has said anything to you that could potentially be a lead.”

“My mother is just afraid of incriminating my father further,” Draco told the Minister and two flanking Aurors. “Despite their history and my father’s evilness, my mother does love him. Will you let her go home and rest? I will stay and answer any questions you may think of.”

“You must stay in the country, Mrs. Malfoy,” one of the Aurors said immediately upon Kingsley’s nod of consent. “If you hear anything from your husband, you need to contact us immediately. Your floo will be monitored until Mr. Malfoy is apprehended, understood?”


Draco watched solemnly while his mother was escorted out of the small interrogation room. When the door closed and he was sure she was gone, he turned to the Minister with hard eyes. “I want you to station Aurors at Lizzie William’s home,” he insisted softly.

“You have reason to believe that the Williams family will be targeted?” the second Auror asked, his eyes accusing. It didn’t seem to matter that the Minister believed that he and his mother were not a part of the terrorist group – the Aurors had their doubts.

“My father was awfully curious as to who they are and where they live, I know their home is under the Fidelus, but knowing the precise location could leave the family open to risks unless they are in their home. I know Lizzie’s mother runs around with her younger siblings a lot.” Draco looked at the Auror imploringly, trying to radiate sincerity. “I’m in love with Lizzie Williams,” he said softly. “I couldn’t stand it if anything happened to her family because of my father.”
It’s been over a century since the ancient Wizard’s duel has been invoked and leave it to Hermione Snape, nee Granger, to be its cause – and on her wedding day, no less. Not even an hour after exchanging their vows, chaos erupted at the intimate and exclusive ceremony. According to sources, Severus Snape (in a fit of rage likened to Ares himself) stormed into the reception tent, bellowing out the challenge to none other than his best man and rumored best friend, Lucius Malfoy.

Yes, dear readers, that Lucius Malfoy. The very same who escaped significant condemnation from two wars despite being a vowed Death Eater to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.

“I’ve never seen anything like it!” exclaimed Charlie Weasley, a close friend of the bride. “Sure, I’ve read about the traditional – if somewhat archaic – call to battle, but to witness it is something entirely different.”

For those unfamiliar, the Nabul Dehul is a challenge that calls on the oldest of magic. It’s a fight to the death, the magic not allowing any outside interference. It can only be accepted if the accusation that spurs the duel is true. As shocking as the challenge and acceptance was, equally shocking was the release of the challenge as a defeated Lucius Malfoy knelt at Severus Snape’s feet.

According to inside sources, Lucius Malfoy had readily accepted the duel with little to no show of emotion or regret. The accusation? This is where this witch has had to pull out all her tricks, my privileged readers. The guest list was small, all attendee’s close and protective friends of the couple. However, you can thank me for finding one source willing to talk on the promise of anonymity. Hold on to your wands, this is a doozy!

Apparently, Lucius Malfoy, and unnamed accomplices, were responsible for the kidnap and rape of the female third of the golden trio. Not only did the Malfoy patriarch accept the challenge and therefore admit his guilt, he detailed specific descriptions of the horrific acts the young bride was subjected to as he threw curses at his proclaimed best friend.

“It was very disturbing and sexually graphic,” the anonymous source claimed. In a voice trembling with emotion, the source went on to say, “To have abused the poor girl in such a way. It’s a depraved and moral-less man who could do such acts and then boast of them.”

Shockingly, it was Madam Snape’s plea’s and cries for her newlywed husband’s soul that gave the enraged wizard pause enough to release the challenge allowing the Aurors to cart the felon off to Azkaban. In a disturbing turn of events, the elusive Lucius Malfoy has once again escaped incarceration by simply Apparating away before the Aurors could get to him.

“It was very upsetting and not a little bit inept of our law enforcement,” claimed Ginny Weasley, fiancé of Harry Potter. “I say this not as an insult to my future husband’s comrades, we are each of us only human, however Lucius Malfoy is on the loose and is capable of horrors I had not dreamt possible until today. He needs to be captured and I fear none of us, especially Muggle-borns, are safe until he is.”

That’s all I have for now, dear readers. More later!

Toodles
drawn and pale, it was obvious that she was nursing a broken heart.

“I sent him an owl post with Arwen the day after, but he didn’t respond,” the blonde said dejectedly.

“Perhaps he just wants to talk to you in person,” Ginny consoled, helping Lizzie pull her trunk up onto the train, the small elf owl hooted at the manhandling.

“I don’t know what to think,” Lizzie answered softly. “I’m just hoping we can talk and figure things out.”

They made their way down the corridor, jostling with other students before finding Harry, Ron, and Neville in a compartment together. Lizzie waited in the doorway, chatting with the boys while watching Ginny levitate her trunk overhead before moving to sit down next to Harry.

“How was the rest of your break?” Ron asked, helping her with her trunk and gesturing her to sit across from him next to Neville. “Being you’re with us, and not Malfoy, I’m guessing not too good.”

“We just haven’t had the chance to talk yet, is all,” Lizzie tried to shrug it off. “I’m sure things have not been easy for him. What about you, Neville? Have a good break?”

“Oh,” Neville shrugged and returned his gaze back to the window. His lackadaisical response drew two sets of sharp, feminine eyes to him with more intensity.

“Where’s Luna, Nev?” Ginny said brightly as she exchanged knowing glance with Lizzie.

“Probably with her new boyfriend.” Neville’s tone was a bit bitter.

“Probably with her new boyfriend.” Neville’s tone was a bit bitter.

“Probabably with her new boyfriend.” Neville’s tone was a bit bitter.

“Oh, honey,” Lizzie said gently, reaching out to brush her hand over his shoulder. Neville threw her a grateful smile.

“It’s all right,” he intoned. “I just…was surprised. I didn’t think Luna and I would have ever gone the distance or anything, but I really cared about her.”

“Of course you did,” Harry spoke up, looking sympathetic. “You guys went through a lot together.”

“She’s a bit odd, though,” Ron spoke up in his typical insensitive manner. Ginny elbowed her brother, an exasperated huff leaving her just as the sliding door opened.

“Sue!” Ron grinned, jumping to his feet and grasping his girlfriend around the wasit to pull her in for a kiss. “How’s it going? You gonna sit with us?”

Susan, looking a bit dazed with a brilliant smile on her face nodded her head when the other occupants of the car gave her a wave. She answered, “For a little bit. Hannah wants me to spend some time with her, too. We didn’t get to see each other all break because her folks dragged her to the continent to visit some family.”

“Sure!” Ron answered.

“How’s Hannah?” Lizzie asked. “She should come sit with us, too.”

“Naw, she’s with a few other friends.”

The sextet fell into easy conversation, avoiding any serious topics in attempts to lighten both Lizzie and Neville’s dim moods. The train started moving a few minutes after Susan arrived, and about half an hour into their trip back to school, there was a gentle knock at their door.
The group looked up to find Draco Malfoy standing on the other side, looking in through the window at Lizzie. Their eyes locked and everyone could feel the emotion that instantly surrounded the two. The blonde got up to slide the door open for him. “Hi,” she whispered.

“Hi, Lizzie.” Draco reached to touch her face, but seemed to think better of it at the last moment and diverted the movement to run his hand through his hair in a nervous gesture instead. “Could we… can we talk?”

Lizzie nodded, looking back at her friends briefly to see their supportive looks. “I’d like that, Draco.”

He held his hand out for her, palm up. “I have a compartment to myself at the moment. Theo’s off snogging some girl and Blaise has prefect duties right now.” He watched carefully as Lizzie took his hand and laced her fingers carefully through his own.

“I’ll see you all a bit later,” Lizzie told her group. She allowed Draco to lead her by her hand down the hall. The moment they were tucked into he empty compartment, Draco slid the door closed and pulled down the privacy blind.

She wasn’t even sure how it happened, but suddenly, she was wrapped up tightly in his arms. “I’m sorry,” he told her, his voice rough with emotion. “I’m sorry I didn’t respond to your owl post. I was just trying to figure everything out and time with my mum. The rest of break was a nightmare. I missed you so much.”

Lizzie felt him drop a kiss onto the top of her head, but all she could do was slip her arms around his waist and cling tightly while words spilled out of him. “I had no idea, please believe me. I had no clue he was one of the ones that attacked Granger. My mum is devasted. She just got him back and I know she realizes she’s going to lose him forever. When he’s found, he’ll mostly likely go to Azkaban – for a life sentence this time – or be kissed. If Snape’s the one who finds him, he’ll be dead. He’s a right bastard, Lizzie, but my mum loves him.”

“And so do you,” Lizzie told him quietly, pulling back only far enough to look up into Draco’s face which was tense and his eyes guarded.

“You believe me, don’t you?” he breathed, not able to stop himself from pressing his lips to the center of her forehead.

Lizzie reached up to smooth fingers over his troubled features. “I believe you, Draco,” she answered quietly.

“I love you,” he promised.

“I love you, too.” She kissed him.

“What…are…you…eating?”

Hermione looked up in surprise, a sheepish expression on her face. “Food?” she asked, chuckling with embarrassment when Severus rolled his eyes.

“Well, I do hope so,” he chuckled, settling into the chair across from him. “It smells…spicy.”

“Not really,” she shrugged taking another large bite of her sandwich as she watched her husband tuck into his totally normal supper – chicken with potatoes and peas.

“So…are you going to tell me what you’re eating?” There was a permanent smirk on his face as she
made little ticking sounds of pleasure as she tucked into her food. “What are those orange things?”


“Okay, and the spicy smell?” he prompted, trying not laugh at her oversensitivity.

“You might smell the horseradish on my ham and sharp cheddar sandwich,” she said offhandedly. “Or maybe the barbeque sauce.”

“The red stuff you’re dipping the … Cheetos? … in?”

“Yes, that’s the barbeque sauce,” she exclaimed. “Wanna try?”

“No, thank you,” Severus answered. “Have you had any fruits or vegetables today, Hermione? I saw what you had for lunch.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I just…they don’t taste good, Severus.”

“The nutrient potion will only get you so far,” he scolded gently. “You have to try and eat some fresh foods. At least once a day.” He was trying not to laugh. To be honest, he was just so happy that her mood was high and her appetite was back, he wasn’t too fussed. Yet, If she kept eating like this, she probably wouldn’t like herself much when the baby arrived and she found herself significantly overweight. Not that he would mind – he always liked a woman with meat on her bones. Hermione had been curvy to begin with, but healthy and in shape. The war had melted the bit of youthful fat she had left, leaving her toned and strong, but the death of her parents and the subsequent troubles she had gone through had caused her to become too thin.

“Grr,” she grumbled before popping another barbeque-covered Cheeto in her mouth. “Fine. Pepper!”

The house elf winked into existence and Hermione gave the wrinkled little thing a grimace. “Professor Snape is insisting I eat some…ruffage,” she sighed. “Can you bring me something? Sweet – please make it sweet. Oh, goodness. Now I want cake.” Snape couldn’t help it – he snorted, but sobered quickly when his little wife glared at him. “Some kind of fruity dessert,” she glanced at him. “Strawberries and chocolate? Apples and caramel?”

“Pepper knows’es just the thing, Madam Snape,” the elf crooned with an indulgent – if not a bit terrifying – smile. “I’s be right back!” Then she was gone.

“Happy?”

“It’s a start,” Snape grinned at her. “But I get to feed you if she brings back chocolate covered strawberries.”

Hermione swallowed hard at her husband before she shifted in her seat, rubbing her thighs together. The rest of their weekend had been filled with endless rounds of heated sex, reacquainting each other with their bodies. It was safe to say that Hermione was well on her way to being emotionally healthy again, and the ardor from her spouse only aided the healing processes. “We’ll never make our appointment if you do that.”

Pepper started them when she Apparated back into their chamber. “Here yous go, Madam!” the house elf stated proudly. “Cake and berries!”

Hermione looked at the plate where a double helping of angel food cake with vanilla pudding was heaped, covered in strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries. Her mouth instantly started to water. “That looks incredible, Pepper. Thank you so much!”
The elf gave a titter of pleasure at being thanked so sweetly before she winked out yet again. “You’re going to share that right?” Snape teased. Then finally could no longer keep actual laughter at bay when her answered “of course” was hesitant. “Come here, witch,” he commanded gently. She smiled a bit shyly at him as she rose from her chair and rounded the table.

“I’m getting too heavy to be doing this,” she whispered when he pulled her down into his lap. He curled two fingers at the plate of dessert, causing it to slide across the table.

“Never,” he smirked, raising a bite to her lips. Hermione smiled at him and opened obediently for the first bite.

“Mmm.” Her eyes slid shut as a look of orgasmic bliss overcame her. Severus couldn’t help the low, husky chuckle at her pleasure. He pressed a kiss to just under her ear. “That’s so good,” she mewed. She watched with hooded eyes as Snape took his own bite, making a sound of approval in his throat.

They ate their dessert together in silence, basking in the other’s quiet, contented company after the long, hard first day back after the hols. When their treat was gone, Snape gently pushed Hermione to stand and led her to one of the chairs near the fire. They had to leave in a little over forty minutes for their weekly session with Dr. Andrews, but he once again pulled her into his lap and guided her to rest herself against his chest.

“Tell me about your day,” he requested gently.

“There’s not much to tell,” she answered.

“Now, I know that’s a lie,” he smoothed hair off her forehead. “I heard plenty of the gossip myself. How are you handling things.”

“Honestly, Severus?” she murmured. “Draco got the worst of it. It died down a bit after lunch when we were out on the battlements – Harry told a few people off. Has there been any leads on where Lucius is?”

“Not yet” he answered regretfully. “He won’t be able to hide forever, love. He’s not one for slinking off into the darkness forevermore. He likes the limelight too much.”

“I just hope no one else gets hurt in the process,” Hermione breathed, snuggling herself deeper into her husband’s gentle touch.

“Me too, Hermione. Me, too.”
Chapter 38
April 19th 1999
17 Weeks Gestation

“Please…have a seat,” Minerva said quietly, gesturing to the chairs in front of her desk. She was beginning to understand why Dumbledore always had a jar of lemon drops on his desk and offered them at the start of every meeting. It provided another minute of reprieve before having to discuss something unpleasant.

Lizzie sat on the edge of the chair, her voice panicked. “Please, professor. My heart is pounding.” The blonde cast a glance at the imposing figure of Kingsley Shacklebolt before her pleading eyes were back on the Headmistress. “Is my family okay? That’s why you’ve called me here, isn’t it? Has something happened?”

“My dear child,” McGonagall glanced up at Shacklebolt and back at Lizzie. “Your family is alive, and they are safe. Your home was attacked in the wee hours this morning.”

All color drained from Lizzie’s face as she collapsed back in her chair in equal parts relief and horror. “Attacked? What happened?” Her trembling fingers ghosted her mouth, her eyes wide with concern.

Draco grabbed Lizzie’s hand and squeezed it. “Breathe, love.”

Shacklebolt’s deep baritone voice answered. “Well, fortunately, thanks to Draco’s insistence, we had extra Aurors monitoring your family. They intervened before the Death Eaters even knew what hit them. There was very little damage and there were no injuries. Draco was concerned that his relationship with you would make you a target.”

Tears of relief sprang to her eyes as she looked at Draco who was watching her with worried eyes. “Draco? You insisted?”

Draco swallowed heavily, his own relief palpable and his sadness over his father’s betrayal deep. He spoke despondently. “I had a feeling, love. I just couldn’t ignore it. My father, he… Well, you know.”
“Yes, and thanks to his insistence (which I will admit I was hesitant to heed), we have avoided another tragedy. Your family is now in a safe house where they will need to remain until we can find them a better alternative.” He drew his chest up and looked at Draco with gratitude. “We also apprehended two Death Eaters in the process, Antonin Dolohov and Thornfinn Rowle. They are being interrogated as we speak and with any luck, we will be making more apprehensions as the day progresses.” He shook his head. “Your instincts are good ones, young man. I hope you will consider Auror training upon graduation.”

Lizzie’s eyes welled with tears as she leapt out of her chair and landed in Draco’s lap, her arms wrapped around him tightly. “Thank you.” She peppered his face with kisses as she spoke. “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You amazing, wonderful boy. I love you so much!”

“Ahem.”

Lizzie giggled, looking back over her shoulder at the Headmistress. “Sorry,” she said demurely, moving to go back to her seat. However, Draco’s arms slithered around her waist, holding her in place.

McGonagall wasn’t the least bit bothered by the display before her and her twinkling eyes and closed mouth smile let the couple know it.

Lizzie sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, concern once again etched on her face. “Can I see them? Can I talk to them?”

Shacklebolt contemplated and then looked at the Headmistress, speaking softly. “I think something can be arranged. If that is alright with you, Minerva?”

McGonagall looked back at Lizzie. “Yes, a couple hours via floo, if possible.”

“And Draco? He can come with me? My family needs to meet the boy I love whom they are indebted to.”

This time it was McGonagall who looked up at Shacklebolt, enquiringly. “I don’t see why not,” he answered simply.

Minerva turned her attention back to Draco. “I will need to obtain permission from your mother but, if she consents, I see no reason why you can’t accompany Miss Williams.”

Minerva McGonagall was an astute witch and looking at Draco Malfoy she realized with absolute clarity the young man was not anything like his father. It was something she had never really believed until this moment. “Mr. Malfoy,” her eyes softened, “Draco… the actions of your father do not define you in any way. Never forget that. You have proven yourself to be a good and fine young man and I see tremendous and great possibilities for your future.”

Draco was stunned. First by her use of his given name and secondly by her words. The witch had never expressed any real faith in him before, Severus being the only teacher at Hogwarts whom had ever really done so. Not sure how to respond, and not the least bit comfortable with the unfamiliar praise, he simply nodded in return.

“Well, unless you have any more questions, you are free to go. Consider yourselves excused from classes for the rest of the day.”

Lizzie looked at the Headmistress gratefully as the gravity of what had almost happened began to weigh heavily on her, once again. She realized, a bit late in her opinion, that Draco’s father had betrayed him. She had been so wrapped up in her own circumstances, she had not thought of his
until the Headmistress made the point of bringing it up.

She snuggled into him, her eyes once again welling in tears. “I’m sorry, Draco. This must be very hard for you.”

“Minister?” Draco asked, his mind grasping at a small piece of hope. “My father, he wasn’t seen during the attack, was he? He wasn’t part of it, that you know of?”

Shacklebolt’s gaze fell and he let out a heavy sigh. “I didn’t want to mention this in front of Miss Williams, but yes. Your father was there this morning. Once again, he was able to Apparate away before he could be apprehended. He’s a formidable wizard, your father.”

Draco swallowed heavily. “Yes. Yes, he is. Thank you for telling me.”

Shacklebolt hesitated for a moment before he continued, “I feel you have the right to know that we have put a bounty on your father. Dead or alive, there is a price on his head. We need to bring him to heel, Mr. Malfoy. He cannot remain at large.”

Draco froze for a brief moment, his stomach turning into a block of ice, before he gave a jerky nod. Lizzie wrapped her fingers tightly around his own as he answered, “I understand, sir.”

“Better have a damned good reason for pounding on my private suite doors at this time on a Friday evening. I have the bloody weekend off; just got fucking married,” Snape muttered blackly as he pulled his robe on over his pajama pants. Hermione was snickering loudly into her pillow. “You just wait until I get back here, Madam,” he purred, not deterred by her giggles. She had been pretty disappointed a moment ago.

“What!?” he growled, then was immediately surprised to find two teenagers when he threw his door open.

Draco and Lizzie, both exhibiting a fair amount of shock themselves, took one look at their Potions Professor and realized they had interrupted a delicate situation. Snape watched in amusement as Lizzie’s cheeks went from pale pink to a brilliant shade of red in mere seconds.

Draco, shaking himself in order to get back to an appropriate train of thought, told him, “We have news for you. About my father.”

There was a beat of a pause before Snape left the door open and walked away from it. “Sitting room through there.” He pointed. “You stay there until I return.” Neither would have dreamed of disobeying him.

Snape stalked through the bedroom door to find Hermione sitting on the edge of the bed, she had donned his white, button down dress shirt and was looking at him inquisitively. “What’s going on?”

“Get dressed – fully. I don’t want you traipsing around with no bra on in front of Malfoy,” Snape snapped without looking at her as he disappeared into the bathroom. Hermione huffed, blowing a strand of hair out of her face.

“Damnit,” she muttered, pulling the dress shirt back off her frame. She started looking around the room and laughed when she spotted her knickers hanging from an unlit torch post. They had been more than eager to get their Friday evening started. It had been a long week, and some stress relief was sorely needed.

A few minutes later found the quartet in the sitting room, Lizzie and Draco sharing the information
that had been given that afternoon, including the price on Lucius’ head.

“Do you know where my father is, Professor?” Draco asked once a bought of silence stretched uncomfortably long. “Do you have any ideas where to find him? I’ve already given the Magical Law Enforcement all our properties – even the hunting cabin in Germany. I have no idea where he is.”

Hermione had been watching her husband closely and didn’t miss the flicker of awareness in his eyes. A flicker that told her yes – he did have an idea of where Lucius might be.

“No,” Snape answered. “No idea. He must have acquired a piece of property you do not know about or is simply on the lamb.”

“If he’s simply hiding, he’s not doing it in the Wizarding World.” Draco shook his head before resting his elbows on his knees and lifting his hands to cover his mouth, his fingertips pressed together. He rubbed his lips before letting his hands slide up into his hair. “Do you think he’s in the Muggle world?”

“I doubt it,” Severus scoffed. “Maybe he went abroad?”

“If he has, he must have had a lot of cash on him,” Draco explained. “He hasn’t attempted access to any of our accounts.”

“Hm,” was Snape’s only reply.

There was another stretch of silence in which Hermione yawned loudly. Severus glanced at the clock to see it was just about nine, their guest had been there for almost two hours. “It’s almost curfew,” he told them, pushing himself to stand. “Hermione tires easily and it’s been a long day at the end of a long week. We should call it a night.”

“Yes,” Draco and Lizzie said together, also standing. All three watching with some amusement as Hermione shifted in her seat, her ever growing bump making everyday tasks a bit awkward.

“Thanks for the help,” she stated facetiously, glaring at Severus as she pushed herself up.

“I can’t seem to win, wife,” he teased, his eyes glittering. “You’re either perturbed I didn’t help you or annoyed that I did. You must pick one.”

Draco snorted before Lizzie elbowed him in the side. “Be nice,” she hissed at the blond wizard, causing Draco to snicker all the more loudly

If Severus had thought Hermione would be annoyed with his observation, he was wrong. She gave him an indulgent smile and saw her friends to the door. When she returned to the study, Severus was taking small sips from a glass of brandy.

“What do you know?” There was no point in preamble, she had seen it in his eyes. He knew where Lucius was.

“Nothing,” he insisted, looking straight into her face. “I know nothing.”

“You’re lying,” she returned calmly. “You at least have an idea.”

“Nothing for you to be concerned about,” he told her brusquely. She tried to be stern, but the impatient wife look was completely undone by a huge yawn and she raised the back of one hand to her mouth to cover it. “Come, let’s bathe and then put you to bed. You look like you might drop.”
“But what about – ?” Her question was broken off by another deep inhale as her fatigue from the week started to overtake everything, even her ability to speak. “Okay, a bath. We’ll talk more about this tomorrow.”

“If you insist,” Severus answered indulgently. “Come.” He grasped one of her hands in his and led her back to the bedroom and into their ensuite bathroom. Within moments, Hermione was lost to her husband’s tender and non-sexual ministrations. He cast a charm on her hair to pile it on top of her head in an unruly bun while the tub filled with deliciously warm water. They crawled in together, relaxing her back to his front as he rested against the porcelain of the basin.

While gently washing his wife, Snape couldn’t help but run over in his mind all the haunts he and Lucius spent time getting up to shenanigans as young adults. Over and over he kept returning to only one place that Draco couldn’t have checked, as he wasn’t even sure the young man knew the place existed.

If Lucius was there, he was waiting for Severus to find him. If he were there, it would be obvious to Severus that Lucius was hoping to be found – and to be found by his one-time best friend. Only Snape would be able to figure it out. Rightly so, as the property belonged to him – even if he didn’t use it. He had only even mentioned it in passing to his wife.

The more he thought about it, as he and Hermione dried themselves and made their way into their bed, the more he realized it was the only place the Malfoy patriarch could be. He wrapped Hermione in his arms and relaxed as her head rested in the hallow between his chest and shoulder and the slight swell of his daughter within her body pressed against his hip.

He waited, pretending to be on his way to dreamland himself, while she shifted and made herself comfortable before finally – finally – falling asleep. He then waited an additional thirty-minutes to make sure she was out completely before carefully sliding away from her.

He knew what he had to do.

It was almost as if Lucius was calling to him personally.

It would be an actual fight to the death this time –

One of them would not leave Prince Manor alive.

Snape stood in the doorway of the study. The sheets covering the furniture and bookshelves were thick with many years of accumulated dust. It had been some time since he had stepped foot in this God-forsaken place. Narrow rays of light filtered around the edges of the dark-plum, velvet window coverings, bringing to life the dust motes floating lightly through the air, likely stirred by his arrival and wanderings.

A subtle flash of light and then a shadow, coming from the far corner of the vast room, and Snape’s hawk-like gaze shifted, his pupils dilated, and his posture became primed for attack. He had been right. The seventeenth century Louis XVI Bergere chair was facing the window, it’s sheet disregarded in a heap on the floor to the left of it. To the right of antique chair’s armrest, a pale hand rested on the familiar handle of Lucius Malfoy’s signature cane. A hint of white-blond hair peeked over the high back of it while an accompanied lazy drawl echoed, “I never understood why you abandoned this place, Severus. Your ancestral home? Your legacy?”

Snape didn’t respond, he simply watched and waited.

“But then again, you were never loyal, were you? Not to your friends. Not to Slytherin. Certainly not
to your true master. It should come as no surprise you would abandon your home, as well.”

“I think it’s quite clear you were never my friend, Lucius.”

The light shifted as Lucius stood, the dust motes dancing about frantically. His tall form turned, and steel eyes met obsidian. “What’s most disappointing,” a condescending sneer now matched the voice, “is where your loyalty has finally landed.” A hint of a smile ghosted his lips. “Well, hardly landed; more like rushed in with all the glory of a knighted soldier – to avenge the honor of a Mudblood.” He stepped around the chair. “To challenge the Nabul Dehul,” Lucius now chuckled as he chided, “at your own wedding! How very…precipitous of you…how very…Gryffindor. Honestly, Severus. I’ve sampled the pussy, it’s average at best.”

Lucius was prepared when the curse approached, a flick of his wand and the diverged spell splattered the priceless antique chair to pieces. Lucius’ grin grew wide. “Pity. You must learn to take better care of your things, Severus.”

The return spell flashed a yellow beam of light. Severus recognized the blood boiling curse instantly, and with a whispered incantation, the approaching tentacles turned to chattering sparrows and dispersed about the room.

Lucius continued his taunt. “After all, you didn’t take very good care of your witch that day in Diagon Alley, now did you?” He stepped to the left, casting a shield charm as the next spell almost hit him. “Don’t worry. I took extra special care of her in your stead.”

Snape dropped and rolled to his right, firing off the Sectumsempra, the movement catching Lucius off guard.

It was Severus’ turn to taunt. He watched as Lucius cursed, tearing off his sleeve and fastening it tightly around his bicep to staunch the bleeding from his elbow where the curse had landed. “You must be very proud of your son, Lucius. He spoke to Shacklebolt personally to request the extra guarding of the Williams’ home. He took such initiative, knowing you would betray him and the girl he loves.”

Lucius made a face of disgust. “Draco knows his place, he’ll use the little wench until he bores of her charms and then he’ll come to heel. Ultimately, he would never blemish the name of Malfoy with such an atrocious act as to marry the chit. I’ll look forward to fucking her after he’s done with her…or maybe before.” His smile grew lecherous. “At least Draco went after an attractive Mudblood and not a plain jane little bookworm.”

“Lucius, your arrogance and naivety surprise me. You will never be a free wizard again. Should you survive this day, which is highly improbable, you will be hunted until the moment you are brought to justice.”

“Now who’s the naive one? You know as well as I do how the tides of favor and what’s acceptable can turn so abruptly.”

Severus was barely listening, instead his focus was pulled to the garter on Lucius’ now exposed forearm; a garter holding a particular knife in place. A knife Severus knew very well, having had seen its original master use it countless times on unwilling subjects at the debauched revels and gatherings of years past. Bellatrix Lestrange had been known for many talents of cruelty, but that knife had been every bit as much her signature to her work, as Lucius’ cane was to his. A cane which the man had used to violate and then brand his victims most depravedly.

Severus’ thoughts had left him vulnerable, as he discovered too late, when suddenly, black, tar-like
darts flew at him. A quick *Protego* blocked a few, but several were unhindered by the poorly cast shield. Those that got through landed on his feet, adhering his shoes to the wood floor. The tar-like substance slowly began creeping up his legs, leaving him unable to move them. Lucius began to laugh.

Severus did not panic. He was well-aware Lucius liked to play with his food before he consumed it. The loquacious blond loved to hear the tenor of his own voice and thus was the poster child for monologuing.

Severus cast another *Protego* before flicking his wand at the ceiling chandelier, whispering *Finestra*. Shards of glass flew in all directions.

Lucius rolled his eyes as though bored and flicked his own wand, causing a great gust of wind to blow the glass away from him. He did not realize that Snape had merely cast the glass shattering spell as a distraction and, as Snape expected, the words began to spill out of the haughty wizard’s mouth. “You’ve lost your instincts, my friend. You’ve lost your touch. I could have never cast such a simple spell upon you so easily in the past. She’s made you weak. Soft. An easy target. You would have been so much better off with a *real* witch.” His eyes glanced down at Severus, his forehead crinkling and his nose in the air as though something smelled bad. “You wreak of filth; of stale, used cunt.” As Lucius spoke, Severus cast a non-verbal spell which caused a petroleum like substance to drip from his wand, dissolving the tar instantly.

Severus went for more distraction. “Ah, I’m confused Lucius. Haven’t you been sleeping with your wife for over twenty years? Isn’t that the epitome of stale?”

Lines of anger crossed Lucius face. “Cissa does not bear mentioning in a conversation such as this. She is perfection. A doting, submissive, and faithful wife with drippings between her legs like honey from the finest clover.”

Severus shrugged and smacked his mouth like he tasted something bad. “Well, I found her flavor to be rather tart and tangy, not really to my liking – but her lips and mouth? Now there lies her talent. That witch can suck …” Severus didn’t get to finish his sentence. An uncharacteristic and hasty “*Avada Kedavra!*” spilled from the enraged blond wizard’s wand. Severus once again dropped and rolled, the spell missing him entirely while shocking its caster, whom had believed Severus to still be tethered by the tar.

“How dare you speak of my wife in such a manner. As if she would ever touch you!”

“Not just me, Lucius. Did you truly believe she sat idly by while you dipped your wick in every passing fancy? Half the Death Eaters have sampled her charms.”

“I don’t believe you. I’m going to enjoy killing you and sending your bits back to your little *Mudblood* in a shoe box.”

“Perhaps the most endearing physical attribute of your dear wife, Lucy, is that delicious little birth mark, right at the top of her inner left thigh.”

In truth, Severus had never touched Narcissa and as far as he knew, she had never been unfaithful to Lucius. The birth mark had been spotted quite by accident, many years ago. Narcissa and Severus had been alone, walking along the Malfoy Manor grounds when she slipped on wet grass and rolled down a small hill. Her skirt had risen above her waist and in his haste to help her, he had spotted a view of the creamy pale skin and the delicate little mark. For some reason, the memory had always stuck. That intimate detail popped into his thoughts at the most inopportune moments. It was worth remembering now, however, as it offered proof to his little lie and the torment on Lucius’ face was a
Deciding his moment was upon him, Severus cast a non-verbal “relashio” followed by an “accio” and the knife that had distracted him earlier was now flying through the air in haste, the ivory handle landing perfectly in his left palm.

The surprise on Lucius’ face at the impressive bit of deception added to Severus’ thrill of battle.

He was ready to kill the man before him.

He was ready to avenge the woman he loved.

Knife in hand, he lunged at Lucius who was standing a mere few feet away from him.

Lucius regained his composure and side stepped the assault. “Resorting to Muggle combat, I see. Your slip into mundanity knows no bounds.” Lucius’ face became one of panic when he stepped into a glob of tar that had missed it’s mark earlier and had been innocently waiting for a victim to consume.

Severus had known the substance was there and had purposely jumped at Lucius, knowing the wizard would step right into it, none the wiser. “Incarcerous,” Severus shouted with fervor. Binds suddenly wrapped around Lucius, pinning his arms to his sides and entwining his wrists and hands, leaving him without use of his wand.

Little did Severus Snape know that the moment he Apparated away from the front gates of Hogwarts, his wife sat up in bed with a bolt of fear unlike any she had ever felt before. Her heart was racing in her chest and, instinctively, she covered the slight swell of her abdomen with trembling hands and she attempted to peer through the dark.

Severus was gone and automatically she knew that this fact was the cause of her fears. Fruitlessly, she called his name, hoping beyond hope that perhaps he had just left to use the loo or make a floo call. Only silence answered her. The rest of her body started trembling to match her fingers – he had gone after Lucius Malfoy. He had to have. There was no other reason he would leave their rooms without waking her.

She sat quaking for a few moments, trying to collect her thoughts – to figure out where he may have gone. Places kept erupting in her mind, but she pushed them away as fast as they came. The Forbidden Forest – no. Spinner’s End – no. Malfoy Manor – no. They’d have Aurors watching there for sure. Shrieking Shack – no. Hogsmeade – no.

It wouldn’t be anywhere obvious. It wouldn’t be somewhere that the Ministry or Draco would not have already thought of. It would be somewhere obscure, remote. She shoved the blankets back on the bed and snatched her wand from the nightstand. Flicking it to raise the torch light, she hastily pulled on leggings and an oversized Gryffindor Quidditch jersey that had belonged to one of the Weasley boys. She stepped into shoes and pulled her cloak off the hook as she pulled open the door that led to Snape’s office, then made her way out through his classroom.

She wasn’t even sure where she was going – her body was running on pure instinct. Ideas kept popping into her head. Ideas she kept dismissing as too obvious or too obscure.

Before Hermione even knew it, she was standing at the gates of the castle. She tapped them, which undid the lock, and slipped out, turning again to snap the lock back into place. (Being married to the staff had its benefits.) She turned back to the path that led to Hogsmeade and froze. What now…?

What now, you silly girl? Oh, this was so foolish, Severus would be so mad at you! What were you th
Quite suddenly, she knew. Or was at least hit with a plausible idea – one that made sense.

With a twist and spin on her heel, she Apparated to Severus’ estate – Prince Manor. She really wasn’t expecting to find him, he had only ever mentioned this place in a fleeting conversation. What he had told her, however, resurfaced and gave her pause. Pause enough to realize he – they – could be here.

He had been bequeathed the property in his late teens, a time when he was completely immersed in the Death Eater campaign. At the beginnings of his friendship with Malfoy. Lucius Malfoy would have been someone Snape would have trusted to look at the property with him – as it was an old Pureblood estate.

She was quite surprised when the wards at the gates let her through, but figured it had to do with her marriage bond to Severus. Then there, in the not so far away distance, she saw the front door open – her heart leapt.

Pausing in the entryway, Hermione took a moment to catch her breath and slow her heart rate, all the while listening intently. It was then she heard the voices of the two men down the vast hallway. She silenced her shoes and cast a rebound spell around her, so she couldn’t be caught off guard. Then she began trotting lightly through the foyer and into the manor.

After a minute or so of walking, the unmistakable drone of the man she hated above all others came from a room a couple of doors up and to her left. It made her skin crawl with revulsion even as it sounded panicked and desperate. “Go ahead and kill me, you worthless piece of filth.” She raced the final meter and paused in the doorway. “You are pathet –” Lucius paused his words at the sight of the young witch’s entrance, causing Severus to give a sideways glance at the door.

Hermione was greeted with polar opposite reactions from each man. Adoration on the face of the one she loved and utter horror on the face of the other.

“And there she is! The little Mudblood whore herself. Come back for more? Perhaps a little two on one action? You had quite a taste for…” Taking stock of the situation, which her husband had under complete control, Hermione swished her wand with flair at the blond abomination as she whispered, “Muffliato.”

Severus actually laughed with a combination of surprise and relief when she shrugged apologetically and playfully said, “I’m sorry for the ‘foolish wand waving’. I know how you abhor it, but I couldn’t resist.”

Severus held his arm out for her and she rushed into his side. “You scared me! Why did you run off without telling me where you were going? I woke up and you were gone! I was terrified!”

Severus didn’t respond. His arm held her close, but he kept his wand and his eyes on Lucius. The monster would not escape this time. He kissed the top of her head. “Love, you shouldn’t be here. Trust me. You don’t want to see this.”

“Yes I do, Severus. I’m not leaving, any more than he is.” She glanced back at the brick-red face of the wizard who was now trapped and at their mercy. “I want to watch him die.” Hermione had never imagined such words would escape her lips, much less that they would be true, but this man had almost destroyed her. Godric only knew how many others he had raped and killed. She was not so naïve to believe he should be left to the care of the Aurors. Not again.

“In that case, stand back. I don’t want you close.” She hesitated but Severus’ patience was slipping. “Now! Witch!”
Hermione swallowed heavily, slowly stepping away and back towards the doorway. She knew Severus was on edge. Killing a man did not come easy, she imagined there was a part of Severus that regretted having to kill this man especially. One who had once been his friend.

If Severus had been reading her thoughts he would have laughed. He held no more regard or concern for the man before him than he had held for Voldemort himself. There was no remnant of Lucius that Severus found redeemable enough to be mourned. He merely didn’t want his witch in any way tainted with blood on her hands or harbor any guilt to flood her conscience at a later time. She was bloodthirsty right now, sure, but she was still an innocent. Being that it was up to him, he was determined she would remain that way.

Snape was completely aware that Lucius knew he was going to die. It was written in the quiet resignation on his pointed face. It disturbed Severus that the man wasn’t panicked and wasn’t groveling for his life. As he released the Muffliato, Severus studied the wizard before him. An evil tug played at the corners of his mouth as ideas for true retribution spun through his imagination. He was rewarded with a barely discernable dulling of Lucius’ eyes.

“Well, you didn’t think that your death would come easy, did you?” Severus taunted quietly.

Lucius didn’t answer, he merely watched the dark-haired wizard as his mind tried to conjure a way out of this mess. He had never been very proficient with nonverbals, but it didn’t stop him from trying all the same. However, the inability to move his wand left him impotent.

Severus tucked his own wand into his pocket and passed the knife from his left to his right hand.

Lucius’ gaze moved to the blade and his heart began to thrum quickly. He knew what that knife could do. He knew the curses that were ingrained into its blade. He had been perfecting it. Where it had always left scars that were difficult to heal, it now also contained a poison that, once they entered the blood stream, caused a slow and gradual thickening of the blood. It would take weeks to be deadly, but it could not be cured. Even a small cut on the finger with this new and improved blade would lead to certain death. The irony was not lost on Lucius that its first time being used since the enhancements would be on his own person. He would prefer a quick death, so he began his quest to obtain one.

“Just do it already, you poor excuse for a wizard. Pussy whipped, emasculated, weak…”

“Tell me, Lucius. What does this blade do? What has you so afraid that you are goading me rather than appealing to my humility?”

Lucius didn’t answer. He didn’t want to give credit to Severus for seeing through him so easily.

“You don’t have it in you anymore, Severus. Best leave the killing to the better equipped. Perhaps your Mudblood wife?”

Severus stepped close and pressed the knife against Lucius’ pale and long neck, without breaking the skin. Lucius’ breath hitched. He didn’t dare move.

Severus was finally rewarded with the panic he had been seeking. “Ahh, there is the yellow-bellied man I’ve known most of my life.” He smiled wickedly as he flicked Lucius’ throat with the blade, inflicting a shallow cut.

Lucius’ eyes closed, and he slumped. It was now official – his life was forfeit. He did not open them again. He merely stood, wrapped frozen in his bindings; his eyes shut and his life over.

“No, you will open your eyes and be present. You will pay for what you have done.”
“Severus.”

Snape ignored the soft voice of his wife.

“Severus,” she said more loudly. “Just be done with it. Please.”

Lucius’ lids fluttered open as he taunted the dark-haired wizard. “You heard your wife. Just do – ”

But Lucius Malfoy was not allowed his final sentence. Instead, his grey eyes grew wide with obvious surprise as Severus suddenly wrapped an arm around him while at the same time pressing the blade through his ribcage and into his heart like a hot knife through soft butter.

Severus’ eyes were locked to Lucius surprised grey orbs. He wanted to make sure his words were heard. “Is that quick enough for you… sweetheart?” Loathing overtook to Potion Master’s face as the purposeful words left his lips. He twisted the knife, causing Lucius to cough, droplets of blood escaping his mouth and peppering his lips and chin.

A loud thud and cracking sound followed as Severus released his grip, allowing the body to fall to the floor. The blond head had the unfortunate circumstance of meeting the corner of a table on the way down. Severus tossed the knife into the enormous, stone framed fireplace before casting Fiendfyre. Hermione practically flew to his side, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face into his side. She looked towards the raging hearth and was about to ask how to stop it, when the flames were suddenly doused with a flick of Severus’ wand.

“I have no idea what Lucius did to that knife, but whatever it was it scared him. Best to destroy it.”

Hermione looked down at the body on the floor, it’s dull and lifeless eyes open and staring. She swallowed thickly. “Take me home, Severus. Take me home.”
“Thank you for agreeing to this after such a long day, Hermione. We’ve arranged a line-up that includes the two men we captured yesterday at Miss Williams’ home as well as a few others. We need you to identify anyone from this grouping you can.” Kingsley Shacklebolt’s voice was weary.

Hermione and Severus had floo’d to the Ministry first thing after getting some rest the night before to turn themselves in for Lucius Malfoy’s death. As expected, no charges were brought against them as the Ministry had wanted him dead or alive. However, they were held for questioning through much of the day. His new request made her apprehensive.

Hermione swallowed heavily, her heart thrumming in her chest. “I’ll do my best but, as you know, a charm was placed that prevents me from recognizing any of the faces of my captors.” In truth, Hermione realized how important this was – despite her desire to be anywhere other than here. However, when the Minister of Magic himself offers to personally escorts you to sub level eight of the Ministry…

Well, it’s not really something you can refuse.

Shacklebolt rubbed the back of his head, awkwardly. “Uh, yeah. This lineup isn’t of their faces, Hermione.”

Hermione stifled a surprised gasp and stepped lightly back into the firm chest of her husband, who was standing directly behind her. The silence was thick, having herself been rendered speechless, but then the resonant voice of her husband purred the words she couldn’t seem to say. “You are asking my wife to compare the genitalia of a line up of men? Have you lost your mind?”

Shacklebolt’s face grew stern, his tone slightly defensive. “It’s not just genitalia, Professor. Its body scars, tattoos and piercings…all of it. How else is she going to identify the men who tortured her?”

“Perhaps by their voices?” Severus replied with no small amount of condescension.

“Their voices were distorted, Severus. They used some sort of charm,” Hermione added quietly. “You know how unsure I was about Malfoy at first.” She glanced back over her shoulder and up into the eyes of the man whom she loved more than air itself. “As loathe as I am to the idea, the Minister is right. This is the best way.”
She looked back into the tired eyes of the man in front of her. “I can do it. Whatever you need me to.” Hermione held tremendous respect for the Minister. As busy as he was – and as important – he was personally accompanying her throughout this process. An Auror by trade, and her friend, he had told her in no uncertain terms that he would be the one assisting her today instead of someone she barely knew. He could not have known how much she appreciated him at this particular moment.

Shacklebolt nodded solemnly. “Thank you, Hermione.”

The Minister placed his hand on her shoulder. “If you’ll just follow me.”

When Snape began to follow as well, Hermione turned back towards him and spoke softly, but firmly. “Severus wait here.” Her caramel eyes peeked up at him as she added softly, “Please.”

Obsidian irises stared at her and Hermione expected his flat refusal at any second. She was surprised when his piercing gaze softened with the reflection of understanding. “Whatever you need, pet. I’ll be here waiting for you.” Hermione gave him a tremulous smile before she tilted up on her toes and planted a soft kiss on his cheek.

After following Kingsley down two long hallways that were littered with guards and layers upon layers of wards, Hermione braced herself as she stepped into the dreaded cell with the Minister. Instantly, she felt a stab of illness in her gut and it took all her strength not to turn and run. The space had been set up as a replica of her room from her capture; from the cot, to the walls, to the dirty toilet and sink…even the shackles hanging from the ceiling. She choked back a groan of horror even as her body started shaking with fear.

The Minister swallowed, chastising himself for his carelessness. “I should have warned you, Hermione. In my haste to get you back here, I forgot to prepare you for the room you would be entering. I am very sorry.” He glanced around the room and then back at her. “We felt it would be…more conducive to proper identification if you could see the suspects in the same environment you were attacked.” He hesitated, watching her reaction. Her silent trembling only increased his guilt. “We based it on the description you provided, which was exceedingly detailed, I might add.” When she didn’t respond right away, he added softly. “We can move them to another, more generic room if you would prefer.”

After a moment, Hermione simply shook her head, finding herself at a loss for words. She looked to her left and inhaled deeply at the sight before her. Six naked and hooded men stood facing her, each with shackles on his wrists and ankles.

“I suggest we start over here and work our way down the line?” He posed the idea as a question, allowing her the control to proceed differently should she choose. As hard as this was, he was very understanding, and she appreciated his concern for her.

Hermione nodded somewhat reluctantly, following the tall and imposing former Auror to the wizard on the farthest left. She started at the man’s collar bones and slowly gazed down his chest, his arms and abdomen. She closed her eyes, attempting to strengthen her resolve. She could do this. She needed to do this. Opening them again, her focus traced dutifully from his navel to the sandy blond thatch of hair over his pubis. She knew instantly, but it was confirmed when she saw the serpent cock ring.

She looked up at her friend and nodded. “This one, yes. He – ”

Kingsley held up a hand to stop her. “Don’t say anymore. The acknowledgement is all we need for now. Let’s move on.”
The next man was short and stout with a rounded belly. Hermione studied him from neck to toe but found nothing she recognized. She shook her head at the Minister and moved on. It was becoming easier to look at them and she found herself feeling comfortably detached as the process became more and more clinical.

The wizard she approached next seemed familiar. He was tall with thick, dark chest hair and his legs were muscular. Steeling herself she stepped closer, closing her eyes and breathing deep. The smell of patchouli was strong, but the memory the pungent scent elicited was stronger. *Long, strong, and dexterous fingers held her head, guiding her mouth over him, gagging her before pulling her hair roughly as he forced her ministrations to move under him, to the foulest of places. Hermione quickly stepped back, not wanting to, but finding the pull to look overbearing. A quick peek was all she needed. His familiar penis was clean shaven, long and thick. Swiftly turning away, she flinched when the man let out a dark, low chuckle. She closed her eyes and then nodded up at her friend, all the while trying to control her breathing.*

She couldn’t believe this. The had caught them. The ones who...she swallowed with difficulty, trying to cut the panic that was rising in her throat...the ones who had tortured her worse than the others. The pair that had been so focused on making her body betray her over and over again. The two who had forced her to come apart at their ministrations, filling her with shame and a sense of betrayal for the man she had left behind. They had apprehended the ones that had tortured her so roughly with straps and canes, breaking her skin and spirit, before taking her sweetly – forcing her body over the precipice of pleasure over and over again.

She gagged silently before steeling herself to pull in a deep, calming breath. Only to grind her teeth when the patchouli man chuckled again, more loudly this time, as he sensed her discomfort.

They had caught Thing One and Thing Two.

Kingsley noticed her color pale, “Are you alright?”

She nodded swiftly. “Yes. Yes, I’m fine,” she responded, fully aware her voice sounded anything other than fine. “Let’s get this over with.”

The fourth suspect had a young man’s body. He was toned and angular, but not muscular. He had no body hair to speak of and he wasn’t very tall. He couldn’t be older than early twenties. From what Hermione could remember, the men who raped her seemed older, none of them younger than mid to late thirties.

They talked about things as they had their way with her; things such as plans for the evening, gifts that needed purchasing for a wife or a girlfriend. Things that were perfectly normal except for the fact they were raping her in the process. Their words to each other were occasionally interrupted with an expletive, “Fuck, that feels good!” or maybe an instruction for her. “That’s right. Take it all, sweetheart. Doesn’t that feel nice? A cock in your ass and your mouth on my prick?” Then their conversation would slip right back to something mundane, as though they weren’t buried balls deep within her. She knew they had done it on purpose to dehumanize her and to make sure she realized they felt she was less than nothing.

This time when she shook her head at Kingsley, her discomfort was gone, replaced by determination and no small amount of fury. *This is your moment, Hermione. Show these men how wrong they were about you; not broken and weak but a fierce force who will not back down and cow away from the opportunity to see them rot in a jail cell for the rest of their miserable lives.*

Moving on, Hermione was able to quickly determine the last two suspects were not familiar. It was only the two. The Minister looked down at her with warm eyes. “Thank you, Hermione. You gave
us exactly what we needed. We’ll –”

He was interrupted when Hermione softly said, “I would like to speak with them. Alone.”

Kingsley’s right eye brow shot up to his hairline in surprise. “What?”

“Alone.” Her gaze was sharp and her voice non-wavering. “I have some things I want to say to
them. Things for their ears only; things they need to hear all the same.”

“Hermione, you can’t expect me to let you be alone with those two men.”

“Am I not safe here, Minister?” She looked around, her tone challenging. “Are the anti-violence and
spell wards so weak down here that they could possibly lay a finger on me? If so, you have far
greater problems than I realized.”

Shacklebolt sighed heavily. “You are impossible, you know that? You realize Severus will have my
head on a pike if I allow this.”

“Since when does the Minister of Magic cower to the Potions Professor from a boarding school?”
Hermione asked brazenly.

Shacklebolt stared at her with no small touch of irritation. “If you were anyone other than Hermione
Granger, I would refuse you. However, as you are fully aware, I do not have it in my capacity to do
so.” He took a breath. “They will remain in shackles, with their hoods on.”

“Hoods off,” she corrected.

“Why, Hermione? Why do you need to see their faces to say what you have to say?”

Hermione thought for a minute, her focus flickering from his left to his right iris and back again. “I
need to place the body with the face. I just…I keep having dreams and visions of these faceless men
as they attack me. I…I think it will be therapeutic for me if I can switch the mortal man’s face for the
monsters in my dreams.” She looked at the floor. “I don’t expect you to understand.” After a pause,
she looked up at him with pleading eyes. “I don’t want to be walking down the street twenty years
from now wondering if the man I just passed was one of my assailants. There were fourteen of them,
Kingsley. Fourteen! The more I can piece together…the more faces I can place…”

Kingsley touched her shoulder, interrupting her gently with understanding. “Alright, Hermione. I
can’t even fathom what you went through. I’ll grant you this, of course.” Reaching in his pocket, he
pulled out a coin and handed it to her. “It’s a portkey. You will land in my office if you use it.” He
winked at her. “One of the perks of being Minister. I want you to keep it while you are alone with
them. If at any time you need to leave quickly, simply rub both sides of the coin at the same time and
you will be whisked away.”

Hermione smiled softly at him, taking the coin. “Thank you.”

A quick nod and Shacklebolt turned away, approaching the two Aurors who had been watching
discreetly from their posts at the door. Kingsley whispered to them and they both shot worried
glances towards Hermione. One of them began to speak, the rapidity of his lip movement and the
spark in his eyes telling her the man was not pleased with the Minister’s directive. Shacklebolt
quieted him with a few words and the Auror sighed, looking at his cohort in obvious frustration. The
two men crossed the room, unshackling and escorting the four men Hermione did not identify away.
Shacklebolt walked over to the two identified suspects, and with a nod from Hermione, pulled off
their hoods.
Hermione stared. The men blinked rapidly, their eyes adjusting from the blackness to the light.

“I’ll just, uhh… I’ll be right outside the door… along with Mullings and Brackart.” The Minister opened the door and Hermione spotted the two Aurors standing outside with irritated glances into the room. Once the door was closed, Hermione looked back at her rapists. She thought the muscle behind her sternum was going to beat its way out of her chest and onto the floor, but that was on the inside. On the outside, she was the epitome of calm.

The blond-haired wizard to the left smirked at her, his cock twitching to attention. He looked down at himself in amusement. “Well, looks like you aren’t the only one who remembers.” He looked back up, all amusement gone. Instead his gaze was dark. “Miss us… sweetheart?”

Her mind clicked with recognition, vividly remembering the big burly man from the café on Tottenham Court Road right after she and the boys had Apparated away from Bill and Fleur’s wedding. Rowle.

Hermione suppressed a shudder as her focus shifted to the wizard on the right who let out another soft chuckle. His gravelly voice echoed throughout the room. “I hardly recognize you with clothes on.” He smiled lasciviously as he glanced down her form and then back up again. “Why don’t you take them off. We’ll play hide the sausage again. You liked that game, if my memory serves.” Hermione internally flinched. She remembered… vividly.

Of course, she recognized this man as well – from the Department of Mysteries in her fifth year. Dolohov. She glanced down his body and back up again, matching his face with many of her numerous assaults – mostly un conjuncture with Rowle.

Looking to the left, she saw Rowle’s eyes were still glittered lustfully. With a leer, he looked at her swollen belly. “Well, you can’t say we never gave you nothin’.” He glanced at Dolohov. “I wonder which of us pulled that off? Could be mine… could be yours… could be, well. No need to give our secrets away.”

Hermione’s hand reflexively went to her abdomen where she cradled her unborn child. “This child? This child growing inside of me? She is the result of love, not hate. She was conceived immediately after my release. You see, what you men didn’t know, and failed to realize, is that you didn’t break me. You didn’t own my mind or my heart or my will to live. You merely controlled and used my body for a limited amount of time.”

She stepped towards them. Still looking at Rowle, she continued. “I was able to remove myself mentally from what was happening to me physically. I maintained a clinical assessment of each assault. So…despite your little metal serpent which let you last for what seemed like hours,” she glanced at the cock ring, disdainfully, “it brings me quite a bit of pleasure to let you know you were the worst lay of them all, Thornfinn Rowle. Of course, I’m sure you already know that… don’t you? I mean honestly,” she rolled her eyes, “if you consistently have to ask, ‘Who’s the man?!’ as you are plundering away at some poor woman? Well… more than likely it isn’t you, right?”

His left eye twitched with barely concealed rage. “That wasn’t me, you little bitch. It was Nott… he fucking said that all the god-damned time.”

Hermione internally rejoiced at her small victory. Nott. Theo’s father.

Hermione played dumb. “Oh yeah, that’s right.” She smirked at him and teased, “You were the one who kept making me say over and over again,” she said the words with exaggerated exhaustion, “how big you were.” She shrugged lazily. “Kind of the same pathetic cry for undeserved praise if you ask me. Besides, I’ve had bigger – and much, much better.”
Dolohov’s rumbling laugh at his friend’s expense brought her attention his way. “And you. For Godric’s sake, learn what a bar of soap is! Coating on more layers of that disgusting oil doesn’t replace proper bathing. Did your mother teach you nothing?”

“As if I would bother with hygiene for the likes of you, Mudblood,” he spat, specks of spittle escaping his mouth. His eyes flickered to her chest. “How’s your scar?” he asked maliciously.

“It’s fine, thank you. It’s quite sensitive, you know. Severus does this thing with his tongue where... oh, never mind,” she tossed her hand flippantly. In truth, the scar across her chest left her skin numb and with little feeling, but Dolohov did not need to know that.

He looked at her with knowing eyes. “Hmm, didn’t seem so sensitive when I flicked my tongue along its length as I fucked you.”

Hermione didn’t hesitate. “Well, I guess it’s all about technique then.”

Dolohov grinned malevolently. “Tell me, does your professor know how much you like it when you get your ass tongued? Has he heard that little squeaking sound you make when your ass gets plundered by a large cock? Or how your eyes flutter when that demanding little clit of yours gets licked and nibbled while a charmed dildo plows into that cavernous pussy of yours?”

Hermione swallowed, her resolve threatening to crumble. She wouldn’t let them tear her down. This was her moment.

Sensing victory, Dolohov continued his relentless taunt. “You were so nice and tight the first time I fucked you. I guess it was inevitable, though. Fourteen of us, repeatedly... day in and day out, fucking every orifice. Shouldn’t be a surprise that by the time we dumped you, two cocks could fit into that pussy of yours at the same time with room for a third. That hardly seems pleasurable for your... husband. Of course, what was he going to do? Admit you are a lousy lay?”

Casting his cruel words to the back of her mind where they could be dealt with at a later time, Hermione cocked her head sideways, as though studying him. “You know, you seem to remember everything in very fine detail. I would almost say you are obsessed with my memory.”

Dolohov scoffed. “You were no more than an assignment. A chore. We were all glad to be rid of you.” His eyes darkened. “We should have killed you.” His eyes glazed over as though remembering. “I came close a couple times. Your neck is so small. Would have been so easy to... snap. Could have told her it was an accident.”

_Her?

Dolohov immediately stiffened, obviously catching his own slip up. He cut a glance at Rowle, who met his with a reprimanding glare.

After a moment, Hermione realized she really didn’t have as much to say as she thought. She brushed her hands down her sides, “Well...” She looked from one to the other. “You are both going to Azkaban for life, if I have any say about it.” She turned to leave, but then stopped and peaked back over her shoulder. “While you’re there, rotting away in a cold, damp cell, I’ll be living my life. A happy life with a man who loves me and whom I love more than life itself. I’ll have children and they will have children and my blood will continue to weave its way through the fabric of the wizarding world. You accomplished nothing. Your abuse, hatred, and cruelty didn’t succeed in the quest to ruin my life.” She shrugged, “I just wanted you to know that.”

She did not try to disguise or contain the small smile that claimed her mouth as she left the room. She
felt empowered and strong. It was a heady thing being able to turn the tables on the two men. She immediately approached the Minister and the two Aurors. “Alastair Nott,” she said simply before adding, “he was another one. I provoked Rowle into slipping the name.” Her face grew contemplative as she continued, “Think about any female’s who could be running the show. Dolohov let it slip he had wanted to kill me and could have told her it was an accident.”

The two Aurors, Mullings and Brackart, both could have caught flies with how far their jaws dropped at her provided intel.

Shacklebolt beamed at her. “Ahh, Hermione. You never fail to disappoint.” He turned to the two wide-eyed Aurors. “This is why I trust this witch, gentlemen.”

The adrenaline of the moment was starting to fade, and Kingsley realized that Hermione’s unearthly composure was starting to weaken. “Let us get you back to the Professor, Madam,” he suggested gently, offering his arm.

Hermione smiled gratefully, reaching for him to steady herself. “Gentlemen,” she nodded at the Aurors in farewell.

It was only moments later when she entered the meeting room she and Severus had spent most of the day in. Her husband was in a chair, leaning back up against a wall with his eyes closed. The second the door opened, however, he was on his feet. His eyes dark with worry as he took in her expression and body language. “You’re okay?”

His proximity and obvious concern for her let Hermione feel as if she could finally let go. Tears tumbled hotly down her cheeks even as she nodded. Unable to speak, she released Kingsley and met Severus part way when he reached out for her.

“She was incredible,” the Minister of Magic said, his voice husky with his pride. “Then again, this is Hermione Granger we’re talking about. When has she been anything but?”

Severus tucked the witch under his chin, holding her tightly as her hands twisted into the shirt at his back. “What’s all this, then?” he demanded, his heart leaping as a sob broke from his wife’s body.

“Mostly likely a cathartic release,” Kingsley answered. He went on to explain what happened as Severus held Hermione, gently moving his hand in her hair comfortingly as he listened with no small amount of pride. After Kingsley finished his explanation and answered a few questions from the professor, he discreetly took his leave to rummage up some dinner for the pair before he would send them home. Severus continued to comfort his witch while her body calmed from the adrenaline rush.

“You are incredible,” he murmured into her hair when silence fell after a time. And she was. She was the strongest, most incredible witch he had ever known. And she was his.
The silence after the screams was eerily deafening. This was the first Kiss he had witnessed since directly after the trials had ended the previous October. It was a horrible sentencing. Truly, sentencing a man to death via the Killing Curse was much, much kinder.

The Minister of Magic had a purpose to this, however. There had been another attack last night. Another Muggle-born child stolen away in the night with his family murdered in the mess left behind. He knew that, even though it had been Dolohov who slipped and gave Hermione a bit too much information, it was Rowle who would talk.

Rowle was only in his late twenties and had been recruited to fight in his father and grandfather’s war, it was no surprise to him that the man being led to the restraining bench was now shaking like a leaf while he watched his Brother-in-Arm floated away with his head lolling and his eyes whirring nonsensically.

Dolohov had walked himself to the bench, but all the bravery and stubbornness in the world could not stop the screams of knowing that your soul was being sucked from your body. Kingsley had counted on those screams to make Rowle talk.

“Proceed,” he said loudly from behind the one-way partition. A new Dementor needed to be brought in. One soul was enough to sustain a Dementor for life, though if they had never taken a soul before, they needed to feed on destruction and despair.

The gate started to rise, and Kingsley could not help the grim smile of satisfaction that crossed his face when Rowle started screaming. “No! No – I can’t do this! I’ll talk, I’ll talk! Gods forgive me, I’ll talk!”

**FLASBACK**

**May 6th, 1998**

**THE COUNTY CORK TRIBUNE**

**Wife Missing After Fleeing Home Overnight**

**By: Finly Dunne, Bantry correspondent**

Strange happenings in the small gulf town of Bantry last night. A local resident, Connor O’Keeffe, claims that his wife of twelve years, Aideen, awoke abruptly around two o’clock in the morning and flew into a rage of fury, tearing the house apart as she raved and ranted with nonsensical words about wands and finding someone she kept referring to as ‘the Dark Lord.’ Their three small children, aged four to nine, hid under their beds, quickly realizing there was danger. Connor claims Aideen had pulses of what felt like electricity coming from her very body and that windows and mirrors blew open, injuring himself and his troubled wife. “She didn’t seem to notice the cuts and
blood. Her nightgown was a mess. I just don’t understand it. Please. She needs help. Help me find her!” He pleaded with the authorities as they surveyed the scene. According to sources, the children are now with their grandparents while Connor receives medical attention and further questioning.

Authorities are requesting that anyone with knowledge of Mrs. O’Keeffe’s whereabouts, please contact your local police. She is described as being approximately 1.65 meters tall and weighing about ten and a half stone or one hundred and forty-seven pounds. She was last seen in a floor length white nightgown with three quarter length sleeves. She has short, reddish blonde hair and green eyes.

More to come as information is relayed.

“Draco Malfoy!” Snape roared as he stalked into the Slytherin common room, eyes blazing. Blaise Zabini abruptly leapt to his feet as many other students jumped and started to their own in the show of respect for their House leader. “He’s in our room, sir,” Blaise offered even though he looked worried for his friend. “He’s not …” The dark-skinned boy trailed off as the Potions Master swept toward the boys’ dormitories, obviously not listening to him. “…alone,” he finished weakly.

Snape slammed the eighth-year dorm door open with a resounding crash against the wall. He was unsurprised to find Lizzie Williams with Draco but was startled enough to realize their positions even though they quickly sat up and apart in the bed, their eyes wide. They had been stretched out next to each other, Lizzie’s head on Draco’s chest while they were reading what looked to be their Charms textbook.

Now, however, they both looked at him with wide and scared eyes. “Is something wrong, professor?” Lizzie whispered.

Snape momentarily realized that his fury was misdirected. The boy couldn’t have known. If he had known, he would never have taken Lizzie to Malfoy Manor. If there was one thing the Professor was absolutely positive about it was that Draco Malfoy absolutely adored Miss Williams.

“Leave, Miss Williams,” Snape directed in a cool voice.

“Sir, I’d really like to sta – ”

“Ten points from Hufflepuff! Leave NOW, Miss Williams!”

“Go, Lizzie,” Draco urged, giving the blonde a little push. “It’ll be fine.”

Lizzie looked murderously at Snape, which almost caused him to snort. The girl would have made a fine Gryffindor, she had balls as big as a bull. “Come find me later?” she asked, leaned to give Draco a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Yeah, go!” Draco promised even though he kept glancing nervously at his godfather.

The moment the door closed behind the girl, Snape warded it and then turned on his student. “Legillimens,” he hissed, much to Draco’s astonishment. He slammed into Draco’s mind, only feeling a bit guilty when the boy gave a hiss of pain as Snape started roughly sorting memories. He went all the way back to the previous May, but he saw nothing of any consequence.

He gave up the path he was currently on and started looking for anomalies instead. He was just about to give up when he caught the fine, silver thread … the one that let him know his godson had been Obliviated. He only hoped his mother had been, as well.
Hermione was in absolutely shock. “H-how?” she whispered, her horrified gaze moving from Severus to Kingsley and back again. “How is that possible?”

“We don’t have all the details yet – but I assure you, she has been caught. She will face the Dementor’s kiss tomorrow morning.”

“Draco?” Hermione murmured. “Mrs. Malfoy?”

“They were Obliviated. We are not sure by who,” Snape answered. “Both are at St. Mungo’s to see if the memory wipe can be reversed.”

“How?” she asked again, even as relief started to spread through her. It was done, over. They had got her. By getting her...they had gotten them all. She had completely spilled her guts on every person who had been a part of their terrorist group. Kingsley said that the psychotic witch had told them if her minions were going to turn on her, she would turn on all of them...

Everything happened so fast, that the person belonging to every single name she had given had been apprehended at the location she knew them to be at within twenty-four hours. Each member of the group was now sitting in Azkaban awaiting trial.

Rowle would be given immunity and house arrest for twenty years. They felt it would not be safe for him in Azkaban. Not after his confession had lead to the capture of twelve men and five women who would now sit the rest of their lives in the prison when – not if – they were convicted.

The witch stared exhaustedly at the dark grey stone wall, her thoughts simmering and stewing, her pent-up rage suddenly cooling as lucid thoughts reclaimed her.

That fool Rowle – he had no backbone and was such a pathetic little traitor! Why did she trust any of them? They were all unworthy, unable to keep themselves from getting caught. Lucius, perhaps the largest disappointment of them all, had disappeared only to have been killed in a duel. If he had merely kept his trap shut and not taunted the stupid little Mudblood, she and Snape would have never figured out his involvement and they could have simply captured her again. They would have killed her this time and dumped her at Snape’s door; bloodied, raped, torn to shreds…dead.

In truth Bellatrix LeStrange cared less about torturing the chit than about destroying Snape.

She felt her temper flare. Why had no one believed her? If only the Dark Lord had listened, the war would have come out very differently. She had seen Snape’s traitorous stripes. Why was it no one else had?

She remembered arriving at Malfoy Manor, looking nothing like her former self; the shocked surprise on her sister’s face, the unbelievable news that the Dark Lord had perished. Bella had fallen into a deep despair. Narcissa had hidden her in her old suite, and Bella had barely eaten anything as she let her new body waste away. He was out there, somewhere, her master. He had to be. Her horcrux had worked, why had his not? Where was he? It wasn’t until she finally allowed Narcissa’s company that she learned the sordid and disgusting truth. The Dark Lord’s horcruxes, all of them, had been destroyed by the Brat-That-Lived. But that idiot boy had only gone to his death – just as the fool Dumbledore had wanted him to – because of Snape.

The Dark Lord had shared his secret, had encouraged her participation in horcrux backed immortality. She had killed the old muggle woman, her horcrux embedded into the woman’s pendant. When she resurrected, the pendant was around the neck of the body she now occupied; a daughter to the old woman perhaps? A granddaughter? It was ironic. How was it she was still alive,
and he was...gone? She had sworn a blood oath with her master not to tell anyone of her own 
horcrux and not to share his secret. Her memory drifted to that brief time she was truly the one he 
trusted. She desperately missed that period in her life...when she was young and beautiful, and the 
Dark Lord was dashing and powerful and a possessive lover. Over the years her devotion to him 
never wavered, yet after his return and her escape from Azkaban, things never went back to how 
they had been before. If only he had still trusted her, he would have destroyed Snape. But no. She 
ever thought the day would come that she pitied the Dark Lord. Yet she did now. Fooled by a 
potions master who was loyal to a long dead Mudblood and killed by a boy.

Bella’s brow furrowed angrily. After destroying Snape, she would kill Harry Potter. Then she would 
figure out where to go next. With her new body and a made-up pureblood name, she planned to re-
enter the magical world as a fresh face with bright ideas of ways to carves a better future. A way 
which encouraged the good seed, while weeding out the bad. Existing Mudbloods and blood traitors 
would be forced into servitude or killed. All new, young Mudbloods would be destroyed, meeting 
unfortunate accidents before their eleventh birthdays, before they could even step foot into Hogwarts 
or other magical places of learning. That had been her initial plan, anyway.

But then Dolohov had visited and had accidently found her. Encouraged her to start more quickly, 
while there was still chaos in the ministry, while people were still scared and easy to stir up into 
panic. He had reported to her that the Mudblood Granger had been visiting with Snape all summer 
and told her his thoughts, his plans and ideas and she had foolishly decided to move with his support.

Dolohov had Obliviated Narcissa and Draco late summer, the day after Snape had been seen kissing 
Potter’s Mudblood with the bushy hair in his hospital bed, and he and Bellatrix had disappeared to 
the bowels of Malfoy Manor. The sub Dungeons where Narcissa and Draco would never go. Where 
there was an Apparition point that was so old, it was not monitored by the Ministry. Where Lucius 
could be recruited and join in the fun when he was released from Azkaban and no one would be the 
wiser.

It had been the perfect plan – but it had failed. And now…

She glanced around the cell, her shackles heavy on her wrists and ankles. She needed to get out of 
here. Somehow. She had work to do. Mudbloods needed to die, her Lord needed avenging. She felt 
the desperation swell within her as her control began to slip. A feral growl and a maniacal scream 
escaped as her mouth as her bloodied wrists followed her pale hands to grab handfuls of the still 
unfamiliar reddish blonde locks on her head. Her feet kicked out in rebellion against the metal binds 
on her ankles, her skin ripping from the friction, adding to the previous scrapes and bleeding open 
areas.

Outside her cell there were two Aurors. Mullings and Brackart looked at each other before peeking 
through the window into the dark cell. They had known she had madness inside her, but the depths 
of that insanity were becoming more and more apparent the longer they held her. She yelled and 
cursed and kicked and screamed, not responding to rational words and not engaging or answering 
questions. Finally, to keep her from harming herself further, they had resorted to calming spells. This 
time is was Brackart who rolled his eyes in disgust as he begrudgingly cast the spell through the 
window. Both Aurors watched as the witch slowly stilled and stared into the wall, once again.
Seemingly lost in her thoughts of Merlin only knew what.

Bella stared at the stone wall, exhaustion seeping into her bones as rational thought slowly reclaimed 
her. That fool Rowle, he had no backbone and was such a pathetic little traitor. Why did she trust 
any of them?

When the morning came, an owl was received by Snape and he shared it with his wife. It was done,
and they were finally free.
Snape pulled Hermione’s arm through the crook of his elbow, encouraging her to lean on him without saying the words. NEWTs had finished two days ago and, while she looked considerably better, he was still a bit concerned considering how hard she had pushed herself over the last six weeks.

At just over twenty-six weeks pregnant, she was no longer able to hide the fact that she was showing. He had been hard pressed to pull her away from her studies the previous weekend to take her into Diagon Alley and then Muggle London; but he had insisted when she had burst into tears after their shared morning shower when she couldn’t get her tattered Muggle sweats up over her belly. He had already noticed that her robes were quite snug and knew she had stopped wearing her school uniform underneath them altogether; only donning a top that allowed her tie to peek through with a pair of panties underneath.

So, during the insisted upon trip, he had purchased her two new school uniform skirts and blouses (she had argued that she only had three weeks of school left and did not need more than that). Pepper laundered them for her nightly. He had then insisted on purchasing her a handful of maternity robes, some new undergarments to fit her fuller frame, and (from Muggle London) she had chosen about a dozen outfits from a maternity shop. Jeans and slacks with a funny panel where the button and zip should be, billowy blouses, and a couple pairs of pajamas. She had thanked him profusely, although he had felt she hadn’t purchased enough.

Being it was a Sunday evening, she was currently wearing a lovely witches robe in a pale lavender color that had trailing sleeves and it made him happy to see her comfortable in her own skin again. “Have I told you how lovely you look in that color?” he asked her as they finished her rounds on the fourth floor and made their way up the stairs to the fifth.

“Thank you,” she murmured distractedly as she pulled away from him. Using her lighted wand to check a popular tapestry to snog behind, she chased a fifth-year couple from Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw away deducting points for being out of their common space after hours. Both students
had looked fearfully at him, but one of the compromises they had made with her patrolling duties is that he wouldn’t interfere with her punishments.

Because he didn’t want Hermione patrolling alone, he had agreed. She continued to fight him, however, worried that he worked too hard and insisted he should use his alone time to read and relax. Maybe one day she would get it through her stubborn Gryffindor skull that there was nowhere he would rather be than at her side – especially given her pregnancy.

Hermione let out a heavy sigh as they made their way up the stairs from the fifth to the sixth floor.

“We’ll be done soon,” Severus said encouragingly. Her assignments tonight were floors four through six. They only had one level left.

“Are you nervous for tomorrow?” he asked, watching her fidget with her fingers a bit. She had yet to retake his arm, being her stubborn self once again. He knew she was tired.

“A little,” she admitted, “but I think I did well enough.”

NEWT results would be handed out at breakfast in the morning for all the returning eighth year students. They had been expedited for the few students who had returned – mostly because of their war status and because many of them were wallowing in job offers that were just waiting on their test results. He knew Hermione had been made at least a dozen such offers, but he was also aware that she had turned down most, if not all of them. She was wholly unsure and undecided about her future, telling him that she just wanted to get through her confinement before thinking too hard about what was next. The seventh years would be given their results a few days before the graduation ceremony.

When his attention focused on her again, he realized she was still fidgeting. “What’s the matter, pet?” he implored, taking one of her hands in his and pulling her back into his side.

“I’m hungry.”

She sounded annoyed and Severus cocked a brow as he peered down at the witch’s pained expression. It was getting harder and harder to shield his amusement and Salazar help him if she ever figured out the entertainment she unwittingly provided. “Just one more floor to patrol and you’ll be back at the troth… I mean the kitchen in our quarters.” He pinched his lips, almost succumbing to the urge to bark out a laugh. They had shared a bowl of popcorn just before starting her patrols.

Hermione didn’t miss the slight upturning at the corners of his mouth as she cut him a glance at the troth comment. The wizard thought he was so sly. For a double agent, he wasn’t very good at concealing his thoughts from her. She knew he found humor in her pregnancy woes. She’d like to see him have to survive one day of what she went through. “You assume I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong you black-cloaked Snallygaster. You, who actually gets to sleep through the night without having to pee…”

“Shh,” he interrupted as he turned his head to the side. He whispered, “I heard something.”

Convinced he was merely trying to distract her, which he usually accomplished by mentioning food, she was about to continue her rant before she heard it as well. It sounded like giggling. Only it was a rather masculine giggle. It sounded like it was just ahead of them in the vacant classroom to their right. They both tiptoed forward, her eyes wide and his narrowed as they zeroed in on the newest set of curfew breakers.

As they approached the door, the couple could be heard much more clearly. It was definitely a man laughing. “Stop, stop! That tickled, you minx.” The playful reprimand was followed by a moan of
what sounded like pleasure, “Oh Gods, Luna. Your tongue is amazing. Suck it, witch. Suck it!” Hermione looked up at Severus, her jaw slackened with shock as she whispered, “Luna?”

Severus rolled his eyes. “It’s not the first time I’ve caught her. She and Longbottom were…”

“Stop! Don’t tell me. For Merlin’s sake, don’t tell me.”

Drawing himself up, the potions professor whispered, “Alohomora,” and stepped through the now open door. Hermione tentatively followed, not sure she wanted to actually see. As far as she knew, Luna wasn’t dating anyone. Then again, she hadn’t really spent any time with Luna in months.

Hermione was speechless. If she had spent hours, or even days, contemplating what she would discover behind the door, she never would have imagined the truth of it. Theo Nott was naked and laying on a bed of what looked like Venus Rose leaves, given the variegated coloring. The wizard was on his stomach and Luna was sitting at his feet, sucking on his toes as she tossed what looked like Sopophorous beans onto his back. The couple was so engrossed in their task, neither noticed the intruder’s entrance.

“Mr. Nott. Would you care to explain just what it is you are doing?” Even Hermione cringed at the tone of her husband’s voice, a tone usually saved for Harry or Neville, certainly not for one of his beloved Slytherins.

Theo immediately jumped up, careful to keep his back towards the door as he grabbed his cloak and pulled it on. Luna, who was clad only in a thong, stood slowly and offered polite greetings without the least bit of discomfiture. “Oh, hello Professor Snape. Hello Hermione.” She simply stood before them with her breasts exposed as though it was the most normal thing in the world.

“Miss Lovegood, could you kindly put some clothes on instead of standing there like a…like a…”

Hermione could not remember a time her husband was at a loss for words, and certainly not while he was in full snarky professor mode, but Hermione guessed if anyone could render the wizard speechless it would be Luna Lovegood. Hermione tried to contain her smile as she stepped towards her girlfriend and picked up the cloak draped over a desk behind her, tossing it over her shoulders.

“Thanks,” Luna said lightly in response before looking back at the professor. Hermione glanced at Theo to see his face was the color of a ripe tomato as he stared at the wall over his professor’s head.

Snape let out an exasperated sigh. “I’m almost afraid to ask, but I simply have to hear this. What were you two doing? Why were you throwing the beans on him?”

“It’s the snorklerooks, you see. Theo has been having trouble lately with some of his spell casting. I knew something was wrong when we woke up in his bed this morning and the wrackspurts were hovering all around him.” She was looking sympathetically at Theo who was now looking at the floor in front of him, his right hand rubbing his forehead.

Luna sighed and looked back at the professor, “So, obviously I had to do something. Snorklerooks not only increase magical strength, they also feed on wrackspurts. It was a simple matter of attracting them. That’s what we were doing, Sir.”

“Let me get this straight,” Hermione could tell her husband was greatly amused despite his attempts to hide it, otherwise he wouldn’t bother with hearing an explanation. “When you woke up in Theo’s bed this morning, you noticed… wrackspurts?”

“Yes, sir. All around him. Quite an infestation, really. So tonight, we were attracting the snorklerooks with the sopophorous beans. The snorklerooks in turn consume the wrackspurts while
transferring magical strength to the infested witch or wizard,” her forehead wrinkled, “although, we didn’t get very far. We had only just started when you arrived.”

“Just two more questions, Miss Lovegood, why were you both naked and why were Theo’s toes in your mouth?”

“Being naked simplifies the cleansing and magic transfer. As far as the toe sucking, that’s just something Theo really likes.”

A small whimper escaped Theo as his other hand came up to shield his face completely.

Severus’ gaze lazed to his Slytherin. “Theo. You’ve been awfully quiet. Do you have anything to add?”

“No, sir. Sorry, sir.” His hands had fallen to his side, but his eyes remained glued to the floor.

“I see. Well Miss Lovegood, perhaps you would have more success if you squeezed the sopophorous juice onto his body. Just saturate him with it. Maybe leave it on him for a couple days. I would venture it’s the juice they are attracted to. Perhaps the snorklerooks simply need more time to work their way here?”

Luna’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Why didn’t I think of that? Yes! Yes, I think that might help.”

Theo’s eyes grew wide with horror as he looked up at his Professor.

“Theo, you will wear the juice until Miss Lovegood determines it is no longer necessary. You will not wash it off. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” he barely croaked.

“Just for good measure, I would work the juice into his hair as well, Miss Lovegood.”

“Thank you, Professor. I believe you are right.”

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it. However, I expect you each in your own dorm room within the hour.”

Hermione followed her husband out of the classroom shaking her head. “You really do have a sadistic streak in you. You know that, right? Sopophorous juice smells foul. He is going to reek.”

“Yes, well. I doubt we will ever catch Mr. Nott in such a precarious situation again. Lessons come in many forms, my dear. Detentions are not always the best option.” Severus shook his head lightly as they made their way down the hall, letting out a soft chuckle. “Snorklerooks. How absurd.”

By the time they were done with rounds Hermione was exhausted. Her back ached and she desperately had to pee. The minute her bladder was empty, and her hands washed, she pulled off her clothes and slipped on one of the loose, comfortable night gowns Severus has purchased her the previous weekend. She let out a sigh of relief as she padded to their kitchenette. To her surprise, her husband was standing next to their little eat-in table where he had laid out cut-up fruit and vegetables as well as a big glass of pumpkin juice. This was not the snack Hermione had in mind. Her eyes glanced surreptitiously at the pantry cabinet where her half-full bag of Cheetos was hidden behind several stacked cans of beans.

Her husband cocked a knowing brow. “Cheetos hold absolutely no nutritional value whatsoever. Have you even looked at the listed ingredients?”
She tried to hide her surprise at his knowledge of her stash. *At least he doesn’t know about the bag in my trunk...or the others.* “I don’t eat them all the time. They are an occasional treat.”

“I suppose that’s why I found a bag tucked into the washing pale in our broom closet and another hidden behind your winter boots?” He smirked at her slackened jaw expression. “I can only imagine what’s tucked into your trunk.”

“I only hide them because when I eat them in front of you, you get that condescending look of superiority on your face like you are wearing right now!” She knew her voice was trembling, she was gearing up to cry again and she hated that she had no control over it. Damn it – she wanted those Cheetos! “You have no idea what I’m going through and how intense my cravings are! I’m miserable. I’m always hungry, my back aches, I have terrible indigestion, I’m fat, and now…” She let out a small tearless sob as she collapsed into the chair. She gestured at her feet. “Now… I have *cankles!*” She new she was being totally overreactive, but she just couldn’t stop herself. She wanted her body back.

When a genuine big, fat tear slid down her cheek, Severus sprung into action. Crouching in front of her, he nudged her chin up so their eyes met. “You have never been as beautiful to me as you are right now, pet.” When she snorted her disbelief at that, he continued, “Your body is adapting and providing for our child. There is nothing sexier than that. And you are not fat, you are *pregnant!*” He looked down at her slightly swollen feet. “Furthermore, you do *not* have cankles. You have slightly swollen feet because you push yourself to hard. You don’t rest your legs enough. Now that NEWTs are over, I expect you to rest more.”

He paused for a moment before a rare, crooked smile graced his lips when his gaze shifted back to her face. “In fact, I find your feet to be very sexy.” He lifted her left foot and kissed each toe, before sucking her big toe into his mouth. Her back automatically arched and a small gasp escaped her lips. He released it and smirked up at her now flushed face. “Hmm, perhaps Mr. Nott was on to something?”

Hermione, whose emotions changed with the wind, let out a giggle before giving him a come-hither look. Her pregnancy hormones left her practically insatiable.

To her surprise, Severus stood and grabbed the bag of Cheetos off the counter behind him. *How did I miss those?* He held his hand out to her. “Come, let’s explore this new erogenous spot, shall we?”

Taking his hand, she let him pull her up to follow. “What are the Cheetos for?”

“A well, I need something to toss at you as I suck your toes, don’t I?”

He let out a bark of laughter when she shoved him playfully.

Two hours later Hermione woke, her bladder screaming. As gracefully as she could manage, she slid out of Severus’ protective hold and padded to the loo. She sighed with relief as she emptied her bladder and smiled at the memory of their lovemaking. Godric, she loved that man. He may find mirth in her pregnancy complaints, but he was certainly good with his reassurances and distraction techniques. Still, if he truly understood what it was she was experiencing he might be even more sympathetic. After all, she knew he was simply tuning out her complaints much of the time. Not that she blamed him. She pretty much complained all the time.

As she washed her hands she looked at her reflection and whispered to herself. “There’s no way for him to fully understand, Hermione.” As she dried her hands, she paused in thought. “Unless…” A small smile crept over her lips. “Where did I see that book?”
Hermione lay in bed, wondering if the spell had worked; hoping on the one hand it didn’t and on the other hand it did. Would he be angry? Perhaps she should cast the counter spell? As she continued her internal debate, her husband started shifting in his sleep. She peeked at him as his forehead crinkled and he grew restless. After a minute of squirming, he whispered a curse in frustration before flipping the covers back and slipping out of bed.

Hermione had to stifle a giggle when the minute he was standing, his hands flew to his lower back and he let out a groan. Then his feet shuffled quickly towards the loo as his hands continued to rub his lower back. A minute later he sleepily made his way back to bed and let out a moan of what sounded like relief as he sank into the bedcovers. When his stomach let out a loud growl, her hand flew to her mouth to keep from guffawing. It was when he sat up and his palm flew to his lower abdomen and he looked down in surprise that she began to feel a twinge of guilt. Was he feeling the baby move? A hiccough, perhaps? These were all symptoms she had experienced in the last twenty-four hours. She tried to recall her other symptoms as she watched him once again climb out of bed, only this time he headed to the kitchen.

This was just too good. Unable to resist, she climbed out of bed and, after relieving her own bladder once again, made her way to the kitchen as well. It took every ounce of control to not give up the gig when she saw him. Half asleep and his hair a mess, he was pulling everything out of the fridge. Everything he pulled out, he made a face of disapproval at before reaching for the next item. Her inner witch let out a cheer of victory when the vegetables and cut-fruit was met with a scornful look.

“There’s some of that Shepherds pie in the round container,” she said simply, her arms crossed as she leaned on the door frame. He looked up in surprise, not having noticed her presence. That was another symptom, being singularly focused at times (especially when food was involved) to the detriment of being unaware of what was going on around you. It was very un-Snape-like.

“What are you doing up?” he growled as he continued his foraging, finally finding the round container and pulling it up to his nose. A resigned sigh escaped him as he cast a warming charm and grabbed a fork.

“I heard you moving about and wanted to check on you.”

“Well, as you can see I’m fine. I’m just so hungry all of a sudden.” He made a face of disgust as he chewed the shepherds pie. He put it down and looked back in the fridge, disappointment etched in the lines of his face at not having found anything that satisfied his craving. He grudgingly picked up the round bowl again and began eating.

Wondering, she went to her trunk and pulled out the unopened bag of Cheetos and brought them into the kitchen. She opened the bag and ate one, her eyes practically rolling in bliss. Watching her, he pulled out the jar of Muggle barbeque sauce from the pantry and studied her curiously as she dipped one into the sauce before popping it into her mouth. “Wanna try it?” She asked, her voice muffled from being full.

He seemed to ponder and then held his hand out. Hermione handed him the bag and set the jar in front of him. He tentatively dipped a small cheese curl into the sauce and hesitantly put it in his mouth. After a couple seconds of chewing, his eyes grew wide and he grabbed another, dipping further into the sauce before eagerly eating it. “So good,” he mumbled before sitting and feasting on the very thing he had ridiculed her for eating. After consuming about ten curls, he let out a loud and unexpected belch. His hand flew to his abdomen. “Something’s not right,” he looked at her with apologetic eyes. “I think I might need the loo again.” When he went to stand, his body refused to allow him the speed he was accustomed to. “I feel so heavy and my back is killing me. And look at my feet – look how swollen they are.”
“Maybe it’s just from the walking about during rounds?” Hermione suggested. She was torn between confessing to what she had done to him and letting him live it out a little more. What would one day be compared to the over hundred she had already spent in this condition?

He looked contemplative for a minute before shrugging. “Perhaps.” A yawn grabbed him, and he covered his mouth as he watched her flick her wand to put all the food he had pulled out back where it belonged.

“Use the loo, Severus,” she told him. “Then let’s go back to bed.”

Hermione was a mess. She was torn between total guilt and complete mirth at how Severus was responding to the spell she had cast on him. He had gotten up twice more before morning to pee, the second time muttering darkly how he just “didn’t understand why he got up with a screaming bladder only to squeak out a few dribbles before he felt relief and could return to bed”.

The morning came with a small bought of nausea when he smelled the PG Tips she was brewing and the insistence he couldn’t eat a thing, only to devour the English muffin slathered with peanut butter she set down in front of him like it was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

She watched with continued amusement while he grumbled and groused about how much his lower back hurt and how he must have “slept funny” the night before. She tutted sympathetically and they both slowly made their way to the Great Hall. Having to bite her lip while he slowly waddled his way to the dais after having left her to sit with her friends for breakfast, she watched as Minerva asked after him with concerned eyes. He waved her off.

Hermione had a late morning free period, where she returned to their rooms and found Severus crashed out in front of the fire after just having had a free period himself. He had class starting in less three minutes. Feeling a little bit guiltier this time, she woke him gently and pressed a Pepper Up potion in his hands, telling herself she would tell him what she had done after dinner and remove the spell. Less than twenty-four hours would be enough time to get her point across; she wouldn’t make him suffer for longer than that.

After dinner in the Great Hall, the Heads of Houses and all returning eighth year students made their way to a large classroom on the second floor to obtain their NEWT results.

“Nervous?” Harry asked her sympathetically as she settled herself carefully in the desk next to him. Noticing her harrumph at not having a lot of space left for her ever expanding abdomen, he smiled tenderly at her and slung an arm over her shoulders and surprised her by planting a kiss on her temple. “You look beautiful,” he assured her.

She gave him a bashful smile and answered him, “Thanks. Yeah, I’m nervous. You?”

“Uh-huh,” he responded. “You know you did amazing, though, ‘Mione.” It was said teasingly as Ron plunked down on her other side with Susan in tow. Hermione let her gaze roam as the boys fell into joking and watched her classmates settle in. Seamus, Dean, Hannah, Tracy, Justin, Draco, Theo, Blaise…almost everyone who had survived the war had returned.

Professor McGonagall brought everyone to order a few minutes later and started a brief speech about her pride in all off them that, much to Hermione’s amusement, obvious caused her husbands “hormone’s” to act up as much as hers did. She watched him struggling to compose himself by hiding the lower half of his face in the palm of one hand and supporting his elbow with the opposite palm. For herself, she discreetly dabbed her tears with a tissue.
“I’d like to begin with announcing the re-opening of the Apprenticeship program of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Starting now, we will take applications for a two or four year degree in Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, Herbology, Ancient Runes, and Arithmancy. If you have an interest in any of these fields and would prefer a faster-paced program than University, I highly recommend you discuss the opportunities with your Head of House.” There was some excited chatter as students exchanged enthusiastic glances and quietly commented on the new opportunity available to them.

After a few moments, the Headmistress continued. “We have decided to take a moment to recognize those who have made some exceptional achievements in a more private manner, so if your name is stated, please stand. Hard copies of your awards have been sent to your dorms. When we are finished, you will receive a hard copy of your marks.

“Neville Longbottom – Excellence in Herbology.” Neville stood, a pleased blush covering his cheeks and Hermione noticed with interest as Hannah Abbot clapped a little louder than the rest while her eyes never left the boys’ face. Hmm...

Harry received mention for the highest DADA score in over twenty-five years. Draco for Potions. Terry Boot for Charms. When the individual core-class awards were handed out, Hermione felt herself disappointed but tried not to show it. She hadn’t received the highest score in any class? A bought of panic was starting to swell in her chest. I’ve failed everything! She was going to be sick.

“Hermione Snape.” McGonagall’s voice saying her name snapped her back to attention and she stood so quickly a bought of vertigo swept over her. She saw her husband take a step towards her in concern, but she held up her hand. “Sorry, just dizzy.” She was embarrassed when her voice came out tinged with the evidence of the tightness in her throat.

“Hermione Snape,” McGonagall repeated. “I’m happy to inform you of being this graduating class’ Valedictorian.” Hermione felt her lips part in surprise and all the teachers who stood before their small grouping smiled at her, all except her husband, whose face was blank. “I also want to congratulate you on receiving the highest overall NEWT score since your husband graduated in 1979.”

“What?” she whispered, her eyes quickly moving to meet Severus’.

His face remained impassive, but his eyes were glinting with pride and amusement. “I dare say you outscored me by three percent.” Neither noticed her classmate’s wide eyes as they swiveled back and forth between the married couple in astonishment. His tone suggested he was upset, but she knew better.

“It’s only three percent.” Her elation was hard to suppress and she broke into a tooth-baring grin. “Hardly worth mentioning.” Her heart fluttered when Severus started to laugh, and she wanted nothing more than to run and jump into his arms.

“Congratulations, love,” he told her from their safe distance apart and the murmurs that broke out around them drew their attention to remind them they were not alone. She felt her face heat as her classmates started to tease her, a few of the girls chattering how sweet they were – much to Severus’ chagrin.

A few minutes later, after McGonagall announced that Theo Nott secured Salutatorian and Terry Boot had taken the third-place honors, they were handed a sealed envelop with their actual results and dismissed.
After spending a bit of time with Ron, Harry, Lizzie, and their respective significant others, Hermione headed back to the dungeons, each step causing her more and more guilt.

She entered their suite a few minutes later to find Severus seated at the table with a huge bowl of Cheetos in front of him along with a dish of barbeque sauce and a large glass of milk while he paged through a Potions Journal. Her mouth started watering even as she choked back a laugh.

“You were right,” he didn’t look up at her, “this is good. I’m sorry I’ve been giving you so much grief.”

She sat down next to him after pouring herself a glass of milk. They sat in silence for a while, each munching on their snack. After a little while, the baby started rolling and stretching low in her womb causing Hermione to smile fondly and drop her hand to the rounded flesh. A moment later, Severus looked severely startled as he, too, dropped his hand to his abdomen.

“Are you okay?” she whispered, wondering if he was feeling the baby move as well. She fought a snicker – it would be an odd feeling for him, especially as he didn’t know what it was.

He looked at her with concern, which caused her amusement to disappear instantly. “Don’t get to close to me, pet. I think I’m sick and I don’t want you to get it.” He rose from the chair with a groan, his hands flying to his lower back.

Once again, guilt flooded her as she watched him practically waddle towards the bathroom. She just couldn’t let him suffer anymore. Pointing her wand at his still retreating form, she whispered the counter spell, catching him just before the bathroom door closed. A minute later he came out shrugging his shoulders. “I feel fine now. It’s been such a strange day.”

Silently, Hermione waved her wand at the kitchen, magically putting everything away before moving to pick up the ancient book from the coffee table to bring to him. He shot her a curious glance and then looked at the page in front of him. She watched as his eyes grew wider with each line of the spell’s description. He closed the book and stared at her, his dark eyes gave nothing away. Hermione suddenly not only felt guilty, but a touch of concern – fear even. She had gone too far. Was he about to lose his temper? Yell? Or worse, just walk away and say nothing?

Her chocolate orbs were heavy with remorse. “Severus…forgive me. I shouldn’t have… It was wrong on so –”

“Sshh,” he whispered as his index finger glanced over her lips in an effective means of silencing her. “I forgive you. Frankly, I deserved it… No, I needed it.” He kissed her forehead and pulled her close, his strong hands sliding down to her lower back where he began to rub. She gave a small moan of appreciation. “I have a whole new understanding. Come on, let’s get you in the tub to relax your muscles.” He paused, “Or are you hungry? I can get you something? Cheetos?”

She smiled warmly and pushed up on her toes to plant a lingering kiss on his lips. “Maybe some vegetables. It’s better for the baby after all.”

“We’re going to get going, too,” Lizzie said to her friends as she watched Hermione exit the Gryffindor common room. “Congrats Harry, Ron, Sue – on your NEWTs. I can’t wait to get mine!” She smiled at the group as they gave their thanks and waved her and Draco good-bye.

It was their turn for the Head-Girl suite tonight, and they were looking forward to some quiet alone time after the craziness that had been the last couple of weeks. Last six weeks, actually. Draco had been struggling lately. Mostly with his emotions surrounding his father’s death and the Obliviate that
had been cast on himself and his mother – which they had found Lucius’ signature on upon examination at St. Mungo’s.

The funeral had been very small and very quiet. The Malfoy money had been able to keep it out of the papers for the most part – only announcing his death and the transference of title and estate to Draco.

Draco had thrown himself entirely into his studying and Quidditch since their return after their weekend of bereavement leave. They had hardly talked about anything besides school at all. He hadn’t even given her much in the way of playful ribbing when Hufflepuff secured the Quidditch Cup for the first time in sixty-two years because of her Seeking – she had caught the Snitch over Harry in the final match of Gryffindor vs Hufflepuff just before NEWTs had begun.

She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye as they barely caught the moving staircase to the fourth floor, the look on his face was contemplative and she reached out to snag his hand. “What’re you thinking about?” Lizzie asked.

Instinctively, Draco laced his fingers through her and pulled her closer to his side. “The future,” he replied honestly as he turned his head slightly to meet her gaze. “We need to discuss it, don’t we?”

*Does he know?* Lizzie’s thoughts became quickly frantic.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Who *did* tell you?” she wasn’t mad, not in the least, but she hadn’t told anyone but Hermione. Well…and Ginny, but Ginny had only known because she had also been on the receiving end of a very similar offer.

Draco raised his eyebrows and smirked at her. “Well, that’s something the Team Owner *would* find out about, I guess.”

“What do you mean…Team Owner? *You* own the Holyhead Harpies?!” She pulled her hand from his and stopped in the middle of the corridor, her hands slamming down on her hips.

Narrowing his eyes, Draco took in her defensive stance with slight exasperation. “Before you go get all ‘Did I get an offer because of you?’ on me – that answer is no. I own the team, but I do not manage it. I pay someone very well to do that for me. The team was my seventeenth birthday present from my mum. In my opinion, they couldn’t have picked two better witches for this years’ recruitment, however. Now my question again – why didn’t you tell me?”

Lizzie, her ire calming, turned her eyes to the floor in embarrassment. “I…” She trailed off as Draco pushed open the suite room door, letting her enter before turning and locking it behind them.

She still didn’t answer him, even when he trailed his long fingers up to tangle into her golden locks. Gently, he forced her eyes up to him. “Are you leaving me, Lizzie?” His face was stoic, even if his eyes were sad. The sensation of ice water washed over her as the question made her gasp.

“No!” She reached for him clenching her fists in his robes. “No, Draco. I love you! I just…I didn’t know how to bring it up. You’ve been going through so much, and I didn’t want it to add any stress. It would mean a lot of time apart – I don’t think I’m going to – ”

“Of course, you’re going to take it,” he interrupted her with a tone a finality in his voice. “You deserve it. You’ll be *brilliant*.”

She froze, her stomach clenching in fear. “But…but what about…us?” It came out as a pitiful
whisper.

He smiled warmly at him. “We’ll figure it out,” he promised her. “You won’t get rid of me that easily.” His crooked smirk warmed her instantly and her tension melted away.

“Okay then,” she returned his smile. “What about you?” she asked. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

“Yes,” he answered straightening. “I think I’m going to apply for the Potions Apprenticeship.”
Chapter 42
Nursery Rhymes

Hermione woke to her favorite sound in the world – the beguiling tenor of her husband’s voice. It could incite the greatest passion and soothe the greatest ire. It held a power over her and he wielded it without mercy. Long fingers were stroking her round belly with tenderness as the sound of his whispers caressed her soul. It was when Hermione focused on the words being said that she realized this was not a moment for her, but for her unborn daughter. She kept her eyes closed and feigned sleep so as not to interrupt the tender moment.

“Have patience with me, little one. This is all new to me. I will make mistakes, I’ll say the wrong thing, likely overreact and be completely overbearing at times. Your mother reminds me frequently of these shortcomings, but never doubt that I love you and would give my life for you. I hope that you will grow to love me as well, tarnished as I am.”

She smiled at the irony as the bat of dungeons, the man who could strike fear with a mere glance, could be brought to such tenderness and vulnerability. It took every ounce of Hermione’s will not to interrupt and reassure this darling man that their daughter would love him every bit as much as she does. Before her will power could crumble, he continued.

“One more thing, while all the houses have their finer points, Slytherin is truly the most superior. Your mother will dispute this, of course, but trust me. You will find as you get to know us that I am the more level headed and logical one.”

“Now rest well my…oomph.” The pillow landing on his head put an abrupt end to the tender moment. “Merlin, woman!” he exclaimed with a laugh. “You are merely proving my point.” Grabbing her wrist to prevent another swipe with the feather filled weapon, he looked back at her belly. “You see what I mean? Your mother has resorted to violence. It’s always better to use your words.”

“Already conspiring against me, I see,” Hermione teased. Suddenly her eyebrows shot up to her
hairline. “Oh Godric, I have to pee!”

With a speed Severus no longer knew his wife was capable of, he watched in bewildered mirth as she hopped out of bed and waddled to the bathroom. He’d heard of speed walking, but speed waddling was truly something to behold. He slid up the bed and leaned against the headboard as he waited for her to reappear. Her pace was much slower and therefore her adorable waddle less pronounced on her return. He held his arms open. “Come here my little penguin.”

As she plopped into bed next to him, she cut him a reproving glare. “You know, I can recast that spell again if you don’t behave. You seem to have forgotten that lesson.”

“Oh no, not forgotten. I remember quite well, and I thank the Gods above to have been born a man. Besides, I made a point to learn the counter spell.”

“What, you don’t trust me?” She shook her head in amusement. “Not even married a year and already the trust is gone.”

Unable to resist, he pulled her close and gently laid his lips over hers before peppering delicate caresses to the tender skin just below her earlobe. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but you have given my life meaning, Hermione. Don’t think for a minute I don’t appreciate you. I have never known such happiness. I think I’m finally starting to believe that the bottom is not going to fall out of everything. I hope I am not jinxing us by acknowledging that.”

Hermione nestled into chest. “You deserve to be happy, Severus – more than anyone – and I’m the lucky one. What did I do to deserve you? I think that is the more accurate question.”

“Indeed.”

Understanding his meaning, Hermione looked up at him. “Stop being self-deprecating. You know I love you more than the air I breathe. You are quite the catch, Severus Snape.”

“Yes, I was practically beating the witches off with my Cleansweep when you came along.”

Hermione could see the hint of a smile on her husband’s face. Did all men enjoy having their egos stroked as much as it appeared that he did? She didn’t mind. The man deserved more praise than she could deliver in a lifetime for all he had done.

“Well, it has been said that I’m the brightest witch of my age. It’s reasonable to assume I would catch on before the others.”

“Yes, you are an insufferable know-it-all. No one can dispute that.”

Thinking about her husband’s insecurities she broached the topic lightly. “I know the therapy sessions are supposed to end soon, but perhaps you could use some individual counseling.” Seeing he was about to interrupt she added quickly, “Only because of the baby coming and all the changes in our life right now. You have this habit of always expecting the worst – an insecurity almost. He’s helped me so much. I just think – ”

“Absolutely not. I think we have both benefitted from our visits with the good doctor, but I see no need to continue. I think…I think once the baby comes I’ll feel better.”

She watched him for a minute and then kissed his cheek before relaxing back onto his chest. “Okay, we can always resume the sessions if necessary.”

“Perhaps… perhaps we should move.” He looked around at the space that had been his home his
entire adult life.

“A true fresh start?” she asked, a touch of surprise in her voice.

Severus didn’t miss the way her eyes brightened immediately. “What do you think? It would be a big change, leaving the castle.”

“Well, it’s not like we can’t stay here sometimes. These are your rooms as long as you teach here.” She pushed herself up, studying him. “Unless…do you not want to teach anymore?”

Not teach? He hadn’t really thought about it. After a moment’s contemplation he shook his head.

“I’m content teaching for now. I have enough change taking place for the time being.” Nestling her further into his arms, he kissed her head as he stroked her belly soothingly.

“But you would be willing to move?”

His hands paused. “You really like that idea, don’t you?”

“Well, perhaps living in a dungeon was not the vision that came to mind when I imagined being married with children. I won’t deny I find the thought of a house with a fenced yard and a large oak tree out front with a swing on it…rather enticing.”

There was a moment of silence. “No, I guess dungeons are not the ideal setting for a small child to develop and grow in,” he conceded. His hand began to rub her swollen abdomen again.

“Hogsmeade is close and there were some adverts for some available properties the last time I was in town.”

“What about Spinners End? Or Prince Manor? Don’t you miss your homes?”

“I miss neither. Spinners End is a depressing dwelling that I’d rather sell than ever have to step into again – too many bad memories – and the Manor was never really my home. It’s merely a responsibility…a burden really.”

“Do you want to sell it?”

“No, it has been in my mother’s family’s possession for hundreds of years. She grew up there. I owe it to her to preserve it. Perhaps our daughter will want it one day. It’s her legacy and the legacy of any other children, should we have more.”

Hermione sighed and rolled onto her back, still leaning against Severus. His right hand absently moved up to one of her newly enlarged breasts where it began to massage. She arched her back, her voice almost a purr. “Hmmm. Hogsmeade. I rather like that idea.” When his other hand slid up her thigh and under her night dress, the conversation gave way to more pressing matters.

**August 13th – 34 weeks gestation**

“Oh my, look at the view! Ginny, Luna, Susan! You have to see this!”

Lizzie stared out the window of the room that was to be the nursery as Ginny and Susan thundered up the stairs. The girls came to a halt as the vista met their eyes.

“Wow,” whispered Ginny, “the castle.” The window overlooked the grassy, backyard lawn with a dense forest behind it. In the not too far distance, however, over the tree tops with their mid-August turning leaves, was a stunning view of Hogwarts. Gryffindor tower was plain as day.
“Can you imagine waking up to that view every morning?” asked Susan.

“This view was the deciding factor for me. I loved the house, but the minute I looked out this window, I told Severus this was the one.”

The three witches turned back to their very pregnant friend. “Hermione, the house is perfect. It’s like something out of a fairytale.” Lizzie beamed.

Hermione smiled back. “It is, isn’t it?” She was rubbing her arched back.

With a wave of her wand, Ginny transfigured an empty box into a plush lounge chair. “Sit, Hermione. We’ve got this! You direct, and we perform.”

“I’m pregnant, not handicapped.”

Ginny cocked a red brow to her hairline. “You do know who your husband is, right? Do you think he didn’t make me swear, on promises of an excruciating death, that you wouldn’t exert yourself in any way, shape, or form today?”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “He’s all bark and no bite.”

All gazes turned to the door as Luna sauntered in, wearing her Spectrespects. “No signs of Nargles but you have a rather large infestation of wrackspurts in your hall closet,” she said lightly. Her focus moved to the window. “Oh look, the thestrals are grazing in your backyard.”

The other witches all turned to look. Sure enough, two adult and one juvenile thestral were standing on the edge of the wood and nibbling on her grass.

Hermione made her way to the window. Thestrals used to terrify her as they were magical creatures only visible to those who had seen death. Dark and scary. Only now that she was watching them from her window, she found them rather beautiful. They were tall and lean, yet strong. Foreboding and ominous until you looked past that exterior and saw them for what they were. Magnificent magical beings who were simply disregarded and feared because of what they represented. Hmm… much like her husband.

Hermione looked back at her friends and then glanced at the bare walls. “What do you think? I really hadn’t thought much about how the nursery should look.”

“Do you have furniture picked out?”

Hermione smiled. “It’s being delivered today.”

“I have some ideas,” Luna said softly, her blue eyes sparkling with eagerness.

The girls all worked steadfastly through the morning and early afternoon, only pausing for a light lunch of sandwiches and crisps that Severus had quickly and quietly brought into the room along with a jug of pumpkin juice and a light reprimand to his wife to sit for a bit and put her feet up while she ate. He ignored the other young witches completely when they tittered pleasantly at his demonstrative gesture and thanked him teasingly for feeding them. Hermione had to bite her lip at the look of resignation on his face. He was no longer scary to her friends, his care and affection for her made him sweet in their eyes.

The furniture arrived mid-afternoon and they continued their work into the early evening when Hermione promised she could put up the few final touches and insisted they all get back to their families. She sent them all home with long hugs of gratitude and promises to see them soon.
It wasn’t until about thirty minutes later that Severus realized the house had grown quiet. No more incessant chattering and feminine laughter. He dropped the book he was reading to his lap and cocked his head, listening for sounds of his wife. Dare he say it was almost too quiet? He hadn’t had true silence since the little witch had moved in with him after her parents’ deaths. He was finding it a bit unnerving.

He found her in the nursery and was surprised to see how much work she and her friends had completed. It was a very gender-neutral theme, though accents around the room leaned toward the feminine. One wall was a huge, life-like mural of the Forbidden Forest. It was very impressive and melded well into the very light greys of the other three walls. The furniture was a dark cherry wood that matched the trim and the wood floors. The bedding and accents were light lavender and pale green. He wondered where she had gotten the stuffed animals that were piled up in the overstuffed rocker recliner in one corner. There was a large, thick cream-colored rug that covered most of the floor and matched the flowy curtains. Speaking of curtains, this was where he found Hermione – on a step ladder, straightening the tops of them by hand and making sure they fluffed and laid just the way she wanted them to.

She was wearing a pair of cotton shorts under the large swell of their daughter with an oversized tee shirt that fell to just above the hem on the shorts but when she stretched, he could see the lower part of her abdomen. He felt himself start to get hard as he watched, his eyes trailing over her rounded backside and down her shapely legs that were a deep golden shade from the summer sun she had been absorbing daily. Her feet were bare, and he could see that one of her friends must have painted her toenails a brilliant pink color for her.

Not saying a word for fear of startling her, he moved silently across the room and made his presence known by gripping her hips.

“Severus!” she squeaked with a startled laugh. “You scared me!”

“I figured I would,” his answer rumbled low, his deep baritone was slightly gruff, and it let her know immediately what his current mood was, “which is why I decided my hands on you would be the best way to let you know I was here.”

“Is that right?” she murmured as she turned her head to look at him over her shoulder with a knowing smirk on her face.

“Indeed.” Carefully he helped her down and returned her smirk when she reached to tangle her fingers in his hair, pulling his face to hers to kiss his lips lightly a few times.

“What do you think?” she asked a bit breathlessly a moment later.

“I think you need to put your feet up for a while,” he answered in a lascivious tone, “and I think our bed is the perfect place to do so.”

She laughed throatily while giving him an exasperated pat on his chest. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

He sighed and looked around the room once more. “You know very well that it’s lovely, even if it doesn’t much meet my taste in decor. I hardly think that any way I would decorate a nursery would be thought as appropriate.” He paused when she snorted a laugh, a small grin curving his mouth. “I think she will love it. More importantly – what do you think? Are you pleased?”

“I’m very happy with it.”
“Good.” He pulled her in for another kiss and she sighed when his tongue brushed her lips in order to coax her mouth open. She obliged enthusiastically, meeting the seeking muscle with a low moan as he wrapped one long-fingered hand around the back of her neck to hold her in place as he tasted her thoroughly.

By his count, it had been well over a week and closer to two since they’d been intimate. With putting the house up for sale in Spinner’s End (which was actually quite simple, as the moment it was listed, a company who had been slowly purchasing the small, desolate community for demolition and construction had swept in and made them a fair offer), setting up the new house in Hogsmeade (which overlooked the back of the Forbidden Forest and Hogwarts), and heavily discussing her future plans (which she insisted on putting on hold until after their daughter was born), the days had been horribly busy and the poor witch had fallen into bed each night, sound asleep before her head even touched the pillow.

He needed her, though, and if she were willing – he was going to meet those needs. “I miss you,” she murmured with a sigh as he broke away from her lips and trailed hot, wet kisses over her jaw and down her throat. “It’s been too long.”

“I was hoping you’d say that, pet,” he muttered against her pulse point before suckling the sensitive skin there.

They didn’t say much as they slowly moved down the hall to their own bedroom while leaving articles of clothing in their wake, dropped randomly behind them as they undressed each other unhurriedly on their way. By the time he helped her crawl into the bed, they were both naked.

Hermione rested her upper back on a couple of pillows while Snape moved to lay beside her and cupped one full, heavy breast to pluck the over-sensitive nipple languidly with calloused fingertips. She breathed in sharply at the sensation, exhaling on a humming groan as he followed his fingers with his lips and tongue. He was surprised when a sweet taste hit is tongue that he wasn’t quite expecting and pulled back to inspect her breast. Glancing up at her, he saw that her eyes were closed with her head tilted back and no realization that anything was out of the ordinary. He gently squeezed around her nipple, his eyes becoming half lidded when a thick, golden cream slowly seeped out. They hadn’t discussed the whole aspect of breast feeding, but in this moment, Severus fervently hoped she planned on doing so. He was slightly taken aback at the rush of pride and protectiveness that swept through him when he realized his wife’s body was gearing up to be able to provide his daughter with the nourishment she would need to grow.

Giving a slight growl, he closed his lips over the taut bud a second time and pulled more deeply. Again, it was just a taste of sweet, but he felt he could become addicted to the flavor. Hermione gave another deep sigh of mixed need and contentment, arching her upper back and tangling her hands once again into his hair.

“Severus, please,” she murmured, tugging him up to cover her lips with his again. He answered her plea, deciding not to mention his discovery until later, and kissed her deeply before rolling her to her side so he could spoon her from behind. He knew her well enough at this point that he recognized not only her burning need, but the fact that she was fatigued and just needed to be taken care of.

Slipping his hand under her belly, he dipped his fingers into her slit, finding her more than ready for him. This always gave him such a thrill, nothing compared to the feeling of having this witch want him as much as he wanted her.

Severus lifted her leg gently over his hip and slid into her from behind, letting out a soft groan to mix with her low moan of pleasure. He moved slowly, languidly while gently teasing her clit with his fingers. Hissing with the sensation, he felt her purposefully contract her pussy muscles around him,
and he nipped her shoulder in warning when she let out a throaty chuckle.

Hermione groaned more loudly when his fingers increased their pressure, refining the skill of his torture on her clit. Her breath hitched as she started barreling towards that delicious cliff of ecstasy he was so good at throwing her off. She reached up and behind her as his hips started pounding more quickly into her, their skin slapping audibly, and pulled him into a desperate kiss.

“T’m going to come,” she whimpered into his mouth before nibbling at, and then sucking on, his lower lip.

“Yes,” he encouraged in a low voice as he moved his lips to her ear and rolled his hips harder, jerking firmly at the end of each thrust to make sure he was hitting that sweet spot on the front wall of her channel.

“Ooh, Gods,” she muttered, and he could feel her body tensing. She keened as she reached for her peak and Severus knew he had her. He pinched the pearl at the top of her slit and pushed her over forcefully. “Fuck!” she cried out as his maddening chuckle of triumph reached her ears and her muscles clenched and spasmed over his length.

He didn’t say a word, but grunted loudly when her orgasm triggered his own, dragging him over the precipice of his pleasure. Bliss poured through him along with the sentimentality that his life was turning out better than he could have ever hoped for, and it was all because of the little witch in his arms.
Lizzie’s eyes were alight with wonder and incredulity as she slowly looked around her. “Draco! This is…this is…wow.”

“You like it?” he responded in a rush with a somewhat nervous tone.

“Pfft. What’s not to like?” She had forgotten just how rich her boyfriend was. Times like this reminded her like a Bludger to the nose. “It’s beautiful,” she said quietly as she ventured from the entrance foyer further into the flat. The living room was huge with natural light streaming in through four floor-to-ceiling, paned windows on the opposite side from the entryway. The floors were a rich, dark-brown hardwood and the walls were painted a light cream color with bright white trim on the moldings. A large fireplace adorned the right-hand wall and there were two doors on the left. One led to a large, state-of-the-art kitchen and the other to a long hallway. Down the hall was a half bath for guests, a den, an office/library, as well as two bedrooms with full baths, and a master suite.

Making her way down the hall, she wondered what Draco needed all this space for. Then again, he grew up in a mansion. His perspective of necessity was likely very different from her own. When she stepped into the master bedroom, she could only shake her head at the luxury. Paned, French doors led to a balcony with an amazing view of wizarding London, including Diagon Alley and its many adjoining streets and alleyways. Several large windows offered more views and bright sunlight, which gave the room a very welcoming feel. Massive his and hers dressing rooms and a monstrous bath that was in-between added to the opulence. “I’ve never seen a flat or apartment like this. It’s amazing.”

Draco was leaning against the master bedroom doorframe as he watched her take it all in. He visibly relaxed at her approving words. “Well, it needs furniture and decorating.”

She smiled as she peeked back over her shoulder at him. “I guess you’ll hire Lexie Poppinstock or some other decorator for the rich and famous?”

“No,” he responded, barely above a whisper. “I had another idea entirely.”

She turned back to him fully. “Your mother? Or Belby, maybe? I know how you adore that elf.”
He approached her slowly, a slight upturn to the corners of his mouth. His voice was quiet and calm, and his eyes held a heat that caused her stomach to flutter. “No, not mother or Belby.” When he was standing directly in front of her, he took both her hands into his own. “You, Lizzie. You.”

Her forehead crinkled in slight confusion. “Draco, I’m not a decorator! I have no experience…”

“We’ll do it together. We’ll make this place ours. Because…I want you with me, Lizzie. I want you to live here with me.”

There was a moment of silence before her jaw fell slightly open. “Wait, you want me to…”

“Yes, I love you and you love me. We’ve graduated from school. I know you’ll be traveling with the team a lot, but I want you to call this home. I want to be your home.”

Her blue eyes shone as his words sank in. “You do?” Her whispered response quivered a touch with emotion.

He smiled crookedly. “Of course I do, silly witch. I realize it’s not traditional, or even entirely favored upon in wizarding society, to live together before we get married but it’s common in the Muggle world and I thought…”

Her eyes were wide, and a tear escaped her bottom right lash. “Before we get married?”

His thumb wiped the tear. “Well, one day…hopefully. I mean we aren’t even in our twenties yet. There’s no hurry, is there?”

Swallowing heavily, a no-nonsense look came over her as she abruptly wiped under her eyes. “Let me get this straight, Draco Malfoy. You love me, and you want to marry me one day, but first you want me to live with you…in sin.”

His jaw fell as a slight panic overcame him. “Well, I mean…we could get married first if…”

His words were interrupted when his girlfriend jumped up and threw her arms around his shoulders, causing his hands to reflexively grab hold of her. Her legs wrapped around him as his palms slid around and cradled her bottom while she peppered his cheeks, brows, and lips with kisses. “Yes, Draco. Yes! I’d love to live with you. I’d love to one day – perhaps when we are ready to have children – marry you.”

His grin was wide, and his eyes glittered with excitement and relief. “You would? You’re sure?”

“Now who’s being silly?! Of course, I would,” she beamed as she pulled back, meeting his fevered stare. “I love you, you darling, darling man.”

Immediately his lips were on hers. A few steps and he had her back pressed up against the wall. Lips and tongues dueled for dominance before he pulled back and choked in a throaty growl, “We are christening this room, now!”

She brokered no argument as she slid out of his hold and onto her own feet. Her hands made quick work of untucking his shirt, as his hands unbuttoned her jeans and slid down the zipper. Not interested in fooling with the pesky buttons of his shirt, she pulled it roughly, causing said buttons to fly and his creamy skin to come into view. He groaned when her soft lips and tongue flicked and caressed first his left nipple and then his right.

In a blurred frenzy, Draco had his witch naked, both their shirts tossed aside, with trousers and jeans laying in a puddle at their feet. Still pressed between the chest of her lover, soon to be live in
boyfriend, and the wall behind her, Lizzie’s eyes grew wide when she found her hands pinned over her head. As one of his large hands held hers in place, his other slid between her legs causing her eyes to flutter back and her breathing to morph into short pants as his fingers stroked her moistened slit.

Draco’s heart was racing, his own arousal incited even more by her response to his touch. Within seconds, she was dripping. Releasing her hands, he promptly hoisted her thighs onto his forearms. As he lifted her light frame, her legs immediately wrapped around his slender hips and her hands grasped his shoulders. Balancing her between his torso and the wall, his left hand slid between them to guide himself into her warm, wet entrance. He could not contain his growl when a whimpering mewl escaped her lips as he slid home. Freezing in place for a few seconds to maintain control, he was brought back to the present when her voice whispered fiercely and commandingly, “Move! For Morgana’s sake, move!!”

Not needing to be told twice, and slightly taken back by her demanding tone, Draco was not going to disappoint. His hips plunged at a steady pace as he melted his mouth onto hers. He was surprised and, shockingly, even more aroused when she sucked his bottom lip between her own before biting down on it. His brain was reeling from the heady combination of pleasure and pain as a sharp tug on the hair at the back of his head had his grey eyes on her emblazoned blue.

“Touch me,” she throatily commanded and without conscious thought, Draco’s left hand moved back between them, rubbing her bullet-hard nub. He could tell she was close by the little grunting gasps she always made before she came. She completely surprised him when he felt her reach under him and gently grasp his sack before giving it a quick tug. And then there were stars that were magnificent and all-encompassing when he felt her walls clamp and quiver over his shaft. He was barely conscious of the euphoric wail from her release as he was completely lost in the most intense orgasm he had ever experienced. Later, he would ponder and marvel at the fact that not only did his little witch have a slightly dominant streak, but he loved it. Who knew?

Still cradling her body to his, Draco slid to the floor, holding her on his lap. Her face was nestled into his neck and her breath slowly returned to normal. His arms wrapped tightly around her, he held her close and kissed her head tenderly. It was in this moment that Draco knew everything would be okay. Lizzie had said yes. She would live with him and one day he would marry her. He had lost his father and his life would never be the same but with Lizzie at his side, he knew he could be happy. He worried about his mother, however. Despite Lucius’ faults, she had loved the wizard dearly. Narcissa was still young in the eyes of the wizarding world, though. She was stunningly beautiful and was still able to bear children. She was also wealthy and not in need of a husband. Wizards would be pursuing her in droves. If Narcissa were to decide she wanted to remarry or if she became lonely, she would have a sea of wizards to choose from. He knew in his heart his mother would be fine. Draco closed his eyes and thanked Salazar. His shoulders felt lighter than they had since he was a young Slytherin. At last his life was his own.

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**August 28th 1999**

**Gestation – 35 weeks, 5 days**

Hermione was an emotional mess, but the guests of her surprise baby shower were being very understanding and sweet. She had been completely shocked when Severus had escorted her to the newly erected park in Diagon Alley on this hot Saturday in August to find almost all the women Hermione knew in the wizarding world waiting in the new pavilion that was decked out with baby girl decorations and tons of culinary delights.
He had left her with a kiss to the forehead and an indulgent smile, promising he’d return for her in a few hours. Those hours had passed quickly and had been full of food, laughter, silly games, and a mountain of presents. She had been floored with the number of people who had come. Molly, Ginny, and Fleur Weasley had organized it and all her friends were there, plus people from the order, and almost every classmate who was in her year – and many from the grades above and below her, as well.

“I still can’t believe you girls did this for me!” she whispered as she hugged Ginny close to her. “You’re amazing,” she turned her attention to Lizzie, Luna, and Susan. “All of you. Thank you so much.” The guests had all slowly started trickling away once the gifts had been opened. Those left in attendance were vanishing the party mess, packing up the leftover food, and shrinking gifts to be transported home.

“Of course, we did!” Lizzie exclaimed. “And you’re very welcome, we love you!”

“Do you need to do this now, Hermione?” Severus asked concernedly while he leaned against the nursery door jamb with his arms crossed over his chest. “It’s been a busy day, why don’t we have some supper and read for a bit?”

“I couldn’t possibly eat another bite today,” Hermione insisted, not looking up from where she was sorting a massive pile of baby clothes into bins according to size. “There was so much food at the party and I have to get this done. It will just cause anxiety if I don’t get everything situated right away. The baby could come at any minute now.”

“I think we’ll be safe for a few more weeks,” he told her softly. She had been acting a bit odd since they had returned home. She had snapped at him to bring the bags upstairs, then had gotten emotional when she apologized for her snippy behavior – telling him she must just be tired. He had tried to talk her into laying down but, just like a moment prior, she had insisted on unpacking all the gifts they had received. Severus had helped her resize and unpack all the bags and watched as she had made numerous piles before transfiguring some boxes into large plastic totes to store in the attic. She was now filling them with the gifts that they wouldn’t use with a newborn.

He was startled when, after a few moments of silence, she started sniffling. “What’s the matter?” he questioned.

Large doe eyes found his and she gave him a tremulous smile. “I have no idea,” she told him. “Something just seems a little…off.”

“Are you feeling alright?” His arms dropped to his sides as he quickly made his way through the piles of stuff.

“Yes, I feel fine,” she told him honestly as he settled onto his knees next to her and ran a hand down her spine. “I really do!” she assured him when he peered at her through narrowed eyes, trying to gage how she was really feeling. “I’m a little tired, but that’s to be expected. I’m almost thirty-six weeks, I’m huge, and I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“It’s been an exciting day – why don’t we go relax. A bath?” He prodded her again to come with him. He didn’t understand this obsessive need she seemed to have to put all the baby’s stuff away right this moment.

The tears were gone as quickly as they had come, and she hummed lightly to herself while gently asking him to hand her certain things. After a bit, she shifted to her knees and reached for the last pile of clothing to pack away. She clipped the lid into place and turned a bright smile on where he was.
now sitting with a book in the rocker-recliner in the corner of the room.

“I think I could possibly eat a little something now,” she told him as she bent one leg up. He was marking his page with a bookmark while watching her struggle to stand.

“I’m coming,” he told her. “I’ll help you up.”

“It’s okay,” she answered with a giggle, planting both hands on the ground as she pulled her other foot underneath her and tried to push herself up with her hands. He almost laughed at her, she looked utterly ridiculous – like some sort of Yoga move – but he was able to catch the laugh as he crossed the now cleaned and straightened room with the intent to take her arm and help her stand.

He watched, fascinated as she bent her elbows, then gave herself a shove off the floor – propelling her into a standing position with a muffled groan that turned into a gasp of pain. His stomach dropped as the noise met his ears followed by a low curse from his wife.

“Hermione?” he was at her side in less than a second more. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, ow,” she rubbed her low belly, under her bump cautiously. “I think I just pulled something a little bit. That was stupid. I should have waited for you.”

“Yes, you should have,” he answered and wrapped an arm around her waist. “A bath now – I can bring you something to snack while you rest?”

“I actually think that would be good,” she replied. “Soak my sore muscles.”

They took a step together, but this only caused Hermione to double in half and cry out. “Oh, Gods!” she exclaimed as a debilitating pain swept through her abdomen. “Oh my God,” she groaned. “Severus…” She gasped in a lungful of air before swearing softly under her breath.

“What’s wrong?!?” he demanded, his heart rate rising rapidly.

“I don’t know!” she let out a hiss as another wave of pain shot through her. “I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“Can you stand upright?”

“I can try!” Slowly, she allowed him to help her into a more upright position. When she was as straight as was comfortable she looked up into his eyes. She could see fear and nervousness in the depths of his dark eyes.

“Better?” he murmured before he pressed a kiss to her forehead which had broken out in a cool sweat.

“I think so…” She trailed off. After a moment of no more sharp pains, she tried another step, which seemed to go well. A few more and she felt herself relax. “I must have just pinched a nerve or something,” she shrugged lightly.

“Are you certain?” Severus responded, tilting her chin up.

“I do believe so.” She gave him a small smile and went to pop up on her toes, planning to kiss his lips reassuringly.

She never made it there, instead the stretch to her toes caused her to cry out in the worst pain yet and she let out a sob as Severus caught her forearms and held her steady, leaning into the wall to support
them. Before he had even finished steadying her, she felt a gush of fluid soak her knickers and the light cotton stretch pants she was wearing.

“We’re going to Mungo’s,” he told her decidedly, pulling her tightly to him. He reached to sweep her up into his arms, but she gripped him tighter in order to halt the motion.

“Wait!” she said through gritted teeth. She let out a controlled squeal as another wave of pain swept low through her womb as the baby shifted and squirmed. The motion stole her breath. She heaved and sobbed out, “Severus, my water broke!”

“Are you having labor pains?”

“I don’t know!” Her voice was tight with pain and tears. “Something’s not right.” She gasped again, and her body twisted reflexively trying to offset the anguish she was experiencing. She choked back another sob. “Severus, something’s wrong!”

Severus gently pulled back, gripping under her arms tightly to steady her as his eyes swept down her body. As he did, his eyes flooded with horror and his gaze snapped to hers. “Hermione,” even through the haze of pain she was experiencing, she could see how terrified he was. “That’s not amniotic fluid – you’re bleeding.”
“Hermione, that’s not amniotic fluid – you’re bleeding.”

While the statement met her ears easily enough, she still struggled to grasp it’s meaning. The little girl who was being carried inside her rolled fitfully and the pain that came with it blurred her vision and made her knees weak. She moaned incoherently and felt Severus pull her up and into his arms in some herculean burst of strength, because even in her pain-muddled mind Hermione knew she was too heavy for him to carry these days. The jolts of the stairs to the living room caused gasps and small shrieks that only caused her husband to hold her tighter and press kisses to her head. He spouted a stream of heart-felt apologies and promises and begged her to hold on, that he’d get help.

The floo ride caused her to black out.

“We’re here, Hermione, it’s going to be fine,” Snape promised her the moment they stepped out of the fireplace at St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. He walked swiftly through the dimly lit waiting area and right to the front of the queue of people waiting their turn to check in. He growled menacingly at a woman who tried to protest, and the unremarkable woman took one look at him holding his blood-soaked and obviously pregnant wife and her jaw dropped in horror. Severus knew his body language was screaming that everyone should back off – that he was dangerous. He was silent and rigid and much, much too calm as he told the woman behind the desk what had happened and demanded she hurried. He didn’t have to worry, before he had even finished speaking, a team of medical professionals had appeared with a stretcher and there was a flurry of activity as he lay her carefully on the magically suspended cot.

She woke at the movement and cried out in obvious agony. “Severus!”

“I’m here,” he grasped her hand and hustled along side the team as they transported her to a private room for assessment.

Severus stood back wordlessly while the staff situated the bed and watched as one witch cast several monitoring charms, causing runes to hover over head. He recognized both his wife’s and daughter’s life signs as they hung in suspension at the head of the bed and the rapid, too quick beat of Hermione’s heart met his ears.

Another person cast diagnostic charms and it wasn’t long before he called out. “Placental abruption, she’s lost almost two liters of blood. Blood pressure low.”

His eyes moved from the medical professional’s frantic motions and fury as they tried to help, to his wife who was watching him with her fingers splayed. When their eyes met, she beckoned him closer. She spoke immediately in a frantic whisper.

“Name her Rosa – ” He cut across her.

“You will be naming her.”

“Severus, please!” she gasped and groaned loudly, writhing on the cot as a Healer pressed up her legs and vanished her clothing.

“Hemorrhaging bad!” the tactless man called over his shoulder. There was a flurry of activity from
the Medi-witches and -wizards who were prepping what Severus now realized was a surgical suite.

“You’re going to have to leave, sir.”

“No.” His answer was blunt, no-nonsense, and final.

The Healer leveled a gaze at him and the moment froze. Severus didn’t know what the doctor saw in his face, but the man obviously realized he had no intention of changing his mind. He flicked his wand at Severus, who was suddenly dressed from head to toe in a sterilized robe much like the ones worn by the staff surrounding them. Hermione pulled his attention back with a gasp followed by a loud sob.

“I’m here,” he told her for the second time in only minutes. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Harry – Ron,” she begged. “Please…” she sucked in a ragged breath and sobbed again as more pain overcame her.

“I will owl them later.”

“Name her Rosalind Eileen – honor my – oh!” Another stab of pain obviously took her words away, and her face crump as tears splashed down her cheeks. He reached both hands to cup her jaw and wipe the tears away only to realize how cold and clammy her skin was, his stomach dropped.

Fuck.

Was he going to lose her?

He couldn’t…he couldn’t do this without her.

Be a parent.

That wasn’t part of the deal.

It was like she read the realization in his eyes. “I’m going to fight like hell, Severus,” she promised in a tired voice. “But if I… name her for the tradition my mother started and for your mother. Shakespeare and your mother’s name. Love her so much – you have so much love to give…’’ She gave a torn gasp and her head tilted back, her face screwed up with the constant torment she was obviously feeling. Gods, he didn’t want to remember her like this.

What are you thinking! he chastised himself. She’s not going to die.

“Blood pressure’s bottoming out!”

“Hang three units!”

Severus barely comprehended as a young Medi-wizard rushed to the bedside carrying what appeared to be small bags of blood. He watched as the wizard frantically tapped his wand on Hermione’s chest and then tapped the small bags in his hand. “Blood is compatible. Safe to administer!” He called out urgently. An older Medi-witch grabbed the bags with haste and with a wave of her wand, their contents floated through the air, hovering over Hermione’s small, pale form. A soft warm glow came to her skin as the blood slowly disappeared from the air above her. She was in no condition to drink blood replenishing potion. This was a much more rapid and direct way. The young Medi-wizard stumbled back from the bed and it was then that Severus noticed the young man’s badge said: Medi-wizard in Training. His look was panicked, and it was clear he was green to all this. Severus wanted to rage. A Student? What was a student even doing in the room at such a moment! Before he could
protest his focus was pulled to the wizard whose badge read: Chief of Sleep Induction.

“I’m going to have to put her under.”

A caesarian section was the same in the magical world as it was in the non-magical world. The only difference was the medicine and healing that went along with it. Snape realized they were going to cut his daughter out of his wife.

Everything melted to the background as he locked his eyes with hers and promised her he’d do what she asked as long as she promised to stay with him. She gave him a tortured little half smile and whispered, “I love you,” so faintly he almost didn’t catch the words before her eyes rolled back in her head and the magical anesthesiologist was rapidly forming complicated wand movements over her face. He did not miss the fact that she had not made the promise he requested of her. She wouldn’t, though, would she? he thought. Hermione would never make a promise if she wasn’t sure she’d be able to keep it.

Severus was shunted out of the way and back against a wall but was too dazed to care as his stare remained on the now relaxed face of his wife. He could see where he had left bright red finger prints on her face and glanced at his hands to see they were covered in her blood. He started trembling violently and one hand involuntarily raised to press the back of his wrist over his mouth as he tried to control his burst of emotions.

As the Delivery Healer tore into his wife’ womb a few minutes later, a loud, horrendous, single-tone beep entered the room. He gagged as his body revolted at the noise. That sound…he knew what that sound meant. Hermione’s heart had ceased to beat. He turned automatically and fled the suite, not able to watch them destroy her body in their effort to free the child that had just murdered its mother. Two Medi-wizards met him in the hall, and he stopped in his tracks when his whole body froze as if he had been hit with a Petrificus Totalus.

The wizards held their hands up, showing that they meant no harm. He almost started laughing – but it came out as a sob. “Who can we contact?” one man said in a soft, calm voice.

“Potter, Weasley,” he answered gruffly, finding it hard to swallow around the thick ball of grief in his throat. “They need to be here.”

The men exchanged a glance before returning their stare to him. One set of eyes widened in recognition. “You’re Severus Snape.” His tone was almost reverent and, in that instant, Snape’s ability to cope with the situation shattered alarmingly.

“Mr. Snape.” The voice was a woman’s, firm but gentle. He heard a soft squawk and felt himself wince at the unfamiliar, but surprising familiar, sound.

“He’s coming around.” That voice he knew very well. Potter.

Then there was a rush of comprehension, and his eyes flew open. “Hermione?” he gasped as he bolted upright in bed. A wave of calm hit him instantly as the witch hit him with a Soothing Charm.

“There you are,” she murmured. “You need to stay in this bed. You hit your head when you passed out.” He didn’t recognize the witch who was running a diagnostic charm on him before propping his bed up to a sitting position.

Severus’ eyes found the two young men he had asked for sitting in a pair of chairs at the foot of his bed. Weasley was holding a bundle of pink cloth. Snape’s eyes narrowed menacingly at the boys and he watched as Weasley swallowed audibly before standing and awkwardly walking over to him.
“She’s perfect,” Ron told his professor while offering the child to him.

Severus didn’t move, just locked stares with first Weasley, then Potter. “Where’s Hermione?”

Neither answered him and Weasley made to hand him the child again. “Take her, Professor,” the redhead insisted.

Severus turned his head to demand answers from the Medi-witch, only to find she had left the room. The squall of the small human in Weasley’s arms drew his attention back to the young man. “She needs you,” Potter insisted from across the room. “Take your daughter, Professor Snape.”

Reluctantly, Severus reached for the swaddled infant. As he registered how light and fragile she was, he pulled the soft bundle to his chest and carefully used his fingers to open the blankets, bringing his daughter’s face into view.

Her features were perfect. Long lashes fluttered against rosy cheeks. Perfect, cupids-bow lips opened in a small cry of discontent. An immediate need to guard and protect, along with a deep feeling of warmth and peace settled over him as Severus adjusted the bundle and held the girl more tightly to his chest. “Hush, now, my little Rosie. Everything will be just fine,” he murmured in his low, rumbling bass. The infant seemed to calm instantly at the sound of his voice and wide, dark eyes opened fully as she found her fist and started to suck on it.

Severus wasn’t sure how long he stared at the miracle in his hands. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours. He was startled out of his wonder, however when the two young men sitting quietly in the room suddenly jumped to their feet as the surgical Healer that Severus remembered from before he had blacked out stepped into the room looking careworn and exhausted.

Potter and Weasley both started talking quickly, asking about their best friend while Severus just stared at the man’s face, trying to gage what he was going to tell them. When the man met his eyes, Severus froze in shock.

He could barely breath and wasn’t sure if he’d be able to speak. He didn’t dare believe the words he could see in the Healer’s eyes.

His throat once again choked with emotion, he opened his mouth and said gruffly, “My wife?”

One chapter left everyone! I can't believe we're almost there...
“Well, good morning Miss Rosie,” Severus said in his deep rumbling bass as he watched his three-year-old daughter toddle into the kitchen in her pajamas while holding a framed photograph. “What have you got there, young lady?”

“Mummy,” Rosalind Snape replied as she hugged the picture to her chest with one arm and rubbed sleepy eyes with the other hand.

“Ah,” Severus nodded with a tender smile. “Which picture of Mummy this time?” He held his hand out to allow his daughter to place the 8x10 picture in his hand.

It was a beautiful picture of Hermione on their wedding day. Her eyes sparkled as she gave the camera a secretive smile while late evening sunset glowed behind her. Severus hunched down to be at Rosalind’s level and turned the photo, so they could both look. “Mummy was so pretty this day, wasn’t she?”

“Booful,” Rosalind agreed, tipping her small head so her thick, black curls brushed his arm. “I be pretty like mummy someday, too?”

“Child,” he pressed a kiss to her temple while he pulled her onto his knee and settled fully onto the floor, “you’re pretty like mummy every single day. Sassy like her, too.”

“I heard that.” Severus looked up only to flash his devastatingly handsome grin at his wife. Hermione was leaning against the kitchen door jamb, her arms crossed under her breasts and over the top of her slightly protruding abdomen.

“I knew you were coming,” he teased her. “I heard you on the stairs.”

“Of course you did,” she smiled back at him and crossed the kitchen to take Rosalind off his lap. “Shall we go get you dressed for your party, Miss Rosie?”

“Yay! Pawties!” Rosalind threw her hands up in the air before grabbing her mother around the neck and squeezing tight. “Cake? Choc’ate cake? Wiff roses?”

Hermione laughed delightedly while hugging the small girl and pressing kisses to her cheek. “As if I would get you any other kind? Of course, we’ll have chocolate cake with roses, Miss Rosie.” She pulled back just enough to rub the girl’s nose with her own. “You run up to your room, and I’ll be there right quick – yes?”

“Otay, mummy!” Hermione set Rosalind down and just like that, the girl scampered out of the kitchen only to be heard a few seconds later tromping up the staircase.

“Morning, Severus,” Hermione hummed as her husband of three years stood and resettled himself
against the counter while taking another deep sip of coffee. She smiled as he opened one arm for her and she snuggled into his side, brushing her face into his chest and inhaling deeply. Woodsmoke and mint assaulted her senses and she relaxed, content with the moment of peace and closeness.

“How are you feeling?” he inquired worriedly, pressing a kiss to her damp-from-the-shower curls.

“Tired, but the sickness has abated the last few days,” she informed him in a low murmur.

Severus set down his coffee and squeezed his eyes closed as he wrapped both arms tightly around her and she turned into him fully, sliding her arms around his waist. He knew his constant concern was driving Hermione batty, but she also knew that he had only agreed to this second pregnancy because she wanted it so very badly. It had taken her months upon months to convince him, stating she had been lonely as an only child, had always wished for a sibling, and wanted more for Rosalind.

Severus had relented finally and sneakily insisted upon frequent doctor visits and cruelly had given her the ultimatum that if he agreed, she would have to stop working when she started her third trimester. He’d thought she would never agree to the stop working part. Chagrined, he had found she was almost too quick to agree. This had only proven to him how desperate she truly was for another child, and he had found himself feeling guilty for fighting her for so long. Especially after it took them almost another six-months before they were able to conceive.

He was excited about having another child – another daughter – but the memory of Rosalind’s birth still plagued his nightmares, both sleeping and awake.

“Mummy! You comin’ or what?!” Rosalind’s high-pitched voice could be heard calling down the stairs.

Hermione snorted as Severus muttered, “Sassy,” under his breath, but it wasn’t without humor.

“I’ll talk to her again about her mouth,” Hermione promised as she pressed a kiss to the underside of his jaw. “Make me a cuppa?” she requested. She smiled against his lips when he leaned to kiss her sweetly.

“Yes pet, I’ll make you a cuppa,” he told her before landing a light smack on her bum. “Now, are you going or what?” Severus smiled fully as his wife’s laughter trailed behind her as she headed for the stairs.

He couldn’t help his mind wandering as he prepared her a cup of tea…

…the surgical Healer stepped into the room looking careworn and exhausted.

Potter and Weasley both started talking quickly, asking about their best friend while Severus just stared at the man’s face, trying to gage what he was going to tell them. When the man met his eyes, Severus froze in shock.

He could barely breath and wasn’t sure if he’d be able to speak. He didn’t dare believe the words he could see in the Healer’s eyes.

His throat once again choked with emotion, he opened his mouth and said gruffly, “My wife?”

“Mrs. Snape is resting comfortably at the moment,” the man responded, and it seemed couldn’t help the small grin that crossed his face as the two younger men in the room gave exclamations of relief and joy. “She lost a lot of blood and her heart stopped. While I extracted the infant from her, other staff was able to administer more blood and restart her heart. She is a strong woman, your wife.”
“Hell yes, she is!” Ron crowed as Harry turned to his future brother-in-law and they exchanged an awkward, but needed, hug.

Severus could barely breath as his relief tightened his chest so much he was almost sick with it. “I wish to go to her, immediately.” He was already sitting on the edge of the bed with Rosalind still cuddled contentedly in the crook of his arm.

Relieved to find that the knock to his head had not incapacitated him in anyway, he stood and motioned for the reluctant Healer to lead the way.

“Only you and the child for the moment,” he replied after a short hesitation. “You two will be able to visit in a short while.” Neither Potter nor Weasley brooked any argument before Severus was led back to the maternity ward.

A few minutes later, he and Rosalind were standing at the foot of Hermione’s hospital bed. She was propped in a semi-reclined position with stark white bedding making the dark chestnut color of her splayed curls stand out in severe contrast. There were curtains drawn on each side of them, but the other half of the room was occupied, and a soft grunt from a feeding infant could be heard.

Carefully, he moved to the left side of the bed before gently sitting next to her hip and smoothing the blankets covering her thigh. Hermione’s face was very pale, but the gore of his fingerprints had been cleaned away. Slowly, Severus reached out and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip.

“Hermione?” he murmured. His thumb slid from her dry lips to the smooth skin of her cheek.

“Love?”

She stirred slightly, and her peaceful expression contorted into a furrowed brow of mild discomfort and possible confusion. “Sev’rus?” she questioned as her eye lids fluttered.

“Yes,” he breathed, “it’s me.” He cleared his throat as their eyes met and held, trying to conceal the overwhelming emotions that arose in him at the sight of her. That she was alive – that she was going to be just fine. “I brought someone who would very much like to meet you.”

Hermione’s gaze shifted when he gently moved the small infant from the crook of his arm to the palms of his hands, cradling her head carefully.

She gasped as one hand fluttered up to cover her mouth. “Is that..?” she trailed off, her eyes filling with tears.

“This is our daughter, Rosalind Eileen Snape – meet your mother.”

“Hello Snape family!” Lizzie Williams’ voice could be heard from the front door of their little home and Severus couldn’t help the chuckle when his over-excitible, young wife let out an ear-piercing squeal, stopped smack dab in the middle of pulling food out of the charmed ice box, and bolted from the kitchen towards the entryway.

When more loud shrieks emitted from the foyer, Severus decided that warranted an investigation. He flicked his wand at the food they had been setting up for their soon-to-be-arriving guests and sent it out to the serving tables that were on the back patio. Satisfied that everything was situated just as he knew Hermione would want it to be, he turned to join the new arrivals. (Much to his chagrin, they had become the central home of their group of friends and often hosted get-togethers.)

“What is all the commotion?” he questioned, but his question was answered when he found Hermione examining a massively large emerald and diamond ring on Lizzie’s left hand.
“Dwaco and Lizzie are gettin’ mawwied, Daddy!” Rosalind shrieked over the top of Lizzie and Hermione’s excited gushing.

“I see congratulations are in order,” he told Draco, extending his hand to his godson and Potions Apprentice.

“Thanks, sir,” Draco responded with a grin. He continued to talk to Severus while bending down to scoop Rosalind up in his arms. “Now that I’m in my last year as your Apprentice, I figured the time was right. Lizzie and mum will have a year to plan the ceremony.”

“You have a baby, Dwaco?” Rosalind asked. The question made all the adult freeze in surprise.

“Not yet, Rosie,” Draco answered carefully. “Why would you think that?”

“I was in mummy’s tummy when mummy and daddy gots mawwied.”

“That’s right, you were!” Hermione interjected before anyone could say anything. She reached for Rosalind, who dove into her mother’s arms. “You were a special circumstance!” She tickled the little girl under the chin as Severus gestured for Lizzie and Draco to head out back in the garden just as an obscenely large unicorn plushie entered the house followed by Luna Lovegood and Rolf Scamander.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Luna said dreamily, and Rosalind started squawking enthusiastically about the stuffed animal.

“Hello Luna, Rolf,” Hermione and Severus greeted together with equal amounts of amusement in their tones.

“Are we still on for Sunday, Professor Snape?” Luna asked jovially while she watched Rosalind crawl all over the “Oonicown!”

“Yes, Mrs. Scamander,” he laughed lightly as Rosalind went arse over teakettle and then burst into giggles. “I know we’ve been working on this for almost three years, but I’m still determined to figure out all the properties with sopophorous bean juice and the increase in magical ability. When I saw Nott wandlessly make fiendfyre dance in his palm two weeks after your little stunt in the classroom – I knew you were on to something.”

“Yes, sir,” she smiled. “But I’m telling you, it has to do with the wrackspurts.”

“Which you have still not proven to me are real…Mrs. Scamander.”

Twenty minutes later, and after another heated debate between himself, Rolf, and Luna, Severus found the crowd of party goers gathered in the back garden. Among them were Harry and Ginny. Ron and his newest girlfriend, Amelia. Susan and Terry Boot and their newborn son, Griffin. Newlyweds Neville and Hannah Longbottom. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout. It seemed that neither Lizzie nor Ginny could help their giggles when gorgeous-as-ever Narcissa Malfoy made a grand entrance followed by a puppy-love-sick Marcus Flint, who was near twenty years her junior – much to Draco’s annoyance.

The food and friendship and celebration of a young life made for a glorious day.

“Did you have fun today, birthday girl?” Hermione asked sweetly as she settled Rosalind onto her toddler bed in her new big girl room that was her birthday present from her parents.

“I did, mummy! I has so much fun wiff Teddy and Vic’orie. An’ Hawwy and Won gots me a
bwoom! Do you fink daddy will teach me to fwy?” Rosalind was chattering a mile a minute as Hermione slipped her nightgown over her head before pulling the blankets up to the little girl’s chin.

“I’m sure he will, love,” Hermione smiled indulgently.

“Daddy will teach you ‘fwy,’” Severus assured her with a low chuckle as he entered the room with two new children’s books in hand. “Is mummy or daddy reading to you tonight?”

Rosalind tilted her head with a serious look on her face before answering. “Boff. Mummy wead wun, daddy wead wun.”

“I think that sound like a good plan, Miss Rosie.” Hermione smiled at Severus as they both settled on the floor on opposite sides of the girl’s bed. She chose one of the books from her father’s hands and handed it to Hermione.

“Hinkle Tickle and the Talking Pickle.” Hermione took the new book with raised eyebrows. “Well, doesn’t that sound interesting…”

Thirty minutes later, Hermione’s eyes were fluttering as she tried to stay awake while the dulcet sounds of Severus voice lulled their daughter to sleep with the last few pages of the new children’s book by Hannah Longbottom. *Harry Potter: The-Boy-Who-Lived*.

When he finished the last sentence, he set the books on Rosalind’s nightstand and rounded the bed to help Hermione to her feet. Arms around each other, they made their way to the master bedroom.

“Tired?” he asked quietly as he urged her arms over her head, so he could pull her shirt up and off.

“I am,” she replied with a small yawn, “but it’s a good tired. How’re you holding up?”

“Well enough,” he responded. “I’m looking forward to the start of term. Our school year routine is much more agreeable to that little monster.”

Hermione chuckled as she finished unbuttoning Severus’ shirt before reaching to push it off his shoulders. “Agreed. Though I can’t imagine what she’s going to be like during my maternity leave. A disaster waiting to happen.”

“She’s is a combination of your precociousness and my sneakiness,” he concurred while unlatching her bra. “Mm,” he cupped one breast, which caused an involuntary sigh to leave her lips as she arched into his touch. “I will be taking the last few months at school off as well, however. I just finished arranging that with Minerva this afternoon.”

“You are much, much too anxious about this pregnancy, Severus,” she scolded, but not unkindly. She made quick work of his trousers, pulling the belt free and unfastening his placket. Too impatient to feel him, she slid her hand down his boxers and encircled his growing erection with her small, warm hand. “Everything is going to be just fine.”

“Everything was just fine – until it wasn’t – last time, as well,” he reminded her with a growl of need.

Severus knew that he had stalled their argument for now when Hermione pushed her leggings and knickers off together and stretched up on her toes to plant a hungry kiss on his lips. “Need you,” she whispered before she pulled away to climb up on their bed. She settled on her hands and knees and looked over her shoulder at him, beckoning him with a come-hither look.

It was all the invitation he needed. He coated himself in her own desire before firmly sliding into her with one, slow thrust. Reveling in her mewl of delight he started a rhythm to suit both their needs
while placing one hand on the bed and sliding the other to manipulate the pearl at the top of her slit. Severus gently bit her shoulder blade at the same time she let out a puff of pleasure as he circled her clit with quickly dampening fingers.

Her pregnant body was so needy and responsive, that she came in under a minute while gasping his name euphorically.

Severus gave the nape of her neck another loving nip before straightening to grasp both her hips in his hands and upping the pace to seek his own pleasure, tipping himself over the edge a few minutes later.

Afterwards, they cleaned up manually while filling the bath and crawled into their oversized tub full of lavender scented bubbles.

“It was a good day,” Hermione sighed as she leaned back against Severus’ chest. She made a humming noise in her throat when one arm wrapped around her just under her breasts, and his other hand splayed flat across the rounded skin of her abdomen.

“It was a noisy, tolerable day,” he corrected, but not without humor. “Rosie enjoyed herself. That’s what matters, I suppose.”

“You suppose,” Hermione sniffed. “Of course, that’s what matters.” She paused. “Isn’t it wonderful about Lizzie and Draco?”

“It is nice; I’m pleased for them,” Severus agreed in a low, relaxed tone as he gently slid his fingertips over the swell that was their second daughter. “I knew three years ago that she was a good match for him. I’m glad they were able to stick it out.” There was a moment of silence where they just basked in their closeness and the heat of the water. “How do you feel about them being this one’s godparents.”

Hermione let out a puff of surprise before laughing quietly. “I’d say ‘you read my mind,’” she answered. “That’s perfect. I know we have both Ron and Harry as Rosie’s godfathers because you insisted there wouldn’t be another and knew I’d never be able to pick just one of them. I wasn’t sure if you’d want to move them around or pick someone new. Draco and Lizzie are perfect, though.”

“I think so as well.” Gently, Severus pushed Hermione forward, so he could soap a flannel and gently massage her aching back. She let out some low moans that did nothing but aid his returning erection. He put the notion to the side for the moment. This was the only time of day they could speak without being interrupted by curious little ears. He pressed a kiss just below one ear and whispered, “How do you feel about Minerva’s job offer?”

“Very tempted…but it would mean that Rosie and princess number two would have to go to daycare. I don’t know how I feel about that…”

“Pet, you’ve been putting off furthering your education for too long now,” he encouraged carefully. “It’ll only be weekdays that you’re apprenticing. No holidays, no weekends, and you’ll be home in the summer…and I’m positive that Molly Weasley would never let you put these girls in childcare. Perhaps we could adopt a house elf from Hogwarts and have the elf help Molly. I truly think you should do it.”

Hermione heaved another sigh and leaned back against his chest. She had been working part-time as Hogwarts’ librarian since right after Rosalind was born because Madam Pince had dropped her hours, wanting to slow down a little before retiring completely. The old librarian would be done for good after this school year, and Minerva had warned Hermione that they would be hiring a full-time
librarian and that her part-time position would no longer be available. She had promised the job was Hermione’s, if she wanted it, but had also offered her the Transfiguration apprentice position with the assurance of taking over as the Transfiguration Professor once Hermione completed her apprenticeship.

“I know you’re right,” she answered finally. “I will let her know I accept her offer to apprentice. It’s good work, I enjoy the students. I love the subject…it makes perfect sense.”

“Good,” he agreed. “Now, love,” he purposefully pressed his renewed erection into her lower back, causing her to wiggle her bum invitingly. “I have another offer for you…”

Later, when they were both spent and laying comfortably in each other’s arms, she gently took his face in hand and kissed his lips tenderly. “Everything is going to be fine,” she told him again and he sighed, knowing she was talking about their little tiff just before their first round of intimacies. “Do you know how I know?”

“No,” he answered. “Tell me, how do you know?”

“Because we have been through our fair share of heartache and grief.” She gave him a small smile. “And I’m young and healthy and we’re being careful.”

He sighed and wrapped his arms more snuggly around her. “I suppose you’re right. It’s only fair that I let us live our happily-ever-after without too much fretting, hm?”

“We aren’t living our happily-ever-after,” she said seriously. “Happily-ever-after started at the end of the war, and I hadn’t found you yet.

“Hm, I see,” he paused. “What would you call it then?”

“Our after happily-ever-after.”

~*Finite Incantatem*~

This has been a long journey and just over 18-months in the making. If you’ve made it this far, you just finished reading my first ever Harry Potter fanfiction. It weighs in at 387 pages and 181,190 words! Thanks for sticking with us!

First and foremost, I wish to thank Snowblind12 – who BETA’d, encouraged, helped me when I was stuck, and, finally, became my co-author and best friend in the entire world. I have no idea what I would do without you in my life. God knows I’d laugh less and be bored more often. Love you so, so much.

Snow and I can’t express our love and thanks to all those who favorited, followed, kudo’ed, voted, bookmarked, and – most importantly – reviewed. YOU are who kept us motivated and going and we’re so thrilled to say, “THE END.” We hope you enjoyed it. SS/HG, HEA. Always.

What’s next on the docket? Snow and I will be returning to A World Not Fit to Live In. This is a dark “VoldemortWins” story. If you are on AFF, you can find it under out joint page: SnowblindLissaDream (link in our profile or on my favorite authors list). If you’re on WP, AO3 or AFF – just check out mine or Snow’s story page.

Love and peace,
LissaDream
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!