The Lord of Death and Albus Dumbledore

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Summary

[HG/SS] When Harry and Ron try to "prank" Draco Malfoy for the audacity of being Draco Malfoy, Hermione steps in to stop him, but the curse takes her full on. Dumbledore makes a choice for her to preserve the brains of the Golden Trio and thus keep Harry Potter alive. [EWE, NC, AU] M for safety.
Chapter 1

Chapter by corvus draconis

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Chapter One

*Life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides.*

*Lao Tzu*

Albus Dumbledore walked across the ungodly mess that was once a most beautiful and well-kept family home. Half of the walls were gone, blasted in from the outside, and the roof was only barely hanging on by a thread of blessing that the home had once been well built. As he walked through, hoping beyond hope that the home had been empty when the destruction had blown through, he stumbled on the broken, twisted forms that had once been human bodies.

He knelt down, his hand searching in vain for the carotid pulse on the neck of one and then the other. His eyes closed as he slumped in defeat. He took in a few laboured breaths and opened his eyes, his gaze falling upon an old photograph of the two brothers and their curly-haired, redhead younger sister. Their photo had been of happier times, and those times seemed long and far away.

A strange wheeze caught his attention, causing him to turn. His eyes widened as he hurried to a smear of black cloth and gnarled hands. Dark eyes stared into nothingness even as a bare wheeze and weak rasp of breath barely moved his side.

"Severus," Albus said, placing his hand on him with no response. Blood pooled around him, having already soaked his black, woolen robes.

He pulled on the few healing spells he knew, attempting to stabilise him for an Apparate, but his body twitched and convulsed, going into seizures.

"Headmaster, there will be an attack tonight on the house. Five Death Eaters at the very least. More if there is enthusiasm. You must get them out of there."

"Severus, I discussed your warning with our Auror allies, and they believe the attack will be on the Muggles just outside London."

"Potter and Black? Don't be absurd. They would say anything to discredit me! I'm telling you the Prewetts are going to be targeted! At least warn THEM if nothing else!"

"Enough, Severus," Albus said, waving his hand. We can only afford one large group of people to stop events, and innocent Muggles have no defence against magic."

Albus frantically patted is robes and pulled out a small, worn box. He opened it exposing what looked like a coin with a grotesque face carved on the front, more akin to a gargoyle than any recognisable animal. The coin was faded slightly towards the top as if it had been worn away, but the rest seemed surprisingly *alive*. He dipped it into a pool of blood, and the coin flashed brightly as the blood disappeared.

A low, rumbling growl sounded around the ruins as a dark, ominous mist swirled around the ruined hardwood floor. A figure, seemingly built of shadow, rose up from the swirling mist. Its form
solidified no less creepily, pale, thin skin over bones, seemingly far less material than a spectre.

"This is the second time you have called upon me, Albus Dumbledore. What crisis would my old bones have to offer you?"

The air around them seemed to freeze with only Dumbledore's breath painting clouds in the cold. The figure stood still as tree. Time seemed to be suspended in that moment where even the blood stopped its trail across the floor.

"I need Severus alive," Albus said. "He is imperative for the war."

The figure's face twisted cruelly, thin lips pulling back from ivory fangs. "What I offer is not life, as well you know."

"But you could preserve him. He would keep his mind," Albus insisted.

The creature pulled back its lips. "And what if he looks like me, hrm? Will that work for your hidden cause?"

Albus flinched, and it did not go unnoticed by the creature.

"I thought not. How good for you that his looks are already pale and his countenance already uncommonly harsh. Do you truly wish to condemn an innocent to a fate that is neither truly living nor death?"

Albus looked down at the body of his newly acquired spy. "He is not innocent, but I need him all the same."

"We all have things we need, Albus," the creature replied, his face like a skull with only a thin layer of skin pulled across the surface, looking so much like some beast who had died a long time previous than anything remotely alive, much less human. "What makes you think he will thank you for this fate?"

"He is needed," Dumbledore repeated stubbornly.

The being, who seemed neither fully human nor beast, curled thin, cruel lips around a jagged, fang-filled smile. "You have used the token, and this is to be the second of the three boons as I promised to you so long ago as a reward for alerting me to your former friend Grindelwald's intent to attack my coven. Again I must ask, are you entirely certain that this particular boon is what you desire?"

"I am quite positive."

The inhuman creature smiled, and it was not a kind one. He flipped the coin back to Albus, this time only a sliver of the original engraving remained. He snarled, and his fangs sank into Severus' neck, burying deep. Rivulets of dark crimson blood trickled down his neck as the creature fed deeply, making no effort to conceal the enjoyment he was gaining from the feeding. He pulled away, blood dripping from his fangs as he drew one sharp claw against his neck to allow thick, black blood to pool in the wound. He then drew Severus' mouth to the wound, forcing him to drink. At first it seemed as if the dying wizard struggled against it, but the creature's embrace was iron. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, he was drinking deeply, growling, struggling to feed.

The ancient creature stared at Dumbledore, his umbral gaze never faltering. "I would leave us, unless you wish to partake," he growled. "Or become food."

Dumbledore nodded swiftly and fled at once, having to step over the cold bodies of the Prewett
twins as he left.

"Albus," the creature said as he left. "I hope you do not complain if the results are not quite to your liking as you did when I dealt with Grindelwald on your behalf."

Albus flinched, turning slightly. "This must be done, just as it had to be back then."

Then Albus fled into the night, followed by a resounding crack.

Harry and Ron knew they were in trouble this time. Big trouble. Big B and capital T trouble with a side serving of "Oh, fuck" instead of chips.

Harry hadn't meant to lose his temper so epically, but, damn it, he'd seen that bloody git, Malfoy and — well, he'd totally lost it. Ron had lured Malfoy in to confront him about having seen him slinking off in the middle of the night. He'd just meant to talk to him. Rattle his cage, but—he'd used a spell that Sirius had taught him, telling him he'd once created it with James to get back at Snape but had never had a good opportunity to use it.

The moment the first word had come out of his mouth, Hermione had screeched in horror, throwing herself in front of a startled Malfoy as she screamed, "NO HARRY! That's Dark magic!"

And then she had screamed, this time in agony—

And screamed.

And screamed.

"What spell was it, Mr Potter?" Poppy yelled frantically as she and her fellow medi-witches swarmed over Hermione.

"Mr Potter!"

"MR POTTER!"

Harry, his eyes wide and his face drained of blood, looked up with a jolt. "Hominem— Vir— Viridi Hominem Mori," he finally stammered out.

Hermione's skin was moist and bright green, like summer grass wet with the morning dew. She screamed in agony, her entire body convulsing violently. The blood-tinged foam that spewed from her mouth dribbled onto the pillow, and the pillow started to fizzle and smoke as the pinkish liquid actually ate through the cloth.

"What's happening?" Harry cried.

"What's wrong with her skin?" Ron blurted out in horror.

Poppy cast a rapid series of complex diagnostic spells, summoning a flask of something milky-looking and pouring it down Hermione's throat. For a tense minute, it seemed like Hermione was starting to improve, but then she started to shriek again.

"Get me more of the alkaline potion!" Poppy yelled. "And keep pouring it down her until we can counter that spell. POTTER! Give me the counter curse!"

"The—"
"GIVE ME THAT COUNTER CURSE RIGHT NOW, MR POTTER!"

"I—" Harry stammered. "T-there isn't one!"

"WHAT?!"

Hermione continued to scream and scream.

"What are we going to do, Harry?" Ron said, wringing his hands in a manner much like his mother's typical reaction to extreme stress. His voice trembled like the night he begged Harry to murder him because he looked like his old Aunt Tessie.

"I don't know."

"She always knew what to do. What if we can't figure it out! What if she's not—"

"I DON'T KNOW!" Harry cried, throwing a punch at a nearby Screechsnap plant. It wobbled and fell to the floor, unpotting itself, and they both heard it give a sad little death rattle as its leaves drooped and it wilted and shriveled into a dessicated ball right before their eyes.

Ron just stared at Harry as his best mate recoiled again, frantically trying to repot the plant, right it, and give it water. The plant, however, just slumped completely.

Ron, silent for the moment, staring at the unfortunate plant. Then he looked up. "What if—"

Harry jerked his head up, his face flushing red. "I don't know, Ron!"

The other potted plants, quivering in fear, jumped to huddle against each other, their leaves trembling in obvious fear.

Ron stared at the huddled plants, swallowing hard. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he thought better of it.

"It was just supposed to turn Malfoy's skin green," Harry said in barely a whisper. "It was just a joke from Sirius."

"It was a spell for Hermione?"

"No, it was a spell my dad and him made up for Snape. As a joke."

Ron stared at the quivering Screechsnap plants that seemed to be whispering to each other. "Not that I like the greasy old git, mate, but that didn't seem like a joke to me. That was all about hate."

Harry frowned, his hands clenched tightly into fists. "It was supposed to be a ruddy prank."

Ron stared out the window, swallowing. "Right, then. A prank." He remained silent, but his eyes showed fear and uncertainty.

Albus frowned at the lifeless body of Hermione Granger that was being held in stasis, kept in a state of suspended animation as poor Poppy Pomfrey and her fellows tried desperately to find a cure for the horrific condition that ailed the young witch—a Dark curse. But Albus knew deep in his aged bones that there would be nothing normal that could save her from her blood turning to acid and her organs rotting within her… this was not something that any known potion could fix. That, and there
was no counter curse to save her either. He heard Poppy crying to her fellow medi-witches about how nothing was working. St Mungos had even sent a Dark curse specialist over to Hogwarts—and Dumbledore worried that Healer Lourdes would report the situation to the Aurors and get them all entangled in the resultant mess. That could be traced back to Harry Potter, and that was something he simply could not afford.

No, Harry Potter had to be kept safely out of reach for him to finish his appointed task, if only the boy could manage to keep his hot temper under control.

And with both Sirius Black and James Potter dead, there was no counter curse to be had for poor Hermione Granger—the one person Dumbledore knew was capable of keeping Harry Potter on track or at least—save him from his own failings.

Now, Albus finally realised, much to his shame, just what kind of relationship his spy had truly had with the group of boyhood chums. He'd been blind to it for so long, dismissing it as nothing more than childish pranks or bouts of adolescent anger that they would eventually grow out of. But Tom hadn't grown out of it either. Why then, did he always think they would?

Albus frowned, compulsively sucking on his lemon sherbet.

He was sure, however, that Harry had to have the best possible chance to defeat Tom, and the only way that was ever going to happen was if Hermione was alive to keep him safe until it was time for the boy to face him.

He couldn't rely on Severus—Severus had a great many other tasks he had to perform, and Albus had worked very hard to keep Harry and Snape oblivious to each other's better qualities. There was no turning back the clock there.

He fingered the coin he kept hidden in his robe pocket and pulled out his wand. He muttered a spell, and blood dripped from his cut hand onto the coin. He clenched the coin tightly, and the blood disappeared as the coin burst into a blinding radiance.

Dark mist pooled around his feet, seemingly seeping out of the stone and mortar. Claws reached out and pulled another form behind it, skeletal and dark in a way that made Snape's idea of fashion seem like pastels and rainbow unicorns. The mist coagulated into form, and the form was even more monstrous that the last time Dumbledore had set eyes upon him.

"Are you dying, Albus?" its voice rumbled, a mixture of venom and unearthly mockery. "What could possibly be so important to call upon me one. Final. Time?"

Albus gestured to the body of Hermione Granger, who looked barely human with the curse running through her veins as acid.

"You wish me to save her?" the creature asked, lips pulling back from sharp, dagger teeth. "This is your last boon you would ask of me? Not to defeat your little thorn in your side? Tom Riddle?"

Albus flinched. "Harry needs her. He will require her to keep him on track to defeat Tom."

The dark figure extended one bony talon towards Hermione, the tip gently brushing against her forehead. "And what makes her so special? Is she one of your pet projects too, hrm? Is not one of mine enough to keep in your pocket?"

Albus squared his jaw. "Don't you think I would keep such a boon for some other reason if I could? This must be done."
"Albus, I am not sure what you would keep or use anymore," the ancient creature drawled, his eyes blinking slowly. "Are you sure you do not wish to just drink from me and do your own dirty work?"

Dumbledore flinched, unable to suppress an instinctive shudder of revulsion.

The creature did not miss the gesture, and its lips curled back from its teeth in a cruel, knowing smile. "Some lines find you cannot cross, hm, Albus? You would rather be old-looking like some wizened, kindly old man than what I am. Even when mortality ticks away at your weakening bones. Or— perhaps you do not wish to see what power I would have over you, fearing that I could command you as you command the one I saved for you?"

Dumbledore stiffened. "This is necessary."

"So it would seem." The creature cradled Hermione's body gently against himself, tilting her head to the side. "It's a good thing acid has no effect on me, Albus. One might think you wanted me dead."

His fangs struck, and he drank from Hermione's neck, her acidic blood dripping from her neck to sizzled on the pillow and mattress. It steamed off of the creature's mouth, but even as the flesh burned, it regenerated unnervingly fast, flesh forming over skeletal bone in the merest blink of an eye. The creature took one claw and sank it into his neck, pulling it to free his black blood to pool, and he drew Hermione to it, pressing her to the wound.

Hermione's body spasmed and her arms beat weakly against the creature at first, struggling, but then her hands slowly twisted into newborn claws as she latched onto the ancient creature's offering, her hungry suckling at the horrific offering as desperate as a hungry newborn infant seeking the milk of its mother. Her green skin turned pale and ashen as her eyes stared at Albus as she drank. Her whisky brown eyes faded into a disturbing, almost glowing shade of pure gold.

The creature gave a strange gasp that sounded strangely pleasurable, his eyes fluttering slightly as he clutched at Hermione, not even bothering to push her away. Strangely, he encouraged her to drink as much as she desired— the rush of his supernatural blood hastening her conversion much faster.

The creature began to laugh, his eyes focused on Albus with a strangely amused, dark brand of humour. "She is not like Severus, Albus. Her will to live is very strong. While he struggled to find something to live for— she has many reasons to survive." He chuckled, his eyes fluttering with the ecstasy of the dark embrace, feeling the tendrils that bound this witch to his bloodline slither darkly around them both and bind them tightly.

Already, her hands were twisted into elongated talons, the ends of her fingers shaping into delicate, pearlescent, yet dangerously razor-sharp claws. The tips of her ears jerked up into almost elfin points, flicking inhumanely as she focused on sounds she seemed to hear that Albus' own human hearing couldn't. Already, small dagger-like fangs were unsheathed inside her mouth, stretching unnervingly like a vipers even as they folded back— hidden. A long tongue flicked out, licking his neck as her drinking fervor lessened, but with each stroke of her inhuman tongue, she carried more of the precious gift into her mouth, not letting one single drop be wasted.

Albus couldn't help but stare both in fascination and disgust. The transformation was as interesting as it was grotesque, and it was obvious that his creature ally was not preventing her from taking too much, if there was even such a thing, allowing his fledgling to recreate herself at her own, breakneck pace. Severus had not shown quite so much enthusiasm, and it made him wonder if the creature's dark comment about Miss Granger's greater will to live was true.

Despite it, there could be no doubt that the Granger witch was leaving far more of her humanity behind than she was taking it with her, at least physically. Her body moved like a shrug, as if
something was wriggling underneath her skin, trying to free itself from the cocoon of her frail human body, and if he looked too closely, he found he could almost see something moving there— like an eel moving under the surface of the water. Something was changing deep within the young witch that was Hermione Granger— remaking her entirely from within.

Exactly what it was that was threatening to break free of the young witch's tortured body, Albus wasn't quite sure. All he knew was that Severus hadn't undergone such a drastic change. He'd left, mind you, before the wizard had completed his transition, but he'd seen enough to know there was a big difference in the process. This time, the creature that had become his unwitting ally was ensuring that Hermione got the most she could from their unholy bargain.

But exactly what that meant, Albus wasn't sure other than she would live to keep Harry alive. That was all that mattered to him.

Albus shuddered, unconsciously wrapping his arms tightly around himself as Hermione became something he'd never want for himself. Vampires were a thing that bestowed immortality with the kind of unlife that he could not, would not wish for. While Sanguini was one of those vampires that did look human as well as having an iron control over his baser instincts, he couldn't help but wonder if with power came less humanity, as if the balance of such things did not normally allow one to attain both things. His ancient ally, for example, made no effort to appear anything but the Dark creature it— he— was.

At least he could blame the changes in Granger girl as being the aftereffects of the Potter boy's misplaced curse, as he had no doubt whatsoever that there were going to be some physical things that would require an extensive glamour— especially if the changes he was witnessing before his eyes was any clue.

The ancient creature cradled the young witch, crooning with a soft, rumbling growl, clicking in a high, bat-like whisper. "Now we sleep in the ground where all those who die must go at least once." He pulled Hermione to him, pressing his almost-muzzle against her neck with a curl of his lips stretched over his too-white fangs.

"Do see that we are not disturbed," he said finally, not even looking at Albus.

Then the pair disappeared together in a swirl of black mist.

The first thing she knew was pain and then the astounded look of shock and horror on Draco's face as she had stepped in front of the boy to take the spell that had been intended for him. Draco had cradled her to himself as her body had trembled in agony.

She had screamed— her body felt as if in every single cell of her body was on fire. As her body convulsed, Draco had been yelling frantically for help, his face as pale as milk and haunted as if he was watching her die before him.

Perhaps, she had been.

The pain hadn't stopped— not even when Madam Pomfrey had placed her in stasis. She had heard them frantically casting spells as they had poured potion after potion into her. Even though some of it had helped, it was only temporary.

All of it was futile.

Until a blessedly cool touch upon her forehead finally made the pain stop.
She found herself in a land of strangely muted colour. Mist swirled around the ground like the storms of Jupiter from space. A tall figure draped only in wispy robes stood like a statuary. A hood was pulled over the figure's face, shadowing it completely, yet she did not feel any menace from it. She found herself thinking it seemed a lot like her Potions professor, sans the forbidding aura of disgust and loathing.

Remembering the manners her parents had carefully drilled into her, she curtseyed. "Did you stop my pain, sir? Thank you."

The figure chuckled. "Even now, such beautiful manners. Most would demand so many things, least of all where they were or who I was."

Hermione flushed slightly. "The pain is gone. I—find myself inclined to be far more grateful than rude." She looked around, curious, but she bit her lip and held back.

"I, young Hermione, am called Desmodon. One name of many names, but this is the one I find I am most fond of." He gestured around him. "This is my home. My domain. My—refuge. Here, time has no place. Here, we may speak unhurried by the passage of the mortal world."

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. Her hair practically stood on end with curiosity. "Are you a friend of Headmaster Dumbledore, sir?"

Desmodon chuckled. "Friend is the wrong word for two beings such as I and Albus Dumbledore. I owed him a few favours, once upon a time, for protecting some of those under my care when I was required to be elsewhere. We are...familiar, he and I, but we are hardly friends."

Hermione frowned, processing what he said. "I see. But, you know about me?"

Desmodon chuckled again. "I know of many people, my dear, but there is knowing about someone and truly knowing someone, yes?"

Hermione's brows knit together. "Yes." She reached out into the mist, marvelling at how it swirled around her fingers. "Am I dying?" she asked quietly, voice barely a whisper.

"Do you feel like you are dying?"

Hermione tilted her head. "I feel like I was." She stared at her hands and her skin. "I think I still am," she confessed.

"Are you frightened?"

Hermione nodded. She looked around her. "I wasn't expecting to die, at least not so soon, but—" She rubbed her arms. "I think a part of me knew when I threw myself in that it wasn't going to end well." She looked at the robed figure with some realisation—lucidity in the face of her own mortality. "You're Death, aren't you, sir?"

"I've come to prefer Desmodon, I think," he replied. "Results in far less tiresome screaming and gnashing of teeth. You are a very bright young lady. Very lucid in the face of death. Few, even the very old, possess such grace."

Hermione nodded timidly, obviously a bit nervous, but not so much that she'd forget to be properly respectful her elders—and what was more elder than Death himself? "Sir?"

"Desmodon."
"Desmodon," she said quietly, rolling the name around in her mouth. "May I ask you a question?"

"Two even," he replied, utterly deadpan.

Hermione frowned and then seemed to realise that Death had a sense of humour. She smiled a little. "Why am I here? Have I done something wrong? Will I be stuck in Purgatory?"

"Oh, my dear child, nothing like that," he reassured her. "You simply have— certain options that others in this situation would not. You see, Dumbledore has requested that his old ally save your life, even knowing that the kind of life I can bestow is not truly life but something rather unlike life. But I —"

Desmodon rubbed his chin with his long, talon-like fingers. "I have become rather fond of you, Hermione. You cling to life with a will much stronger than most, yet you respect the Cycle and that sometimes your time comes when you least expect it. I would offer you something I would not normally bestow upon most others. You are familiar with the stories. The reasons why my trust of humanity is a little… jaded."

"The Tale of Three Brothers," Hermione said, recalling the wizarding that story she had read in the Hogwarts library.

Death nodded. "I must bring Albus back something due to our bargain— three boons given, his last boon being to save your life— but I give you the option to fully embrace the gift I give you and become something far greater. An avenging angel, if you would forgive the rather romantic spin. My Fury, to be more precise, like the Erinyes. You are familiar?"

"The Greeks believed them to be deities of vengeance and retribution, sprung from the death of Uranus by his son's hand," Hermione said, recalling the tome of mythology she had often curled up with for light reading.

Death chuckled. "Indeed. I have one other, and as a pair, you would rain down the justice that I cannot— rules, always, rules. But, the rules I must play by are not your rules, for you would be answerable to me alone. You would, of course, play the part of one as weak and limited as Albus believes you to be, for he wishes you to save the life of Harry Potter, or least keep him alive long enough to serve his purpose."

Hermione blinked, her eyes growing wide. "What purpose?"

"He is meant to defeat the Dark Lord of his time. You see, there is always one. Some are quite weak and never rise to become a true threat to mortalkind. Some, however, become terrible and even more horrible to behold. But the one thing that remains the same, no matter the time, is that there is always death to be had, both innocents and the guilty, young and old. Job security, I believe, is what mortals call it."

"I would take you as my apprentice. I would make you Mine. We would be bound until there was no more need for Death. The transition would be a bit— overwhelming, but I would never betray you."

Hermione rubbed her shoulders.

Desmodon let out a soft sigh. "I will tell you a story that perhaps may influence your answer."

"Long ago, as the mortals have it, a boy was born of a foolish witch who made a potion to simulate love in a man who did not know love. This boy was a troubled soul, born without love and whose soul was already fragile. But, he was powerful, and his will was strong. He tortured those that bullied him. He set them on fire. He spoke with snakes—"
"And one day, Albus Dumbledore, still wounded by the death of his younger sister and his own betrayal of his old friend to a cause they once shared, took this boy from the orphanage and brought him to Hogwarts to train him and his magic."

"But training his magic could not fill the gaping hole within the boy. The boy was selfish, unfeeling, and very broken. His hate was far stronger than any other emotion, and he found a way to accomplish the one thing he wanted more than anything else: to never die. He researched the oldest, darkest magic, and he murdered to seal the Covenant of unnatural magic. He created a Horcrux with murder, not once, but seven times. With each one, he lost more and more of what made him human, but he became ultimately much harder to kill."

Desmodon rubbed his robes and looked into the mist. "But the one Horcrux he made was not intentional. It was created one night when he attacked the mother of a infant lying in his crib. Her magic protected her son with her death—the most powerful magic a mortal has: that of personal sacrifice. But the murder of not just the father but the mother shattered yet another part of his already fractured soul, and a piece of it branded itself into the boy, turning him into a human Horcrux. A living phylactery for a man who fears death above all things. Are you familiar? The phylactery?"

Hermione nodded slowly. "Old wizards or witches would attempt to place their soul inside a vessel of some sort and bury or hide it deep to preserve their life should their body die. That did not require murder, however."

"No, the Horcrux is a shortcut to that most ancient magic, and not in a good way. For while death claims all whose time is up, murder is against that natural order. One can kill in many different ways and not all are cruel or evil, but murder is a different sort of crime whose ultimate victim is the soul."

"Harry," Hermione said suddenly, her eyes widening in shock "His scar. He's the Horcrux."

"Brightest witch of her age, indeed," Death said, approvingly. "And the only way for the Dark Lord to die, truly, is to destroy all of his Horcruxes first. Every single one."

"He means for Harry to die," Hermione said, her face twisting in horror. "The prophecy— they're going to kill each other." She shook her head. "I really hate Divination," she whispered, cursing softly.

She stared into the mist, silent for many minutes. Then, her fist tightened. "I want to help you. I want to help Harry. He doesn't deserve—he can be an utter prat, but he doesn't deserve to be trussed up like some sacrificial animal and served up to Voldemort!"

"You must realise, if this is your choice, you would be with me for so much longer than this war. Win or lose, you would remain Mine. I give you this choice, free of lies or misleading half-truths. If you do not wish to accept my offer, I will escort you to the land beyond with no ill will, to the life that awaits all after death."

Hermione's fist clenched. "Am I allowed to punch Harry when I get back?"

Desmodon laughed, his shoulders shaking with mirth. "My dear child, I would even allow you to sink your fangs into him, if you so chose. Wouldn't that just rattle a few cages, hrn?"

"What would I become?" Hermione asked.

"Child, pull down my hood," he guided her gently.
Hermione slowly approached, squaring her shoulders to steady herself as she pulled the hood down from Death's head. As the dark fabric fell away, a whitened animal-like skull stared back at her with black holes for eyes. Thin, pale skin stretched over the skull, resembling a dessicated corpse. She stared for a moment, but then placed her hands on his face, closing her eyes. As she touched his skin, it seemed to come alive. There was warmth, softness. When she opened her eyes, he appeared different, and his face seemed to change yet again. His face, not wizened or wrinkled yet not youthful regarded her, some surprise in his expression at her willingness to touch him.

Long, pointed ears flicked, looking very much like the ears of Anubis. His face, however, at least at that moment, was human. If she looked too long, his face would shift—Camazotz, Aipaloovik, Hades, Mictlantecuhtli, Yan Luo, Batara Kala, Anubis, the Horned God—countless faces for countless ideas of who or what Death truly was. Yet, as she closed her eyes, she felt only one face: one that was seemingly ageless and unexpectedly kind. Her fingers traced his mouth as his lips turned upward in an amused smile.

"So brave, Hermione," he said warmly.

This time, when she opened her eyes, his face remained that of the kindly-looking man whose age seemed so ambiguous. His long silver hair framed his face, and she touched that too, perhaps verifying that he was real enough to touch. She looked into his eyes, searching for something.

"You will be many things, Hermione," Desmodon said quietly. "Feared, misunderstood, welcomed, hated, loved, underestimated, respected. But if you choose to follow the Path with me, you will never be alone again."

"I choose to bind myself to your service, Master Desmodon," Hermione said equally quietly. "This is my choice. Freely and of my own volition."

Her bravery wavered slightly. "Will it hurt?"

Desmodon, drew her into an embrace. "Not for long, my child, I promise. It is only the pain of growth, and I will be with you."

Hermione's lips twitched. "As long as it isn't like having your blood turn to acid," she said.

Death's smile was genuine as he tilted her head to the side and struck, his white fangs flashing for a moment before finding its mark as he drank away the remaining life's blood within her. Hermione seemed to fight it at first, even with her agreement, her body's instinctive fight for life did not seem inclined to agree with her decision. It fought fiercely in its attempt to remain alive, clawing like a wild thing as her arms beat against him, trying to push him away. He held her in a fond lover's embrace, his grip like iron as he completed his task, and then and only then, he drew one claw across his neck and drew her to the wound where his own dark blood welled up. He drew her head down upon his neck, placing her mouth to his offering and forcing it there, even as her body continued to struggle, pound, and claw at him.

Patient as the dead, he held her until the blood passed her lips and down her throat, and then a strange change went through the witch's body. Her body, her tissues starving for life, realised that blood was life and the path to salvation. She almost breathed it in, swallowing it in almost frantic gulps. Desmodon's body shuddered as they were swallowed up by the binding intimacy of the sharing as he gave his most potent gift freely, allowing her to take as much as she needed to calm the panic of her own body as it clung desperately to live on in whatever state it was allowed.

Falling fully into his dark embrace, Hermione's body was already changing from within. Her body twisting, relearning its boundaries or the lack thereof. Her magic flared brightly, joining completely
with her master's and then filtering back into her body, reinventing the pathways as her hands twisted into talons, fangs lengthened and then folded back—

Wings burst from Death's back, a mixture of soft feathers and leathery membrane, spreading wide to blot out the sky before wrapping around Hermione's rapidly changing body, and the very ground opened up underneath him, as he enfolded her and drew her into the very earth itself.

"Sleep, my beloved child," his voice purred. "Drink deep and rest well. Your journey will begin when you awaken."

Poppy Pomfrey felt she was losing her mind. Well, more than she usually did. The stress was definitely getting to her this time. After running to fetch Dumbledore to explain she'd lost — literally lost as in couldn't find— a patient and then dragged him down to see what she meant, she found Hermione Granger on the formerly unoccupied bed, lying under the fluffiest looking blanket she had ever remembered seeing. Her skin was very pale, which she would've found quite concerning had she not known that the poor girl's skin had been violently green earlier. Even more importantly, she was sleeping soundly without a sustaining stasis spell, and her blood was apparently no longer acidic.

"Yes, Poppy?" Albus said, frowning and staring at the bed like he thought that his chief medi-witch was completely off her rocker.

"She wasn't here when I went to fetch you, Albus!" Poppy fretted. "I swear to you that she wasn't!"

"Perhaps she went to the loo, my dear?"

"She was in stasis!"

"Well, she's obviously not in stasis right now, so whatever you gave her must have finally worked," Albus said, giving her the eye.

"But—" Poppy wrung her hands, obviously quite disconcerted by the situation. "We didn't do anything else! There was nothing more that we could do!"

Albus hushed her as Hermione shifted slightly in the bed, mumbling something indistinct into her pillow.

Poppy gasped as she saw Hermione's hand reach out and squish her pillow a little to adjust it in her sleep. Pearlescent claws scratched the fabric as her ear flicked— distinctly pointed ears. "Oh, Albus! The curse must have evolved somehow!"

Just as Poppy started to panic and run a hundred and one scans with her wand, Crookshanks appeared, jumped up onto the bed and wriggled under Hermione's arm, purring loudly. Hermione's arm moved to open the blanket, and the half-Kneazle padded under and snuggled into her.

"Poppy," Dumbledore said, staying her wand. "I think Miss Granger will be just fine. I'll have Severus make her a few of his specialty potions to hasten her recovery, however."

"But, Albus! Those claws! And the ears! That's hardly—"

Albus shushed her as Hermione began to stir. "Come, Poppy. Give Miss Granger some time to rest.

As they pair left, and the lights dimmed, Hermione's eyes opened, her glowing golden eyes shimmering in the dark before her lids closed and she hugged Crookshanks closer.
Crookshanks purred, his own eyes glowing under the covers with an eerie golden radiance.

Hermione awoke to find a large, spherical, black and white arachnid perched on her pillow.

"Oh hai!" it squeaked. "Would you like some tea?"

Hermione blinked.

"Octavius, you're absolutely insufferable," a familiar, sardonic voice said as a pale hand scooped up the fluffy arachnid and moved him over.

"Awww," the spider complained. It gave itself a running start and spronged back onto Hermione's bed and sat on her pillow. "I'm Octavius! I'm a shadow spider! We normally live in the in-between world, but we are allowed to travel with Morangelus like you."

Hogwarts' Potion Master was looking down at her with one eyebrow arched at her. "I'm Hermione," she said quietly, eyeing the spider somewhat suspiciously. "This is Crookshanks."

"Eeee!" the spider exclaimed, running in circles.

"Mor— what?" Hermione asked, baffled.

"Morangelus," Snape said softly, his deep voice lacking the typical bite and seething regard it normally held. "Angels of Death."

"Oh…" Hermione tried to sit up, but her head spun crazily, and she would have fallen backwards had it not been for Snape's arm swiftly catching her. A jolt of familiar energy coursed through her body, and her brain kicked in. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "You're one of Master Desmodon's too."

Snape's lips twitched. "Obviously." She realised he was amused, and he was actually showing it. It was slightly discombobulating, shattering all of her previous impressions of the normally stern and prickly wizard.

"I am sorry," he said, causing her head to jerk up with surprise.

"Whatever for?" Hermione asked, frowning in confusion.

"Your death," he said grimly. "It could not have been easy—the torture you went through. Draco Malfoy has neither eaten nor slept since the day you saved his life. That curse—you should know that it was originally intended for me. A belated gift from Black and Potter, I would imagine. I almost wish that he had used it on me, at least then you would not have had—"

Hermione just shook her head. "Master Desmodon took away the pain and told me I had a choice. It's not your fault, Professor. I didn't think Harry would actually use that horrid thing on anyone. I saw the book it was originally contained in, back at Grimmauld Place, and I thought it was an old Dark relic from the Black Family. When I realised what Harry was casting, I jumped in front of Draco. I thought—"

Hermione sighed. "I thought he'd stop if he saw me there, but it was already too late."

"I'm fairly certain, if wizarding society knew about it, it would be listed as another Unforgivable,"
Snape said rather grimly. "A great deal of hatred has to fuel the casting in order for the curse to work, and it worked all too well. Currently, Mr Potter and Mr Weasley are serving detention with Professor McGonagall. For life, if I have anything to say about it, but alas, the Headmaster is not prone to agreeing with me on such things."

"Will you take points from Gryffindor if I deck him one, Professor?" Hermione asked quietly.

Snape's lip curled. "I might even award you points. As I understand it, our mutual master even gave you permission to take a chunk out of him with your fangs."

"I'd start with a solid right hook," Hermione said, petting a madly purring Crookshanks.

Hermione's stomach growled abruptly, and her eyes grew wide with embarrassment.

Snape chuckled. "The hunger is quite strong at first. Much like an infant that must be fed often before they realise they are not going to die if they aren't surgically attached to a nipple. It's not like we can actually die, but our bodies remember what it is to live. Strange, yes?"

Hermione flushed at that, her unnervingly pale skin turning a little pink.

Severus sat down beside her and his fangs flashed briefly before he sank them into his wrist. Blood welled up from the self-inflicted wound. "Drink. Eventually you'll be able to tolerate normal food again. Start with tea, juice, broth and other liquids and work your way up. But for now, you need a very specific form of nourishment, and there is only one way to get that, I fear."

Hermione looked at him with a little panic in her golden eyes, still seeing him more as her Professor than a comrade. She eyed the blood hungrily, and her stomach felt like it wanted to leap out of her body and take it by itself. She winced in pain as she tried to control it, but the hunger was very strong.

"You have my permission, Miss Granger. Please, do not hurt yourself trying to deny what you are and what you need. I have already fed and taken a blood replenishing potion. You will not kill me again, I promise you."

Tentatively, she raised his wrist to her mouth and covered the wound. The crimson liquid seemed to convert into liquid ambrosia on her tongue, and her entire body sang with sweet relief as she drank. She barely realised it, but her slender hands clung to him as she fed, and his arm went securely around her, pulling her against him. So intent on her latch, she didn't notice how his body shuddered and his eyes rolled back as she drank her fill, nor did she notice how his hand gently stroked her hair. His lips parted and his fangs were bared in a grimace of elation.

When Hermione's feeding finally slowed, she gently bathed his wrist with her tongue as his wound closed. Her breaths came less frantic, less desperate, as if her body's memory of breathing was connected directly to the need to feed.

"I'm sorry," she apologised almost shyly. She let go of his wrist, looking at him with a little timidity, like he would yell at her for taking liberties with his person more than just feeding off of him.

"Miss Granger," he said, causing her head to jerk up. He shook his head. "You never need to apologise for what you are. What we are. I have had many years to accustom myself to our rather unique lifestyle, and you must not think yourself a burden for needing time to get used to it. Our master is not unrealistic, nor does he demand any more from us than we can give. Of all the masters we could have, he will always be behind us. He will always be looking out for us, and that, my dear Miss Granger, is the difference between a true master and a mere pretender."
Hermione nodded. She realised as she sat there that they were sitting in the sunlight that streamed through the window. She looked at her hands filtering the sunlight as she spread them and looked at him with the obvious question written all over her face.

"We are not vampires, Miss Granger," Snape said with a tug of the lips. "Not in the traditional sense. Our bodies crave life most of all shortly after our death, and what carries life to most things but blood. Even our bodies, who are not strictly living in the sense we once knew, have blood in which to share, but it far more potent, as you have know, carrying our magic as well as what some may call a taint, for even one drop of it can make a thrall."

Hermione's eyes grew wide.

"You needn't worry, unless you plan on bleeding around and letting some idiot lick it up," Snape said, eyebrow arching into his hair.

Hermione looked horrified until she watched his face and realised he was joking with her. Snape, joking?! she thought to herself. He has a sense of humour? Her eyes widened as the revelation that Snape's cruelty and lack of emotion was a very carefully crafted mask rather than a true reflection of his hate for all things.

Seemingly reading her thoughts, he said, "I was not always a reasonable sort, Miss Granger. There was a time when I was as hateful as the mask I wear. Misguided. On a path of destruction I mistakenly thought would bring me power while the inside of me craved my own death for the deeds I had done. Then, one day, I died, or rather I should have, in the normal way."

"Unlike you, at the time of my 'death' most of me wished only to die and let it all be over. I believed I deserved it. It took me many years to finally accept our master's gift as fully as you did. You strove to live. You clawed toward life, even as that curse dragged you down, defiant to the end." Snape sighed and gave her a small smile. "I would have expected no less of you, having kept those two cretins in line for as long as you have."

Hermione jerked, immediately feeling like she had to leap to their defence, and then her brows furrowed as she remembered how she had ended up in her situation to begin with, and her lips pursed as her expression hardened.

Snape's shoulder's quaked.

Laughter. He was laughing! She thought with wonder. How ageless it made him look. How fascinating.

When she stared at his face, she started to see it—the mask. It wasn't as layered as their master's, but it was strong. The great dungeon bat git of the dungeons. Potions bastard extraordinaire. She reached to touch his face, hesitating. He nodded at her, giving her silent permission. She closed her eyes and touched his face, tracing his jaw, feeling his skin, feeling the warmth and the flow of familiar magic that sustained them both—the real face below the mask. She dropped her hands, but she looked at him, cocking her head to the side, still fascinated.

"I will have to teach you how to create and alter your mask," he said, his face. "Eventually you will have many, but for now, simply looking more like people expect you will be a start. People will tend to see you strangely until you wear the mask, just as people see our master as they envision death to be. The mask allows them to see what you wish them to see, but this lesson will wait until you have rested and the hunger does not gnaw on your ability to concentrate."

Hermione nodded.
Octavius popped in in a cloud of dark mist, brandishing a teacup and saucer. "Tea for you!"

Snape put a finger to a fang and allowed a drop or two of his blood to mix into the tea. "It will help you adjust to it," he said. "Tea is a dead thing. There is no life to it when made with dried leaves and herbs. Most foods are, you will come to find. Ironic yes? We crave life, while the living eat the dead."

Hermione sipped the tea and her eyes widened. She nodded. "What if we make tea from freshly picked leaves and fruits?"

Snape's lips curved upward as he tapped his nose. "Very good, Miss Granger." His voice changed purposely. "Insufferable Know-it-all."

Hermione's flinch was automatic, but then her smile spread across her face, finally realising that he didn't mean it as horribly as she'd always made out.

"Infusions of freshly picked things retain life. They will always satisfy more than the standard fare you normally see at the English table. As you are adjusting, try to stick with liquids and fresh things." Severus pulled out a flask from his robes and bit his wrist, allowing the crimson blood to collect in it. He stoppered it as he placed his mouth to the wound to close it. "Take this and add a few drops to whatever you drink for now, but if you feel true hunger, you are to come to me at whatever time and we will take care of it. Am I clear?"

Hermione nodded.

Crookshanks mrowled and rubbed up against Snape's robes, getting them coated with ginger fur.

Snape eyed the half-Kneazle with pursed lips.

Hermione snatched her familiar up and cuddled him. "Sorry."

"Felines have little respect for the living," Snape said. "Equally so the dead."

Hermione smiled, giggling. She let out a yawn, covering her mouth in instant response to her rudeness.

"Miss Granger," he said. "Rest. There will be time again soon enough. Though, I am sure I do not have to explain to you that when we are not alone, I will unfortunately treat you as I always have, and it would be best if make a show of how hurt you are to my insults."

Hermione bit her lip but nodded.

"That being said, if ever you are in need, you are to find me. Despite what I may say to you then, you are always welcome. Is this clear?"

"Crystal, professor."

His face softened. "Rest," he repeated, pulling the blanket back over her as he held the blanket up for Crooks to slowly, painfully walk every so slowly under the sheet to curl up with his mistress.

"Sorry," Hermione apologised as she hugged the feline.


"What about arachnids?" Octavius asked, bouncing up and down on all eight legs.
Severus sneered, pulling the spider to him so he could hide in his hair. "You're even more insufferable."

"Awww, you're a git," Octavius muttered, hiding in Snape's hair.

Hermione tried not to laugh, but she snickered into her pillow.

Snape gave her a look, his mask of Bastard Potions Master Extraordinaire fully in place. He arched a brow at her, and she instinctively shrunk back, far too conditioned from six years of seeing him in a very different light. Yet, as a tiny crack of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, she smiled again, radiant and genuine.

"Rest well, Miss Granger. I look forward to serving you your detention every night until you graduate."

Hermione bawked, letting out an instinctive cry of protest. Yet, when she looked up at him in a panic, she saw the hint of a smile, and hers came out to greet his once more. She nodded at him in understanding.

"She needs a spider friend," Octavius squeaked. "Everyone needs one."

"You can hush that mouth," Severus admonished. "No one asked for you opinion."

"But my opinion is free!" Octavius protested.

"All the more reason to shut it," Snape hissed.

Snape bowed his head curtly, swirling as he spun to leave, his robes practically taking out the privacy barrier between her bed and the next. She heard him slam something down on the counter. "Here are Miss Granger's potions for all the good it will do her," he growled caustically, sounding very much like he wanted to murder someone. His footsteps, so much louder, stormed from the infirmary.

"Severus Snape, you awful git! This is an infirmary!"

"Oooo! That man!" Poppy's voice scoffed as she walked over to Hermione's bed. "Are you up, my dear? Up to taking a few sips of some potions?"

Hermione hid under her sheet but nodded. "He means to kill me with them," she said.

Poppy sighed. "You may think so, and they may taste awful, but you will feel better after. He's a rampaging badger with a toothache, that one, but he's the best you'll find for potions anywhere this side of the pond."

Hermione nodded and obediently took a few spoonfuls of the nasty tasting potions. She wrinkled her nose and made bleching noises.

Poppy tucked her back in. "Get some rest now, my dear. You gave us quite a scare. I'm glad you are back with us."

"Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said disappearing back under the blanket.

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**Boy-Who-Lived Tires of Harlot Hermione Granger Toying With Feelings and Curses Her**

The Boy Who Lived, orphan, abused, and mentally tortured youth of Hogwarts finally had enough
Rita Skeeter, bring you the truth!

Harry Potter apparently had enough of Hermione Granger and her sleeping around with other wizards, and unleashed a rather nasty curse upon Granger in a desperate bid to get the horrid pest of a chit to leave him alone! Rumour has it that the curse may have her hair on fire, as Granger was heard screaming her fool head off all the way to the infirmary.

Good to see Mr Potter finally taking a stand against the little hussy. Maybe she'll learn to keep herself away from everyone. Hopefully this shows Mr Weasley that he needs to set his romantic aims higher instead of settling for such a shameless, fame-seeking tart of a Muggleborn.

Hermione awoke in the dark, in the wee small hours of the morning, feeling just a little bit stronger. Crookshanks purred and exited the cocoon of her arm and blankets and headbonked her on the chin before leaping onto the window and devouring the food that was left there by a well-meaning house elf with grateful meows in-between bites.

Hermione chuckled, sitting up slowly, having learned her lesson from when she'd almost fallen over doing it the first time. Her head felt a little fuzzy, and the tray table had some warm broth and hot tea set out for her beneath a stasis charm.

Silently thanking Poppy for her kind consideration, she pulled out the small flask her Potions professor had given her and added the prescribed drops of his blood into each both. Drinking the tea, her eyes fluttered with blessed relief. She found she was quite hungry, but the mixture seemed to hit the spot, filling her stomach with the right combination of life and liquid. She silently thanked Snape for having been there for her when she woke the first time, as she wasn't sure what she would have done had the hunger come upon her first thing and he not have been there.

Ironies were starting to poke around in her brain. Many students made fun of the dungeon's resident "vampire bat" whenever they thought he wasn't listening, but oh, if they only knew. They'd probably soil themselves and then faint. She wondered what vampires were, however, if they weren't. There were some glaring similarities, after all. Then again— what Professor Snape had told her was that their bodies craved life, especially shortly after the change—a remnant of their drive to survive when they were still alive. Vampires, as far as the books told her, were not so much craving of life per se, just thirsty for human blood.

She could feel the distinct thrum of her link to her master and even her connection to Professor Snape through him—a sort of reassuring second heartbeat that pulsed both magic and presence shared between them. Her master's solid presence was comforting and warm, and she knew if she were in trouble he'd be there in an instant. There was something wonderfully comforting in that revelation.

Also, ironic. Being comforted by Death. Loved by Death. There was no doubt that he truly cared for her. The bond was not created in a vacuum. She had given him her trust, and he had cradled her into his bloodline. The old Hermione, perhaps, would have been coming unglued with so many earth-shattering revelations, but she could she couldn't be upset in regards to her new master or her new lot in life. He'd given her a choice, after all. He'd given her time to decide. There had been no duress, no lies, no sugarcoating or bending of the truth. Most of all, there had been no hard feelings no matter what she chose to do.

Death, she supposed, did give one perspective. Centering. A strange sort of peace that she had never known before. Time.

Especially time, at least for herself. Harry, on the other hand—
Hermione's fists clenched with instinctive anger. She wanted to give him a piece of her mind, starting with her fist impacting his face. Her dainty fangs unfolded like a viper's in response to the strength of the emotion, and she licked them experimentally, feeling them out. At least they weren't like her master's. That would be— socially awkward. More socially awkward, that is.

Her father had once said that death was thing that was elusive when sought but as tenacious as a bloodhound— chasing its prey with a mouth full of many-layered teeth. Hermione wondered if her father had more of a connection with Death than he ever let on. Desmodon did have many, many fangs. Then again, her father had always been a fan of horror movies and stories, so maybe he was just trying to scare her.

Hermione wondered what she was going to do about her parents. They were highly observant people, and they would, eventually, notice that their daughter had gone through some significant— changes. To put it mildly. Even if she was glamoured— her mother would know something was up by her drastically changed eating habits alone. Mums were annoyingly observant like that. No visits to home until she could at least eat her mother's chowder without making faces.

Still, her parents were in grave danger— the threat posed by the Dark Lord and his minions still loomed over all of Great Britain, and they were, unfortunately, the weakest link in a magical world. Muggles always were, through no fault of their own. Death Eaters were hardly going to announce their arrival in advance and allow the police to show up. Even then, police usually didn't show up with firearms at the ready unless they already believed they were going to face someone with firearms, and who in their right Muggle mind would see a person toting a ruddy stick in their hand as dangerous?

Mind you, most magicals wouldn't see a person with a rifle as being dangerous either, if the situation was reversed. That wasn't even getting into handguns and other such things that the Americans were so terribly fond of.

Hermione sighed.

She might have all the time in the world, but there were still others around her who didn't.

A rustling caught her attention, causing her ears to flick to pinpoint where it was coming from. Madam Pomfrey had put her in the furthest bed from the door and away from the other beds to give her more privacy. Most of the patients didn't even know she was there, which was just fine by her.

Her nostrils flared. She smelled fear. It was a odd sensation, smelling fear. She'd always heard people on the telly, villains that is, scream something stupid like "I can smell your fear!" but she had never put much stock in it. It was just a saying— or so she thought. But no, she could definitely smell the fear: a mixture of sweat, a sort of acidic tang, and a strange kind of bitterness that stuck to the back of her mouth.

Well, that was odd. What a strange place to smell something.

Suddenly, a pale, wisp of a young wizard was stood in front of her, his hands clasped in front of him as his blond hair hung down over his eyes in a sort of ill-kempt haven't-slept-in-days look. Distinctive grey eyes locked with hers as his teeth bit his lower lip. "Hey," he said awkwardly.

Hermione realised in that moment that Draco was more than just a little scared. Of her, she wondered? No, she thought, it wasn't just her he feared.

Malfoy, she thought. No— Draco. To keep calling him Malfoy, even in her head, was to be as guilty as Harry and Ron grouping the individual with the family. She'd obviously thought enough to save
him once, punched him once, and that sort of left her with the ability to make better choices.

"Hello, Draco," she replied. She pulled the sheet over herself, despite the gown. Her modesty hadn't left with her life, at the very least. "Tea?" she asked, pointing to the tea service, which she thankfully hadn't doctored the pot.

Tea, the official English lubricant for all social situations, worked its own magic.

"Sure," Draco said, sitting in the nearby seat. "Thanks."

Hermione poured the tea and shared it, praying silently that she could down the tea without doing something horrible—like gag in front of company.

Draco stared into his cup after drinking. "Thank you," he said quietly. "You saved my life."

Hermione sipped her tea carefully. "No one deserved that," she said after a while. "Were you injured at all?"

Draco shook his head. "No, you took the brunt of it," he said, his grey eyes haunted.

"Madam Pomfrey said you were the one that summoned help for me," she said. "Thank you."

"I don't deserve your thanks!" Draco said, his voice cracking. He dug his fingers into his palms. "I've been a right git to you since day one."

"Well, the later is right, at least," Hermione said, giving a small smile. "But you did do something you didn't have to do, so you are deserving of thanks."

Draco stared at her. "How can you do that?"

Hermione cocked her head. "Do what?"

"Forgive… or at least not punch me in the face like I deserve," Draco asked, obviously baffled.

"You weren't the one that turned my blood into something from Aliens," Hermione said.

Draco looked at her strangely.

"Acid for blood," Hermione said. "Muggle movie. Space creatures with acid for blood. They have like a double mouth. Lots of teeth, more teeth inside… tendency to take out your brain…"

Draco blinked. "That's more than a little terrifying," he admitted.

"My dad is a horror fan. Movies, books… mum used to scold him something awful for telling me horror stories at bedtime," Hermione admitted. "I thought they were wonderful. Looking back on that, maybe it was a little odd."

"You think?" Draco said, downing his tea in a long gulp.

They both laughed together, and it seemed to break down the nigh-impenetrable wall that had been forming between them from their first year on.

Draco frowned, then sighed. "I've been a sorry-arsed git. For the longest time, blood purity rhetoric was all I knew. I mean, it was the only thing that was always true. Kind of like gravity, yeah? It's what my parents always thought and it's what they taught me from as far back as I can remember. It's what I always thought—until he came. The Dark Lord. He talks of of nothing but power and purity,
Draco looked even more haunted. He clutched his arm, wincing. "It's really all about sadism, torture, murder and control. Threatening your family and loved ones to get you to commit horrible acts of depravity, hideous things that you can't ever go back from."

Hermione eyed Draco's left arm.

"He's forcing you to kill Dumbledore, isn't he?" Hermione deduced. "He's threatening your family."

Draco's eyes went wide, terrified. "He'll kill them. He'll torture them first, but then he'll kill them and make me watch it all. And I can't not go when he calls because he—he—he branded me with his disgusting Mark to ensure I couldn't fuck it up!"

Hermione looked at the Mark, her eyes narrowing as she saw it differently. No more the unnatural moving ink, she saw the tendrils of magic trying to infest itself into Draco's nervous system and into his magic. Tendrils, like overgrown fungal roots, spread through his arm, growing like a parasitic Kudzu inside Draco's body. She saw how it sucked in his life's energy to feed itself. It was a parasite. A vampire.

It was unnatural. There was some magic that tied the Mark back to its creator, feeding Draco's lifeforce to him—the Dark Lord himself. It was no wonder he didn't care of his people died. All of their life would go to him so he could live instead. Apparently Horcruxes weren't enough.

A warm trickle of her master's touch caressed her mind, and some of his knowledge flowed into her. She saw how the tendrils were connected, and thus she realised how they could be undone. All it required was a little death.

Hermione pressed her lips together and thought for a moment. "Draco, how much do you know about what happened to me?"

Draco flinched. "Dumbledore bargained for your life with something ancient. Very old magic. Older than old. It saved your life, or maybe—" he trailed off for a moment. "It preserved what you were. Made you like my uncle."

"He tell you this?"

Draco shook his head. "I was frantic. I thought you were going to die. I was going absolutely out of my mind. I—I—"

"You tried to kill yourself, didn't you?"

Draco looked at Hermione and nodded glumly. "He pulled me out of the lake, forced me to drink his blood, and then he cursed me out in about three hundred languages I didn't even know he knew, saying he didn't diaper my bottom and save me from walking off tables just so I could go and off myself now in a fit of unreasonable guilt."

Hermione's eyes went very wide and then she started to laugh. Strangely, Draco did too.

"That did sound pretty ludicrous didn't it—"

Hermione smiled. "I'm sorry."

"I never did take major revelations well," Draco confessed. "I know what you are. Or rather. I know what you aren't. You're something different, outside, neither here nor there. But you're still Granger, the brain trust of Gryffindor."
Hermione snorted, shaking her head.

"I understand now what Severus has tried to tell me for the last few years. Now, I was just as bad to him as I was to you, a bloody royal pain in the arse."

Hermione reached out and touched the Mark. Draco's eyes widened in horror, thinking, perhaps, even touching it would corrupt the very skin of her hand. "I might be able to— help you with your problem. One of them anyway."

She eyed him, her expression sad. "But it is not without its own risks."

Draco's head jerked up. "What risk? Tell me and I will let yo know if it's worth it."

Hermione eyed the Mark, feeling her master's warth and knowledge flow between them. "I could rid you of the Mark. Kill it even, but— it could travel down your bloodline."

"You mean my father might—?"

Hermione nodded.

"Gods, that's a relief if it did," Draco said. "You may not believe this, but— my father is not ardent supporter of the Dark Lord anymore. He lost it somewhere between torture and the branding of his son and the threatening to rape his wife with one of his other Death Eaters."

Hermione's horrific expression froze on her face.

"He's a piece of work," Draco said. He shook his head. "Do it. Doesn't matter what may happen. It's worth it. Father would agree if he were here. You may not believe that, but he would. Anything is worth not feeling this vile thing crawling under my skin."

Hermione, hearing the voice of her master within her mind, said again, "You must agree of your own free will, Draco."

"Do it," he repeated firmly. Draco seemed to realise that three was the sacred number. "Do it, you have my permission."

Hermione gently took his arm in her hands. Her fangs folded down from the roof of her mouth. "You may not wish to watch."

Draco squared his jaw. "I didn't have the balls to watch it go on. But damn it, I'm watching it leave."

Hermione smiled slightly and with a flash, sank her fangs into his arm with a lightning strike. Her energy connected to her master's and through him to Snape, the knowledge of what she was doing being passed between them like signals down a nerve pathway. She withdrew with a hiss, her fangs folding back, and his blood trickled down his arm.

She eyed it, uninterested, for it tasted like ash and it smelled beyond awful, like a gangrenous limb. Her nose wrinkled, and her fangs sank into her hand, and she let her own blood drip down over Draco's arm.

*Split.*

*Split.*

*Splat.*
The droplets covered his arm and seemed to gravitate towards the small puncture marks made by her fangs. It seemed to gather in a wave and dive into the holes, and Draco hissed, startled, as a gush of steam rose from his arm. His flesh grew pink then red then black as the "ink" writhed and thrashed underneath his pale skin. Hermione's blood, however, surrounded that pulsing blackness, coating every tendril of every tainted nerve from the Mark. It pulsed, and it shoved the Mark out of Draco's body in a flood of foul smelling rot that oozed out of his puncture sites and pooled on the floor, sizzling as it tried to eat away at the very stone.

Hermione abruptly realised in that moment that had Draco not attempted to kill himself, Snape would never have given him his blood, and Draco's veins would have not been pure— it would most likely taken root all the faster and tortured him all the more strongly. She could only imagine what his father had gone through— or any other who bore the Mark.

It was truly a cruel piece of twisted genius.

Draco was trying really, really hard not to scream and alert everyone in the entire infirmary, and Hermione couldn't help but see his innate bravery, something he kept hidden under the more easily seen cowardice he more frequently showed. Compassion growing for the blond wizard, she held his gaze and swept his mind, using her master's touch to dull the pain, as her beloved master had once done for her.

Draco let out a gasp of wonder, tears of gratefulness and relief streaming from his eyes.

*Split.*

*Splat.*

*Schluck.*

The foul darkness flowed from his arm and slowly trickled to a halt. It seemed to realise that it was exposed where it was, and part of it rose back up as if to go back into Draco's arm or any orifice that was available.

Hermione bit into her hand again, squeezing the blood down to touch the puddle of corruption.

And it *screamed.*

And screamed.

And screamed.

Hermione let go of Draco's arm, as the heaviness in the air became lighter. Draco touched his arm where even the punctures had healed. His arm was pale but perfectly clean.

Uncorrupted.

Un-Marked.

A dark, brooding spectre loomed over them. "You're *such* a drama queen, Draco," Severus said, his lips curled into a sneer. "Had I known you wanted to take everyone with you, I'd have recommended a sodding bonfire."

Hermione's and Draco's eyes went wide, and suddenly they were all laughing uproariously. Genuine, relieved laughter.
"Next time give me a little more warning, Miss Granger. I think I spent all of my magic throwing a silencing charm down on this half of the castle." Snape rubbed his nose, sniffing.

Draco just laughed and laughed, slumping back in the chair with his mouth open and a grateful prayer spilling from his lips. Hermione smiled and hugged Crookshanks, who had just appeared on the scene like the snuggle instigator he was and proceeded to demand cuddles on his terms.

"I want cuddles too," Octavius pouted, coming out from under Snape's long hair.

"Begone, fluffy menace."

"Aww, you're still such a git," the arachnid huffed, going back into hiding. "No wonder no one wants to hug you."

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**St Mungo's Flooded With Patients Displaying Mysterious Cruciatius-like Symptoms**

*St Mungo's experienced a record number of emergency admissions yesterday evening when over a hundred people came in, were brought in, or were flooed in from all over Great Britain. Every patient was writhing uncontrollably in agonising pain, and none of them could stop screaming long enough to explain why.*

Healers worked double shifts attempting in vain to stabilise their patients while even more worked to make room for many more patients than they were set up to take in at all once.

Healers worry that this may be the beginning of some sort of magical plague, as every single patient seemed to experience severe nausea and vomiting of what could only be described as "a foul-smelling acidic black sludge."

Now, a day later, the surviving patients are being treated for internal injuries resembling acid burns, constrictures from the continuous muscle spasms, and various other ailments they are only beginning to delve into. Recovery seems grim, but healers aren't giving up.

As for what caused this strange plague, which thankfully doesn't seem to be contagious short of those who originally came in, it remains a baffling and frightening medical mystery.

The public is encouraged to check on family members and loved ones who may have been exposed to this mysterious pathogen. The only trait in common, however, seems to be that they were all from pureblood families. Whether this was a coincidence or no remains to be seen.

"Harry James Potter!"

**SHHHHMAC**

Harry Potter went tumbling backwards into Ron, and the pair ended up in the mud.

"How DARE you point your wand at me!"

Harry tried to get up. "But, Hermione! I wasn't aiming at you!"

"You pulled your wand out at another student with the intent to kill!"

"It was only bloody Malfoy!" Ron protested, clearly not seeing the problem.
THUMP!

Hermione's fist socked Ron squarely in the face, and he fell onto Harry this time, both ending up in the mud again, blood running down their noses.

"Only Malfoy? Do you think I didn't notice my blood turning into ACID?" Hermione's face was flushed red despite her pale complexion. "Do you think I'd be all chummy with you after you tried to KILL me? Oh, let's not even go there about it wasn't actually meant for me. What if it DID hit Draco? What if it had killed HIM? Is that okay? Is that a PRANK, Harry Potter?!"

"Good start that, bloody Malfoy," Ron muttered trying to staunch his face.

Hermione pulled Ron up by his collar and slammed him into a nearby pillar. "Now you listen to me Ronald Weasley, and you listen well. The difference between a good person and a Dark wizard isn't about their blood. It isn't about family. It isn't about what bloody House they were Sorted into. It's about the choices they make in life and if they hurt someone accidentally or they do it on purpose, and you had better think long and hard on what you think your motives were when you turned my blood to acid."

"But I didn't—"

Hermione glared at Ron, her golden eyes flashing. Ron's eyes widened as he immediately pissed himself, a warm dampness running down his leg. "You lured him there. You may not have cast that spell, Ronald Weasley, but you would have, but you just stood there and watched Harry let his emotions run wild again, feeding the fire. What harm could it do, eh? Just a Slytherin." She slammed Ron into the post as her claws ripped into the fabric of his collar with a tearing sound. "I'm walking, talking proof of your 'harmless' prank, and I don't want to see either of you again until you two get your shite straight and pull your heads out of your respective arses!"

Hermione flung him away into the mud beside a still shell-shocked Harry as she spun to storm away, stomping her way out of the courtyard. People parted in front of her like the Red Sea, terrified that she might do the same to them as they had witnessed on Harry and Ron— her supposed best mates. As she stomped of, she almost slammed into the towering form of Severus Snape; his lip curled in disgust.

"You will serve detention with me this week, Miss Granger, for that vile physical altercation," he said venomously, his black eyes boring into her.

"Yes, Sir," she replied, lips pressed tightly together in her anger.

He glowered at the gathered crowd, and the lot of them quickly made tracks, preferring to make themselves scarce rather than face Snape's wrath or the Gryffindor witch's ire. Both options seemed frankly suicidal.

When everyone had left, Snape narrowed his eyes, giving a second look. Then, quietly, he sniffed. "Ten points to Gryffindor, Miss Granger. For your cheek."

Hermione looked up at him, her eyes shining with the satisfaction her face could not reveal. Her anger was gone.

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End of Chapter One
Chapter Two

A/N: Someone kindly extend my spring break by about a month, please.

A/N: A very kind reader reported to me that one of my stories had been re-published under a different title and different author on A03. How disgusting. I will always publish under CorvusDraconis, and my completed stories are always on fanfiction dot net. (I slack on A03, sorry). Also, my stories will always credit my betas (unless they were the ones where I was my own beta, for which I apologise for that mess… anyway). If you should happen to see any of my stories suspiciously published under any other username, please let me know, and I thank you, kindly, for those of you looking out for me.

A/N 3: Thank you to Sweet Trufflepuff, who noticed a character displacement, which has been fixed to connect to chapter 3.

Beta Love: The Sufferer-of-Chronic-Snowstorms-Dragon and the Rose, the Chronically Overworked Dutchgirl01, and the Keeper-of-the-Pulled-Pork-Sammiches Commander Shepard

Octavius: No money being made disclaimer here!

The Lord of Death and Albus Dumbledore

Chapter Two

I love those who can smile in trouble, who can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink, but they whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves their conduct, will pursue their principles unto death.

Leonardo da Vinci

There was a velvety-furred pewter-coloured arachnid on her pillow, snuggling into her face.

Hermione yawned, her breath rustling the spider's almost metallic-reflective fur.

"Good morning!" the arachnid said. "I'm Shade! You don't seem to have a spider. Do you want a spider? I'll be your spider!"

Crookshanks sniffed the pillow-bouncing arachnid and bopped him a few times over the head. Shade squeaked a few times.

Hermione sat up and realised the dorm room was completely empty—as in empty empty. Nothing but her stuff remained.

The pewter shadow spider hunkered down on the pillow. "I didn't do it, I swear!"

Three other bundles of fluff and legs trembled underneath her pillow. "We didn't do it either!"

Hermione lifted the pillow to see three other shadow spiders that had hidden themselves under her pillow. One looked rather, for lack of a better descriptor, demonic—like the shadows from the
Muggle sci-fi show, Babylon 5. He tapped his legs in that unnerving arachnid twitch that screamed "spider" to any witch that had ever had one skitter across the floor of the shower.

Another was dark grey with tiny ginger freckles that seemed to flicker like flames on her fuzzy abdomen.

The last one was a light grey almost like moonlight and seemed to be acting like the pillow was still there and was extremely surprised to see Hermione looking down at her.

"I saw her first!" Shade protested.

"But we like her too!" the demonic one said. "I'm Kobal! The fire-starter is Cinder. The strange one is Haze."

"Hey!" Haze said. "Your bollywogs are apertight."

The other spiders all stared at Haze.

"Point made," Kobal affirmed.

Cinder bounced on all eight legs. "You want us, don't you? All of us?"

"Well, maybe not Haze," Kobal said, eyeing the light grey, addled-looking spider.

The spiders looked at Hermione expectantly.

"Yes?" Hermione said awkwardly.

"Yay!"

"Double yay!"

"Take that, Octavius!"

They bounced onto her arm and disappeared into her hair, hiding by her collar. Hermione felt an odd tingle as a few more mental presences took up housekeeping in her brain.

Damn, but it was getting pretty crowded up there.

Mrowl!

Crookshanks yawned and stretched, taking the light grey spider that had been too addled to migrate with the others into his mouth. She wriggled, spouting random poetry. Crooks gnawed on her, none too seriously, causing her to squeak in-between lines.

Hermione wondered if her familiar could have a familiar. Then again, she had more than one familiar, apparently. Crooks seemed content enough with the idea, if his pleasant chewing on her was any indicator. She didn't seem to mind, as she was continually spouting odd poetry about love and grapes.

Grapes?

What a strange arachnid.

"I hope you're a responsible spider dad, Crooks," Hermione said.
"Mrowl, he replied, his fluffy tail swishing from side to side."

She looked around. "Why is the dorm empty?"

"No! I'm not going back in there!" she heard a voice a few rooms over. Hermione's ears flicked. "Did you see her? What if that curse is contagious! What if she touches one of us and we start turning green and mutating? NO!"

"She looks like a monster!" Lavender's voice wailed hysterically.

"Shh! It's not her fault. It was Potter!"

"Well what if he decides to curse one of us then?! Just for being around HER! I don't want to look like... like... a BEAST!"

"Shhh! Damnit, Lav, can't you be a little less shrill?"

Hermione sighed. It was to be expected, she knew. Her Lord and Master had whispered such things to her in the space between life and death. There would be many misunderstandings, but more so—if Lavender truly was a Seer of some sort—she might possibly see more than most and also be more than unsettled by it.

Oh, how she hated Divination.

She should have realised when Lavender had given her that welcome back hug—the very touch of her had given her an in depth, painful glimpse of her death, at least if things went on as they were. Casually touching the living was painful. She hadn't been ready or focused. She hadn't been ready for the flood of images—the screams, the pain.

Perhaps, Lavender had caught some of the backwash from that touch, for her eyes had grown so wide, so fearful. Or—perhaps Lavender had seen her almost Anubian ears and how fingernails had been shaped into pearly claws.

Lavender Brown had never been one for the beauty of one's heart and mind, no. Appearances—and maybe it was also because Ron, who Lavender had been crushing on, was now outed as being a part of Harry's Dark cursing conspiracy. It was a secret, after all, so obviously everyone in Hogwarts knew all about it.

Yet, they didn't know what she was, not really, or what Professor Snape was. The biggest secret just under their nose was right there in plain sight—and they didn't even realise it.

Even though the rumours painted Harry as an emotionally-traumatised victim who simply couldn't help himself, the fact that he'd "almost" killed his best friend hadn't exactly gone unnoticed.

Draco had been painted as the hero for calling for help, even for his most reviled Gryffindor rival, and he'd managed to escape the poking and prodding of the Aurors that had come after. They had the memories of Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sinistra to confirm he'd been aptly horrified, terrified, and petrified at the same time. While it didn't exactly earn him any points from his fellow Slytherin rejects who still clung tightly to the so-called "Old Ways" it did up his reputation in eyes of Aurors, the staff, and anyone with more than two brain cells to rub together, the likes of Rita Skeeter notwithstanding.

Draco, she knew, had gotten word from his parents, who had sent him an owl in the middle of the night. Lucius, having hurled up a horrid pool of concentrated evil, downed about two hundred
potions Severus had told him to sit on in case of emergencies, and recovered enough to Apparate with his wife to a safe house in Maastricht, Netherlands, where their Ministry of Magic was putting them in to what amounted to witness protection.

Draco had told her that most likely, the house elves would grab all the things they could and dump them off at the new place in the midst of all the chaos—and his father had described the current goings on at the former Malfoy estate as being nothing less than total pandemonium with a chaser of ataxia.

Lucius had, fortunately for him, Narcissa to help him when he was struck by the detoxifying anti-Marking magic, and that had been the only reason he wasn't in Mungo's suffering from all manner of ailments caused by having to evict evil out of your pores and other miscellaneous orifices. Others, however, had not been quite so fortunate. The house elves described the scenes of so many Death Eaters convulsing on the floor while the furious and pain-stricken Dark Lord found himself weakening rapidly as he simultaneously lost multiple infusions of stolen life energy.

The Horcruxes still existed, though, and as long as they did, the Dark Lord remained a threat. He had not died. That much she knew. But what condition he may be in, she really couldn't say. He probably wasn't happy in any way, and there was no telling how many other accidental Horcruxes he would make as he murdered his way across Great Britain—that is, if he could even move at the moment.

But as for Marking new knights—he might be hard-pressed to find someone who wasn't linked in some way to the Malfoy and Black family ala Draco. Draco had, whether he knew it or not, helped purify an entire lineage of the Dark Lord's parasitic taint, whether they wanted it or not.

It was proof, she found ironic, that most Wizarding families were, indeed, every bit as inbred as the legends said.

"You can't sleep on the floor over here, Lavender!" Parvati protested.

"Why not? You have enough room!"

Hermione closed her eyes, one hand pinching the bridge of her nose. Realising what she'd just done, she started to laugh and couldn't stop.

She understood, at last, the dour Potion Master's distinctive habits. Never wishing to touch or be touched, always being able to hear something from clear across a room, the way he'd pinch the bridge of his nose as he contemplated idiots and obliviousness.

Most mortals, she realised, were such dunderheads.

Hermione waited in the shadows of Dumbledore's office. The bickering and negotiations had finally ended, and Minerva McGonagall had conceded that Hermione staying in the dorms "in her current condition" was causing more harm than good amongst the "other children." She couldn't help but think that the feline Animagus was being left out of the loop in many things, quite deliberately. The Headmaster seemed very keen on keeping his secret dealings, well, as secret as possible.

Minerva would have to be let in on some things if it was proven she could keep her secrets as well as she had to from Dumbledore. That would remain to be seen, and Hermione wasn't going to be the one to judge that—for now at least.

She wondered if Dumbledore realised that she wasn't exactly oblivious to the fact that he'd forced her into a fate she wouldn't have likely chosen for herself had the circumstances been different. Did he
think she'd just wake up, drink blood, and not notice she'd undergone some significant changes in lifestyle?

Was he **really** that blind?

But, as she sat in the darkened alcove in the Headmaster's office, obviously forgotten, she realised that something about Dumbledore was off. It took a certain kind of arrogance or desperation to be able to command her Lord Master and not suspect who or what he really was, and Dumbledore was supposedly the greatest wizard alive.

That being said—he left her in this alcove, had an entire meeting with his staff, and then casually sauntered off, forgetting she was even there. That didn't seem right somehow. Perhaps the war was truly getting to him.

Dumbledore walked in, muttering distractedly to himself. She was about to stand up and greet him, but something she couldn't quite explain stopped her from reminding him of her presence. He paced the floor in places that had started to wear the floor in specific spots. He talked to himself, the portraits, the wall. He even talked to Fawkes, but the phoenix seemed pretty baffled by the old wizard's questions.

Suddenly, he pulled a box out from behind one of the portraits—old and dusty. He opened it, throwing it on the desk. A golden ring set with a black stone that rested in a plush cushion of moulded velvet. She could easily smell the pervasive unnaturalness that wafted about it like a fog of cheap cologne and stale tobacco smoke.

The **rot**.

Rot, contrary to popular belief, was not death itself but rather a result of the process of decay. Bacteria and fungi competed for purchase on the mortal remains of that which was often dead. Rot was alive. Death was a different smell—the passing of life into the next world as the energy and life of the body moved into a different form and different place.

Rings were not something that typically rotted. Metals could, she supposed, tarnish, and some could oxidise, but they did **not** rot. Something clung to that ring from the time it was made—forged or bathed in the death of another so the preservative magic of the ring held onto it.

Even more suspicious, she recognised the feel of the stone in the ring.

It was her Lord Master's. The thrum of warmth from it was familiar as his embrace. Yet, around it was a layer of another spell clinging to the ring—dangerous, fatal magic.

Corrupting, **very** Dark magic.

Shade rustled under her ear. "**Want me to go get it?**" He tapped on her ear with one leg to get her attention.

Hermione's eyes flicked from Dumbledore to the ring. He was staring fixedly at it where it lay on this desk. He looked at it, then away, and then back again.

She closed her eyes, focusing on the connection between herself and her master, bringing Professor Snape as she did so, filling them in with pictures and memories. She felt Snape's startled surprise at the discovery—their master's item so close, yet he had never detected it before.

*There is magic in the lid,* Desmondon said, his eyes glowing as his magic shifted, caressing the memory of the object as he examined it. "**Concealing it from all who would recognise it, perhaps**
even from Dumbledore himself. But that is *my* stone," he confirmed. "But tampered with. Violated."

"Master, he looks as though he is going to put it on." Snape's voice came through the link, concerned and angry.

*Link yourselves together*, Desmondon instructed them, his mental voice like iron and fire, molten with rage. *Severus, guide Hermione into the shift. Neutralise that ring and bring it home to me.*

*Yes, my master*, Severus' voice replied as he threw out a line, stronger than the passive one, directly to Hermione's mind. She saw Octavius sending out streams of shadow silk to reinforce it. Shade did the same from his end, and Kobal and Cinder added their own reinforcements. Haze sort of wandered off, bumping into walls until Crooks gave her a reorienting swat with his paw, and she began reinforcing the silken energy lines as well.

Dumbledore's hand reached for the ring and picked it up. He moved to place it on his finger.

"NO!"

Hermione lunged into the middle of the room, her talons outstretched as the magic filled her, she surrendered to it, allowing Severus to mold her into what she needed to be, trusting him as she trusted her master—as he trusted them. Her body convulsed, distorting, reshaping. Her head jerked as her jaw lengthened, twisted, reformed into a skull-like perversion of life. Rows of angry, jagged teeth dripped dark saliva as a blackened tongue whipped back and forth in her mouth.

She hissed, lurching as a row of bony growths burst up from her back, leathery membranes pulling tight between the bones as feathers and scales covered the surface. Her golden eyes smoldered in black fire, consuming her eye sockets as her robes went up in smoke, turning into wispy, spectre fabric. Shade jumped into the air and transformed as her gnarled, bony hands curved around the shaft of a glistening scythe and the blade swooshed through the air and hit the ring just so.

**CLANK!**

The ring swelled and burst into pieces, dark, twisted soul-corruption billowed out, screaming in thwarted rage. The pieces flew towards Hermione's outstretched talons, slamming into her palm. The moment they landed, she clenched her fist, growling as acid-like spittle dripped from her fangs. The gold of the ring melted as her hand burst into flames, consuming the once ring in the flames of her master. The corruption on the stone burned away, and the stone shone like a beacon.

"Death!"

"Death!"

"Death!" the corrupt soul screamed, attempting to escape.

**SHING!**

Another scythe cut through the corrupt soul as a flash of magic swirled and seemed to suck the cloud in.

*No!*

NO!

NOOOO! The soul screamed.
Hermione reached out, her talons meeting Severus' bony, skeletal hands. His fathomless, flaming eyes met hers as their magic merged, and through them to their master.

Together they raised their scythes high and slammed them down together, and the nova of magic they created surrounded the corrupted soul matter and destroyed it, casting it into the netherworld to be torn to pieces by the Furies.

Severus growled, a bestial snarl on his muzzle-like face. One wing extended to wrap around Hermione and she approached, fangs bared as she slowly, even tenderly rubbed her muzzle against his in recognition of each other, the bond, and their roles together. His teeth bared as he took in her scent, and his wing pulled her to him. Black mist surrounded them both, and they disappeared completely.

Crookshanks leapt up onto the Headmaster's desk, clamped his teeth around his wand, and then jumped into the swirling cloud of blackness, disappearing as the void swallowed him up, taking him to his mistress.

Haze skittered around on the floor, confused, bumping into things as she tumbled down the staircase, squeaking as she went.

Dumbledore shook his head, shaking off the daze. "What—just happened?"

He pulled a lemon sherbet out of the bowl and sucked on it. Fawkes swung on his perch, slowly whistling *Still Crazy After All These Years*.

"Have you seen my wand, Severus?"

Snape glanced up from his cauldron even as three students he was supervising during Slughorn's detention blew their own cauldrons up the moment they heard the Headmaster's voice.

"And *why* would you think I had the time to babysit you and your wand, Headmaster? On top of babysitting Slughorn's detention while he is off—schmoozing."

Dumbledore scratched his head. "It's odd, Severus, I find that I don't quite remember what I was doing last night."

"How very awful for you," Severus said, his lip curling. His students trembled under his black gaze as they frantically tried to clean up the ungodly mess they'd made.

"Did I tell you do anything special last night?" Albus asked.

"Yes."

Albus looked at him. "And?"

"And what?"

"What did I tell you?"

"I believe your precise words were 'Get out of my face, Severus. Some of us have more important things to do than worry about the soul of a mere girl and if she has a comfortable place to sleep at night'."

Albus had the decency to flush pink under his beard. "Oh. I said that?"
"I can provide a memory, if you wish."

"No, no," Albus said quickly. "I believe you." He frowned. "I don't remember saying that."

"Ob-viously," Snape replied, sneering at the elderly wizard.

"Did I, um, give you permission to—" Albus trailed off. "Suitably amend her living quarters arrangements?"

"Yes," Snape said, his words clipped. His dark eyes seemed even darker. "I believe your words were 'You're two birds of a feather, anyway. Might as well roost together. Not like your reputation can become any worse, eh?'"

Albus held up his hand, wincing slightly. "I see, I see." Then he frowned, scratching his head. "Ah, good. Er—Carry on then, Severus," he said as he trudged out the classroom, rubbing his aching head.

The children were furtively whispering to each other.


The children immediately applied themselves to their potions work with frantic focus.

"Just when I thought you were finally getting somewhere," Octavius sighed softly. "You're still a meanie jerkface."

Severus' pale hand smooshed the spider and moved him back under his hair. "Enough of you, cheeky arachnid."

"Professor Snape," Hermione greeted, bowing her head.

"Miss Granger," Snape greeted, raising his chin to look down at her, a curl of his lip twisting his expression in customary disdain.

"What brings you to my detention on a day when most of the student body is running frantically about the school greens? Miss scrubbing cauldrons without magic, hrm? Pity I am not babysitting Slughorn's detention today. Today, I am babysitting these fine specimens of human classroom wrecking balls for destroying the floor during dueling practice."

The students polished the floor more frantically as he cast his gaze towards them.

"No, Professor," she said, squaring her jaw. The eyes of the students in detention raked her back as their whispers caused her ears to flick. She stiffened under their judgemental regards. All of them were scrubbing and waxing the dueling platform in the Defence Against Dark Arts classroom with polishing cloths and traditional cleaning supplies. "I've come to talk to you about a matter of great importance."

"Get less than an O since you were in the infirmary, Miss Granger?"

Hermione flushed, staring at the floor. "No, Sir."

"I am currently occupied, as you can see, Miss Granger," Snape said with a sneer. "If you wish my consultation, you will have to wait until these miscreants finish cleaning up their mess. It could take—hours."
"Yes, Sir. I'll wait, Sir." Hermione's mouth twitched.

Snape scowled. "As you wish. Try not to break anything as you wait."

"Of course, Sir."

Snape snarled at the polishing and cleaning students. "The longer you take, the longer you risk missing dinner, gentlemen. Get cracking."

"Miss Granger," Snape said as he glided into his office. He closed the door, and with a gesture rose the wards and the silencing charm.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Professor."

"Miss Granger, as I told you before," he replied. "It is not a bother. Is there something troubling you?"

Hermione trembled as she sat, her stomach growling. She gave him a desperate look.

Snape frowned. "You haven't fed."

Hermione shook her head. "I came to you right after class, Sir."

"And I made you wait for three hours while those idiots repaired the floor," He replied, cursing under his breath.

"It was no trouble, Sir," Hermione said.

He felt her sincerity through the bond. She truly did not see the problem in waiting while her hunger crawled inside her stomach like a mad thing when his duties kept him busy. He remembered what that hunger felt like—that endless pit of craving for life that did not ease.

"You are trembling," he said, his black eyes growing darker as a musk wafted off of him. "Come to me," he directed, his claw digging into his neck.

Hermione, her eyes focusing on the trail of crimson on his throat, did as she was bidden. Hunger whetted, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself up, pressing her mouth to his offering. She drank, the flood of Snape's mixture of life and magic swirled together in a very specific cocktail that satisfied her. After a few minutes, she tenderly licked his neck clean. She pulled away, seemingly reluctantly, from his warmth. "Thank you, Sir."

"It is what we are, Miss Granger. It is no problem," he said. "But perhaps, should this happen again, we need to develop a special word or phrase to indicate your need before it becomes urgent. You should not hold back from your feeds, especially so soon. They will weaken you when are not so strong that it would not matter."

Hermione nodded, licking her teeth as she drew her hand to her mouth. "It wasn't just the feed," she said. "I—"

Snape furrowed his brows, feeling her conflict and her fear. "Miss Granger, what is bothering you so intensely?"

"My parents are in serious danger, Sir," she said. "I—Dumbledore wishes me to go with Harry and Ron to find something... I believe he means for us to find and destroy the Horcruxes. I know my parents will be marked the moment they realise I'm with Harry. They wouldn't know about
Apparation. About the danger of magic. They would be sure they could stand up to someone—that the police could save them. That the police would even listen to them."

Hermione fretted. "I'm afraid," she said. "Something is very wrong with the Headmaster. We both saw that. If something happens to him, and we still have to leave, my parents—they'll be vulnerable. They'll be killed."

*Because of* Harry, Snape realised. *All for finding Harry Potter, the Boy-Who-Lived-By-Some-Miracle-of-Merlin.*

"I thought about Obliviating them, sending them to Australia under a new name, but—"

Hermione’s profound distress radiated through the bond, and he wondered why he didn’t feel it before. It was strong, so very, very strong.

Slowly, he placed his hand over hers, allowing his warmth to share with hers. Her eyes grew wider, but less panicked. Her breaths came more easy. The chaos of her mind started to slow down to what a normal person might have been able to follow, had they been an astrophysicist. Even then, it slowly crept down to where base mortals could make sense of it.

He realised that was how he hadn’t read her thoughts through the fledgling bond with their master. Her mind was thinking so fast, so hard that it was creating its own Occlumency, like white noise covering up the sounds of smaller, more subtle things.

"I need to help them, Professor," she said, biting her lip. "If they knew the danger, they’d try to protect me. Pull me out of school, move somewhere with me. They would never let me go, and they would be killed. I would have to leave them against their wishes and they would surely be killed."

Knowing Granger, she’d have come up with about a hundred different scenarios, all backed up with odds in Arithmancy, he thought to himself. That’s what he would have done too, had he actually had a family left to care about.

"I’ll help you," he said, gently squeezing her hand. It was such an odd thing for him, to touch. It was intoxicating just feeling her warmth under his hand and not have her pull away in revulsion. He felt the pull to her—as if she were gravity. She stirred this alien feeling of protectiveness, tenderness.

The relief in her eyes nearly broke him to pieces. He just couldn't let her down.

Nothing was worse than abusive parents, except perhaps for the complete polar opposite, truly apathetic parents.

Mr and Mrs Granger were neither of those, however. They were kind, highly intelligent, rational people. They were just ordinary people who weren’t magical in the slightest and had no clue whatsoever about the threats and evils their world held for people outside of commonplace Muggle dangers, and while those things were bad enough in their own way, it wasn’t by the hand of an Unforgivable that either of them ever saw themselves dying.

Armed with the one thing that parents all over the world wanted more than anything when their babies were in danger, Severus Snape found himself at the Doctors Granger’s front door and then living room.

Hermione fidgeted, wringing her hands, and Severus had even worn his best Muggle clothes to bring down the "oh hell no not in my house" reaction that would problem come soon after seeing the wall of black he normally was in front of, well, everyone, usually. Hermione was staring at him, or rather
his clothes as her parents took turns dipping their head in a travel Pensieve that they had pretty much put together with twine and lemon sherbets. Using Albus’ was out the question, as he knew what the old fool would say about protecting them.

_Necessary evils, Severus. We can't save everyone._

Well, they couldn't just stand there like idiots and simply _let_ things happen. Merlin knew what that did for the Prewitt twins. Dumbledore had done a lot of fancy footwork to avoid getting called out for that bit of drama, especially since Severus had tried to tell him that they were in danger. Potter and Black had even known about it. Then, if that wasn't enough, when Severus tried to tell him about Lily being in danger, he demanded even more of him because "He'd saved his life, after all."

Technically, Desmondon had said to him that actually it was _he_ who had saved his life, not Albus Dumbledore. Well, saved his human essence, anyway. Severus, like Hermione, was no longer amongst the living. That truth would wait for another day for poor Mr and Mrs Granger, thank you very much.

"I can and _do_ wear colour, Miss Granger," Severus said as Hermione stared at his navy blue jumper.

Hermione blinked at that. "Black _is_ a colour."

"Such cheek, Miss Granger."

Hermione smiled at him, knowing she could get away with it here in the privacy of the house, far away from Hogwarts. She sat close to him, basking in their connection to their master, but he had to admit he found her warmth to be soothing, comforting. Always before, he'd been cold and alone, and for once, he didn't feel alone anymore. It wasn't like Desmondon had ever left him adrift to fend for himself. If he was in trouble, his master would attend, unlike certain other masters that laid claim on him.

As he looked around at all the photos of the family—Hermione in almost every single one—he realised exactly what Hermione had given up to live in the magical world: caring, loving parents. In both words, he had longed for something else. Something _more_. Her parents, at least, meant well and did their very best for her. They just couldn't fathom the power of magic, and how could they, really? The Muggle world had long since put aside the time when magic and Muggle lived side by side with both sides being fully aware of each other. At least they weren't trying to drown people to find out if they were a witch. Oh, oops! Guess she was human, after all! Oh well, at least she _wasn't_ a witch!

_Yeah... good going there, humanity._

There were times when Severus wondered if the Wizarding world wasn't all that far away from that primitive mindset. They did have magic, but they also had their own set of problems, thank you very much.

She was staring at his blue jumper again.

"Miss Granger, do I need to assign you something to do?"

Hermione jumped at his voice and looked guiltily away. A strange warmth flooded the bond.

_Attraction?_

Severus tugged at his collar, trying not to think about that too hard. Hermione Granger did not fancy the dungeon git of the dungeons. Whatever she felt was because of the shared bond with Desmondon. Nothing more.
Student, his brain hissed.

Attractive young witch that sincerely fancies you, Severus.

Shut it! Where was the off switch to these meddlesome and unwelcome thoughts? She hasn't even sat her N.E.W.T. s for god's sake. So what if she died and wouldn't ever age again—

GAH!

Octavius was scurrying around the house, exploring, followed by his comrades in shameless arachnid curiosity. He was glad that they couldn't be seen unless they wanted to be, at least by people—mortals. Haze clumsily knocked over a picture, and Helen Granger had just picked it up, chuckled, and blamed poltergeist activity.

Have those often, did we, Mrs Granger?

By the time a very pale Helen and Aaron had finished dunking their heads into the Pensieve, they both immediately poured themselves a stiff drink and gave him one too, not even asking if he wanted it. Hermione, however, had been given a glass of apple juice, causing her to give Severus a look and a very familiar arched eyebrow.

Apparently, she'd been taking lessons from a master.

Good parents always protect their children, he thought towards her, and she sighed out loud.

Memories viewed, Aaron and Helen Granger now knew a great many things about the Wizarding world. Some good. Some not so good. Some were downright awful. He had been very careful to mix them up so they didn't get a one-sided horror show view of the magical side of Britain. No one wants to see only the bad and then wonder why the hell they had ever allowed their child to go to school there in the first place.

Aaron held his wife's hand tightly. "What can we do, Professor Snape? We want to be able to protect our Hermione. How can we do that by running away?"

Snape caught himself from biting out something sarcastic, reminding himself that these were Hermione's parents—her well-meaning, Muggle parents.

"It is not running away. It is being safe. And your being safe is what is going protect her the most. Consider it…a form of witness protection, only Hermione is the one they want to get their hands on. She has learnt well the magic necessary to protect herself. However, you yourselves do not have such defences. They would come for you with the intent of using you to get to her, and they do not need you alive to utterly cripple her."

The words, he knew, were terribly harsh, but he wasn't sugar-coating anything for them. They had already seen his memories—the good things Hermione was fighting to preserve, the bad things she was fighting to defeat.

"What subject do you teach, Professor Snape?"

"Defence Against the Dark Arts," Snape said. He found he still loved potions too much to truly be free of it, but at least old Slughorn wasn't completely inept. Unlike Gilderoy Lockhard—er, hart.

Helen squeezed Aaron's hand a little tighter.

Snape knew his looks were far from trustworthy. He looked like "that bloke your mum always
warned you about" and unlike Sirius Black, who could always charm his way into and out of trouble, Snape had been gifted his father's aquiline profile, one that was fit to make a statuesque reference for classical Roman nose artists. Black hair, obvious nose, black eyes, thin lips, and pale as death skin, even before he had Changed.

Why did Hermione think his coming here was a good idea, again? She'd have been far better off with the likes of Lupin pretending to be her professor. Lupin at least had that certain animal magnetism about him.

Hah.

He could have at least adjusted his mask not to look so, well—him.

Oh well. What was done was done. Hermione wanted him to be there, and he would be there if she asked, even if he had to trudge through a raining of Dark Lords. Did she have any idea what effect she had on him? Did her touch come so easily because she trusted him as her mentor, her future colleague, her fellow Morangelus? Or did the young girl—no, young woman—did she actually care for him?

"Foolish girl."

How could that even be possible after all he'd done to her? Everything he had said?

"I see no difference."

Could she have forgiven him his multitude of sins simple because she knew he wore a mask? Simply because he told her and she believed him?

Even now, in front of her parents, she was sitting so close to him—her emotions and insecurity about the fate of her parents driving her to seek comfort from his presence.

Impossible. She took comfort in him because he was more experienced. If anything she was more his student now as a Morangelus than ever she had been under Potions or Defence Against the Dark Arts. She clung to him because she had no else she could freely touch, and once that wore away—once she needed no one but herself and the shared link with their master—she would be free to make her own path.

Free of him.

Octavius spronged himself up off of the hearth and scurried towards the garden side window. Haze looked like she was going to set herself on fire any second. Hermione made it look like she was poking the fireplace to fling the errant spider in another direction. She landed in the umbrella box with a startled squeak.

Flaming spiders were a bad thing.

Flaming invisible spiders all the more so.

"What can we do?" Aaron asked.

Octavius poofed onto Severus' shoulder, squeaking shrilly in alarm.

"What is it, fuzzball?"

"Do you have a safe room?"

The Grangers shook their heads, both going white with the new urgency in his tone.

Severus looked grimly to Hermione. "Wand out and at the ready."

Hermione immediately leapt up and ushered her parents into the kitchen pantry. She vanished all the pots and pans and various under cabinet items and somehow got her parents into them and closed the doors without them asking too many questions.

"Not a sound," she said. "I am going to cast a few spells, mum. You and dad won't be seen or heard, but do not leave this cupboard until either the Professor or I come for you!" She shut the doors and used a permanent sticking charm on them. They'd have to worry about that one later.

She quickly traced glyphs in the air over the cupboard and protective runes on the door. They glowed for a moment then disappeared. She was good. More than good.

Severus narrowed his eyes, watching her. That was very high level work, mastery level, even. When the hell had she had the time to learn that?

Severus held out his hand, and Hermione accepted it immediately. No question. No words. Trust. Immediate and unquestioning trust. He drew her in to an embrace as his Disillusionment spell covered them both even as one final spell extinguished all the lights in the entire subdivision.

Silence like the utter stillness of a graveyard descended upon the area. He felt his ears swivel to catch the sounds everywhere. Octavius clung to his shoulder, watching and waiting, and Shade did the same for Hermione. The others remained hidden around the house, tense and waiting.

Minutes passed.

Nothing.

Hermione did not move, trusting that if he wasn't moving, she wasn't going to either. No word of protest. No tugging on his sleeve. No hand waving. It was as if every cell in her body had switched over to the language of war. How had that transformation happened? How and when had she become so very different from her student peers?

Damn Albus for having purged the innocence of her childhood and forced her to grow up even more quickly than she already had been. She had always been far ahead of her peers in mind and maturity. He could feel the vice grip she was keeping on her emotions, shoving them deep, refusing to let them overcome her. Brave little witch.

The door opened to a spell, and dark shapes and shadows began to move in.

"I heard the Mudblood chit's family lives here," a gruff male voice said in a raspy almost-growl. "Find them and cut them up. Let the papers get the happy news back to her. The faster she goes down, the faster we kill that brat with the scar."

"Just show us who we kill," another said. "I want to earn my Mark tonight."

"Anything that moves," the first growled. "Just don't let anything living escape."

"No problem there, Fenders," another said.

One of them must have been Muggleborn because they reached for the light switch and flipped it.
"Ow! FUCK!" he yelled.

"What the hell is the matter with you, Hogwood," Fenders hissed angrily. "We didn't go sneakin' in here just so you could bloody announce our arrival! Fenrir sent us here to take care of that Mudblood, and that's what we're doin'!"

"Something BIT me!"

"I'm going to bite you if you don't get in there and find those Muggles!"

Hogwood staggered in, cradling his bleeding hand. He had been bitten on his wand hand, and he was forced to switch his wand to his non-dominant hand. Even from where he was, he could see that the hand was very swollen and shifting rapidly through a fascinating array of glow-in-the-dark colours.

Snape realised there were a lot of them trying to cram themselves in this modest-sized house, and none of them were wearing masks. If they were taking orders from Fenrir, that meant they weren't Marked yet. That made this lot even more dangerous because that meant they didn't have the Dark Lord giving them instructions. This was something new, independent.

Bogger.

Fenrir, the brute of a wizard and werewolf, looked and smelled more animal than man. He reveled, and had always revelled, in his animal aspect—but it wasn't a true animal. Real wolves didn't deliberately stalk children and delight in turning them into slavering beasts. Real wolves didn't murder people for fun. Did they kill other wolves? Undoubtedly, when necessary. Other animals? Yes—but murder purely for the fun of it? No.

This Fenders werewolf, however, was something just as twisted—almost a carbon copy of his "sire." He'd led a trail of destruction as wide as the flooded Okavango across Britain, and made Fenrir proud. Hell, he was so much like his "alpha" many people thought he was Fenrir himself under an alias.

Fenrir was a right piece of work, and all those he "commanded" either feared him or were so smitten by his unbridled lust for violence and mayhem that they were just as bloody fucked up in the head as he was. This man, this Fenders, was just as brutal and mentally twisted as his "pack leader." His insanity was thick enough to smell. His voice—and both Severus and Hermione had the displeasure of knowing it—had insinuated itself into his loyal minion's very speech patterns.

It was enough to disgust and terrify that the possibility was that if someone embraced what Fenrir was giving them, that they would become "just like him."

Severus carefully moved himself and Hermione in a slow dance of footwork in and out of the path of the invaders. Their bodies moved in unison, and he realised she was paying careful attention to every move he made, pulling on the security of the bond to guide her with him, the gentle brush of her mind against his as she filtered through what he needed from her.

It was so unlike Legilimency—

There was no force, pain, or deception. She just brushed against his mind and let him filter what she required, trusting him to do it. Doing it without question. He knew that if Potter had the option whether to listen to him and survive or distrust him and die, he'd probably choose option two, not that he wanted to die, but that he'd never trust Severus Snape for his life choices.
Severus Snape wasn't exactly open and forthcoming of his feelings. Opinions, on the other hand, well, he could spew those out in a chain of verbal emesis akin to a upper gastric blockage.

It wasn't the characteristic he was the most proud of, considering that is what got him in trouble with Lily back in the day.

Strangely enough, he was hearing various yelps and yells throughout the house as their shadow spiders sank their fangs into hands, feet, ankles, faces, and whatever they could reach before skittering off into the darkness. He realised, as one of them started foaming at the mouth and convulsing on the floor that maybe their venom was more potent than he'd originally suspected.

**Thud.**

Coughing and choking noises began to spread through the Granger home.

Maybe even more potent than he had started to believe…

A muffled squeak came from poor Haze, who had been squished underfoot by someone's boot. Suddenly, the boot was on fire—green and blue faerie fire consuming the man's leg up to the ankle. He screamed shrilly as the grey form of Haze skittered off to slide under the couch. The wizard went running out into the dark of night, still screaming as the faerie fire moved upward.

Severus lowered his mouth to Hermione's ear, whispering so softly that it seemed more quiet than the brush of cloth. They started to crouch down behind the kitchen island in case they had to—

"What the **FUCK** is going on in here?!!" Fenders screamed. "I'm going to find you and tear you to pieces and I don't care a **fuck** if you're dead first!"

Flashes of of spellfire flew through the house. Some of them hit his own people. Some of them hit the wall. Some of them broke the windows and knocked a poor, unfortunate nightingale out of a tree.

Now, it was **on**, only it was a crazy free-for-all. They were all casting spells at each other, trying to do each other in before someone, somewhere did them in. Only now, they were starting to destroy the house, and it would only take one stray hit of just the right spell to smash the cupboard that Mr and Mrs Granger were hiding in or, if the wards on the cabinet were too well crafted, it would be only place in the house that wasn't destroyed, thus giving one of those homicidal maniacs a very large clue.

One of them was backing straight up into them, hoping to pick one of the others off before they got to him, and Severus reached out, pressed a wand to his throat, and **Stupefied** him even as Hermione reached out and did a silent **Incarcerous**, binding the man completely from head to toe.

Cunning little witch—brilliant and deadly.

Severus sent the body flying with a **Mobilicorpus** and then used another spell to push it at full speed out the open door. That, of course, attracted more attention in just the right way.

His ears flicked, listening to where they all were. If it were just he and Hermione, things would be easier—the battle so much shorter—but Aaron and Helen Granger were hiding in their kitchen cupboards. They were the priority, and despite the fact Hermione was not in the same kind of danger had she been wholly human, she was **still** a student of Hogwarts. That made him responsible for her safety.

He crouched low, silently touching her shoulder as he bade her stay with a squeeze of his hand on
hers. She grasped his finger as he stood, and he felt her panic for him.

Not for herself, but for him.

He gently squeezed her fingers in his. He would be careful. He was always careful.

He left her with her own Disillusionment spell and closed his eyes. One wing unfolded from his back and then another. His posture grew ever taller, seeming to expand into the room. Shadows expanded from his limbs, swirling around him like sentient tentacles as his face extended into a snarling almost-animal skull. Octavius leapt into the air and transformed, and Severus' clawed talons grabbed it.

Sccrrrrrrrrrrr…

The bottom of his scythe seemed to cut into the ground, making an eerie scream-like nose. His eyes burned as black as coal, the flames flicking out of their sockets.

Hrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
wrapped around her from behind and a wand jabbed into her neck. "There you are, pretty," a rough voice said. "I smell the fear of your little Muggle parents, and I'll deal with them, but not before I get a damn good fuck out you, little witch," he said, licking the side of her face with grotesque pleasure. "Maybe I'll Turn you so next full moon, I'll make sure you carry my pups, girlie. Or— I will give our Alpha Fenrir the pleasure of fucking you until you want to be Turned. Heh. Heh. Heh."

Hermione went still, and Fenders believed he'd won, making her surrender in terror to her fate with him. Perhaps, he saw her as some typical witch who'd never been outside Hogwarts, and somehow he thought that made her weak. But Hermione had been raised in Hogwarts during the Dark Lord's rising, and she had sacrificed her childhood, her innocence, and any chance for a normal life for that greater good.

Her mind went utterly still.

Fenders's voice faded into the background.

She could feel her Master's presence in her mind, just as she had felt Severus' earlier. He gave her the information she required, no more and no less.

No distraction.

No questions.

She slipped under his arm lock, using her elbow to shove right in the chest as her body whirled around. Her knee connected between his legs in way no manner of tucking would have saved him. She reached out her hand, and Shade jumped into it, transforming into her own, shining scythe, but even as she held it up, she moved her hands out. The scythe broke into two pieces, reforming into two sickles connected by a shimmering chain—the kusarigama.

"My Lord and Master sends you his regards and the wish a most painful afterlife," she hissed, spinning around as her blades gleamed. One sickle left her hand as it wrapped around Fenders's neck, and then it returned to her hand. She pulled the chain tight, jerking his head up as she stared him down, her fiery eyes locked on his as his soul screamed at the sight. His mouth opened, gurgling.

She made a jerking motion, double cutting his neck with each sickle as the chain met no more resistance. Fenders's body fell to the floor, face frozen in terror as his soul drifted upward. Hermione threw her kusarigami into the air, and Shade took form again. He shot silk out to capture the soul and then disappeared into a vortex of shadow aether, taking the soul to her Lord and Master.

Hermione stood, still save her laboured intake and output of breath—a tenacious remnant from her body's memory that breathing was necessary. The light came back on, signalling the containment of the house. She straightened, feeling the thrum of the bond between her and her comrade, professor, and fellow Morangulus. The wild look in her eyes faded. She brushed her hand across her face, reactivating her mask as she stumbled toward the cupboard and traced the runes backwards. She took one claw and carved around the permanent sticking charm, and the door fell out, exposing her wide-eyed parents. They took her into their arms, having heard the sounds around them and thought the worst.

And perhaps, they thought the worst was yet to come, as the dark spectre of the male Morangelus in his full glory stood in the middle of the living room, body still, but shadows wisping around him. His baleful eyes burned as he regarded them, a snarl on his lips as he dropped the corpse of Clifton Crowley, wanted murderer and former prisoner of Azkaban.
Hermione's mother screamed, but her daughter turned and walked straight towards the figure that looked like Death come to collect.

As the creature gazed at the two trembling Muggles, Hermione wrapped her arms around him, pressing her head to his chest. "Thank you, Professor," she said clearly so her parents could hear.

Only as her touch embraced him, his dangerous talons touched her head, oh-so-carefully caressing her hair. He used her warmth and her safety to ground himself, calming his mind and body to make the shift back. A part of him struggled, wanting nothing to do with suppressing its true self. He wanted to scoop her into his wings and hold her close, rubbing her scent all over him— rubbing his on her. But Severus was anything but a man without control, and he shoved such thoughts deep, tempering his own fevered imagination with the cold fact that she didn't feel such things for him. She had calmed him out of courtesy, concern for her parents— nothing more.

Severus' bestial form folded in on itself, and he stood as the man her parents recognised. She looked up at him, perhaps checking if he was in control of his instincts. His eyes closed as he nodded to Hermione.

"My apologies for the current condition of your home, Mr and Mrs Granger," he said in same voice he used to welcome first years to the Potions classroom. "I will, of course, repair the damage after the Aurors come to pick up the bodies."

Helen Granger took a really big swig directly from the scotch bottle that had managed to survive the onslaught as Aaron Granger's face lit up like a tree on Christmas morn.

"Wicked!" he said enthusiastically. "Can you do that all the time?! Do you have teeth like a canine or something else? Do you have more than four canines?"

Severus' eyebrows went up as his face paled a little at this unexpected reaction. Mrs Granger was about par for the course—close to meaningless babbling and screaming with the flailing of arms. Mr Granger, however—

"Oh, Daddy," Hermione said hugging him tightly. "I love you and mum so much."

Hours later, Aurors helped seal up the house after repairing the damage as the Department of Mysteries took Aaron and Helen Granger underground, moving them to Australia under the names of Wendell and Monica Wilkins with the promise that when the danger was over, they would be able to return to their home once more.

All under one condition.

Severus had to tolerate Dr Aaron Granger taking a mold of his bite so he could make a casting for his desk as a "fantasy piece."

Hermione gave him a long hug after watching her parents walk off with Amelia Bones and the Unspeakables, and Severus began to dread the time when Hermione would no longer need his help or his comfort.

He would miss that intimacy, that closeness.

He would miss— her.

_Silent on the Front. Ministry Worried_
It's silent out there in Wizarding Britain, and the Ministry is nervous that it means the eye of the storm is about to arrive. Aurors patrol everywhere, but the attacks against Muggles, people in Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and other Wizarding towns have dramatically stopped.

Minister Scrimgeour stated crime has actually gone down in the past month, and rumours say that something even more horrible has befallen He Who Shall Not Be Named and those that ally with him.

One attack on a Muggle housing district about a month ago left over twenty Dark wizards and witches incapacitated and the notorious werewolf criminal, Fenders O'Connolly, number one protégé and rumoured bastard of Fenrir Greyback, dead.

While details of the fight have been kept tightly under wraps, some speculate that the Dark Lord has very few allies left in which to pull from. Meanwhile, our children at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry remain safe under watch of the schools' dedicated staff.

Many at the Ministry are still wondering what this means for the Wizarding World and if some strange supernatural event had occurred due to an unusual planetary alignment. Researchers are scrambling. Astrologists and Astronomers are attempting to find any connection to these events and determine if something worse is fated.

Our Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, encourages people to remain strong as the Ministry will remain both vigilant and strong for its people.

Severus and Minerva exchanged glances as Albus Dumbledore spent the entire faculty meeting talking about his great love for eggs. Flitwick had tried to bring up expanding the music curriculum only to be asked about singing eggs. Even Argus Filch was getting mighty confused when the Headmaster handed him a crate of golden eggs and told him to fix up his quarters how he'd like it.

Poppy Pomfrey brought up the matter of Harry Potter's scar or rather the lack of. Albus had focused a bit more on the mention of Harry Potter, and the meeting had continued more or less normally after that.

Poppy gave the others a concerned look as Albus shuffled off at the end of the meeting stating he had to go meet his sister for lunch before teaching class in the afternoon.

Madam Hooch rubbed her hair and frowned, looking after Albus. "Ariana has been dead for decades," she whispered.

Snape frowned. "If Albus was a Muggle, I'd say he was starting to suffer from dementia, but—I was not aware that wizards could suffer from that affliction."

Poppy shook her head. "Normally, no," she said with confused look. "But there is no telling what he's been exposed to in his long life."

The teachers exchanged worried glances.

Severus patrolled the halls, finding himself meditating on Dumbledore's strange transformation lately. He'd always been a shrewd, secretive, controlling man, always keeping his cards held carefully close to his chest. Something, however, had changed. Something big.

At first, he thought that Hermione's change and Albus' condition were not connected, but he was starting to think that perhaps it was—not that Hermione had anything to do with directly.
My token, my child, Desmondon's voice rumbled in his mind. It was a gift to preserve his mind. When he used it, a part of my true boon was taken away. With each wish he made on it, his mind began to wander as it would have so much sooner, had I not given him my token.

Of bloody course! How could he have missed that?

Desmondon was not one to coddle his "children". If they asked the appropriate questions or requested for his aid, he was there. If they went down the right path of thinking and got stuck, he would assist. But Severus hadn't asked the right questions. He'd not asked for help— until he found himself pondering the right question.

Why had Albus Dumbledore been given one of Master Desmondon's tokens to begin with— Why give him power over Death?

Severus knew that Albus never realised that the token was from Death himself— the one being in all the world he most desperately wanted to control. He had done a great, selfless deed once: saved Desmondon's coven of servile vampires. But for all Albus Dumbledore knew, Desmondon was simply a very ancient vampire.

His Lord Master had given Albus a boon in the form of his token— a token that would preserve his mind for just as long as he kept it with him. A token that would not disappear—

Unless he made wishes upon it.

The image of Dumbledore pacing in a dark room next to a photo of himself and Grindelwald came to mind. He had reached into his robe and worried on the token and wished.

Wished to bring Grindelwald to heel. Wished that he was no longer a threat.

And Death had responded, taking one notch out of his token. It would have continued to protect his mind, had he not used it again to save the "life" of Severus Snape, his servant spy.

And then— he had used it one final time to seal the fate of Hermione Granger.

And his own.

Desmondon's protection gone, Albus lost his true boon: preservation of his own mind.

And now Albus Dumbledore was suffering from what he should have been suffering from decades previous: dementia.

But why? Why was Albus suffering from a Muggle disease?

Unless it wasn't Muggle at all.

What if dementia was a magical disease all along, only it affected Muggles because they didn't have magic to counter its effect on their minds? Having nothing to drive it out, Muggles succumbed to their brain's inability to parse magic from their world and stuff it into a box where it had safely been all of their life: a fantasy. Reality and fantasy mixed together, and for a Muggle, that would seem so very unbelievable indeed.

Dumbledore wasn't suffering because he had dementia. He had dementia because his magic was failing and it couldn't fight off the disease.

And who had been poised at that time to best defend the world against Dark threats? Albus Percival
Wulfric Brian Dumbledore.

Albus had done Desmondon a favour, and in return, his master had given Albus a tool to help the world: his mind, his magic.

But just like the Deathly Hallows, Death's gift had been taken for granted and used selfishly. He had accidentally found the other use for the token and once found couldn't not use it.

Dumbledore had once been a man set to become the most powerful force for good in the world, and it had all gone to pot with the making of one desperate, selfish wish that Gellert Grindelwald would be taken out of the picture so he didn't have to.

Desmondon's mental warmth filled the bond, and he felt his master's approval at the epiphany. He withdrew, leaving Severus to his thoughts.

Severus wrinkled his nose. What, then, did this mean for the fate of Albus Dumbledore? How would they explain his condition to those who didn't know that Death was more than just some allegory to teach children?

Why did things have to be so difficult?

Abruptly, Severus became aware of rustling and moaning noises that were coming from a nearby alcove, and Snape's lips twisted into a snarl as he flung a bright magelight into the darkened passage.

Ronald Weasley and one Lavender Brown screeched in terror as they tried, unsuccessfully to cover their half-dressed bodies.

Snape scowled. "Detention with Mr Filch tonight, Mr Weasley. Miss Brown. And that will be ten points less for Gryffindor from the each of you for your disgusting states of undress in public. Get out of my sight."

The pair ran down the hallways, crashing into things as they went.

Snape's temples throbbed. Children. Some of them never grew up.

Some of them just kept proving they were children despite how old they were.

His lip curled.

*Dunderheads.*

---

Time passed, and life at Hogwarts continued on.

Harry occasionally began to wonder, when Dumbledore would finally send word on just when he was supposed to go off on his grand quest. His sixth year had come to a close, and yet—

Still no word, neither from the Order or Dumbledore himself.

Bill and Fleur had their wedding, and *still* no word came.

The wedding had been a mess—Molly Weasley hadn't been happy that Bill chose a French Veela hussy for a lifemate. She put out all the effort for the wedding in a huge tent in St Ottery Catchpole, but you could tell that the wedding was stressing her out even more than Bill and Fleur, and they were the ones getting married!
On the bright side, Ginny and he had gotten closer in-between enthusiastic snogs, and they couldn’t get enough of each other. Thankfully, Molly seemed happy about that, unlike with Bill and Fleur.

On the dark side, Ron seemed to be even more driven to bed Lavender Brown after seeing Hermione and Viktor dancing together at the wedding. Viktor Krum always pushed Ron's buttons to one extreme or the other. Ron's strangely obsessive behaviour seemed rather odd to Harry, but he could barely take the time to pry himself from Ginny.

Ginny certainly wasn't complaining.

He wasn't complaining either.

Though the niggling concern in his brain kept popping up every so often. Shouldn't he be going? Shouldn't Dumbledore have sent word? Why had the lessons stopped?

Maybe Dumbledore had taken care of it. Maybe the crisis wasn't happening as the Headmaster had expected to.

Maybe. Damn if he wasn't sure. He never felt sure— well, except for that he'd driven away his best female friend into some sort of protective custody with Snape.

Guilt chewed at him when he thought about it. He was so sure Malfoy was evil.

He was doubly sure that Snape was evil.

Snivellus Greasy. Greasy Snivellus.

His father torturing Snape as he hung from a tree by the lake— upside down with his pants and trousers down.

Harry flinched.

Your father. Was. A. SWINE.

No. His father was a hero! He had died for him. His mother had died for him! The memories were a lie. They had to be. The were made up!

But— fuck.

He'd done something even worse than his father and Sirius. He'd almost killed Hermione, and he actually liked Hermione. He'd— turned her into a monster, if you listened to the gossip coming from the girls in Gryffindor tower.

Guilt surged up again.

A soft knocking signalled just as Ginny slipped into his room, a smile on her face.

All thoughts outside of her went away.

"I understand," Viktor said as he sat next to Hermione. They looked over the marsh.

"It's not that I don't like you, Viktor," Hermione said. She sighed.
Viktor's hand went over hers. His warmth was vast, far more than he showed to most with his grandstanding and public image. "Her-my-o-knee," he said tenderly. "Your friend, Harry. He say you are with Ron, but he not right in head, da?"

Hermione sputtered. "No, it's definitely not Ron."

Viktor laughed. "Good because would have to drop him from my broom at cloud level and suddenly forget how to fly."

Hermione's eyes widened.

Viktor gave her a disarming smile. "Your heart with someone else, da? Can love more than one person— but heart. Heart faithful when brain conflicted. Sometimes, heart, mind speak different language. Heart happy with someone, Her-my-o-knee? Feel safe. Feel protected?"

Hermione flushed and nodded.

"I am glad, da?" Viktor said. "Want happy for you."

"I want you to be happy, Viktor," she said, her face frowning. "I do. He doesn't even know."

Viktor brushed her cheek with his thumb. "Maybe, you tell soon. Before head get bad idea, and heart have to rise up and choke brain."

Hermione laughed, a tear going down her cheek. "I really do care for you Viktor."

Viktor kissed her forehead. "I care for you too. Cannot help when heart decide for you. We be friends for long time. Make friend Ron jealous forever, da?" He grinned wickedly.

Hermione laughed. "I love you, Viktor. Please, find someone that will make you happy."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "Love you too, Her-my-own. If cannot be one here and here," he said pointing to her head and heart. "Then I will be brother, hrn? Will embarrass your suitor with horribly awkward memories of childhood together."

"Viktor!" Hermione cried, flushing.

Viktor smiled wickedly, squeezing her hand. She realised she couldn't see his death. He, like she and Severus, had no death in which to see. He was claimed by an ancient force. It wasn't Death, but it was someone— something— as primordial and vast as He was.

He saw her comprehension. "Now you see? No guilt. I must find my here and here," he said, gesturing to his head and heart. "I must find one like me. Maybe not now. Maybe not soon. But— have long time to find, da? Maybe when find. We all get together and celebrate, da?"

Hermione smiled, relief in her very soul. "Da," she replied warmly.

"See? Speak Bulgarian like me soon. Have time plenty to learn."

Hermione hugged him. "Blagodarya."

Viktor smiled at her. "Very welcome."

By the time Hogwarts was back in session for the Autumn term, Minerva was a bundle of fur on fire charged with enough static electricity to power a small village.
She'd found Hermione Granger's N.E.W.T.s results tucked away in one of Albus' shelves when the doddering old wizard had accidentally summoned a cyclone in his office. There, nestled in an ornate box, was Hermione Granger's credentials, the permission for time-turner usage from the Department of Mysteries, the Board of Governors authorisation for her to share quarters with Severus Snape as her vampire mentor—

Vampire?

While Poppy was taking care of Albus after his accident, Minerva spent the next day sorting through the ungodly mess that was Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore's office so she could get things organised for the first day of classes, and found more things that she hadn't expected.

Such as parchment that had Severus Snape's message to Dumbledore writing out in explicit detail the impending attack on the Prewett brothers' safe-house and his begging for Albus to move them— and the letter from Sirius Black and James Potter assuring Albus that it was nothing but a sham. There would be no attack on the Prewett brothers. Any warning from Snape was a lie.

Dumbledore had known all along about the upcoming attack, and he had done bugger-all about it.

Then, she found the letters no one was supposed to find.

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**Dear Ariana,**

*It's been only a year after you died, and been trying to put aside my feelings for Gellert to do what must be done. He must be stopped. He must, but I am afraid. I write this in the hopes that you know I'm still working to write the wrong that was done to you as a child. I haven't forgotten.*

*Gellert and I wished to become the Masters of Death, but both of us had different reasons, even if we both wanted the same things, the Statute of Secrecy is truly standing in our way. I know you were much too young to understand, Ariana, but they got away with a crime that deserved punishment. Father knew that. He spent time in Azkaban after trying to rectify the injustice, and I swore on his deathbed that I would avenge you.*

*And then, you were gone, killed by the man I respected.*

*My friend.*

*And I can't bring myself to fight him. I wish I could. I know it must be done, but…*

*I just can't do it, Ariana.*

---

**My dearest Ariana,**

*Grindelwald is now imprisoned in Nurmengard, and I think I have found a way to avenge the wrongs that were done upon you as a child. A token, given to me by an old, so very ancient vampire who owed me a debt of thanks. The token, at first, seemed to give me back clarity of thought, something that I was feeling had eluded me lately, but now I see its true purpose. With it, I gained three boons from one of the oldest creatures on this earth.*

*The first, I used to defeat Grindelwald when our duel never advanced. Each of us trying to outdo the other. Me, and my heart could not take it. Grindelwald had cut me, and blood soaked my robes—soaked that token as I screamed out my wish to see Gellert rot in his own prison.*
And it was done.

I woke in my own bed with tabloids calling me a hero.

Gellert was gone— gone forever from my life.

If only I had not fallen so completely for his wit, his charm, and his charisma. If only I had seen his true face sooner.

Dear Ariana,

I have failed. Somewhere along the line, my attempt to right a wrong done to Tom Riddle has resulted in the very opposite. I have created, nurtured, and fostered the newest Dark Lord. He calls himself Voldemort, now. Lord Voldemort, as if the grandiose name will somehow erase his hated half-blood heritage and make him mighty. He's corrupted all of or most of Slytherin and bent them to his twisted cause.

I have to do something about Slytherin. I need to foster distrust of them to get people see how dangerous they are. There are far more of his corrupted supporters in Slytherin than in any other House.

Dear Ariana,

I've really buggered it up this time. I worked really hard getting Severus Snape in position to throw himself into my service. I ignored his harassments to get James Potter and Sirius Black on the side for the greater good. I brought the Muggleborn friend, Lily Potter, in for a talk about she had to move on and that forgiving something as horrible as being called a Mudblood would make her weak. He was right there, throwing himself into my service to spy for me. He was already bringing me intelligence.

But I botched it.

He came to me with a report on an attack, and I brought it up to Potter and Black. As Aurors they would know the signs.

Severus said the Prewitt home was going to be attacked.

Potter and Black denied it, saying they heard nothing.

Fabian and Gideon both died, and I almost lost Severus too. I couldn't—I'd done too much. I'd set him up so perfectly. I simply couldn't lose him. I used the token. I had the vampire save his life.

Well, what passes for life.

I made up some excuse to the Board explaining how he'd been Turned because Death Eaters found him while he was working for me, doing something to secure the safety of the school. It was true, after all. Poppy helped by telling them he was the main person crafting potions for Hogwarts. So, at least, he's always going to live here at Hogwarts. I'd probably prefer myself it to the shameful wreck that is Spinner's End. The Governors like the idea of having a Potions Master on staff full time. I'm just going to have to make up some way to prevent him from taking the Defence Against Dark Arts position. A suitable curse would work well enough. Easy enough to blame it all on Tom.

So that is what I'll do.
Dear Ariana,

Damn it all. James and Lily Potter are dead. After all I did to get them in place, get them safe, something went wrong. Somehow, someone told the Dark Lord and they were murdered.

I had to take their son, Harry, and put him with his Muggle Aunt and Uncle. They were none-too-pleased about the situation too.

Damn it all. How could this happen?

Severus is a wreck. Well, more of a wreck than ever. Lily Evans Potter was his entire world, the only positive thing he had in his life. Now, I have to refocus him to get him back on task. I had to pull the life debt into play. As far as the boy knows, I'm the one that saved him. That's why he hates me so much. That's just fine with me. He doesn't have to like me to do what I say.

The Dursleys don't like me either. That's fine. They fear me enough to take care of Harry. He just has to survive to fulfill his destiny, just as Sybill foretold.

The Granger girl reminds me far too much of Lily. I think it's occurred to Severus, though thankfully he does not appear to be conscious of the rather striking similarities. His gaze lingers and he begins to remember things that he is best of not remembering. It's not perverted, thank Merlin, but I can't afford for him to be kind to the girl. If those two had been young together, Lily Evans would have merely been some passing thought quick to fall into obscurity.

She's brilliant, that little witch. Just like he is.

And if Severus just gave her one ounce of compassion, she'd surely move worlds for him. I have no doubt that had they met when he was young, he'd never have taken the Mark. More disturbing yet is her tremendous sense of compassion and ability to forgive. She would never have let a word break a friendship forever. She'd have punched him on that huge nose of his and sent him into the lake, but she would have forgiven him.

I can't let that power touch him. There is too much to do. She needs to train and grow up fast. He needs to keep his mind firmly on task. She needs to fully trained and ready to fight, ward, and make Harry vanish at a moments notice. I will distract her with something more valuable than friendship and some wish for mentorship with Severus. I will give her books upon books and instill upon her that no man as wretched as Severus could possibly respect how brilliant she truly is. Now, while she trusts her elders without thinking. Before she figures out how to think for herself. Before she doubts.

Severus is not the one who needs her as an ally. She's supposed to keep Harry alive. The Ronald boy... Weasley. He's doing his job quite well, all for a couple galleons and a box of chocolate frogs. He turned Harry against Slytherin just like I needed him to. Even if Draco Malfoy did do most of the work for him, thanks to his father's blood bigotry brainwashing.

It's almost time, Ariana.

Time to set young Harry on his path to destroy the Horcruxes and then destroy Tom himself. It's unfortunate that Harry will have to die to fulfill his destiny, but we all must make certain sacrifices for the greater good. I found the stone set in a ring buried in one of Tom's old places... I'm so tempted to use the stone to see you again, Ariana. So very tempted.

I wanted father to know how much I've done for you.
I want you to see how much I've done for you.

I've tucked the stone away for now, in a small box on my shelf, until I can figure out a way to remove the curse from the old ring that it's been set on. Then, I'll be able to take the Cloak back from Harry's trunk and then...

You'll be back, Ariana. You, father... all of my pain and guilt will be worth it.

Minerva wanted to take Hermione on as her apprentice, and I shot her down. She doesn't need to know the reason why, but I didn't train the Granger girl up, have her sit her N.E.W.T.s, and study under a magical martial arts master in secret just so she could bind herself to Minerva and not be able to leave when Harry needs her. It's bad enough I have to put a glamour on her just so she doesn't look her age. I mean, the girl ages well, but I couldn't let them suspect she wasn't their age just like any student.

Fortunately she thinks she's doing all this for Harry. She'll keep her mouth shut for Harry, provided he doesn't do anything too stupid. She's forgiven him so many things, I don't foresee that being a problem.

Sweet Merlin's fungus-encrusted toenails!

I had to use the last boon on the token to save Granger's life. That utter imbecile, Harry— he tried to curse Draco but struck the girl instead. She was worried about him getting in trouble for using Dark magic on a fellow student. She thought he wouldn't cast the spell if she was there.

Bloody hell, Ariana!

She's alive, but now I had to explain the presence of two sodding vampires in Hogwarts to the Board.

They expect them to live together. Severus is to "keep her from killing or Turning someone else." They wouldn't let me just give her a private room in the dormitories, no. Not after that dreadful fiasco with Brimley Bumstead, the nutter who starved himself and then tried to take out half of Hufflepuff. Damn that Sanguini, anyway. At least Slughorn took the heat for that one instead of me.

That's the last thing I ever wanted, Severus and Granger permitted, nay, encouraged to become close. They're far too similar. Together, they may decide to pool their respective knowledge, and if they do that— they will surely realise what I've been trying to keep them from realising.

Hopefully I can get Harry to leave soon on the quest for the Horcruxes. That will take her away from him. Away from Severus, hopefully before either of them even begin to realise just how much they have in common. Before they realise they both almost died for me.

All I can hope is that Severus' near-allergy to physical contact applies to her as well. I can't imagine she'd actually be attracted to the unattractive sod. He's no catch by any stretch of the imagination.

I don't want him to remember what it was like to be touched. To realise that someone can forgive him. If he should discover that it is, in fact, possible for him to be forgiven, my hold over Severus will be utterly destroyed.

Whispers of Dumbledore's befuddlement remained spurious rumours, as far as the students knew, and Minerva kept the majority of what she had learned to herself, even after owling a transcript to Amelia Bones at the Department of Mysteries. Her reasoning, however, was not to protect
Dumbledore but rather the students in her care.

Many firmly believed that Albus Dumbledore was the sole reason the Dark Lord didn't attack Hogwarts and kill them in their beds, and she didn't want them to be right. As long as Albus remained at Hogwarts, they had a little more time to work with.

Harry Potter seemed utterly confused by his meetings with Albus, as he had clearly been under the impression that he was to leave on some great mission, yet that time for that mission never seemed to arrive. Strangely, both Potter and Weasley seemed primarily preoccupied with exploring their teenage hormones instead of seeing to their other responsibilities. It gave Minerva a bit of a facial tic just thinking about it, especially with how many times Severus had caught them multiple times in the midst of various acts of fornication and given them detention.

Separate detentions after the disaster of putting them together in the same one. She desperately wanted to be Obliviated of the memories of that all-too-memorable occasion, even if she had only suffered the report of the incident rather than being unfortunate enough to actually witness it, as poor Severus had.

Thankfully, Draco and Hermione had settled in comfortably with Severus over the summer, even assisting him with the year's brewing for Poppy. With Draco an orphan for all anyone knew and Hermione having undergone some lifestyle changes of a vampiric nature (at least as far as anyone knew) she worried far less about them than the rest of the students.

She and Severus had agreed to have a sit down "soon," but as to when that would occur, she wasn't quite sure yet. Her hands were very full taking over for Albus and yet still making sure it looked like he was doing it all. She needed to tell him about Hermione's true age and Albus' mechanizations. She needed them to know they had been actively turned against each other for far longer than either of them knew. She wanted them to know that there was something Albus obviously feared about them being together and how he desperately hoped they wouldn't ever touch, even after all that had happened.

She wanted to hear their story. From them.

In the meantime, she steadily insinuated herself in the dour wizard's life, inviting herself over to check on Draco and Hermione as well as the man himself. Snape seemed disgusted by her presence, as usual, but there was a strange softness to his agreement that she would be permitted past his formidable wards for the main room at least— if only to get her to stop hounding him like an unlucky black cat.

It was there, however, that she'd misinterpreted Hermione going in "for the kill" on Draco and sent Hermione flying backwards and Draco in the opposite direction.

Hermione had given a shriek of distress as Draco yelled something about having given her permission. Severus— or rather something dark, winged, and highly brassed off— had landed in the middle of the room with a roar of fury, snarling at Minerva like she'd committed the worst crime possible.

And so an embarrassed Minerva McGonagall had finally learned the true secret of Severus Snape and Hermione Granger.

Severus had scooped Hermione up in his wings and dragged a claw across his neck, allowing her to feed in front of Minerva's horrified eyes. The terrified girl had half-changed, a bundle of trembling wings and claws as she affixed herself to Severus' embrace like a baby bat to its mother's fur.
Hours later, as Minerva drank what seemed like her twentieth cup of strong Scottish breakfast tea in front of the fire as Hermione and Draco went over their homework and Severus stared darkly at her the entire time like she was completely mental, Minerva realised the vastness of the crime Albus had committed.

She hadn't told him the rest yet. It had been too soon, too fresh, and far too much to deal with coming to terms with all the truths she'd learned just in that one, dramatic show of what Snape and Granger truly were—

"Well, guess the Kneazle is out of the bag," Draco had said behind them.

"Mrowl," Crookshanks had said.

"At least she didn't use an Unforgivable on me," Hermione had whispered.

Guilt gnawed at Minerva's stomach, despite everything.

Severus said she'd responded quite well, all things considered. At least, he'd said, she didn't want to make dental impressions of his teeth.

Minerva, already confused, didn't deign to ask what in Merlin's name that was all about.

She did, however, tell them that she had something important to tell them about Albus and when they decided that they were ready to hear it, she would tell them. It would give them both some time to settle a little into their new arrangements before throwing the proverbial hammer at their heads… again.

She also sincerely apologised to Draco for having overreacted, but the wizard just shrugged it off.

"I'd imagine it had to look pretty bad, not knowing," Draco admitted. "Next time we'll just do it in my bedroom."

"You bloody well will not!" Snape's voice had roared in response to that rather ill-conceived idea.

Well, Minerva said to herself, at least Severus still has some boundaries of of what constitutes respectable behaviour.

As Severus came back to "his" quarters, he was greeted by the sight of a female Morangulus in all of her monstrous glory, cuddling a clutter of fluffy arachnids, one half-kneazle, and a silver tabby, a cup of hot cocoa resting between her talons as she read an enormous tome entitled *Death Throughout the Ages: A Multicultural Study*.

Draco was leaning up against her, reading some sort of Muggle book called *101 Ways to Ditch Bad Habits and Combat Peer Pressure*, using one of her wings as a makeshift lounge chair.

"I should have figured you couldn't keep your feline whiskers out of my business, Minerva," Severus sniffed, sighing as he put his outer robe on the hook. He shed his robes as he shifted, allowing his body to expand and reform into its more, ironically, comfortable form.

Hermione looked up, a smile on her muzzle, and she extricated herself from the pile, placing Crooks and Minerva into Draco's lap as she stood and walked over to greet him. Their muzzles touched, fangs bared as she rubbed herself against him, tucking her wings down and around his back.

Severus, unused to such casual warmth awkwardly wrapped his wings around her in return and
pressed his muzzle into her mane of curls, slowly relaxing as the young Morangelus radiated happy contentment at being reunited with him once more. He felt her emotions—pure and unfiltered—through their bond with their master and even more surprisingly their master's approval at their closeness before he withdrew slightly to give them privacy.

She'd genuinely missed him, and it baffled him every time that it happened, even when it happened quite often. Her relief at feeling his touch was readily palpable. Her warmth was like she'd become her own star, and he inwardly cursed at two incredibly moronic young wizards who had so carelessly thrown away any respect for the magnitude of the gift she could have given them—

That warmth. That compassion. That searing loyalty.

All of it broken with that final straw—an Unforgivable curse meant for "someone else" that had torn away her fragile mortality and left her no one but HIM for companionship. How was that fair to her?

Yet, as her warm golden eyes met his, he saw something there that broke him, shattering his heart into so many pieces and then put it back together using herself as the glue. His breath caught in his chest. His life wanted to spill out to feed her now and forever—hoping that he would be all she never needed. And a part of him wondered if she would ever saddle herself with him and allow herself to be his. Would his life be enough to sustain such a beautiful, vibrant soul?

Ages aside, such things no longer mattered. Even on paper, Granger was of age. Technically, she'd died and so had he, so was there really any rule that forbid it, truly? They were both ageless now, hampered only by their old memories of what made them one age or another. If they really wanted to be technical, there were the countless "years" they spent under their master's wings deep within the earth, being whispered the knowledge of the ages as the ground itself rocked them to sleep.

They had both changed. They had both evolved. They had both died for Albus.

He was a fool to believe that someone as radiant as Granger would be happy "settling" with him. Eventually her fascination with him would fade, and they would be nothing more than comrades, bonded through their master but not knowing that elusive closeness that a part of him so longed for.

Minerva was batting Draco on the head to pay attention to his reading, and the boy sputtered, having never had any such encouragement through the paw that Minerva was administering.

Draco, too, it seemed, was now under his wing. It wasn't safe for him to remain living in Slytherin thanks to the sons and daughters of vengeful Death Eaters. They'd blamed him for their parents' conditions, which was only partially true at best. Had they known the whole truth, perhaps they would have killed Draco even faster. Had he not been listening for just precisely that sort of event, he would never have gotten to Draco in time, and he would have bled out for the third and final time in his life on the Hogwarts grounds.

So, Draco now shared quarters with him, clasped in as his godfather, responsibility, family being missing, blah, blah, blah. Hermione was written in due to certain unavoidable and unfortunate similar lifestyle changes.

Lifestyle changes?

The Board of Governors didn't have a problem with vampires cohabitating, apparently. Nor did they care that the students were being taught by one. Werewolves, however—apparently those were still frowned on. It probably had something to do with Lupin "forgetting" his wolfsbane potion. What idiot forgot something as important as that, escaped criminal murdering friend or not. There was also the entire keep the vampires together segregation mixed with the "who cares where Mr Malfoy goes
as long as he's not being murdered" mentality.

Personally, Severus figured that they believed Hermione had to have a fellow vampire teaching her the ropes so she didn't go postal and eat the student body. Governors frowned upon that for some reason. Chalked on the board was also that the best Potions Master on this side of the pond, or so Poppy told them, was here at Hogwarts and named Severus Snape. Letting him go would definitely position him elsewhere where he would most likely charge even more for his services and, ahem, not give a shite to a school that spurned him.

Maybe Poppy was Slytherin after all.

Minerva, well—

The tabby meowed sweetly and rubbed up against Hermione's legs, and she picked her up and pet her fondly as she would Crookshanks. The tabby Animagus seemed to quite enjoy the feline attention, though she'd never allow such things outside in public.

The horror.

Here, in the comfort of Snape's dungeon domain, the masks were off. It was such a strange thing, sharing such an intimate thing as cohabitation. Yet, there was a line his mind refused to cross until Hermione passed her N.E.W.T.s, not that he didn't doubt she could pass them with her wings tied behind her back. Pass those, and she could officially make whatever choice she wanted without worry of saying she cheated or whatever stupid accusation they could come up with.

Pass those and learn whatever meager unlife lessons she could cadge from him, and she would surely leave him for the greater world—out there, somewhere.

"Death Through the Ages, Miss Granger?" Severus said, his voice a purr wrapped in a velvet burrito.

Hermione flushed deeply, and Severus felt a corresponding flutter in his chest. Her wings were still wrapped around him and she pressed her head against his chest, tucking her head under his chin—a perfect fit to hide her embarrassment. "I find it curious what other cultures think of death."

She withdrew from him, her wings folding away as she flushed, and he flinched, trying very hard not to scoop her back up in his wings and wipe that discomfort away. The ghost of her touch, the feeling of warmth, lingered on his skin. A pain, unlike anything he had ever known, accompanied the loss of just that small touch—something he could not even fathom before harsh circumstances had allowed them to share a touch both of mind and body.

Surely, he was a fool.

No young witch, one who had been at the very cusp of independence, could possibly have such thoughts on her mind when they barely even knew what they truly wanted at such an age.

Lily hadn't—

Yet she had allowed herself to fall in love with and elope with the likes of James Potter while on the run from the Dark Lord. Having a child during a time of war. How foolish could anyone be? She had not been alone. Many other young couples threw themselves enthusiastically into having children while the Dark Lord rose to murder everything they cared about.

Idiots, all of them.

Severus sighed. Then again, he thought, they had only so much time allotted to them. Perhaps, he
could not truly blame them for wanting to make their mark on the world why they could. Would he have been any different, had he found love and life shared with someone?

If Lily had forgiven him, would there ever have been a chance?

"Hermione, do you think if you connected vectors of the Horcruxes to sharing with trusted allies would increase the probability of success?" Draco pointed to the scroll they had pinned to the board. Various arithmancy equations spread over the parchment.

Hermione wrinkled her nose, huffing, her wild curls blowing out of the way as she looked at it, tracing her claw from one vector to the other. She pointed at one, tapping at it. She shook her head and pointed at one vector and snorted, causing a spider to dislodge from her hair and fling itself off into the air.

"Eeee!" Cinder cried as she landed on the board with a soft squeak. "No fair! Unstable clinging surface!"

Hermione lowered her muzzle, allowing the dislodged spider to use her as a ramp back into her mane.

"Thank you!" Cinder said, scurrying back into her curls.

"You make me climb up your horribly long robes," Octavius complained. "This is why she has four spiders instead of just one."

Severus snorted, flicking his hair, and Octavius went flying off into the curtains.

"Git!" he squeaked as he hit the curtains, clinging to the cord. He accidentally landed on Haze, who was seemingly chasing a bug. Both spiders were tumbling down the curtain to the floor.

Haze, irritated, bit Octavius on the spinnerets and chased him around the room. "Ahhh! Abuse! Stop it! Not the spinnerets!"

Crookshanks' paw came out and bopped both spiders over the head and then he dragged them towards himself, chewing on Haze and cuddling Octavius between his paws. The stunned spiders could only squeak in response, their legs wriggling spasmodically.

Severus saw Hermione was looking at him, one eyebrow arched.

An epiphany hit him in just that moment. It was the same expression he'd seen her give to Potter and the redhead menace.

"Was that really necessary, Harry?"

"Really, Ron?"

Severus flinched as he remembered a time when Lily had said much the same.

"Was that really necessary, Sev?" Lily had said as his trademarked scowl had sent some poor Hufflepuff running home to mummy—or at least to the badger dorms.

He'd reached for her to brush a stray leaf from her shoulder, and she'd turned away to point at the lake. "We should take the boat out on the lake, Sev," she said, not even looking him in the eye.

He'd stood, deciding that if that was what she wanted, they would go. He extended his hand to her. "Let's go then."
"What?" she gasped. "Now?"

"You wanted to go, right?"

"Well, yeah, but—" She flushed and rolled on her hands instead to push herself up off the ground. "Fine," she said, rubbing her damp hands on her robes. She trotted out in front, leaving him standing there wondering if a simple touch was too much to ask for.

Suddenly, Hermione's hands went around his, tugging him over to her side. "Check out this vector, Professor Snape," she said. The warmth in her touch alone sent his stomach into knots. She never called him by his given name. Never tried to call him Sev. Always Sir or Professor or Professor Snape. Even when she hated him for insulting her teeth. Even as the pull to touch him and be touched by him, something he blamed on the bond between their master and them, she was still respectful.

"Yes, Sir." Tears rolled down her face as she turned and fled him as Draco snickered at her long buck teeth.

"There is ninety percent chance that Professor Flitwick can help us find the Diadem, and ninety nine percent chance that if we ask Professor Hagrid—"

"Everything will go straight to Hades," Draco said, lip curling.

"Draco!"

"It's true! We'd be trampled by Acromantulas before he'd actually help us. Isn't that right, Severus?"

"Professor Snape, Draco!"

"Oh, come on. Severus is his name. I've been calling him that since I was jumping off tables as a toddler!"

"What?"


"No! It's not polite!"

"To call someone by their name?"

"He's a teacher!"

Severus stared at the parchment, tracing the equations, trying to ignore the pang of wanting to hear his name in her voice. Would it be as warm as her touch or would the first time she said it be filled with venom for some stupid thing he was bound to do to push her away like he pushed everyone else?

"Severus."

Severus' head jolted up as the sound of his name held a tremble of emotion that felt like a caress.

Respect.

Companionship.

Need.
 Desire.

Wait, desire?

Her eyes widened in horror as she shifted forms into her human shape and fled the room. "I'm sorry, Sir!" she cried, mortified and hyperventilating.

He felt her slam walls down around herself, withdrawing as far as she could from the security of the bond.

Draco sat in the chair nearby. "What did I say?"

Hermione sat on the shore of Black Lake and sighed. "What an idiot," she admonished herself. He was a comrade by the same master, but he was still a teacher. Even if she had already taken her N.E.W.T.s—if even she was only posing as a student at Dumbledore's behest due to the rather shady time-turning that had continued far into her Hogwarts career.

She'd given it back, the time-turner, but he'd convinced her to give it a shot again.

For Harry.

It was always about Harry.

She had a feeling no one knew why but Dumbledore himself.

Was that why he'd wanted her saved? Too much invested in one Muggleborn chit and not enough time to train a new one to keep Harry going?

Was it really that simple?

Even if she was far older than anyone knew, her old Potions Professor had no reason to think she was anything but a mere student—his former student, and she was still a student at Hogwarts as far as he knew. And her stupid feelings—

Were always getting the best of her.

Emotional.

Reckless.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

But just for a moment, when she had said his name, all of her pent-up longing and loneliness had poured out unfiltered. She yearned for someone that understood her, or at least put on their best effort to try. It was something she'd never had before.

And Severus Snape—just the fluid rise of his eyebrow cause a flutter in her stomach. His eyes were as fascinating as a library full of tomes she'd never read before. She wanted to get lost in them forever. His warmth was like nothing she'd ever known.

Safe.

Secure.

She couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be cared for by one such as him—to be loved.
Never before had someone attracted her so clearly and baffled her at the same time. Never before had she been so frightened of rejection.

She frowned.

It was something she knew she'd never have for herself. She was outside of the living world now. The binding magic between magicals was for the living unto death. No matter how fascinating she might find a person, she could never be intimate with them in both body and soul—not that it mattered to most people, she knew. Many could go their entire lives thinking themselves just fine without that last bit that bound them together throughout a lifetime. Others thought such things were the thing of fantasy and myth, old stories to cover up old customs.

Hermione clenched her fists.

Why did she have to feel things so strongly? It wasn't liked she offered anything special in the looks department. All she had was her stupid, overactive, emotional brain—a brain that didn't know when to realise she was just being used by her so-called "best mates" and the Headmaster of Hogwarts until—

Yeah, good one, Hermione, she thought. You're just pathetic. Get your head on straight. Fix Harry up so he doesn't die trying to be a bloody hero, and move on with your life at your master's side.

Priorities, she admonished herself.

A very small voice whispered inside herself, "But who takes care of Hermione?"

Hermione closed her eyes, digging her claws into her clenched hands. "Me."

"Hey," Draco said, sitting down beside her.

"Hey," Hermione replied, staring out over the lake.

"Want to talk about it?" he asked, scratching his head. "I generally suck at advice, but I can nod and pretend the stuff you say makes perfect sense."

Hermione snorted. "That's what I like about you, Draco. You say it like it is."

Draco chuckled a little. "Malfoys were never great listeners. They are more demanders and 'Do this for me and I won't ruin you forever' kinda people."

Hermione eyed Draco with an arched brow. "And then you wonder why you didn't make friends easily."

Draco shrugged. "Made plenty of friends, just very few of them that don't want to kill me right now."

"Let me correct that observation with the phrase 'Friends you can trust not to kill you over something stupid'."

Draco laughed. "Seems we both need that advice."

"Seems like it," Hermione agreed.

"So, why the blush and rush?" Draco said.

Hermione sighed. "It was stupid. I was stupid."
"Tell me, and I'll let you know if really was."

"Brutal honesty?"

"That's what real friends do, right?"

Hermione looked down to her claws and flexed them. "Yeah, it is. Unless you're a Malfoy, which means all you'd do is belittle me and tell me how you're going to ruin my life."

"Yeah, well, maybe I failed at being the perfect Malfoy lately," Draco replied with a shrug.

"Thank Merlin for that," Hermione said, earning herself a smile.

Draco nudged her. "So, what was that about?"

Hermione dipped her toe claws into the water. "For a moment, when I said Professor Snape's name, I felt this intense loneliness. And, just for a moment, my stupid brain wondered what it would be like to be cared for by someone. Desired by someone." She snorted. "For a moment, I thought of him."

*Liar,* her brain screamed. It was more than just a moment.

Draco looked into the calm dark water. "Well, back when you were, you know, alive, I'd say there were some barriers," he said. "But you're more alike now. Hell you were alike before." He tapped his head. "Up here, where it matters. And if was back in my father's time, I'd already be bloody married to my betrothed, arranged at birth."

"They still do that?" Hermione said, horrified.

"Purebloods do a lot of things to promote bloodlines," Draco said. "I was arranged too, but she died. She was really sick. Some kind of blood disease."

"I'm sorry, Draco."

Draco shrugged. "I was a baby, so our magic hadn't fused or anything. I know Pansy wanted to be my choice for a long while, but she has the emotional depth of a teaspoon."

Hermione choked.

"What?"

"I used to say exactly that about Ronald."

"They really should elope," Draco said, utterly deadpan. "Have bigoted, homicidal babies together."

Hermione coughed, trying to shove that train wreck of a mental image into a bottomless chasm somewhere far away.

"Look, I'm not saying I believe in love at first sight or anything, Hermione, but—" Draco looked at her with a lopsided smile. "It's not like you're going to age out of it. Give it a go. He—he's been like the walking wounded for a long time. So have you. You have this understanding. You both know what betrayal feels like. He's always been good to me, even when I threw pudding at him and jumped off tables and nearly gave him coronaries. Well—you know, if he *could* have one."

Hermione tilted her head. "Draco Malfoy, are you telling me to give your godfather a chance?"

Draco nudged her. "Give *yourself* a chance, Hermione. Speaking of which, don't you need a little
you-know-what by now?"

"Figgy pudding?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Maybe if the figs were red," he said.

Hermione's expression was sad. "I can find another—"

Draco placed a hand on her arm, careful to put it on her robes and not touch her skin uninvited. "Hermione, it's fine. It's life, and I have a blood replenishing potion to take just in case you find you like me too much."

Hermione pushed.

Draco gave her a cheeky wink, and the both of them seemed to realise they had both come so far. "Go on, then. Consider it a donation to the cause."

"What cause, exactly?"

Draco gave her a gallant shrug. "The Please-Don't-Kill-Me-Later cause."

"So, killing you now is okay?" Hermione whispered. Her eyes were kind, warm.

"As long as it's you," Draco said. "Severus would make it hurt out of principle."

Hermione looked upward and then back at Draco. Her eyes glowed with a sunlike fire. She captured him in her gaze as her fingers gently curved around his chin to pull it to the side to expose his neck. She moved in, eyes focused on his flow of life and magic just under the skin.

"As if Viktor wasn't bad enough, now you want to go down on fucking MALFOY?!" a loud, angry voice screamed.

Fury flared up within her like a scorching burn as Ron appeared out of nowhere, Harry's invisibility cloak fluttering unheeded onto the ground.

Ron's fist connected solidly with a startled Draco's jaw, and Draco went tumbling off the dock into the murky water below.

"Ron, no!" Hermione cried. Aching hunger warred with ever-increasing weakness. She hadn't fed. She'd been through a major stressor. She was tired, so very tired. She was scared. She jumped into the water anyway to save Draco, whom she had rolled with her power to spare him pain.

Ron, however, jerked her back out, dragging her back onto shore. "What the HELL, 'Mione?! You so desperate for a good snog that you'd resort to bloody MALFOY?"

"Let go of me, Ron! Draco is drowning!"

"Draco is it. now? He give you a really good shag and now you just can't live without him?!"

SLAP!

Hermione's hand stung against Ron's cheek, and his skin became as red as his hair. He put his hands around her throat, shaking and choking her as she struggled. "You're just not getting it, Mione! What do I have to DO to get your attention? You got something for stupid snakes, is that it? How many witches do I have to shag before you realise you're meant for ME?"
Fear flooded her panicked mind as she struggled to get to Draco. The walls she had erected around herself to protect her from embarrassing herself with her own feelings for her professor within the bond fell away. Fear blotted out all logic, reason, spells, and any other sort of rational thought. Her body still remembered what it was to be alive, and it kicked out frantically and struggled.

Black mist began to trickle up from the ground, over the still lake, and through the forest. Hermione's golden eyes began to glow as some memory began to return to her over her body's panic to "live."

There was a mighty roar, and vast dark wings seemed to span the entire lake as a black, black shape flew towards them. But, before it even came close, a small grey spider with jagged black racing stripes appeared on top of Hermione's head.

Its legs twitched as it seemed to grow.

And grow.

And grow.

The demonic-looking spider's mandibles clacked audibly together, acidic green venom dripping from gigantic fangs, and then it leapt onto a horrified Ron's face.

Ron screamed shrilly, thrown back on the ground as the spider continued to grow. He soiled himself on the spot, then turned tail and fled as fast as he could—smack into a massive tree branch, knocking himself out cold.

The dark form of one superiously brassed-off Severus Snape landed as he dropped off Minerva. The Animagus immediately shifted back into her human form and used a spell to pull Draco from the water and resuscitate him, even as Severus quickly tended to Hermione. His jaws opened, his lips curved back in a snarl as he saw the unconscious young Weasley's still body. He nuzzled Hermione's trembling form as she shivered against him weakly, her body severely strained without much-needed sustenance.

Snape drew a claw across his neck and drew her to it, his wings wrapping protectively around her as he cradled her to himself. She drank, her arms slowly moving to wrap around his neck as she snuggled closer into his soothing warmth.

Kobal happily busied himself by wrapping a still-unconscious Ron into his best interpretation of a silken yarn ball, shrunk himself back down, and then scurried up Hermione's leg and dove back into her hair.

Only when Hermione's feeding slowed did the great wings fold away and his form slowly revert to something more human. The Potion Master's woolen robes wrapped around her just like his wings once had. His smoldering eyes regained a more human appearance as the total blackness receded. The thick, possessive ire slowly trickled away.

Minerva touched Severus' shoulder. "Go, take her home, laddie. I will take care of Mr Weasley and get Draco safely back."

Snape's eyes were still feral, his expression caught in the strength of some great emotion before the iron of his control and his mask slipped seamlessly into place. He carried Hermione back to Hogwarts as the clouds passed over the moon and stole the light away.

Hermione opened her eyes to find herself staring at Snape's pale neck. Her eyes widened as she felt the lull of his heat, his magic, and the thrum of the bond she had tried so very hard to shut out during
her embarrassment. The rise and fall of his chest seemed so natural rather than the body's memory of breathing. His eyes were closed, but his arm was wrapped around her just like the reassuring curve of his great wings.

Her small hand curved around his ribs, tenderly caressing his warm skin. Her nose pressed up against his neck, breathing in his familiar scent and imprinting it on her memory.

Silently, she wished it would never end. That he would not wake up and withdraw, pushing her away once more.

"Please do not do that again," his voice rumbled. His head moved as he opened his eyes to stare into her face. "My poor heart could not take it."

Hermione froze.

"Hermione," he said, his hand moving to touch her cheek and move her hair to the side. "I wish you would have just told me. Like a normal person and not a frantic brain dump into my heart when your body thought it was somehow dying again."

Hermione trembled. "I'm sorry."

"Hermione." His deep, rumbling voice alone sent shivers down her body. Her insides heated seemingly to the boiling point. "Will you not say my given name?"

Hermione struggled. "But Professor Dumble—"

He put his finger to her lips. "Damn that meddling old fool," he said. "He has ruined your childhood, made mine a living hell, killed us both without even the courtesy to let us stay dead, aged you far beyond your childhood, and then hid you away, making sure that you pass for a student just so you can go on some bloody thankless quest to prevent that imbecile Potter from cursing himself to death while tripping over a sodding tree root."

Hermione touched his hand, her pearlescent claws gently drawing circles against his skin.

"Say my name, Hermione."


His eyes closed as a shudder went through his body. "Again."

"Severus," she repeated.

His neck tensed, a ragged breath coming from his throat. "Again."

Hermione pressed her face into his neck. "Severus."

His arms went around her, holding her tightly against him. "Hermione." A single tear fell from his eye, rolling down his cheek.

Warmth and amusement came flooding into them via their bond to their master as Desmondon's mental voice chuckled, "Finally! I was beginning to think I would have to smack your heads together. Do properly seal the bond, so we don't have a repeat of tonight, I beg of you. I would much prefer to keep my Morangelus whole, both in body and in soul."

With that, their master withdrew, leaving them with some much-desired privacy in their mutual embarrassment.
Hermione’s eyes were very wide. "What does he mean by 'seal the bond'?” she squeaked.

Octavius popped from his hiding spot behind the pillow to enlighten her. "Mind-blowing consummation!"

Severus’ hand slammed down on the black and white spider and shoved him back under the pillow as his mouth moved to cover hers.

"Oh—" Hermione sighed, her heart hammering. "That."

"Do you wish me to stop?"

"Please don’t ever," she whispered fervently.

Severus laughed then, a strange and genuine sound that rolled into her soul and curled up like a cat on a pile of freshly-dried laundry. "Probably not very practical in our job description, but let’s start with tonight and work our way up from there, hrn?"

"Okay," Hermione said as gave the end of his nose a tender lick.

His black eyes widened. "I don’t think anyone has ever seen my nose and thought to do that—not that I would have let them."

"Do you want me to stop?" she asked, repeating his own question to her.

He gave her a dark, primal look. "Hermione, you may use your tongue anywhere you desire, just not in front of Albus." He paused, his eyes filling with wicked intent. "No, forget I said that. By all means do that to me in front of Albus. Maybe he’ll have a heart attack."

Hermione made a small squeaking sound as Snape growled lowly, pinning her on her back as he caged her between his arms and demonstrated his rather skillful technique in the art of tongue yoga as he simultaneously erected the silencing and locking wards on his bedroom.

Hours later, as the pair lay entwined in wings, legs, and arms, the clutter of shadow arachnids scurried over them, pulling their well-won prize of the night over them as a blanket and made the pair of happy and content Morangelus vanish from sight.

Cinder looked at Haze. "Hey, isn’t this a Hallow?"

Haze blinked. "It doesn’t look hollow to me."

"Not hollow, hallow!"

"Well, hallow to you too!"

Octavius and Shade turned wearily to rub each other’s eyes with their forelegs.

Crookshanks, having appeared out of nowhere, leapt up onto the bed, took Haze into his mouth, and wriggled his furry bulk under the Cloak of Invisibility to join his beloved mistress in sleep.

The remaining spiders exchanged shrugs and scurried under the cloak too, settling around their master and mistress for a warm and comfy night’s sleep.

"Mr Malfoy, I am growing rather tired of seeing you in my infirmary," Poppy said with a tolerant but weary expression.
"Sorry, Madam Pomfrey," Draco said as he sat shivering on an infirmary bed, his hair still cold, wet and all over the place.

Pomfrey gave him a warm charmed blanket to wrap himself in. "Well, you just drink up this potion and then Minerva can take you back to your quarters, just as soon as we are finished making certain that Mr. Weasley doesn't have to have the headmaster come down here until morning."

Draco nodded.

Pomfrey walked over to where Minerva was glaring down at one Ronald Weasley, casting a series of spells to act as restraints to keep him secured to the bed. "Did he really attack Miss Granger?"

Minerva nodded grimly. "I have no doubt that it would have been far worse had we not shown up when we did."

"She is alright though? Do I need to—"

Minerva shook her head. "Shaken up, but unharmed. Severus is seeing to her as we speak."

Pomfrey sighed. "That poor girl. She's been through so much lately." She looked at Minerva. "Are you sure it's a good idea to have Severus cohabitating with Miss Granger? I mean, I know he's the best protection she could ever have, but—"

Minerva just shook her head and smiled. "Trust me, Poppy. No one cared more for Hermione Granger's safety tonight than him."

Poppy sighed. "It's just—"

Minerva eyed Poppy questioningly.

"I performed an age scan on her after the incident with Mr. Potter just in case I had to use potions that require one to be dosed by age," Poppy said slowly. "She's twenty-three, Minerva."

Minerva's brows furrowed. "She stopped using the time turner after her third year, Poppy."

Poppy frowned. "Does Albus know?"

Minerva pondered that silently. "There was a time when I could answer your question, Poppy, but I'm afraid that is not the case today."

"I just can't help but think—"

"Poppy?"

Pomfrey wrinkled her nose. "I can't help but think he put the two of them together on purpose." She paused and frowned. "Albus seems much more—addled lately, don't you think? He was wandering around the castle the other day, looking for his wand. When have you ever known him to misplace his own wand?"

Minerva shook her head. "I don't know, Poppy," she admitted. "Lately, it seems like he's getting lost inside his own head."

Poppy rubbed her shoulders briskly like she was cold. "What does that mean for us, Minerva?"

"I wish I knew, my old friend. I really do."
Minerva turned to escort Draco back to the dungeons and Severus, only to find that the exhausted boy had fallen asleep on the bed.

Smiling gently, she levitated the sleeping young wizard to his new room and tucked him in, taking her leave for a much-needed night's rest.

Harry sat in the chair by Ron's bed in the infirmary and took the head off a chocolate frog that he'd liberated from Ron's pile of get well soon candy. Ron stirred sometime around lunch, having been potioned up to keep him from jarring his head any more than he had already done in knocking himself clear out.

Ron groaned, sitting up on his elbows and pushing himself off the bed. "Whut happened?"

Harry shook his head. "You've been dosed, mate."

"Dosed? With wut?" Ron said, groaning.


"You eat anything weird lately, mate?"

Ron gave him a look.

"Yeah, I told them that too. You eat a lot of stuff, how was I supposed to know. I got it too," he said.

"Wait, you were dosed too?"

Harry nodded. "I told him I didn't have any reason to be possessive, yeah? I'm with Ginny."

Ron's brows furrowed. "Wait, that night she found out that we were going to leave. She brought us some of our mum's sweets."

Harry eyed him obliviously. "So?"

"Well, we both ate them."

Harry eyed Ron. "What you getting on about?"

"You asked if we ate anything that was different, and that was the only thing," Ron said, somewhat surprised he was the one putting it together for once.

Harry frowned. "But we saw more than just Ginny that night."

"Yeah, while we were eating mum's sweets, Lavender came in. Then 'Mione passed by with all her stuff on her way out of Gryffindor tower after Lavender and that whole mess of girls shunned her. You had your back to the door, so you never saw 'Mione leave."

"I didn't really make a connection there, Ron," Harry said slowly. "You and Lavender have been going at it like Nifflers in Gringott's."

Ron flushed the same colour as his hair. But he frowned, thinking. "Ginny was real upset we were going to leave. Lavender too, because Ginny can't keep her ruddy mouth shut. And she wonders why we don't tell her nuthin'."
Harry shook his head. "It couldn't be," Harry objected. "Not that it matters. Old Mad-Eye is here to do a trace. Dumbledore called him in as a special favour for the Order."

"Mad-Eye?"

"Yeah, he's none too happy. Up to his eyeballs over to St Mungo's trying to figure out why a hundred and some Death Eaters showed up puking bile and acid. Big team of Aurors there. Apparently they are even calling in the retired ones for it."

Ron seemed thoughtful. "Harry, you get the feeling we can't ever have a normal life?"

Harry rubbed his head. "Well, if dreaming about ruddy huge snakes coming out of my head and waking up to slime on my pillow means yes, then yes."

Ron stared at him. "Harry."

"What?"

Ron fumbled around to the mirror on the cabinet next to the wash bowl and towels. He lifted it up. Harry touched his forehead and stared.

"Whaa?" he said, patting around like crazy, checking the other side of his head as if it would move without his knowing. "It... it's gone."

Harry set the mirror down. "What does that mean?"

Ron rubbed his head. "I don't know, mate, but maybe it means you're free. To be, you know, normal."

"Well, as normal as being drugged by your sister and girlfriend normal is?"

Ron shrugged sheepishly. "As normal as Hogwarts gets, yeah."

"Come on, let's go see Hagrid. Where did you put my cloak?"

Ron frowned. "Cloak?"

"Yeah my cloak," Harry said. "It's not in my trunk."

Ron frowned harder. "Harry, mate, I can't remember anything after binging on mum's sweets."

"WHAT?!"

---

Severus woke to the snuggle of a very warm Morangelus trying to merge herself into his body as if merely being close was simply not enough. Her beacon of radiance hadn't diminished in the slightest, and if anything it had grown blinding. Her bushy mane of hair seemed almost sentient, tendrils reaching out and sprawling over every nearby surface, including him.

Their forms had entwined in many shapes, having finally settled, at least for this moment, on the human guise—that memory of form that was too hard to forget. It had been their original life, after all. And here, in this room, he had the form that had been with him when he had originally died—a younger wizard not so unlike Hermione. Both young and aged beyond their years by the horrors they had been forced to endure for that elusive greater good.
A warm hand touched his face—exploring its curves and dips. She stared at him as though he were the light and she the moth, her golden eyes shining with wonder.

"You're beautiful," she said, pressing a kiss to his nose.

"You're mad as a box of frogs, Miss Granger."

Her lips turned in a soft pout. "Is that how it shall be, Professor?"

There was a growl in his throat. He wanted his name on her lips. His name. Every syllable etched into the air with her distinctively emotional voice. He lowered himself to her neck, taking her skin into his mouth.

"S-Severus," she gasped, her talons clawing his back as she pulled him down on top of her.

Yes! That. Always that.

That whisper of emotion that might as well been shouted from every rooftop. Need. Want. Of him.

He would worship every curve, every bend, every turn of her body to hear his name, his true name, breathed as she spoke it.

Reverence.

Respect.

Adoration.

Need.

How could he deny her when she saw through the mask so completely—yet even when she did, she doubted. She doubted someone she viewed as vastly spectacular could ever wish to love her.

How could anyone that knew her not love her?

Hermione—this bossy, brilliant witch—was insecure. Chosen of Death, worthy of the Covenant with an ancient power that had existed the moment Life had sprung from the Void. All that power, and she was insecure, vulnerable that she was not worthy of compassion. And why should she, she probably thought, when her best mates barely even spotted she was female—anything more than a resource to help with homework and get them out of fixes. Then, just when she was perhaps starting to wonder what it would be like to be cared for, Albus Dumbledore had forced her to focus on growing up fast and leave such "childish" needs behind her, while so many of her peers were still clinging to their childish needs in abundance.

She did not need the glamorous patrician beauty of the pureblood lines, gallons of hair product, perfumes, and a flawless body to shine as perfection. She was perfection for him, just in the way her body tucked against his, how her wings wrapped just perfectly around his body, how her head nestled just so under his chin, how she rose to the challenge of his intellectual equal, retorting to his snark with her own, shining defiance.

Oh, what a pair they made. The brooding, snarky Dark wizard and this brilliant little witch whose size meant absolutely nothing to the vastness of her power—over magic, over him. Even to her power over Death Himself, having charmed her enough that it impressed him with a fondness to see her continue preserved as one of His own than to see her shell preserved just for Albus' grand plans.
Both she and he could have easily been some weak, servantile vampire that emptily hungered for fresh, human blood but not necessarily life. Desmondon's cloud of vampiric servants were not of his Get. No. They were simply lesser creatures fawning upon something ancient and hoping to gain his favour and perhaps a fraction of his power in the hopes to remember what it was like to be human.

Sanguini was one of those—vampires that were almost human. He had enough control to appear human and not lose control surrounded in food. But in the end, all vampires respected Desmondon. All of them knew he was beginning and the end. They may not realise he was not a true vampire, but it didn't matter. Just as Sanguini believed Severus was a vampire. Just as the Board of Governors accepted he and Hermione were both vampires—sometimes the lie was easier to believe.

And Albus was all too keen on letting the Board of Governors think his Potions Master was a vampire and that Hermione Granger was the victim of a vampiric curse or some such rot. The truth, as they say, was far stranger.

A figure was turning a page to the daily paper, licking one talon as he turned the page.

Desmondon.

He sat in the wing back chair by the fire quite casually, sipping a drink that some house elf had brought him.

"Master," Severus said, stepping out of the bed with some, or rather a lot, of awkwardness.

"No hurry, child," Desmondon said, reading. "You two were due for some alone time after what Albus put you through. I was hoping you two would figure each other out sooner rather than later, fearing you would end up parted in the war, forced to take sides, play some dramatic self-sacrificing plot, and end up self-flagellating yourselves before getting back together."

He said it so casually, Severus could only pull on his robes and stand there like a fool.

"I believe you have something of mine," Desmondon said casually, as if commenting on the weather in Wales.

It was then, Severus realised his mate was missing off the bed—well, half of her was. He ran his hands over the missing part and found the Invisibility Cloak. It, unlike the stone, had a disguised aura about it. No wonder he couldn't detect it before. He pulled it up, and Hermione muttered unhappily, her warm blanket having been stolen.

Flushing, Severus covered her up with the nearby duvet then realised how idiotic he was being considering Death had both held them both to his body and fed them his blood as they lay naked and transforming in his arms deep within the earth. Still—he did have some modesty. Somewhere. Gods only knew where the hell it was.

He picked up the Cloak of Invisibility and a clutter of sleepy spiders rolled out, squeaking. They scurried back under the duvet to join their mistress, including one black and white traitor that wanted a lie in with the others.

Octavius was such an cuddle monger.

Severus bowed to his master, handing him the cloak.

Desmondon put down the paper and took the cloak, soothing it with his hands. It shimmered to life under his hands, wrapping around him like a cherished friend, seemingly blending into his existing cloak and becoming whole again. For a moment, it seemed nothing had changed, and then a nova of
warm magic filled the room.

Severus felt himself shudder as the bond between he and his master grew hot like the sun against the skin on a very hot day. Power, unlike anything he'd ever been graced, flowed even more freely between them as though someone had released the floodgates of a dam.

Desmondon sighed contentedly. "Ah, it has been far too long. Even for those of us who measure time so differently."

Severus had to brace himself on the back of the nearby settee. The flood of returning power had been more than intense. His vision had auras. His aura had auras.

"Do sit down, Severus," Desmondon chuckled. "You're making me dizzy watching the thoughts trying to leak out your ears to dance about your head."

Severus simply sat. What else could he do, after all?

Hermione let out a loud yawn and squeak, stretching her entire body across the diagonal of the bed. Her claws scraped the linens ever so carefully, just enough to make a sound but not tear. She looked over to them sleepily, lazily blinking at the both of them.

"Hello, Master Desmondon," she said, warm and respectful despite her lazy position.

"Hello, my child," he replied, obviously approving of her languishing. "Sleep well?"

"Mmmhmm," she said, rumbling.

"I am glad of it," Death said, smiling smugly.

"You knew she wasn't as young as I thought she was," Severus accused.

"Of course, I did, child," Desmondon said with a chuckle. "I see all your memories when you take your first feed— the most important one."

"Why didn't you say something?" Severus asked.

"I did not feel it important," Death replied. "Compassion does not stop due to age groups, Severus. You would have to find your way to it regardless of what age you look, or what age you feel. Being able to accept her, her touch, her warmth, that was something you had to work out yourself. I cannot simply tell you that you will mean something to each other. That, you had to figure out yourselves."

Severus frowned, brows furrowed, but seemed to realise his Master was not being cruel or holding things back like a certain Albus did. He had allowed his Morangelus to find each other naturally by fostering their trust in each other and allowing them to come to their own conclusions. "I suppose you are right. I would have scoffed at the idea anyway."

Desmondon chuckled. "She had some baggage. You had some baggage. I'm sure I've had my fair share of it throughout the eons. The loss of my Hallows, for example, were a great set of 'baggage' as it were."

Hermione, who had glided over on silent feet, an impressive feat with her long toe claws, wrapped her arms around Desmondon and gave him a warm hug, snuggling into his neck and giving him an affectionate lick under the chin.

Desmondon, tilted his head to the side, allowing her access to feed, closing his eyes as she did so.
Severus watched, surprised that he was not, in fact, jealous. The bond between them was strong, and there was no doubt that what Desmondon felt for them was paternal and providing them both with feeds was simply the pleasure of that intimacy of mind. With every feed, he gained the feeling of their health, how they were feeling, and the most important sharing of their experiences through their eyes.

He would always be there to provide and protect, and that was no small amount of comfort.

Once Hermione was done, Desmondon beckoned Severus over, and he took over where Hermione had left off, surrendering his emotions and memories to their master as he was rejuvenated by his very specific, special cocktail of magic and life. Severus licked the wound as it closed, wasting nothing, pulling away as their master smiled.

"Now that you are more comfortable and I have had my Hallow's returned, I can reveal to you the last pieces of the greater task left to us. The Horcruxes—fragments of a soul that scream within objects never meant to carry such burdens."

Desmondon shrugged, letting out a sigh.

"One is here, a diadem, somewhere in the castle in a room that holds a great many things. One is a goblet, a cup, deep within the bowels of the goblin nation—their bank, held within the vault of a soul whose life came to me when Draco's Mark was purged. One is a locket, nestled in a hidden house on Grimmauld Place, protected by elf whose last task was to destroy it—but he could not. One is a serpent, living and evil, who stays at her master's side in all things. The other is also living, this Harry Potter, but in thanks for his keeping my Cloak undamaged, I did touch his head and remove it while he slept. He seems to have many things he needs to worry about without that monstrosity being one of them."

"I wonder if he'll even notice," Hermione said thoughtfully. "He spends most of his time covering it up and ignoring it, trying to remain normal."

"Perhaps you can time him to see how long it takes," Desmondon said with no little amusement.

Hermione smiled, up to the challenge.

Severus grunted as Hermione sat beside him and snuggled up to him, seeking his warmth. "So, a diadem, a goblet, a locket, and Nagini—we have a history, that snake and I. It is not a pleasant one."

"The locket must be at Grimmauld Place in—" Hermione frowned. "Oh! Kreacher's stash! He holds a lot of Black keepsakes in a pile to protect them from Sirius. Sirius threatened to throw it all out and burn it."

Severus arched a brow. "So, we should be glad this Kreacher is a hoarder."

Hermione shrugged. "It's worth a look."

"So, are you ready to take on this task?" Desmondon asked. "You need not do it right this instant, but it should probably be done soon, before word of Albus' deterioration reaches the wrong ears."

"Yes, Master," they said together.

"Good," he said standing. He took them both into an embrace, pressing his kiss upon their foreheads. "I will be listening, if my help you should require."

Both Hermione and Severus bowed. "Thank you, Master."
Desmondon smiled, holding out his hand. They frowned, curiosity burning. They held out their hands and he dropped something into each, and then he vanished into a wisp of smoke.

They stared into their palms as a shimmering serpent made of goblin silver slithered around their ring fingers and fused to their pale skin. Tiny gemstone eyes glittered up at them as though it were alive.

Severus and Hermione's jaws simultaneously hit the floor.

Octavius peeked out to peer at them at exactly the same time as Shade.

"Congratulations!" they cheered, lifting their legs in celebration.

_I'd recommend some serious cuddling time, perhaps after a nice, relaxing bath… together,_ Desmondon's voice chuckled as he withdrew from the bond's awareness to give them some much-desired privacy.

_A/N: No one gets to pull one over on Desmondon. Nope. And he always gets the last word._
The Strands Come Together

A/N: Oops that last chapter wasn't supposed to be that long… Sorry?

Beta Love: Curfew-Breaker-Dragon and the Rose, Budgie-Wrangler Dutchgirl01, Flyby Commander Shepard, and the Wait-Where-is-Sesshōmaru Hollowg1rl

Octavius: No money being made disclaimer here!

The Lord of Death and Albus Dumbledore

Chapter Three

Attachment and aversion are the root cause of karma,

and karma originates from infatuation. Karma is the root cause of

birth and death, and these are said to be the source of misery.

None can escape the effect of their own past karma.

Mahavira

Hermione's eyes widened as the goblin opened the vault with a low bow and then she saw what lay within. Her hand clasped Severus' as his tightened around hers.

"This vault now belongs to you according to the will set by the last of the Prince family on the condition of your marriage sealed in magic under the traditional virginity clause," the goblin said. "Please touch your wands to this parchment."

Hermione and Severus, almost zombie-like, pressed their wands to the parchment together as a flash of magic moved out and opened the vault even wider, igniting a number of ornate lanterns that were scattered throughout. Piles upon piles of fortune lay heaped within from galleons to jewels to rare tomes, filling the vault from floor to ceiling like a dragon's hoard.

"What do you mean, "virginity clause"?" Hermione whispered.

"A marital bond consummated without—" the goblin paused, looking a little uncomfortable.

"We both had no other lovers," Severus whispered.

"You've never had another lover?" Hermione's voice squeaked, disbelieving. "But you—"

Severus arched a brow at her.

Hermione flushed crimson. "You were amazing."

"Should I be flexing or strutting to your compliment?"

Hermione stared at him, audibly swallowing. "But, we weren't—"

The goblin coughed lightly. "Marriage of magic," he explained. "It is not something defined on
parchment and affixed with wax seal, madam."

"Oh," Hermione said. She looked up at Severus. "Did you know—"

"No."

"Oh."

"The vault has been waiting for a couple who fit the criteria for upwards of three centuries now, Madam Snape," the goblin said. He cleared his throat. "It seems that that one of the ancestors sealed the family fortune to keep it safe from selfish and eager relations having more and more children in the hopes of draining the family's seemingly vast array of assets. The clause is quite traditional, so it was not so out of place at the time—"

"But the sexual revolution locked them out of their own family fortune," Severus let out a laugh that filled the vault. "Done in by hormonal infatuation and a simple lack of self control."

Hermione sat down in the nearby chair, her hands running across the inlaid mother of pearl. "I guess being the infamous Virgin if Gryffindor did have an advantage after all."

Severus favoured his wife with an amused raise of both eyebrows. "Quite a few interesting things will come of this other than being able to afford a downpayment on the house of our choosing," he rumbled.

"Oh?" Hermione's ears perked towards him.

The goblin smiled, showing his many sharp teeth. "Many, many vaults in Gringotts are sealed with the exact same clause," he said. "A great many wealthy magical families wished to protect their fortunes from the threat posed by— gold-digging usurpers."

Hermione blinked at that. "Usurpers?"

Severus rubbed her hand soothingly with his fingers. "People who would entice suitors with the favours of their body in order to marry for plentiful gold. The magic knows, even if we do not."

Hermione, ever curious as a feline, asked, "So, not every, um, virgin act consummates a marriage?"

Severus watched his wife's face flush very, very red. "No, I think sometimes even Magic has certain limits to what it can bless. Also, marriage magic can only occur when both persons are of age, which typically happens around seventeen for magical folk, unless a betrothal bond is created between the children at a young age— which most pureblood families would do to ensure their bloodlines remain pure."

"Oh, thank Merlin," Hermione said, her mind filled with a what a world filled with feverish teenage groping begetting marriage would do to the Wizarding world.

"Margoz," Hermione asked, "You said many vaults in Gringotts are under that clause. Does that mean many of the old families have unclaimed fortunes sitting in limbo?"

The goblin smiled toothily. "Yes, Madam."

Hermione performed some rapid mental calculating, the astronomical numbers practically swirling around in her brain like a hurricane. "Do those families usually have secondary vaults for their children to cover the costs of their schooling and any other necessities until they become of age?"
Margoz grinned wider, showing all of his teeth. "Yes, Madam."

Severus looked at Hermione, an unasked question in his eyes.

"Severus," she said. "You said Harry's parents fled the Dark Lord, yes?"

"Yes?" he said, elongating the word in his confusion.

"I'd always wondered about them. I mean, Harry claimed that his parents were these heroes on the run from the Dark Lord, right? They were on the run. But, why didn't they just move to America or some other country? Why did they choose to stay here instead, knowing their family was targeted for death? Why not run somewhere further away if they had the resources with which to do so? Unless… they didn't have sufficient galleons at their backs to cover the costs of pulling up stakes and moving abroad."

Severus stared, his face utterly deadpan, and then his lips curved into an impressive sneer. "They didn't satisfy the Potter family vault's virginity clause, did they?"

Margoz gave a dark chuckle. "No, they didn't. Many families could not. None but the very strictest magical families. Purebloods such as the Malfoys—Blacks. Very particular about their children's behaviour. Marriage. Old ways. Some families wished to be more modern. More—permissive."

"Way to shoot yourself in the heart with an Unforgivable," Severus said, shaking his head. Hermione squealed in pure delight as she found an ancient tome buried in galleons. "A first edition of *Hogwarts: a History*… with a foreword by Rowena Ravenclaw!"

Severus eyed Hermione with pursed lips.

"**Haußibus UiáM Fecerít Incredíbili!**" Hermione cried, doing a stomping dance with her feet.

"**No!**" Severus gasped with disbelief as she thrust the book into his arms. He brushed a thick layer of dust off the cover. "Merlin's saggy man-tits! *Another* first edition!"

Hermione eyed her husband with pursed lips and then set the book down as her clutter of arachnids zoomed around the vault, chittering excitedly.

Mrowl!

Crookshanks dashed after them, having suddenly appeared in a cloud of black vapour.

Severus and Hermione exchanged looks. "I didn't know he could—"

"Don't look at *me*, witch. That is your familiar!"

Octavius popped out from under his hair and spronged off his shoulder with a "**Wheeee!**" before skittering off to explore the vault, accompanied by Shade, Kobal, Haze and Cinder, who were not about to be left out of something so exciting.

Shade bounced up and down on a particularly dusty box. "**Oooo, ingredients!**"

Severus glided over to examine the box in question, a smile quickly lighting up his face. "I think I just died and went to potion ingredient heaven."

Hermione shot him a look that clearly said "**Died, hrm?**"
He gave her a tug of lips that might as well been a sheepish grin.

"Does Snapes wish to add— creatures to vault access?" Margoz asked, utterly unflappable.

Hermione jerked her head up. "You can see them?"

The goblin smiled. "Goblins can see many things, Madam Snape. Many things most humans cannot."

"We would," Severus said, plucking a curious Haze out of a flawless Ming vase. She squeaked indignantly as he transferred her to the surface of a harpsichord that had been hidden underneath multiple ornate chests filled with jewelry.

She bounced up and down on the keys, making quite a racket.

"Leg, body, or paw prints here," Margoz instructed them, extending the parchment.

"Mrowl," Crookshanks said, strutting across the parchment. He had Haze clutched in his mouth and blotted her fuzzy body against the parchment, causing her to squeak. The other spiders skittered onto the parchment and it glowed brightly.

"Very good," Margoz said with a toothy smile that reminded Hermione of a film she'd seen during Shark Week on the telly. The goblin nodded as he checked things over, rolling the scroll up again. "The wards have been adjusted. Familiars can come and go as you wish. Do you wish your personal vaults to be transferred to the family vault?"

Hermione looked at Severus, a shy look upon her face. "Um… would that be okay?"

Severus blinked. "You're asking if I approve of our belongings mingling in a dark hole in the ground?"

"Yes?" Hermione said.

He touched her cheek. "Yes, Margoz, please make the necessary arrangements."

"Very well, it shall be done by the end of the week," Margoz said. "Do you wish to have the same family retainer for your vault?"

Severus' head turned as if on a swivel. "What?"

"A retainer, sir. Someone outside of family who is authorised to make small withdrawals in case of emergency."

"Ah, yes, wait—" Severus narrowed his eyes in sudden suspicion. "Who is my family's current retainer on this vault?"

"Mr Albus Dumbledore, Mr Snape."

Snape's figure abruptly darkened as black mist seemed to slowly swirl around him. His eyes blazed with dark fire. "How much has he taken from this vault over his years as the Prince family retainer?" he hissed angrily, his fists clenching.

The goblin closed his eyes, calculating rapidly. "Approximately five thousand galleons a year for medical care… for you, Mr Snape, while you were attending Hogwarts."

Hermione seemed to be putting the pieces together and was horrified by the ugly picture that began
to form. "He purposely arranged for you to get hurt, just so he could withdraw money from the vault in your name," Hermione whispered.

Molten rage wafted off of Severus—the shift so very close to the surface. His real form struggling to be free of the Mask. Hermione enveloped him with her arms, pressing her head to his chest. She said nothing, but she hugged him tight, wordlessly offering the support he needed to center himself. Then, like the cool touch of a cloth during a fever, their master's touch covered them.

Severus let out a long, cleansing sigh. "Thank you."

Desmondon's cool, centering touch withdrew, having given them both clarity in the midst of overpowering rage.

"Please replace him as retainer with Minerva McGonagall, Mr Margoz," Severus said, the cool mask of Professor Snape falling into place once more. "And file an immediate charge of fraud for every last withdrawal allegedly made on my behalf by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

"Of course, Mr Snape," Margoz replied with a bow. "Do you wish to conclude our business involving the illegal Dark soul-bound artefact harboured in the vaults at this time?"

Severus and Hermione nodded. "Yes."

"Very well, this way, please," the goblin said, bowing as they left the vault.

"You're sure, Snape?"

"Very."

Moody narrowed his eyes. "I don't like this."

"I'm sure there are a lot of things you do not like, Mr Moody," Severus said, his face set like stone. "But it is there."

Moody glowered at Severus, his magic eye spazzing. "You're hiding something."

"I hide a great many things, Mr Moody, including how I get my fabulous hair to be this perfectly greasy."

"Why you—" Moody snarled, his face getting red as he tried to storm right up into Severus' face.

Hermione stood in front of him. "He is telling the truth, Professor Moody. I would recommend you apply yourself to verifying it instead of attempting to preserve the honour of a man who has none."

Severus' lips twitched, tugging slightly upward. The moment he did it, Moody whipped out his wand and pointed it at Severus' heart.

The moment he did it, Hermione's golden eyes blazed, and she used one arm to cast an arc in front of her as a shield went in front of her. One hand touched Severus' and the shield strengthened.

"Get out of the way, girlie," Moody barked. "He's a bloody Death Eater. He'll kill you as soon as spit on ya."

"You cast one spell upon me, Professor, and I promise you that I will respond in kind," Hermione said, standing taller, her hair writhing around her head like a living thing.
"I don't think you're ready to duel against me, lassie," Moody snapped, his wand still pointed at Severus.

"I have been in many duels, Professor. I have lost to only one wizard. He is behind me. You are in front of me. If you value your life. Be. Somewhere. Else." **

Moody's jaw clenched, his eye zipping around wildly.

"What is going on here!?” Minerva shrieked as she stormed in, stepping between them. She used her stature to wedge herself between them, shoving Hermione and Severus behind her as she glowered fiercely at Alastor. "This is a school, Mr Moody, and you are not an active Auror anymore. You cannot just pull wands in a school and expect people to stand down when there are children about!"

Moody, reluctantly lowered his wand, his jaw twitching. Then, and only then, did Hermione dispel her shield.

"I invited you here, Alastor," Minerva said. "I asked Severus to fill you in, and at no time did I ever expect you to pull a wand on him here at Hogwarts! Now, please get in my office before I hex you myself."

Moody managed to look quite sheepish, a tint of pink on his cheeks as he did so, ducking into Minerva's office with a swirl of his long leather coat.

As Minerva requested a house elf to supply them with tea, Severus sat down on the small couch, and Hermione sat beside him, her hand still curled in his. Alastor glowered as he saw it, mingled disgust and pity clear on his craggy face.

"Encouraging fraternisation between student and faculty, Minerva?" Moody growled.

"There is no fraternisation when they are of age and married, Alastor, so just chew on that awhile I pull out some things you need to read before we get to the real reason I called you here."

"Married? Psh. You can't be serious."

"Would you like us to snog here in front of you, or will just seeing the rings do?" Severus said, his lip twitching.

The pair lifted their ring fingers where Death's marriage bands glimmered, pulsing with the signature of a magically bonded marriage— and then some.

Alastor's jaw hit the ground as he sputtered. "How? Granger is Potter's age? He's barely out of his training pants."

Minerva threw down copies of the journals Albus had hidden away in his office. "Read those, Alastor, then we some other things you need to view over there." She pointed to the Pensieve sitting near her window. And so you don't immediately assume they were somehow tampered with, we will extract them right here while you watch."

Minerva's phantom claws seemed to scrape against her desk.

Alastor tentatively accepted the pile of papers and began to read.

"Merlin, I need a drink," Alastor said, sucking down the last dregs of the Scottish breakfast tea in his
He looked at Severus and Hermione rather awkwardly. "I— apologise."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the former Auror, but Severus patted her hand. "You believed what you were supposed to, just as I once did. Just as he did, and as Minerva did. Until very recently."

"He aged you?" Moody looked sick to his stomach.

"I aged myself, Professor Moody," Hermione said, still lapsing into the last formal name she had for him. "But I did have help getting there."

Moody eyed her with pity, but not for the same reasons as before.

"Believe me, Professor," Hermione said. "Aging a few years does not sit high on my list of concerns right now. There are far greater concerns."

"The Horcruxes," Moody said. "And the fact Dumbledore pilfered money out of your family vault for years— your memories, the beatings, the alcoholism. Do you know if he was always that way?"

"Tobias was a bitter drunkard of a father, and I never knew him otherwise, but I have often wondered what would have drove her to such a man and lay down with him to have a child when so many other options remained to her."

Moody narrowed his eyes. "How long has Albus Dumbledore been the retainer for the Prince family fortune?"

"Longer than I have been alive, but that is all I know for sure. How he became a retainer over simply creating a minor bank account, I am not sure. I didn't even know the Prince family had a vault for their family fortunes until we went there to find the cup in Bellatrix' family vault." Severus flinched as Hermione's stomach growled noisily.

Hermione flushed. "Excuse me," she said.

Moody saw the look of pure panic on Hermione's face as she buried her face against Severus' robes.

"Amelia said there was something I needed to take an Oath for— something I'd understand only after I talked to you and after I saw something important," he said. "It involves you two, doesn't it?" His eye flicked over them, and he still saw them as he expected, but there was something else flickering around the edges. Something hidden deep. "Something Albus did to save your lives, there in the journals."

Severus and Hermione stared at him, silent and stone-faced.

Moody raised his wand. "I do solemnly swear on my wand and on my magic that anything I learn here tonight involving Severus Snape and Hermione Gr— Snape shall not leave my lips, quill, or anything else unless they allow it first."

His wand flashed a bright green, filling the room, as Magic accepted the former Auror's oath.

Severus face twisted into a grimace as his fangs flashed, and he bit his wrist. Hermione took it, snuggling into him as she drank in his offering. Severus' expression was peaceful as he wrapped his free arm around her, pressing his nose into her mane of curls. The bodies shimmered as the Masks fell away, and the younger Morangelus fed from her mate.
Severus turned his head to stare at Moody, his black eyes like fathomless pits of darkness in a twisted animal skull. His jaws parted as he huffed once, his wings wrapping around his mate as she fed. As she finished, she snuggled into him, purring softly. Then, and only then, did their Masks reform, hiding away their true selves to appear as Professor Severus Snape and the "young" Hermione Granger.

Moody just stared at them for a few minutes. Silent. Expressionless.

"Minerva, please tell me you have something highly alcoholic in a drawer somewhere," he said at last. "I'm going to need a bit of sedation or I'm going to storm up to that Headmaster's tower and do something I'll regret sometime later when I'm sitting in Azkaban for murder."

Minerva placed a bottle of four hundred year old scotch on the top of the desk. "Neat or with water, Alastor."

"Neat," he sighed. "Definitely neat."

Minerva poured him the scotch into her crystal snifter and pushed it toward him.

Alastor downed the lot in one go. He looked at Severus and for once his magical eye seemed at ease, no longer spazzing wildly about. "What happened to your Mark, Severus?"

Severus lifted his head slowly, realising he was being addressed by a man who had never before used his name with any sort of respect. "You cannot Mark the dead, Alastor," he said quietly, returning the gesture. "Well. you can, but it disappears the moment we shift, which is what mine did the first time I shifted to heal myself from the Dark Lord's twisted pleasures."

"He never suspected?"

"Oh, I'm sure he had his suspicions, but when he looked, he saw only what he wished to see, just as you did."

Alastor had the decency to look embarrassed. "How did you know when he called?"

"Cast a spell on someone like us, and we tend to remember the feel of it. The more Dark and, say... deadly in intent it is, the more it sticks with us, like a whisper or a homing beacon, depending on the spell. Hermione, for example, will know where Mr Potter is for the rest of his life. She will know when he is close to death because it was actually Potter who killed her."

"Potter?! Harry Potter did this to you?"

Hermione shook her head. "He cast the spell, but he meant to inflict it on someone else. While I can never fully trust him again, I know that his rage was not for me. That doesn't make it right, but I know where it came from. It was planted and nurtured early on. It was fed gradually, turning a small thing into a raging beast that churned in his stomach. Just as others fed him stories of how noble and pure his parents were— faultless, perfect— he also had his Muggle relatives telling him how horrible he was and how his parents were nothing but drunken freaks. Who to believe when neither story was the truth?"

Hermione's golden eyes glowed brightly and then faded. "Death brings one greater perspective. Forgiveness. I do not forgive to forget. I forgive to move on. He has only a set amount of time in which to make his mistakes and learn how to live with them. I have all the time in the world now, and I am no longer alone. We are no longer alone." Her fingers curled around Severus' and wove into his fingers.
"You would just let him get away with what he did to you?"

Hermione's smile was brief. "Who says he has or will?" she replied. "Punishment is kind of an odd duck. It can come from one's self even more strongly than from others. Even when one thinks they have escaped and gotten away scot-free, sometimes the truth comes back to haunt them. Just as Dumbledore is haunted by one event—from so long ago. He continually runs away from it, not towards salvation but towards his damnation."

Moody stared in awe. "You're very deep for a twenty-something who was effectively murdered by her own best mate."

Hermione licked her teeth thoughtfully. "He may find it sooner than he thinks when he discovers that he and Ginny will not be granted access to the Potter family fortune upon their marriage. So, too, will Ron, as I believe the only ones in the Prewett and Weasley family line who waited until marriage were Bill and Fleur. If there is any fortune left to be had, but do you not think it odd that out of two pureblood families, the Weasleys were forced to live on solely what Mr Weasley brought home to support his many children? Odd, don't you think, that neither Mr or Mrs Weasley ever mentioned such things to her children to at least warn them?"

Alastor just stared. "You're quite the spitfire, Miss Gr— Madam Snape," he said. "Is it true what you said? That Severus was the only one to defeat you in a duel?"

"She was twelve at the time," Severus said. "Lockhart was teaching. I don't think one witch in that classroom was paying attention to anything but his unnaturally white smile."

Hermione flushed pink.

Moody's eyebrow twitched. "Pretty sure that bloke was a child predator," he said. "He just Obliviated himself before we could catch him."

"You can thank Ronald's broken wand for that," Hermione snorted.

"Oh, but don't discount Lockhart's inherent idiocy," Severus added.

Alastor snorted. "So what is this thing about the jinx on the Defence teaching position?"

"There is one," Snape confirmed with a deep sigh.

"It has to be rooted to something physical. Would it be the classroom itself?" Alastor asked. "Wait, why hasn't it affected you?"

Severus smiled, unnerving Moody. "I'm already dead."

"Right," Moody said, shaking his head. "It's hard to consider you dead when you're sitting right there talking to me and— obviously still able to bleed."

Severus shrugged. "There is always a chance that he altered the jinx so I would continue teaching in that position."

Moody wrinkled his nose. "I think it's time to bring in the Unspeakables to dismantle that ruddy classroom brick by brick. It has to be something that focuses on the room itself. Can you authorise it, Minerva?"

Minerva nodded sharply. "Albus has been a right mess for months. I'll sign for it."
"And you still want to postpone bringing formal charges against him until after the war?" Moody asked.

"As much as it pains me, yes," Minerva sighed. "There is no telling what will happen if word gets out that Albus is not here 'protecting' Hogwarts. Even Riddle feared Albus, which is why he tried to get Draco to kill him instead."

"Well, I'll add these charges to the pile that Amelia is gathering. She's ready to feed that sodding old bastard his own beard. I didn't realise why until I came here tonight, and I almost botched that mess right up before we even got to the sit down," Alastor said, visibly chagrined. "So, what do you intend to do to the cup and the other Horcruxes as you find them?"

Severus smiled smugly. "Cut them down with a scythe and bleed on them."

Alastor blinked at that. "Right then. I wish you luck."

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Octavius gave a spider purr as Hermione rubbed his belly. The shadow spider wriggled his legs in pleasure as she gave him a fond kiss on the head before sending him back off to Severus.

"Awww, but he's a git," Octavius complained.

"But you love him," Hermione said.

"Well, yes, but he's still a jerkface!"

Hermione smiled. "He's my loveable git jerkface too," she said giving the spider a shoo on the abdomen.

Octavius sighed. "At least he cuddles you and doesn't try to squish you into random things."

Hermione grinned as the spider toddled off to return to his master. Despite the complaining, she knew Octavius was fanatically loyal to Severus, and Severus had a clear fondness for the spider in return. They just both covered it up with snide banter and insults. When it came down to it, though, Octavius could dish out every bit as much as he took, and Severus respected that in any companion. Octavius just didn't have a filter.

The jinx on the Defence Against Dark Arts position had finally been laid to rest. The Unspeakables had found that the position was anchored to none other than the dueling platform— the one thing that no one ever thought to check. It had been there for as long as anyone could remember, becoming almost as invisible as the classroom floor. People didn't think on it much, and that had played right into hiding it.

The first to stand on the platform every term was always the teacher— and so the jinx would unerringly find its victim. Even when they weren't using the dueling platform, it was the teacher's responsibility to check the platform— and all it took was that standing on it, and by that time, they were already jinxed and unable to sense the jinx anymore.

Twisted, but brilliant.

Severus sent her word via Octavius since he was so angry that he didn't want to risk opening the bond between them and then dumping all that rage into her mind or Desmondon's. Now, he was suffering through the Unspeakables taking the jinx off him— or at least what they could find of it. He suspected the jinx was still there and quite active. It was just really hard to kill someone who was already dead.
Thank Merlin for that, she thought.

Hermione had to smile at Minerva's enthusiasm when it came to getting things done behind Albus' addled back. With his brain frequently wandering off without him, he rarely ever left his office now. He even forgot to feed Fawkes, but thankfully the house elves were taking care of the bird's needs. Fawkes had taken up singing *I Plead Insanity* as the Headmaster's personal theme song, using his taloned feet to drum the beats on his perch.

Hermione nibbled on a few blackberries, her hunger finally abated enough to allow her to take her craving for life in something other than liquid form. That, she knew, would always be the surefire way to stop the hunger, but it was nice to be able to at least look like she was not starving herself at every meal drinking only tea and broth. Not that it really mattered anymore. School rumours pegged her as a vampire, with stories mixing as to the why. Most people thought it was because of Harry's curse. Others thought the dungeon bat had finally gotten so sick of her hand waving that he bit her. Most pitied her, but they also feared her due to her "condition." Half the school didn't want to catch her "curse" and the rest of them were terrified she'd drain every drop of their blood.

As if she'd ever want the blood of most of these witless dunderheads.

Oops. Maybe she was spending a just little too much time with her husband lately.

Not that either of them would have it any other way.

Harry had tried to talk to her when she had visited the infirmary— for once it wasn't *her* in the bed. Madam Pomfrey said he was finally free from the yoke of being dosed with Possessiveness Potion, and she made sure of *that* while he was visiting Neville, who had a concussion from getting whomped by the Whomping Willow when he attempted to harvest moss for Professor Sprout's class.

*Not that it had kept him and Ginny apart, really. They seemed addicted to each other,* she thought. *Only at least Ron was only obsessing with Lavender instead of both Lavender AND her.*

Both Harry and Ron were still serving "time" in the manner of detention and school service every night for their attack against her the first time— Harry for cursing her and Ron for his attack on her and Draco later having cemented their solidarity in mutual torment and a complete lack of free time. It seemed like they actually wanted to be in detention, however, because if they weren't in detention, they were off getting even more detention for getting caught snogging or— worse.

Hermione shuddered.

She'd not really felt that craving for the more carnal aspects of a relationship until—

She blushed. Well, she wasn't exactly complaining. Her mate was— everything and more. Yes, please. Thank you.

She'd been even more surprised that Severus had quite a fortune on his own even without the family vault— having squirreled hundreds of patents for every potion, spell, hex, and whatever he had created throughout his career.

"What would I spend it on?" he asked her as she saw the increased piles of everything in the family vault. "Until now," he clarified.

She recalled the haunted look on his face as he confessed he'd even sent money to cover the Malfoys' witness protection before they had been married. Lucius had lost a great deal of his family's money thanks to the Dark Lord's continual demands. Bribes, payments for services, pleasures— Lucius had, in his own way, looked out for Severus, as misguided as it had been, once upon a time.
Hermione, however, had surprised him by hugging him and telling him there was no guilt in helping a true friend, especially one who went so far back. Lucius, she had said, and perhaps the entire Malfoy family, had a new lease on life. When the Dark Lord was well and truly gone, he could eventually rebuild.

That had earned her a seriously good snog.

No complaints there. Nope.

It was a discombobulating to have such an accumulation of extreme wealth hidden away. Knowledge, money—but, short of being able to renovate Spinner's End and selling it to what must have been the happiest family in Cokesworth by the time they were done repairing and modernising the old house—they knew they had time to find just the right place for themselves. They could wait. There was no hurry, and they could afford to eat out and spend a bit of time away from Hogwarts on occasion.

All things of value from Severus' old house went into the vault—mostly his collection of books. Everything else had bitter memories attached to it or else had been pawned off by his "sodding drunk of a father for more cheap booze."

Hermione, who normally would have wanted to meet the parents of her husband, realised perhaps it was a blessing that she did not, lest she might have done some terribly unspeakable things to them, with or without magic, for the horrors they had inflicted upon their son.

When a lipping of her hair startled her, she found herself surrounded by the Hogwarts thestral herd and smiled. They crooned and keened, sounding more like a pod of whales rather than creatures of the land or sky. She realised with some delight in the epiphany, that the look of the thestrals' heads looked mighty familiar—much like the Morangelus, only with fewer lines of pointed teeth. Perhaps sharing in the domain of Death had something to do with it—the reason why most did not see their true natures or the shadow spiders. She had not seen the thestrals when Harry had tried to tell her about them.

It wasn't though she didn't believe him as much as she hadn't seen them, and he'd asked "Don't you see them, Hermione?"

The answer to that being "No, I don't see anything, Harry. The carriages are pulling themselves, like always."

It had been pretty naive of her, thinking back on it, much like her old obsession with freeing the house elves "whether they believed they needed it or not." She sighed. She was a right example of oblivious self-righteousness there, for sure. Not everything that looked like slavery actually was slavery.

She and Severus were prime examples of such. To the normal person, perhaps, they were the slaves of Death, forced to do his bidding in all things. They were not. They chose to bind themselves to his service, and he, in exchange, protected and guided them to what he needed of them—tasks they were free to complete in whichever way they wanted to, provided they followed the rules he had set.

And Death had many more rules than they did. Their only rules were to follow his wishes and not take those whose time was not yet up. Those, they were to leave alive—or barely alive, depending on their particular transgressions.

Death Eaters, almost Death Eaters, most of Fenrir's rejects, and those who tried to kill you first—well, they had their own karma backlog just waiting to rise up and smother them. The ones that had
attacked her parents, for example, were enjoying her Lord Master's private, erm, hospitality.

It wasn't like Master Desmondon was going to say "Oh, they're trying to kill you and the people you actually care about? Take it to the face, dear."

Hermione snorted. That was so not Master Desmondon's style.

The nearby thestral nickered, bowing, inviting her to ride, and Hermione smiled. "Why not, eh?"

She slipped onto the thestral's back and in front of the wings, hugging the animal's warm neck. Their bodies exuded gratuitous amounts of heat and warmth, so unlike their looks, which people often thought of reptiles, cold blooded, and monsters.

She signalled the thestral with her seat, letting him know she was ready, and the beast spread its great wings and took a running gallop into the air as the rest of the herd followed behind, flying in lazy circles and emitting friendly calls.

As Harry sat on the fence near Hagrid's hut, he saw the thestrals touch down in the field, nimbly dodging the Whomping Willow's not-so-friendly swats. At first he thought they were just milling about, waiting for Hagrid to feed them, but then he realised there was someone perched on one of their backs.

Hermione.

Harry's stomach tied in knots, still unsure what to think.

Ron sat down beside him. "He's not here, mate. Maybe we can come back later." He paused. "Who's that?"

"Hermione."

"Wut?" Ron said, disbelief writ bold across every freckle. "She finally come down from on high to mingle with us lowly mortals?"

Harry gave him a look that wasn't all that kind. "If she hadn't been so badly hurt, she'd still be around us. You do realise that right?"

Ron huffed in annoyance. "It was just an accident, Harry. We're already being punished for it. The least she could do is acknowledge that."

"By what? Pretending it didn't happen? She has claws, mate. Her eyes— It's not exactly like I gave her a case of faerie pox and she just broke out in rainbow spots for a week."

Ron sighed.

"And then you went and almost tried to kill her— again," Harry said, staring down at his shoes.

"I was under the influence!" Ron protested angrily.

"Does it really matter?" Harry asked, running his hands through his messy mop of black hair. "We both— did some pretty horrible things."

The thestral herd milled about, and Hermione was brushing each one, combing the few hairs they had, and using a soft brush to dust them off. She grabbed the large tube of lotion that was sitting on the fence and slathered each thestral, vigorously rubbing it into their dry areas. Each beast nickered
and rubbed up against her, eager to get their turn and quite impatient for their own share of the attention.

Harry stared as some of the brushes seem to move on their own, and the lotion she applied seemed to smear itself on each thestral. Ron, who only saw brushes moving themselves stared blankly into the almost-dark of dusk, confused. "She mental? What's she brushing? Air?"

"Thestrals, Ron."

"Oh," Ron said, frowning.

"There you go," Hermione said with a beaming smile. "Thank you very much for the ride."

The thestrals whickered and rubbed up against her in thanks, obviously appreciating her clawed scratchings on their itchiest spots.

"You know, I never really liked flying before," she confessed to one of the foals. "Brooms and I never quite got on." She sniffed and then smiled. "I think I can handle thestrals though."

The baby thestral nickered happily, tossing his tail. His curved almost-beak nibbled on her curls.

"Gah, no, not the hair," Hermione laughed, giving the young foal a hug around the neck before it trotted off to his mum. She looked down at her robes. "I'm now covered in hair," she grumped.

"Out for a little evening romp, Miss Granger," a familiar voice cut through the night sounds, startling the crickets.

"Why, yes, Professor, it seems that I am," Hermione answered. Her face was radiant, beaming with happiness.

"You seem to have quite the collection of hair, Miss Granger," he replied, his dark shape seeming to tower over hers.

"I was born with it," Hermione replied.

"Such cheek," Snape said wryly, his oh-so-white fingers plucking the long strands of thestral hair from her shoulder. He pulled out a long box and his wand."

"Do hold still. I would hate to injure something."

Hermione's lips turned in a smug smile as he guided every single stray thestral hair into the box.

"Thinking of building your own thestral, Miss Granger, or do you have other entrepreneurial goals in mind?" he said, face dispassionate.

"I was thinking of bribing someone with them," Hermione said, her face carefully stoic.

"Do tell? Mr Ollivander, perhaps? I'm sure he'd love to make himself an entire mountain of elder wands."

"You, actually," she said, her eyes smiling for her.

"And what, pray tell, could I possibly have to interest the likes of you, hrn?" Snape's dark eyes gazed down his impressive nose at her, staring her in the eyes.

"I was thinking, to start, perhaps a kiss," she said, going on her tippy toes to oh-so-delicately lick the
very tip of his nose. "And then, perhaps, you could throw me down onto this comfy patch of moss and have your wicked way with me out here under the stars."

"Miss Granger, are you propositioning me?"

"Why, is it working?" she asked. "I do love your sexy crooked nose," she purred. "And you have the most delicately long fingers, which I would love to have touching every bit of my attention-starved body as you said just about anything to me in that voice of yours...Professor."

"Hrrr," Severus growled. "Attention-starved? Are you telling me that in all of Hogwarts, no young wizard has come to find value in your more— feminine assets?"

"I fear they don't even know I'm female," Hermione replied sadly, sticking out her lower lip in a pout.

"And you would pick one such as me to bring you into the world of adulthood? Did you fall and hit your head, perhaps?"

"Perhaps, but, it is my choice. I am of age, after all, and perhaps I prefer the touch and attentions of an experienced man to the clumsy fumbling of overeager teenage boys whose only desire is to fornicate in alcoves in Hogwarts in the hopes they are not caught praying beyond all logic that the very act does not saddle them with child and ruin their illusion of adolescent invulnerability without responsibility."

"And what if I were to call you on this so-called responsibility, Miss Granger," Snape said, his nose touching hers. "What if I would demand your own responsibility and inform you that would I bed no female who is not entirely mine. Body." He pressed against her. "Magic." He ran his hands over her face. "Soul." His face twisted into a cruel smile. "Would you willingly choose to bind yourself to such a forbidding scarecrow of a wizard? This vampire of the dungeons. Bat. Git. Overall bastard extraordinaire?"

"Yes, please," Hermione breathed, her voice a shudder of heat and desire.

"And who am I to argue with the foolishness of youth, when such talent and feminine guile walks right up and takes me by the nose, hrm?" He pulled out a pretty silver ring. "Very well, Miss Granger. I would make you mine. With this ring and a kiss, I claim you as mine." He paused. "You are a virgin, yes? The binding magic will not be kind if you are not. Last chance to say no."

Hermione slipped her finger through the ring and pulled his head down into passionate kiss that practically pulled Snape down onto the wall with her. When they parted, they were breathless, and the air was thrumming with thick magic.

"Welcome to my family, Madam Snape," Severus rumbled. "Shall we consummate our union right here or in a proper bed like civilised people?"

Hermione grinned wickedly. "How about over your teaching desk, professor?"

Snape's eyes grew comically wide. "I had no idea you had such adventurous... interests."

"Get to know me," Hermione purred. "Perhaps you will learn something too."

_Thud._

Hermione and Severus turned their heads at the same time, spying the pale, fallen forms of one Harry James Potter and Ronald Bilius Weasley— both boys staring up at the sky with drool leaking from
the corner of their mouths. Their bodies were dressed in very opulent and ornate drag, complete with stunning Elizabethan skirts, full makeup, corsets, and excessively frilly underthings.

Hermione eyed Severus. "My love?"

"Hrm?"

"Did you happen to ward the paddock for privacy with a cross-dressing jinx?"

"Madam, what do you take me for?"

"A cruel, merciless bastard."

"Your cruel, merciless bastard," he said archly, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead.

"I wouldn't have you any other way—" she purred invitingly. "Except maybe in bed. Right now with your mouth right here and your hands right here," she said meaningfully.

"Is that all, Madam Snape?" he asked.

"I'll think of the rest depending on just how well you do."

Severus rumbled. "Challenge accepted."

Colin Creevey wasn't even sure what he was taking pictures of, but when the Hufflepuff Quidditch team pointed him in a direction and told him to click away like nothing else mattered, he merely did as he was told. The entire team was at it, laughing and yelling and wolf-whistling like mad, but Colin had no idea what was really going on. For all he knew, there was a brawl going on, but at least he'd have plenty of pictures for the school paper in the morning.

As he sat alone in the dark room waiting for the photographs to develop, he moved them over to the setter, jiggling the tray so they would set correctly. Squinting at the pictures, all he could see was a pair of silly witches dressed in fancy old-style clothes from the Muggle world. However, when all the photos were hanging to dry, he opened the door to the dark room and lit the lanterns again so he could see…

And promptly grabbed up all the photographs and ran full tilt to the newspaper room, yelling for them to hold the presses.

"Professor McGonagall you have to do something!" Harry pleaded.

"She's been Imperiused!" Ron exclaimed.

"She must've been Confunded!" Harry added

Minerva, who was trying really hard to take two teen wizards dressed in Elizabethan drag seriously, cleared her throat. "Let me get this straight, Messrs Potter, Weasley. You were out on the grounds, well after curfew, spying on another student, and allegedly saw this student, how did you put it—"

"Mione went down on Snape!" Ron blurted out. "It was disgusting!"

"More disgusting than, say, the over twenty detentions you two gentlemen have accumulated so far for being caught in various indecent acts in the hallway alcoves, Mr Weasley?" Minerva asked,
giving both boys a stern look over her spectacles.

"That's different! That's only natural!" Ron defended himself, his ears going very red.

"Well, gentlemen, while normally we would take such accusations very seriously here at Hogwarts," Minerva said, with a twitch of the invisible whiskers on her face, "I fear there is nothing we can really do about a consensual marriage bond or—" Minerva coughed lightly. "Relations taking place between two consenting adults."

"WUT?!" Ron blurted.

"What do you mean?" Harry exclaimed.

Minerva did her very best to keep a straight face. "You two are barking up the wrong tree. I think instead of trying to point out sin where there is none, perhaps you should instead focus on how your own behaviour is not exactly helping your respective reputations, and those reputations have become more than a little shaky as of late. I must ask that you work on curbing your… appetites, lest you, ah… expose your younger and impressionable fellow students to acts that they should not have to witness in these halls of education."

"Now, that being said, both of you will be serving an extra month’s worth of weekend detentions assisting Mr Filch in his duties for breaking curfew and falsely accusing the staff of this school of lewd behaviour."

"But Mione is a student!" Ron argued.

"No, Mr Weasley. She is not," Minerva calmly informed the aggrieved redhead.

Suddenly, there was a quiet knock at Minerva's door.

"Ah, do come in, please," she called out welcomingly.

Hermione walked in followed by the always looming with a touch of dooming Professor Snape.

"Hello, Professor. I'm here to sign the contract we discussed."

"Ah, yes, Hermione, Severus. Please give me a moment—" She shuffled through her drawers and pulled out a scroll. "Here we go," she said, smoothing it out. "A one-year apprenticeship under Horace, who has, shall I say, quite gleefully agreed and is greatly anticipating a return to the joys of retirement. After which, you will, upon completion of your mastery project, be offered a full-time contract position here at Hogwarts as the new professor of Potions and head of Gryffindor house. Congratulations, my dear."

Hermione dipped a quill into the inkwell and signed her name, and Minerva witnessed it with her seal. "Thank you, Professor."

"No, thank you," Minerva said, a smile spanning her entire face like a certain Cheshire Cat as she handed the younger witch a hefty sack of galleons. "Here is your stipend to purchase your teaching robes, pins, and signet rings. All the usual rubbish." She winked at Hermione. "Horace even added a little extra to bribe you perhaps into mooching some of Severus' formidable expertise to fast track yourself, I assume so he can get back to his retirement all the quicker."

"Professor," Hermione said with a gasp, placing her hand to her sternum. "Are you encouraging me to use Professor Snape's impressive fountain of knowledge as my personal drinking fountain?"

Severus' expression didn't waver in the slightest. "What makes you think there is anything she could
offer that would make me take away from the joys of watching dear Horace searching for the retirement he still pines for like a long lost lover?"

"Oh, I'm sure you could think of something that might distract you from that, laddie," Minerva said, her eyes sparkling with mischief and her lips tilting just slightly upward.

Minerva smiled. "As much as he will probably hate you for it, do take Severus out to get some sun while you shop. But try not to spontaneously combust, if you please."

Severus wrinkled his nose at her. "Are you trying to kill me, Minerva? Everyone in Hogwarts knows I will spontaneously combust if exposed to sunlight."

"Just dodge those sunbeams, laddie," Minerva said with a warm chuckle. "With all that forbidding black you choose to wear all the time, all you really need to do is pull up your hood and keep your hands in your pockets."

Severus eyed the Deputy Headmistress with the look that consistently made Hufflepuffs cry and drove even the proudest Gryffindor to slink away from his black gaze with their tail tucked firmly between their legs. Minerva, however, simply passed him a shortbread biscuit and gave him her best feline smile.

"Sorry for interrupting your conference, Professor," Hermione said as both she and Severus turned to leave. "I will leave you and your… ah, young ladies in peace."

"WAAAAAT?!" Ronald screeched. "I am not a lady!"

Hermione turned slowly like a star in a horror movie. "Ronald? Is that YOU?! Wait… HARRY?!"

Ron, having suddenly realised that he could have denied everything had it not been for his own big mouth, turned bright red as he stammered and sputtered. Harry gave Ron the most hateful look he could muster, fervently wishing his best mate would have shut the ruddy hell up while he was ahead.

"Haven't read the paper, yet, hm?" Severus' voice purred as he pulled a copy of the Hogwarts Chronicle out of his robes and placed it down on Minerva's desk.

Harry made a frantic lunge for it, quickly trying to hide it against his chest, unaware that the back side was the one plastered with Colin's impressive collection of pictures from the Quidditch practice.

Ron tried to slither under the desk as Hermione grinned wickedly. "Well, I know what I'll be reading in the bath tonight, hm?" she said.

Hermione and Severus swept from the room in a flurry of black cloth as Harry and Ron did their best to die of embarrassment.

Minerva, steepling her fingers, could only watch, the smothered grin on her face sparkling in her eyes as she attempted to remain proper.

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**SHOCKER: Boy-Who-Lived Comes Out In Transvestite Love Affair!**

*Ginevra Weasley and Lavender Brown Left Heartbroken!*

*Oh ho ho, Wizarding Britain! It has become quite the stirring pot at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, and I, Rita Skeeter, have the scoop for you!*
Yes, we all preach to our children to keep their budding libidos under control and their hands to themselves, but do they ever listen? In today's age, it seems to hard to keep the old practices alive—traditions that have guarded many a family fortune over countless generations. Of course, few families actually say the why, right? It is assumed that when the parents say to use good judgement that the child doesn't plan to mess up their entire future by say… shagging in a random cupboard or public hallway.

Stuff and nonsense, you say?

I don't think so, for I have learned the dark and dirty secret of the Boy-Who-Mucked-Things-Up and his best mate, Ronald Bilius Weasley, thanks to the photographs taken by the up-and-coming young photographer Colin Creevey—photos that were so good, the Daily Prophet has offered him a permanent position upon graduation as well as paying him top galleons for rights to his stunning array of candid photos of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley running side-by-side through the hallowed halls of Hogwarts sporting elaborate Elizabethan dresses and full makeup.

And if such stories and photos do not sway you to accepting the truth that Harry Potter is hardly an innocent victim in this story, I have it on very good authority that the two young wizards' now ex-girlfriends have shocking news of their hidden pregnancies—having consummated their teenage lust in many a dark and deserted school hallway.

So, who is the betrayer? Who is the betrayed?

It might be easy to believe that Potter and Weasley were merely the hapless victims of someone's epic prank, but after seeing Ms Brown and Ms Weasley dressed as Muggles and sneaking out to get Muggle pregnancy tests together, what can I truly say? Seems like there is quite a lot going on in the life of Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley.

What Potter and Weasley intend to do about this shocking state of affairs, however, remains to be seen.

Draco Malfoy, heir to the "throne" of Malfoy, was losing his marbles all over the shared common room. Minerva, who at least had the decency to be in cat form before getting herself high on nip and rolling around completely stoned out of her feline mind, chased Haze around with Crookshanks until the dizzy spider dove under a low cabinet to escape her furry pursuers.

Severus, staring down at the young wizard sprawled out on his floor, finally sighed. "Are you quite finished?"

Draco continued to roll around, laughing hysterically. "No, no, not even close."

Severus rolled his eyes.

A clutter of spiders skittered by carrying a delicate silver diadem set with a sparkling blue stone. "Don't mind us!"

"Nope!"

"We're just doing all of the work around here."

"While you're rolling around on the floor."

"Gosh."
They skittered up to put the diadem on Hermione's desk, where she and Severus sat face to face, hands linked across the desk as magic swirled around them. Dark wisps of black aether swirled around them, their eyes fully black and fully gold, the irises having swallowed the whites completely. They stared into each other, but they did not see the other. Hermione's curls seemed to twist and writhe on their own as Severus' hair stood up from the roots as though he'd just walked across a bearskin rug.

Skullface to skullface, their jaws were slightly parted as they focused. Darkened vapour swirled from each of their mouths, moving around the other in a seeming caress. Their wings hung loosely, but the Spurs touched, hooking around the other's in a makeshift cocoon.

\[\text{Master of Death} \]
\[\text{Balance of Life} \]
\[\text{Lurks in the darkness} \]
\[\text{But walks in the light} \]
\[\text{Seeker of souls} \]
\[\text{And master of ends} \]
\[\text{Purify this diadem} \]
\[\text{Once crafted amongst friends.} \]
\[\text{Restore the purity} \]
\[\text{Of knowledge gained,} \]
\[\text{Release the Darkness,} \]
\[\text{Within this object is chained} \]
\[\text{Blood of the servant,} \]
\[\text{Freely given.} \]
\[\text{Blood of the master,} \]
\[\text{Within is hidden.} \]

With a rush of magic, they bit their hands and let the blood drip over the diadem, and the circlet screamed as a foul, black corruption immediately fled from its core. The scream was strangled, almost too human, filled with the kind of rage and hate that held an entire lifetime condensed in one shrill, agonising wail.

A golden goblet floated in the air before them, and Octavius lead the way in catching it in silk, sticking it firmly in place as both Hermione and Severus extended their talons forward. With a sharp thrust, Severus grasped the goblet, and it started to buck and tilt wildly in the webbing. Hermione's eyes glowed as she bit her finger and then smeared her blood over the goblet.

\[\text{Goblet of Hufflepuff} \]
\[\text{Of the workers' caste} \]
Noble of spirit
Duty to last.

Blood of our Master
Through us does flow
Purify this travesty.
Where darkness was sown.

Back to the corruptor,
These curses shall flee.
Destroy the destroyer,
Thrice back in deed.
Wherever the creator
Hides in the dark,

Our Master sends greetings,
To demand you embark.

Choose to seek out your end,
in our Master's embrace,
Or be flung in the Abyss,
Without even a trace.

Your life is unnatural,
Defying the law.

You seek not the Cycle,
Only other's pain and awe.

We give you one year,
To settle your earthly affairs.
After which we shall come,
And your unworthy soul to reap.

With the blood of our Master,
You will know pain,

Or you can come to him willingly,
Wearing only your shame.

The end will come one way,

Like it or not.

Be it on our terms,

Or in the chains you have wrought.

As Hermione's blood touched the goblet, it began to smoke as dark slime oozed out of the gold metal. It bounced in the web, unable to escape its strong, silken prison, and it then it seemed explode outward, attempting to destroy the pair as they sat at the desk together.

The moment the blackness touched their pale flesh, it ate it away, dissolved the skin, muscle, and fat, liquefying it as it went all the way down to the bone until two white skulls were all that remained, along with matching sets of skeletal talons. The skulls seemed to twist into mocking smiles, twin flames glowing from the sockets where their eyes should have been.

Slowly at first, and then faster, the flesh seemed to crawl back into where it belonged, reforming as it had left. The goblet was still in the silken web, pristine once more.

Hermione yawned, showing all fang and a lolling tongue just before her elongated muzzle-skull reformed into something more human.

"Tired?" Severus asked quietly.

Hermione nodded. "Is it bad that I've already forgotten what year this is supposed to be for me?"

Severus gave his own yawn and shrugged. "I don't believe so, considering all we've been through lately. All the time turning probably didn't help any in your case."

Hermione chuckled. She grew sombre as she stood and wrapped her arms around herself in a shiver. "I should probably tell Draco he can stop plastering his ear to the door and come back in the main room, hrn?"

Severus rolled his eyes. "No."

Draco burst through the door and blurted, "Hey!"

Severus shook his head. "Point made."

Draco snorted. "Why are you such a git, Severus?"

"I'm paid to," Severus replied. "It's in my contract."

"Yeah, and he's a master at it!" Octavius squeaked, earning himself a firm squish and a shove back under Severus' hair. "Git!"

Shade, Cinder, Kobal shook their heads simultaneously, seemingly glad they weren't having to deal with such rough handling.

"I want ice cream," Cinder said.

"Ooo, what kind?" Kobal asked eagerly.
"Do you think it would be too much to ask for bugs in my ice cream?"

"I don't think that's normal," Kobal replied.

Haze skittered over. "Double chocolate and toffee chips," she said, in a rare moment of lucidity.

"I agree with her," Draco said with enthusiasm, plucking Haze off Hermione's shoulder.

Poof!

A house elf arrived with a tray full of bowls of ice cream—and a few extra tiny bowls of ice cream, perfectly spider-sized.

"Banana split with lacewing flies, yum!" The spiders all dove in, taking their mini-bowls and making themselves obnoxiously happy.

Hermione handed Draco the double chocolate and toffee chip bowl and Severus the espresso with fudge swirl before taking her own bowl of black raspberry chocolate chunk. "Thank you, Figgy."

"Figgy is happy to serve most glorious Snape Madam!" the little elf beamed and vanished with a poof.

Hermione looked down at a diagonal, her head tilted oddly as she sighed. "Well, I suppose that's better than them running in fear that I'm going to give them clothes."

Severus made a scrunched face. "I heard about that."

Hermione flushed. "I was an idiot."

"You probably saw some sort of house elf underappreciated slavery," Severus said. "But—if they are doing their job right, they mean to be underappreciated. Their magic is making things seem... magical."

Hermione tilted her head. "I think you're right."

"As Lucius would say, 'Of course, I'm right. I'm me.'" Severus did a flourish and a bow.

Hermione snorted, eating her ice cream.

Severus shook his head, looking like it truly hurt him to emulate Lucius Malfoy for any amount of time. "I feel like I am going to spontaneously combust."

"That did look rather painful," Hermione admitted. "Especially that hair flip."

Severus sighed.

Octavius let out a yawning squeak. "So, um, what's next?"

Hermione stared into her bowl of ice cream. "I have no idea."

"We wait for the Dark Lord to give up, or we meet up in a year and force our hand." Severus rubbed his chin and sighed. "That is the time when our confrontation would have happened regardless of what we are."

"Severus you make the end of the war sound like such a bother."
"Oh, but it is," Severus confessed.

"No, a bother is Sybill Trelawney," Hermione sniffed. "A bother is having to save your supposed friends from blowing everyone up in class and then having to take a detention for it."

Severus snorted. "Missing such days, are you?"

Hermione plunked her empty dish down. "No, not really."

"I really wasn't a fan of my school days either," Severus said. "Only my tormentors could find me anywhere, somehow, anytime."

Hermione frowned. "Harry's father?"

Severus nodded.

Hermione scowled a moment, the gears in her head turning. "I think I know how they did it."

His eyes looked at her guardedly. "Go on."

Hermione extended one hand, her fingers twisting into gnarled talons. She put her palm up. Severus carefully laid his hand in hers, and there was a jolt as her memory flowed into his.

His hissed quietly as the memory was almost too clear.

Potter and Weasley were there, under the invisibility cloak as they muttered to each other, pulling out a folded piece of parchment. They tapped it with their wand and said, "I do solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

The parchment became a giant, highly-detailed map of Hogwarts, filled with moving names.

Severus shook off the memory. "The old me would be livid," he said after a long silence. "I think i'm just a little disgusted that I was outwitted by a ruddy piece of smart-arsed parchment."

Hermione winced. "Sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "Dying has a way of— providing perspective."

Hermione placed her hand over his. "I am glad to have you in this journey, Severus."

Severus stood, tugging her with him to their joined bed chambers. "I think it's time we did a little something for ourselves, love."

Hermione squeaked as his mouth covered a sensitive spot under her ear. "Okay," she murmured against his cheek.

He gathered her up in his arms and plunked her down on the bed. He gave her a wicked smile that spoke volumes only to her.

Hermione admired his chain of buttons that seemed to go on forever.

Challenge accepted.

Voldemort sat at the head of his table, the table he had stolen with the rest of Lucius Malfoy's estate. Around him lay the corpses of his knights, sucked dry of their magic and life before they could be
purified.

In the middle of the room lay the corpse of Nagini, perhaps his only true friend, even if she couldn't help but be loyal to him as a Parseltongue.

Voldemort now forced himself to rebuild his ranks with the likes of Fenrir Greyback and those he had once deemed too impure to join his knights, but there was a price for binding one's self to the riff-raff of Wizarding society. His powerbase no longer pulled on old magic families where blood and magic were bound together. He no longer had the seemingly infinite coffers of Lucius Malfoy and the other Sacred 28 to pull from.

He was surviving, but every attempt to create a new Horcrux caused him waves of excruciating pain. How his hidden Horcruxes had been found and destroyed, however… that still remained to be seen.

He could still feel the one, though— the locket was still safe, and as long as it remained so, that nightmare of two skull-faced figures warning him to put his affairs in order and embrace death could be dismissed as mere folly.

Psh.

He was the great Lord Voldemort, more powerful than any wizard that had ever lived, more powerful than his blood could have ever imagined. He was immortal, and even Death himself could not claim him for his own.

At least he had the new Marked to feed him, even if they didn't realise what it was doing—

Even if it had some odd side effects.

Fenrir was, perhaps, the most shaken by them. The Mark had taken away his "gift" - the thing all others called a curse, or at least those who hadn't been brainwashed into thinking rampaging around as a mindless, violent beast was somehow a good thing.

It didn't matter to him, though. The neutering of Fenrir only make him forcibly subservient, hoping that gaining his lord's favour would return his "power" to him. Fenrir had to work extra hard to get his "cured" people to fear him enough to give him what he believed was the proper respect.

A part of Voldemort thought it ironic that the "cure" for lycanthropy was to override it with Dark Magic and have it drive out the curse. The person could not serve two masters. There was either him or the beast— and Voldemort was more of a beast than any bloodthirsty mindless animal.

It annoyed him that it took so much energy to appear powerful enough to intimidate ever since his original Death Eaters had left him, their screams of agony as the outpouring of the Mark's Dark Influence was torn from their very blood. He couldn't fathom how it had happened— the Mark had been the most perfect connection to both power and ensured loyalty. Soon enough he'd be strong enough to make another Horcrux. He just had to remain patient.

Harry panted as he let himself sag wearily against the bookshelves in Dumbledore's office. The "field trip" to a cave swarming with Inferi had done wonders to convince him that he wasn't ready to face just how evil Voldemort was— a person who could kill so many just to make an army of the dead to guard a lake. Perhaps he had only killed a handful, and they had made their victims into kin, but Harry wasn't sure if it even mattered.

Dumbledore had used some sort of swirling ring of fire to save them both, but after that, it was Harry that had to save their lives by focusing the Headmaster enough to bring them home without
splinching them both.

Yet, even as he was thankful that they had survived the experience, he couldn't help but notice how strange and… different the Headmaster had become. Where once was surity of action and planning, now there was only confusion.

Dumbledore muttered lowly to himself, and a locket lay near his withered hand. Dumbledore himself was slumped heavily near a window, his aged face haunted.

Harry had heard many of the man's strange apologies and confessions of guilt as he had drank down the strange potion from the stone bowl—

Dumbledore looked far older now than he once did, and it seemed as if that sort of timeless, ageless quality had left him. No one doubted he was old, but always before Dumbledore had seemed outside of time— as if it didn't really matter to him.

The locket was vitally important, or so the Headmaster had confided in him, yet as the open locket lay on the floor—a piece of parchment unfurled from its compartment—all that could be discerned was a long lost note by someone named R.A.B. who had taken the real item to destroy it. What that meant for Dumbledore's quest, however, remained elusive.

Harry found himself wishing fiercely that Hermione was there to help shed some light on the situation, and the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach was nothing short of guilty. He'd well and truly mucked up that avenue of communication by turning Hermione's blood to acid and doing whatever it as that had caused her to undergo a grisly transformation into something "other" that required Snape, of all people, to watch over her.

He still wasn't wrapping his mind around marriage, however, preferring to think instead that someone had spiked his and Ron's pumpkin juice and caused them both to hallucinate the whole thing together. It didn't matter that Hermione was now apprenticing as a teacher under Slughorn or that everyone in the school other than Ron and the Headmaster seemed to think that everything was all HIS fault. Even Sybill Trelawney had flung a crystal ball at him, cursing him for stealing away the only wizard worthy of herself.

Harry felt his eye twitching. That was just one hell of a nasty mental image— arguably even worse than Snape and Hermione, if only by a fraction.

Ron, he knew, had practically hurled at the thought of it, yelling "that greasy git doesn't deserve her" and "even Hermione deserves better than ruddy Snape." That statement had earned Ron a few looks that weren't even remotely friendly. Not at all. Matters had compounded when someone said "Madam Snape" within earshot of Ron, and he set off on a massive tirade that ended with Ron enjoying yet another detention with Filch thanks to him plowing into Professor Flitwick in the greenhouse. The unfortunate smaller teacher had ended up tangled in the Venomous Tentacula and had suffered numerous bites before finally being extricated from the pissed-off plant—

No, that hadn't ended well at all.

Harry knew that Dumbledore was the main reason he and Ron hadn't been all but drawn and quartered by the Aurors and the Wizengamot. It had been him, after all, who had advocated that the two of them "serve penance" at Hogwarts since they were, technically, still minors. Now, of course, they had to be extra mindful, since both Ron and him were now of age by Wizarding standards. The only reason Ron had escaped notice from being, technically, seventeen was again— thanks to Albus Dumbledore.
Then again, it had also helped that Ron hadn't been one to actually cast the spell.

The Headmaster had mumbled something about how Harry needed to keep Hermione close before lapsing back into his disjointed mumblings.

Harry was just too confused to figure out how exactly he was supposed to do that after having done what he did to her. Apologies aside, she obviously had exchanged trust for frank suspicion.

Harry picked up the rolled up parchment that had once been in the locket. Hermione did always like puzzles. Perhaps he could entice her into humouring him.

For a moment, he placed his hand on Dumbledore's shoulder. "I need to go, sir."

Clarity seemed to flicker across Dumbledore's eyes. "Yes, of course, Harry," he said.

Harry frowned and nodded. "Take care of yourself, Sir," he said, slowly walking out of the headmaster's office, his mind full of too many questions and not enough answers.

Harry found himself oogling around as Slughorn lead him down a corridor and into another atrium. "Don't be too long, my boy. I have her working on a project."

"Thank you, Professor Slughorn," Harry thanked the portly man awkwardly, trying hard not to stare at his mustache too much.

As Harry walked into the room, Slughorn left them alone, and Hermione's eyes flicked up from a pile of scrolls. Her unnerving, golden gaze bored into him and then flicked back down to her work. "May I help you, Mr Potter?" she said formally, her voice barely changing.

"Hermione—"

Crookshanks jumped up on the desk and glowered fiercely at him, tail swishing back and forth in clear annoyance. He stretched and headbonked Hermione's arm before curling up right in the middle of her parchments.

Hermione sighed, nudging the feline's fluffy tail aside to sign another parchment before plunking her quill down.

"Hermione, Dumbledore really needs our help," he said quickly.

"And what, pray tell, would the great Albus Dumbledore need a lowly apprentice to help him with?"

Harry swallowed hard. He had to admit, she had a valid point—at least had the Headmaster been fully aware.

"There's something—" Harry began. "There's something off about him, Hermione. He's not like he was."

"No longer able to cover up the shameful atrocities happening within the very hallowed halls of his school?"

"Hermione, I'm sorry! How many times must I say it before you will believe me!"

A dark shadow moved in from behind Harry, the sweep of black swirling in the teacher's wake. "I would hope that you had something more significant to say than to come here to beat an already long dead horse of apology, Mr Potter. " The DADA teacher curled his lip, but Crookshanks chose that
moment to stand up and purr-rub against the curtain of black, getting an obnoxious amount of ginger fur on the heavy black wool.

"You are truly insufferable, cat," Severus said, pointing his long finger at the unrepentant feline offender.

Crookshanks rubbed up against his finger, scenting both sides with a deep, rumbling purr.

Snape rolled his eyes.

"Don't blame him," Hermione said. "It's not his fault you're so likeable."

"Are you mental, witch？" Severus said, snorting in sheer disbelief.

"I do have my occasional moments of lucidity," Hermione said primly.

Harry decided to be a bit more more direct. "Look, I know you think some pretty horrible things about me, but this is important," he explained. "Professor Dumbledore took me out to some hidden cave near the ocean and he had to drink some weird potion to pull an old locket out of the bowl it was in. But when we got back, the locket opened up to reveal this note, and I think it might be really important!"

Hermione's lips tightened, and Severus placed a hand on her shoulder before he gestured to the desk. "Put it here, Mr Potter."

"What?"

"The note, or have you forgotten already?"

Harry flinched and unrolled the small parchment.

Snape eyed it, lids narrowing. "Where was this, Mr Potter?"

"Inside a locket."

"Where was the locket found?"

"In a bowl on a pedestal, covered in some emerald green potion, sir."

Hermione looked up at the DADA teacher, and he returned her gaze. Harry could have sworn they were somehow talking, but their lips didn't move at all.

"What aren't you saying, Mr Potter?" Severus asked.

Harry cringed, expecting Snape to point his wand at him and tromp through his mind. "There were dead people in the lake—they tried to drag me under when I tried to get water for Professor Dumbledore. He set them on fire, and we escaped—barely."

Professor Snape cracked his neck. "I see." He sighed and shook his head. "I suppose it cannot be helped," he said after a while. "I will send a Patronus to Alastor and see if we can light a fire under the proper amount of posteriors."

Harry frowned at the strange intimacy between them that seemed to scream that all his denial was for naught.

He had driven his best friend into the arms of Snape.
Professor Snape allowed Hermione to take his fingers—his FINGERS! She rubbed them with her thumb and squeezed gently, taking comfort from him.

"My wife," the dour man rumbled. "I recommend dinner before you pass out from famished exhaustion. I do not approve of Horace's abuse of you doing all his paperwork that he should have filled out."

"I don't mind it, Severus," Hermione said, and Harry flinched as she used the man's given name with such... tenderness. It wasn't right. It wasn't... natural. "I don't have to brew the example potions for tomorrow's class because of it."

"Oh, and what horrible potions would he desire for his classes?"

"Amortentia and the Compulsion potions," she said.

"Shirking your potions duties, Hermione? How indecent."

"Psh," Hermione replied. "I brewed them already last week. All he has to do is decanter the cauldrons into his teaching vessels."

Professor Snape let out a sigh. "Who is the teacher again?"

"You, sir," Hermione replied with a whisper that made it sound positively indecent.

Harry looked on in unabashed horror as it looked like the two were going to kiss right in front of him, and he felt the bile rise in his throat. "Okay! Stop! I learned my lesson! You don't have to fake being married anymore just to gross me out!"

Severus looked upward, reluctantly pulling away from his lovely wife's irresistible lips and even more skilled tongue.

Hermione, however, took that moment to say, "Oh, believe me Harry, the pleasure is all mine," she purred, tugging Snape's chin towards her as she guided his mouth down to hers where she proceeded to demonstrate the art of the most sensual kiss known to the living.

Harry tried to suppress his other brain's instinctive, uncontrollable reaction, and failed utterly. He flushed, digging his fingers into his palms with an anguished look.

"I'm sorry, alright. Please, just—"

Severus looked upward, reluctantly pulling away from his lovely wife's irresistible lips and even more skilled tongue.

"Mr Potter, you are the one who have intruded on our private space for your—issue. You can stop looking at us like we are a freak show and thinking such awful thoughts about me having to drug someone to get them to find me appealing in any way. I have every right to enjoy private moments with my wife, and she has every right to indulge in them with whomever she chooses, as long as that person is me."

"Severus," Hermione huffed.

"I can't have my wife out there snogging immature boys now can I?"

"Like I would ever be snogging anyone but you, you insufferable git!" she protested, somehow ending up with a rolled up Prophet in her hands which she proceeded to smack him with.

"Agh! Abuse, wife. Desist your assault upon my cranium with inane printed drivell!"
Severus and Hermione turned their heads simultaneously to see Harry passed out cold on the floor. Octavius sprung from Severus' shoulder and landed on Harry's chest. "I know exactly what to do!"

Minerva walked into the workroom that connected both to Slughorn's domicile and to the Snape quarters and was immediately assaulted by Harry Potter hanging upside down, wrapped like a Christmas ham in silk. Hermione was up to her neck in scrolls she was writing over, and Severus was sitting in an armchair reading the *Daily Prophet* like it was the latest issue of *Potions Monthly*.

"Severus."

"Yes, Minerva?"

"Care to explain why Mr Potter is hanging upside-down in your wife's workroom wrapped up like a prize ham?"

"No, not really," Severus said, licking one finger and idly turning the page to the paper. Octavius landed neatly on Minerva's shoulder. "He deserved it," the spider squeaked. "And what, pray tell, did he do that qualifies as 'deserving it'?" Minerva asked.

"He accused Severus of drugging Hermione to love him and faking that they're married," Octavius said, his forelegs tapping in annoyance. "I figured he needed to grow up fast, so hanging him upside down would increase the blood flow to his clearly starved little grey cells."

"Emphasis on little." Haze said, rubbing her abdomen with her legs. "Emphasis on starving," Shade added, gazing up at Minerva with a determined air.

Minerva pinched the bridge of her nose. "Please, just get Potter down from there. I'm just glad you didn't challenge him to a duel of honour like the purebloods do whenever their wives are involved."

"You could do that?" Haze asked, clearly interested.

"No," Minerva said. "He cannot."

"Awwww," Kobal said. "I do so love a good duel."

"It's a good thing there aren't any more of you," Minerva sighed. "I'm not sure this school could handle a rampaging horde of vengeful arachnids on a mission to defend their mistress' honour."

The shadow spiders perked and bounced happily. "We aim to please!"

"Please whom, exactly?" Minerva asked, frowning worriedly.

The spiders' eyes whirled. "Hee!"

"Poof."

They disappeared into a wisp of black aether.

Minerva sighed.
To say he was unnerved was calling the Atlantic ocean a puddle, and Harry was feeling more than a little unnerved walking into Grimmauld Place with Hermione on one side and Snape on the other. To add even more discomfort, Alastor Moody brought up the rear, wearing the kind of scowl that made merely breathing look like an Unforgivable.

When Kreacher walked up to them, scowling darkly, he looked like he was ready to spew his typical brand of hatred upon them. The elf suddenly stopped in his tracks, his eyes growing wider than wide on the normally narrow-eyed face.

"Is it Kreacher's time?" the elf whispered, terror in his voice.

Harry turned to look at Hermione, his mind full of questions.

Hermione, who normally dreaded Kreacher's foul treatment of her, had schooled her face into utter dispassion, but it was disturbing coupled with her unnerving amber eyes and unnaturally pale skin. And claws…

Harry flinched. All his fault.

"No, Kreacher," Hermione said, her voice strangely unemotional and so unlike the Hermione Harry knew—or thought he knew.

Harry swallowed hard, realising that that, too, was his fault.

The house elf still looked beyond terrified, something Harry didn't quite understand. This was Hermione, after all, and she had done nothing to Kreacher but try to treat him with kindness and respect, even when the elf had insulted her to the point of tears.

Molly stood at the end of the hallway. "Harry!" she greeted warmly. She approached and hugged him warmly, but she gave Hermione a cold glare and Severus a twisted lip of pure disgust. "How could you, Severus?! Corrupting a young girl and forcing her to marry you?!"

"It was a magic-blessed marriage, Molly," Severus said, teeth clenched. "And you know as well as me what that means."

Molly paled, staring at Hermione. "No, it can't be. She's just a young child. You're wrong."

Severus scowled at her, glowering down his nose at the Weasley matron. "Do tell Mr Potter and the rest of the people with their ears plastered to the doors what that means, Molly." He spat her first name like a curse. "Tell them what it really means."

Molly shook her head adamantly. "There's no way she could be of age and willingly wish to bind herself to the likes of you."

"Ah, and there's the rub, isn't it?" Severus sneered at her. "I'm willing to bet that if she had been willingly bound to your son of choice, there wouldn't be a problem for you, yes? But no one could ever find such value within me."

Molly's face flushed red with embarrassment and anger.

"You're her TEACHER!" Molly hissed.

"Hasn't Albus told you? I am no longer her teacher, and it was he who put us together—"
Molly's face paled. "I don't believe you!"

"Would you like a memory?" Snape seethed at her.

"If you are quite finished talking like I am not here," Hermione said with no small amount of annoyance, "there is a meeting we were summoned to attend."

She and Moody swept by both Severus and Molly, even as Hermione's hair seemed to rise up on its own and emulate a nest of cobras.

As Harry shuffled along uneasily behind them, Molly brought up the rear.

"You look tired," Remus said quietly, sitting down beside Hermione as she looked out over the back garden—the only flourishing thing that remained vibrantly alive at Grimmauld Place "Rough conversation in there," he said. "As usual, they focus on the stupid things and forget all about why we are here to begin with."

Hermione sighed. "It's too much to expect to be treated like my opinion is worth anything."

"Not everyone can see past the illusion of youth," Remus said. "Others spend their entire lifetime trying to put themselves back to such days." Remus sighed, looking up at the night sky. The angry voices of the people inside arguing continued to fill the house.

"I wish they'd stop trying to make Severus look like the bad guy long enough to realise that he's right."

Remus smiled. "I fear years of his caustic personality hasn't helped improve their opinions of the man," he said. "In school, it only got worse with age." He took in a deep breath. He pressed a package into her hands. "Here. My… belated congratulations."

Hermione tilted her head curiously. Then she unwrapped the small cloth-wrapped bundle and stared. Nestled in the cloth was a grotesque gargoyle face, lovingly carved in realistic detail. "Is this—?"

"Traditional housewarming gift to newlywed wizarding couples," he said. "Guards the home from evil, but I think one look at Severus' scowl and most denizens of evil would run the other way."

Hermione laughed, touching the relief with a smile. "Thank you, Remus. It means a lot to me. Severus will be touched, even if he won't admit it, much less show it."

"I expect no less," Remus assured her. "He's not the only one who's changed since school, Hermione, but you can well imagine the old grudges are still all-too-real."

Hermione touched Remus's hand. "When the war is done, Remus, you may find many things will not matter as much. How did you find out about the marriage?"

Remus smiled, flushing a little. "Harry wrote me a rather panicked letter saying it was all his fault that Hermione ran into the arms of Snape. I tried to tell him that no one, no way, and no how was Severus going to let any female touch him unless it was real. I knew it was real. Severus is a great many things, but he doesn't play with women like that. Breaks their minds, perhaps, but not like that."

Hermione snorted. "My mind is perfectly solid."
Remus chuckled. "Solidly 'round the bend. Seems good old Molly left out the part about how magical marriages work and that it requires both being of appropriate age to make sound decisions and a willingness to be bound."

"I don't think she has ever forgiven me for getting her Ronald in trouble. Harry too. She sees them both as her youngest sons. But me— I've never been more than an outsider as far as she's concerned. Even Ginny won't talk to me now." She pointed to her eyes and splayed her claws. "Can't imagine why."

"You don't even bother to glamour it," Remus observed, not accusing.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I find it helps show me who my real friends are."

"You're not a child, Hermione, but I find it rather sad that you can be so cynical as young as you are," Remus confessed. "Something terrible must have happened to you— something more than what Harry told me about."

Hermione looked grimly at the far side of the garden. "I heard you question Albus tonight."

Remus nodded. "He's losing it, Hermione. Only a fool couldn't see it. They're in there, arguing about Severus, when they don't see the old man is off in la-la land."

"When Harry cursed me, it killed me," Hermione said. She looked at Remus carefully, studying his expression. "This transformation is what saved me. Well, more or less."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Remus said slowly.

Hermione gave him a half-hearted, mirthless smile. "Unfortunately." She looked up. "Make no mistake. I chose to come back. I chose to fight, but the Hermione that Harry knew died that day."

"I recognise that look—" Remus said. "I saw Severus right after Lily died. It was the same look. The same… odd scent."

Hermione cocked her head again. "Werewolves and your sensitive noses," she sniffed.

Remus gave her a sheepish grin. "Can't help it. I can tell you're mated too. Your scents carry each other's. Maybe that's why I didn't question it."

"Harry may have killed me, Remus," Hermione said, "but it was Albus who called in a favour to bring me back from death. And it is that act which pushed him into this state he is in right now— the magic that kept him from forgetting himself was used to keep me alive."

Remus stared hard at one particular rosebush, his face twisted into a myriad of different emotions. "He wants me infiltrate Fenrir's pack and turn them against him, but he doesn't seem to realise that the only way out of Fenrir's pack is death— and the word is—"

Hermione lifted her head. "Hrm?"

"Fenrir is now Marked by the Dark Lord— he and all his pack. If I go and infiltrate, I'd have to take the Mark."

Hermione jerked her head, her lips flattening in a firm line. "Do not go."

"I have to," Remus said. "I— am bound to."

Hermione's golden eyes flashed, her lips curved into a snarl. "He put you under Oath?"
"He saved my life."

"So you are to give that life up in return?" Hermione's expression was beyond wrathful. "Didn't you just say he losing it? How could you—"

"I must," Remus said, his fist clenching. "It is a life debt. I'm the only one in the Order who can do this."

"Because you're a werewolf."

Remus jerked his head. "Yes."

"That is a stupid reason to order someone with a child on the way to throw himself to the werewolves— and not just any werewolves," Hermione said.

"At least I have a chance to come home to Tonks," Remus said sadly.

"The moment you take the Mark, you are dead, Remus, and you know it. If not by Fenrir himself but the Dark Lord's Mark, which he has designed to kill you so he may live."

Remus paled.

Hermione closed her eyes, and she suddenly had a rather large spider in her lap. She pet it like one would a cat, and it purred— just like a cat.

Remus stared as the multi-eyed and legged creature stared back at him accusingly.

"I do not recall giving you permission to upset my wife, Lupin," Severus' voice rumbled as a mass of black wool brushed by. The heated yelling inside of Grimmauld Place had seemingly ceased, at least for the moment. He sat next to Hermione, pressing his face into her lush curls. Waves of agitation and anger rolled off the dark wizard, and a loss of his tight, usually unwavering control.

Hermione's head jerked up as Severus gave a low growl of hunger, his normal steady temperance lost. "Severus?"

He panted into her neck. "Can't— control."

Lupin paled as he felt a powerful wave of gut-twisting, agonising hunger.

Hermione stared at Remus, her eyes glowing. "Do you wish to see why you cannot go on Albus's errands, Remus?"

"What?"

"Do you wish to see what he is willing to turn you into?"

Remus found himself trembling with hunger he had no idea where it came from— only to realise it was coming off of Severus.

"The tea— the fucking. Tea." Severus' voice was but a harsh snarl. "Going to. Murder her."

Hermione trembled, and Remus thought it was in fear, but then he realised she was holding something back, if but only barely. "If you wish to see the truth, Remus, stay. If not. Leave. Now."

Her voice grated, as if speaking aloud actually pained her.

When he didn't leave, jerking his head in a "no" gesture, she gave him a snarl as her teeth
lengthened. Her fingers elongated as membrane spread from her arms and between her fingers. The pointed, funnel ears she had been hiding in her hair revealed themselves as her face twisted into a muzzle. Each jerk of her muscles hurried the transformation—teeth jerking as fangs replaced dull human teeth. A strange mixture of feathers grew on the leathery membranes, giving her wingspan the impression of some fallen angel. She drew one claw across her neck, and Severus was on it in a flash, drinking deeply. Hermione's wings wrapped around him, her eyes half-lidded in some alien ecstasy.

Remus found himself breathing again as the gut-twisting hunger slowly abated, and Hermione's winged embrace loosened as Severus went limp against her. Her monstrous features receded as her human-ish shape, yet she kept her arms around her husband, her golden eyes boring into the werewolf with both challenge and—

"Do you understand now, Remus?"

Remus felt confusion and anger combining inside him, rage for what had been done to two people who had obviously been turned into something far more monstrous than a mere three-nights-a-month monster.

"This was for the "greater good,"" Severus said, his eyes were completely black from pupil to sclera. "Ask yourself whose greater good. Ours? Or one old man's pipe dream?"

Hermione stroked Severus' hair in comfort, seemingly uncaring that Remus was watching them. "Are you alright now?"

Severus took a deep breath. "Yes. Thank you."

"For once, I could help you for a change."

Severus snorted. "There was something in that bloody tea. The mint was far too strong. I couldn't smell anything else."

Hermione frowned. "It is odd that anything would affect us."

"You okay, boss?" Octavius squeaked, concern in his voice instead of his usual, playful banter.

"I am fine, Octavius," Severus said with a sigh. "It was an intense, driving hunger, and I was willing to get it from every soul in that house had Hermione not—"

"But I was," she said, grasping his hand.

"Bonsai!" Haze cried, scurrying off into the house.

The other spiders looked at Haze strangely.

"Doesn't she mean 'bonzai'?" Shade asked quizzically.

"Maybe she wants to trim small Asian evergreens?" Cinder asked.

Haze skittered off, regardless of correct word usage.

"Wait for me!" Cinder complained.

"Oi! Don't forget me!" Kobal added.

"Whoa, hey, I have eight legs too!" Octavius muttered, joining the others.
Shade sat in Hermione's lap, continuing his own unique version of purr therapy.

"You are okay, my child?" Desmondon's mind voice rumbled between his Morangelus.

"Yes, Master," Severus replied. "Thanks to Hermione."

"This is why I wish you to be together— and why you should always strive to be. To support each other, but that is neither here nor there. Send me your memories."

There was a warmth that spread between them as their master took what he required from them.

"There are many simple herbs that are quite harmless to humans, but when imbibed by those aligned by their allegiance, such as to death, they can have unforeseen effects," Desmondon explained. "A very common reagent to make one more open to the help of benign spirits is dandelion— but it also summons the attention of the dead."

Desmondon seemed thoughtful. "Needless to say, if those that are dead are still, shall we say, walking around— such summons have a very negative reaction. Spirit dead are usually quite eager for such things. Those such as you, obviously, would not think so kindly upon such endeavours."

"This Molly Weasley," Desmondon said, "she pines for her dead twin brothers, and is constantly seeking their guidance. She probably hopes the spirits of them— will watch over her loved ones. Once it was a common folk medicine additive, easily forgotten for the new and more modern."

"So it was not intentional," Severus whispered into Hermione's hair, nuzzling her neck.

"Doubtful, Severus," Desmondon said.

"She doesn't know we are dead, my love," Hermione said quietly. "There was no way she could have known what it would do to us. We certainly didn't."

Severus grumbled into Hermione's hair, his hands still twisted into unnerving, inhuman talons. With each stroke of Hermione's fingers in his hair, he reverted, looking more human and less— other.

"Take care of your werewolf friend, my children," Desmondon said. "If you make him your ally, the curse will be—" Desmondon chuckled. "No longer an issue."

"He is not my friend," Severus snarked.

Hermione caught his mouth with hers, distracting him. "Yes, my Master."

Desmondon chuckled as he withdrew, still chuckling.

Hermione's eyes flicked over to Remus. "Just how much did your sensitive werewolf ears overhear, Remus?"

Remus looked at her, wide-eyed.

"Morangelus," Hermione said, eyes half-lidded as Severus bathed her neck to comfort himself.

"Angels of Death…"

"You know of us, then?" Severus lifted his head, suddenly much more interested.

Remus flinched. "I almost died when I was first infected as a child. Albus was there at our home, talking to my father. They thought I was going to die that night. There was a… man, and yet he
was not a man. He said I would not survive to become a Morangelus. I would die, horribly, unless I wished strongly enough to live. He could not help me. I saw things. Horrible things. Twisted faces. Bodies. It scared me back to life. I survived. The man—he told Albus this one was a freebie. He did not… turn children. Children who had no idea of what their choices were."

Remus flinched. "I thought it was just a nightmare—from the werewolf bite. It happened often, the same scene playing over and over in my head—"

Remus' eyes widened. "Oh, Merlin. That man—that man is your master, isn't it? You're his… Morangelus."

Severus looked more sympathetic. "I had no idea Albus had his hooks in you from childhood," he said. "Even back then, he was bending the rules to turn you into his debt-cursed slave."

"You know, it was Albus who tipped James off to go for a walk that night when they found Poppy escorting me to the shack," he said. "Such a bright, beautiful moon, they told me. That's why they decided to become Animagi—for me."

Severus' expression remained set like stone, but Hermione leaned into him, giving a soft purr of encouragement, and much to Remus' surprise, the dour wizard leaned into her, allowing her comfort and—actually smiling. Remus had never seen it, not even—

Not even when Lily had been alive.

Severus seemed to ponder something deeply, his brows knitting together as he thought something over. "I am willing to concede that there have been certain… outside influences with regard to our deplorable mutual past history, Lupin. Pasts wherein neither of us had any idea we were being…" He closed his eyes. "Expertly manipulated."

Severus drew Hermione close to him, his eyes seemingly far away. "You should know that we can rid you of your furry little problem, Lupin, but you will have to completely trust us—something I'm sure you are having issues with right now, not that you ever did trust me." He looked off into the distance over the garden wall. "I must warn you that it will not be a pleasant experience for you. In fact, it will be agony, but it will drive out the curse you have been afflicted with, through no fault of your own."

Remus sat up straight, his body seemingly electrically charged. "Severus, if there is even the slightest chance I could be free of this. Any at all—I'd do it. I'd do it right now."

"And your wife would agree to your throwing your fate to those she doesn't know?" Severus did not appear to be discouraging him, but the question was valid and pertinent.

"Severus, I could support Dora and our child! I could get a real job! I could pass those stupid lycanthropy tests and no longer be a social pariah who can't even walk in public without—Severus, please. Please, I beg you, do not dangle such a thing in front of me only to deter me."

Severus straightened. "No."

"What?"

"Take time to warn your mate that you will be suffering. Speak to her about what you want to happen. What you will do to achieve it. Then we will arrange for a meeting place where no one will hear your screams—for there will be many. Do not expect her to understand immediately afterwards, even if the results are in your favour. That sort of betrayal will not exactly help your new marriage."
Remus stiffened and then slumped. "You're right, Severus. I was already planning on helping Harry along on his quest instead of—"

Hermione snapped her head up. "You were going to leave your wife and child to—"

"What good is staying safe if the whole world goes to shite?" Remus snapped. "What good is being alive if you are only going to watch your child wither away and your wife hate you because you couldn't do anything to save them!"

"Remus?" Nymphadora's voice trembled from the doorway. Her hair had turned a shocking stark white. "You were going to just leave us behind? To go off with Harry?!"

"Dora—" Remus stammered, standing to get to her.

Tonks threw her arms up. "Don't touch me!" she said, her face turning purple as warthog tusks sprouted from her mouth. She decked Remus when he tried to touch her anyway, sending him flying headlong into the rose bushes. She spun on her heel and stormed back into the house, sobbing.

Hermione slumped against Severus. "Being a werewolf is the least of his problems, I fear."

Severus pulled her against him, closing his eyes. "Yes."

As the rest of Grimmauld Place slept, the two Morangelus stood silently as Kreacher opened the door marked "Regulus Arcturus Black."

"It is in here, Death Ones," Kreacher said, his arm gesturing to the inside of the room. "Nothing was moved since young Master's death."

Hermione walked in first, utterly silent. Her golden eyes glowed from inside her skull-like face. Her bony talons touched the door, leaving a ghost of a skeletal print there in black before it slowly faded away.

Kreacher grovelled, bowing and scraping before them.

Severus swept in behind her, his hands wrapped around his scythe.

Haze bounced up and down on a box on the dresser, causing a small cloud of dust to move around her.


"Peace, Kreacher," Severus said, his black eyes fathomless. "Had you destroyed the locket, you would have destroyed the souls trapped inside that fuel its immortality. I am willing to bet, every one of those inferi Potter talked about— their souls are within the locket— which is what allowed so many of them to be created, focused around this one thing."

Hermione tilted her head. "Every spell you cast destroyed one soul instead of the locket— a very disturbing bit of Dark magic."

Kreacher's eyes widened in horror. "Kreacher could have killed his master?" He grabbed a bat and started beating himself with it viciously.

Hermione hissed, waving her hand over Kreacher, and the bat turned to foam and made a strange squeaking sound like a dog toy every time Kreacher hit himself with it. Kreacher tried something
else, but everything he touched was converted to something harmless, from feather pillows to butterflies to gelatin cubes. Hermione looked at Severus with a strange expression of resignation and disgust.

The spiders swarmed all over the lacquered box and stuck their forelegs into the locking mechanism. It opened with a click, exposing only one thing: a locket with a silver snake formed into the shape of an s. The locket pulsed with dark magic, sending out a wake of intent, and the two Morangelus stared at it.

"There's hundreds of souls trapped within this Horcrux, all forced to save it, should it come under attack via any form of magic." Hermione's eyes flicked over it, watching the auras.

"How fortunate that we do not require mortal magic," Severus growled.

Hermione nodded. "So here lies the conundrum, my love," she said. "Had Dumbledore not been a manipulative old bastard, we would not be here—able to destroy this thing that harbors the souls of those unfortunate enough to have touched it. We would not found each other, nor would we be able to help. So—was he right to do these horrible things for this nebulous greater good, or does the ends never justify the means?"

Severus eyed the locket as he bit his hand, squeezing his blood over the locket. The locket began to smoke, quake, and scream as clouds of black smoke billowed out of it. Hermione bit her own hand, doing the same, adding her blood to the mix.

"Through our Master, be undone," Severus intoned.

"Immortality, unjustly won," Hermione said.

"We unravel what you have wrought," Severus continued.

"You end will come as it ought," Hermione finished.

The cloud of vapour formed into a screaming face—hands clutching at vapour-hair, pulling it tightly between phantom fingers. "No! NOOOO! I am immortal! I AM FOREVER! AVADA KEDAVRA!"

Sickly green beams hit Severus and Hermione on their skull-like faces, the flesh melting off to show the bleached, white bone underneath. Their flesh seemed to crawl back across the bone, realigning, forming, and knitting back together.

"Bodies lost to your duress," Severus hummed.

"Come back ye now, to our caress." Hermione waved her hand over the locket.

"Take from what once was skin and bone," Severus said.

"A soul returned which once was flown." Hermione clenched her fist as dark green and black energy gathered even as Severus did the same, his own energy swirling crimson and black. They slammed their hands together in a slap as their eyes glowed, their other hands extended out as Octavius and Shade leapt into their free hands, transforming into the distinctive, unearthly scythes.

The locket screamed as the two blades swung down upon it, severing its tenuous anchor to the physical plane and time. The construct exploded as a flood of shrunken, emaciated bodies spilled out, expanding like a toppled trunk off the Hogwarts Express. The Horcrux's wake of attempted retaliation ripped through the magical wards and carefully crafted Fidelius charms on Grimmauld
Place, blowing them all to smithereens. The portraits in the house froze in mid-scream, unmoving, their enchantments broken. Muggles outside stopped and stared at the house that hadn't been there before, even as the doors blew open and hundreds of naked witches and wizards rolled out in a massive tidal wave of magic.

*Crack.*

**CRACK.**

**CRRAAACKKK!**

Unspeakables arrived with a team of Oblivators, drawn to the explosion of magic where magic should decidedly *not* have been. Amelia Bones, dressed in head to toe red robes with runes running up and down her golden stole, had a severe look of consternation on her face as the team with her stunned and Obliviated all Muggles who had seen the outpouring of bodies from Grimmauld Place 12.

Just as they were getting a handle on it, Amelia saw one horrifyingly starkers Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore Apparate in casting some random spell that turned the entire street purple and filled each window with water like an aquarium—water that turned every human it touched into various species of fancy goldfish.

"Get that sodding idiot back in the house!" Moody's voice barked. "You there, Savage, Proudfoot! Undo all of this fishy business! **YOU!** Turn them back into people and Obliviate them until they don't know their own names for two bloody weeks. **YOU!** Make something up and send it to the Muggles Authorities. Gas leak. Whatever! **YOU!** Figure out why this street is covered in naked people! **GET MOVING YOU IDIOTS! NOW!**"

People moved around like frantic ants as they tried to put things into order.

Meanwhile, from their perch on a roof on the opposite side of the street, Severus and Hermione watched, unseen by the living.

"That man is damned scary," Hermione said, pursing her lips.

"Want us to do anything?" the spiders asked, eager to help in the face of hundreds of naked witches and wizards.

"No, our job is done. The rest must fall in the hands of mortals."

The spiders seemed disappointed. "*Oh, okay then.*"

Octavius nudged Severus. "*We could go find any other objects like that one.*"

Severus turned to him. "Oh?"

"**Yup!**"

"Please do."

"**Yay!**"

The spiders instantly poofed into the shadow aether.

"You've created a monster," Hermione said, eyebrow twitching.
"They already were; I just gave them focus." Severus scratched his head.

"Focused shadow spiders are even more dangerous."

Severus' lips curved upward. "Indeed."

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**Drug Bust Leads to Accidental Release of a Cloud of LSD,**

**Affecting Over One Hundred Area Residents**

If you happened to sleep through it last night, you're probably far better off. Last night, a drug bust in Islington near Claremont Square sent a massive cloud of LSD vapour into the air, affecting over a hundred residents of the area and causing them to experience all manner of highly bizarre and extremely vivid hallucinations ranging from people thinking they were goldfish to witnessing an unclothed elderly man appearing out of nowhere, to a pile of nude bodies flooding out of a house that wasn't there before.

Authorities had quarantined the area, but it seems all is back to normal again this afternoon. No sign of an extra house, strange people in funny hats, and a rampaging horde of naked people have turned up, much to the great relief of the local mothers whose daycare is located very close to where the incident took place.

Most affected reported vivid and dramatic hallucinations as well as odd bruises and scrapes from things they don't remember having done. Thankfully, authorities have released the ban on the area, stating all is now well. The only victim they cannot seem to explain is the neighborhood's birds, who seem to have all been replaced by non-native cassowaries, leading people to believe that the entire incident was actually fabricated by immigrants from New Guinea and Australia.

More updates to come as we learn more from the authorities.

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Nymphadora was coming unglued in the sitting room as she heard Remus' screams from the next room. Even knowing no one else would be able to hear them outside there, she felt guilty that she had ever wished Remus to suffer for having through the best thing to do for her and the baby was to run away with Harry Potter.

Nothing could have prepared her for it. The Calming Draught did nothing for her. The screams—Merlin, the screams.

Worse than anything she had heard from him during the throes of transformation.

Worse than anything she had ever heard from those under Cruciatu.

And she couldn't help but think that it was all her fault.

She had told him to go throw himself in front of the Knight Bus for all she cared. She had told him she'd never forgive him.

She hadn't meant it, but the look on his face—

Gods.

It was like he had no reason left to live. He had just calmly walked out of the house that they shared
in silence and disappeared.

It had taken her umpteen Patroni and much begging, groveling, and all manner of pleading to get to where she was now— here on the outside, listening to him scream.

She'd called him *worthless*.

She'd called him a *coward*.

And he was in there, screaming— being tortured or gods knew what else— just so he could be "normal".

To get a job.

To be able to provide for his family, like a normal person.

She was such a sodding hypocrite. She had always told him that his lycanthropy didn't matter— that she loved him and accepted him just as he was.

But it had been her constantly nagging him about providing and Teddy and providing for Teddy, and — gods, *GODS!*

Why did she have to be so bloody *stupid?*

Tea appeared, connected to a pale hand.

Nymphadora looked up, seeing the strangely young yet wizened face of Hermione Granger staring back at her— unlike so many times before, her emotions were hidden behind a stoic expression.

"The tea will help. There is nothing potion-y about it, but some would argue tea is, by own inmate nature, a drinkable tincture." Hermione sounded clinical, but her voice was not unkind.

Tonks, however, was a total wreck. She sniffled, and blew her nose into the seventh hanky, too drained to even charm it clean. She drank the offered tea in one massive gulp, and Hermione's eyes went wide at the spectacle. She summoned the teapot and poured Tonks another with a worried expression breaking her stoic face.

"It's all my fault he's in there," she moaned.

"No, it not," Hermione said.

"But—"

"It is only part of why he's in there, yes," Hermione said. "To say the only reason he's in there solely because of something you said to him would not be true."

Tonks frowned. "How can you say that when it was my words that drove him away to *THAT!*" she yelled, pointing to the next room where the agonised screaming continued.

"If you think more than two decades of being a werewolf boiled down to a mere few words said in anger to drive him to this fate, you would be quite mistaken," Hermione said. "Your words probably hurt, yes, but that is what you intended, yes?"

Tonks gaped at her. "How can you—"

Hermione leveled an intense stare at her. "When people say hurtful words, they mean them. Even if
but for a moment. Even for a second—in that moment they want that person to be in pain. They want them to suffer. Then, later, reality comes back. Feelings come back. Rationality comes back. We realise in that moment we are sorry, and we truly mean it—and those that are not sorry, well, they have different issues to deal with."

"You are an Auror, perhaps one of the most dangerous jobs out there as you constantly put yourself in danger for the people who cannot protect themselves, yet," Hermione said, "and you had no issues going to work. You had no issues leaving your child at home with Remus, alone, so you could save lives. Yet, when Remus wished to do something so he could work like a normal wizard, everything changed. Do you know why?"

"It's not the same thing!"

"Why?"

"Because we were just fine the way we were!"

Hermione curled her lip before her face went back to the impassive and unnerving mask she had worn before. "Fine for him? Fine for you?" She tilted her head to the side slightly. "Perhaps, you should think of what fine would be for your son— having both parents there providing both love and protection."

"And I'm supposed to take the word of a ruddy walking encyclopedia? Some swotty little girl? Don't think I haven't heard what all the others say about you, Hermione."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, and part of Tonks felt a real thrill that she'd broken through that stupid emotionless facade.

But when Hermione's eyes opened again, her eyes were golden, and the fingers she splayed across her face were no longer even remotely human. "Did your little tattletales tell you what they did to that swotty little girl, that ruddy walking encyclopedia, hrm?"

Hermione stared at Tonks, her fangs glinting unnaturally white in her human mouth. "Did your blessed Harry Potter tell you about how he turned my blood to acid because his beloved godfather and his father had created a nasty little prank spell to deal with 'Snivellus'? Did Ron also tell you how he lured Draco Malfoy into that little hallway to— teach him a lesson? How that "harmless little prank" became this?"

Hermione stood. "I have welcomed you into my home, and you have repaid me in insults and scorn. Once Remus' time is finished here, I would ask you not to return, to ask me no favours, and if you were to have some crisis— kindly find someone else to placate your petty selfishness, for I will not. And if you were to somehow imagine that sidling up to my husband will somehow change my decision, you would be wrong."

Hermione walked over to the floo and threw in a handful of powder. "Minerva."

"Yes, Hermione, what is it, lass?" came McGonagall's voice.

"I fear I cannot guarantee the continued safety of my guest, Minerva. If you would, please, accept her into your care, I would be most grateful."

"Of course, Hermione, send her through. I'll have the elves make her up a cot."

"No! No, please! Don't make me leave! Don't— I need to be here! I need to be here for when he
comes out!" Tonks wailed tearfully, standing up and wringing her hands.

"I will not be here, Mrs Lupin, and you are not trusted in my home alone. When your husband comes out, Bonkers will fetch you. Then, and only then, will I allow you back into my home."

Hermione's teeth flashed. "Now, please get out of my sight."

"Please, please," Tonks begged. "I'll do anything. Just let me stay. Let me be here when he comes out." She rubbed her abdomen frantically.

"Perhaps, you should have thought of this before you threw my hospitality and concern for your wellbeing out the window by insulting me. Tell me Mrs Lupin. Were you sorry after you called me what you did, or was it only when I showed you I wasn't buying it that you began to regret what you said?"

Hermione threw more powder into the floo and reached out her hand to Tonks and made a clawing motion, snapping her wrist.

Tonks went sliding across the floor and into the floo with a whoosh and then disappeared.

Hermione glared into the floo for a while, long after the green flames died.

"Bonkers," she said.

**Pop!**

A small house-elf appeared. "Yes, Mistress Snape?"

"Please inform Mrs Lupin when Remus returns to this room. You may… tend to her needs as long as it does not involve you bringing her back here at any time before Remus is waiting for her in this room."

"Yes, Mistress! Bonkers is happy to serve the most wonderful Mistress Snape."

The elf disappeared with another pop.

Hermione closed her eyes, feeling her hunger clawing at her stomach after Tonks' little temper tantrum and bout of name-calling. It had fueled Hermione's hunger, and having her stay in the same room as her while she was feeling that hunger, when her mate was occupied with curing Remus— it would not have ended well. Had she remained calm, or at least sad but not spiteful, the effort to control that hunger would have been easier, but most of her energy was being spent being a rock and anchor for Severus— and with Severus, as without him, Remus's treatment would most likely fail.

He was far more experienced in the matter of delicate counter balances of magic and auras, finding what was off, and realigning what needed it.

Hermione, oddly, was supposed to better at dealing with people, but apparently she was having a particularly awful day at it, having botched whatever attempt to placate Nymphadora Tonks.

Her stomach growled.

She had to hunt. She had to feed.

Her mate counted on her stability, and she would not disappoint him now.

"Child, I come," Desmondon's voice warmed her from the inside.
With only seconds from his words, he was there, his pale features glowing by the hearthlight as he opened his arms to her, dragging one claw across his neck without a word being said.

She latched onto him, her hunger whetted, and she drank, allowing his embrace to soothe her stress as his blood soothed her hunger.

"There, there, child," her master said kindly. "You need only ask, and I will always be there for you."

Hermione crumpled in his arms as his wings folded around her, and she allowed herself to truly relax. "Thank you, Master."

Her master's expression was kind as he continued to comfort her. "Alas, it is that saturation of life and all its emotion that triggers such overwhelming hunger, at least at first. You have no reason to feel guilty, child. Had you not thrown her out, you would have eventually fed on her, and she would have lost the baby as a result."

Hermione clutched her master's cloak and nodded. "Even knowing that, I feel horrible. She may be selfish, but she's also pregnant and emotionally unstable, and I probably didn't help much with that."

Desmondon chuckled. "Dear child, you cannot blame everything on pregnancy, despite what those that are would tell you. There are times when you must take responsibility for yourself, your actions, and your choices— and while one may not necessarily mean to hurt another, you do have to reap the consequences of doing so, no matter how understanding one might wish to be."

He stroked her back tenderly. "Do you think that elusive greater good, even if it did allow for your and Severus to be together, even if it did bring out an ultimately good thing, excuses those like Albus—who used my token for his own ends? Does forcing you, even if you didn't see it that way as a child, to age much faster than your peers, to learn more than your peers for one person's ultimate benefit— even if they were to say, save the world— make it right?"

Hermione stared at his buttons on his cloak before answering.

"You were a child then, Hermione. You may not have been when you made the choice to bind yourself to my service and become what you are, but you were then, and I loathe those who would manipulate children who have no concept of exactly what they are agreeing to."

"While all are but children to me, my child, I know the difference between informed decisions and answers given to me because someone wants to give me an answer they think I want. Taking such answers as true— is a disgrace. Shameful."

"Did Albus truly ask you to save Remus back when he was attacked by Fenrir?" Hermione asked.

Desmondon nodded, sighing at the memory of that night. "Can you even imagine a five-year-old Morangelus? Frozen in time at that age? Frozen in maturity at that particular phase of life? Emotional "instability" as it were? Despite what you may think of the maturity of the soul, the body is what allows that to channel, and if the body is not ready, it will never be ready if cut at a moment so vulnerable and immature. Especially with those such as witches and wizards, who are still brimming with accidental magic until they reach their teens, and even then— well, it's debatable if such things are stable while pubescent hormones are still rampaging around."

Hermione shuddered with horror. "No, thank you."

"Exactly. I may call you my child, and you may always be my child to me, but you are not frozen as a child, and that is a big difference."
Hermione tilted her head. "Is that why he thinks you're a vampire, Master? Rather than Death, I mean."

Desmondon laughed. "Well, it's ironically easier to accept vampire over Death, I think."

Hermione blinked. "Oh."

"For most people, anyway," he said, chuckling. He tilted his head to the side. "I fear it was due to that refusal to 'save' the boy that he was so much more careful with Severus— and by careful, I believe you know what I really mean."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, Master. Molding him into the kind of person he wanted, one who would make all the right mistakes for reasons that were quite unknown to him." Hermione curled her lip in disgust.

"Master?"

"Hrm?"

"What will happen to Albus when he dies?"

Desmondon cracked his neck, blinking slowly. "First, he has to die, my dear, and some might say that living trapped within your addled mind might be living in a prison of your very own making."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Wizards typically live a very long time."

Desmondon smiled without humour. "Indeed, they do."

When Remus came out of the next room, Severus set him down on a hastily transfigured bed, made him drink some restorative potions, and then covered him up with a duvet before rushing to Hermione's side and scooping her up into his arms and crushing her to himself hard enough to almost crack a rib.

By the time Nymphadora came in, throwing herself at the resting Remus, Severus had curled up on the couch with Hermione draped across his lap. He said nothing to her, his black eyes raking over the younger witch with hardly a flicker of sympathy.

Minerva flooed in shortly after, carrying a tray of finger foods ranging from light to the more substantial, drinks, and an assorted mixture of "life" foods that she knew would cater to their other, more specific needs.

Severus partook of the offerings gratefully, giving the elder witch a respectful nod.

"Are you alright, Severus? Is Hermione?" Minerva asked with concern.

"Our master took care of her, Minerva," Severus said. "She will be fine, and because she was fine, I am also fine," he reassured her.

Minerva nursed her tea. "And Remus?"

"He will be fine," Severus said. "Removing something that had been parasitically living in him since he was five was about as hard as one might expect— like trying to remove an invasive cancer, cell by cell."

Minerva closed her eyes. "Did you hear about Fenrir Greyback?"
Severus shook his head. "No, only that Remus was supposed to go and infiltrate his pack by Albus' orders."

"He has no pack anymore," Minerva said. "Alastor said they caught him attempting to kidnap Garrick Ollivander— and he was Marked, Severus. Marked and free of lycanthropy. If you are to believe it—even more insane because of its loss."

Severus frowned, staring into his tea. "The Dark Mark— cured the lycanthropy?"

Minerva shook her head. "Oh, it drove out the lycanthropy, but it replaced it with something that I would argue is infinitely worse. Alastor says that, even as twisted as Fenrir was or is, he had always had his twisted pack in mind. The Mark demands absolute loyalty to the Dark Lord alone, and this puts every werewolf Marked in a primal conflict with themselves—"

"What aren't you saying, Minerva?" Severus asked.

Minerva's face scrunched up. "They gnawed off their own arms in holding, Severus. Every single one of them— with fully human teeth— and they bled out in their cells."

Severus' eyes widened. "I— I cannot say I expected that."

"I don't think anyone suspected that would happen, Severus."

"What does that mean for the Dark Lord?" Hermione asked, stirring from Severus' lap like a cat rolling over in a sunbeam.

"Nothing good for him," Severus said grimly. "His year will be up since we unravelled the goblet and diadem. And that was before we found the locket."

"The spiders are still searching for any other stragglers that may have been hidden," Hermione said. "We have no way of knowing if he might have created another Horcrux by accident."

"Or on purpose, given his proclivity for such things," Severus said grimly, his eyebrow twitching slightly.

"School is going to start up again soon, and I'm not sure how it's going to go with Dumbledore as addled as he is. He seems somewhat better during the day than towards evening, so he might make it if we move up the welcome feast to early afternoon instead of night— that could also give the new students time to get settled, which always seemed to be us unpacking and sleeping in our clothes the first night anyway…"

Severus arched a brow. "Tours of the castle could help with the first years ending up dangling off staircases by accident and creeping around the wrong corridors."

Hermione nodded.

"Sounds like a good idea," Minerva said, nodding her head. "I could easily arrange that with the board without having to explain or bring in Dumbledore—he's always had me do such things anyway. We will have to bring in the Head of Houses as well as the more competent staff members to funnel attention away from Albus during the worsening times. My hope, however, is that when you do finish off this thing with the Dark Lord and his various objects that we can safely retire him. We're practically doing all of his work for him anyway," she said soberly.

Severus sighed and gave a curt nod.
"One of the greatest wizards of all time reduced to being addled and unable to even control his basest impulses," Hermione said, shaking her head. "It's truly terrifying."

Minerva furrowed her brows. "I was speaking with Poppy, and she said that it would probably be best to give Albus a chaperone of sorts—someone like a personal aide that will not leave his side. We could disguise it as being a sort of organisational thing, like a secretary, but it would really be for keeping him from showing up starkers to dinner or doing something that would result in Rita Skeeter getting involved, which is the absolute last thing we need."

"So when he's coherent, he has a secretary, but when he's not, he'd have someone who keeps him from doing something truly unfortunate?" Severus asked.

Minerva nodded.

"You do realise, he would need a talented Occlumens to survive his constant need to pilfer through other people's thoughts?"

Minerva frowned, having not thought of that.

"How strong is his—"

"Very," Severus said.

"Shite," Minerva summed it up quite succinctly.

She stared down at the floor, seemingly counting cracks.

Suddenly, Minerva grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"Minerva, I know that look."

The Scottish witch continued to grin. "I do believe I have an idea."

"When you said you had an idea, Minerva, this was not quite what I was expecting, considering your view on transfiguration of people—"

"Transfiguration of students as a form of punishment, Severus," Minerva replied tartly. "This is transfiguration for the preservation of the school and the Headmaster's dirty little secrets until the war is well and truly over."

"I've never seen a trigger transfiguration hex before!" Hermione said, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"Do try to stop being so excited," Severus snipped.

Hermione pouted and turned her head away, snubbing him.

"Git!" Octavius admonished him.

Severus frowned and squished the shadow spider back under his hair.

"Still a git!" the spider hissed.

"I would be glad to teach you," Minerva said with a wink.
"Still, do you really trust Hagrid not to spill the beans to Albus the moment he changes back?" Severus asked.

"I do when he's under oath."

Severus widened his eyes. "However did you manage to convince him to do that?"

"He genuinely wants to help Albus—and like most people who don't know any better, he thinks he owes him."

"At least he and Fang seem to be getting on really well," Hermione said, tapping one talon to her chin. The boarhound and the silvery-white Toggenburg goat had curled up together before the hearth, snoring away peacefully.

"It does seem—oddly fitting," Severus said with a distinct smirk.

"He seems to do much better as a goat," Hermione said, puckering her lips in speculation.

"It may have been his true calling," Minerva said. "I didn't pick the form, after all. Magic did."

"You used Wild Magick on him?"

"The only thing that Hogwarts can't specifically counter due to his status as the current Headmaster," Minerva said, nodding sharply. "It will attempt to do whatever he wishes, whenever he wishes it."

"Such an antiquated system," Severus muttered.

"I don't think that was the real system," Hermione said after a long moment.

"Huh?" Severus and Minerva looked at her the same, confused and curious.

"Hogwarts was created by the Founders, who all shared duties equally. There was no headmaster and deputy. There were just them—what we call the Heads of House. Yet, recently, at least as time goes, someone decided it was better to give one person all the power and shove all the rule makers into a Board of Governors—effectively making it so the right hand doesn't know what the left is doing."

Minerva tilted her head. "You, my dear, must discuss this with me further, after all is said and done in this war. Now, unfortunately, is not the time."

Hermione's lip twitched, and she nodded.

"Well, here is hoping the start of the new term goes off without a hitch—and that the Dark Lord continues to believe that Albus sits firmly in his throne," Minerva said after a while. "Which is the only reason we are even humouring Albus remaining here at the school when he should be an inpatient at Mungo's being treated for his condition."

Severus nodded, letting out his breath slowly. "It's a good thing I'm dead because all this drama would surely kill me."

McGonagall scoffed, shaking her head. "Well, I'm still alive, laddie, and I'd certainly like to stay as such for just as long as naturally possible."

Severus wrinkled his nose. "As you wish, Minerva."
Hermione stood silently as she watched the potions class, her hands clasped behind her back. Horace Slughorn wandered the room making occasional humming sounds, grimacing in a way that looked like he was in pain. He had one of those auras that reminded her of a prey animal— beady eyes constantly on the move, paranoid and swift to flee, yet smart enough to survive.

The way life was seen through various lenses totally fascinated her— now that death was clearer. People often spent their lives fearfully running from death rather than living. Horace was one of those people who spent much more time looking over his shoulder than truly experiencing his life as it unfolded. He surrounded himself in powerful people— or rather those most likely to be powerful so he could seek favours from them at a later date.

The truth was, she wasn't learning anything overly mind-blowing from Slughorn when it came to potions, but she was certainly learning the art of political maneuvering— not that she particularly cared for it. It made her skin crawl to do the back scratching game. Rub here. Grease there. Tweak here. Shake there.

Yet—

Hermione had no reason to not learn new things, even if they were distasteful to her. Playing the game was a part of life, and it was something that was, unfortunately for her, everywhere. Muggle or magical made no actual difference.

There were the invisible movers, the social climbers, the social elite, and those who were simply too tenacious to give up on a long, arduous process of red tape and votes and social improvement. Slughorn was one who dreamed of being an invisible mover, but he was really just a social climber by proxy. He rubbed up against those who did the climbing and the moving, the true bringers of change. He lived vicariously through others, thinking he was as great, if not even greater for having recognised those who would become great before others did.

The students were all staring intently at her, perhaps seeing her for the first time as someone who not only survived a great and terrible attack, but as someone who had been irrevocably changed.

Even her family name had changed— emblazoned on the front page of the Prophet, thanks to the ever-obnoxious Rita Skeeter digging her nose into the Ministry's marital records while looking for dirt on someone else.

One title proclaimed:

*Magically Blessed Marriage Binds Teacher and Student as Snapes Forever*

Another, shortly after, cried:

*Victim of Harry Potter's Foul Curse Finds Herself Bound To the Equally Foul Severus T. Snape*

While one that had obviously come from Rita Skeeter slipped in with:

*Granger Trollop Seduces Hogwarts Potions Professor Into Carrying Bastard Lovechild*

That headline had been especially entertaining when a bewildered representative of the Department of Magical Marriage couldn't explain exactly why the couple's names— or rather, their ages— were strangely indecipherable, yet he did confirm that the pair were, in fact, recently wed via Ancient Magick— whoever and however old they really were.

That had led to Hermione calling Severus "you there in the black" and him calling her "the one with
the sentient curls" for a week's worth of chuckling. Minerva hadn't particularly appreciated being
dubbed "the walking hairball" but Draco had amused himself by being "that obnoxious blond git".

Hermione had speculated that made it perhaps too vague, but Draco had simply refused to
acknowledge her logic and wouldn't even consider her alternate suggestion of "the wily white
ferret".

She couldn't imagine why—

The other students seemed to forget she had ever been one of them, but whether that was self-
defense or a gift from Desmondon, Hermione wasn't entirely sure. It was true that his gift protected
them from being scrutinised too closely— all that did would find themselves staring at themselves or
into the Abyss.

It did make Hermione wonder why Rita was not affected by it, causing her to suspect that maybe
Rita had made a pact with some sort of minor force of shite-stirring on a cosmic level.

The mental image of Rita being claimed by some minor demon of the underworld for temporary
fame, money, and popularity made her teeth itch. Even your novice demonologists in the Muggle
world could tell you that making pacts with demons were bad news with a huge helping of no thank
you and so-not-worth-it.

Minerva didn't seem to be affected by whatever magic caused most others to gloss over and forget
about Hermione as a former student, but Severus had speculated that true loyalty was the key to
unlocking the magic. It made sense, as both Draco and Minerva trusted them implicitly. Perhaps, she
thought, it really was that simple.

Not that true loyalty was simple or even all that common—and Rita Skeeter was definitely not filed
under loyalty to anyone but herself.

Dumbledore seemed to dodge the radar of the students well enough. No one associated the billy goat
following Hagrid and Fang around with Albus Dumbledore, and that made it ever so much easier to
get other things done. Meanwhile, the countdown to the Dark Lord's "year" to get his affairs in order
and report to Death was ticking away little by little.

Neither Severus nor Hermione thought the Dark Lord would actually take the words to heart, but
there was the slimmest chance that all the bad things that kept happening to him would eventually
help him take a hint.

Draco was still cohabitating with the Snapes due to the war not being quite over yet. Slytherin was
still full of backstabbing, pureblood elitist, aspiring murderers— and the fact their mothers, fathers,
sisters, brothers, and whatever else had either died due to the Mark or else had been outed and
shamed because if it only seemed to make Draco even more glad that his parents were safely away in
another country.

On the positive side, Draco's grades had never been better, as he had no distractions from "peers"
and he had access to two brilliant minds to ask questions of only a few steps away every evening.
Rekindling a trust with Severus and forming a new, better relationship with Hermione was just the
sweet icing on the cake.

A tender nuzzle along her neckline alerted Hermione to her husband's return, and his wings wrapped
around her as he rocked her back and forth as he hummed softly.

"Hullo," Hermione greeted him. "No patrol this evening?"
"It's already well past the witching hour, my love," he said. "Even the late night Astronomy tower snoggers are sleeping."

Hermione chuckled. "It seems like I was just in Slughorn's classroom watching over student cauldrons."

"Would you rather be back there?"

"No," Hermione laughed, pulling his head down with one hand. "It's bad enough that Horace is looking for reasons to push me out of apprenticeship and into full mastery at a moment's notice. You'd think he wanted to retire or something."

Severus snorted. "He wanted to retire back when I first studied under him. He wants to be a full-time schmoozer."

Hermione shook her head. "Isn't he already?"

"Is that the proper respect for your elders, Miss Granger?" Severus admonished, reverting to his stern professor voice.

"The truth, professor," she answered, leveling a gaze at him.

Severus rumbled softly, rubbing his thumb across her smooth cheek.

Hermione stared into the fire, her golden eyes flickering in reflection to the light. "Severus?"

"Hn?"

"Do you think we could have had something, had we not been—"

"Mutually murdered?"

"Yeah."

"No," he said, causing her head to jerk up, raw pain in her eyes.

He touched her chin, shaking his head. "Even our allies only see our masks, albeit a different sort. Only a single piece of who we are. Never the whole. It would be an unfair love— you having only a small bit of the whole— and me unable to show you all of who I was. While I'm not saying we could not have become close, it would have been a desperate longing between us, each wishing to feel that completeness and never being able to obtain it."

He leveled his gaze at her. "It would not be because you lacked in some way as a person, Hermione, and I think you know this."

Hermione sighed and nodded. "I just feel like part of Dumbledore was right, you know? Like there was a greater good, forged through terrible deeds."

Severus pulled her to him and wrapped himself around her. "We are truly one, you and I, united to each other and to our master. We are free from the earthly restraints that once held us. And, ultimately, we serve both a better master, one who genuinely cares for us, and a better purpose as well."

Hermione nodded, smiling at him. "I just— think it's a bit unfair that I'd never have gotten to know you if it hadn't been for Dumbledore's meddling and Harry ultimately— killing me."
Snape sniffed. "I find my opinion of the boy— and yes, I still consider him very much a boy— has remained unchanged over the years."

"And here I thought I found something redeemable in Draco, and you say that nothing changes," Hermione ribbed him.

"Nothing with anyone related to Potter ever changes," Severus muttered. "It seems to be some sort of genetic family issue. As we have the evidence of his failure to satisfy the virginity clause of his family fortune as well as his parents not leaving him something in his own sodding mini-vault to say "oh hey, be careful who you sleep with because, oh, you could lose everything like we did" or some other such rot." Severus wrinkled his nose.

"Who knows, maybe there is a clause that prevents someone from warning their underage relatives, otherwise it's all null and void. Kind of a guaranteed unbias to the test. I mean, if you knew you stood to earn the family fortune just by virtue of being celibate until marriage, wouldn't most people be able to control themselves for a few more years?" Hermione scratched her head.

Severus looked thoughtful. "Judging by how many children seem to want to drag their peers into closets and indulge more than their hands— I tend to think no," he said. "And let's not get into the fact that if they really cared, they could just as easily just raise them with, I don't know, values."

Hermione sighed. "I'll admit I had certain values instilled in me, and I still done mucked up by having a crush on Ronald Weasley."

Severus closed his eyes, shuddering. "That was an image I did not need."

"If it is a pureblood tradition, then it isn't exactly a secret that such things exist, right?" Hermione asked.

"I have to wonder if some families are so shamed by their inability to keep it in their pants that they purposely encourage their children's sexual freedom to cover up their own shame," Severus said after a while.

Hermione leaned into Severus. "It's a little ironic, yes, that we are the ones with the family fortune and we aren't exactly going out of our way to spend it all like some Muggle winning the lottery?"

"Diving into the library, perhaps," Severus quipped.

"Yeah, that," Hermione agreed.

Severus took in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"How long do you think it will take Harry or— well, most of the Weasleys to figure out about the clause?" Hermione asked.

Cinder gave a yawning squeak. "Not long at all if there is an arachnid intervention," the spider said cheekily, wearing a very bent, tarnished halo.

"Cinder, wherever did you get that halo?" Hermione asked.

"I found it in the room with all the stuff," she replied with a spider shrug. "It liked me and followed me home."

Hermione blinked. "Okay then."
"And I thought Octavius brought home all the odd stuff," Severus said, rubbing his chin.

Sssshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhnnnggggg!

PLOP!

A gargantuan snake wrapped in spider silk and fastened to a large, cast-iron cooking spit abruptly dropped out of thin air. Its mouth was tightly wrapped closed, and the entire body was unmoving save for the very tip of its tail, which was twitching angrily like a brassed-off cat attempting to do its best rattlesnake impression.

Upon seeing Severus, the snake went completely ballistic, thrashing and straining in the silk, hatred that seemed deeply seated in every movement. The snake's eyes went entirely red, and a voice seemed to come from the serpent.

"Ssseverus!" the voice hissed.

Haze, who had been perched on top of the snake's head, wrapped more silk around the snake's head and anchored it down to the floor, yanking on the silk to pull it tight. The snake's head hit the floor with a sickening crack.

"Yer zollywogs are apertight!" Haze said, flicking on strand of silk, causing the snake's head to smash hard against the floor multiple times.

"You will come to heel, Ssseverus," the voice continued from the snake. "Where I shall teach you the true meaning of pain."

Severus's lips turned up slightly. "We shall sing you a song, my Lord," he said, his voice resonating with the very air.

The beating of deep drums sounded off from the deep, seemingly from the deepest depths of Hogwarts itself. The croon of a stringed instrument sang in the echo. Hermione and Severus stood together, their bodies straightening completely as their bodies shifted, cracked, and reformed. Their heads became twisted skulls that were neither human or animal. Claws grew like crystalline blades from their fingertips as webbed wings stretched between bone.

Hermione began to sing, a strange ethereal echo causing her voice to both rise and fall like the beating of a heart.

Hvem skal synge meg
(Who shall sing me)

I daudsvevna slynge meg
(into the death-sleep sling me)

Når eg på Helvegen går
(When I walk on the Path of Death)

Og dei spora eg trår er kalda, så kalda
(and the tracks I tread are cold, so cold)

Severus added his voice to her song, singing with her, his voice curling around hers like the
wrappings of the world serpent, the great and massive coils of Jörmungandr flexing and sliding against the very roots of the mighty Yggdrasil.

Eg songane søkte
(I sought the songs)

Eg songane sende
(I sent the songs)

Då den djupaste brunni
(when the deepest well)

Gav meg dråoer så ramme
(gave me the drops so touched)

Av Valfaders pant
(of Death-father's wager)

Alt veit eg, Odin
(I know it all, Odin)

Var du gjønde ditt auge
(where you hid your eye)

Hermione walked over to the snake, pulling her head up with one, bony finger as she met the enormous serpent's fangs with a flash of her own. She breathed a strange, red vapour directly into the snake's nostrils

Når dy ved Helgrini står
(When you stand by the Gate of Death)

Og når du laus deg nå riva
(and you have to tear free)

Skal eg fylgje deg
(I shall follow you)

Over Gjallarbrua med min song
(across the Resounding Bridge with my song)***

The body of the serpent shook and twisted as a shockingly shrill scream came from within. A humanoid form formed out of the red mist that spewed forth from the serpent's mouth even as Severus struck at the snake's neck with his own fangs, tearing into scale and flesh. He pulled away, spitting out the chunk of scale and skin, and Hermione dripped her blood onto the gaping wound.

The serpent's body shrivelled and crunched in on itself as a shrieking black cloud of a fractured soul
came rushing forth and was immediately destroyed. The spewed red smoke then formed into the twisted, hideously misshapen body of the Dark Lord himself.

"What is the meaning of this?!
the barely-human figure screamed.

The Morangelus said nothing, moving not one fraction as blackened vapour rose up from the ground, swirling, and forming into another figure.

"Tom," Desmondon's voice was both venom and velvet combined.

"Du blir løyst frå banda som bind deg!" Hermione sang. (You will be free from the bonds that bind you!)

"Du er løyst frå banda som batt deg!" Severus answered her. (You are free from the bonds that bound you!)

Desmondon smiled at Tom. "Do you hear it, boy? The dirge of the dead come to free you from your earthly bindings and carry you into the crushing coils of Jörmungandr."

"I do not believe in such rot!" Tom hissed. "I am immortal and beyond the reach of death!"

Desmondon reached out one finger and poked Tom lightly on the "nose". "You have no idea how long I've been waiting to do that, Tom."

"Who the hell do you think you are?!

"Oh, I think I'm a great many things, Tom," he said after a long moment. "But I think the name you would be the most familiar with—is Death."

"You're lying."

Desmondon's lips curved into a cruel smile. "Is that what your Legilimency tells you, Tom?"

Tom snatched a wand from the nearby table and pointed it at the one who claimed to be "Death" and snarled "Legimens!!"

Riddle's eyes changed from red to a fully human dark brown as the the figure in front of him expanded into a monstrous and beautiful creature that shifted form with every blink. Human merged with beast. Angel merged with demon. Youth met with skeletal bleached bones. Dull, human fingers turned to wicked talons. Arms became tentacles that became fins. Fire and brilliance met with the darkness of the Abyss.

Tom let out a shrill scream of agony, dropping the stolen wand as he clutched at his head. His eyes burned out from his sockets, charred and empty as the true form of Death was too much to behold by any living creature.

He fell to the floor, writhing in pain, his face transformed into a parody of rigor. His body quaked, thrashed, and jerked like a hundred strong cords were simultaneously pulling his limbs in random directions.

Death stood over him, face emotionless. He reached out his hands, and Hermione and Severus put their hands in his. They transformed into his instruments, their bodies blurring as each became a sickle united by a chain—Death's own kusarigama.

Long you have avoided
My gentle touch,

But you shall no longer be able

To say as such.

Long in years,

But short on death,

I even the scale,

As I take your last breath.

Defiler of the balance,

Abuser of men,

Destroyer of minds,

Again and again.

Now is your ending,

By my hand not alone,

For they were your victims,

Whom you must atone.

Roll the boulder upward

On the hill neverending

Only to have it roll back

In a cycle unending.

Death is too easy

For one such as you.

I condemn you to live,

Your punishment anew.

Day after day,

And night after night.

The beasts bay for your blood,

Despite all your might.

Your power will be nothing,

But ash and a dream—
Only a faint glimmer
That can be barely seen.
And just when you think,

Having no soul is your friend.

I shall give you one anew,

To suffer your end.

Every pain you shall feel,

Every murder in your past—

Each will haunt you forever

From the first to the last.

And if by some miracle,

You should feel regret,

One day I shall take

From the punishment you get.

Death stood above Tom Riddle, his skull face holding two burning eyes composed entirely of flame. He spun, using his sickles to slice off the head of Tom Riddle, releasing the last remaining shard of his soul to the beyond only to have gnarled spirit hands grasp ahold of it and drag the final soul piece to the underworld. The vengeful screams of Riddle's multitude of victims rang out as one, their combined hands dragging him away through the very bowels of damnation, raking his body over the burning coals of his own making.

The Earth cracked, swallowing up his body before it filled with molten magma and then sealed completely.

Desmondon's face was utterly expressionless as the glow from the underworld faded to nothing.

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**Headmaster of Hogwarts Retires Upon Confirmation of the End of He Who Died**

Albus Dumbledore has retired from Hogwarts after successfully guiding generations of students through two Wizarding Wars. After Aurors reported a record number of outlying wizards and witches, werewolves, and confirmed Death Eaters dropping dead at the same time, the decapitated body and head of the man who had once been Tom Riddle and the Dark Lord, appeared on the desk of Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour.

After much time was spent confirming if this corpse was truly the man who had terrorized Britain for upwards of twenty-odd decades, the grim reality was that someone had "taken care of business" and rid the world of an impending doom.

The attacks both on Muggle and magicals alike have come to screeching halt, peppered only with what Aurors consider "ordinary crimes" from witches and wizards hoping to cash in on the chaos to get away with things that would have normally been side-lined in favour of pursuing the evil agents
Fortunately for Wizarding Britain and less fortunately for them, the death of the Dark Lord has freed up many Aurors to respond immediately to reports of other criminal activity.

As for the retirement of Albus Dumbledore, Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall has taken the reins as Headmistress, and the Board of Governors has appointed Professor Filius Flitwick as her Deputy-Headmaster. Classes have not missed a beat, however, in light of the fact that Headmistress McGonagall cannot teach and be head of a Hogwarts' house while being Headmaster, it is rumoured that Apprentice Hermione Snape will be taking her mastery tests early and assuming the vacancy left by the Headmistress' change in roles.

Unfortunately, this leaves Professor Horace Slughorn without an apprentice to take over his position before his planned retirement. Those interested in applying for the potions position are welcome to owl Headmistress McGonagall for a personal interview.

"Horace, I realise that you were hoping to retire and finally get to have that vacation without worrying about Death Eaters," Minerva said, "but we desperately needed a new Transfiguration teacher, and we needed it more urgently than a potions teacher. Your contract doesn't officially run out for the ten year renewal for quite a few years unless you have an apprentice who agrees to take your place during that time."

Horace was sulking in the corner. "You know I was counting on this retirement, Minerva!"

"We all count on retirement, someday, Horace!" Minerva said with an exasperated sigh. "But if you want to blame someone for this, blame Albus for retiring in a flurry after the war, not me, and most definitely not Professor Snape!"

"I don't blame Severus—" Horace protested.

"Hermione Snape!" Minerva elaborated.

Horace slumped.

Minerva put a hand on his shoulder. "Look, Horace, I know you've been looking forward to retirement for quite some time, but try looking at this in a different way. The esteem we've all gathered from keeping our students alive during two wars will give you even more clout with those little parties you have inside and outside of the school, hrm? By the time you do retire, your name will be firmly in the glow, yes?"

"But surely you can let that Lupin person take DADA again and let Severus take—"

"Horace!" Minerva chided. "I will not take away a position that he has wanted to teach for as long as I can remember just so you can retire faster!"

Slughorn messed with his mustache, sighing. "Very well, Headmistress. You will let me know as soon as someone applies for the apprenticeship?"

"I will."

"Thanks," he said, grumbling as he left the Headmistress' office.

"Sorry about that," Minerva said as she waved to the figure hidden in the alcove of her office. "Here is your contract for teaching Wizarding History, starting as soon as you can get Professor Binns'
ghost to move on."

Remus rubbed his ruffled hair and shrugged. "Horace really wants to get out of here."

Minerva sighed. "I think it's more that he's wanting to do less, not more— Hermione made me aware of just how much she was doing for him without much in the way of guidance. He assumed she already knew everything, at least when it came to potions. To be fair, if she had any real question she had Severus there to ask— but it leaves me in a pickle as to what kind of person I will have to bring in to apprentice with him."

"May I ask you a favour, then, Headmistress?"

"I can promise nothing in these times, but you are welcome to ask."

"Can I move the history classrooms to a new location? Binns probably won't even notice he's lecturing to an empty room, and then I won't have to fight him for it."

Minerva grinned. "I like the way you think, Remus. I will arrange it."

Remus smiled. "Thank you."

"I'll move Sybill into the history rooms and give you the tower. Think of the great view."

Remus belted out laughter. "I like your style, Headmistress." He signed the contract.

"Oh, and Remus?"

"Hrm?"

"Be prepared to spend a week ridding yourself of the hidden sherry bottles and smell of booze and incense."

"I'm so glad I'm not a werewolf anymore," Remus said, wrinkling his nose.

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Harry and Ron waited in the intensely long lines at Gringotts in order to open their joint accounts between themselves and their new wives. Ginny and Lavender chatted away amicably, even as Harry and Ron tried not to get annoyed. Apparently, there were a lot of people opening up joint accounts due to even more people getting married after the confirmed end of the war.

Ron was distracted by the sound of feminine, French laughter— a distinctive sound in London even without the familiarity from knowing exactly who it was.

"That's Fleur," Ron said to Harry, nudging him in the ribs.

"So? They have to go to be bank too," Harry said.

Ron scowled, crossing his arms across his chest. "That's my Aunt Muriel with them," he said.

"The one you don't like?" Harry asked, frowning.

"The one no-one likes," Ron said. "I have no idea why they are talking to her."

"Yes, yes, I will take care of it, my dears," Muriel said, tsking and tutting as she signed the parchments. "You will tell me if you plan on having more children, and we can set them up together. You should have it down perfectly by the time you have to teach them how to do it."
Fleur laughed lightly. "I should hope I do not have children forever," she said. "A few will be just fine."

"Yes, well, you did manage to keep your hands to yourselves until marriage, unlike the rest of the family, or so it seems, so I am more than happy to help you with the ins and outs with regard to your inheritance. In a few years you should have enough investments that you won't have to withdraw from the family vaults, and if you play your gobstones correctly, add to it. Don't worry, my dear, that's what it's there for— making a good start for you and your family until you can put a little back in, yes?"

Fleur smiled along with Bill.

"Thank you, Aunt Muriel," Bill said giving her a hug. "I really appreciate your help."

Muriel tutted. "You needn't worry, my boy," she said. "You just remember, it's for you and your immediate family, not to be divided out to the rest of the clan. That's the part a lot of folks don't get. When they come with their hands out, hoping that their inability to keep it in their pants will be forgiven if but for the blood in their veins. If that were true, we wouldn't have the Clause to begin with, yes? You can, however, do formal loans under Goblin contract, which can be arranged at any time. I'm sure you're fully aware of what those entail."

Bill nodded. "Goblin contracts are not to be trifled with."

Muriel smiled. "No, they are most certainly not. Anyway. You can provide for the children or yourself at least until they come of age, after which they must rely on their own vaults unless they, too, satisfy the clause. At that point they are allowed to share in it as well, equally."

"I had no idea the Weasley family even had a family vault," Bill said, boggling. "I had always thought my parents' personal vault was it."

Muriel wrinkled her nose. "Yes, well, bad blood there, that. I'm sure you can see why they don't talk about it, even if they could."

Bill and Fleur nodded in agreement. "We both understand the need," Fleur said. "Many families in France do much the same but for perhaps stranger reasons."

"Stranger reasons?"

"To prevent crimes of a sexual nature," she said.

Bill's eyes widened. "That actually makes sense, strangely."

"Stranger reasons," Fleur said, laughing. "You see?"

Bill seemed to understand something as his brows knit together. "Aunt Muriel, what happens if someone is—" he trailed off. "Forced. It is not their fault, after all. Not that I would ever allow such a thing with a daughter or son of mine, but—"

"A special clause takes care of the victim," his aunt said. "Compensation comes from the attacker's family vaults to make up for the loss— needless to say, any family worth their salt would far rather eat their own children before permitting them to drain their vaults by committing such a heinous act."

Fleur tilted her head. "Many old families had extensive curses to prevent such things," she said. "Hexes that shriveled a man and made his parts fall off if he even attempted such a crime."
"Gods!" Bill gasped, instinctively choking and doing a swift, surreptitious check of his own male parts.

Fleur and Muriel chuckled together at his expense.

Ron turned to Harry, whispering. "I think there may be some family money tucked away," he muttered. "Something about needing to be married."

Harry frowned. "What do you mean, Ron?"

"I didn't hear them very well, but I think once you are married you get access to the real family vault."

"Next," a sharp-toothed goblin grunted.

"Oi, goblin," Ron said self-importantly. "How do we access our family vault?"

The wizened goblin narrowed his eyes. "It is the same with every wizard family, young Mister Weasley," he said, his teeth grinding together. "Be married, and satisfy the family magic on the door. Many have certain specific… clauses to prevent unauthorised, selfish access to those vaults."

"Ron, whatever are you going on about?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Oh! A family vault?" Lavender was suddenly fully alert and really interested now. "It's only the very oldest wizarding families that have those! Mine doesn't!"

Ginny butted in. "What do you mean a family vault?"

"We'll we're both married now, so let's see those vaults!" Ron said, grinning madly.

"You are welcome to attempt to pass the door, Mister Weasley," the goblin said neutrally.

"Is there a vault for me too, sir?" Harry asked politely.

"There is a Potter Vault, yes," the goblin said cryptically.

"Well, come on, Harry, if Bill and the Frenchie can do it, it must be pretty easy," Ron said, rubbing his hands together in glee.

The goblin rang a bell, and another goblin walked out from behind the curtain. He gestured for them to follow him.

Lavender and Ginny looked at each other excitedly, chattering on with high voices and squeals.

The path to the family vaults was strangely desolate, even peaceful. There were no ominous growls or keens from the famous vault guardians, and even less people walking through.

Ron's jaw tightened as he saw Draco Malfoy standing by one of the open vaults, pressing his personal seal into a parchment as his new wife did the same— who was that? Daphne? No, Astoria? One of those Greengrass girls, anyway.

The girl in question was blushing like crazy at something the goblin was saying.

"Hey, what is this test anyway?" Ron asked the goblin.

"Every family had a choice of which tests would be used to grant or deny their future descendants
"access," the goblin informed him. "All were properly established at the foundation of the family vault."

"But what is it?" Ron insisted.

"That is entirely between you and the vault, Mister Weasley."

Ron scowled and fell silent.

They reached the Potter vault first, its giant doors looming with engraved dragons on the front.

"Stand right here, Mister Potter," the goblin directed Harry. "Cast any spell upon the door so it can recognise your magic. You may do the same over there, Mister Weasley." He pointed to another vault door, one that seemed to be decorated with weasels rampant, all carrying swords and shields.

Harry stood in the area and pointed his wand at the door. "Expecto Patronum!" he cast his spell towards the door, and the Patronus stag zipped in and out through the vault door.

The door glowed a bright, blinding green and then blue.

The dragons slithered on the door, moving. One turned to face them. "Couldn't keep your todger in your pants, could you, boy?" the dragon snorted. "You shall not pass. Only those who satisfy the Potter virginity clause may walk through these doors."

"I have to be a virgin to pass?" Harry blurted.

"No, boy," the other dragon said. "You and your bride both must until your marriage and the following consummation. Such things sing in your magic, boy. We cannot be fooled. And you—we were not forced or coerced against your will, or we'd have known it. Now begone! Pray your spawn have better sense than you, for you cannot tell them. They must make their choices on their own, or we will deny them too."

The door went silent as the dragons moved back into position guarding the door.

Harry squared his shoulders. "Well, that's okay," he said after a while. "I still have what my parents left me, and the rest I'll make on my own."

Ginny, however, looked utterly horrified. "Why didn't my mum ever tell me!" she screeched.

"Gin—"

"Don't touch me!" she cried, holding her belly with an instinctive flinch. She fled the corridor in tears.

"Does Mr Potter still wish to create a join account?" The goblin asked, not even bothering to spare glance to where Ginevra had left.

Harry looked somberly in the direction that Ginny had fled. "I think—I'll leave it for now as it is, thank you."

"As you wish, Mister Potter."

"No! No! You can't do this!" Ron's outraged scream came and Lavender's shrill wailing joined in.

Harry frowned, figuring that he hadn't really counted on any sort of riches beyond what he had from
his parents. Why, then, were Ron and Lavender (or even Ginny) acting like they'd just been robbed? He had a lot left over from what his parents had left him, even after having paid for quite a few sweets for Gryffindor during finals week, year after year.

"What is the oddest clause you've ever had on a vault?" Harry asked, curious.

The goblin twitched his ears. "Consummation in front of the vault door and me as a witness." The goblin's lips moved with clear discomfort.

Harry's eyes went very wide. "I have a lot more respect for you, sir," he said after a beat.

The goblin bared his teeth. "Griphook had it even worse. One wizard family required the kissing of a goat."

Harry flinched. "I think I would far rather rely on my own means to make money," he said.

"You would be surprised what some wizards are willing to do for money," the goblin said.

"Wait— if no one can know what they need to do until they get here, how did they—"

The goblin smiled cruelly. "He transfigured his wife into a nanny goat and then kissed her."

Harry swallowed hard. "Good talking to you," he said, shuffling down the corridor. "What about Ron and Lavender?"

The goblin waved his hand negligently. "They will find their own way back out or starve. If they pass out, we will place their bodies on a cart and move them out with the evening refuse."

Harry made a face. "Oh."

As they began the trek back towards the lobby, Harry suddenly heard the high-pitched babbling of a very small child.

He looked to see Hermione holding up a young infant high in the air, making silly faces at the little girl.

"Babababababaaaaaa!" the infant cooed happily.

"Maaamamamamama!" another infant said, and Harry about fell over as he saw Severus Snape touching noses with another infant, a little boy.

They stood together just inside a giant, open vault door. Beyond it lay a great and vast collection of books and antiques as well as enormous piles of gold galleons.

"Just a handprint on the parchment here," the goblin near them said. "We will send out the proper notification if they satisfy the clause for the vault when they are of age and if they meet the conditions."

Severus nodded. "Very well."

"I don't think you're even going to be able to go out on a date without daddy blowing his top and making some little boy cry, Abby," she cooed to the infant.

Abigail babbled happily.

Severus gave his wife a "look." "No child of ours will allow their lower brain to rule them, now will
they, yes, Duncan?"

The infant boy babbled like his sister, blissfully oblivious and happy.

"Do you wish to make any other withdrawals, sir and madam?"

Both parents shook their heads. "Just what we alloted for their personal vaults for school," Hermione said.

"Very well, ma'am," the goblin said politely, and Hermione bared her teeth in what looked like a vicious snarl as she bowed.

The goblin seemed quite pleased as they exited the vault together.

"You!" Ron's voice rang out, and Harry moved to act, but the goblin next to him shook his head.

Harry looked like he wanted to protest, but the goblin was not entertaining conversation.

Ron threw himself in front of Hermione. "You took our vault from us!"

Hermione stood still, eyebrow arched. "Me, Ronald? How exactly did I take a vault from you?"

"If you'd just got off your high horse and engaged in a little snogging and gave me a good wank, I would never have had to go to Lavender to have my needs taken care of!"

Hermione's face ranged from disbelief to anger to hilarity.

"Really, Ronald? You're going to blame your putting your penis into a witch as MY fault? How is that, exactly? Considering you had your tongue down her throat in every broom closet for over a year before you and Harry made it quite impossible for us to be in a relationship, hrm?"

"What do you mean 'have to go to Lavender'?" Lavender screeched, pulling out her wand. "You sorry, son of a—" her face was cherry red with her rage, and it seemed like she was channeling her magic through her swollen belly.

SHHHHHHHHHHHHHIIINGGGGGGZAP!

Magic blew out from her abdomen and shot into Ron, bowling him arse over kettle into the nearby vault door— where the Snape's guardian door came to life as winged beasts and roared and clawed at his body before flinging him further down the corridor.

"Let's see you stick your cock into anything again, Ronald Weasley. I want a divorce!"

Lavender stormed down the corridor, electricity zapping through her hair.

Harry watched Ron rolling around on the ground, holding his groin as he moaned.

Hermione leaned over to whisper to Severus. "That wasn't what I expected to happen."

"Are you complaining, wife?"

"No, just… surprised."

Severus snorted, and rubbed her hair, eliciting a purr from his wife.

"That was— I mean— Nngh," Hermione's eyes fluttered. "You win. I surrender to your skill."
Severus smiled, watching the show of a certain younger Weasley check his parts and scream hysterically. "Karma is a true pleasure to watch in action when it is not torturing me."

Hermione thumped him. "You made your mistakes as all people make them. And you paid for your mistakes."

"And you, wife? What mistakes did you pay for with your life?"

Hermione snuggled into his side. "Trusting the wrong people."

Severus touched her cheek. "I trusted no one. You trusted the wrong ones. Between us, perhaps our spawn shall at least find the middle ground."

"Baaa!" the twins burbled together.

Hermione closed her eyes, her body shaking with laughter.

"Can we discuss the strange irony of two beings that have died being able to have children?"

Severus smiled. "Who are we to question the miracles of our Lord?"

Hermione traced the line of her husband's nose. "Speaking of which, today he's coming to entertain his grandbabies."

Severus grunted something about universal grandparent spoilings.

Hermione pressed a soft kiss on his mouth. "I love you."

His lips twitched. "I suppose I must love you back."

"I suppose," Hermione replied. She lifted her head like a certain Lucius Malfoy, twisting her face into a scowl of disdain—

Which lasted all of three seconds as her husband descended upon her face with a searing kiss.

Hermione mumbled something incoherent.

Severus smiled. "I love you too," he purred.

Hermione's face lit up like the sun.

"Viktor," Hermione greeted happily, enfolding him in an embrace. "How are you?"

The Bulgarian smiled broadly. "Sestrá, I have missed you."

"You could visit more," she chided. "In between all that fame and responsibility."

Viktor grinned as he watched their children merge into a gaggle and chatter away non-stop. "They never seem to have problems, da? Picking right up where they left off?"

Hermione grinned. "A lot like us, Viktor."

Viktor smiled broadly. "Am happy that being sworn to Zmei is not so vast as being Morangelus of Death," he said honestly. "Have hands full as it is."

Hermione laughed. "It helps that we are dead, old friend. Well, at least as the mortals go."
"It is a gift from our Masters, yes? Perhaps yours most of all, that you are allowed children— and they be a given normal, mortal life to decide their own paths." Viktor looked thoughtful. "Protecting Bulgaria seems big enough task for me and my mate."

Hermione smiled warmly. "You have always been a protector, Viktor. It suits you well."

Viktor chuckled. "I cannot say I ever saw you as Morangelus when first met— but cannot see any other way, now."

Hermione laughed. "Well, some others are not quite so understanding."

"Bulgaria doesn't always think benevolent when Zmei is involved," Viktor said wryly. "See dragon, run screaming, mess everywhere."

"Yay for cleaning charms?"

Viktor shrugged. "Sometimes best to just cut losses, protect people, and leave quickly."

Hermione snorted. "Sorry," she said, waving her hands. "That must really irritate you, leaving messes for others to clean up."

Viktor stretched and shook his head. "Thankfully in Bulgaria, most of the bad things Zmei wishes us to combat are night-creatures. Traditional dangers, rooted in Slavic folklore and culture."

"Master Desmondon gives us tasks of tracking down those cheating the natural cycle— but he prefers we try to assist their being caught by their own mortal peers unless there is no other choice."

Viktor sipped at the iced lemonade that appeared in front of them. "Your master seems quite wise and compassionate."

"Don't tell that to Wizarding Britain," Hermione said. "They might all have a collective aneurysm, and then we'd be reaping souls for weeks."

The Bulgarian laughed. "I will restrain myself."

"Thanks for that," Hermione replied, chuckling.

They both turned together as their respective children let out a loud collective screech of joyous abandon as they discovered the Muggle water hose and the glory of water fights without wands.

"Joie de vivre?" Viktor asked.

"Oui, bien entendu," she replied with a chuckle. "Nothing say joy of living like a water fight on a hot summer day."

"A water fight on a hot summer day with friends," Viktor said approvingly. "And those that would be family in all but blood."

Hermione only had a few seconds to register the duality of what he'd just said when Viktor blasted her with a wand movement, bowling her over with a wave of water.

Suddenly, Viktor went arse-over-teakettle as Severus blasted him with his own vortex of icy water. The children gaped as they watched Hermione and Viktor team up together to blast Severus down.

If anyone happened to be looking over the hedge to see what all the mad cackling was about, no one
said anything, but they did end up with a massive water fight involving all the local children gathering en masse in the yard and joining in on the water fun.

By the time the parents shuffled over to collect their wet children, Severus, Hermione, and Viktor were all sopping wet and wearing mad grins.

[Clipping in local paper]

**Water Wands by Crookshanks and the Canary**

_The newest summer toy has been released in London, and they are taking Britain by Storm. Designed to hold an amazing amount of water, these new toys are beating out the traditional squirt gun for wet summer-time fun. These things are so popular, that they sell out in minutes._

_Crafted locally by Mr and Mrs Snape, each one is painstakingly made by hand and sold in small batches at local stores. Local businesses have been begging to be the next to be allowed to sell the next batch, and the small shop businesses have enjoyed a great boost in sales akin to the mini monsters sales of a few years ago._

_The next release will be Wednesday at Gambol and Japes upon opening. See you there!_

Severus and Hermione stood next to their trembling twins. Desmondon nudged them forward. "Come now, Abigail, Duncan. You've been waiting all of eleven years for this very moment."

Abigail hugged her familiar's cage to her, rattling the poor owl inside and causing Noto to hoot softly in annoyance.

Duncan's face was a bit more stoic, but he was still trembling too. He held onto his familiar's cage with an iron grip. The half-Kneazle kit snuggled on, Pakhet totally oblivious to her master's nervousness.

Crookshanks meowed from Hermione's shoulder, looking on sagely.

Tiny half-grown shadow spiders huddled against each child's neck. "Come on! We've got this!"

"Yeah, we'll be with you!"

The children seemed to gather their courage as they looked back at their parents.

"We're proud of you both," Hermione said warmly.

"Unless you get sorted, Gryffindor," Severus snarked.

Hermione gave him a look, and all the spiders promptly leapt onto his face.

Severus pinged them off with a swipe of his hand.

"Git!" Octavius yelled as he silked himself back up to crawl under his hair.

Hermione cuddled Cinder. "You okay with your kiddos going off with ours?"

"Of course!" Cinder said, bobbing up and down happily.

"Us too!" the little spiders perched on Viktor's children's shoulders exclaimed as Gavril and Iskra
giggled.

"Aren't you a merry bunch of conspirators," Severus quipped.

The smaller spiders cheered happily.

Upon seeing their Uncle Viktor arrive with their best friends, the children barely waited to hug and kiss their parents for their official goodbye before running to board the Hogwarts Express.

Severus sighed. "To think, we won't see them for another—"

"Five or six hours?" Hermione chuckled.

Severus sniffed. "Children never leave. They just get needier and more demanding."

Viktor snorted and nudged Severus with his elbow. "They are young and human. Is that not reason enough for them to enjoy life's milestones?"

Severus rolled his eyes as Hermione hugged them both together. "Let's all have some excellent curry over at Akuti, yeah? Is your wife coming, Viktor?"

"Give my Galina some time to weep over her children getting married," he said. "Her mind is already many years ahead. To her, they are leaving forever."

Hermione chuckled. "She'll always have the holidays."

"She does love curry," Viktor said approvingly. "It will be good motivator."

"Isn't that how you convinced her allow all of you to move to Britain for the kids? You bribed her with curry?"

"Shh," Viktor said with a wicked grin. "Trade secret."

The Hogwarts' Express squealed as it started to take off, slowing chugging forward. Their children all waved out the windows frantically, staying together in the same car— as everyone knew they would.

Galina was sniffling away like a leaky faucet, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

The spiders all bounced up and down, waving.

"Buh bye!"

"Good luck!"

"Bon chance!"

"Blingrad Vasperkeep!"

The other spiders stared at Haze, shaking their heads.

"Come," Desmondon said, smiling knowingly and flaunting his current more "human" looking guise — a golden-haired, fair-skinned man with piercing blue eyes. "Let's go eat. I'm buying, and none of you are arguing."

"Yes, Master," Hermione and Severus said immediately, and Viktor bowed respectfully.
As they walked away, Viktor snagged his wife by the sleeve and tugged her alone, hugging her waist.

"You are very creepy-looking so human and... well, alive," Severus observed as they walked.

Desmondon smiled warmly. "Someone has to make up for your own dreary fashion sense, child."

Hermione bust up laughing and wrapped her arms around them both. "I love you."

Severus flushed as Desmondon and Viktor grinned, unashamed and proud.

Haze clung to Galina's shoulder and patted her neck gently. "There, there, it's not the end of the world." She offered her a freshly spun silk handkerchief.

Galina hugged the shadow spider to her and sobbed into her fluffy body.

"Curry for Lady Galina, stat!" Kobal squeaked.

Viktor pressed a kiss to her head. "Do not worry, love. We can make more children with new excess free time."

Galina flushed a bright crimson, sputtering, trying to beat Viktor's kiss off with her hands and failing utterly.

Desmondon pulled Severus and Hermione together, grinning. "Will there by more grandchildren for me in the future, hrm?"

Hermione blushed.

Desmondon laughed joyously, his cheer causing quite a few people to turn their heads and stare at him as if he were quite mad.

Severus muttered. "We can't take you anywhere, Master."

"You can take him," Hermione said, "but there will always a bit of death about it."

Desmondon laughed heartily. "Just because we are not alive does not mean we cannot live, my children. For living well is the greatest curse upon our enemies—that we are happy, and they—well... There is that very special place in the Afterlife for two exceptionally deserving individuals. And—I may, on occasion, give them a glimpse of other people living happy lives without them."

They continued to walk on for some time before Severus stopped dead in his tracks. "Master, what kind of glimpses?"

Desmondon's smile was both serene and utterly terrifying. "Oh, just some prime examples of life going on in spite of death."

Severus eyed his master somewhat suspiciously as Desmondon dragged his "children" down the street towards a great dinner and a bright future.

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**Meanwhile, in Purgatory**

Sweating heavily, Tom Riddle struggled to push an enormous boulder up a seemingly endless hill to get to the glasses of cool water that had been left every few hundred feet or so. Each time he used his
his body to hold the boulder in place so he could reach the glass of water and drink, the bottom of the glass would show him some scene of the world of the living— life going on without his influence and being so much better for it.

Elsewhere, a solitary goat stood alone in a field of unending grass with no distinguishable landmarks. No matter which way it went, everything looked exactly the same. He ended up walking back to the very same still pond no matter which direction he went, and each time he resigned himself to take a drink, the surface of the water would shimmer, showing him a vision of his beloved sister, Ariana… she was healthy, strong, beautiful and wholly magical, living out a wonderful, glorious Afterlife— all without him.

Albus knew all he had to do was get to her and everything would be right again. Everything would be worth it. She would greet him, remember him, forgive him—

He just had to find his way out of this accursed grassy field.

It had to be that way.

Yes!

He ran towards the horizon.

That must be it.

This time for sure!

Meanwhile the pond flickered, changing to a brand-new image of a certain raven-haired Morangelus embracing his lovely mate in the throes of mutual bliss as shadow spiders busily wove a new silken curtain over the "view".

"Hey! No peeking!"

"Private time!"

"Bugger off!"

"Oi, nothing to see here!"

"Mind your own business!"

"Oistang bemitzkreg!"

"Yeah, whatever she said."

The silken curtain covered up the pond, looking like peaceful white clouds.

Meanwhile back with our couple…

Octavius scurried in between the nestled bodies and attempted to gain a warm cuddle as the other spiders dove into Hermione's lush mane of curls.

Severus' pale talons plucked him up and tossed him off the bed.

"You're still a GIT!" the spider squeaked as he bounced repeatedly across the bedroom rug.
Crookshanks plucked the spider up between his jaws and jumped up onto the bed and wove himself under the covers, carrying the spider with him. He nestled under Hermione's arm and against her chest, purring like mad. Crooks dropped Octavius between his paws and set his head down on top, closing his eyes.

"Hermione."

"Hrm?"

"Your familiar is cuddling Octavius. It makes him utterly insufferable."

"I seem to do quite well with insufferable personalities."

"Hn."

"I happen to think you both make excellent cuddle buddies." Hermione snuggled up to her mate and kissed his nose.

"She loves me!" Octavius squeaked from under the covers.

Severus reached under the covers and muffled the arachnid.

"GIT-MMMPHHHFF!"

"I love her more," he growled, descending upon his mate with a heated kiss.

"You're jealous of a spider?" Hermione laughed as his kiss ended.

"Octavius is not the one giving you children," he grumped.

"You needn't worry," Hermione said with a warm chuckle. "All of our children have two legs, not eight." She guided his hand down to her abdomen. "Even the latest one," she purred.

Severus' eyes grew very wide. "Truly?"

"Mhmm," she purred.

"Do you love me?" she said coyly, flipping her hair to the side just so.

His eyes filled with the darkness of space as he growled. "Always," he rumbled, capturing her in his arms and pulling her close.

Spiders hung in glistening webs as they spun countless sets of silken baby booties and sleeper-wear. The younger spiders scurried over the empty baby crib, weaving new linens in perfect detail, all eagerly awaiting the arrival of the newest member of the Snape family.

Fin.

** This quote was adapted from Delenn from B5 in Severed Dreams, one of my favourite kick ass quotes (and there were many). Kudos to you that know where it came from. You deserve pie.

*** This song was written and performed by Wardruna. The song is called "Helvegen" (The Way To Hell) and if you can find the version on youtube performed by Wardruna AND Aurora (live) it
may move you as it did me when I heard it.

**A/N:** I hope you enjoyed the story.

Many thanks to my sleep-starved betas The Dragon and the Rose and Hollowgirl who stayed up past their expiry date to beta this fic to completion. Praise them!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!